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Abbreviations

ANE	Ancient Near East
CILD	Coordinator of Intercultural Leadership Development
CMS	Church Missionary Society
CPM	church planting movement
ESV	English Standard Version
FAIR	Fellowship Aid for International Relief
FEBCC	Fellowship of Evangelical Baptist Churches of Canada
Gk	Greek
GNB	Good News Bible
Heb	Hebrew
HPD	high power distance
HRCP	Human Rights Commission of Pakistan
KJV	King James Version
LPD	low power distance
LXX	Septuagint
MQM	Mohajir Quami Movement
NGO	Non-Government Organization
NIV	New International Version
NJB	New Jerusalem Bible
NT	New Testament
NRSV	New Revised Standard Version
OM	Operation Mobilization
OT	Old Testament
PBS	Pakistan Bible Society
PPP	People's Party of Pakistan
RSV	Revised Standard Version
TNIV	Today's New International Version
TWU	Trinity Western University
UBS	United Bible Societies
WEA	World Evangelical Alliance
WBT	Wycliffe Bible Translators

Abbreviations for the books of the Bible follow the *New Revised Standard Version* (1997:vii).

CHAPTER 1. Research Design

1.1 Introduction: Identifying Theological Trajectories

I had just completed the final chapter when I was introduced to a book that summed up the heart of what was discovered through this research project. Kreeft (2010:16-18) suggests that Christians need to learn from Muslims about the “beginning of wisdom” found in the fear of God – a robust faith that is indignant over sin and irreverence – while Christians can offer the “end of wisdom” which is the love of God. This represents a progress “from the awe of terror to the awe of adoration” that provides a framework for the latter without rejecting the former. The “flower” of the love of God must not be “cut off from its roots in the beginning of wisdom (the fear of God).” Similarly, a primary claim of this thesis is that Muslims who have become “believers”¹ do not reject an Islamic view of God in order to embrace a Christian view as if they were shedding one coat for another. The idea that people move from one system of thought (e.g., Muslim theology) to a different, unrelated system of thought (e.g., Christian theology) without having their personal history and cultural worldview affect their thinking is unrealistic. Instead, the Bible acts as God’s revelation using the concepts already present within the culture. The believers’ theology therefore emerges out of and, to a significant extent, is consistent with prior assumptions as scripture is engaged and faith developed within their context. Their theology is enhanced and altered because of the vision of God’s love in Jesus, but the root remains in the Islamic vision of a transcendent God of might, a God to be feared.²

This research project is built upon L. Sanneh’s (1989) concept of “translatability” and on R. Rottenburg’s (2003:30) statement that the “business of ethnography can be considered to be about the translatability of narratives on the meaning of life and the world from one cultural frame of reference to another.” “Translatability” is demonstrated in this project in two distinct yet interrelated ways. First, Bible translation is considered as the reshaping of the narrative of God speaking and acting within human history; a service rendered for a cultural group distinct from the Old Testament Hebrews or the New Testament audience of Christ followers. Second, the transforming impact of scripture upon a particular people group³ is observed. The primary interest

¹ Those submissive to the authority of the biblical text as defined in 5.2.

² In Western thinking “fear” tends to have negative connotations. This explanation assumes an Islamic and biblical perspective that assigns a positive connotation to “fear” and considers it an appropriate motivation towards good. See further in 4.3.3.

³ See 5.14 for a definition of “people group.”

of the research is to explore how the “narrative” of the lives of believers is being “translated” as they engage the scriptures or, more appropriately, as they engage God *through* the scriptures.

This study follows the assumption that “interpretation requires a conversation between the sacred text and our human contexts” (Flemming 2005:171). Groups of believers in the way of Jesus Christ are emerging from the Sindhi Muslim context in the province of Sindh,⁴ Pakistan. The proposal examined here is that as believers engage the Bible from a contextually shaped faith perspective (inclusive of worldview, beliefs and values)⁵ they develop unique theological understandings through an ongoing dialectical relationship between text and context. Historical, religious, geographical, social and political dimensions of the context determine to a great extent the way beliefs are formed, expressed and lived out. Therefore the believers’ reading of the text is colored and shaped by the priorities, beliefs and concerns of the surrounding society and, conversely, meanings gleaned from the text result in new perspectives on their world. Furthermore, even while their faith is reformulated through an encounter with the sacred text, that reformulation is expressed in terms of their established framework of reality. The implication is that the emerging theology of those submitted to biblical revelation is influenced by Muslim assumptions and beliefs. Following this conviction, the goal was to discover how the faith of Sindhi believers is being shaped as they live within their Muslim Sindhi context. In particular, the desire was to identify *theological trajectories*⁶ that reflect both pre-existing faith assumptions as well as new and developing beliefs. To rephrase Fleming’s quote, contextualized theology is emerging⁷ from the dialogue between the sacred text and the Sindhi context, and the identification or *mapping* of such trajectories is the purpose of the research.

While stressing continuity of an emerging theology with its context, the corresponding concern is to recognize that it is also something new and paradoxically *dis*-continuous with its context. Theology without transformation is not Christian theology at all. “To think that

⁴ The accepted modern spelling is “Sindh.” However, many older documents use the form “Sind.”

⁵ This particular understanding of “faith” is developed in 5.3.

⁶ See 5.7 for a description of mapping theological trajectories.

⁷ The word “emerging” or the phrase “emerging church” should not be confused with the *emerging church movement* pioneered by Chris Seay, Doug Pagitt, Dan Kimball and Mark Driscoll (Belcher 2009:25), or the *Emergent Village*, “a node in the web of the emerging church” (Emergent Village website undated). For the purpose of this study the phrase is used as an appropriate description of the fledgling people movement occurring among the Muslim Sindhi people. It is *emerging* in that the base line is the Islamic Sindhi community and context of the Sindh. The Sindhi church did not exist in a self-identifying manner before the turn of the century and is only now beginning to develop its own identity and parameters.

Christianity will not change a situation is to rob the Christian message of its most important part” (Schreiter 1985:29). This implies that the cross-cultural minister must strike a “balance between respect of the culture and the need for change within culture” (:29). Thus, while not being definitive about how contextualization of the biblical message *should be* done, this study recognizes that contextualization by the believers⁸ *is* occurring and establishes parameters to examine the process. The focus is on “mapping” social change, recognizing that Sindhi society is not static and discernment is needed to identify the activity of transformation and change. In fact, to pretend that change is not occurring is to be blind to an essential aspect of culture. “Social change is a social fact in many of the world’s cultures today, and in some instances the change is so rapid and thoroughgoing that not to address it is not to describe the culture” (Schreiter 1985:70). The intentional insertion of a Bible translation into the Sindhi context is one impetus towards change that leads to *gospel* transformation.⁹ What remains is an exploration and evaluation of the change effected.

This study does not claim to be diachronic in documenting a history of cultural changes, rather it explores expressions of faith at one point in time that indicate a change of belief in the past and projects possible developments in the future. The goal is to provide a description or “snapshot” that represents the current interaction of the Bible within Sindhi culture at a particular point in time. It is like the photo of a tree that has grown before the photo and continues to change and grow afterwards, rather than like the sculpting of a statue with an unchangeable result at the conclusion of the carving. At the same time, even though the tree may grow in unexpected ways after the photo, it does maintain a distinct shape with an element of continuity. Like the tree photo, the “snapshot” of the theological parameters indicates what has occurred, what is lasting and what likely can be expected from future developments.

My years of experience living among and interacting with Sindhis in the Sindh province and, in particular, my involvement in Sindhi Bible translation created an impetus for this study. The latter ministry follows the historically verified conviction that translating the biblical text into other languages has significant impact in bringing about gospel transformation (Sanneh 2012:40). I like to think of the text as a *catalyst* to bring about societal change. The “catalyst” imagery reflects my undergraduate days studying chemistry and I remember one experiment clearly. In the

⁸ Insider contextualization is also referred to in this thesis as *inculturation*. See 6.4.1.

⁹ The phrase “gospel transformation” focuses on the impact of God’s redemptive message within a given society – the transforming power of the gospel – rather than on the way the gospel is shaped, reformed and expressed through cultural contexts.

first part of the experiment, two chemicals were mixed and the lack of reaction noted. Then a small piece of coal was added and a reaction quickly occurred between the two chemicals resulting in a new molecular compound. This reaction would not have occurred without the presence of the coal, yet neither the reaction nor the resulting product included the coal itself. The coal was not changed but served as a platform that allowed the molecules of the two chemicals to come together and form a new compound. This imagery is a metaphor for my experience with Bible translation in the Sindhi language. Through the work of Bible translation, a text is prepared that brings God's Word into Sindhi culture in a way that *resonates*¹⁰ with the heart language of the Sindhi people. Although the scriptures are available in the national language, Urdu, as well as in an older, more literary Sindhi translation, it is the presence of the accessible Sindhi translation that brings the biblical message into contact with Sindhis in a way that resonates and results in transformation. In the chemistry experiment, the power of the reaction does not lie with the catalyst; its role is to provide the medium by which the two active ingredients can combine into a new compound. Similarly, the power of spiritual transformation does not lie in the translated text but in the way it functions as the medium to bring Sindhis in touch with the reality of God's revelation – the divine¹¹ character and will revealed in history. It is not the power of the Bible translation that results in transformation, but the working of God's Spirit through the message of the word.

To carry the analogy further, even as the chemistry experiment included a description of how the coal functioned to bring about the desired reaction, so this research examines how choices in Bible translation play a role in a revelation of God's Word that results in transformation. Bible translation uses concepts and images of Sindhi culture and worldview so that Sindhis can hear God speak. Their submission to the message integrates God's Word into their world to bring about impact and transformation. In a limited¹² yet detailed manner this research project examines the transformation that is occurring in order to draw conclusions about Bible translation choices and the way they influence the emerging theology of Sindhi believers.

The phenomenon of transformation researched is also considered within the parameters of religious conversion. Rather than viewing conversion as a point in time prior to the study, conversion is considered in covenantal terms as an ongoing reality worked out through the

¹⁰ See 5.5 for a description of resonance.

¹¹ When used as an adjective "divine" is not capitalized, while "Divine" used as a noun equivalent to "God" is capitalized.

¹² Only one short passage, a parable of Jesus, is considered.

interaction of the believers with the text. Nonetheless, the goal is modest and does not pretend to fully reveal the motives, beliefs or extent of the theological shift occurring among Sindhi believers. As Downs (1991:156) states, “It is not possible to determine with certainty why people convert.... But it is possible to study empirically the way in which conversion movements take place in a society, and thereby gain some insight into the dynamics and, possibly, the motivation, conscious or unconscious, of the converts.” The research provides insight concerning the dynamic of conversion in terms of faith transformation.

1.1.1 Researching Theological Trajectories

The research to identify emerging theological trajectories of Sindhi believers is qualitative and inductive in nature. The emphasis is “on the participants and their world-views [with] a reluctance to impose any pre-set theory or explanation” (Mouton 2001:151). The knowledge I want to obtain is “situated and contextual,” and therefore interviews are required “to ensure that the relevant contexts are brought into focus so that situated knowledge can be produced” (Mason 2002:62). The “intellectual puzzle” for which I am seeking “social explanations” (Mason 1996:14) requires a qualitative approach that “generates” (:36) an insiders’ (emic) view and interprets the meaning as close as possible to the participants’ intention. To accomplish this, the judgment of the researcher is suspended as much as possible in favor of determining the opinions of the insider.¹³ As researcher, my recording and reporting of the data is, of necessity, an etic view, but the process allows me to begin with emic expressions of self-reflective understanding and, with sensitivity, to adequately identify and represent that perspective, even though I am an outsider.¹⁴ The process adopted is to present as catalyst a passage from the meaning-based Sindhi translation of the Bible in a conversational setting for the purpose of generating and identifying descriptions used by the participants that reveal their understanding of God. As believers express their perspectives on the meaning of a passage of scripture contrasts with the traditionally accepted faith positions of the Sindhi Muslim community are revealed.

The presentation of a Bible passage encourages interaction between text and faith in three

¹³ See 5.11 for an explanation of *insider* and *outsider* terminology.

¹⁴ The terms “etic” and “emic” were coined by Pike (1962:35-38) to describe a view from inside a system (emic) versus a view of the system from the outside (etic). The etic view is foreign and cross-cultural, while the emic view is “monocultural with its units derived from the internal functional relations of only one individual or culture at a time” (:37). In addition, this thesis uses the term “insider” to refer to those who hold an emic perspective, while an “outsider” has an etic perspective. See further in 5.11.

distinct ways that build on each other. First, exposure to the translated text engages the participants in a process of interpretation as they draw meaning from the text according to their context and faith (worldview, beliefs and values) position. Second, the responses generated reveal the participants' priorities and beliefs concerning reality. As argued in my (Naylor 2004:14-15,55) Masters dissertation, through narratives and descriptions from their lives and relationships, people explain the significance of their place in the world (Sillars & Gronbeck 2001:212; Schreiter 1985:56-63; Patterson, Grenny, Maxfield, McMillan & Switzler 2008:72). Third, exposing the participants to God's revelation and hearing their response as they engage the text reveals their view of how God relates to them in their context. It is this latter aspect that reveals the faith divergence between the traditional and believer groups.

The "hard data" from which the participants' (1) understanding of the text's meaning, (2) their priorities and beliefs about reality, and (3) their *perspective of God's*¹⁵ relationship to their context are discerned and called *culture texts*:¹⁶ units of thoughts and expressions given by the participants in the interviews. These are identified and analyzed according to their relationship to the translated passage. Through a comparison and contrast of the believers' culture texts with the traditional group interviews as well as with the broader Sindhi community, the reshaping of the believers' faith convictions can be identified.

At the same time, this "reluctance to impose any pre-set theory or explanation" (Mouton 2001:151) occurs within a broader paradigm in which I have functioned and continue to function as a change agent seeking to shape the theological perspectives of Sindhis. These apparently contradictory purposes require careful delineation to ensure a legitimate data collecting and analysis procedure. The legitimacy of these dual roles of the researcher – *change agent* and *interpretivist* (Mason 1996:4, 2002:76) – is argued in the following sections. In summary, the argument is that in order to construct a realistic understanding of the participants' subjective shift in faith – the *change agent's* impact – I attempted to "bracket"¹⁷ (Creswell 1998:52) my personal interpretations and explanations for the purpose of creating the opportunity for Sindhis to express

¹⁵ See 6.6.1 for an explanation of the phrase "perspective of God."

¹⁶ Using Schreiter's (1985:61) terminology. See 5.6 and 6.6 for explanations of *culture texts*.

¹⁷ By "bracket" I do not mean to imply that the participants of the interviews were unaware that I also am a believer. My faith orientation was assumed by the participants and the text was treated with the respect due a sacred book. This was both understood and accepted as appropriate behavior. However, I avoided any attempt to influence their responses according to my theological perspective or beliefs. I played the role of neutral observer to their personal expressions of the meaning of the text.

their response to the message – the *interpretivist* concern. As researcher following an interpretivist model, I did not shape the *content* of the responses, but sought to discover and fairly represent the participants’ understanding. The interview process generated the emic perspectives of the participants, underscoring the qualitative aspect of the research. As researcher, I did introduce the topic and guided the conversation, but my attentive stance towards the participants’ responses and reluctance to influence them ensured that the interpretivist purpose was maintained.

It is helpful to relate the different levels of this research project to Mouton’s (2001:137-142) three “worlds.” The intersection of the passage of scripture with the Sindhi context as perceived by the participants relates to World 1, “the world of everyday life and lay knowledge.” While the actual responses of Sindhis are World 1, they can only be represented through my identification and analysis of the data generated from the interviews, which lies within World 2, “the world of science and scientific research.” The culture texts generated by the participants as they engage scripture from the perspective of their beliefs about God (World 1) are used to develop a model of the believers’ theology as compared to and contrasted with the perspective of the traditional Muslim group (World 2). World 3, “the world of meta–science,” is the realm in which the research design and methodology is described, analyzed and validated including a consideration of anthropology, epistemology and hermeneutics.¹⁸

1.2 Research Question

The research question, stated in specific terms but with the flexibility indicated by a qualitative approach (Creswell 1998:99; Marshall & Rossman 1999:38) is “*What theological trajectories can be identified among Sindhi believers through exposure to a contextually sensitive Sindhi translation of the Bible?*” The question is phrased in this manner to acknowledge that interaction with the text may reveal *existing* trajectories, thus the term “identified,” as well as acknowledging that the posture of the believers towards the text allows for the shaping of their theology *during* the interaction. However, the goal is the identification of possible theological trajectories without necessarily distinguishing prior convictions from those generated during the interview. The phrase “*contextually sensitive translation*” underscores the fact that the passage instigating the discussion is introduced by outsiders and was constructed with cultural sensitivity to impact Sindhi readers and hearers.

The theological parameters are the nature and character of God as perceived from within

¹⁸ These “World 3” perspectives are developed in chapters 6-8.

an Islamic framework particular to the Sindhi context.¹⁹ This framework is influenced by a number of factors, including Sufism,²⁰ the veneration of saints (*pirs*²¹) common to Folk Islam²² as well as the teachings of those respected as guardians of the more orthodox expressions of Islam. A clear delineation of this framework is not possible due to the internal complexity of the structures as well as the interactions and integration of the structures with each other. Ongoing negotiations, compromises and struggles between them serve to shape Sindhi faith and it is impossible for the outsider to grasp the nuances, let alone articulate a feasible description. Fortunately, a comprehensive framework is not necessary because the concern is to identify points of deviation between the generally accepted perception of traditional Muslim Sindhis and the new perspectives of the believers stimulated from interaction with God's Word. The assumption of a generally accepted Islamic framework is evident in the phrasing of the interview questions as well as from the perspectives of God expressed by the participants as they interpret the passage. The themes and theological trajectories center on the nature of God, how God relates to humanity generally, and how God relates to the participants in particular.

The main question can be broken down into three sub-questions that reflect the development of the research. These sub-questions correspond to the ways in which participants engage the text: (1) *Understanding the text's meaning* – What are the culture texts expressed by Sindhi believers as they respond to a specific passage of scripture read from the common language Sindhi translation? (2) *Beliefs about reality* – What themes can be identified from the culture texts that indicate theological concerns common to both believers and those with a more traditional view? (3) *Perspectives of God* – What are the possible theological trajectories that can be mapped through the identification of contrasts between believer and traditional responses?

There are secondary interests that are served by this inquiry. From a translator's standpoint, the ability of the interview participants to appropriately interpret the meaning of the passage is an affirmation of the success of the translation. Misinterpretations or confusion may indicate a need for revision, which, though disappointing, would result in a more adequate

¹⁹ Chapter 4 provides a description of the Sindhi context.

²⁰ See 4.2.2.2 for a description of Sufism.

²¹ See 4.2.2.4 for a definition of this Sindhi term. There is no standardized transliteration format for Sindhi into Roman script, and some that have been proposed tend to be cumbersome, such as Leghari & Rahman's (2010) suggestion. For this thesis, Arabic terms used in Sindhi follow commonly accepted transliterations, while other Sindhi terms use the Romanized transliteration introduced by Addleton & Brown (1984).

²² See 5.15 for a definition of Folk Islam.

representation of God’s Word for the Sindhi context.

As an evangelical²³ Christian and an intercultural change agent, I believe that exposure to the Word of God is an important part of the spiritual journey for Sindhi people, whether Christian or Muslim. A research project that encourages interaction with a passage of scripture impacts the participants’ perspective of life and God. The congruity of this secondary interest with a qualitative research methodology is considered in the following sections.

The methodology of presenting scripture to discover the depth and direction of belief occurring within an emerging church is one that can have broad application for people involved in cross-cultural ministry. Proposing and testing a *listening process* that provides insight into the developing beliefs of an emerging church among the Sindhi people can serve as a model for intercultural change agents working in other contexts. I apply these principles through an interactive course for Fellowship International missionaries entitled “Contextualized Communication of the Cross” (Naylor 2010a). For one assignment, course participants present a passage of scripture and record the respondents’ perspectives and reactions to God’s revelation.

This research project is designed to generate insight into the theological development of Sindhi believers that can lead to further discussions and application. Meaningful terms, metaphors, and idioms that express the Christian faith for believers may be revealed, aspects of Christian theology that resonate with Sindhis can be discerned, and fresh insights into the gospel message may be discovered.

1.3 Overview of Research and Analysis Process

The study begins with the observation that believers who have accepted the Sindhi Bible as God’s Word have a different orientation to scripture than Sindhi Muslims who view it, at best, as a sacred book from a religious tradition to which they have no obligation. The believers’ attitude of submission to the Bible opens up the possibility that their perspective of God has shifted. An interview process in which dialogue is stimulated through interaction with a biblical passage can reveal diverse theological perspectives between believers and those with traditional Muslim Sindhi views.

The focus groups of believers and those holding to traditional perspectives were interviewed separately. These are referred to as the “believer focus group” and “traditional focus

²³ See 5.12 for a definition of “evangelical.”

group,”²⁴ or simply as “believers” and “traditional group.” Each interview began with reading the same passage of scripture (Lk 15:11-32, the Parable of the Two Lost Sons) from *The New Testament in Sindhi* (1991). An open-ended question was used to initiate a response and encourage participants to give their opinion. As an aid to listening and evaluating the discussion, each interview was recorded using a small digital voice recorder. In addition, written notes were taken to document the date, describe the room, list participants and provide other pertinent details.

The interviews were later translated into English by the researcher and the relevant and significant culture texts given in response to the passage were identified. These culture texts were clustered into themes, keeping the comments of believers and the traditional group separate. The analysis compares and contrasts the believer and traditional groups’ positions for each theme in an attempt to identify divergence. Listening “to a culture in the interests of local theology means being able to listen also for the dissonances that mark the advent or progression of change” (Schreier 1985:45). The research process highlights some of these “progressions” in terms of theological trajectories. The significance of these trajectories as expressions of the intersection of text and faith – an application of Gadamer’s (1989 [1975]:447-448) “fusing of horizons” that he coined to describe the hermeneutical process – and how they reveal the development of theology within a conversion process is considered. The research and ministry benefits of creating a text-faith tension through the presentation of a passage of scripture to initiate a dialogue are assessed along with implications for Bible translation.

1.4 Rationale for the Research Design

1.4.1 Phenomenological and Ethnographic Aspects

Two of Creswell’s (1998:31,34,51, 2003:15) five distinct traditions of qualitative research help define the nature of this project: phenomenological and ethnographic. The phenomenon identified is the relatively small number of Sindhi believers who exhibit patterns of belief distinct from the traditional belief patterns. The focus on one sub group – believers – of a self-identified ethnic group – Sindhi Muslims – in order to discover the insiders’ point of view is characteristic of an ethnographic study (Spradley 1980:4). Important ethnographic methods that have their roots in anthropology and sociolinguistics, such as participant observation, observation, and interviews (Martin, Nakayama & Flores 2002:10) are applied in the generation and analysis of the data. Because I essentially played the role of an ethnographer over a number of years to discover

²⁴ See 1.4.5.2 for descriptions of “believer” and “traditional” groups.

patterns of life and significance as viewed by Sindhis themselves (cf. Spradley 1980:4-5), the insights gained provide me with the ability to interpret the participants' comments according to the cultural context with which I have become familiar.

Despite my extensive exposure to the Sindhi context and the ethnographic elements appropriated in the methodology, the research project has notable differences from a typical ethnography. Because ethnographers take part in the ordinary life of the people being studied, they are able to gather “data through direct observation and spontaneous discussion which [they then use] to induce statements about the regularities which constitute [their] subjects' culture” (Payne, Dingwall, Payne & Carter 1981:89). However, the cultural insights gained from ethnographic observations and societal interactions in order to understand Sindhis as a distinct people group is not the *primary* focus of the current task. Instead, data is purposefully generated from the interviews through the presentation of a passage of scripture in order to explore one particular cultural phenomenon – the change in belief about God among those who have become believers – and discover the meaning and significance of this shift as expressed by the interviewees. That is, the intention to “map” the direction of the shift in belief and interpret its significance and validity is more than simple ethnographic observation. Spradley (1980:128) refers to three kinds of observation that move from a broad to a narrow focus: *descriptive*, *focused* and *selective*. While the research question is an example of a question used in selective observation, the interview process of engaging participants in a way that both reveals and shapes their theological development moves this beyond the realm of traditional ethnography.

With regard to Creswell's traditions of qualitative research, this study could be described as having a phenomenological focus with benefits gleaned from ethnographic observations that guide the gathering and analysis of the data.

1.4.2 Qualitative Research within a Participatory Paradigm

Within these phenomenological and ethnographical parameters, the research project uses a hybrid of two distinct investigative methods. An interview process designed to generate data of the Muslim Sindhis' social world as “interpreted, understood, experienced or produced” by those living within that setting (Mason 1996:4) identifies this as a qualitative method and the researcher's role is one of “interpretivist.” At the same time, this desire to see things from the insiders' point of view intersects with the broader context of my life as “observing participant” among Sindhis. The reference to qualitative research *within* a participatory paradigm points to this

distinction between my broader involvement as observing participant living among Sindhis and my narrow and limited interpretivist role to facilitate the research. The participatory aspect is the framework within which the qualitative research is accomplished. In addition, I was not passive during my role of observing participant, but acted as a change agent seeking to initiate transformation among Sindhis at the level of faith and worldview.²⁵ These roles and their purpose are summarized in the following chart.

Table 1 *Roles and Purposes in Participatory Paradigm*

Date	Role	Context	Purpose
1985-present	Observing Participant	Sindhi Society	Learn language and culture/develop relationships
1989-present	Change Agent	Bible Translation into Sindhi	Provide Sindhi Muslims access to the Bible/stimulate spiritual transformation
March 2009	Interpretivist Researcher	Interviews with Sindhis	Generate expressions of faith in order to identify theological trajectories

Qualitative research within a participatory paradigm has a number of advantages in that it “builds a complex, holistic picture, analyzes words, reports detailed views of informants, and conducts the study in a natural setting” (Creswell 1998:15). While the participatory aspect provides a multi-dimensional and developed background and framework, the interaction between the researcher and the interviewees during the data generation stage fits Creswell’s description of qualitative research. The interview process was designed to reveal a “complex, holistic picture” because (1) it deals with the changing belief system of Sindhi believers as expressed within their setting, (2) it “analyzes words” through the data generated from interviews as well as in the translated text that initiates the conversation, (3) it “reports detailed views of informants” through the identification of culture texts, and (4) the research was primarily conducted in the “natural setting” of a meeting room for men (the *otaq*) or in the home when women were included.

1.4.2.1 The Researcher as Observing Participant

An *observing participant* paradigm serves as the background to and permeates the research, the interview process and the analysis. The phrase “observing participant”²⁶ is a deliberate reversal of

²⁵ As indicated in 4.1 and 6.4, my role as change agent was more extensive than Bible translation; however, the translation task is of greatest relevance for this study.

²⁶ I was introduced to the concept “observing participant” through Hankela’s (2013) academic dissertation. While she cites other sources, her use of “observant participation” parallels my own references to “observing participant”. She adopted this description for her research because “at times participation was much stronger an element of my presence than observation” (:26).

“participant observation” that usually refers “to methods of generating data which entail the researcher immersing herself or himself in a research ‘setting’ so that they can experience and observe at first hand a range of dimensions in and of that setting” (Mason 2002:84-85). Collins (1984:57) differentiates this interactive posture from the “unobtrusive observer” who seeks to surreptitiously observe “everything without disturbing the situation in any way.” In contrast to the “non-participant observer,” Gobo (2008:5) describes the participant observer with the following attributes:

- 1) the researcher establishes a direct relationship with the social actors;
- 2) staying in their natural environment;
- 3) with the purpose of observing and describing their behavior;
- 4) by interacting with them and participating in their everyday ceremonials and rituals, and;
- 5) learning their code (or at least parts of it) in order to understand the meaning of their actions.

Apart from an important distinction in Gobo’s third attribute, this is an accurate portrayal of my orientation towards Sindhis. My role matches the researcher “who studies a new situation and therefore has to work over a period of time to apprentice himself or herself to that situation to become a legitimate participant” (Scollon, Wong & Scollon 2001:17). Although I lived with my family in the Sindh for fourteen years, it is not my natural setting and during my frequent trips back to Pakistan after our move back to Canada I continue to be viewed as a foreigner. Nonetheless, I have become a legitimate participant in the Sindhi context by proactively learning Sindhi culture and language. I played and continue to play the role of a *learner*, with Sindhis as the *teachers*, enabling me to go beyond observation of what Sindhis do, to discover the meaning that they give to their actions and environment. I have systematically observed and become familiar with many of the social actions, behaviors, interactions, and relationships of the Sindhi people (cf. Mason 1996:60). My immersion into the Sindhi context has afforded me insight to recognize and pursue the observed phenomenon of theological shift. During the interview process, my understanding of the context and the language provided a connection with the participants that facilitated their willingness to cooperate. My familiarity with Sindhi thought processes, worldview assumptions and common expressions allowed me to focus on the significant comments and guide the participants to elaborate on relevant topics. At the analysis stage, the skills and insights developed through my years of observing Sindhis in a participatory role has given me tools to interpret, sort and evaluate the generated data. In this way, I am like an ethnographer drawing reflectively on my own experiences and perceptions as part of the data

(Mason 2002:77). These judgments are not a detriment interfering with the process of determining the insiders' viewpoint but affirm and clarify their viewpoint, as long as the judgments can be justified as accurate and valid (:77).

Gobo's (2008:5) third attribute, "with the purpose of observing and describing their behavior" and the word order of the term "participant observer" indicate that the *observing* intent of the researcher is the primary reason for living among and interacting with the people. However, my purpose as an intercultural change agent went beyond "observing and describing" and therefore the emphasis on *observer* in *participant observer* is not quite correct. Instead a better description is to reverse the word order and refer to an *observing participant*. Using "observing" as an adjective that qualifies "participant" indicates that the critical aspect of *observing* is secondary to the primary role as a *participant*. Observation and description were key components in my role as I engaged Sindhis on their terms and in their context, but I was observing in order to build relationships, not for the sake of research. In the following references to scholarship and research techniques on participant observation, this nuanced emphasis is assumed.

Because I was a Bible translator living among Sindhis, my role was not primarily one of observer but change agent. This role cannot be downplayed in the research process as if I was merely a neutral spectator. I have biases and motives that move beyond a pure observer stance. As a participant in the interview process, I was sensitive to Sindhi cultural, linguistic and religious issues. But at the same time, I am also a "believer" in my posture towards the text. It was known and communicated to the participants that I am a Bible translator, thus acknowledging my association with and faith stance towards the Bible passage. In my "insertion" (Holland & Henriot 1983:8)²⁷ among Sindhis as an "outside advocate of change" (Kraft 1996:400) for the sake of the gospel of Jesus Christ, I have engaged in a reflective process with a community of believers in order to influence them towards considering and acting on the implications of God's revelation in their lives. I have been active in bringing about the changes that were explored in the research, and so I am sympathetic to the identified theological shifts. Thus my interviews and interactions, while seeking to be honest and transparent in the recording and reporting of the data, constitute an event or presentation in which such change is not just observed, but also facilitated. I am an engaged participant who constantly observes in order to learn and, through the research process, identifies the impact made by my insertion.²⁸

²⁷ Justification for the use of "insertion" in this way is provided in 6.4.

²⁸ Implications of facilitating change with respect to validating the data are explored in 2.1.1.3.4.

Heeschen (2003:117) affirms that competence in the source language is a necessity for a researcher or translator to accurately present data. Skill is required to identify and interpret all kinds of information, “especially if the meaning is hidden in nonverbal symbol systems.” Heeschen (2003:131) adds that understanding life–moments and translating ephemeral speech acts allows the researcher to develop those skills in which “speakers and hearers fill gaps, establish concrete differences, and negotiate vagueness.” The work of Bible translation has been instrumental in providing opportunity for me to delve into the thought processes of the Sindhi people. Through years of exploring the interpretations and explanations of scripture by Sindhis, I have developed skills to analyze and understand how Sindhis interact with the world and to identify the worldview assumptions that are at the root of their actions.

Participant observation has been referred to as “perhaps the most traditional, most widely revered, and most widely misunderstood approach to conducting ethnographic research” (Angrosino 2002:5), a caution that calls for careful application. Tierney (2002:12-17) outlines the process: watching and listening, which requires a prolonged period of time spent relating to people (:12-13); self–awareness, including the characteristics of humility, openness and a sense of humor (:13); recording observations (:14); developing relationships with “informants” (:15); thought and reflection on the data (:16); selection of an appropriate site (:16-17); participation within that setting (:17); and interpreting the observations based on the researcher’s own questions (:17). My approach of *observing participant* both conforms to and differs from this model. Each of Tierney’s distinctives is represented in my insertion into Sindhi culture as I have engaged Sindhi people over the years. I have spent time discovering answers to questions through prolonged exposure to the Sindhi setting and drawing conclusions through observations and conversations. The source of the research data, however, was limited to the interviews when my primary orientation was in an interpretivist role. Nonetheless, during the data generating stage I did participate in a common social forum of interaction within Sindhi society – the *otaq* – that reflects one of Tierney’s distinctives, although the interviewer posture differs from the usual participatory *otaq* paradigm. Because I was an *interviewer*, not just a conversation partner, I intentionally engaged the participants to find out their understanding concerning a topic I am interested in. This is unusual because the *otaq* generally provides a more egalitarian exchange of ideas between friends or is dominated by one or two personalities who are listened to by the rest with minimal interaction. I have engaged in the *otaq* experience numerous times noting how this dynamic of Sindhi culture aids in generating information. However, for the sake of the research

goal, my role as interviewer within the *otaq* context is a considerable shift from a strictly observing participant stance. Although many of the practices outlined by Tierney and others parallel this research context so that it is legitimate to label the dynamic “participant observation,” there are departures from the traditional model.

One departure of note was the presentation of the Bible passage in the interview process to generate responses. This “presentation” feature is not a common practice in qualitative interviews, although it could be argued that in this case it functioned as a tool to introduce a topic. This would be legitimate if the passage was an item of Sindhi culture unrelated to my efforts as a change agent. However, the text was a Bible passage from a Sindhi version, the translation of which I have supervised for several years. It is a text shaped for Sindhis by a team that includes outsiders as well as insiders, a text that has been “inserted” into the culture as I have been. My involvement in Bible translation was intended to stimulate the kind of responses I identify through the data generation process; that is, the believers’ posture in engaging the text results in a hearing of the Word that alters the hearers’ life choices and shapes their orientation towards God. The text is representative of my work within the participatory paradigm in which I function as a change agent. Nonetheless, the use of the text is necessary because it generates the interaction I am interested in.

My interest is not neutral; I have an investment in the interview dialogues that reflects the broader investment I have made with my life. The hope is that the research reveals how my and others’ investment as change agents and active participants in Sindhi society has impacted their thinking. However, while the preparation of the translated text represents my role within the participatory paradigm, during the interviews I am making a conscious and deliberate shift from *observing participant* (or change agent) to *interpretivist* (non-directive attentive) role in order to generate and listen to insiders’ responses to the Bible passage.

1.4.2.2 The Interpretivist Role of the Researcher

Within the research process, my orientation towards the participants is *interpretivist* (Mason 1996:4, 2002:76) because it is the perceptions of the cultural insiders that constitute the primary data source (2002:56). I did not rely on my own “first-hand experience” as the source of data, as might be expected from participant observation within an ethnographic orientation. In order to explore an observed phenomenon of theological shift, I generated culture texts from Sindhis in order to discover their own creative expressions and personal examples of faith. Interpretivist

research seeks to uncover the emic perspective of insiders, while recognizing that the researcher's understanding or expression of that perspective remains etic. While being sensitive to the researcher's etic orientation, the goal is to come as close as possible to a careful and sensitive account of the Sindhi perspective. As observing participant I can provide ethnographic reports and coherent, relevant analysis, but the interpretivist approach to the research is required so that the primary data remains the participants' "interpretations, perceptions, meanings and understandings." The primary data source is the insiders, and the data is their expressed perceptions (Mason 2002:56).

Being a participant in the interviews is not an unfortunate necessity, but "central, irreplaceable and, indeed, the essence of the method" in which interaction and dialogue is maximized (Collins 1984:60). However, there is an important distinction between my role and the role of the participants, which was maintained at all times. There was no "blurring" of the distinction between observer and observed. I guided the conversation towards the issues relevant to the research concerns, but those being interviewed were the "knowers" whose responses provided the required data. I stimulated conversation through the presentation of a passage of scripture and asked questions to guide them in the discussion of the topic, but the interpretation was guided by their own beliefs and orientation towards the passage.

1.4.2.3 Epistemological Basis for Qualitative Research

The qualitative research of this thesis is based on a critical realist epistemology.²⁹ That is, the perspectives, interpretations, experiences and interactions of the research participants reveal what is meaningful in the social reality of a people group (Mason 1996:39, 2002:63). Rather than looking for "one objective and true reality which can simply be 'discovered' with rigorous and careful research instruments" (Mason 2002:150; cf. Spradley 1980:4), the conviction that "all truth is known only from a given perspective" (Van Gelder 1996b:120) leads to a methodology that discloses the participants' view of reality. A positivist approach is thus excluded that assumes "if the research is conducted with a properly representative sample of participants, the findings that a researcher obtains are true or probably true for everyone in the study site – that is, they can be generalized to the study population as a whole" (LeCompte & Schensul 1999:42). Nonetheless, because a critical realist assumption accepts meaning as socially mediated, what is meaningful and true to a small group of participants within their context as they are faced with a text that they

²⁹ See 7.6 for a description of the epistemological assumptions.

accept as true and authoritative will be reflected to some extent among the larger group. This does not necessitate uniformity of faith, but comprehension, relevance and resonance with the participants will be evident among others even if they offer conflicting perspectives. Because the participants are engaging in a dialogue between text and context, it follows that those within the same context would respond with similar concerns, if not with similar convictions.

A corollary of this epistemology that makes the research possible is that communication within a commonly enculturated people group is sufficiently ordered and consistent that outsiders can learn how to understand and participate in conversation. People are meaning-makers and the communication of that meaning comes in many forms, including speech and text. Communication requires communal acceptance of linguistic signs with their assigned meanings. The translated text of the Bible has meaning not just for the participants but for the broader group, and therefore their dialogue concerning the passage reveals the participants' thinking about God using categories and concepts that the outside researcher familiar with the language can recognize.

Because a critical realist epistemology is perspectival, this allows for the assumptions (1) that behaviors and beliefs change over time, thus validating the exploration of theological trajectories, (2) that context influences the subjects' values and decisions, and therefore affects how readers engage scripture, and (3) that it is not only valid but necessary to include participants in a reflective research process rather than assuming that outside observation is sufficient (LeCompte & Schensul 1999:42). The researcher's interpretivist posture is conducive to a critical realist orientation as reflected in the desire to discover how the interview participants construct and change their world through "shared meanings and as expressed in common language, symbols, and other modes of communication" (LeCompte & Schensul 1999:49).

The primary actors expressing their view of reality are members of the Sindhi people group who define their faith (worldview, beliefs and values). This "defining" is not static, nor monolithic across the culture, but is constantly being tested and shaped during the enculturation process of all members of society, a process that continues from birth to death. In accordance with human nature, they have a *perspectival* view of God that fluctuates due to contextual influences. Part of this shaping and redefinition is stimulated through the creative tension established between a sacred text and faith. The impact of the Qur'an, Hadith and classical *tafsir* (commentaries) on Islamic societies, such as the imposition of *Shari'ah* law or expressions of Islamic monotheism (Parsons 2005:139-181) demonstrate the power of this dynamic. Thus the presentation of a biblical passage within a group of Sindhis creates a familiar interaction between participants and

text, as well as between the participants themselves, that reveals and *simultaneously shapes and redefines* their faith.

A critical realist epistemology also establishes a basis for the participatory paradigm referred to as the broader context for the research project. “Interactions, actions and behaviours and the way people interpret these [and] act on them [are] central, [and] knowledge or evidence of the social world can be generated by observing, or participating in, or experiencing ‘natural’ or ‘real-life’ settings, interactive situations and so on” (Mason 2002:85). As someone who has lived among Sindhis prior to the research project, I am a “knower” in the participatory paradigm “because of shared experience, participation or by developing empathy with the researched... and in that sense [I am] epistemologically privileged” (:85). Consistent with critical realism, this “knowing” is limited and perspectival. My experiences provide a sufficient framework so that I can understand, engage and participate with Sindhis effectively in a variety of settings, but not to the extent that I can be an independent judge of their faith. For example, in the Bible translation process, I require a team of Sindhis to give insider understanding about a verse or phrase. Because of my insertion in the culture I am capable of comprehending their explanation, but my skills at observation do not extend to a description of *their* interaction with a text of scripture *unless they provide that insight*. Although we share relevant experiences, my analysis and explanation of the passage as an outsider varies in a number of ways. In essence, this research is built on the assumption that my attentive and interpretive powers as observing participant are insufficient to give me an insider perspective. However, the observations I make are sufficient to confirm or question the expressed views of the insiders and identify those views as reflective of a broader spectrum of society.

This epistemological assumption is reflected in each stage of data generation, identification and analysis. Data generation views the participants as “knowers,” thus the need for qualitative interviews. Data identification requires an ability to recognize relevant data based on ethnographic background exposure and experience. The way Sindhis shape their world determines what is meaningful to them and this can be identified through their responses in the interviews. Similarly, data analysis requires sensitivity to the participants’ expressed beliefs and actions, especially when using outsider tools to examine various dimensions of identified theological trajectories.

Kraft’s (1991:92-97) seven implications of critical realism as it relates to communication can be adapted to relate to the qualitative research approach within a participatory paradigm:

1. There are three separate “realities” addressed in the research design: (a) the world “out there” that includes the passage of text under consideration, (b) the researcher’s perspective of reality and (c) the participants’ perspective of reality from which data for the research is provided.
2. There is a close relationship between the life lived by the participants and the communication of their experiences. That is, their communication is a “critical” reflection of their relationships with each other, the text and their broader context.
3. Those with “similar perceptions of similar experiences are most likely to construct similar meanings” (Kraft 1991:94). The enculturation effect establishes commonalities that permit communication and the expression of similar perspectives.
4. The cultural shaping of a group enables communication, but it is recognized that “not only groups but individuals differ” (Kraft 1991:95). Each individual interviewed has unique perspectives on the common themes and concerns of the group.
5. The *perception* of the participant is the impetus of change whether initiated through a text of scripture or through interaction with others outside the people group. The theological trajectories are an act of creating meaning through perceived relevance between text and context.
6. “Meaning is a deep-level phenomenon, even though it is symbolized by surface-level forms” (Kraft 1991:97). The culture texts generated in the interview process are the “surface-level forms” that need to be analyzed to discern the deeper meaning (i.e., faith) being communicated from one person to another.
7. Language is deeply personal and an essential part of our identity. “As human beings we ‘own’ our language, and there is very little else that we regard as more precious” (Kraft 1991:97). It is part of our constructed reality and in order to adequately communicate on the deep level of faith, we need to speak using our “heart language.” To facilitate this, the research is conducted in the Sindhi language, on the participants’ “linguistic turf” (Kraft 1991:97).

1.4.3 Data Collection through an Interview Process

As a *change agent* living and working among Sindhis, the goal has been to stimulate movement towards an inculturated or contextualized theology centered on God’s revelation in the Bible, cf. Schreiter’s (1985) *Constructing Local Theologies*. However, the purpose of this research project

is not to *construct* a local theology but to *observe* a theology in the making. It is an attempt to attend to Sindhis with an interpretivist posture in order to hear the way they are developing their own theology. Data collection in this paradigm thus requires “firsthand involvement in the social world chosen for study” (Marshall & Rossman 1999:106).

Data was generated in an interview setting from believers who have experienced shift in their perspective of God because of their submissive posture towards the Bible and from members of the traditional group who interact with the same passage but with a non-submissive attitude towards the text. The assumption is that a more comprehensive picture of the participants’ perspective is possible through a dialogical rather than empirical approach (Mason 1996:43). It reflects LeCompte & Schensul’s (1999:49-50) observation that

Phenomenological approaches are inherently participatory because meaning can be created only through interaction.... Individual constructs or ideas can be elicited and refined only through interaction between and among all researchers, participants, and partners in the project. In this sense, the data and findings of [the researcher] are created and recreated as the research proceeds.

Stimulating conversation and challenging questions are an enjoyable aspect of Sindhi culture, and this qualitative methodology resonates well in this environment.

1.4.3.1 A Natural Setting for the Interviews

Scollon *et al* (2001:17) speak of qualitative ethnographic research as consisting of “fieldwork, participant observation, ‘strange making,’ and contrastive observation.” “Fieldwork” refers to research done in the natural setting of the people group being observed, as opposed to “artificial or laboratory conditions.” Payne *et al* (1981:252) note that research “is obviously substantially determined by the ideas available to the would-be investigator. The research that actually gets done, however, is ultimately determined by a quite different set of influences... most crucially, the organizational settings in which sociologists work.” The *otaq*, a meeting room for men in which conversation is the main activity, was the primary setting for the interviews. “The *otaq* is usually a small room set on the side of a house with an informal arrangement of chairs, sofa sets or simply a carpet to sit on” (Naylor 2004:49). Dialogue and expressions of opinions are valued in Sindhi society and the privacy of the *otaq* allows for a comfortable, familiar environment so that the research participants can talk naturally and freely.

If women were involved, an inner room of the house was used for the interviews. For believers, the act of listening to them in their home, a place of security and identity, is a validation

of their faith so that the connection between faith and family is affirmed and strengthened.

Each interaction was pre-arranged rather than relying on spontaneous interviews in public places such as offices or restaurants. The research participants were given an invitation to engage in a conversation of a religious nature and were aware that the motive was to collect data for a research project. Such invitations are not incongruous with the nature of the *otaq* or the home setting, but neither do they reflect the daily and common use of the room. Nonetheless, the gregarious nature of Sindhis coupled with the familiar surroundings, ensured that people were easily drawn into conversation.

The research was done in the Sindhi language, the mother tongue of all participants.³⁰ The religious context was Islamic; all the terminology and concepts used stem from the religious framework with which the participants are familiar. This includes the translated text, which makes use of Islamic religious terminology.³¹

1.4.3.2 “Strange Making” and “Contrastive Observation”

By "strange making" Scollon *et al* (2001:18) are referring to “what happens when a person takes up the dual stance of participant and of observer.... [and] ‘makes strange’ what is normally taken for granted.” This occurred in the interview process through the deliberate stimulation of the participants to express their views about God in ways that they may not have been used to. As an outsider, I asked questions that required them to explicate information that would normally be taken for granted. They also gave voice to assumptions or conclusions that would not otherwise have been expressed.

“Contrastive observation” was an essential part of the methodology because the two groups differ in their relationship to the biblical text. The diverging responses of the believers from the expected and “normal” responses of the traditional group highlighted the “strangeness” of their view. The contrasts evident in the interviews prompted me to ask more penetrating questions to determine the motives and beliefs that lie behind the differences.

³⁰ One participant was a mother-tongue Saraiki-speaker, but as he was born and brought up in the Sindhi setting, he is functionally fully bi-cultural and bi-lingual.

³¹ The use of Islamic terminology has made the translation acceptable to Sindhi Muslims, but unacceptable for people with a Christian or Hindu background. In response, the Pakistan Bible Society has approved the preparation of a parallel Sindhi translation using terminology that is acceptable to Hindu Sindhis and Christians from a Hindu background.

1.4.3.3 Text Presentation

A passage of scripture was presented to create an intersection between text and faith. The researcher exposed the participants to a biblical text with encouragement to respond resulting in “face to face” dialogue as they expressed the perceived meaning of the passage. This “presentation” methodology and observation stance as interpretivist researcher was an interlude or “stepping back” from the broader reality of my ongoing insertion as an intentional change agent among Sindhis. The research was an observation point-in-time occurring within the longer term act of insertion. In the insertion I have been learning to express the meaning of the gospel through Bible translation and teaching with a view to seeing believers construct a local theology. The creative dynamic includes (1) learning how to communicate the gospel in local terms on my part (*contextualization*), and (2) living out and expressing the gospel in culturally relevant and impacting ways on the insiders’ part (*inculturation*).³² In contrast, the research is an attempt to step back from that construction process and assess the local theology from the believers’ point of view, as far as that may be possible. The change on my part is from interpreting scripture for the believers to guide them in the construction of their faith, to a posture of hearing them interpret one particular part of the text as it relates to their lives. While the presentation of the passage does *shape* their theology because they are processing the significance of God’s word for themselves, the primary intent on my part is to *identify* their perspective.

An analogy of the presentation methodology would be throwing bread (the text) on the surface of a pond (the believers’ perspective) in order to identify which fish (culture texts that point to theological trajectories) come up to feed. While the external influence through the presentation must be acknowledged, the focus of the exercise is identification. The value of the presentation is how it facilitates and reveals the responses rather than how it shapes or constructs them. At the same time, the impact and bias of the ongoing insertion of the believing researcher into the context, especially one with the status of teacher and foreigner, cannot be dismissed as inconsequential. The primary concern, however, is the stimulation of a dialectical and interactive relationship between scripture and the participants’ lives in order to hear their interpretations and expressions of that relationship. As researcher, I am not disinterested and did direct the discussion towards the research topic, but in such a fashion that my interaction was non-directive with respect to the *content* of the participants’ view of the topic.

³² See 6.4.1 for the distinction between contextualization and inculturation.

1.4.3.3.1 Validating Text Presentation within a Qualitative Research Model

The presentation of a scripture text is somewhat unusual in this type of research,³³ however, it was not only a necessary stimulus in order to guide the conversation into a productive direction, but it was also legitimate for the following reasons.

The contrast between my change agent orientation and interpretivist role is in the use I make of the biblical text. As observing participant I use the Bible with *pedagogical* intent, but in the interpretivist role the passage is an entry point into their theological reflections for the purpose of generating data. In the interview process the biblical text does influence the participants' theology; however, I am careful not to teach, correct or impose my own perspective when I interview the participants and report the believers' theological trajectories. Within the participatory paradigm, scripture is used to impact their faith and represents part of the Bible translation effort in which I have played a major role. But as researcher, I distance myself from that intent in order to observe the impact and attend to the responses.

As a change agent, I assume the Holy Spirit's working in and through the text to impact the hearers, but for research purposes I am not required to identify that influence or take it into account. Instead, I look for how the text influences the participants' existing theological categories. That is, I am not assessing the impact of the text upon the participants, but rather attending to and accepting the participants' responses to the text as evidence of their theological development. These expressions are generated from the participants voluntarily and spontaneously. The role of the translated text is to *stimulate* those responses, not to *dictate* them.

This presentation of a text can also be considered necessary and legitimate to guide the interview process towards the topic of interest. It is part of the "co-production" of data that involves both researcher and participants focusing on a particular issue that results in a "construction or reconstruction of knowledge more than the excavation of it" (Mason 2002:63). As a translation into the Sindhi language, the text is recognized as a legitimate part of Sindhi culture. The participants responded to the passage as Sindhi literature that communicates in an acceptable fashion requiring an intelligent response. Because the text cannot be dismissed as illegitimate on linguistic grounds, I was able to observe the process of theologizing that occurred as participants wrestled with the meaning of the passage. The Sindhi translation was considered an insider artifact, speaking into their context, even if the traditional participants did not agree

³³ Some psychological or educational research methodologies do place pictures or photos in front of subjects in order to discern their responses, for example, the Rorschach tests (Beck 1949).

with the message.

1.4.3.4 Intercultural Dialectics

The dialectical approach described by Martin *et al* (2002:3) that “emphasizes the *processual*, *relational*, and *contradictory* nature of intercultural communication” demonstrates the benefits of the research design. This study is *processual* because it considers a particular phenomenon of change occurring among the Sindhi people. It is *relational* because the research not only involves interpersonal interaction between researcher and participants, but also relates the dynamic of change in belief to traditional or mainstream perspectives. It is *contradictory* in that the goal is not to fit the observations within a logical frame of reference, but to acknowledge the complexities of change and the inevitable conflict of emotion and thought that comes with a shift in beliefs. The complexity, ambiguity and contradiction that are characteristic of worldviews are the driving force behind the process of change and the fluidity of belief and understanding that we experience.

Martin *et al*'s dialectical approach was evident throughout the interview process as people wrestled with concepts that lacked common agreement. Because we cannot fully express what we mean in definitive and unambiguous terms, we resort to culture texts: stories, personal narratives and metaphors, which have a variety of nuance and interpretation. But this approach can reveal more of the essence of the thought than analytical descriptions or the “kind of broad surveys of surface patterns which, for example, questionnaires might provide” (Mason 1996:41). This reality affirms the qualitative interview process as instrumental in generating data in the form of culture texts so that significant and productive answers to the research question can be discovered.³⁴

Of the six different intercultural dialectics Martin *et al* (2002:4-6) describe, three of them are particularly relevant for the analysis portion of this study.³⁵ The “cultural–individual” tension is evident when a person identifying with a group separates himself or herself from a practice or value that is considered part of the group’s identity. The “difference–similarities” dialectic follows from the first to distinguish between what remains the same and what is changing when

³⁴ This does not exclude *explanations* as culture texts, since they inevitably involve concepts that have their root in the culture and emerge from the narrative of the participant’s life. The concern here is to distinguish between propositional, technical discussions and the use of cultural signs and symbols in communication.

³⁵ The other three dialectics – “personal–social” (contextual roles), “Present–future/History–Past” and “Privilege–disadvantage” – while not irrelevant to the concerns of this research, are not immediately applicable.

there is a shift in loyalties. The third dialectic, the “static–dynamic,” has even greater implications for this study because it recognizes that while cultures are constantly changing, the change occurs within relatively stable patterns. In fact, without a sense of the consistent, an examination of change becomes impossible. These distinctions are evident in the analysis as part of the “mapping” process.

1.4.4 Data Analysis in the Participatory Paradigm

As Sindhis develop their own faith and understanding of their relationship to God, they communicate that perspective to each other and their faith is revealed through the practices, narratives and metaphors – *culture texts* – they use. As the interview participants interact with the biblical text, they use that same faith language even as they grapple with the new challenges of God’s revelation. Because their understanding of God has a structured discourse and vocabulary, it can be studied by an outsider. Because that language is being used to wrestle with new concepts from scripture, insight into their worldview redefinitions or theological shifts is possible. This epistemological rationale is the basis for claiming the legitimacy of generating data through interviews (Mason 1996:39-40; Creswell 2003:17). It is the participants’ interpretive expressions or culture texts that constitute the data provided during the interviews.

In the analysis, the culture texts are clustered into themes to provide a “wider resonance or generalizability” (Mason 1996:154) that also highlight contrasts between the two groups leading to the identification of theological differences. This identification is possible because the worldview aspect of faith has both collective and individual dimensions.³⁶ The collective element is seen in the common allegiance towards an expressed understanding of reality. Because worldview is established through our interactions with others, we are enculturated into a communal worldview.³⁷ At the same time, each individual has a personalized perspective and interpretation. We all go through life with unique experiences that reinforce, shape and challenge our inherited worldview. When our experiences contrast and conflict with that worldview perspective (as often happens), resolution is required in order to regain a sense of security and resonance with our perceived reality. The impact of realizing the implications of new concepts occurs within the “indicatives of history, horizon, expectation and key relationships” (Ford

³⁶ See a more developed argument of these dimensions in 6.1.

³⁷ Hofstede & Hofstede (2005:4) outline three “levels of uniqueness in Mental programming”: the universal and inherited level of human nature, the group specific and learned level of culture (i.e., *enculturation*), and the individual specific, inherited *and* learned level of personality.

1989:199), and these cannot be ignored. The presentation of the passage of scripture is an example of one such clash between an established worldview and external stimuli creating tension that demands a response to restore a sense of equilibrium. This may take the form of

- *rejection* (the experience is interpreted as conflicting with prior beliefs and therefore rejected),
- *redefinition* (the experience is manipulated and altered to be consistent with prior beliefs),
- *assimilation* (the experience is accepted and interpreted in a way that is not inconsistent with either prior beliefs or the perceived meaning of the experience), or
- *acceptance* (prior beliefs are adjusted to accommodate the new experience).³⁸

A comparison and contrast of these four possible responses from the believer and the traditional focus groups provides the means to identify a theological trajectory, after which the seven dimensions of JNJ Kritzinger's (2010) praxis matrix³⁹ are used to consider the impact of the trajectory in the context of the broader cultural setting. Attending to both participants and the broader culture reveals the *extent* of the believers' theological praxis. Missiological conclusions are then made about the theological trajectory with reference to the role of the Sindhi translation in generating culture texts, the potential for ongoing inculturation and the "fusing of horizons" between the faith of Sindhi believers and the biblical text as part of the conversion dynamic.

1.4.5 Limitations of Qualitative Research

"[To] note shortcomings alongside strengths of any human undertaking is simply to be realistic" (Schreiter 1985:15).

1.4.5.1 Limitations in Communication and Interpretation

Despite the obvious fit of qualitative research for this project, there are limitations. Because we cannot get inside the participants' heads, the channel through which their view of reality can be glimpsed is their verbal descriptions offered to disclose their perspective. Based on the assumption that all knowing is intersubjective and relational, this approach is necessary, but at the same time it is admittedly imprecise. The identification and analysis of the data is limited by (1)

³⁸ This four-fold typology is my own developed from experience and in dialogue with scholarship. For example, Kraft (1991:78-79) describes how "receptors" receive a message: *Awareness (knowledge), Interest, Evaluation, Choice, Implementation and Readjustment*, and Lochhead (1996:400) outlines four relationships of church to world demonstrating mission: *isolation, hostility, cooperation and partnership*.

³⁹ See 7.3.3 for a description of the praxis matrix.

the nature of language that cannot fully encompass the speaker's meaning, (2) the ability of the participants to articulate their thoughts, and (3) the researcher's interpretive skills and biases. The first point is a hermeneutical issue.⁴⁰ The other two will be considered here.

The limited ability of participants to adequately articulate their thoughts is due to a number of factors. First, the profound nature of the topic – relationship with God – requires metaphorical language that is by nature imaginative rather than precise or concrete. Second, ideas on the topic are likely not fully formed or rigorously understood and, therefore, may be contradictory or lack reflective formulation. The participants are not prepared beforehand concerning the topic of conversation, nor do they have opportunity to read the passage before the interview, so ignorance or insufficient reflection on the topic may result in inappropriate or irrelevant contributions. In addition, participants may be confused and uncertain about what is being asked of them and so pertinent information may not be shared. In fact, reticence to fully reveal their thoughts could be caused by a variety of influences: uncertainty, embarrassment, fear of being misunderstood, sense of societal propriety, concern about the judgmental attitudes of other participants, or lack of “talking power.”⁴¹ It is also possible that, in the interest of preserving the honor of their society, community or religion, the views expressed may not correspond with the actual practice.⁴² In a larger group, a few participants may dominate the conversation, so that others do not have opportunity to speak.⁴³ Furthermore, because of the open-ended nature of the interviews in which participants were encouraged to respond to the text, there were many possible avenues to pursue; those who responded first tended to set the direction of the conversation and some concepts may not have been expressed. Moreover, Mason (2002:63) reminds us that the interview context is dependent on the participants' ability to “verbalize, interact, conceptualize and remember.” Therefore, understandings generated in the interviews must be viewed as immediate to the context and not generalized as if they are abstract facts that exist outside of the interaction.

There is considerable “distance” or steps between the thoughts of the participants and the

⁴⁰ The nature of language is considered in 8.1.1.

⁴¹ This English phrase commonly used among Sindhis does not refer to the authority to speak, but the ability to articulate one's thoughts. It is primarily used to refer to the limitations of a second language speaker, but can apply to articulation within one's mother tongue.

⁴² In his study of Ndembu rituals, Turner (1967:19,20) maintains a distinction between the “observational” and “interpretive” material, where “interpretive” compares to the emic expressions generated in this study. He points out that often the “interpretations of informants are contradicted by the way people actually behave” (:22).

⁴³ This occurred in at least one group. One of the participants informed me later that his view was not expressed and he proceeded to give me his perspective.

final presentation by the researcher. Each of these movements from the participants to researcher's presentation creates the possibility for a less than adequate understanding:

- From the participants' perspective to their understanding of the relevance of the their perspective to the topic,
- From understanding the relevance of the topic to clarity of thought,
- From clarity of thought to articulation,
- From articulation of thought to expressing the connection with the topic,
- From articulation by participant to comprehension by researcher,
- From comprehension by researcher to translation into English,
- From translation to identification of the transcription as a culture text,
- From identification to appropriate analysis of the culture text as significant in revealing a theological trajectory,
- From identification of a theological trajectory to adequate representation and communication by the researcher.

The research design does provide significant and adequate data that can be meaningfully communicated and analyzed. However, the limitations demand humility and carefulness in interpreting the data and drawing conclusions – humility because we can only understand in part and carefulness because there are many ways to misunderstand.

1.4.5.2 Sampling

Separate focus groups of Sindhi believers and Sindhi Muslims from a traditional perspective were engaged in an interview process.⁴⁴ Those in the traditional group were Sindhi Muslim men who are part of the local Sindhi context. They are not believers in the sense used in this thesis and consider themselves rooted in the traditional faith of the society. Focus groups are “a small group of people whose response to something... is studied to determine the response that can be expected from a larger population” (Merriam–Webster 2011). This research methodology is a form of “theoretical sampling” which selects “groups or categories to study on the basis of their relevance to [the] research questions, [the] theoretical position, and analytical framework, [the] analytical practice, and most importantly the explanation or account which [is being developed]” (Mason 1996:94). It is assumed that the selection of Sindhis from a Muslim background, whether

⁴⁴ The interview process is described in 2.1.1. Although over half of the participants were interviewed individually, the terminology of “group” is used throughout to refer to the participants' orientation as believer or traditional.

believers or holding to a traditional perspective, has theoretical meaning for the broader society. Because theological trajectories are mapped using the data generated from these focus groups, the trajectories have relevance for other segments of Sindhi society, even though there may not be the same faith commitment.

The participants of the focus groups represent only a small sampling of Sindhi society. Practical limitations because of time, geographical distance, and sheer numbers mean that “the quest for universal explanation is elusive” (Ratcliff 1994:4) leaving little room for generalizations. At best, a reasonable explanation of the phenomenon is presented that exhibits few exceptions and is consistent with available data. Moreover, the sampling is done at a specific moment in time. It is a snapshot of a few Sindhis at a particular point in their life and at one moment in Sindhi history. Culture and societies are constantly in flux (an important assumption of the research question!) and even as participants express their thoughts, they are simultaneously being changed and shaped by the conversation. As Ratcliff (1994:4) expresses it, “Because everyday life is a continual process of ongoing symbolization, concepts used tend to have boundaries that are marked by vagaries.”

The result of this study is a “thin description,” to use Geertz’s (1973:5,6) terminology,⁴⁵ of both the Sindhi people and the believers’ faith. The data results should not be extrapolated as comprehensive of Sindhis as a whole, nor as a complete description of the cultural shift that is occurring. Nonetheless, the emic shift among a few Sindhi people is evident and finds expression both verbally and by the actions of those involved. The modest goal of this research is to examine one aspect of that shift which, while representative of the social dynamic, is not exhaustive.

1.4.6 Validation of the Methodology

Despite these limitations, this method of generating culture texts is valid and profitable. People are meaning-makers and it is worthwhile to study their expressions of meaning because those expressions give us a window into their world, inviting us to view life from their perspective. Because the expressions are intended to be – and are accepted by others – as *meaningful*, they are suitable as data. From a critical realist standpoint, it is assumed that these culture texts *truthfully* and *sufficiently* (but not comprehensively or with full detail) represent their perspective, even though there is no means to test that assumption. What can be stated with *confidence*, rather than *certainty*, is that the data adequately represents their expressed perspective. That is, their public

⁴⁵ See 7.6.1 for an exploration of Geertz’s concept as it relates to this thesis.

contribution, which they profess as their understanding, has been recorded and interpreted with integrity and, therefore, stands as a true representation of one cultural aspect of a particular segment of Sindhi society.

The claim is not that the expressions of the interview participants directly correspond to the understanding of Sindhi believers not involved in the project. Rather, as members of Sindhi society, the participants' reading of the text and the way they are impacted *resonates with* other believers because they belong to a similar context. Although other believers may not be in full agreement with the theological trajectory of the participants, they would be able to recognize those perspectives as fitting with Sindhi concerns. They can understand and reflect on the expressed beliefs and actions of the participants, relate the contributions of the participants to their common context, and address the beliefs in a relevant way so that those expressions of faith can be clarified, corrected or enhanced.

Many of the limitations can be controlled through a series of checks and balances. The focus group interviews take place as a lengthy conversation. Rather than disconnected thoughts or ideas, like a series of bullet points, a conversation consists of interactions that correct and clarify. People respond to one another, agree or disagree, explain, provide examples, and ask questions. Each additional comment gives listeners another point of reference drawing them towards mutual understanding that is independent of the participants' *acceptance* of any conclusion as true. The conversation dynamic provides the opportunity for participants to clarify the points they have made and to defend their validity against any misunderstanding. This process can be compared to the method of triangulation in surveying; the more reference points used by a surveyor, the greater the confidence that a particular place has been correctly located.⁴⁶

My own experience in the Sindhi context is also a guide. If a participant's comment within the focus group resonated with other elements I have seen or heard, this validated the statement as a legitimate part of the Sindhi setting. If a contribution sounded odd or unclear, I was often able to immediately cross-check my understanding with other participants. Furthermore, the number of interviews allowed for confirmation of those claims or perspectives that were repeated.

The goal of the research does not reach beyond the limits of the methodology. The expectation is not to discover a fully formed and articulate theological *system*, but to indicate the

⁴⁶ This reference to triangulation needs to be distinguished from the concept of assessing a particular phenomenon through the use of different methods or data sources, an approach critiqued by Mason (1996:149) and Silverman (2005:212). My use of the term is metaphorical referring to comparisons made within the application of *one* methodology.

current direction of thought among Sindhi believers of their relationship to God as they articulate their beliefs to each other stimulated by reading a Bible text. This method of generating a response, while not give participants much time to form their answers, does encourage them to reflect on their current faith and participate in an ongoing process of theological development.

1.4.7 Overview of Thesis

The thesis is organized with the first four chapters describing the research framework, including a rationale for the methodology and explaining the research parameters. Chapters 5 to 8 describe the theoretical scaffolding that gives structure and definition for a rigorous exploration of the research question. Chapter 9 contains the data analysis and chapters 10 and 11 answer the research question, provide theological reflections and evaluate the research methodology. In this overview an explanation of how each chapter advances the research process and contributes to the overall structure of the study provides the reader with a concise reference to the thesis.

Chapter 1: *Research Design* presents the research question and discusses the purpose of this qualitative study. The phenomenon of interest that prompted the research was the observed impact of a Sindhi translation of scripture on the theological development of first generation believers among Sindhi Muslims. The research question centers on identifying theological trajectories of Sindhi believers emerging from a Muslim context through the analysis of contextual expressions generated from both believer and traditional Muslim groups as they engage a biblical text. The contrasts between the two groups' responses are used to "map" theological shifts occurring among believers. As researcher I have an observing participant and an interpretivist role. Observing participant refers to my years living among Sindhis as change agent in order to learn how they view and interact with each other, their environment and religious influences and to introduce them to the gospel message. In my interpretivist role I "step back" from seeking to directly influence Sindhis with a view to discover how they are responding to the Christian influences that have entered their world. The research question is explored through an interview process that encourages dialogue to generate culture texts and reveal how the participants engage and understand the Parable of the Two Lost Sons found in Luke 15.

Chapter 2: *Research Methodology* describes how the interviews were arranged and conducted. Believers were interviewed separately from the traditional group using the same Bible passage, the Parable of the Two Lost Sons in Luke 15, the same interview approach and a similar set of questions. My role as interpretivist researcher is examined to validate the interview dynamic

and to explain how to limit researcher influence and bias in both the data collection and analysis. The parameters of the pre-set questions are discussed to show how they encourage responses about the nature and will of God that reflect both the participants' understanding of the passage and reveal cultural assumptions, beliefs and values. Ethical considerations include sensitivity to a conversion dynamic within a Muslim setting, appropriate treatment of the participants (especially those vulnerable to persecution because of their faith commitment) and an argument for the ethical validity and importance of the methodology in terms of attending to the participants.

Chapter 3: *Rationale for the Research* considers the importance of the research and makes the case that both the phenomenon and the methodology are sufficiently significant and unique to warrant this study. Concerning methodology, the dialogical tool of active listening in an interview setting is argued for in order to attend to and identify insiders' theological development. With respect to the phenomenon, focusing on the ordinary believer as an "author of theology" both generates and affirms new expressions of faith that are shaped by interpersonal and communal influences. In addition, the relationship between a Sindhi translation of the New Testament and an emerging theology is explored. The "reader response" dynamic allows the translation to be both affirmed and critiqued since the process reveals how scripture is being interpreted and brings to light weaknesses in the text. Rationale for choosing the parable reveals the benefit of a non-confrontational story format that allows for positive engagement and avoids contentious theological arguments. A unique aspect of this study is the examination of theological shifts of believers within a Muslim people group where there is no established church.

Chapter 4: *Personal Insertion* considers the implications of my role as change agent immersed in the Sindhi setting during which I observed theological tensions and developments evident in the believers' emerging faith expressions as they engaged the Bible and allowed it to shape their thinking. An orientation to the Sindhi people is given with a description of the historical forces that have shaped their religious outlook, worldview assumptions and cultural values. The identity of Sindhi Muslims is highlighted as it relates to the religion of Islam and the influence of Sufism. The current political, economic and educational climate in the Sindh province is described. The Sindhi Muslim orientation to sacred texts and the Bible in particular is explained as well as a history of Sindhi Bible translation from which the presented passage is taken. These considerations provide the backdrop for evaluating the culture texts and identifying theological trajectories.

Chapter 5: *Terminology* describes and defines key terms such as the faith-text-context

triangle and mapping theological trajectories. An understanding of the faith–text–context dynamic that views faith in terms of worldview, values and beliefs is an essential prerequisite to follow the arguments presented in this thesis. A grasp of the meaning of mapping theological trajectories is crucial to understand the analysis.

Chapter 6: *Anthropological Assumptions* provides a theoretical basis for an outsider change agent to explore diversity and change within a foreign cultural context and to contextualize a message such as through the process of Bible translation. Contextualization as the work of the outsider is distinguished from inculturation as the act of the insider. Based on the claim that this research project is an exploration of an ongoing conversion journey occurring among Sindhi believers, the phenomenon of conversion is explored including alterations in cosmology and worldview, individual versus group conversions and theological shifts in the Islamic world. A metaphor of covenant describing conversion as a change of allegiance is the framework that enables theological trajectories to be considered. The significance of culture texts, metaphorical language and the concept of “perspectives of God” for this research project is discussed.

Chapter 7: *Theological / Epistemological Assumptions* begins with a consideration of the *missio Dei*, the act of God to bring redemption to all people groups, an act that initiates theological trajectories. God speaking *into* human contexts by speaking *through* cultural constructs provides a theological argument for the process of contextualization. Theology as praxis – an ongoing interplay between reflection and action – is considered as the driving force for theological trajectories. Kritzinger’s (2010) praxis matrix is used to explore outsider missionary insertion into the Sindhi context to reveal background interaction that was a catalyst to Sindhi believers’ theological development. Narrative theology is argued for as appropriate to express the revelation of God in relation to the experiences of life. Culture texts generated in the research are an articulation of narrative theology that considers faith in a contextually sensitive and holistic manner. A rationale is provided for the importance of local theologies as a product of the dialogue between faith, text and context leading to a unique perspective of God. Documented examples of this dynamic are discussed along with a consideration of theoretical models of local theologies. The chapter concludes by outlining a critical realist epistemology that legitimizes theological trajectories through the affirmation that the perspectives of human beings are authentic but limited expressions of reality.

Chapter 8: *Hermeneutical / Translation Assumptions* proposes that communication occurs

as a covenant between interlocutors. Meaning is located in speaker and hearer and messages are communicated through semiotic and social dynamics. Communication theory principles are applied to written texts to explore the faith–text tension in terms of how the text “reads” us. The dynamics of Bible translation are considered and three separate interpretive stages of the biblical message are identified – translation, theological development and mapping – which have corresponding hermeneutical stances. Believers develop theological trajectories “in front of the translated text” and the researcher attempts to interpret or “map” their theological development. The concept of the “hermeneutical spiral” within Christian community is used to describe the dialogical dynamic of theological development. Because mapping theological trajectories is a hermeneutical process, the researcher can evaluate culture texts generated by believers and contrast them to traditional faith stances in order to identify their changing perspectives of God. An exegetical overview and a consideration of translation issues of the parable presented in the interviews is provided based on the assumption that the message perceived from the text by the believing readers must reflect the intended meaning in order to be a *biblical* theology. Teleological considerations express the hope that evangelical change agents will reflect upon the impact of their actions through this research methodology as they explore the emerging theological praxis of those to whom they are ministering.

Chapter 9: *Analysis of Interviews* identifies culture texts from the interviews and uses clustering criteria and the consideration of genre to categorize them into six themes. The contextual legitimacy of the culture texts is determined by considering four validating factors. Each theme is described with the comments of believer and traditional groups kept separate in order to facilitate the identification of contrasting theological perspectives. The themes are (1) *God is compassionate/kind/merciful/loving beyond our imagination*, (2) *God forgives those servants who repent*, (3) *Concepts of rewards, punishment and the fear of God*, (4) *The relationship of human beings with God (child versus servant)*, (5) *Issues of justice, honor and status*, and (6) *The importance of obedience to God*.

Chapter 10: *Theological Shift* identifies one primary theological trajectory of Sindhi believers from the interview data, a shift from a *master–servant* to a *father–child* paradigm. This trajectory is identified from theme 4, *the relationship of human beings with God*, as the dominating trajectory that encompasses the shifts evident in the other five themes. Two diverse narratives of God in Islam – God as cruel and terrifying from the believers’ perspective and God as trustworthy and gracious from the traditional group’s view – are explored to clarify the impact

of the trajectory for the believers. Five characteristics of God – God as *Father, just, forgiving, love* and *redeemer* – drawn from the data describe the content of the trajectory. Three shifts – *religious, relational* and *christological* – reveal the motivational dynamic behind the trajectory. Kritzinger's (2010) praxis matrix is used to evaluate the breadth and depth of the trajectory.

Chapter 11: *Conclusions* argues for the missiological significance of the research including (1) The value of theological trajectories to explore Christian conversion and the development of contextual theologies, (2) The importance of the research methodology to identify theological trajectories and (3) The benefits of researching theological trajectories to the task of Bible translation. Issues for further research are considered including (1) exploring the identified trajectory further by revisiting the same passage with different parameters or participants, (2) pursuing other possible trajectories among Sindhis and (3) using the research methodology in other cultural contexts.

CHAPTER 2. Research Methodology

Research Methodology explains how the interviews were arranged and conducted, develops the interpretivist posture of the researcher, provides a rationale for the biblical passage, describes the criteria by which the data was identified and concludes with two ethical considerations: the sensitivity required to deal with such a volatile topic as religious change in a Muslim context and the ethical treatment of the participants during and after the interview process.

2.1.1 Interviews

Following the process outlined in my (Naylor 2004:45-49) Masters dissertation, I observed and guided conversations with focus groups for the purpose of generating expressions of culture texts in response to a Bible passage. The assumption is that the message of the text resonates with their faith on some level, calling for a response. The Parable of the Two Lost Sons (Lk 15:11-32) was read aloud with an invitation for the participants to express their understanding with the goal of generating culture texts that reveal their values and beliefs.

Each interview followed the same basic pattern:

- Gathering of participants at a specific time and place
- Introductions and greetings
- Serving of tea
- Explanation of the purpose for meeting (to collect data for a research project) and the process that would be followed
- Start recording
- Reading of passage
- Initiating question
- Exploratory questions and dialogue
- Believers only: Specific questions concerning change in faith
- End recording
- Permissions given and received to end time together

Twenty-one interviews were held in the Sindhi language in seven cities of the Sindh province of Pakistan during the month of March 2009.⁴⁷ Five of these interviews were from the traditional group with a total of 20 participants; sixteen were from the believer group with a total

⁴⁷ Due to my travel schedule for Bible translation, I made arrangements to complete all of the interviews during a one month trip in March 2009.

of 28 participants. Twelve of the interviews involved only one participant; nine included two or more participants. In the following chart, “+” indicates the presence of a host who was not part of the interview, yet would occasionally interject questions or attempt to clarify the answers of those being interviewed. Their contribution was accepted as part of the context that serves to shape the participants’ perspective. However, it is only the culture texts of the participants that are included as data. When citing quotes from the interviews, the initial(s) of the speaker is provided as well as the interview number and indication whether this is a believer “B” or traditional “T” group interview, for example, “GS (Interview 14T).”

Table 2 *Interviews Conducted*

No.	Date	Place	Group	No. of participants
1	March 3/09	Hyderabad	Traditional group	1+
2	March 3/09	Hyderabad	Traditional group	1+
3	March 4/09	Hyderabad	Believer	1
4	March 4/09	Hyderabad	Believer	1
5	March 4/09	Hyderabad	Believer	2+
6	March 5/09	Hyderabad	Believer	1
7	March 13/09	Jacobabad	Believer	7+
8	March 14/09	Rohri	Believer	2
9	March 14/09	Rohri	Believer	1+
10	March 14/09	Rohri	Believer	1
11	March 14/09	Rohri	Believer	1+
12	March 16/09	Shikarpur	Believer	2+
13	March 19/09	Shikarpur	Believer	1+
14	March 21/09	Khanpur	Traditional group	6
15	March 22/09	Shikarpur	Believer	1
16	March 22/09	Shikarpur	Believer	2+
17	March 23/09	Shikarpur	Traditional group	2+
18	March 28/09	NaoDero	Believer	3
19	March 28/09	NaoDero	Believer	1
20	March 29/09	Larkana	Traditional group	10
21	March 29/09	Larkana	Believer	1

2.1.1.1 Qualifications of Participants

The participants, whether members of the believer focus group or the traditional focus group, were Sindhis from a Muslim background.⁴⁸ Of particular interest were those believers involved in household churches,⁴⁹ as this is the most stable expression of the emerging church among the

⁴⁸ R (Interview 6B) describes his conversion not as a shift from Islam, but from communism. Nonetheless, his family background is Sindhi Muslim, he lives within a Muslim context and his responses reflect a Sindhi Muslim rather than communist perspective.

⁴⁹ See 4.1.5.2 for a description of household churches and 4.2.2.4 for an explanation of these

Sindhi people. Using Collier's (2000:21) terminology, the relevant "cultural identity issues" are the *Sindh province of Pakistan* (geographic identity), *Sindhi* (ethnic and language identity), *Muslim* (former or current religious identity) and *believers* (orientation to the Bible). All participants come from self-identified Muslim families so that those believers who no longer consider themselves to be Muslim are first generation believers who have also been raised in a Sindhi Muslim home. In most cases I was only able to meet with the male members of these groups due to the cultural practice of strict separation of men and women who are unrelated. Even in those groups where I have a "family relationship" and can have a conversation with women, it was the men who provided the majority of the interaction. There are a few reasons why this would be so, not least of which is the patriarchal and high power distance nature⁵⁰ of the family structure that requires the leading male to act as spokesman. There were no women in the traditional group. It would be informative to study the difference between men and women's religious perspectives in Sindhi culture, but the collection of data from women would have to be done by a female researcher.

For the most part, the participants of the traditional group were not antagonistic to the Bible passage read. They all have relationships with Christians and are positive or ambivalent to the presence of Christians among them. Most are also sympathetic to the Christian scriptures, regarding them as sacred. They are not fundamentalist Muslims who consider it a virtue to argue with Christians and prove that the Bible has been corrupted, but are open to considering the merits of the message. It was not only natural that such people would be the ones willing to meet for an interview, but these were also the desirable participants who would respond openly to the scripture reading rather than being defensive, aggressive or agenda driven.⁵¹ What the research required was an honest response to the presented text according to their understanding. The intent was to have the participants engage the message, rather than dispute the legitimacy of the book. Unless influenced by the more radical groups in Pakistan, this moderate position reflects the

churches as a form of *Isa Jama'at* or "Jesus congregations."

⁵⁰ See the description of Sindhis as a high power distance culture in 4.3.4.

⁵¹ While the majority of Sindhis in my experience are tolerant of other belief systems, some Muslims demonstrate a proselytizing orientation that would not be conducive to the interview goals. For example, I recall a frustrating two hours spent in an interview with one Muslim religious leader. Even though he had agreed to be interviewed on a particular topic, he insisted on reviewing Islamic history for the entire time and only at the end informed me that at our next interview he would answer my questions. This occurred in the preparation of a paper unrelated to this thesis.

thinking of most Sindhis with whom I have been acquainted. The pervasive and moderating influence of Sufism has led to a tolerant and respectful view of the Christian and Jewish scriptures. Nonetheless, the key distinction is that those in the traditional group do not view the Bible as authoritative for them, nor is it used as a guide for their lives.

The following table provides an overview of the attitudes that the participants have towards the Bible. Believers are those who have a declared commitment towards the text as “relevant and authoritative” through which God speaks to them. Those oriented towards Sufism hold all religious texts to be relevant and sacred, but interpret them according to their particular mystical agenda and thus do not submit to them as authoritative. Those who relate to the text under the category “irrelevant but tolerated” accept the Bible as scripture, but not as relevant to them. A commonly expressed attitude is that the Bible has been superseded and Muslims need only submit to the Qur’an. For those who view the Bible as a threat, the response is usually to argue for its corruption or to disparage the message as not from God.

Table 3 *Sindhi Attitudes to the Bible*

		Attitude Towards Christian Scriptures				
Potential Participants		Types	Relevant and Authoritative	Relevant but not Authoritative	Irrelevant but tolerated	Seen as a threat
	Believer focus	Identity as previously Muslim	Yes (all)	(None)	(None)	(None)
		Identity as Muslim	Yes (all)	(None)	(None)	(None)
	Traditional focus group	Oriented towards Sufism	(None)	Yes (all)	(None)	(None)
		Identity with non-sufistic Islam but tolerant	(None)	Yes (a few)	Yes (majority)	Yes (a few)
		“Religious” Muslims	(None)	(None)	Yes (None)	Yes (None)

The shaded portion of the table refers to those who participated in the interviews. “Yes” indicates the orientations present in the Sindhi context. The comments in parentheses indicate the approximate segment of interview participants of each type who exhibited the specified attitude. The traditional group can be roughly divided into three types: those oriented towards Sufi thinking, those with a more traditional view of Islam and yet tolerant of those outside of their family who have other religious beliefs, and those who are “religious” Muslims and intolerant of other belief systems that are deemed a threat to their society. The term “religious” relates to the

Sindhi description (*mazhabi*)⁵² of those who are not only dedicated to practice their religion strictly, but are anxious to defend their beliefs against any perceived threat. People from this group were not included in the interviews since they were less likely to engage the passage in a constructive way. The majority of Sindhis would fall into the tolerant group who view the Bible as sacred but lacking relevance and authority for them. The participants' responses reflect the orientations indicated in the table and are discussed in the analysis.

The believing participants are divided into two types: those who have accepted a new identity as followers of Christ that distinguishes them from their past as Muslims and in contrast to Islam, and those who use the Bible as their primary text to hear and obey God's voice, but view their faith as developing within a broader expression of Islam.⁵³ An example of the latter are the poets connected to evangelist RM. They study the Bible as God's Word speaking to them and write songs to express the development of their faith. My translation of a portion of one of the songs is given here:

You are great, Jesus, who came to raise the dead,
You came in the form of Adam to make the weepers laugh
...
It is Jesus who opens the many closed doors,
Why, Ayaz, would you call on any other name? (RM 2009)

Some of the believers have been my friends and acquaintances for years and I am aware of their faith stance. For others, I relied on my colleagues in Pakistan to identify those who fit the criteria, described in my correspondence (Naylor 2009e) to them:

Individuals or groups of mother tongue Sindhis with a Muslim background who approach the New Testament as speaking authoritatively from God into their lives. This would be either those who have made a commitment as followers of Christ, or those who are well on their way as they are committed to listening to and obeying the NT as God speaking into their lives.

2.1.1.2 Arranging the Interviews

For both the believers' and the traditional focus groups the arrangements were "negotiated" through "gatekeepers" (Marshall & Rossman 1999:80-81) of the community. For the believers, full time Christian workers arranged interviews with individuals whom they considered fit the description of "believers." I was not granted access to some people due to the sensitivity of the

⁵² To be "religious" (Sindhi *mazhabi*) is generally considered by the more tolerant Muslims as a negative characteristic and distinct from those considered positively as "pious" (Sindhi *deendAr*).

⁵³ See 6.5.11 for a description of this dynamic and the controversy in evangelical missions.

ministry setting in Pakistan. A few interviews with personal contacts were set up by me. While some believers were members of an *Isa Jama'at* (Jesus congregation),⁵⁴ others were unconnected to any organized group. For the traditional group, acquaintances from the Sindhi community and Christian workers facilitated the arrangements with Muslim men as interviewees. The interviews with believers were done separately from the traditional group in order to ensure a safe environment for the believers in which they would be willing to reveal their perspective.

In order to set up the interviews, I sent emails to my contacts in both English and Sindhi informing them of the research and the dates when I would be available, and asked them to arrange the meetings. I assured them that I would take care of any and all expenses, especially because they would take place in private residences and require the customary hospitality of tea and snacks. The interview arrangements were generally comfortable and relaxing, creating an environment conducive to pleasant conversation.

Because of the level of trust the interviewees have with my contacts or with me, the interviews were generally open and honest. One exception was an interview conducted in a hospital room with other relatives present. It was uncomfortable and the responses were guarded. Because of this dynamic, one of my contacts recommended that, for the traditional group, I “not meet with more than 1 or 2 at a time. Our experience has been that in a group setting, they are not inclined to give their own opinions so freely” (TW 2009). I did not follow this pattern consistently, however, and had two of my contacts set up traditional group interviews with men who were well acquainted with each other. In fact, due to interpersonal dynamics⁵⁵ the difficulty of openness occurred more with believers speaking within a family setting than in the interviews with the traditional group.

Twelve of the twenty-one interviews were done with individuals. This allowed for greater openness and more detailed descriptions than was possible in the group settings. However, because immediate confirmation or challenge from other participants was lacking, additional means of affirmation are required in the analysis to ensure that the thoughts expressed reflect the perspectives of others as well. The interaction and challenges of the group settings stimulated discussion in profitable directions that did not occur in the individual settings. Having both individual and group interviews was beneficial by taking advantage of these dynamics.

⁵⁴ The term “*Isa Jama'at*,” used in some Muslim countries, has been adopted by Christian workers in the Sindh. It is a variant of *Isaya Umma* (“Community of Jesus”) used in other parts of the world (Tennent 2006:102).

⁵⁵ See 2.1.1.4.2 for a description of interpersonal dynamics.

2.1.1.3 Role of Researcher

2.1.1.3.1 *The Third Theologizing Movement – the Interpretivist Orientation*

Affirming Atkinson & Hammersley's (1994:249) contention that "all social research is a form of participant observation, because we cannot study the social world without being a part of it," this research project follows the methodology of my (Naylor 2004:41) Masters dissertation with the attempt "to recognize and account for the subjective role of the researcher as a legitimate part of the process." The research takes place within a participatory paradigm since the majority of my efforts have come from a position as intentional change agent living among Sindhis.⁵⁶ Thus, even as interpretivist researcher I was not acting as a passive objective observer, but was an "integral part of the study process" (Mauch & Birch 1998:18). I strove to be a "thinking, reflexive, practitioner" (Mason 1996:8,41, 2002:66) by engaging Sindhis as an active participant with the goal of discovering how they perceive an aspect of their spiritual life. Within an interview setting, I did not merely observe, but instigated the discussion, guided the direction of the conversation, asked questions and dialogued with the participants in order to elicit culture texts that revealed their understanding of God. Nonetheless, my primary task in the interpretivist role was to *listen*, following the approach of Conde-Frazier, Kang & Parrett (2004:184) in order to "attend" to the participants' comments:

Attending begins with an attitude of openness that enables us to set aside our preoccupations in order to turn our attention to others. This is followed by a response. We may respond for the purpose of clarification or for checking the accuracy of what we have understood. A deeper response involves an awareness of what something means from the point of view of the one who shared it. Attending, therefore, includes the ability to listen accurately and to respond with accurate understanding.

In a sense, my role in this research project corresponds to my role as supervisor of the Sindhi Bible translation project. I am at the hub of the project. I bring together competent Sindhis who can create acceptable Sindhi texts, the scholarship of experts who exegete the meaning of the original text, and the insights of those who guide the translation process. I provide the setting and orchestrate the interaction for the purpose of "attending" to the translation suggestions created by the other members of the team. I then compare the meaning of the Sindhi text against the standard of the original facilitating a dialogue between the scholarship and the Sindhi team members in order to create an adequate and equivalent meaning in Sindhi. Similarly, in my interpretivist role, I instigate the conversation, establish the parameters for discussion, and "attend" to the comments

⁵⁶ See 1.4.2 for a description of the change agent role.

of the participants in order to identify those culture texts that reveal their theological perspectives. I then compare the results between the believers and the traditional group for contrasts in meaning. However, the comparison ends there. In Bible translation, the aim is to *shape* the text to conform to the meaning of the original text. For the research, the goal is reached with the *identification* of a contrast that indicates a theological trajectory. In Bible translation the original text determines the meaning, in the research the participants provide the meaning according to their perspective.

Three separate theologizing movements can be identified from my time in the Sindh. In the first movement I enter the Sindhi world as *observing participant* and learn to view and experience reality from their perspective. The Sindhi insiders who express and live out their beliefs impact my theological development as outsider.⁵⁷ This movement is ongoing and encompasses the second and third movements which have distinct emphases. In the second movement, I am a change agent seeking to influence Sindhis by the insertion of God's word through Bible translation, which has as its ultimate goal an adequate representation in Sindhi of an outsider text. I also stimulate Sindhis to develop a compelling interpretation of that sacred text as a contextualized theology. Insiders and outsiders cooperate to access the meaning of God's revelation for Sindhis, by Sindhis and according to Sindhi patterns. As Kritzinger (2011) suggests, my facilitating role at this stage could be described "like the 'maieutic' (midwifing) method associated with Socrates: helping to let a community 'give birth' to their own theology." In the third movement, as *interpretivist* researcher, I step back from my role as change agent in order to assess the impact of the second movement. Rather than seeking to *influence* Sindhis, I engage the participants in order to *attend* to the emerging expressions of faith as believers address a passage of scripture. As insiders wrestle with the meaning of God's Word for their lives they reveal their faith perspective and take another step in the development of a local theology. The theologizing movements can be added to the roles and purpose chart.⁵⁸

⁵⁷ The impact on the outsider change agent relates to *interculturalization* discussed in 3.1.2.2.

⁵⁸ See 1.4.2 for original chart.

Table 4 *Roles and Purposes in Participatory Paradigm (adjusted)*

Date	Role	Context	Purpose	Theologizing Movements
1985-present	Observing Participant	Sindhi Society	Learn language and culture/develop relationships	Insiders impact Outsider's theological development
1989-present	Change Agent	Bible Translation into Sindhi	Provide Sindhi Muslims access to the Bible/stimulate spiritual transformation	Insiders and Outsiders work together towards a Sindhi contextualized theology
March 2009	Interpretivist Researcher	Interviews with Sindhis	Generate expressions of faith in order to identify theological trajectories	Insiders express and shape their own faith

2.1.1.3.2 Researcher Impact in Data Collection

Even though all three roles are distinct, there is overlap since my influence in each carries over into the others. For example, there are unavoidable subjective factors stemming from my observing participant role that affect the sampling process of the qualitative interpretivist dynamic (cf. Ember & Ember 2001:73). The participants were chosen from my places of former residence, through the friends and connections I have developed, according to my ability to ask for favors based on those relationships, and the coincidental availability of willing participants that fit my limited schedule. The settings reflect the places where I used to do my work and the “third places” (Oldenburg 2002:2) outside of home and work where men interact. The questions I asked were based on my experience and knowledge of Sindhis. I know what draws them out and facilitates discussion, sometimes intuitively.

Even though these cultural interactions and insights contain a subjective element that impacts the research, they also ensure relevance and enable appropriate treatment of the participants. Schreiter (1985:4) warns that theology should not take place without careful cultural analysis: “Without such an initial analysis, a theology readily can become either irrelevant or a subtle tool of ideological manipulation.” My extensive interaction with Sindhis as observing participant gives me insight into the culture that helped prevent inappropriate comments and control during the interviews. Because of my familiarity with Sindhis and the ability to converse fluently, I was able to identify and attend to the concepts that are of concern to them without manipulating or overriding their contributions. This was underscored by my intentional interpretivist orientation during the interviews. Since my role was to *discover* rather than *determine* the participants' theology, I intentionally avoided having my own agenda so that their perspective would not be influenced. The participants were approached as grassroots theologians

who read the text with their own cultural lenses in place.

The interviews were done in the Sindhi language, my second language. Although I have been learning Sindhi since 1985, including 14 years immersed in the culture, and am sufficiently fluent that I comfortably spend days interacting with my translation team entirely in Sindhi, there are still some topics, idioms and communication subtleties that escape my full comprehension. Apart from these language limitations, there are also cultural assumptions, experiences and common knowledge with which I am unfamiliar. The variability and diversity of intercultural communication occasionally limits my ability to understand or relate naturally. Schreier (1985:41) warns that it

is part of the larger problem of one's own ethnocentricity, namely, to what extent can a person ever fully understand someone else's culture? The turns of language, the infrequently invoked custom, the full freight of a metaphor – all of these can confound a foreigner, even one who has spent many years in a culture.

Dodd (1998 [1982]:4) adds that differences “in communication and social style, world view, customs, expectations, rules, roles, and myths illustrate a few of the elements that explain how culture shapes the communication process.” Furthermore, communication has both content and relationship dimensions because “intercultural communication assumes not only the message, but the social relationship associated with an interaction” (:21). Struggles in both of these dimensions were evident during the interviews and may have led to “biased perceptual distortion (misobservation)” (Greenberg & Folger 1988:125) on my part. Sometimes the participants could not grasp my line of questioning because what seemed natural to me did not resonate with them. Sometimes people were intimidated because I am an educated foreigner. In Sindhi culture there is a desire to please the teacher⁵⁹ and so if I was viewed as a teacher there was a sense of urgency to give the “right” answer. Greenberg & Folger (1988:122) caution that without proper precautions, “the responses of subjects might be biased by unintended, unconscious cues emanating from an experimenter.” Despite the best efforts of the researcher to exhibit a neutral stance such a possibility always exists, particularly at the beginning of an interchange when the participant is exploring the parameters of the interview. Once participants were convinced of the honest intent to elicit their beliefs through my affirmations of the validity of their contributions and once they

⁵⁹ The intensity of the teacher/student relationship is illustrated in my (Naylor 2004:71-74,86-87) Masters dissertation by the negative reaction of the interview participants to Peter’s refusal to let Jesus wash his feet. See further detail in 3.1.2.

began to interact with each other in familiar dialogue,⁶⁰ they appeared to be sufficiently comfortable to provide their own answers and perspectives. This was especially evident in the expressions of their life and context, topics on which they were the “experts.”

2.1.1.3.3 Researcher Impact in Data Analysis

Cultural sensitivity is also required at the analysis stage in order to identify, interpret and classify – further subjective elements – the culture texts through which the participants’ theology is revealed. Based upon the proposed communication theory,⁶¹ a key assumption is that meaning can be drawn from the participants and translated through a number of steps until finally appearing as analyzed and authentic conclusions. As the outsider who established the parameters used to guide the research, I also orchestrated the interviews, chose, interpreted and sorted the data, and eventually presented the written results with a claim that they adequately represent an emerging theology of Sindhi believers. With Rottenburg (2003:35), I do not want to pretend that “the crossover [of meaning] is safe in the sense that the message is not *transformed* but simply *transferred*.” However, as researcher I am responsible to take steps to prevent this *transformation* from becoming an unreliable or misleading *distortion*. The culture texts identified as evidence of theological constructs are compared to and contrasted with similar comments made in other interviews, affirmed through dialogue within each interview and weighed against the broader Sindhi culture through my own experiences living in this context. While this validation process ensures that the conclusions do maintain fidelity with the intentions of the participants, the value of the analysis is in *seeing through the data* to the image of God that is emerging for the Sindhi believers. At that stage, tension is maintained between an intuitive leap towards that image and ensuring appropriate correspondence with the observations gained from the interviews.

The transcription of the interviews was impacted by the reality that Sindhi is my second language. During the interviews I did not always explore unfamiliar concepts, relying instead on the context to draw out and respond to the meaning. However, during transcription I was able to research idioms and vocabulary from the recorded interviews that gave me a greater appreciation for the nuances and subtleties of meaning. Nonetheless, while confident that the transcriptions are an adequate and sufficient depiction of the interviews, there are undoubtedly aspects that have been less than satisfactorily represented. One weakness of the interview recordings was that a few

⁶⁰ Nine of the interviews included two or more participants, see 2.1.1.

⁶¹ See 8.1.2 and 8.1.3 for communication theory.

words were not clear and could not be understood or transcribed with confidence. Some comments seemed irrelevant or enigmatic upon review but it was impossible to revisit the comments with the person to determine their intent. Furthermore, since communication is more than speech, some of the interview dynamic was compromised through my reliance upon the recording. An interview involves living, breathing, interacting participants and cannot be reduced to a transcription without loss (cf. Mason 1996:53).

2.1.1.3.4 Limiting Researcher Bias

Because of the subjective nature of qualitative analysis, researcher bias can be a main source of error (Mouton 2001:150). Observers enter the research process “with a whole constellation of commitments, class attitudes, economic and career anxieties, defense mechanisms and rationalizations, all of which are able to blind us” (Wink 1973:45). Mason (1996:52) comments,

however 'objective' you try to be in your records, you are continually making judgments about what to write down or record, what you have observed, heard and experienced, what you think it means.... it would be naïve to suggest that researchers do not use their memories and unwritten interpretations from time to time in their analyses.

My orientation as change agent in a Sindhi setting, my theological position, my prior experience with and insertion into the Sindhi context, my interests and biases, my personal perspective and investment in how God’s Word should impact Sindhi believers, as well as my exposure to and analysis of the interaction of Islam and Christianity within the Sindhi context all affect, both positively and negatively, my ability to assess and communicate the results of the data.

This reality necessitates considerable self-awareness or “reflexivity” (Creswell 1998:9), not to *eliminate* subjectivity, but to *monitor* and *reduce* the impact I am making upon the generation of data. The fact that I am seeking theological understanding means that I am simultaneously, and inevitably, *influencing* that understanding. This awareness does not undermine the validity of the study but places it appropriately within the reality of daily experience. Seeking objectivity, we lose the intersubjective reality that makes up life. I am examining theology, not as abstract concepts, but as a dialectical process between living subjects and a sacred text. Recognizing the subjectivity of my initiating and guiding as an integral part of the process, I acted in a systematic and reflective way. I exercised care consistently throughout the interview, transcription and analysis stages so that any representation of the data would be recognizable and acceptable to the participant quoted.

My motive is a key factor in understanding the nature of the interaction during the

interviews. The interview questions were raised in a context of reading scripture together; I was a participant with the others in listening and responding and am also a “believer.” I have an underlying desire to see God’s revelation make an impact in the lives of others, even as it impacts my life. However, at that time, what I desired most was to discover a true *inculturation* which is neither syncretism⁶² nor “translation” (Schreier 1985:7). The former is a critical loss of the gospel message, the latter refers to the outsider’s cultural expression of the gospel that replaces or dominates Sindhi expressions and understandings. I believe that *contextualization* (a faithful expression of the gospel by the outsider) should initiate *inculturation* (an authentic reflection of Christ-centered Sindhi culture created by Sindhis). Thus, as *interpretivist* interviewer, I am careful to listen and discover, rather than to impose or correct. I want to test and learn, rather than shape and teach.

Similar to the research procedure for my (Naylor 2004:43) Masters dissertation the interviews were (1) outsider initiated, (2) carried out with the guidance and participation of an outsider, (3) recorded using a digital recorder and (4) described in notes taken by the researcher. While these foreign dynamics shaped the interaction, a conscientious attempt was made to limit researcher bias when culture texts were elicited. The boundaries concerning the topic were carefully delineated, but within those boundaries a listening process was adhered to that allowed participants to freely express their views. Supplemented with the written notes, the recorded data was transcribed and translated faithfully into English in a written format. While choosing, sorting and analyzing the culture texts, the attempt was made to set aside my prejudgments or “bracket” (Creswell 1998:52) my experiences, a discipline that Wink (1973:24) refers to as a “special *askesis* [spiritual discipline of suppressing desire] laid upon the analyst” in order to empathize with the argument of the participants. This requires integrity and “sensitivity to the danger of prejudging and ‘correcting’ the responses given” (Naylor 2004:44). The researcher

must attempt to withdraw his projections, overcome his defenses, achieve sympathetic penetration of the text in its otherness, and restore genuine distance through interpretation. It is this ‘otherness’ in its fascination and mystery which requires protection against subjectivism, propagandistic exploitation, projected self-understandings, and all the other ways we generally fail to hear and see the other in its otherness (Wink 1973:24).⁶³

⁶² See 5.13 for a description of syncretism as a “distortion” of (Taber 1991:154) or deviation from the original tradition as viewed by those belonging to that tradition.

⁶³ Although referring to the interpretation of a text, Wink’s comments are valid for qualitative analysis.

Throughout the research decisions were required that inevitably shaped the outcome. The topic and passage chosen for presentation reflects my theological and epistemological bias. According to my understanding, the passage captures an aspect of Jesus' salvation that is particularly relevant to Muslims since the image of God as Father⁶⁴ contrasts the focus on God as Master (Sindhi *mAlik*) and the unknowability of God in Islam. As I interacted with the participants, my goal was not to critique their exegetical accuracy but to discover how their orientation towards the scriptures shapes their interpretation of the passage and reveals their view of God. Nonetheless, the impact of this act was that I encouraged certain responses and discouraged others which altered the direction of the conversation. When I interpreted and evaluated their input during the analysis, I did so according to the pre-established values of my research question. I also determined which contributions were legitimate and how the data should be prioritized. However, because these decisions did not compromise the data but facilitated the goals of this project, these actions are not only acceptable but necessary. As long as I can demonstrate that the responses of the participants speak to the declared purpose of the research and also transparently represent the participants' perspective, the integrity of the process is maintained.

Schreier (1985:40) notes that it "is clear that any study of culture has a perspective and particular interest." This perspectival approach is both a strength and a weakness. It is a strength because, by its nature, research is never disinterested, and in this case it has a Christian concern to hear how God is speaking into a culture through scripture. But there is also inherent weakness because the priority given to the research question may result in an inadequate reading of the participants' comments. For example, it is assumed that the perspectives of the believers will be evidently different from those who are not believers. In such a scenario "human nature is likely to lead [the] researcher to *find* significant differences and to attribute those differences to his or her *a priori* categories... whether they really fit or not" (Scollon *et al* 2001:267). Therefore, when analyzing the data I must entertain the possibility that assumed contrasts may not exist.

Secondly, not only might I impose non-existent contrasts, but I may also ignore relevant comments. The nature of the topic – the participants' view of God – as well as the parable genre, introduces subjective analysis on the part of all the participants. This is intentional since the point

⁶⁴ Titles such as "Father" and "Master" when referring to God have been capitalized to indicate the unique and superlative relationship that is indicated.

of the research is to identify changes in their theological outlook.⁶⁵ As researcher, I also am drawn into making choices and contrasts based on my background, convictions and perspective as I interact with the participants in the interviews and assess their comments during the analysis. Therefore, I tend to emphasize and follow up on issues that I have identified as relevant theological points with the result that legitimate perspectives raised by others may be ignored. Because this is a cross-cultural analysis, it is easy to assume that categories from my own culture must also be valid for Sindhis. “Even the best intentioned person can misinterpret a cultural situation because of unconscious categories at work” (Schreier 1985:41). As researcher, I must be disciplined to mitigate this danger by attending to Sindhis’ interaction with the text and each other, as well as reporting their responses as accurately as possible. Fortunately, my extensive experience living among Sindhis makes me sensitive to my cultural biases and my exposure and experience in the Sindhi language, enhanced by years in Bible translation, has provided me with skills to understand many of the subtleties and nuances that indicate cultural divergence.

The questions I used to guide the dialogue also reflect my personal preferences and priorities. Although commenting on seminar leaders, Wink (1973:86) provides two ways to counteract the tendency to control the content of a dialogue: the motive of the questions and the posture of the researcher. As to motive, it is important to “ask questions which are known to bring out responses contrary to one's own conviction.” By taking this step, the researcher ensures that control of the content has been relinquished and others have freedom to express their thoughts. As an application of this discipline, I did not use leading questions to elicit specific answers, but crafted them to serve as keys to open their thoughts and encourage them to first make a connection between the text and their lives, and then to give expression to that relationship. Wink’s second way to counteract personal preferences is the essential posture of humility, to be convinced that “new insights and dynamisms will come through” with each interview. Without that expectation and humility, the interview process would have been tedious, frustrating and lacking in validity.

Expectations of what type of contribution would be helpful created a bias both consciously and unconsciously so that I valued certain people’s input over others. I also tend to judge people

⁶⁵ Changes in theological outlook can be expressed in a number of ways. Singing as an act of worship, personal prayer in Jesus’ name, the practice of baptism and the Lord’s Supper are examples that provide Sindhi believers an identity as Christ followers and a means of expressing their faith. This research is limited to verbal descriptions as participants consider a passage of scripture. Nonetheless, some of these practices were mentioned in the interviews.

by their appearance, their ability to communicate and by their attitude, which necessitated a greater level of self-awareness and willingness to discipline my biases. Since I had recorded and transcribed the interviews, I was able to limit this weakness by reflecting on the interaction in the interviews a number of times to make sure I did not inappropriately dismiss a worthwhile comment. At the same time, the recordings and transcriptions are only partial reconstructions of the interviews (Mason 2002:77) and I have to avoid the temptation of imagining more than can be legitimately claimed.

There were contradictions in statements made between the participants during the interviews, and sometimes made by a single participant within a lengthy dialogue. Some comments may appeal more to the goal of the research question, but if they are contradicted by other culture texts, the contradictions need to be taken into account to ensure appropriate disclosure of variety in the data. Attending to these conflicting comments prevents the researcher from introducing unwarranted bias caused by allowing one expression to have undue influence or preference over the identification and interpretation of other culture texts.

As one aspect of being attentive to the participants, I tried to discern the unstated motives behind their input: Are they feeling uncomfortable or threatened? Do they feel a need to defend Islam? Have they become irritated at another person's comment and, therefore, are responding stronger than they would have otherwise? In order to understand sufficiently, I do not take every comment at face value but consider other dynamics that may be moving the person to respond the way they did. In essence, I am constructing a more complex meaning from what they said by taking into account other possible factors. The intuition involved may be correct and important to understand the significance of a participant's comments. On the other hand, it may introduce some distortion which can be mitigated to a certain extent by acknowledging both the comments at face value and introducing other possible interpretations or motives. Although it is not possible to be certain whether an assessment is correct, at least a margin of error is explicitly stated that allows for greater confidence in the conclusions.

In the transcription stage I reconstruct the interview setting in my mind in order to evaluate the significance and impact of the comments. The meaning and intensity is discerned from the non-verbal cues of the speaker, as well as from the words spoken, and is observed from the singular perspective of the interviewer. The end product is a faithful representation of the interviews, but this process is interpretive. While the general meaning of a participant's comments may be easy to convey, the nature of the transcription can misrepresent or hide the emphasis

intended by the speaker. The subtle tones in speech that indicate uncertainty, conviction or emphasis are often difficult to represent. While the transcript does reflect the broken grammar, incomplete sentences and idiomatic phrasing found in conversation, the translation is not strictly formal or word-for-word, but represents the meaning of the speaker taking into account the non-verbal cues. In addition, some speakers stumbled in their answers and, in the interest of providing readable data, their sentences are given in a smooth and free-flowing manner that, while representing the intended communication, does not fully reflect the brokenness of the actual speech. Furthermore, in conversation there tends to be much repetition and that has been edited for ease of reading. Repetition in written script can be mistaken as emphatic, whereas in a spoken interchange there are other reasons why a person may repeat something and those present in the conversation can read the non-verbal cues hidden from the reader of the transcript. For example, the participant in interview 21B has a speech impediment and stutters. In one comment he was particularly moved by the father's immediate response to the son's return and repeated the word "*hikdum*" (immediately) several times. Part of the repetition was due to his stutter, part due to the emphasis he intended to make and part because of a struggle to find the best way to make his point. The transcription provides the word "immediately" only once as sufficient to communicate the emphasis intended. While this does not fully represent the dynamic of the conversation, neither would a formal⁶⁶ word-for-word transcription, and a written code for each stutter could be misinterpreted or distract the reader rather than inform. Silverman (2005:222) argues that even apparently trivial aspects, such as pauses and interruptions can affect the comments and thus shape the data; however, a formal representation would likely fail to communicate their significance. Even as word-for-word Bible translations can fail to communicate the message in contrast to common language versions, the choices made in transcribing the interviews, including creative representations of "trivial aspects," were made with the intention to communicate the meaning in the best possible way.

The implications and nuances of certain Sindhi terms were difficult to represent in English. Where the Sindhi term is crucial to the intent of the speaker and the English translation is lacking, the transliterated Sindhi word is provided so that those working in the Sindhi context are not limited by the transcription choices.

Related to the discernment dynamic on the part of the researcher is the danger of

⁶⁶ See 5.16 for a distinction between "meaning-based" and "formal" used to describe Bible translation styles.

stereotyping.

Stereotyping is a way of thinking that does not acknowledge internal differences within a group, and does not acknowledge exceptions to its general rules or principles.... The problem is that stereotypes blind us to other, equally important aspects of a person's character or behavior (Scollon *et al* 2001:169).

My experience in the culture can work against my ability to accurately evaluate an individual's comments. I must be careful to give each person "room" to act or respond in a way counter to expectations without forcing their response to align with my assumptions. The solution to the oversimplification of stereotyping is to (1) be sensitive to the many dimensions of how Sindhis are alike and how they are different from each other and (2) remember that "no individual member of a group embodies all of his or her group's characteristics" (Scollon *et al* 2001:170).

I also need to beware of the "solidarity fallacy" (:173). I am searching for commonalities between interviews and between participants within each interview. The temptation is to find a commonality on one level and assume solidarity in other dimensions. It requires discipline to avoid erroneous interpretations that conveniently affirm my thesis or assumptions. Knowing the pitfalls is half the battle.

2.1.1.4 Interaction during Interviews

My intention as researcher was to understand the beliefs and perspectives of the participants through their voices (Mouton 2001:151). I organized interview sessions and prepared research questions that reflected a "non-causal evaluation" (Miles & Huberman 1994:24) with a focus on the participants' descriptions of their own created meaning, values and beliefs. I stimulated and guided their interaction with the text through questions that acknowledged and encouraged their responses, but did not critique or evaluate. This does not imply that the process is free from researcher bias, but that there was an intentional reception by the researcher (but not necessarily by fellow participants!) of all the data generated in a non-judgmental manner. As interviewer, my role was to (1) introduce the interview process, (2) facilitate the presentation of the parable by having someone read the passage, (3) ask initiating questions to generate responses, (4) direct the conversation so that topics remained pertinent to the research question and (5) encourage those responses that demonstrated a clear connection between the text and the participants' perception and understanding of God.

During the first week of interviews in Hyderabad I was sick with a cold. Although it did not prevent me from holding the interviews, I was not as sharp in my interactions with the

participants as I would have liked. Nonetheless, the cooperation of the participants was exemplary and they provided a number of culture texts demonstrating that they had engaged the text in a personally relevant way.

2.1.1.4.1 Introducing the Sessions

As with all formal and informal meetings in the Sindh, a series of preliminaries are required before addressing the purpose of the meeting. Greetings, arrangements for tea, and polite remarks to show personal interest formed the initial interaction. If the interview was one on one, I introduced the reason for our meeting, but when the interview took place in a larger group arranged by an acquaintance, I would wait for the host to introduce me before clarifying the purpose and process of the interviews. The introduction to the passage was the same for both believer and traditional groups. The participants were informed that a passage from the New Testament would be read to them, a story told by Jesus to illustrate a spiritual reality: “This story is from the Holy *Injil*. Jesus taught many things about God in stories. This is one of the stories about a man and his sons. I would like you to listen to this story and give me your opinion [*rai*]⁶⁷ about the description of God found in it.” The passage was read out loud by a native Sindhi-speaker from a red, hard covered copy of the Sindhi New Testament with a gold embossed arabesque design that distinguishes it as a “holy book.” In some cases, people would follow along in their own copies. This presentation of the passage was accepted as appropriate by all participants. Whether or not they acknowledged the book as *authoritative*, Muslim Sindhis recognize the New Testament as *sacred*, and this helped ensure a common environment for the reading of scripture in all the interviews.

2.1.1.4.2 Guiding the Interviews

Guidance of the interview process was accomplished through (1) a series of pre-set questions designed to initiate comments, (2) dialogue or spontaneous questions in order to achieve clarity or stimulate further discussion, and (3) summary reflections of the statements made by participants in order to elicit their affirmation or correction of my understanding. Some questions I asked as a researcher were similar to questions I ask as a Bible translator, but interaction in the interviews pursued a different course. As part of the translation process I often ask the translation team what they understand a particular verse to mean. From their response I can determine if the intended

⁶⁷ In the interview transcriptions, square brackets and italicized words are used to indicate Sindhi transliterations of key words. See further formatting explanations in 9.2.

meaning is being communicated. Similarly, in the interviews I asked questions to elicit the participants' response and understanding, but rather than explore whether or not they had grasped a predetermined meaning, my concern was to hear (1) what they believed to be the *implications* of the passage for the nature and character of God and (2) how that belief in God affected their lives.

Although a secondary interest of this project is the testing of the Sindhi translation, the issue of translation was not addressed in the interviews. The aim was to record the participants' responses to the *message* of the parable according to their understanding. I responded to their comments and guided the dialogue along lines particularly relevant to the passage, to them and to their context. I did not anticipate their comments in advance, but responded in an "*organic way*" (Mason 2002:64).

In the larger interview settings, participants helped each other by correcting misconceptions, discovering different ways of describing their beliefs, and collectively creating and affirming new meaning. People develop meaning out of social interaction, an ongoing "mental programming" (Hofstede & Hofstede 2005:3) as they dialogue with each other. Because the participants were all Sindhis they interacted well, but there was not uniform participation; personal preferences and class distinctions affected the communication dynamic. Dodd's (1998 [1982]:14) class dichotomies, referred to as "power relations" by Mason (1996:56), were reflected in the interviews and are used here to evaluate the communication dynamic.

Communication between social classes. In Pakistan class distinctions between the powerful and the dependent, the educated and the uneducated, the rich and the poor dominate social interaction. The powerful, the educated and the rich speak confidently while expecting and receiving deference from the dependent, the uneducated and the poor. This dynamic was evident in one interview dominated by a doctor who spoke often and with a tone indicating that contrary opinions were not worth considering. Fortunately, some participants were not intimidated and carried the conversation beyond the limitations the doctor sought to impose. A few of the interviews were impacted by an educated–uneducated divide. Some uneducated participants were initially intimidated by my and others' presence and became flustered at the demands on them to articulate a point of view. This was not always the case, however, and even some of those who were uncertain at first did make a contribution when they had time to reflect and realized they were not being critiqued. A further study in which social classes are interviewed separately could encourage responses that are not unduly influenced by the presence of those perceived to be of a separate class.

Rural–urban communication. This contrast was not observed between *participants* within any one interview context but between *interviews* occurring in different settings. Hyderabad is a relatively wealthy city in Pakistan and the interviews were held in either a modern room with marble floors and comfortable furniture or in a tended and private garden. In contrast, Jacobabad is poorer and an interview with one family was held in a room with a dirt floor, the seating was rough-hewn string beds and domesticated animals wandered in and out as we talked. The sophistication of the urbanites was seen in their greater attentiveness to and comfort with the interview dynamic. The presence of the digital recorder seemed unremarkable to them, whereas for the rural participants it was an unusual artifact in addition to the presence of a foreigner.

Regional communication. Some interviews were held in southern Sindh while most took place in northern Sindh. Culturally speaking, the previously mentioned two dichotomies had a far greater impact. Both northern and southern Sindhis consider themselves part of one cultural group with their identity tied to the common language and customs of the Sindh, although there are some relatively insignificant regional differences in speech. Nonetheless, the South is dominant in literary influence and education.⁶⁸

Gender communication. This dichotomy was the most impacting for the interviews. Some women refused to speak in front of their male relatives even though encouraged to do so. For example, the wife of one man acted as a catalyst when sitting with her relatives and was quite vocal in encouraging them to participate. However, when she was interviewed separately with her husband, she was deferential and uncomfortable with her answers. She spoke softly and even though he continued to encourage her to speak, she remained reserved. Except for one family, the women interviewed did not feel completely free to dialogue with me in the presence of their male relatives. Since the presence of men obviously impacted the interaction, separate interviews would have encouraged greater openness. The solution in any future study would be to have a female researcher interact with groups of women.

Family cultures. A number of interviews with believers occurred in a family setting. Apart from the dynamic of gender communication, this environment enabled a free–flow of conversation greater than in settings where people were less familiar with each other. One minor

⁶⁸ The Sindhi publication board is located in Hyderabad, the capital of Sindh in the southern part of the province. The difference in dialect is considered interesting and amusing by Sindhis rather than a cause of irritation or regional pride and seldom causes confusion. For example, a reference to oneself (“I”) is pronounced “*Au(n)*” in the south and this is the spelling generally used in Sindhi literature. However, it is more common to hear “*mah(n)*” in the northern vernacular.

difficulty was the distraction of children and household disruptions.

Another category could be added to Dodd's dichotomies: *Generational communication*. Elders in Pakistan are highly respected and younger people will defer to them and avoid contradicting them openly. Interviews with a larger number of participants were affected by this dynamic as older people were given preference to speak first. This tendency was offset by the desire of others to contribute and who were skilled enough to phrase their opinions so that their comments, even when different from the elders', were viewed as valid and acceptable.

The single participant interviews countered the negative effect of these dichotomies to some extent since participants were free to articulate their views without interference from others. Individuals seemed more inclined to share personal examples that they may have omitted in a group setting. This effect was unplanned for and not considered in the research design. While more personal anecdotes were generated in this format, the difference in the *content* between individual and group interviews was relatively minor.

2.1.1.4.3 Inductive Questions

Inductive questions initiate or stimulate conversation so that hearers will express their reaction to the text. In order to maintain "the goal of most accurately representing the reality of the situation" (Ratcliff 1994:1), in the sense of "understanding human behavior from the actor's own frame of reference" (Bogdan & Taylor 1975:2), the questions draw out responses that reflect cultural assumptions, beliefs and values. Based on this objective, the research questions were constructed to encourage participants to share their thoughts and feelings as they engaged the parable and to reveal their perception of the relationship between the description of God encountered in the parable and their life.

a. Pre-set Questions

The initial interaction after the reading was instigated by a question that directed the participants to focus on the description of God that they understood from the parable. At first, the goal was to ask a more general question in order to explore the topics that they considered relevant. But this proved problematic as the broadness of the question left the participants confused about what aspect they should address. As a result, a more directed question was asked that drew the participants into discussion where they felt comfortable. Depending on the direction of the conversation and the responses, I used the following set of questions, translated from Sindhi:

1. What is the description [*bayAn*] of God in the verses of this parable [*missAl*]? What light

is there concerning God?

2. How does this description of God fit [*lagg*] with your understanding [*samjh*]?
3. In these verses is there any detail [*tafseel*], word or idea that you especially like? ... which is difficult for you to accept?
4. What impact [*assar*] has the description of God you provided had in your life? That is, how does your understanding of God's action and character as reflected in this parable affect [*assar*] your life?
5. Is there any event in your life in which this description of God has been revealed?
6. Has this idea about God been consistent in your life or has it changed?
7. How is this description of God revealed in the life of Jesus Christ?

Question 1 was designed to discover the participants' understanding of the description of God in the passage, question 2 encouraged comparison and contrast of the message with their personal thoughts of God, and question 4 explored the relationship of their perspective of God with their life. The goal was to perceive the participants' personal inculturation of their faith by "hearing the normative stance of the text in [their] own cultural and personal contexts" (JK Brown 2007:95). Question 7 was asked only of believers in order to discover how their perspective of God as derived from the parable connects with their understanding of Jesus.

These questions were used to stimulate dialogue after each reading, when the conversation died down or when the discussion was diverted from issues related to the research question. As a general practice I let the participants interact as they saw fit so that a particular topic could be fully addressed. In a few interviews the participants were not interested in pursuing a relevant topic and some of the pre-set questions were not asked.

To be effective and valuable, each pre-set question had to connect (1) the biblical passage to (2) the theological perspectives of the participants and relate to (3) the research question. Mason's (1996:45) parameters outline the considerations that shaped the questions. First, the questions must "make sense to, or be meaningful to, the interviewee(s)" and so they were phrased in common, easily understood Sindhi and expressed in a variety of ways when required. The questions must be related to the "interviewee's(s)' circumstances, experiences and so on, based on what [I] already know about them." For example,



Figure 2 Pre-set Questions Diagram

the interviews took place within an Islamic cosmology and worldview,⁶⁹ thus definitions of main concepts (such as “God”) were assumed in the interaction. Also, the question about personal applications assumed common knowledge about Sindhi life and culture. Because I needed to “be sensitive to the interviewee(s), to their needs and rights, in accordance with [my] ethical position,” the questions reflected sensitivity to the dangerous concept of “conversion” from Islam, and so were phrased in terms of development of their view of God rather than a shift of religion. In order to “help the flow of the interview interaction – the ‘conversation with a purpose’ – rather than impede it,” the questions generated culture texts by ensuring appropriate focus on topics relevant to the research questions.

Because the reading of the parable was divided into sections, the pre-set questions were repeated a number of times and were phrased in a variety of ways. For example,

Question 1: What is this story teaching about spiritual things? What do you understand this story to be saying about what God is like? ... about what he⁷⁰ does? How does this story resonate with the way you understand God? What is the spiritual lesson Jesus teaches from this story?

Question 4: What part of the passage is especially impacting to you? What do you think are the key words/concepts? Why?

Question 5: How does this image of God affect your way of acting towards each other? ... towards your community? ... towards God? How does that image affect your role in your family? Can you give an example of what that would look like?

b. Spontaneous Questions

As interviewer, I also spontaneously created questions in the midst of the interviews to encourage the development of potentially insightful ideas. These questions were “conceptual rather than straightforwardly empirical” (Mason 1996:41) and often explored the different perspectives between traditional and believer focus groups, although the initial starting point of addressing the text remained the same. Because each interview session consisted of an intersection between the research question, the presented text, the individuality of the participants, and my own orientation

⁶⁹ See 4.3.3 for a discussion of cosmology and worldview.

⁷⁰ In the Sindhi context the masculine pronoun is used for God who is the patriarch with authority over all and this perspective is reinforced in both grammar and idiom (e.g., God is frequently referred to by masculine titles such as “king” and “sir”) and reflected in the Sindhi Bible translation. In this thesis the masculine pronoun is used in the transcribed data and when referring to the participants’ understanding of God.

towards and relationship with the participants, many of the questions that arose from the dialogues were situationally specific and formulated “there and then” (:44). The creation of the questions was guided by a determined focus on the participants’ view of God as stimulated through interaction with the passage, but was also sensitive to respond relevantly to the direction of their discussion. As with the pre-set questions, the goal was to interact with the participants so that the questions were meaningful to them, related to their experiences, sensitive to their rights and concerns, and helped the conversation maintain a focus on the research question (Mason 1996:45). For example,

- In interview 1T, the participant was positive about the message of the parable but phrased his answers in terms of obedience and disobedience, servant and master. Therefore, I asked him, “Is there any problem with God being presented in the image of a father in this parable?”
- “And this means...?”
- (Based on the participant’s reference to God’s love): “Have you had an experience where this description of God was obvious? ... where God’s love [*shafqat*] was seen in your life?”
- (In response to a participant’s statement): “Why is it that you can call God “*bAbA*” [father as a term of endearment]?”

2.1.1.4.4 Adjustments to the Interview Process

As the interviews progressed, adjustments to the process were made to correct elements detrimental to the research goals. Initially, the entire passage was read and discussed, but this proved to be too much material for the participants to take in at once. They would focus on one aspect (e.g., love or forgiveness) and other details in the parable were ignored. In the remaining interviews, an initial reading of the passage allowed participants to hear the whole story, and then portions were re-read in chronological order followed by discussion. After reading each section, interaction and response was encouraged by repeating a version of the first pre-set question. At first the story was divided into six sections (11-12, 13-16, 17-20, 21-24, 25-30 and 31-32), but this was unproductive because the participants failed to identify new concepts in the separate sections and the discussion was unnecessarily repetitious. Finally, the passage was split into three sections (11-16, 17-24 and 25-32) allowing the participants to focus on different aspects of the story without being repetitious. However, a few participants found it restrictive and wanted to focus on what they understood to be the main point of the story: the repentance of the son and the mercy of the father. During one interview when the second section was being discussed and a participant

wanted to bring in a point about the older brother, he made this perceptive comment on the need for a holistic consideration of the parable, “You divided the story into three parts which makes it difficult [to discuss]. But if we read the story as a whole, then we can grasp the whole meaning better” (IJ Interview 20T).

The phrasing of the questions was also altered based on responses received during the early interviews. In the second interview I asked, “What kind [*qism*] of God is this?” My intention was to ask “What is God like?” but the participant took this as implying that there are other gods and this resulted in a combative and argumentative environment that was not conducive to the point of the interview. I changed the question in further interviews to “What description [*bayAn*] of God is found in this parable [*missAI*]?” so that the participants would express their understanding of how the passage reveals the nature of God.

In another interview I asked, “Does this fit your *aqeedO* [official statement of religious belief]?” This changed the dialogue into an evaluation of religious positions outside of their own experience and the discussion became abstract with limited benefit. Subsequently, a more personal question was used, “Does this description of God [which you just provided] fit [*lagg*] your understanding [*samjh*]?”

In the interviews with believers I realized early on that the way I shaped the questions did not naturally allow them to connect their descriptions about God to a relationship with Jesus. Therefore, I added a question for the believers only, “How is this description of God revealed in the life of Jesus Christ?” This would not have been an appropriate question for the traditional group since this is not a consideration that shapes their lives.

There were other ways in which I stumbled in my interactions with the participants. In interview 2T, I tried to help the participant see the parable within an honor–shame framework (which he rejected), but then realized that I was inappropriately influencing the outcome thus undermining the purpose of the research. Despite these shortcomings, I was able to guide the interviews so that the participants engaged and responded to the parable in ways that revealed their culturally shaped perspectives.

2.1.1.4.5 Dialogue and Clarification

Besides asking questions, I dialogued with the participants to draw out their thoughts in greater detail. I also paraphrased what they said to bring clarification and to stimulate further response. This was done with sensitivity to the danger of undue influence over the nature and content of the

responses. The desire was to keep the dialogue flowing within the parameters set by the research question, as illustrated in some of my comments from the transcripts:

- I didn't understand that last part....
- (Rephrasing): You said angels must obey, humans have the option to acknowledge [*manan tha*] or not.... [pause to wait for response]
- (Responding to and reflecting a participant's comment on the father's reaction): He will give himself trouble [*takllif*], not his son?
- (Rephrasing a participant's interpretation of the son's return to the father as a call for us to return to God): What you mean is that a person needs to go to God?
- (A clarification given to draw out a line of thought further): So this is not just an example of father and son used to express something else, but it also demonstrates a truth [*haqiqat*] in the relationship.

2.1.1.4.6 Generating Culture Texts as Data

“Generate” follows Mason’s (1996:36) recognition that in an interview process the participants are involved in creative and meaningful acts by producing *culture texts* – expressions of cultural meaning beyond the mere preference of the individual such as traditional stories, proverbs or metaphors⁷¹ – and are not simply providing static or formulaic responses. *Generate* implies an articulation of thoughts stimulated through creative interaction between text and context, the challenge of a message worked out according to the participants’ context. “Generating” is used rather than “finding” or “collecting” data because as researcher I was not a neutral objective figure in the way the data was obtained; I actively constructed knowledge about the world of the participants “according to certain principles and using certain methods derived from [my] epistemological position” (Mason 1996:36). The presentation of a biblical passage as the focal point to engage the Sindhi participants in discussion is one aspect of this. As researcher, I instigated and directed the participants’ expression of the way the passage resonates with their cultural perspectives. “Generates” describes my deliberate action to encourage responses around a topic and text. Rather than “elementary parts collected during fieldwork, transferred as immutable mobiles through the translation chain, as through a telephone line, and reassembled at the ethnographer's desk” (Rottenburg 2003:35), a more “mimetic” translation process is used “based on finding analogies: expressions, mental pictures, or narratives that convey meanings” (:39).

⁷¹ See 6.6 for the theoretical basis of identifying *culture texts* as data.

Three conditions are necessary for the responses to be identified as data: (1) They connect a culture text with an internal referent of the biblical passage. (2) The culture text provides insight into convictions about the nature and will of God that affect their actions and relationships. (3) They include personal narratives that give expression to the significance and meaning of their lives.⁷² These narratives are impacting and meaningful because they show how the participants are making sense of the passage within their personal reality. Their context provides concepts that allow the revelation to have meaning for them. When they “picture the issue in a real-world scenario” (Patterson *et al* 2008:60), they have represented the revelation with personally meaningful concepts as well as demonstrated how that revelation resonates with, challenges or impacts their lives. Thus the culture texts that give the greatest insight into theological shift are those that demonstrate *empathy* (Patterson *et al* 2008:62) with the text revealing a reoriented identity as they abandon themselves to a way of living that goes beyond mere agreement or a sympathetic hearing.

2.1.2 Ethical Considerations

This research project was only possible because of the relationships that I have developed with Muslim Sindhis. The cooperation required indicated a high level of trust and people became vulnerable as they shared their faith commitments, beliefs and life experiences with me. As Finch (1984:81) notes, “There is therefore a real exploitative potential... the crux of [which] lies in the relationship established between interviewer and interviewee.” Mason (1996:159) stresses that there is a “special responsibility to ensure that we do not abuse that trust by renegeing on commitments, acting deceitfully, or producing explanations which may damage the interests of those subjects.” I concur with Kraft (1996:431) that the basis of a biblical ethical stance is found in the incarnation. It is only through empathetic participation in and appreciation for the concerns, needs and desires of the other that we can orient our actions in a way that seeks their best, over and above anything we may desire (Rom 12:9,10).

2.1.2.1 Sensitivity Concerning a Volatile Topic

Despite the moderating influence of Sufi tolerance and international pressures to adopt Western individualist values, religious change away from Islam is a sensitive issue among Sindhi Muslims. Religion marks cultural differences and distinctions in beliefs, attitudes and values (Nakayama & Martin 2002:21) which, for Sindhis, are not merely individual convictions but, together with the

⁷² See 7.4 for the theoretical basis of an emphasis on narrative.

majority of the Muslim world, form part of the social dynamic that constitutes their sense of identity (cf. :29). The primary concern for Sindhis is to maintain the honor of the family so that there is no loss of “face.” “Face” signifies a proper relationship to society, “as essential to a person (and that person's family) as the front part of his/her head. The importance of face is the consequence of living in a society that is very conscious of social contexts” (Hofstede 2002:294). Sindhis’ objection to conversions does not stem from Pakistan’s legal system nor from a local application of *Shari’ah* law, but from authority figures in the family who respond to social pressures that define honor for the family name.

In my experience in the Sindh, the response to a man’s conversion has primarily been one of ostracism rather than violence.⁷³ The convert finds himself without family, home or job, which puts great strain on his faith and lifestyle. Yet, there are ways towards reconciliation if the honor of the family can be preserved or restored. One acquaintance became a follower of Christ and was baptized.⁷⁴ He was a father of three girls and lived in an extended family situation as the oldest of three sons. His father threw him out and he did not see his wife and children for two years. After that time, one of his brothers came to him and said, “Why did you leave home? Our mother is crying all the time. Come back.” When he entered the home the father welcomed him, but immediately told him not to say a word about his faith. The father then went out and announced to the neighborhood that his son had repented from his heresy and returned home. In the father’s mind, the issue was the family honor, not the personal religious convictions of his son.

Another young man I was associated with became a follower of Christ and was baptized.⁷⁵ His father, the religious leader of his village, disowned him. Two years later I had opportunity to meet the young man’s father. Our family was invited to stay overnight in his village where my wife and children entered the home and I remained out in the *otaq*. In the morning, the father came out of the house and called me from the room. We had a ten minute conversation in which

⁷³ For women the matter is more complex. Women tend to avoid controversial religious subjects while remaining the primary spiritual influence in the home and the ones who pass on traditional beliefs. Men have more independence than women to make decisions, and the women of a household are more likely to change their belief in concert with or at the urging of male relatives, than to do so in the face of male opposition. For a woman, a major conflict arises if her spouse becomes a “follower of Jesus” and she is caught between the displeasure of her father’s house and her allegiance to her husband.

⁷⁴ In the Sindhi context, among both Christians and Muslims, baptism is recognized as the sign that a person has become of follower of Jesus.

⁷⁵ The story of this believer’s ostracism from his family that is a prelude to this positive ending can be found in 7.3.4.

he asked me two questions, “Do you eat pork?” and “Do you drink alcohol?” I assured him that we had neither of those substances in our home and would never serve them to anyone in Pakistan. That was the extent of the conversation, but once the father was satisfied that our family was moral and upright, he began to restore his relationship with his son through a gift of money and clothes; the honor of the family was not being compromised in the ways that he feared.

Because of my experience among Sindhis I recognize that researching the volatile topic of conversion experiences requires *trust*. Since I am known to the believers, or to those who introduced me at the interviews, I have a reputation as one who can be trusted. This placed a burden on me to treat their open and transparent faith expressions with care. In order to facilitate this, my research focus on shifts away from traditional theological perspectives was not fully explained or understood by the participants, particularly the traditional group, and some of them were suspicious that I might undermine the teachings of Islam in some way. Even though my limited explanations were sincere and open, a few seemed hesitant as if fearing I may “be trying to manipulate them into doing something that will harm them and benefit [me]” (Patterson *et al* 2008:60). This was a legitimate concern deserving respect because “collective, not merely individual, interests are at stake” (Finch 1984:83). It is possible that some participants viewed my research as undermining Sindhi society in some way due to my interviews with “apostates” and the implied affirmation of their conversion experiences.

The social dynamic surrounding conversion raises moral questions for me as an intentional change agent for the gospel. Jesus referred to the gospel message as subversive in the way it works its way through society to bring change as yeast permeates dough (Mt 13:33, Lk 13:21). Gospel impact in the Sindh resulting in conversions is happening quietly and without publicity. I consider these transformations beneficial, but they would not be accepted as positive by many in the traditional group. While affirming that my intentions are honest and for the good of Sindhi society, my perspective of what that entails conflicts with theirs. Nonetheless, this difference of opinion need not compromise the integrity of the research. Since I represented their views fairly they were not misled and because they were not part of the interviews with believers, they were not implicated in any of the conclusions drawn from this study.

Full transparency concerning my desire to map deviation from the common beliefs of Sindhi Muslims would have been problematic because it would likely have been more difficult to find volunteers for the traditional group and could have altered their attitudes in the interviews by creating mistrust and misunderstanding of my intent rather than building confidence that this is a

worthy project. Such mistrust would have generated guarded and nuanced responses rather than open and honest dialogue. Yet acting without full disclosure was necessary and appropriate since my primary concern was to not compromise the safety of believers who were freely sharing their beliefs. This was not a matter of dishonesty or deception and the participants were not harmed or taken advantage of.⁷⁶

My insertion into the culture as a change agent and my role as researcher exploring the impact of the gospel within a Muslim context introduce the possibility that the believers I engage may suffer opposition or persecution from their family or from the power brokers in society. The appropriateness of such practices can be questioned when the possibility of harm to others exists. Part of what validates this potentially detrimental result is the willingness of the participants to take this risk even though they understood the implications. The risks of these interviews are far less than other actions many of them have taken to proclaim their faith and their courage and desire to vocalize their commitment to follow Christ is commendable. Another validation of the risk is my own faith commitment to the way of Jesus Christ since I consider myself obliged to speak to others about the redemption that he offers. To neglect this duty is to fail both my Lord and the Sindhis among whom I work because they deserve to hear the message. The consequences of not presenting Sindhis an opportunity to explore faith in Christ is more severe than any opposition they may face. Jesus commanded his followers to go to the nations (Mt 28:19,20) and even though there may be persecution and we may create discord because of the gospel (Lk 12:51), we are to remain faithful. At the same time, we must be in solidarity with those to whom we present the message and bear this burden with them as brothers and sisters in Christ (Gal 6:2). As a corollary to this faith imperative, the posture of the messenger and the methodology used to communicate the gospel must be non-condemnatory and compassionate, attracting people through love and not through aggressive, deceptive or manipulative practices.

Power issues needed to be treated with care. I am a Christian, interviewing Muslims and exposing them to God's Word. This privilege was based on power due to education, guest privileges, foreigner status and trusted relationships with the colleagues and friends who arranged the interviews. The moral right to use my power in this way is my intention to do good, bring value and protect people from avoidable adverse consequences from my actions. This intention

⁷⁶ In contrast, Collins (1984:59) provides an illustration of a study done through deception that seems morally indefensible, "The observers had to pretend to be persuaded of the correctness of the belief system. They were not actually interested in the belief system itself."

requires me to “side with” the participants in a way that “inevitably means an emotional as well as an intellectual commitment to promoting their interests” (Finch 1984:86). Part of the benefit is that I am providing a forum within which they can freely express their faith while engaging God’s Word. People can be listened to with attentiveness and care while they reflect on a message of peace, forgiveness and restoration. While the content of the interviews indicates my bias, transparency in the process demonstrates ethical integrity. As Finch (1984:87) affirms concerning her feminist stance, “we need not be defensive about the relationships of our political commitments to our work, nor embarrassed when we resolve the moral dilemmas which it raises by frankly political stances.” In the same way, the political nature of this research, as part of my task of being an intercultural change agent for the gospel, can be recognized without embarrassment. Only with such transparency can I avoid compromise, ensure ethical integrity and produce scholarly work.

2.1.2.2 Treatment of Research Participants

An adequate examination of the social impact of Christian conversion within a Sindhi Muslim society would require a separate research project. This intra-cultural dynamic, while incidental to the main focus of this thesis, impacted the way the research was conducted and how the data has been recorded. A safe environment for the believing participants was provided so they could openly express their beliefs and their anonymity was preserved. As researcher, I have a responsibility to ensure that participants are not harmed “physically, financially, emotionally, or in terms of their reputation” (LeCompte & Schensul 1999:183) due to any action on my part. Even apart from the sensitive nature of the topic and the potential harm that could come to the believers, it is the right of all informants to remain anonymous (Spradley 1980:23) and so initials, rather than full names, are used in the transcripts. No participant expressed concern about this aspect, but my experience in the Sindh cautions me to observe this rule.

Although in some contexts financial remuneration would be considered appropriate (Spradley 1980:24), among Sindhis this would have been insulting. The issue is not one of finances, but of honor and obligation. The cooperation of both those who arranged the interviews and the participants placed obligations on me. My relationship with many of them is ongoing and I continue to have opportunity to express my appreciation in culturally appropriate ways, primarily in terms of initiating contact, sharing in the joy of their blessings and showing concern for their struggles. As with Collier’s (2000:31) experience with Mexican American friends, the

most important characteristics of friendship for Sindhis are “support, trust, intimacy, and commitment to the relationship.”

Concerning the content of the interviews and the questions asked, it was important that I was not inappropriately invasive and that I did not demand disclosure of an aspect of their lives that would cause harm or of something they did not want to discuss. In a Canadian setting, religion is a private matter and the Sindhi way of arranging and conducting the interviews would not have been appropriate. However, in Pakistan religion is both personal and communal. It is an appropriate topic of discussion, as long as it is done with sensitivity and care. Even though the full extent of the topic was not expressed in the invitation to the interview, the participants knew that I was doing research and that I would be asking them questions on religious topics. The questions were phrased in an honest and straightforward way to ensure that I was not insensitive, deceptive or making them uncomfortable (Mason 1996:56).

Informed consent⁷⁷ (:57) was important for all the interviews, but when dialoguing with women consent was granted from her husband or brother, not from the woman. This patriarchal arrangement serves as protection for women since it is the men who will deal with the fallout of any inappropriate use of the women’s comments. The men’s presence during the interviews was a statement to me, the women and any others that the comments made have their approval and they recognize their responsibility to address any issue that may arise.

2.1.2.3 Ethical Implications of the Research Methodology

The research methodology helps the change agent evaluate the ethical implications of introducing change into people’s lives and could therefore be considered a means to develop and maintain ethical integrity. In outlining the dynamics of worldview change that can occur among a people group, Kraft (1996:439-440) describes four missiological concerns that provide guidance to care for people in the midst of such change. Each of these concerns can be facilitated in an ethical manner through this methodology as the cross-cultural worker listens to the personal narratives of people in the midst of change. Empathetic participation in and appreciation for the needs and

⁷⁷ Informed consent for all participants was obtained verbally at the beginning of each interview in a manner that honored in principle the requirements to use information provided for the purpose of academic research. The participants understood the purpose of the interviews and provided information of their own free will to the extent they felt comfortable. They were willing for the interviews to be recorded and for the comments thus obtained to be used in a published thesis. Presenting a written letter of consent to be signed by the participants would have been culturally inappropriate and awkward, creating unnecessary anxiety.

desires of the other can only occur if the voice of other is heard.

1. *The place of stress.* Kraft notes that a change in worldview creates a crisis situation. When there is a fundamental change in the way people view the world, such as is evident in conversion and the creation of contextual theologies, stress is created in relationships. Jesus prophesied that conflict would arise within the households of those who believe (Mt 10:34-36), conflict that could lead to a crisis situation and demoralization, perhaps even death. Change agents are therefore called to consider how faith change is currently impacting the community and the role they are playing in exacerbating stress and conflict. Many examples of family and social pressure apparent in the narratives of the interview participants are evidence of such stress. Is it ethically valid to encourage developments of faith considering the conflict introduced? What difficulties have been unnecessarily created and how can they be alleviated? Listening to the narratives will sharpen the change agent's ability to answer these questions.

2. *The interrelatedness of the parts of a culture.* Even superficial changes will produce a ripple effect influencing other parts of society. This reality is evident with respect to the Sindhi Bible translation work. All members of the translation team have been impacted by our studies together and the published scriptures have resulted in people changing their allegiance to Jesus Christ. In order to avoid causing unnecessary harm the cross-cultural change agent is obliged to consider the implications of the interrelatedness of culture. The interview methodology provides opportunity to assess the ripple that the insertion of scripture into Sindhi society has caused. Theological trajectories impact the way people view life, relate to each other and make decisions. This methodology allows the change agent to identify how faith changes have impacted the participants' life and community.

3. *Cohesion of the total configuration.* Kraft (1996:440) states that the survival of a society is dependent upon ethnic cohesion, the "cultural glue" that maintains their way of life. He further suggests that if our role as change agents has caused a weakening of that cohesion, as the change in some members' faith would suggest, then action should be taken to support and repair the damage. The implication is that change agents should look beyond the narrow concerns of their influence to the network of relationships that make up the participants' lives. Sindhi believers have lost and will lose some relationships while gaining others. It is distressing to lose relationships, but this is not unexpected and Jesus offers his followers this comfort, "Everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or wife or children or fields for my sake will receive a hundred times as much and will inherit eternal life" (Mt 19:29). Such words do

not *alleviate* the responsibility of the change agent, but *sharpen its focus* to ensure that they also play an adequate role towards the fulfillment of Christ's promise in the lives of believers. Listening to the narratives in the interviews and discovering the theological development occurring makes the outsider aware of the dynamics at work that may threaten, or are perceived to threaten, cohesiveness in society.

4. *The maintenance of equilibrium.* Kraft (1996:440) points out that societies require stability because people become unbalanced under stressful conditions. Too much change results in an "unsatisfying, even unintelligible, way of life." The culture texts of the believers generated through this research reveal some of the imbalance that they face in working out their faith in a context that assumes a different premise with respect to the fundamental questions of life. It is therefore incumbent upon the cross-cultural change agent to attend carefully to the believers' struggles, avoid causing a greater imbalance and contribute positively towards a stable society.

2.2 Summary

This chapter describes the research methodology as developed from the research design. My role as *interpretivist* researcher is explained as well as the interview dynamic and the rationale for the biblical passage "presented" to participants so that they would express their faith perspective as they engaged the text. Two distinct groups of participants are identified: believers and the traditional group of Muslims who do not treat the Bible as authoritative for their lives. The participants in the interviews were the primary theologizing agents and my role as researcher was to attend to and interpret their responses in order to discover emic expression of faith called *culture texts*. A description of the interview process explains how the culture texts were generated, including an outline of the questions used. The chapter closes with a consideration of the ethics of the research, including sensitivity concerning the volatile topic of exploring a Christian theological shift away from Islamic belief, treatment of the participants and implications of the research methodology in facilitating ethical concerns. The following chapter provides the reasons why this is a valid and significant research project.

CHAPTER 3. Rationale for the Research

In her book, *Scripture as Communication: Introducing Biblical Hermeneutics*, JK Brown (2007:232) asks, “How do we go about evaluating what constitutes biblical thinking and living?” At the heart of this research project is a methodology through which an emerging contextualized theology – an expression of “biblical thinking and living” – can be recognized and examined. Sindhis live in a faith setting that has been shaped by a number of factors, in particular by Islam. Believers are those within this setting who have submitted to an inserted⁷⁸ Bible translation as God’s revelation to them. How do we identify and record the impact of the gospel message on the faith of an emerging community of believers within an Islamic context? What are the unique Sindhi expressions of that faith? The research methodology is one way⁷⁹ to discover answers to these questions by presenting a biblical text in order to generate responses that reflect the participants’ understanding of God’s revelation and reveal their faith.

As defined in this thesis, the exploration of the biblical faith of Sindhis goes beyond *contextualization* to *inculturation*.⁸⁰ The concern of the research is not with the outsider’s efforts, the etic perspective, even though the product of an insertion into the culture (the Sindhi New Testament) is used to generate the data. Instead, the focus is on the impact of the message as it begins to be lived out by the insiders and expressed according to the categories that are inherent to their context, the emic perspective. As researcher, I am interested in the interaction between the two forces Horton (1993:135) mentions: (1) the incoming message of the Bible and how it resonates with the context in a way that forms the believers’ faith and (2) the corresponding reshaping of the message so that it is expressed in ways familiar and unique to the Sindhi context. As scripture begins to “read” the believers,⁸¹ the lives of believers are shaped and redirected. This shaping includes new expressions of faith that constitute an emerging or contextualized theology.

⁷⁸ See 6.4 for an explanation of this use of the term “inserted.”

⁷⁹ Other methodologies will generate different, but also valid, results. As described here, the methodology chosen is suitable for the context and for the topic under examination. In contrast, note Tippett’s (1967:286-296) quantitative examination of the use of hymns “as a theological index” among the Methodist church in the Western Solomons. In his study, the people group did not have a completed New Testament (:286) and a hymnody played a formative role in theological thought. Tippett attempted to “measure” (:289) theological development by recording the selection of hymns used in two different villages over a period of eight weeks. He concluded that the Methodist church had a theological orientation to “works,” in contrast to an Anglican emphasis on “faith” (:296).

⁸⁰ See 6.4.1 for a discussion of the difference between contextualization and inculturation.

⁸¹ See 8.1.4.1 for the explanation of a text “reading” believers.

An aspect of this “reading” is captured through the interview process. A dialogical approach is used to generate inculturated expressions of faith as Sindhis engage God’s Word in an interview setting. An objection may be raised that the product of such a process will not be an emic perspective because of the outside influence. A purely emic study would begin with questions that arise out of the Sindhi context (such as described in Schreiter’s (1985:12-16) contextual models of local theology) or with concepts that shape Sindhi society and then would explore the worldview and cultural dynamics that create and shape them. But whether or not the influence for change is internal or external, the researcher’s orientation is the same because outsiders trying to identify an emic perspective do not have the luxury of an unbiased view and they are dependent upon insider expressions to form their interpretations. What I, as researcher, can take note of is a contrast of views that indicate a trajectory of belief. The research accomplishes this by examining the impact that outside forces – both the biblical text and change agents – inserted into Sindhi society have upon theological thinking. More precisely, the research discovers the emic categories (culture texts) used to express an emerging theology as believers grapple with God’s revelation introduced into their lives. It is an examination of interactions occurring on the borders of culture, an exploration of what occurs when outsider concepts, values and perspectives require a response. It is an attempt to consider the dynamic of change, in this case an aspect of a phenomenon of conversion, when two horizons meet.

In addition, no culture is isolated, particularly in this era of globalization. All cultures are in flux and are continually negotiating meaning with outside forces. Any emic view will have been influenced by sources beyond the society’s boundaries and therefore research among an “ideal group” insulated from outsiders is not possible. As Schreiter (1985:12) notes as far back as 1985,

Worldwide communication has invaded all but the most isolated of cultures. An image repeated in many cultures of the world comes from Latin America: an elderly Quechua man, riding along on his donkey on a trail in northern Peru, with a transistor radio clasped to his ear.

A more up to date image, commonly seen in Pakistan, would be that of a man riding in his donkey cart speaking into a cell phone. With the proliferation of computers and the internet, the impact of globalization is far greater today. However, outside influences including missionaries, local Christians, books and the internet do not adversely affect the research because they are all part of the Sindhi setting. Sindhi believers engage God’s Word within a context that includes all of these influences plus many others.

Nonetheless, the primary answer to the objection lies in the intent to explore how the insiders of a culture have taken the message and made it their own. Within the current situation of Sindhis, taking into account the uniqueness of their culture, worldview and values as well as the long history of Islam, the question is how are believers *now*, in *this* time and place and in the midst of all the influences, reading the passage and how is the passage “reading” them? Is there a trajectory that is distinct from their Islamic roots? Are threads of biblically influenced belief intermingled with previous assumptions? Is transformation in thought, practice and ritual evident? Is their worldview being reconstructed? The goal of the research is to discover the categories and expressions used by believers within their context to interact with, absorb and nuance the incoming text so that it is shaped, understood and expressed according to their own recognizably Sindhi language and concepts. Even though the long-term insertion of the Bible translation and other change agents that have resulted in ongoing interactions between insiders (participants of the interviews) and outsiders (the text and the researcher) are not part of this research, the process advocated here does reveal in a limited yet significant way how Sindhis are responding to such influences. It is the categories “owned” by Sindhi believers in their responses that can be called emic as they develop an emerging theology that both incorporates and reshapes the incoming message according to their perception of reality. Even though the methodology is centered on a message from the “outside” and is facilitated by an “outsider,” the intent is to identify responses that demonstrate continuity with traditional emic perspectives and reveal the way the text is being received, assimilated and molded according to Sindhi emic categories.

One of Schreiter’s (1985:11) adaptation models of local theology describes a dimension of this research methodology.⁸² Sindhi Bible translation, viewed in terms of Schreiter’s translation model, has been a “seed” for the past thirty years creating a faith–text tension. The theologizing agents of the adaptation model have been both the outsider change agents and the insider believers as they have worked out the implications of the message within the Sindhi setting. Discussion and evaluation during this time has resulted in shared vocabulary, metaphors and concepts that have enriched everyone’s understanding of God.⁸³ This research project was designed to explore this dynamic in terms of how Sindhi believers are expressing their emerging faith through the interpretation of and interaction with God’s revelation.

⁸² This model is discussed in 7.5.1.

⁸³ As related in 4.1.3, the change from a guilt–innocence based salvation metaphor was a personally impacting example.

The concern of this study goes beyond theory to praxis. Contextualized theology occurs when a person or community *acts upon* what they have understood from scripture, shaping their lives within the cognitive, affective, and moral dimensions of worldview (Hiebert 2008:16) in response to God speaking to them. “The goal is the *enactment* of a truly biblical worldview” (JK Brown 2007:233, italics mine). These changes, this shaping of a current worldview into a lived out “biblical worldview,” can only emerge from pre-existing images and spiritual concepts that provide identity and meaning for the community at large. With respect to the study at hand, the pre-existing images are based on the faith (inclusive of worldview, beliefs and values) of Sindhi Muslims. There is no generic “biblical worldview” that *replaces* the prior worldview of believers. Rather, as scripture speaks into the Sindhi context, their current faith becomes shaped in new ways and begins to move in new directions. “The impetus for change [comes] from within cultures as people realize the implications of God’s revelation in Christ within their own context” (Naylor 2006b). This study takes this principle as a basic assumption and examines the phenomenon of inculturation occurring among Sindhi people in order to map emerging theological trajectories. Other characteristics that make this research project a unique and worthwhile effort are presented in this chapter.

3.1 Discovering the Authors of Theology

Schreiter (1985:16) asks a crucial question that is at the heart of this quest: “Who is engaged in developing local theologies?” For this study, the authors of theology are those who are causing or experiencing a shift in their faith perspective. These “theologians” are reshaping their faith commitments as they interact with God’s revelation within their own communal setting. The desire is to identify some of these emerging theological narratives that define their lives.

3.1.1 Theological Narratives

“Narrative theology”⁸⁴ considers *story* rather than systematic categorizations as a more adequate representation of faith. In a similar vein, the words can be reversed to consider *theological narratives* emerging from within a believing community. The emerging theology does not result from an intentional application of a systematic method, but is an intuitive expression of believers’ faith as they reflect on and engage the scriptures and gospel message. Believers allow the text to “read” them by responding to the message that they trust comes from God. *Theological narratives* thus indicate a reshaping of their lives in concert with the stories about God and the divine

⁸⁴ See 7.4 for a theoretical consideration of *narrative theology*.

relationship to humanity. Rather than *systematically and deductively* developing a theological framework by which their lives are measured, they *intuitively and interactively* let the biblical “story and reinterpretation shape or reshape [their] own story” (Van Gelder 1996a:38). In this study the recording and analysis of such narratives leads to the discovery of an emerging theology so that the trajectories of the believers’ faith can be traced.

The unique stories, expressions and descriptions that Sindhi believers use to define their faith arise from their own interactions with and interpretation of God’s Word as it resonates with their perceptions of reality. While the theoretical basis for this understanding has been developed elsewhere,⁸⁵ the pragmatic application can be appreciated through a contrast with a common approach to systematic theology. Systematic theology⁸⁶ begins

with an idea and then occasionally [illustrates] that idea with a simile, metaphor, or parable. The conceptual language is primary and the metaphor or parable is secondary. The first is critical, the second is optional.... [Conceptual language] aids memory. It assists in adding emotional coloration and in catching and holding attention. But through all of this, the pictorial remains a secondary form of speech. The concept continues as the primary form of theological language. A theological discourse is created by attaching one concept to another by means of logic. Philosophy then provides an overall structure for the material (Bailey 1992:15).

Such discourses are cognitively centered and conducive to rationalist analysis. In contrast, this study proposes to hear the story of how God’s revelation of the divine will and character in scripture makes sense to and changes the lives of believers *from their perspective*. The narrative *is* the theology, not just an illustration or application of prior propositional content. In this manner, the posture of the believers towards the Bible resulting in a narrative expression of faith contrasts with a common Western Christian approach to the Bible that reveals a different relationship between text and faith, one that lacks the submissive orientation of the believers:

North American Christians are trained to believe that they are capable of reading the Bible without spiritual and moral transformation. They read the Bible not as Christians, not as a people set apart, but as democratic citizens who think their “common sense” is sufficient for “understanding” the scripture. They feel no need to stand under the authority of a truthful community to be told how to read. Instead they assume that they have all the “religious experience” necessary to know what the Bible

⁸⁵ See 6.6 for the theoretical basis for *culture texts*.

⁸⁶ The intent is not to disparage systematic theology, for that, too, is a meaningful expression of faith within a particular context. Nor am I implying that this is the only possible systematic approach to theology. For example, see Lindbeck’s (1984:120) “intratextual reading” that seeks to “derive the interpretive framework that designates the theologically controlling sense from the literary structure of the text itself.”

is about. As a result the Bible inherently becomes an ideology for a politics quite different from the politics of the Church (Hauerwas 1993:15).

This project discovers meaningful expressions of faith within a Sindhi community that has submitted itself to the authority of God's Word. As Sindhi believers reflect on a passage of scripture as it resonates with their faith, they interpret and apply it according to their current perspectives and experiences of life. Their orientation of submission to the text necessitates a reshaping of their faith that finds expression in contextually sensitive theological narratives. These narratives *simultaneously* shape their interpretation of scripture and their perspective of the world through a dialectical relationship as described by the faith–text–context triangle.⁸⁷

3.1.2 Listening to Contextualized Theologies

In order for the narratives to be identified and comprehended by an outsider, they must be listened to with an orientation sympathetic to the speaker and sensitive to the context that provides the parameters for meaning.

Ideally, for a genuinely contextual theology, the theological process should begin with the opening of culture, that long and careful listening to a culture. Only in this way can the configurations of a culture become apparent of themselves, without simply responding to other kinds of needs extrinsic to the culture (Schreiter 1985:28).

But how can an outsider listen *adequately* to identify what God is doing in another culture?

Schreiter (1985:40) outlines the difficulty in a series of questions:

(1) How does one listen in such a way as to hear Christ already present? (2) How, as a foreigner, does one grow in understanding a culture on its own terms, rather than forcing cultural realities into the foreigner's categories? (3) How, for a native of the culture, does one come to that kind of reflexive thought about one's own culture, particularly if one has never experienced the contrast of another culture? (4) How does a community bring its experience to expression in such a way that it can indeed become the fertile ground out of which a local theology grows?

An important rationale for this research is that it provides answers to these questions. Assuming that adequate communication and comprehension can cross cultural boundaries,⁸⁸ the following outlines the process of how one can be adequately attentive to the faith of an emerging group of believers in another cultural context. Furthermore, it is not just a matter of acquiring knowledge but of affirming local theologies as worthy of acknowledgement and study; they *deserve* attention.

Being attentive to contextual theologies does not mean that the perspective of relatively

⁸⁷ See 5.4 for a description of the faith–text–context triangle.

⁸⁸ The basis for cross-cultural communication is considered in 8.1.2.

new believers requires special treatment or should be accepted with a patronizing attitude because these theologies are emerging from a non–Western context. They should face the same rigorous examination as any theology and be critiqued and subject to correction to the same extent. However, within traditional Christian societies, and for a variety of reasons,⁸⁹ contextual theologies outside of their theological purview have not been *heard* due to a lack of exposure, let alone *listened to* with respect. Dodd (1998 [1982]:202-203) makes a distinction between being *heard* (a natural ability from birth) and being *listened to* (requiring conscious effort). In this application of his thesis, to be *heard* is to have the theology made accessible with contextual sensitivity so that an accurate meaning can be discerned. To be *listened to* means that the hearer actually engages the content and gives it serious consideration. Dodd goes on to give four reasons why people are *not* good listeners, which can be rephrased positively to describe the disciplined listening required to identify contextualized theologies.

1. Listening requires the *intention* and *courtesy* of paying attention to the content of what is being said. Unlike the natural ability to hear, good listening skills require conscious attending to what is being said.
2. Listening requires an *open receptivity* that allows our comprehension of the message to take precedence over our assumptions and expectations.
3. Listening must be done with *integrity* and *generosity* in order to hear the whole message and acknowledge accurately even those parts we may find disagreeable or threatening.
4. Listening requires *discipline* to focus on the speaker and the message despite distractions. Because we can think faster than people are able to talk, we must concentrate so that the tendency of our minds to wander does not cause us to miss significant amounts of information. This discipline requires “listening – really listening – to what people are saying” that goes beyond mere words to “observing, picking up verbal and non–verbal cues about the social situation, and the mood of your interviewee(s)” (Mason 1996:6).

I have failed to practice these disciplines numerous times in my ministry among Sindhis. I remember discussing a possible new development with a national co–worker and becoming so excited that I went ahead to make arrangements only to have him inform me, to my chagrin, that I

⁸⁹ See Schreiter (1985:1-5) for a description of how awareness and exploration of local theologies developed with resistance and with the attitude that “this kind of theology is somehow different from (and probably inferior to) the theology done for Western churches.” In order to deal with the concern that self–theologizing will result in the relativizing of theology Hiebert (1994) proposed a “metatheological” framework that could serve as a check against theological error.

had not sufficiently listened to what he was proposing and had taken the idea in a different direction. As I reflected on this sobering incident, I realized that, following a weakness that Westerners exhibit, I have the unfortunate tendency to make leaps of judgment and am often quick to speak and slow to listen, rather than the reverse (cf. Jas 1:19). This reveals both arrogance and a desire for control and power on my part. As a result, I have begun to appreciate, and live out in the form of this study, the need to attend carefully to what Sindhis recognize and express as God's Word speaking to them. The importance of this research project is not just the conclusions, but the intention and determination to listen carefully to Sindhi believers as they articulate their faith as expressed according to their own culture, beliefs and values.

A stated impetus for my (Naylor 2004:7) Masters dissertation on contextualized Bible storying was a concern that the popular method of chronological Bible storying in missions is based on a Western Protestant theological premise of salvation history that does not demonstrate sufficient cultural sensitivity. The thesis provided a corrective to that limitation through a methodology of discovering and developing contextually sensitive theological themes that can guide the choosing and shaping of Bible stories. This included the practice of *active listening* to theological responses of Sindhi men to the Bible using four types of interactions: Soliciting comments, inductive questions, rephrasing for clarification, and dialogue (:49-52). This research project follows that model of engagement in order to hear and understand the theological perspectives of Sindhi believers.

This discipline of listening counters the tendency of Christian leaders to be knowers and teachers. The emphasis for evangelical missionaries is evangelism and contextualization – discovering ways to cross cultural boundaries to *present* a message. Even though the prerequisite discipline of pausing and listening is encouraged when promoting cross-cultural engagement, it is often prematurely and perfunctorily dismissed in order to discuss strategies on how to present the message. For example, even though ST4T's Bible storying manual (Stringer 2008:15) is a good tool and does promote listening as the first step to engaging another culture, it does not explain *how* to listen and mentions the concept briefly within a single paragraph. In contrast, this research tries to address this weakness by proposing a methodology and example of how to listen and attend to an emerging theology. In order to map one part of the inculturation process that is occurring among Sindhi believers, a method of *observing and listening to* emerging theology is introduced. The ultimate goal is not to produce a comprehensive theological analysis, but to outline theological *movement* or *shift*, by listening to interview participants as they interpret,

rephrase, and apply their faith.

Another reason for the propensity of evangelicals to move quickly beyond listening to teaching is because of our dependence upon God's Word. This is a virtue in that we take scripture seriously and exhort each other to follow the teachings of Christ and we respect those who accurately and relevantly expound the Bible. Furthermore, this value finds resonance in the Sindhi context because of a similar respect for scripture and it is common for Western missionaries with their seminary education to gain status and respect as religious teachers. At the same time, this posture towards the text has the corresponding weakness of leading the outsider to assume that "in the same manner that the text is relevant to *me*, it will be relevant to *others*" or "the cultural issue or question, *as I perceive it*, needs to be addressed according to *my* priorities and understanding." When people believe that their opinion comes from God because they have discovered a truth in scripture, the tendency is speak more than listen. Thus, an important skill for evangelical missionaries to learn is *how* to listen. An exegesis of both text and context is essential for *contextualization* (etic communication), while an evaluation of *inculturation* (emic communication) demands an even more intentional listening posture towards insiders. It is only when the existing theology of those *inside* the culture has been truly heard that its relevance and resonance to both text and context can be validated and appreciated.

Listening is also critical for the outsider because of the probability of misunderstood meanings between the missionary and believers (Kraft 2005b:259). Without a method of reflecting upon how a biblical passage is being interpreted by insiders, it is likely that outsiders will project their own understanding of the message upon the perspective of the believers and assume that the implications, priorities and applications will be the same. As Kritzinger (2008:767) notes, "insiders speak differently about a religious tradition or community than an outsider" indicating the need for a listening methodology to provide an opportunity to "enhance interreligious interaction and collaboration."⁹⁰ An example of this dynamic became apparent in the research for my (Naylor 2004:71-74) Masters dissertation concerning Peter's rejection of Jesus' attempt to wash his feet in John 13. My expectation – based on my "reading" of Sindhi culture – was that the hearers would appreciate Peter's desire to protect Jesus' honor. Instead they were unanimously offended by the insolence of a disciple refusing to obey. The value of

⁹⁰ The context of these comments is an introduction to "encounterology," a term Kritzinger (2008:768) coins to describe the role of missiology to "reflect on all the factors shaping the intentional encounters between followers of different religious ways."

submission to one's *murshid* (teacher) trumps concerns about expressions of respect, as revealed in the Sindhi saying, "Obedience is more important than honor (*adab khan ammr*)" (:56). It was only as I listened to their exegesis of this passage that I discovered that their perspective was in sharp contrast to my assumption.

Finally, listening helps to identify voids in theology that can lead to syncretism and dual systems. Bauer (2008) addresses the problem of "two-tiered Christianity" in which believers participate in anti-biblical practices alongside of Christian rituals. He points out that it is insufficient to forbid traditions or customs that are fulfilling a specific felt need within a culture. Any attempt to forbid a harmful practice will create a cultural void that will draw people back into participation unless it is replaced by an acceptable Christian substitute. Hiebert's (1982) classic article on the flaw of the excluded middle deals with a similar concern pointing out that worldviews that contain evil spirits and magic cannot be ignored by missionaries and church leadership hoping that they will go away. A Christian theology that does not deal with the concerns of the culture is creating a truncated Christianity that will not be sufficient to sustain the faith of the community. Listening to the developing theology within an emerging believing community can lead to an identification of those "voids" which need to be addressed.

3.1.2.1 The Art of Active Listening

"Art" indicates an intuitive and holistic dynamic that is commensurate with a qualitative research approach. It implies interaction with an environment on a number of levels, including the cognitive, emotive, and physical. "Art" expresses appreciation for a complex and multi-faceted reality that cannot be reduced to a set of statistics or summarized in a paragraph. When applied to *listening*, "art" indicates an empathetic unity with the speaker beyond careful observance.

To truly listen means to transcend your own autobiography, to get out of your frame of reference, out of your own value system, out of your own history and judging tendencies, and to get deeply into the frame of reference or viewpoint of another person. This is called empathic listening. It is a very, very rare skill. But it is much more than a skill. Much more (Covey 2004:192).

"Active listening" refers to the intentional pro-active instigation and facilitation by the listener to draw out expressions, narratives and information from the speakers. Rather than passive acceptance of any thought they may wish to say, the listener provides feedback, "response messages the listener transmits back to the speaker" (Barker 1971:23), and directs the conversation to fulfill a previously determined purpose, being careful to preserve the freedom of

the speakers as they respond within the given parameters. Barker (1971:112) notes that the “listener controls some aspects of the speaker's behavior. Through feedback, the listener is able to exercise control over the speaker at several different points in time” because the speaker is being heard. The active listener is an *encourager* who seeks to remove any obstacle that may cause hesitation, reservation or an unwillingness to speak openly. This is done by arranging a suitable environment and by engaging speakers in a dialogical process that encourages them to respond, delineates the required parameters for participation and frees the speakers to give authentic responses. The methodology of generating relevant culture texts can be viewed as “a highly sophisticated level of listening... active, inventive listening” (Zweifel 2003:50).

In a similar vein, Wink (1973:78) refers to *courageous* listening as being “ready to listen even if we must change. And in rare moments of lucidity and courage we may listen *in order to change*.” Vulnerability and sincere openness on the part of the listener requires overcoming one’s own fears in order “to reach an understanding of what [others] see and why they see the world the way they do” (Covey 2004:195). Speaking within the discipline of psychotherapy and addressing “breakdowns in communication,” Carl Rogers (1961:332f) affirms that, in order to listen adequately with “empathetic understanding – understanding *with* a person, not *about* him,” courage is required. To enter a person’s

private world and see the way life appears to him... you run the risk of being changed yourself.... The great majority of us could not *listen*; we would find ourselves compelled to *evaluate*, because listening would seem too dangerous. So the first requirement is courage, and we do not always have it (Rogers 1961:332f).

In a comment that directly addresses the concern to discover contextualized theologies, Schreiter (1985:45) underscores the principle of courage by stating, “To grow in the understanding of a culture is to learn the *ascesis*⁹¹ [severe self-discipline] of listening and to stand open to the transformations that can ensue from it.”

3.1.2.2 Active Listening and Interculturation

Active listening helps the outsider see the gospel from a different worldview perspective and validates the unique theological contribution the faith community brings to the worldwide Christian movement. The impact upon the outsider is what Joseph Blomjous calls “*interculturation*,” a process of mutual learning which “[safeguards] the reciprocal character of

⁹¹ As mentioned in 2.1.1.3.4, Wink (1973:24) refers to the same concept with a slightly different spelling of the Greek (*askesis*) as the appropriate empathetic posture of the analyst.

mission" (Shorter 1988:13). Biblical truth is "seen in a new light with unexpected impact as the outsider begins to perceive the meaning through the worldview grid of the insider" (Naylor 2004:25). This is a form of *reverse* contextualization in which the missionary is affected and even transformed by the thinking and perspective of the believers as they develop their unique expressions of theology. Schineller (1992) affirms that the missionary must

bring to the process of inculturation a critical openness, an attitude of learning and listening to the Christian message in all its richness and to the various human cultures in all their diversity. This listening attitude opens us to the Spirit of God, to the spirit of truth present in all cultures, in new and exciting ways.

Van Gelder (1996a:39) adds that we "will need to develop more capacity for hearing the truths of the text through the stories of others. This will help us both better understand the text and also grow in unity with others in shaping a renewed Christian story." Kritzinger (2011) goes even further to claim that "all authentic communication results in mutual transformation towards the fullness of the kingdom." The implication is that where communication is only a monologue, it is inauthentic and an imposition by the speaker that is insensitive to the listener and the listener's perspective of life. True communication requires a synergistic dialogue in which both parties listen and speak. While it may be that only one party introduces a new message, the interchange creates a framework of meaning from which both interlocutors benefit and see the message with fresh eyes.

Like Peter's interaction with Cornelius (Acts 10), such encounters not only provide insight into the perspective of others, but also can critique and correct one's own thinking. Sanneh (1989:53) suggests that experiencing the message revealed in a "fresh medium" can challenge and even overturn previous convictions, open our eyes to new ways of viewing the world and lead to both personal and cultural revitalization. Newbiggin (1989:8) affirms that

the missionary, and through him the church he represents, can become aware of the element of syncretism in his own Christianity, of the extent to which his culture has been allowed to determine the nature of the gospel he preaches, instead of being brought under judgment by that gospel. If this happens, great possibilities for mutual correction open up. Each side, perceiving Christ through the spectacle of one culture, can help the other to see how much the vision has been blurred or distorted.

In a related sentiment, Yeo (1998:17) states that "one of the main purposes for constructing a comprehensive and cross-cultural model of interpretation is for the sake of the unification or at least the reconciliation of nations and cultural groups in the world." That is, as we allow correction from others, we begin to appreciate and value each other more as we view God's

revelation and the world through different eyes, thus participating in Paul's vision that "together with all the Lord's people, [we] grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love Christ... [so that we] may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God" (Eph 3:18-19).

Listening to and documenting the local theologies of an emerging church can validate these theologies in the eyes of established churches. Until there is appreciation for the theological benefits that can be gained from each other, attitudes of assumed superiority that can subvert relationships with emerging churches will not be overcome. We are often unaware of our own cultural arrogance that creates barriers. Taber (1991:160) observes (emphasis added),

[O]ne must by no means underestimate the degree to which Christians in general and missionaries in particular are people of their age and culture, *even with respect to their theology*. The missionary movement has surely not been determined by the world in which missionaries grew up, but it has been definitely influenced; missionaries have to an astonishing degree followed the twists and turns of prevalent social attitudes and values, no less really because their conformity was so largely unwitting. When the missionaries' home society was outgoing and internationalist in spirit, so were many missionaries; when the home country was isolationist, so were many missionaries; when the missionaries' society was racist, so were many missionaries; when it was aggressive, so were many missionaries; when it was pragmatic, so were many missionaries; and when it was strongly committed to laissez-faire capitalism, so were many missionaries.

Attendance to local theologies will help us remove some of these, often unconscious, blinders that keep us from being impacted. Respect does not mean that these theologies are accepted without examination, nor that they are acknowledged but ignored, but that they are addressed and engaged within established churches with a view to transformation. This research project provides a tool for cross-cultural ministers to attend to the way God is speaking to believers in another context that can result in interculturalization.

A related benefit of this methodology is that it addresses a suspicion that contextualized theologies are syncretistic and a product of relativism.⁹² The desire for an unchanging, certain faith is often combined with a belief that the effect of culture on belief systems is invalid. Any deviation from a particular interpretation or praxis can be viewed as undermining the authority of God's Word. There is a basis for this fear as Hefner (1993:122) notes, "There are limits to the

⁹² Sensitivity to this perspective has stimulated missiological thinking that addresses ways of doing legitimate theology while avoiding the dangers of syncretism. For example, Tiéno and Hiebert (2009) call for a "third way" of doing theology. 5.13 provides other examples. Such missiological thinking not only argues for the theoretical legitimacy of contextualized theology but also establishes "criteria by which to distinguish adequate and valid inculturation from inadequate and invalid attempts at inculturation" (Schineller 1992; cf. Sundermeier 1992:32-48).

flexible adaptation of the faith, it seems. To believe otherwise, church guardians would insist, is to backslide and risk the dissolution of absolute truth into relativism.” The weakness of this position is a tendency to assume that one particular theological formation is the standard, thereby failing to recognize that *all* theologies are culturally located. The solution argued in this thesis is to acknowledge that theology is the product of fallible humans working out the praxis of God’s revelation in their own context. A robust ecclesiology that views the global church as the body of Christ (1 Cor 12:27) points to the need for dialogue between all believing communities in order to explore, challenge and maintain the faith–text–context tension that creates theological trajectories. A robust pneumatology that believes the church will be guided into all truth (Jn 16:13) generates confidence that faith (trust) in Jesus’ promises will result in faith (worldview, beliefs and values) that conforms to the will of God. We cannot understand anything without our cultural lenses, yet our confidence in an unchanging God means that we can move towards the truth in and through any cultural context, as long as we hold firmly to what God has revealed in scripture.⁹³

A fear of syncretism cannot be overcome without sympathetic exposure to contextualized theologies. In contrasting “indigenization” with “contextualization,” Taber (1991:176) notes that “Indigenization tended to assume that the gospel and its theological elaboration would be ‘the same’ in all cultures, barring necessary but superficial adjustments in the form of presentation.” Such thinking is still prevalent. Although the addition of “self–theologizing” to Venn and Anderson’s “three–selves” formula⁹⁴ for the indigenous church has been recognized as legitimate for some time, Hiebert (1994:97) notes that among Western Protestant missions organizations “the fourth self – self–theologizing... was rarely discussed” and goes further to ask rhetorically, “Do young churches have a right to read and interpret the scriptures in their own cultural contexts?” Dyrness (1990:17) notes that evangelicals “came late to discussions of Third World theology” and explains that “the evangelical is anxious to translate what God is saying into terms a culture will understand,” but often with the assumption that their own culturally influenced understanding of what God is saying is somehow absolute and universal (:18). This is not to say

⁹³ This is not to argue that the development of theology is one-dimensional and limited to a study of the biblical text. von Allmen (1975:41-42) notes that “the first Christians did not express their faith in a speculative way, in a strictly theological way. They responded to the preaching by worship; they sang the work that God had done for them in hymns. That was the way the first Christians gradually discovered the implications of their faith in Jesus Christ.”

⁹⁴ Rufus Anderson and Henry Venn established the “three–self” formula (self–governing, self–supporting and self–propagating) as a basis for the establishment of indigenous churches for the American and British Protestant mission in the 19th century (Beaver 1999:248).

that evangelicals are ignoring contextualized theologies,⁹⁵ but the conservative atmosphere is dominated by Calvinist or Reformed theology developed within an environment of Enlightenment epistemology that is generally accepted as the standard. Fresh theological perspectives are viewed with cautious optimism at best and more often with suspicion. While such reservations may be expressed as concern to protect the faith, they can also be driven by unexamined biases towards cultural traditions that are given inappropriate and transcultural status.⁹⁶ When evangelicals validate and document emerging contextual theologies using the methodology presented in this study, such suspicions can be addressed in a constructive way and provide a counter-point to the common orientation.

In *Contextualization in a Glocalizing World*, Colin Andrews (2009) adds further weight to the importance of active listening that facilitates interculturalization through his assertion that we need diverse theologies rather than one absolute theology. He calls for a move to a dynamic of theologies (plural) instead of theology (singular) because the objective truth of the Bible can only be represented in relative and contextual terms. There will be tension that cannot be resolved, not because God is contradictory or that truth is inconsistent, but because cultures are, in many ways, incompatible. This will increase the tension between theologies, but “in a flat and fluctuating world, theology cannot be dogmatic. It needs to remain in flux as world cultures shift and change.” The increasing “flat” reality⁹⁷ of the world brings diverse theologies into contact with each other. Providing a means for identifying theological trajectories emphasizes the reality that *all* theologies are in flux and being constantly reshaped by their respective communities. This is especially impacting when the theology is emerging from a formerly non-Christian context.

This study serves the global church by adding to the library of global theologies, even

⁹⁵ Evangelical seminaries with a missions program such as the School of Intercultural Studies at Fuller, Pasadena, Ca., ACTS seminaries at Langley, B.C. and Trinity Theological Divinity School, Deerfield, Il., all have courses that explore the topic, but they do not engage or explore emerging third world theologies with the same intensity or respect that Western theology is taught worldwide.

⁹⁶ As an example, consider the Judaizers in the New Testament church: “Putting it provocatively, one may say that the heretics in the New Testament are not those who preach the Gospel by becoming Greeks with the Greeks but rather the conservatives who, because they hesitate to win a new culture for the service of Christ, run the risk of being drowned by that very culture” (von Allmen 1975:49).

⁹⁷ The concept of a “flat” world is taken from Friedman (2005), *The world is flat: a brief history of the twenty-first century*. Because of globalization people no longer live isolated lives, but “easily compare their circumstances with others” (:392) and thus exposure to diverse theologies is becoming more common.

though it is only the introduction of a small chapter in an expanding volume of Sindhi believers' theology. Sindhi believers represent a microcosm of theological development derived from the interaction with God's Word within a particular context. The Sindhi context is a complex, dynamic and ever shifting society that is ignored, for the most part, by other cultures of the world (as is the case with the majority of people groups). Yet at the same time, this one microcosm is representative of a global phenomenon of how scripture engages a people group; a cross-cultural dynamic that has been repeated for centuries and continues to occur daily around the globe and in every country of the world, although not yet in every people group (Long & Mandryk 2006:67). Shenk (2006:11) affirms that

To engage in 'globalizing theology' today means that we must guard the commitment to the particular and the local while taking account of the fact that we live with an intensified awareness of the global. If theology is to serve the church throughout the world, it must reflect this bifocal way of seeing; this becomes the vantage point from which we must rethink and revise theology conceptually, methodologically, and programmatically.

Through a methodology of active listening, this research project presents one theological "vantage point" from a Sindhi context that invites attention and dialogue.

3.1.2.3 Active Listening and Critique

The dynamic of allowing scripture to "read" us comes with a corresponding danger of eisegesis – "reading 'into' the biblical materials whatever we wanted the Bible to say in the first place" (Green 2007:74), which is an expression of syncretism. A corrective comes from outsiders who listen empathetically to our expression of God's Word and are themselves believers addressed by God and being formed through scripture. They happily stand in a posture towards both the Bible and others that allows, or even requires, them to speak "so that we might hear more faithfully God's voice at those moments when we are tempted to exchange for God's Word a word of our own" (Green 2007:77). It is not enough to just receive; there also needs to be response and interaction. As part of the broader Christian community, to listen is to take on responsibility. Hunsberger (2006:1) calls for interdependence with "conversation partners" from other Christian communities that are also part of the "church catholic." We are all susceptible to subject God's revelation to personal biases that *undermine* rather than *reveal* the message and we require the challenge of the outsider to "assist us in hearing those melodies in scripture for which we would otherwise have no ear" (Green 2007:79). As Bible translator, I stand in such a place where my assumptions about the meaning of biblical texts and concepts require and receive challenges on a

number of fronts.⁹⁸

Any theological perspective is open to a multi-dimensional critique that should be welcomed as positive and beneficial rather than viewed as a threat. Since theology is a human outworking of God's revelation within a particular context, questions and perspectives from other contexts can serve to correct, sharpen or enhance a theological position. Green (2007:92-93) provides some dimensions within which critical conversation would be productive. *Cross-cultural* interaction exposes the interlocutors to the beliefs, values and priorities that stem from contextual and worldview differences. *Canonical* considerations underscore the point that the content of theology must conform to God's revelation and ensure that a diversity of biblical voices is heard within the unity of God's self-disclosure. *Historical* awareness gives voice to interpreters of the past, recognizing our indebtedness to those who have directly and indirectly guided our understanding (cf. Davis & Hays 2003:2). *Communal* sensitivity recognizes that the Spirit of God works in and through individuals who are formed within an interdependent community. *Global* perspectives prevent idiosyncratic narrowness. *Hospitable* practices exhibit grace even to those who challenge our cherished beliefs and create space for those beliefs to be explored. Sedmak (2002:71) adds two more dimensions that are indicators of "good theology" and complement Green's categories. There must be *fidelity* to the founder of Christianity, that is, to Jesus. This means that the theology must be congruous with the life, spirit and teachings of Jesus. And there must be *fruit* or practical consequences because theology is not merely descriptive and verbal, but a way of following Jesus. Smalley (1991:185) affirms that through such analyses and conversations a local theology

becomes part of the great network of such theologies spanning the centuries, and the globe. This network is incredibly diverse, but through almost all of it run the themes of God creating people and healing their alienation from their creator, of God freeing people and ruling over them, of obedience to Christ, and of hope because of God's presence and work in the world, and a vision of eternal life.

Evaluating theology through dialogue requires humility and openness on the part of both the giver and receiver of the critique together with an overriding desire to discover and live by

⁹⁸ As an example of the dynamic, we have been working on two parallel New Testament translations. Both are in the same language, but one is for a Hindu audience and Hindu background believers, while the other is for a Muslim audience. One translator on our team is a Muslim, another is a Hindu and the third is a Hindu background believer. As we explore some key concepts such as salvation, life, faith or death, I am amazed at the variety of assumptions that each team member brings to the text that challenge my presuppositions.

God's truth. Those evaluating cannot claim a position of authority or superiority as if they are the keepers of an inviolate and irreproachable standard. While there is an assumption of determinate meaning with respect to God's communication, neither the critique nor the theological position being evaluated can claim absolute right of perspective. Green's dimensions for critical conversations create an environment of openness that facilitates identification of misconceptions, affirmation of perspectives that resonate and celebration of new facets and nuances that enhance our understanding of the character of God, the work of the Holy Spirit within us and what it means to center our lives on the Lord Jesus Christ.

3.2 Rationale for the Passage chosen for Presentation

Jesus' Parable of the Two Lost Sons found in Luke 15:11-32 was the passage presented to the participants at the beginning of each interview. It was read by a mother tongue Sindhi-speaker using the Pakistan Bible Society common language *New Testament in Sindhi* (1991). This section outlines reasons for the appropriateness of this parable for the Sindhi context and argues for the validity of the results of the research beyond the particularities of the passage.

3.2.1 The Parable as Catalyst for General Application

The most overt act of the researcher that shapes the direction of the research is the choice of using Jesus' Parable of the Two Lost Sons as the presented passage. Why this passage and not the creation story of Genesis 1, the Levitical laws in the Torah, the wisdom of the ancient Hebrew poets or the proclamations of the Old Testaments prophets? Why not the writings of Paul or Peter or the vision of John? The selection of the passage not only determines which trajectories are identified but also shapes the response of the participants.

This is a natural and practical limitation of this methodology. Due to restrictions of time, interest, finances and opportunity, only a few passages could possibly be used and only a select number of participants could be involved. Practically speaking, this is not a method that can be used to develop a general overview of the theology of Sindhi believers or even to explore one aspect of their faith development in a comprehensive manner. Nonetheless, there are conclusions that can be legitimately drawn from the participants' responses that are relevant beyond the immediate application of any one passage. Although the parable is one short passage of the Bible, the discussion is not limited to those few verses. The passage acts as a stimulus or catalyst so that the believers discover and express resonance between the teaching and their context. This resonance would logically extend to other passages that deal with similar teaching. By identifying

key biblical themes, such as the nature of God, the participants generate expressions of belief that have implications beyond the immediate passage. It can be reasonably expected that their orientation towards God revealed through the interviews would be reflected in their reading of other biblical passages and faith discussions.

For example, within my (Naylor 2004:71-75,86-87) Masters dissertation, one identified theme was the importance of the teacher–disciple relationship. The disciple in the Sindhi context is expected to abandon himself or herself completely to a *murshid* (teacher). Those who choose to follow Jesus are, therefore, expected to dedicate themselves to him with that level of commitment *indicated by Sindhi values*. This perspective would influence the understanding and impact of other passages in the New Testament that speak of discipleship. The participants engaged the passage with the same orientation, beliefs and assumptions that they would have with other passages dealing with a similar theme.

Theoretically, *any* biblical passage could be used effectively as a catalyst to reveal the theological perspectives of believers. A legitimate engagement of God’s Word would result from, and therefore reflect, an intersection of faith and text. The believers’ response to any biblical passage acts as a window onto their view of God, a view that influences many aspects of their lives, defines their values and is relevant to the decisions they make. This reality was shown over and over again throughout my years of Bible translation when our translation team, made up of both Christians and Muslims, would discuss issues of faith and belief. The truth claims of scripture encouraged engagement and responses that were generated from a culturally shaped perspective. As similar themes were identified in a variety of passages, the discussions would follow familiar paths.

In addition, many of the worldview and cosmological assumptions that lie behind the Bible coincide with Sindhi Muslim belief. Although doctrinal content and the conclusions drawn from those assumptions may diverge from Christian thought, there are significant parallels: God is personal and the supreme creator, human beings as part of creation are totally dependent upon God, our proper orientation to God is one of submissive obedience, the acceptance of prophets as messengers from God, scripture as God’s revelation of the divine character and will, the existence of heaven, hell and the afterlife. Because of sufficient overlap with scriptural assumptions, the participants were able to converse on topics they are familiar with, as well as speak intelligently about the passage.

Furthermore, not only do the theological articulations of the Sindhi participants have

implication beyond the presented passage, but there are also inferences that can be made for the Sindhi people beyond the small sampling of those who participated in the interviews. This is not to claim that the results of the interviews are fully representative of Sindhi society; any comment that is representative to some degree will not be sufficiently comprehensive so that full equivalence can be claimed. Nonetheless, the participants, as products of their environment, do reflect the concepts, assumptions and beliefs accepted as the norm in the broader context. While many of the arguments given by the participants may be contradicted, supplemented or further developed by other Sindhis, they represented concepts that resonate with the Sindhi context and would be recognizable. This possibility is further explored in the analysis.

3.2.2 The Particular Appropriateness of Luke 15:11-32

There are several characteristics of Jesus' Parable of the Two Lost Sons that make it a particularly beneficial choice to discern a shift in faith among Muslim Sindhis. Its message concerning the nature of God has potential to both reveal and shape the theological direction of those who approach the passage with an attitude of submission. There are several reasons why this passage proved fruitful in drawing out the participants' theological perspectives in both the believer and traditional focus groups.

Cultural references that resonate with the Sindhi context allowed the hearers to imagine a scenario that, while not equivalent to the context of the original hearers, is not dissimilar to Sindhi life and values. This includes the extended family home and the assumed responsibility of sons to contribute to the estate, the importance of feasting, music and dancing when celebrating, the significance of gift giving, the patriarchal authority of the father coupled with respect and obedience expected from sons, the moral and financial danger inherent with travel to a foreign city, the references to agriculture and animal husbandry. These familiar references, interpreted within the Sindhi context, allow the hearers to easily relate to and engage the story. The placement of the main characters within a "normal" setting also prevents the participants from becoming distracted from the story by focusing on puzzling and relatively insignificant details.

The story format resonates powerfully with Sindhi culture. Sufi influence on the art forms of poetry and story telling has been significant. Stories with a moral or spiritual message are commonly repeated, enjoyed and used to establish societal values. When encountering this genre, Sindhis recognize the meaning intended behind the engaging tale and quickly interact on a deeper level. This reflects a Middle Eastern orientation to story telling, as Bailey (1992:16) points out.

The common Western approach is “concept + illustration [while] the Middle Easterner offers parable + conceptual interpretation.” Bailey (1983 [1980]:xiv) illustrates this dynamic through his “grand piano” analogy in which the story teller constructs the story in a way that resonates with the hearers according to their “common culture and history with the story teller” much like people are drawn into a pleasing melody. Although certain aspects of this “music” in the Parable of the Two Lost Sons will be missed by Sindhi hearers because of a lack of cultural similarity, there are still significant parallels so they are attuned to “those same attitudes, relationships, responses and value judgments [that allow them to]... hear the music of the piano” (Bailey 1983 [1976]:35).

Partly because of the story format, the parable avoids contentious theological arguments; by nature parables do not present propositional truths that could take the research down unprofitable paths. Participants are encouraged to express what they understand and believe about God, not to rehash reasons why another religion is mistaken. This allows for a comparison and contrast of two positively presented perspectives of God rather than dealing with negative views of each other’s theology. For example, there is no direct reference to the cross. In fact, Muslim scholars have used this parable to point out that God can forgive freely without the need for sacrifice (Bailey 1998:34). While there are explanations of the parable that support a theology of the cross, that is not a detail required for this study. Furthermore, because it is a story *about* God,⁹⁹ without a propositional declaration that God *is* a father, we avoid fruitless discussions about why God cannot procreate while focusing on God’s *character* as father. Rather than using a direct *metaphor* (God is father), which is commonly misinterpreted as a literal, physical description, the parable shifts the image to an implied *similarity* (God is *like* this father), which is more to the point, less contentious and focuses on the more profitable aspect of character.

Nonetheless, this is a research project exploring *Christian* interests and the parable is part of the *Christian* scriptures. Thus, contrasts with Sindhi understandings are not just expected, but welcomed, in order to discover how believers are allowing scripture to speak into their lives. Similar to the religious leaders of 1st century Judaism, Jesus’ story challenges some commonly understood conventions about how God is understood in the Sindhi context.

Instead of a bookkeeping, listchecking divine legalist, Jesus confronts them with a picture of God who dances in sheer joy at the sight of a failure coming home. He confronts them with a God who runs after sinners, who throws parties for those who cannot possibly qualify for his favor... an amazing Father who steadfastly, persistently

⁹⁹ This claim should not be seen as exclusive of other dimensions of teaching evident in the parable, such as Jesus’ answer to the Pharisees’ criticism of those with whom Jesus associates.

and unswervingly remains exactly what he is – a Father, even and especially when his children become rebellious, twisted and wayward (Kruger 2001:15).

The parable provides a picture of the Christian view of God, the forgiving, loving Father who welcomes, and does not reject, the repentant child. Even the son's declaration of unworthiness is swept aside by the father's joy. "The glorious news of grace is crying out of the father's being and action. The gospel has wrapped itself around the boy and drowned out his best speech" (Kruger 2001:19). One of the greatest contrasts between Christianity and Orthodox Islam from the Sindhi perspective is the image of God as Father as revealed in Jesus Christ. When the participants are confronted with a revelation of God with the characteristics of a father – Jesus' favorite vocative for God – how do they respond?

This parable would not be unfamiliar to many of the participants, especially the believers. A prior reading was not considered detrimental, but neither was it necessary for participants to have had previous exposure to the parable in order to respond. Since the goal is to discover the current theological development of believers through their interaction with the text, it is even beneficial to have participants who are familiar with the parable. It is an acknowledged assumption that all of the participants are affected by a variety of influences that shape their interaction with the text, and the believers, in particular, may have considered or been taught the text previously. These biases affect the interaction. But since all teaching and development of thought shapes their theology, these biases contribute to the research goal of discovering expressions that reflect ownership of and identity with a particular theological position.

Issues of shame and honor are of paramount importance for Sindhis.¹⁰⁰ In many cases, to shame the family is viewed as the unforgivable sin.¹⁰¹ One of the gravest insults that can be offered in the Sindh is "to *khe ghairat nahe, cha?*" (Have you no passion for honor?). The ongoing tradition of *Karo Kari*¹⁰² in the Sindh, the killing of a person who has brought *zaleel* – "shame" or "defilement" – on the family honor, provides disturbing evidence of this reality. The parable presents a sharp contrast to this demand for the ultimate punishment, punishment that removes shame. The younger son has brought shame on his father, his community and his religion, yet the father's action demonstrates that there is redemption for shame.¹⁰³ How does the

¹⁰⁰ See 4.3.4 for further discussion of shame and honor.

¹⁰¹ Sindhis make a distinction between sins against a law (like stealing), and sins against honor. The former can be forgiven with a word, the latter is often irredeemable.

¹⁰² See an explanation of *Karo Kari* in 4.2.2.2.3.

¹⁰³ See 8.4.1.3.6. for an exegetical overview of the parable.

Sindhi believers' understanding of God through the parable shape their actions when facing an issue of family honor?

The older son was driven by a sense of justice that demanded an accounting. Not only was the sinner being rewarded rather than punished, but the older son was not given recompense for his faithful service. Jesus portrays the father as dismissing this version of justice. For the father it is the restoration of relationships that makes things right, not the dispensing of rewards and punishment. "Grace proclaims the awesome truth that all is gift" (Manning 1990:23). The older son had been trying to earn his right to the inheritance, even as the younger son had demanded it from the father. Both were wrong. All is gift, a matter of grace. These issues of grace, forgiveness and justice are relevant to the daily life and experience of Sindhis. The parable presents similarities, contrasts and hopeful possibilities that are attractive for Sindhis. Since these all relate to the nature of God through Jesus' portrayal of the father in the parable, the interaction of the participants with these issues serve as windows onto their theology.

3.2.3 Limitations Caused by the Passage Chosen

There were two aspects that were underemphasized by limiting the presentation to the Parable of the Two Lost Sons: (1) the historical context and (2) the connection of the parable with the other parables in Luke 15 (the Lost Sheep and the Lost Coin). It could be considered a weakness of the research design that the parable was not situated in its original setting of the critique by the Pharisees that Jesus "welcomes sinners and eats with them" (Lk 15:1) since the impetus for the story was lost. This was, nonetheless, a deliberate research choice so that explanations were kept to a minimum and the focus would be on the meaning of the story from a Sindhi perspective. Attempts to situate the parable within its original context could distract from the main research purpose of having the participants express the meaning from within their own cultural context.

Bailey (2003:57-63) provides evidence that the three parables in Luke 15 were intended to be considered a "single unit" revealing a trilogy of metaphors for God. The common elements to all three parables, such as the meals, highlight certain teachings that could be missed by only reading one parable. These emphases may have been noted by the interviewees if all three parables had been read and the lack of opportunity for comparison meant that the participants were unaware of these shared components. While insights into the Sindhi understanding of the passage and of God would have been enhanced by the inclusion of the other parables, any distortion caused by the lack of inclusion is minor compared to the benefit received from the

limitation. Including the first two parables would have extended the interviews to an uncomfortable length and added extra levels of complexity through the comparison of diverse analogies. Since the primary goal was to discern Sindhi theology through their reading of the passage, the one parable was considered to be sufficient.

3.3 Translation and Theology

A key motive for this project is the desire to explore the relationship between a Bible translation and an emerging theology among Sindhi believers. A Bible translator's responsibility often ends with the publication of the Bible. This project reflects a concern to move beyond that end point and investigate the impact of the translation. The relationship between the Sindhi Bible translation and the development of grassroots theology is explored with a desire to see how a specific translation philosophy (meaning-based), style (common language) and linguistic choices (words, phrases and idioms) both reveals and affects the development of theological conviction. Since faith transformation is the driving force behind worldwide Bible translation, it seems reasonable to explore the impact as believers interact with the translated text and work out the implications within their particular context.

One reason why translators are reluctant to step beyond the translation process is the desire to not influence theological development. The translators' interpretive interest "behind" the text is different from that of the reader who approaches "in front" of the text to hear God speak.¹⁰⁴ Translators play the role of the biblical scholar, looking back at the original text with an interpretive aim of historical reconstruction and linguistic decoding of the intended communication. In contrast, the readers are theologians who seek to hear God speaking relevantly into their context, a role that the translator shies away from lest a theological agenda inappropriately influence the translation.¹⁰⁵

On one hand, this is commendable because it acknowledges the authority of the Holy Spirit to establish the church, as well as demonstrating sensitivity towards a possible negative consequence from the bias of the translator. On the other hand, if translation choices result in

¹⁰⁴ See 8.2.3 for an explanation of "behind" and "in front" of the text.

¹⁰⁵ One example is the form of inclusive language in the Sindhi translation. The male singular pronoun is commonly used in every day speech to represent inclusiveness. This matches the patriarchal orientation of the biblical languages. Does the translator seek less familiar non-gender specific inclusive forms, such as plural pronouns, to communicate inclusivity and downplay the patriarchal orientation? Or is this adopting a theological (or even social engineering) agenda inappropriate for a translator?

interpretations divergent from the original intent, the translator should be concerned about a possible failure within the translation. All those who function as cross-cultural change agents for the gospel have a responsibility to evaluate and respond to potential theological deviations, especially those missionaries who are responsible for translating the sacred text from which such a theology is being derived. “We as Christians, and Bible translators worldwide are a hermeneutical community. If local theologies are developed based on a particular controversial rendering in translation, we need to react as a community” (Goerling 2007).

So while the impact of a translation upon the theological development of a people group is of primary concern and sufficient reason for this study, the methodology can also reveal inadequacies in the translation. As Steiner (1998:428) notes, a “perfect” translation implies “total synonymity,” which is impossible. All translations require constant updating because (1) translators are limited and fallible human beings who may create a faulty translation,¹⁰⁶ (2) exegetical support and scholarship of the original texts are constantly being revised and (3) the ongoing shifts in the target culture and language require frequent alterations in order to ensure appropriate communication. Because theological concepts are influenced and often formed by biblical terminology,¹⁰⁷ relevance and resonance between text and culture is essential so that there is faithful communication of God’s revelation.

In addition, when a translation is used for a number of years, certain interpretations or “readings” become popularized that actually distort the intended meaning. Furthermore, even though a translation may be technically correct, the text may not communicate with the same force or nuance as originally intended.¹⁰⁸ Unless there is a procedure to test this at the level of the average reader, the translation cannot be revised as required. A logical response would be to encourage continuous revision. This research project is one such method that takes into consideration the theological development and perception of Sindhi believers, which will help the Sindhi translation team understand how the readers are interpreting the text.¹⁰⁹

¹⁰⁶ See 8.2.2 for the causes of a faulty translation.

¹⁰⁷ For example, “saved” has non-biblical meanings that are appropriated to communicate biblical references to “salvation.” “Born again” is an example of a theological terminology *formed* by biblical language.

¹⁰⁸ For example, a correction was made recently to the Sindhi New Testament by changing the phrase “kingdom of heaven” to “reign of heaven.” “Kingdom” indicates a territory, place or group over which God is the ruler, “reign” focuses on God’s activity in exerting his authority.

¹⁰⁹ Apart from the mistranslations by the translators, there is also the possibility that readings “in front” of the translated text may not correspond with the intended communication of the

This benefit can be seen from the current revision of the Sindhi New Testament:

In Mt 5:12 and Lk 6:23 Jesus encourages those who are persecuted to “rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven” (TNIV). The word used in the original translation of the Sindhi New Testament [for the concept of “heaven”] was “*bisht*,” a word that parallels the western religious concept of Paradise. From the Muslim Sindhi reader’s point of view this would be understood as the conservative Islamic doctrine of Paradise, the place of eternal reward for the faithful received after the resurrection to life. Moreover, its use in this passage would confirm the common notion among Sindhi Muslims that we can earn rewards here on earth which will be translated into pleasures to be enjoyed in the life to come; our good deeds are tabulated and rewarded in the next life (Naylor 2008a).

Because of attentiveness to the Sindhi readers’ misperception of “*bisht*” in this text, the word for “heaven” was revised to “*Arsh Azeem*” – the dwelling place of God – resulting in a different understanding on the part of the readers. The interpretation changes from enjoying pleasures in the afterlife, to the certainty of gaining blessings from God.

Another example that demonstrates the power of the methodology comes from my (Naylor 2004:71-74) Masters dissertation on contextualized Bible storying among Sindhis. One of the words used to translate the Greek *kurios* and the Hebrew tetragrammaton is “*khudAvand*,”¹¹⁰ which is a loan word from the Urdu Bible (1992 [1870])¹¹¹ and Punjabi Christian theology and, therefore, the meaning of this word as “lord” or “master” is not obvious but must be taught to Sindhis. However, the response to “teacher” (*murshid*) during the research on John 13 made it obvious that this concept has similar functional impact in the mind of Sindhis as is intended with “*khudAvand*,” but with cultural relevance. That is, “teacher” used for Jesus provides Sindhis with an equivalent emotive impact intended by the word *kurios* as used in the Gospels without the reader needing to work through an abstract understanding of “*khudAvand*.” Although the Sindhi word for “teacher” is unsuitable for the Sindhi New Testament as a substitute for “*khudAvand*,” it nonetheless helps them express their relationship to Jesus.

Thus the interaction of believers with the New Testament Sindhi translation reveals their orientation to the text, demonstrates the way their theology is being shaped by the text, and establishes the suitability of the text in communicating the original message.

translators “behind” the translated text. For example, a common misreading in the PBS Urdu Bible (1992 [1870]) is “Rush” gate instead of “Sheep” gate in the wall of Jerusalem. The translation is not incorrect, simply misread since the two words in Urdu, while pronounced differently, are spelled the same way.

¹¹⁰ The linguistic root is Persian.

¹¹¹ The PBS Urdu Bible is the primary sacred text for the Punjabi Protestant Christian community.

3.4 An Integrated Approach

The research design can be summarized as *the presentation of a translated biblical text for the purpose of stimulating dialogue among Sindhis so that their theological development can be identified*. This process brings together four key aspects of my life and ministry: *text, translation, dialogue* and *theological shift*. The integration of these various emphases makes this thesis personally significant beyond the few years set aside for this study.

Text: The Bible is not just an academic textbook for me, but the word of God speaking relevantly and uniquely to a specific audience located within a cultural setting bounded by time and space. While specifically directed, it has universal application because the author of the message is more than the human agent who penned the words. Sacred texts are of primary importance in both Christianity and Islam. We are both “people of the book.” In particular, the Baptist tradition of the centrality of the Word has resonance with Muslim tradition. This, of course, does not mean that we view sacred texts in the same manner,¹¹² but the exploration of the way scripture is viewed and acted upon within the Sindhi context addresses a powerful and influential dynamic.

Translation: Bible translation renders the sacred text into another language through a process of contextualization and interpretation. The insertion of God’s Word into the Sindhi context is an *interpreted* insertion. The responsibility of the task of Bible translation, in light of the respect given by the readers to the publication, reminds me that I am “stepping on holy ground”¹¹³ and compels me to explore avenues of checks and balances to ensure adequate communication. This is not so much a technical task as a sacred ministry through which peoples’ lives will be affected for eternity.

Dialogue: Dialogue is the primary method of active listening. Effective dialogue engages the participants so that they express their understanding of the meaning of the text, as well as explore the personal implications of that meaning. This is an act of empowering Sindhi believers to create their own narratives concerning the relevance of God and God’s Word in their lives. In my role as qualitative researcher, I validate and encourage Sindhi expressions of faith that are stimulated by the biblical text. My primary ministry during the time we lived in Pakistan as a family involved dialogue for the purpose of transmitting the gospel message. In this research the methodology is similar, but the intent is reversed. Rather than seeking to present and teach, the

¹¹² See 4.4.1 for the Sindhi Muslim view of scripture.

¹¹³ See further development of sacredness of the translation task in 8.2.2.

desire is to receive and learn. Nonetheless, the former act of teaching was not possible without an ongoing involvement in dialogue as I engaged Sindhis around the Word of God.

Theological Shift: As a missionary, I see myself as a change agent and catalyst to bring people into the kingdom.¹¹⁴ This change is reflected in the decision of Sindhi believers to become followers of Jesus Christ. Their commitment results in a shift in theological perspective as they begin to reshape their worldview with Jesus as Lord and under the authority of the Bible. The attempt of this study is to identify some of these shifts indicated from the interview participants' narratives and to map the implied theological trajectories in a way that validates Sindhi believers as they "work out [their] salvation" (Phil 2:12). I have worked with believing Sindhis for many years and this project provides a window onto the way their perspective of God is being shaped as they engage the Word within their context.

3.5 A Unique Opportunity

There is no established church among the Sindhi people in Pakistan.¹¹⁵ Although believers from a Sindhi background are influenced by Punjabi Christians, their distinct identity, religious expectations and cultural biases prevent the assimilation of Sindhi believers into existing Punjabi Christian congregations. Tribal loyalties are strong and family castes have lived and worked for generations in villages that bear their name. Sindhis have a long and proud history tied to the land of the Sindh as well as to the beauty and significance of their language, as attested by the high value and respect afforded to their poets. Intermarriage between Sindhis and Punjabis is possible, but rare, and rarer still between a Muslim and a Christian family. Punjabis and Sindhis look upon each other with suspicion and the evidence required for Sindhi believers to be accepted into a Christian congregation can be extreme, to the extent of adopting a Christian name and breaking

¹¹⁴ "Kingdom" is used here in the sense of the Synoptic Gospels as the reign of God into which believers "enter" (Matt. 5:20; 7:21; 18:3; 19:23f.; 23:13). A life changing choice is offered in terms of the kingdom or reign of God, which people can "receive" like a child (Klappert 1976:385-386). As Brownson, Dietterich, Harvey & West (2003:53) explain, "We understand the gospel most clearly and most biblically when we think of receiving the gospel as participation in (that is, receiving, entering, proclaiming, and representing) the reign of God."

¹¹⁵ This refers to believers from the Muslim Sindhi community and not the "diaspora" of Hindu Sindhis who left Pakistan in 1947. The large scale immigration of Hindu Sindhis to India and then to countries around the globe resulted in many changes as they struggled for survival. One of these changes has been the development of Sindhi Christian churches in several of the countries. The International Sindhi Partnership holds a yearly consultation attended by representatives of "Sindhi churches & fellowships" from at least 9 countries (Ward 2006:1).

ties with their family.¹¹⁶

This segregation has given rise to the establishment of separate *Isa Jama'at* including household groups within Sindhi family caste systems. As a relatively recent phenomenon it provides a unique opportunity to study the way translated scripture is shaping these believers' theology. The church is emerging out of a Muslim Sindhi cultural setting and is primarily taking shape within the centuries old structure of the extended family. As a result their Christian theology finds its form and expression within an environment infused with Sindhi cultural values and worldview. At this early stage of the Sindhi church, the theological emphases, perspectives and life–style choices that are becoming evident when they engage the scriptures are worth identifying. In addition, their responses to the translated text and the way the language of the text is reflected in their interpretations and narratives can reveal theological trajectories that will shape their communities in the future.

Even though only a limited aspect of the emerging Sindhi theology can be explored through dialogue centered on one passage of scripture, the value of the research project goes beyond the practical limitations of the interview process. I hope to gain insight into the way Sindhis are responding to and integrating God's Word in their lives. Their responses to scripture reveal more than an abstract understanding of a particular text, they expose a pattern of engaging God's Word with personal impact, a pattern that will be repeated with other passages and affect other aspects of their lives. Furthermore, the effectiveness of this research method should promote its further use, both with Sindhis and other people groups in which a church is emerging. Finally, a comparison of these theological expressions with the traditional perspectives of Sindhi culture highlights theological shifts that are shaping the emerging Christian church in ways that both contrast and reflect the surrounding community.

3.6 Summary

This chapter provides reasons why this research project is valuable and unique. Through the application of active listening while presenting a passage of scripture to insiders, practitioners have a tool that allows them to engage a people group in dialogue and identify theological developments as believers interpret a passage of God's Word. Active listening enables the researcher to engage interview participants in a way that reveals culturally shaped expressions of faith without undue influence upon the content of that faith. The focus is on the average believer

¹¹⁶ See further description of Punjabi and Christian relationships in 4.3.5.

as an “author of theology,” thus validating new expressions of the faith while recognizing that each believer influences and is influenced by the beliefs of those around them. The uniqueness of this study is found in the opportunity to examine theological shifts of believers emerging from within a Muslim people group.

This process also serves to shape the researcher’s beliefs while simultaneously validating emerging local theologies as part of a global movement of identifiable and legitimate theologies. In addition, because a Sindhi translation of the New Testament is used, the relationship between Bible translations and emerging theologies is explored. This benefits the translator by revealing how the text is being interpreted and brings to light possible mistranslations that need correcting. The following chapter describes the Sindhi people, my role as change agent and observing participant as well as the impact of Bible translation within the Sindhi Muslim context.

CHAPTER 4. Personal Insertion

4.1 Engaging the Sindhi People with the Gospel

4.1.1 Demographic Indicators for Sindhi Muslims

Sindhis are a socio-ethnic group of South Asia who identify their homeland as the area surrounding the Indus River located in the present day province of Sindh, Pakistan. “Sindhi” is the word used as the self-identification of the people group and is also the name of their native language. Sindhis are the largest socio-ethnic group in the Sindh province outside of the port city of Karachi. The population of Sindh is given as close to 30 million by the Provincial Disaster Management Authority, Government of Sindh (2012) with a third of the population located in Karachi. In contrast, the Population Welfare Department, Government of Sindh (2011) claims the population to be 42.4 million, a figure that appears to be extrapolated from 1998 census statistics¹¹⁷ based on immigration trends. In those statistics mother tongue Sindhi-speakers are listed as close to 60%, which represents 92% of the rural population and only 26% of the urban centers (Population Census 1998a). This is indicative of the immigration trend as those moving to the Sindh gravitate to urban centers, particularly Karachi. Islam is dominant in the Sindh, as in the rest of Pakistan, with 1998 census figures indicating over 91% registered as Muslims: 88% rural and 95% urban (Population Census 1998b).¹¹⁸

4.1.2 Entering into Sindhi Life

I affirm L Rambo’s (1993:xii) declaration that “all scholarship is ultimately a projection of one’s own personal predicaments” and so an explanation of the forces and events that have shaped me reveal some of the influences that have motivated this study. My wife, Karen, and I were commissioned by the Fellowship of Evangelical Baptist Churches of Canada (FEBCC) to bring the gospel message to the Muslim Sindhi people of Pakistan in 1984. Our initial task was to learn the Sindhi language and culture and develop relationships with those who would help us adapt to a new lifestyle. Our ultimate goal was to engage Sindhis effectively on a spiritual level so that they would be exposed to the biblical revelation of God in Jesus Christ. Our desire was to

¹¹⁷ At the time this thesis was submitted data from a census conducted in 2011 had not been made public.

¹¹⁸ During partition in 1947 many Hindu Sindhis left the Sindh and are now found worldwide; the largest number found outside of Pakistan is in India with a population of over 3.5 million (Sindhi Info 2008). According to 1998 statistics, Hindus constitute 6.5% of the population of the Sindh (Population Census 1998b).

function as change agents so that Sindhi Muslims would be transformed at the level of faith, both in terms of commitment to God in Christ and in the primary use of “faith” in this thesis as encompassing worldview, belief and values.¹¹⁹

Our initial enthusiasm was soon replaced with dogged determinism as we struggled to attain a functional use of the Sindhi language.¹²⁰ This was a time of personal insecurity, uncertainty and helplessness as we faced the humiliating reality that not only were we strangers in a strange land, but we were ill equipped to navigate the norms of social convention that seemed to be second nature to even small children. We discovered that language learning is not an academic task but a social exercise that demanded vulnerability and child-like receptivity on our part in order to connect unfamiliar verbal symbols to physical, emotional, and mental realities. The temptation to remain “safe” in our house and learn Sindhi by finding equivalents for English words was rejected as a poor strategy. It would have been like studying the nature of light while living in a cave. In order for Sindhi to be a language by which we could *speak* to the heart of people, we found that we needed to *think* their thoughts after them. Since people’s thoughts emerge from a social context and reflect their experiences of life, familiarity with their world is more fundamental than linguistic ability in order to communicate with relevance and clarity. Even as seeing is not a matter of focusing on the light of the sun but on the world that it reveals, so we discovered that a technical understanding of the Sindhi language was insufficient. Comprehension of the depth of intended meaning only occurred through an appreciation of the worldview, beliefs and values to which the language referred. Hidden realities are not captured with a tourist’s camera, but are discovered through the development of significant relationships with hours of conversation and the sharing of life’s experiences.

4.1.3 Presenting the Message

Opportunities to engage Sindhis with the gospel message were constant in my role as *observing participant*.¹²¹ Once, while traveling on a bus in the Sindh, I was reading a booklet in Sindhi that explained some Bible verses. A fellow passenger said incredulously to a friend, “He’s reading

¹¹⁹ Faith is defined in 5.3.

¹²⁰ The language learning textbook prepared by fellow missionaries Hubert Addleton and Pauline Brown was appropriately named *Functional Sindhi* (1984).

¹²¹ The personal anecdotes and stories often presented with direct speech are intentional *culture texts* (see 6.6) that reflect the qualitative nature of this research project. They are an attempt to reinforce the concept that beliefs and values cannot be adequately analyzed from a disengaged objective viewpoint, but require the relationships and interactions of a life setting.

Sindhi!” He got up the courage to ask me about the booklets and I offered him one. Immediately others came forward to get a copy and I was able to explain that these were verses from the *Injil* of Jesus.¹²² I invited the men to my house to talk more if they were so inclined. Because of several similar occurrences, I had frequent visitors who would come to my meeting room expecting to talk about spiritual things. A stand for sacred books with copies of the Sindhi Bible was prominently displayed on the coffee table. Because of the spiritual interest of Sindhi men and their open desire to discuss religious matters, the topic of conversation would soon move to the scriptures and we would engage in significant conversations about spiritual things. Some guests were argumentative and wanted to expose the assumed error of my beliefs, but for the most part they were willing to hear what this stranger had to say. This attitude was due to curiosity about foreigners’ ideas, assumptions concerning the superiority of Western education and a sense of obligation to treat me politely as a guest to their country. Sindhis are hospitable and gracious, and generosity towards guests is a high value.

During my first years working among Sindhis, I presented a gospel message that had meaning to me but did not resonate with my visitors. Using a Western influenced guilt–innocence paradigm (Muller 2000), I would tell a story about a man caught stealing who was brought before a judge. I argued that a just judge cannot forgive wrongdoing based on the good deeds of the guilty party; he is bound to punish the crime. By implication, God will not forgive our sins unless there is payment or intervention from someone who can pay the price. This approach made the men thoughtful but they remained unconvinced. One day I had a visitor who startled me with an insight that resulted in a change to my understanding of the gospel¹²³ and the way it should be communicated to Sindhis. After I explained the judge scenario, he sat back and meditated on the concept trying to work out why he found it unsatisfactory. Finally, he turned to me and said, “Yes, but a just judge can also be merciful. God can forgive without undermining justice.” Faced with this thoughtful and true response I replied, “You are right. I will need to think this matter through.”

¹²² *Injil* is the Arabic word used in the Qur’an for the writings associated with Jesus the Messiah. *Injil* is used by the Christian community to identify the New Testament as those writings.

¹²³ A fuller description of this epiphany can be found in the Cross–cultural Impact articles *Shaping the Gospel message so that it Resonates* (Naylor 2010b) and *Making the Gospel Understandable* (2010c). Overviews of biblical and other contextualized metaphors beyond the “forensic” understanding that I had assumed to be the essential explanation of the cross are also widely available (e.g., Aulén 1969 [1931], Morris 1965; Baker 2006; McKnight 2007; Baker & Green 2011).

It was not that I had discovered that my judge scenario was *untrue* but that it was not properly *contextualized*. I had “translated” – to use Schreier’s (1985:6-7) terminology – the message from my outsider context rather than discovering a metaphor of the cross that resonated with the Sindhi context. I had not appreciated the implications of their worldview, beliefs and values with respect to the meaning of Jesus’ death. Because I was becoming familiar with Sindhi culture and, to a certain extent, was able to think according to their concepts and assumptions, I finally understood why the message was not connecting with the hearers. I had assumed, from a Western bias, that

Sindhi people approached salvation from a theology of works. That is, their hope was in their own ability to do more good deeds than bad and thus be able to enter heaven. The criteria for salvation was a simple accounting algorithm: When good – bad = +ve, then heaven is the reward. My use of the penal substitution imagery addressed this view by demonstrating that good deeds cannot mitigate the wrong that we have done. Our only hope is if someone will take our punishment for us. What I did not realize, until my conversation with my guest, was that *I was addressing the wrong assumption*. Due to the influence of Sufism (the mystical side of Islam), the majority of Sindhis with whom I was communicating were neither denying the seriousness of their sin, nor attempting to accumulate credits from good deeds to be applied against the wrong that they had done. Instead, *their hope for salvation lay in the mercy of God to forgive* (Naylor 2010c).

I went away from home for three days to study, meditate and pray. Eventually I discovered a biblical metaphor that addressed a felt need of many Sindhis. What I needed to show was that Jesus is the embodiment of the mercy of God, which is their hope. A Muslim acquaintance told me, “God has given 1% of his mercy to this earth, and reserved 99% for the Day of Judgment.” While appreciating the sentiment, it does not reflect Christian belief and I began to use a gospel message that envisioned 100% of God’s mercy present in the cross of Christ.

As people began to put their faith in Jesus, I was able to witness the power of the gospel message. I continued at times to be insensitive and incompetent both culturally and as an evangelist. Nonetheless, after studying the New Testament together some would say to me, “I want to become of follower of Jesus. I want to be baptized.” I remember one man who said this to me and I responded, “No you don’t.” He was shocked and asked, “What do you mean? We have been studying God’s Word together. Why would I not want this?” I explained that he would be ostracized from his family, he could lose his job and he might not even have the opportunity to be married. He was silent as he thought this through. “You are right,” he finally replied. “But Jesus has given his life for me. How can I do any less than give my life to him?”

Another contact was disturbed by the implications of the message of the New Testament but was also drawn to its truth. He declared, “I cannot become a follower of Jesus until I have read the whole Bible. I must be sure of everything that is in that book.” I gave him a copy of the Old Testament to complement his studies in the New Testament and a few months later he was baptized.

4.1.4 Guiding the Believers

One of my key assumptions as an outsider change agent is that it is important for new believers to discover the relevance of biblical teaching for their context. As questions and struggles arose, I tried to place the burden of decision making on their shoulders so that they would discover God’s will for themselves. Not only was this pragmatic, looking towards a time when I would not be present, and strategic, recognizing the need for indigenous leadership, it was also realistic. I was not capable of determining the interpretation and application of scripture for them because, as an outsider, I did not fully understand the implications and intricacies of their setting and so was not capable of making decisions for them. Two examples illustrate this.

One aspect of Folk Islam among Sindhi people is the black thread worn around their necks or wrists. A thread is placed on babies’ wrists to protect them from the “evil eye,” and adults will have one placed around their necks by a recognized holy man in hopes that it will fulfill a material need. The question arose among the believers, “Does a person need to take off the thread before being baptized?” When they asked my opinion, I informed them that I was unable to make that decision since the practice does not have an equivalent in my home context. I encouraged them to think through the implications based on the principles of God’s Word and make their own decision in a way that affirmed their commitment as Jesus’ disciples. I left them alone and they prayed, read scripture and discussed what should be done. After three hours they came back and announced their decision: people must remove the thread before being baptized. Although I was happy with this decision, I would have accepted the alternative as well, believing that the goal is not to come to the “right” decision so much as to encourage a healthy process of engaging God’s Word so that questions of theology and praxis can be addressed by the believers whenever the Spirit challenges them about the way they are living out their faith.

On another occasion, one of the believers, whom I will refer to as Ahmed, came for advice. His absentee father had returned suddenly and abruptly arranged marriages for his children. Ahmed was now engaged to his Muslim cousin. He asked, “Should I marry her?”

Ahmed had recently begun working with a Christian organization in which the employees were primarily Punjabi Christians and so I asked, “What are the Christians at work telling you?” He informed me that they insisted that he was not allowed to marry a non-Christian. “But,” he continued, “if I refuse to marry my cousin it would shame my father and could tear my family apart. What should I do?” I told him that this was not a situation that I was capable of judging. “I do not fully understand the implications of what it would mean for you to marry a Muslim girl. But I do know this, as a follower of Jesus, you have the Holy Spirit as much as I do. Your responsibility is to discover what *Jesus* would have you do. Don’t do what is easiest or least disruptive for your life. Your goal is to follow Jesus in this decision.”

I also directed him to two passages of scripture in which the teaching appeared irreconcilable in this instance. As with the previous illustration, this underscored the priority of scripture in critical decision making as well as emphasizing the reality that the Bible cannot be approached as a manual for life, as if concrete answers to specific questions can be plucked out of a passage, but should be engaged as a revelation from a personal caring God who communicates the Divine nature and will. 2 Corinthians 6:14 states “Do not be yoked together with unbelievers,”¹²⁴ while in Matthew 19:19 Jesus quotes the Ten Commandments to say, “Honor your father and mother.” The former provides a principle applicable to marriage since a common faith is one of the critical bonds that draw a couple together. The latter emphasizes the importance of respecting our parents. “Ahmed,” I said, “I do not know how you are to navigate these passages in light of your dilemma. I will pray that you make your relationship with Jesus your first priority. But I want you to know that whatever decision you make, I will support you 100%.” In response, and after prayer and consideration of the implications for him and his family in light of his commitment to Christ, Ahmed went ahead with the wedding. Within two months his wife also became a believer and was baptized.

My concerns as an outsider change agent has been to ensure that spiritual guidance is tailored to the felt needs of the believers with an emphasis on the importance for them to “work out [their own] salvation” (Phil 2:12). Furthermore, in developing leaders, it is critical that the model exhibited through my interactions is reproducible in their lives, that it demonstrates respect and support for them and is based on a confidence that the Spirit is at work in their lives.

¹²⁴ Unless otherwise indicated, all scripture quotations are taken from Today’s New International Version (TNIV 2005).

4.1.5 Establishing a Community of Believers

4.1.5.1 Disappointment

As men¹²⁵ professed a faith commitment to Jesus, they identified with the group that was centered on my leadership. At first I was pleased with this sense of cohesiveness that included evidence of fellowship and spiritual growth. My goal was to choose one or two men who could be leaders, train them and then appoint them to positions of authority and responsibility. I would then step aside in the hope that this would constitute a sustainable and reproducible local church. Unfortunately, this was unrealistic and in retrospect I can see why the group, instead of becoming a healthy body of believers with a clear and unified identity, became more and more dysfunctional. The primary problem could be identified as my insensitivity to contextualization principles; without properly evaluating what I meant by “church,” I had gathered believers together and tried to develop cohesiveness and identity with little sensitivity to Sindhi social structures. The following factors contributed to the instability of the group until its demise:

- a. The unity of the group was dependent upon the outsider for stability and purpose. Although my intent was to encourage their common faith as the focal point for unity, in reality my role as leader was the common bond. This proved to be weak and unsustainable.
- b. Because of the heavy influence of Sufism in the Sindh, our group came to resemble the common *murshid–mureed* (teacher–disciple) social dynamic in the eyes of the group. While this is a possible social construct that could be used to form a church, it would require caution and strategic clarity in order to establish Jesus as the *murshid*.
- c. In this case, I had the role of *murshid* but was incapable of fulfilling it in a sustainable or culturally sensitive fashion. The *murshid–mureed* structure contains expectations for leadership of which I was ignorant and could not fulfill. Thus, I was constantly disappointing the men. The climax came when I tried to withdraw from leadership and hand the responsibility to others. A *murshid* cannot cease to be the *murshid* without destroying the group. A disciple may leave and form his own group of followers, but it would be unusual for him to displace the *murshid* while the *murshid* is alive.
- d. Because the men were from different families, loyalty to each other was fragile creating power conflicts, suspicion and increasing dysfunction.

¹²⁵ Karen and I did have family friendships with some believers, but the strict observance of *purda* in the Sindh meant that the believers I worked with as a group were only men.

- e. All the believers in the group were men because, being from different families, it was culturally inappropriate for women and men to gather together in the same setting. With no women, the group was unsustainable as a social community. Although this problem was discussed, no immediate solution was discovered.

4.1.5.2 Celebration

At a time when I was feeling rather discouraged about the direction the group of believers was headed, Ahmed came for a visit.¹²⁶ As we sat talking he asked, “Do you know what my favorite chapters in the Bible are?” I replied, “No, tell me.” He began to list them and they included ones I expected, such as Matthew 5 and 1 Corinthians 13. But then he said, “Genesis 7.” I was taken aback and responded, “Isn’t that when God destroys the whole world with a flood?” “Yes!” he said enthusiastically. I was confused and asked, “Why is this one of your favorite chapters?” “Because,” he replied, “just as God chose Noah to save his family, so God has chosen me to save mine!”

Sometime later, Ahmed asked me to come and speak at the weekly worship meeting he held in his house and I was able to see the outworking of his vision. One of his brothers, his mother, his wife (the Muslim cousin mentioned above¹²⁷) and his four sisters were there, all of whom have expressed a faith commitment to Christ because of Ahmed’s witness. A couple of men from the town were also there who had become believers because of his witness as well as his father and older brother. They are not believers but tolerant of this expression of faith within the family. This gathering is strongest expression of a church in their town.

One day Ahmed brought his four year old son, David, to visit me and the Bible translation team. “Tell these men the story of David and Goliath,” he instructed his son. David stood up straight and told the story. When he finished Ahmed said, “Now, tell them the story of Zacchaeus,” and he did. Finally, at his father’s command, the boy raised his hands and asked God to bless us in Jesus’ name.

Ahmed’s example of spiritual leadership in his home has helped shape church planting strategy among Sindhi Muslims. The current approach is to train men to be the spiritual leaders in their home and to preference the networks of extended family communities as the social structure in which a church can be established. Jesus is being brought into the family setting through the

¹²⁶ This incident has also been recounted in *Nexus Newsletter* (Naylor 2010e).

¹²⁷ See 4.1.4.

natural leaders and “household churches” are emerging. The contrast with the failed paradigm outlined in the previous section is plain:

- a. The unity and stability of the group is dependent upon the primary social structure found in Sindhi society: the family. This is not only strong and sustainable, but also reproducible. Every time a leader of a home comes to Christ, there is potential for a household church.
- b. Because of the patriarchal nature of Sindhi society, the leadership of the head of the home is seldom questioned. When that leadership is committed to following Jesus, the chances are that the family will participate. This societal dynamic parallels Joshua’s expectation of his family (Josh 24:15) as well as the incident of Paul and Silas with the Philippian jailer (Acts 16:32-33) found in biblical patriarchal settings.
- c. In Sindhi society it is the norm for the oldest son to take over leadership of the household when the father is incapacitated or dies, and this would naturally include spiritual leadership. The social structure for the family dictates natural lines of inheritance and authority which helps avoid infighting and power struggles.
- d. Because participants in the worship group are from the same family, loyalty to each other is expected, creating unity. Rather than bringing people together who are isolated from their families as in the failed paradigm, Jesus is brought into a household with the anticipation that a church will emerge.
- e. The believers in the home include men, women, boys and girls in a stable, sustainable social community that is more likely to pass on the faith to the next generation, as is evident from the incident with Ahmed’s son, David.

Donovan’s (1978:62) admonition is being proved true in the case of Sindhis:

Church-planting and church-establishing have often been used as descriptions of a missionary's task. But such descriptions can be misleading since they necessarily imply a kind of fixed and predetermined outcome to the preaching of the gospel. Because a missionary comes from another already existing church, that is the image of church he will have in mind, and if his job is to establish a church, that is the church he will establish. I think, rather, the missionary's job is to preach not the church, but Christ. If he preaches Christ and the message of Christianity, the church may well result, may well appear, but it might not be the church he had in mind.

I had tried to construct a church from the “image of church” I had in mind. This was unsustainable. Instead, because Ahmed faithfully lived out his faith in Christ, God caused a viable expression of church to emerge that is not the church I had envisioned; a move from disappointment to celebration orchestrated by God’s mercy and emerging within the context

rather than through the plans of an outsider.

4.1.6 Coming to Grips with Ignorance

It took Karen and me many years to discover that we could not offer Sindhis anything from a position of superiority. This confession of ignorance is not a reflection on the gospel, it is not intended to diminish the reality of gospel transformation that we have experienced ourselves and lived by, and it should not be understood as minimizing the importance of the relationships that we developed. Instead, it is an acknowledgement that our cultural blinders, unexamined assumptions and jaundiced judgments caused us to dispense living water in rusty tin mugs. We spent much time as knowers and dispensers of religious teaching not realizing that we needed to spend more time listening and dialoguing with Sindhis in order to reach a depth of appreciation for their values and thought processes. Impatience and misplaced self-confidence resulted in failure to communicate in a significant and impacting fashion. Without humility and sensitivity towards our own ignorance, there is a danger of imposing personal convictions that robs the hearer of their own experience of God speaking to them. This study is a reflection of my response to this growing realization. The research models a posture of listening, learning and evaluating in a way that moves the missionary from imposing and correcting to being attentive to what people are hearing and assimilating. A process is introduced whereby missionaries can recognize that those being introduced to the biblical message are already theologians from whom we can learn. Robert McAfee Brown's (1978:25) concern for the oppressed can also apply to Sindhis that "our initial theological task is to take these voices seriously."

4.2 Religious and Cultural History of the Sindhi People

4.2.1 Broad Strokes

The area of Sindh, largely encompassing the province of Sindh in modern day Pakistan, derives its name from the *Sindhu* or Indus River. The river flows through a richly fertile plain and is the "main artery and the life-stream of Sindh" (Baloch 2002:17). The valley is flanked by a rocky range on the west and by a semi desert region to the east and bisects the province from north to south for 360 miles (Ajwani 1970:1). The Indus Valley civilization has had a long and complex history of victories and defeats; times of peace interspersed with upheavals of bloodshed and oppression. During 1985-95 we lived as a family in Larkana, the major city close to the famous

archaeological site Mohenjo-daro¹²⁸ or “Mound of the Dead,” which, at thirty-five hundred years of age is considered to be the “remains of the oldest civilization of South Asia” (Dale 1979:192).¹²⁹ While our children were primarily interested in the area as a playground and picnic site, its cultural benefit and revelation into the history of the Indus valley civilization has been immense, both to scholars in their thirst for knowledge, and to Sindhis as a source of pride and identity, despite their lack of physical relationship with the ancient civilization (Schimmel 1986:10). Mohenjo-daro is the site of the major city of the Harappan civilization built 4-5000 years ago and boasting around 35,000 residents as well as an infrastructure superior to many of the smaller cities in modern day Sindh (Ajwani 1970:3; Porter 2000; Possehl undated; Schimmel 1986:10). Although the Harappan civilization of the earliest known period appears to have been relatively peaceful (Swanson 1998), the location of the Sindh has made it an area that has been conquered many times and been the scene of clashes between civilizations. To the west were kingdoms and empires such as Greece, Persia, Turkistan, Arabia, Iraq and Khurasan, to the east lay the “Hind” (India proper) (Baloch 1996:2). Many civilizations passed through and made their imprint, from the Persian king Darius I (520-515 B.C.) and Alexander the Great (326-325 B.C.), through to the White Huns in the 5th century A.D., the Sassanid Empire in the 6th century, and the Brahman Dynasty in the 7th century (Baloch 1996:3-6; 2002: 19-22; Ajwani 1970:3).

The most obvious lasting influence upon modern day Sindh came from the Muslim era, initiated by the conquering Arab army of Muhammad ben al-Qasim in 711/12 A.D. (Baloch 1996:6; 2002:23; Panhwar 1983:136; Schimmel 1986:1). It was in the first part of the Muslim era during the Arab period (712-1058) that the “Sindhi language was developed and written in the *naskh* script. Education became widely diffused and Sindhi scholars attained fame in the Muslim world” (Baloch 2002:23).¹³⁰ Sindhis also proudly claim that “Sindhi was the first and earliest language in which the Holy Quran [*sic*] was translated in the eighth or ninth century A.D.”

¹²⁸ Sometimes spelled “Mohenjodaro” or “Moenjodaro.”

¹²⁹ It was not until excavations at Mohenjo-daro begun in 1921 that there was evidence of an ancient civilization older than the Kushan kings in the Indian sub-continent (Marshall 1979b:181). Mohenjo-daro is one of only two sites that provide information about the civilization (McIntosh 2008:385).

¹³⁰ The original civilization at the Mohenjo-daro site had a “fully developed” written language in pictographic script (Zide 1979:256). The style of the engraving is different from anything before seen in Indian art (Marshall 1979a:106), and even though studied extensively, the language has not been successfully deciphered (Zide 1979, Mahadevan 1979, Pande 1979, Possehl 2002:127-139), although possible links to other civilizations have been identified (McIntosh 2008:31, Possehl 2002:135). There is no known relationship of that language to modern day Sindhi.

(Allana 1991:4). Independent rule was established during the time of the Soomras (1058-1349) coupled with the spread and general acceptance of Islam. The Soomras were of the Ismaili branch (Panhwar 1983:275). This is considered the “romantic” period of Sindh history during which time traditional folk tales were developed and patriotism was strengthened (Baloch 1996:7). The influence of Islam continued to increase through the construction of “beautiful mosques and monuments” (Baloch 2002:26) during the time of the Moghuls (1592-1732). The Kalhora rule (1700-1782) was a period of political independence when the key Sindhi city of Hyderabad¹³¹ was established. The greatest cultural and spiritual developments during this time came through the poetry of the Sufi mystics Shah Inayat and Shah Abdul Latif (Baloch 1996:10).¹³² During British rule (1843-1947) much energy was expended by Sindhis in the “Freedom movement” which led to the support of the Muslim League and eventually to the establishment of the area as the province of Sindh in the newly created country of Pakistan in 1947 (Baloch 1996:11-14).

4.2.2 Religious and Cultural Influences

Research into a cultural shift occurring among the Sindhi Muslim people requires a consideration of the religious and cultural history that forms the backdrop to their values and perspectives. The concern is not with the *facts* of history, but the *narratives* of history as told by Sindhis. That is, the way they draw out meaning from popular interpretations and readings of Sindhi history reveals their current cultural identity. The emphases and biases, the way the stories are “colored” and shaped, expose how Sindhis view themselves. Because their identity is tied to their history, the interpretation of that past, particularly in the stories and legends recounted among themselves, provides a window onto what they are proud of, what they believe is important and what they reject or despise. It is not dates and battles, but the philosophical, social and religious implications of the actions of the past that hold the greatest interest for Sindhis. The first known work from the Sindh translated into Arabic during the Arab period was a work of philosophy named *Kalilah wa Dimnah*, which became popular in intellectual circles for its anecdotes (Pathan 1978:222). This philosophical orientation and appreciation continues today with great reverence for poets, mystics and saints (*pirs*). Despite the political intrigues and bloody conflicts that have played no small role in the development of the Sindh, it is the influence of the mystics and Islamic teachers upon the hearts and minds of the Sindhi people that is credited with shaping the current Sindhi culture.

¹³¹ Hyderabad, Sindh is currently the largest city of the Sindh outside of Karachi and the majority of its residents are Sindhi.

¹³² The impact of Sufi poetry on Sindhi life and culture is discussed in 4.2.2.2.1.

Dr Habbibullah Siddiqui Patai (1996:1) begins his work on Islam in the Sindh with the explicit premise “that the real makers of Sindhi history belong to the ranks of sufis, saints, pirs, scholars, nationalists and poets, who commanded unmitigated public appeal and moulded the public mind the way they wanted and the people went.”

4.2.2.1 Arab Period

Excavations at Mohenjo-daro have disclosed the religious and cultural fluctuations in pre-Islamic Sindhi history with the presumably cultic images of bulls and human beings from the time of the Harappan civilization (Swanson 1998), to the Buddhist stupa and monastery located on its highest point, constructed during the early years of the Kushan rule, 2nd century A.D. (Panhwar 1983:105). However, it is the Islamic influence upon the Sindhi people that is of concern. The advent of the Arabs in Sindh is viewed as “a new era in the development of the literary and cultural activities which served as a basis for the later Muslim culture of the Indo-Pakistan sub-continent” (Pathan 1978:306). The great pride Sindhis have for their Islamic heritage is reflected in Abdul Majeed Memon’s (1999:44 my translation) statement, “Sindhi civility was increased, expanded, beautified and corrected by the influence of Islam.”

Sindhis, on the eve of the Arab conquest by Muhammad ben al-Qasim, are reported to have been Hindus, Buddhists, animists and star worshippers who held to a variety of beliefs and practices (Pathan 1978:92-93). The land was rich and prosperous (:91) and the people had strong communal and religious ties to their kings. The belief in reincarnation played a critical role in the practice of suicide. The traveler Abu Zayd of Siraf reported that upon the accession of a king a large number of people would gather to eat a small portion of the king’s food. This would require them to commit suicide upon the death of the king (:88-89). “Self-annihilation by way of suicide was universally accepted as a medium of deliverance” (:95). Furthermore, it is speculated that the reason why al-Qasim had “such an easy conquest” was because of the religious beliefs of the people. Buddhists were averse to violence and the influence of the doctrine of *Ahinsa* (or non-violence) resulted in a relatively peaceful populace (:195), a characteristic that can legitimately be applied to Sindhis today. It was into this environment that the Arab army of Muhammad ben al-Qasim brought Islam.

With the establishment of the rule of the Muslim Arabs, a strong and successful movement to promote the faith of Islam was initiated which greatly affected the Sindhi language through the adoption of Arabic religious terminology. Along with the preaching of the tenets of Islam,

mosques and *madrassas* (Islamic schools) were established (Memon 1999:66-69). “There was a large scale conversion of Sindhi tribes to Islam through the Suhrawardy Sufi order propagated by Shaikh Bahauddin Zakariya Multani and hazrat Qalandar lal Shahbaz of Sahwan” (Patai 1996:2). This conversion from idolatry and Hindu practices, paralleling the impact of the prophet of Islam on the Arab peninsula at the birth of Islam, is significant for the cultural identity of the Muslim Sindhi people. The narrative of moving from idolatry to the worship of the one true God is repeated often when the blessings of Islam in the world and particularly in the Sindh are revisited.

Despite the accomplishment of having the Sindhi philosophical work, *Kalilah wa Dimnah*, available in Arabic, it is the first translation of the Qur’an into Sindhi prose during the reign of Abdullah Bin Umar Habari (883/84–913 A.D.) that receives the highest acclaim (Pathan 1978:235-236; Panhwar 1983:188,191). This occurred at the beginning of a century of scholarly work during which the Sindhi language acquired its own peculiar features independent from other *Prakrit* languages (Panhwar 1983:191). The following story demonstrates both the power of the Qur’an and the impact of its translation into vernacular Sindhi:

During the course of translation when the Muslim scholar reached *Surah Yasin* and explained to him the verse..., the raja alighted from his throne and threw himself on the ground. He remained in long prostration weeping bitterly in such a manner that his face was covered with dust. He then raised his head and addressed the court, “Verily Allah is the sole God, the nourishing benefactor of the whole world” (Pathan 1978:236).

This story connects the faith of the Sindhi Muslim to their mother tongue; pride in each reinforces the other.

The thirst for knowledge among Muslims is credited to the prophet Muhammad (Pathan 1978:307) and the people of Sindh contributed to the advancement of education through “precious works of Indo–Pakistan origin, on philosophy, mathematics, medicine, astronomy, astrology, politics and various other subjects, resulting in startling inventions in the Arab world” (:308). These “precious works” are seen in the poetry and prose of the time. Sindh mosques were used as centers for religious studies where commentaries were written on the Qur’an and Hadith (:322). This forms the background to arguably the greatest religious influence upon the Sindhi people: Sufi mystics and poets.

4.2.2.2 Sufi Influence

Sufism or “*Tasawwuf*” (Jotwani 1986:1) is the rubric used to encompass the mystical side of Islam

in the Sindh.¹³³ As mystics, followers of Sufism in the Sindh pursue a variety of meditative and aesthetic paths in order to cultivate an experience of God. Dissatisfied with the limits and duty of “*deen*” – conformity to the demands of orthodox Islamic practice¹³⁴ – they seek spiritual intimacy and significance beyond a practice of religion and the daily joys and pains of life (:2-3). The contrast between religious practice and the experience of God is a common theme in both Sufi poetry and prose. A popular story told to me¹³⁵ involves a religious teacher preaching to his students in the presence of a Sufi mystic.

"If you do bad things you will go to hell," the religious teacher declared, "if you do good things you will go to paradise. So do good and not evil so that you will go to paradise and not hell."

On hearing this, the Sufi mystic arose and went into his house. There he wrapped one end of a stick with cloth, set it alight and began to walk through the town waving the torch over his head. The people began to run after him to stop him, afraid that he was going to set a house alight.

"What are you doing?" people asked.

"I'm looking for paradise and hell," he replied, "and when I find them I will burn them both to the ground."

"That is absurd," they cried. "Why would you want to do that?"

"Because I have just heard religious instruction that teaches people to do good out of fear of hell or greed for paradise and not for the sake of knowing God. It would be better if those causes of greed and terror were removed so that people would only seek God for sake of the divine self and not for their own gain!"

It is difficult to overstate the influence of Sufi teaching on Sindhi culture. A Pakistani evangelist, DR, was explaining the gospel message to two young Sindhi men when they read a

¹³³ Ernst (1996:1) argues that limiting Islamic mysticism to Sufism ignores mystical tendencies inherent within mainstream orthodox Islam. He considers the categorizing of Sufism separate from Islam by European scholarship unfortunate because the artificial caricature of a non-mystical Islamic orthodoxy has allowed for a positive view of Sufism by virtue of contrasting it with Islam. Sells (1996:17-19) affirms the broader reality of mysticism within Islam through the pre-Sufi examples of the Qur'an, ritualistic elements and the accounts of Muhammad's "Night Journey and Ascension." Lieven (2011:134) makes the additional point that the "Sufi" label is "complex and often misleading" blurring the lines between true mysticism and the veneration of saints (*pirs*) found in the common practices of Folk Islam. In my experience in the Sindh all mystical practices and meditative approaches to God are generally referred to under the rubric of "Sufism," as long as there exists a real or assumed connection to a mystic with the status of being a Sufi master.

¹³⁴ "Orthodox Islam" is used to describe mainstream expressions of Islam that, in contrast to Sufism and Folk Islam, center on Qur'anic teaching and traditional practices and emphasize the role of the Muslim as one submitted to God. "Orthodox Islam" focuses on *deen* or a comprehensive religious way of life comprising "acts of worship, political practice, and a detailed code of conduct, including hygiene or etiquette matters" (Al-Sheha 2005:5).

¹³⁵ This retelling is a compilation of a few accounts.

verse from scripture referring to Jesus as the Son of God. They immediately objected to this title and quoted a Qur'anic *ayat* (verse) that contradicted this claim. DR responded by reciting a few lines from Shah Abdul Latif's *Risalo*¹³⁶ that spoke of the closeness of a holy person to God in familial terms. Their response was immediate and positive accepting the example of the Sufi poetry as affirmation that such a relationship was possible.

Sufism enjoys general acceptance among most Sindhis, with paintings of Sindhi ascetics adorning the walls of tea shops, gatherings of men who read and meditate on Sufi poetry and musicians who seek insight through the singing of Sufi songs. However, the more orthodox or fundamental Muslims view Sufi teachings and activities as heretical. One of my friends is a follower of Sufism and is always seen wearing his saffron scarf as a sign of his dedication. One day he came to visit me quite depressed. His Sufi master had been visited by some religious clerics who threatened him and forbade him to have students or teach the way of the Sufi. When my friend tried to visit his teacher, he was rebuffed and told to leave and not return. Even though Sufi literature has much in praise of Islam and reflects Islamic tenets, it is considered by some to be syncretistic with Hinduism and other religious influences (Ajwani 1970:45). One of the alleged sayings of Shah Abdul Latif quoted to me by followers of Sufism anxious to demonstrate the tolerance and inclusiveness in Sufism was, "I am a Muslim, I am a Hindu, I am a Sikh." Such openness clashes with the exclusiveness of orthodox Islam. At the same time, I can affirm Lieven's (2011:138) claim that Sufism in the Sindh plays a stabilizing role by "bridging the Sunni-Shia divide and hindering the rise of sectarian extremism." This is because the mystical concerns valued by the average Sindhi clash with the religious scholars' attempts to draw sharp sectarian distinctions. The inclusive perspective of Sufism facilitates an orientation towards peace, tolerance and spiritual concerns as opposed to rigid legalism.

The influence of the mystics in the Sindh began with Mansur al-Hallaj,¹³⁷ who is credited with the formula "*ana'l-Haqq*, I am the Creative Truth,"¹³⁸ the "most theopathic utterance in the

¹³⁶ *Risalo* is the title of the definitive collection of works of poetry by Shah Abdul Latif Bhittai, the primary Sufi influence in the Sindh.

¹³⁷ Sufism originated in Arabia and from there spread to Iran where it developed its "literary expression... with the advent of al-Ghazzali (1059-1111 A.D.)" (Behari 1993:vii). The "famous mystic of Iran, Shaikh Fariduddin Attar, who flourished from 1140 to 1234 A.D." (:xxxiii) records the sayings and events of Mansur al-Hallaj in the *Tadhkaratul-Auliya (Memoirs of the Saints)* including his travels to China via India and his eventual crucifixion for heresy in Baghdad (:141-149).

¹³⁸ While the Arabic "*haqq*" is usually simply translated as "truth," Schimmel has added the

history of Sufism” and who visited the Indus valley in 905 A.D. (Schimmel 1986:2,96). This statement that “man may thus be viewed as very God incarnate” was, interestingly, not based on Muhammad but, according to Arberry (1950:59,93), on Jesus. Mansur al-Hallaj was beheaded by orthodox Muslims because of his declaration (Ajwani 1970:46; Arberry 1950:59; Behari 1993:143), but his influence is remembered through Sufi poetry sung in the Sindh to this day:

If you want to know what love is,
Ask it from those who are like Mansur . . . (Schimmel 1986:3)

It is the later Sufi masters who are more well known and who have had the greatest impact, such as Sachal Sarmast, writer of spiritual love songs, the prolific Mirza Qalich Beg, the “father of modern Sindhi prose” (Soomro 1977:139), who translated the life of Jesus Christ into Sindhi verse and prose (Beg 1979 [1919]), and the most famous, Shah Abdul Latif Bhittai, 1690-1751 A.D. (Jhangiani 1987:Title Page),¹³⁹ whose work is generally considered to be the apex of mystical poetry and Sindhi literature (Ajwani 1970:44,65; Schimmel 1986:4; Jhangiani 1987:56). “The poetry of Shah reflects not only the culture and social life of Sindh but it reveals the very soul of the people of Sindh” (Allana 1991:21-22). Because Sindhi literature in its current written form dates from the 16th century,¹⁴⁰ it is the writings from this time on that are considered to be *proper* Sindhi literature (Ajwani 1970:43; Schimmel 1986:3,4). This literature has three basic genres: poetry, parables and legends.¹⁴¹

The mystical, experiential orientation of followers of Sufism in the Sindh is evident in their subjective hermeneutic with respect to the teachings. Rather than using a critical or analytical process to access or restate the meaning of the teaching, the general approach occurs within a dialogical setting in which listeners express those aspects of the story or poetry that resonate positively with them. Any element that contradicts their explanation or clashes with their assumptions is usually glossed over without any sense of discomfort. They appear content with cognitive dissonance assuming that the source of discomfort lies in their inability to understand

adjective “creative” presumably to underscore the intended nuance of mystical union with God.

¹³⁹ Jotwani (1986:86) gives the dates as 1689-1752 A.D. Jhangiani (1987:17-18) insists that the “noted scholars” are wrong about the date of his death.

¹⁴⁰ GA Allana (1991:8-11) provides examples of *pir* Nooruddin’s (d. 1079 AD) poetry as early Sindhi poetry, which has survived in written form.

¹⁴¹ Followers of Sufism also quote popular idioms that have been passed on from Sufi masters. These could be regarded as a separate form, but they are often embedded in stories about the Sufi masters of the past. One day I was visited by a *faqir* and as I was bringing him a glass of water the glass slipped from my hand. I exclaimed, “*Arday!*” which is the Sindhi equivalent for “Oh no!” Pointing to the heavens, the *faqir* responded with the idiom, “Don’t say ‘*Arday*,’ say ‘yes, Lord.’”

rather than the teaching and that their task is not to resolve contradictions but to revel in the light perceived.

4.2.2.2.1 Poetry

Poetry has been one of the most influential art forms to shape and reflect Sindhi religious and cultural values. In the Sindhi translation of the Old Testament (2009), we attempted to translate the Hebrew poetry using a Sindhi poetic style. This failed miserably¹⁴² and we were forced to translate into prose, albeit with line breaks to indicate the poetic intent (similar to many English translations). Because of the importance of poetry in Sindhi culture, we wanted to express the translation in a style that would resonate with Sindhis. However, because of their love of poetry, Sindhis have little patience for clumsy and awkward poetry, which is all that we could produce within the restrictions of translation principles. An acceptable Sindhi style of biblical poetry will have to wait until a Sindhi poet, moved by the message in the Psalms, expresses them with poetic skill worthy of both scripture and cultural sensitivity.¹⁴³

Sindhi poetry is primarily spiritual and although romantic themes are common, the meaning is interpreted spiritually as expressions of relationship with God. “In Sindhi, a searching and longing soul is always a woman who yearns for her Divine-bride-groom [*sic*], for her eternal husband” (Allana 1991:22). Jotwani (1986:153) adds that “Indian mysticism... has been through the centuries describing the relationship between God and man as between the familial Husband [*sic*] and wife. This conjugal relationship is the basic metaphor for the fuller understanding of our material and spritual [*sic*] life.” Shah Abdul Latif used everyday objects and experiences to express his devotion to God. His tomb at the town of Bhit Shah is now a shrine and during the yearly Bhit Shah *mela*,¹⁴⁴ Sufi mystics will spend the night singing through his poetry. KF Mirza (1980:58) praises Shah by calling him “deep, mysterious, sweet, musical..., learned, pious, divine.... Shah appeals to your sublime feeling and moves your very soul.... Shah commences with a spark and gradually kindles a bonfire before your eyes.” The first three stanzas of *Barwo*

¹⁴² To our chagrin, one particularly competent reviewer was so offended by the poor quality of Sindhi poetry that she refused to do further checking.

¹⁴³ Such a hope is not unprecedented as seen in the famous *Punjabi Zabur* (Shahbaz 1908), a poetic version of Psalms in the Punjabi language composed by a believing Punjabi poet. Although the Bible is read in an Urdu version in Punjabi Christian worship, it is the singing of the *Punjabi Zabur* that touches the heart of the believers. The *Punjabi Zabur* collection has become a foundational part of the worship ritual throughout Pakistan and in Punjabi Christian communities around the world (P Brown 2006:267).

¹⁴⁴ A *mela* is a public gathering similar to a fair, but in this case is closer to a religious convention.

Sindhi-XXII (Beloved) translated by Elsa Kazi with the help of Allama Kazi provide an example of the emotion and passion evident from Shah Abdul Latif's (Bhittai undated-b:170-171; undated-a for original Sindhi) poetry, although the English translation can only reflect a shadow of the beauty and passion of the original:

Chapter I

1

O say, to what end you to others
would a servant be?
Of Gen'rous one hold stirrup, Lord
of worlds and Destiny?
Who loves Allah alone, but he
supremely happy is!

2

A reed doth murmur with distress
when cut , so even I
Cry suddenly for loved-one in
a fit of wretchedness;-
O leech, brand not my arm, sickness
and pain are in the heart!

3

My breath no longer is my own-
ruled now by other power-
How is my breast assailed by woe
that has a mountain grown?
My love, in dream Himself had shown,
brought joy, and then had gone!

Shah Abdul Latif's focus on mysticism and unity with God (*wahdah al-wujud*) should not be interpreted as intentional contrast to Islam or the *Shari'ah* (God's law). However, he saw the practice of *Shari'ah* as a means to an end, which is to know God. Thus, the focus of his poetry mentions *Shari'ah* sparingly with a greater concern for *tariqah* (meditation), *haqiqah* (reality/truth), and *ma'rifat* (knowledge) as the paths for the true mystic (Jotwani 1986:6,7).

4.2.2.2 Parables

The cultural and religious outlook of Sindhis is also expressed through the telling of Sufi stories, stories that reinforce their values and beliefs. Although Sindhi poetry brings the greatest sense of pride, it is the stories that are more accessible to the average person. From the early days of our time in the Sindh, I kept a record of Sufi stories recited to me by Sindhi acquaintances. Many of

these stories do not originate in the Sindh,¹⁴⁵ but have become a part of Sindhi culture and reflect the values and concerns of the Sindhi people. Whether humorous or profound the stories have impact, as the following parable related to me in conversation illustrates (my translation).

One day when Shah Abdul Latif's father was working in the field some boys came along and decided to tease him and see if they could make him angry. First, they turned his water into another field. When he saw this, he responded by saying, "That is good!" They next loosed his ox that was grinding the grain so that the ox began to eat the grain. He said, "That is wonderful!" Finally they came up to him and used abusive language. He only smiled in reply so they began to hit him. He nodded but did not try to resist them. Finally they became ashamed and asked, "Why do you not become angry?"

"Well," he said, "When you turned the water into another field I thought 'That is good! Other farmers need water too. I shouldn't be so selfish by thinking just of myself.' When you loosed my ox I thought, 'That is wonderful, the ox has been working hard and he needs his rest too.' When you swore at me I thought 'Yes, I have done things worthy of this abuse.' When you began to hit me I thought 'It is good of God to punish me so gently when I deserve so much more.'"

4.2.2.2.3 Legends

Celebrated through both poetry and prose, legends are recited in the Sindh that reveal and reinforce the beliefs and values of Sindhi culture. Ajwani (1970:28-42) summarizes the seven most well-known legends of the Sindh "which have been immortalised in the verses of Sind's greatest poet, Shah Latif, and other poets." Perhaps the most popular of these legends is that of Umar and Marvi, a story that was referred to or retold in my hearing numerous times. It is an excellent example of how Sindhi literature both reflects and reinforces key values of Sindhi culture. In the story, Marvi is the Sindhi heroine whose purity and faithfulness unto death is considered the standard for all Sindhi girl virgins. According to the account told to me,¹⁴⁶ Marvi is engaged to be married, but is kidnapped by a prince, named Umar, who is captivated by her beauty. Through various means he attempts to win her love, or at least her submission, to his advances. She refuses every temptation and begins a fast until Umar will free her to return to her village. She appeals to him on the basis of honor, as a brother, and he eventually relents and returns her to her village. But she is so weakened by her fast that all she can do is lay claim to her

¹⁴⁵ There are written collections of Sufi stories and legends, such as Idries Shah's (1982) *Seeker After Truth: A Handbook of Tales and Teachings*. Since Sufi teaching thrives on illustration and anecdote, many histories of Sufism also contain numerous stories (eg. Arberry 1950; Behari 1993; Mirza 1980). My interest has not been in Sufi stories *per se*, but in those stories admired and recounted within the Sindhi context.

¹⁴⁶ Many different versions of this legend exist through years of retelling in the oral tradition.

chastity and faithfulness before dying.

The story presents a fascinating contrast to Western tales in which the damsel in distress is rescued to experience a positive change of fortune and enjoy happiness and love. In this legend, the damsel maintains the family honor unto death. The honor of the family is expressed through the purity and faithfulness of the women in the household, which is why Marvi is esteemed so highly and why her name is popularly conferred on Sindhi girls. The dark side of this value is reflected in other versions of the legend in which Marvi is not believed when she returns to the village.¹⁴⁷ Rather than being welcomed back, she is forced to undergo an ordeal by fire to prove her purity (Ajwani 1970:32). In the story, she emerges unscathed. Unfortunately, in the reality of Sindhi society many girls who fall under suspicion of being impure through inappropriate conduct¹⁴⁸ do not survive. There is a tradition widely practiced in the Sindh called *Karo Kari*, meaning “black boy, black girl,” that refers to the honor killing¹⁴⁹ of those who have dishonored their families. “Black” in Sindhi thought is pejorative. Amnesty International (1999:2) reports,

Women in Pakistan... face death by shooting, burning or killing with axes if they are deemed to have brought shame on the family. They are killed for supposed ‘illicit’ relationships, for marrying men of their choice, for divorcing abusive husbands. They are even murdered by their kin if they are raped as they are thereby deemed to have brought shame on their family. The truth of the suspicion does not matter – merely the allegation is enough to bring dishonour on the family and therefore justifies the slaying.

The practice is so common that the Sindh police have established a separate emergency number for those who are threatened.¹⁵⁰ The HRCP (2011:202) State of Human Rights report for 2010 asserts that the

human rights picture largely remained bleak for women in 2010 with violence continuing against them unchecked and protection provided by the law eroding. The illegal practices of killings [*sic*] girls and women in the name of honour and giving

¹⁴⁷ The convenient death of Marvi in the version I was introduced to avoids the question of inevitable doubt that would be cast upon her purity.

¹⁴⁸ Any relationship by a female that compromises familial conduct within the family, such as with a brother or uncle, or any conduct with a male outside the family of a private and personal nature constitutes impurity within the Sindhi family dynamic, whether or not there has been sexual activity.

¹⁴⁹ I Haider (2003) points out that many cases of *Karo Kari* are not truly based on family honor but are a form of corruption, oppression and revenge based on other motivations, such as greed and a desire for economic advantage. The stigma attached to an accusation is often sufficient to ruin a person’s reputation and put a woman’s life in danger.

¹⁵⁰ Police have established “anti-*Karo Kari* cells” in four Sindh districts: Sukkur, Ghotki, Khairpur and Naoshero Feroz. The helpline number is 111-123-588 (HRCP 2012).

them away to settle disputes continued. Decisions by *jirga*¹⁵¹ sustained illegal practices such as *Swara*, *Vani* and *Karo Kari*.

I remember an event related to me a number of years ago. A girl was dancing at a wedding when a teenage boy came up and grabbed her hand. The girl's uncle saw this and she was taken out and stoned to death. Although people were appalled and considered this a crime, many also felt conflicted as they sympathized with the need to maintain the family honor.

4.2.2.3 Religious Diversity in the Sindh

An appreciation of the Sindhi context is incomplete without an understanding of the religious diversity found within Sindhi expressions of Islam. Historical summaries can inadvertently imply a unified Islamic influence within the Sindh. The reality is that the Sindh contains, both in the past and currently, a mosaic of Islamic expressions.¹⁵² The mysticism of Sufism is pervasive as is dependence upon *pirs* (saints), both alive and dead, to provide mediation with God. The amulets and charms of Folk Islam are common alongside more orthodox expressions of Islam represented by mosques and *maolvis* (Islamic clerics). Sunni is the dominant movement but there are several Shia families, as well as a scattering of other branches of Islam, some of whom are considered heretical by the religious and governing authorities.

This diversity can be downplayed for visitors, which was my experience when visiting the Institute of Sindhology at the university of Sindh in Jamshoro on February 20, 2010. One of the librarians explained to me that there were 5 influential Islamic movements in the Sindh (Chang 2010).¹⁵³ When discussing these movements with a Sindhi friend (Jatoi 2010), he pointed out that some groups considered heretical by the mainline movements¹⁵⁴ were excluded from the list despite their influence and numbers within the Sindh. It would seem that the ideological persuasions of the librarian had influenced him to provide me with what he considered to be the authentic versions of Islam. The question of whether or not members of any one of these groups would be more open to the gospel message than others is beyond the scope of this study.

¹⁵¹ *Jirga* are private tribal courts parallel to the official judicial system. They are common in the Sindh and have considerable power and authority, particularly in the rural regions.

¹⁵² Other religions, notably Christianity and Hinduism, are visible minorities but the focus for this study is the Muslim population.

¹⁵³ The five mentioned were: *Deobandi* (a Sunni group containing 3 main movements as well as other smaller factions), *Ahl al-Hadith* (a smaller group within the Sunni movement), *Ahl-e-Tashi* (the primary Shia group), *Barelvi* and *Bohri* (or *Bohra*).

¹⁵⁴ Significant groups left out were *Sufi Azam*, *Qadiani* and *Ismaili*.

However, it is evident that diversity of belief, coupled with tolerance towards religious mystical experiences due to Sufism, has influenced many Sindhis towards the exploration of a variety of spiritual paths.

Further evidence of the diversity of belief among Muslims in the Sindh apart from the noted movements can be seen in the following interactions I had on that same day at the institute. A young man was asked to take me to meet with a professor in the Islamics department. As we walked together he informed me that he had been a student of a Christian evangelistic organization familiar to me that sent out Bible correspondence courses. He claimed to be a “secular” Muslim who liked to study other religions and was not overly concerned about any one belief. God was not a part of his life in any personal sense that required religious practice.

When speaking to the Islamics professor I described the nature of my research as an exploration of the impact of culture on religious thought in the Sindh. He pulled some papers from a drawer and introduced me to a lecture he had given concerning Islam as a system (Shaikh 2007). His conviction is that Islam “is a comprehensive and everlasting code of guidance for humanity [that] encompasses human life in totality.” The ambitious goal of Islam is to become “dominant over all man-made systems of life, all over the globe.” This can only be accomplished through correct religious practices (*deen*) in which people “consciously surrender to the sovereignty of a higher authority and live a life of total obedience to that authority.” Worship, then, becomes not a *religious* expression segregated from daily existence, but a joining together of the acts of submission and devotion to God through life lived according to the “system” of Islam.

After the library at the institute closed for the day, I made my way back to roadside where many buses passed by. Since I was unfamiliar with the transportation system and did not know which bus would take me back to the city I approached a few students who were standing there and, in typical Sindhi fashion, they were more than happy to help me out. As we traveled together, I discovered that one of them was a follower of Sufism dedicated to learning and singing the poetry of the Sufi masters of the Sindh. His faith was expressed through the mystical power of song as he reveled in the spiritual poetry of these masters. Although anecdotal, the diversity I experienced in a short span of time is typical of religious belief in the Sindh.

4.2.2.4 Christian Influences in the Sindh

Until recently, all Christian influence on the Sindhi people has been cross-cultural. To be a Sindhi was to be a Muslim or a Hindu. The only churches present were made up of Punjabis who

migrated to the southern province and “especially in Sindh, the Church was hidden in ghettos, on the margin of the culture, a tiny island in a great sea of Islam, constantly in danger of being swallowed up” (P Brown 2006:225). The movement of Punjabi Hindus to Christianity began in the late 1800s¹⁵⁵ resulting in the Christian communities that exist throughout Pakistan today. However, these churches have had little impact upon the Sindhi Muslim population and members of the Christian communities actually discourage their clergy from talking to Muslims about the gospel. A pastor (YM) of one of these Punjabi churches has an evangelistic passion for Sindhi Muslims. One time he handed out some copies of the “JESUS” film¹⁵⁶ in the Sindhi language in his hometown and some Muslim clerics complained to the police. The Christian community was angry with the pastor for jeopardizing their fragile co–existence with the Muslim community (YM 1998).¹⁵⁷

Christian foreign mission agencies were at work among the Muslim and Hindu Sindhi people of the Sindh well before the 1947 partition of India¹⁵⁸ when the Sindh became the southeast province of newly formed Pakistan. Nonetheless, when a new wave of foreign missionaries entered post–partition Sindh in 1954, they felt like pioneers (P Brown 2006:5). The social upheaval caused by the migration of Hindus from the Sindh during partition had altered the demography significantly (Hill, Seltzer, Leaning, Malik, Russell & Makinson 2004:2). Many parts of the Sindh province had not received attention from foreign missionaries (P Brown 2006:4) and there were very few converts to Christianity from the Sindhi Muslim people (:133).

During the remaining decades of the 20th century, only a few Muslims made commitments to become followers of Christ through baptism. During the time that Karen and I worked in the Sindh from 1985 to 1999, it was estimated¹⁵⁹ that there were about 100 Muslim background

¹⁵⁵ Details of this movement are provided in 6.5.7.

¹⁵⁶ The “JESUS” film is produced by *Power to Change* and is the life of Christ taken from the book of Luke. “The ‘JESUS’ film has now been translated into more than 1,000 languages, with a new language being added nearly every week” (“JESUS” film).

¹⁵⁷ Despite the initial negative response, the result was a revival in the church. Charges were dropped and once the members of the church began to appreciate the courage of the pastor, they were ashamed of their negative reaction and admitted their own responsibility “to share the good news” (YM 1998).

¹⁵⁸ In her book, *Jars of Clay*, Pauline Brown (2006:5) reports that, “Founded in 1852, the Sind [*sic*] Mission of CMS [the Church Missionary Society] focused on the major cities of Karachi and Hyderabad in the south and Sukkur in the north. The early Anglican missionaries from England were the real pioneers in Sindh. Others came later from Australia and New Zealand.”

¹⁵⁹ There is no hard data to support these estimates. These are, however, commonly used figures by those involved in ministry to Sindhi Muslims based on their own experience and through

believers. However, as the 21st century unfolds the number is now 200–300 committed believers and close to ten *Isa Jama'at*. These groups are “not just single men, but families [who meet] regularly... and [take] an offering” (NN 2008). Many of these *Isa Jama'at* are household churches that consist solely of one extended family and may represent an early stage of a “people movement”¹⁶⁰ to Christ.

Christian influence among Sindhis has come primarily through evangelical missions, both Western and indigenous. Most indigenous missions have strong ties to Western missions and churches for funding and support.¹⁶¹ Mainline Protestant churches and the Catholic Church have had limited impact on and no sustained focus of outreach to Sindhis. Evangelical missionaries and Christian workers have generally presented the Christian message based on a Western evangelical theological framework and, as a result, the teaching is fairly narrow and centered on Bible study. This has produced a sense of unity in teaching, belief and fellowship, as well as a unified approach to authority – an appeal to scripture – that parallels a similar value in Islam. Although Catholic doctrines such as the veneration of Mary and the authority of the Catholic Church are discussed, they are usually presented in a way that favors the Protestant, evangelical orientation. Thus biblical teaching could be classified as the “translation model” (Longchar 1999:107; Schreiter 1985:7) through which the theological formulations of the West are accepted as authoritative, although Sindhi terms, idioms and categories are used to reflect the concepts.¹⁶²

The decision of Muslim Sindhis to commit their lives to Jesus is often a culmination of a deep personal struggle as they explore the Christian worldview in hopes that it will resolve their dissatisfaction with life. But the expressions of their faith are varied. The spiritual desire and mystical orientation of many Sindhis means that there is a felt need for a significant, although not necessarily *personal*, connection with God. This spiritual hunger resonates well with the evangelical orientation of presenting the Lord Jesus Christ as the way we can enter into a relationship with God as Father. Others identify themselves with Jesus as their *murshid* (teacher)

correspondence with others working in the same field.

¹⁶⁰ A “people movement” within a distinct ethnic group occurs when “a wave of decision for Christ sweeps through the group mind, involving many individual decisions but being far more than merely their sum” (McGavran 2009 [1955]:337). People movements have been documented, investigated and verified among a number of Muslim people groups, albeit with names changed to protect their identity (e.g., Harkin & Moore 2009:687-690; R Brown 2009:706-707). See further in 6.5.7.

¹⁶¹ Even where the connection to Western missions is not official, the leaders of these ministries often appeal to and rely upon Western connections for funding.

¹⁶² Chronological Bible Storying mentioned in 3.1.2 is an example of this tendency.

and *khudAvand* (Lord). Some respond with a rejection of Islam, others with a dismissal of the Sufi mysticism because of its lack of connection to the realities of life. On the other hand, a few attempt to maintain a connection to Islam or Sufism that allows them to keep their Muslim identity, an attempt that can prove syncretistic.

An acquaintance (MH), who was employed as a Sindhi language teacher, is an example of the latter approach. Our classes were held in a church building and during a break he fell asleep on a pew and had a dream that he was standing on one side of a chasm. In the chasm was fire and destruction, but across the chasm was the most beautiful place imaginable and he longed to cross over. However, he was unable to do so because there was only one narrow bridge, as narrow as the blade of the sword.¹⁶³ He woke up with a sense of loss and thought, “I had this dream in a church, it must have spiritual meaning.” He sought out a missionary and asked the meaning of the dream. The missionary gave a Christian interpretation by pointing out that we are separated from God because of our sin and cannot save ourselves unless God intervenes; Jesus is God’s intervention. MH became quite troubled by the implication that he may have to become a follower of Jesus. As he considered his options, he eventually became a follower of Sufism. This choice allowed him to accept the teachings of Christianity without commitment to Christ and, therefore, without the necessity of abandoning his Muslim identity.

Another example involves a man (LP) who studied the book of Romans with me. We studied a chapter each time he visited, and one day when we had come to the end of chapter nine, he turned to me and declared, “I now believe that Jesus is the Son of God, but what about Islam?” I had been in the Sindh long enough to understand the significance of his question. What he meant was that he had a great love and respect for Islam, but now that he had come to recognize who Jesus was, it was difficult for him to understand how he could commit to Jesus while maintaining a proper attitude and respect for Islam. I gave him the example of Jesus’ interaction with the rich ruler (Lk 18:18-30) as a parallel to his situation: a man with loyalties to a well respected religion, but who was still lacking a fully satisfied spiritual life. The ruler in the story was faithful to his religious duties and yet had a hunger for more than his path of obedience could provide, which corresponded to LP’s desire. In the end, just as Jesus called the man in the story to

¹⁶³ This image of judgment in the afterlife as passing over a bridge is found both in the Zoroastrian concept of the *Chinvat* bridge (Eduljee 2007) as well as in the Hadith. According to the tradition of *Ma’soom* in the Hadith, the bridge is “thinner than a hair, sharper than a sword, and hotter than fire.” Believers will pass over it “like lightening,” while unbelievers “will slip and fall down in the pit of hell” (Qummi 2010:114).

follow him without rejecting the good aspects of his religion, so LP committed his life to Christ while maintaining his identity as a Muslim and loyalty to his Islamic heritage.¹⁶⁴

Many Sindhis seek out the help of *pirs* (saints) who act as intercessors and mediators between God and ordinary people. *Pirs* can be living or dead, and their tombs are shrines where people in need go to pray. The concern is primarily personal looking for mediation with God for health or material blessings on their families. Some Christian organizations in Pakistan hold healing services that function with a similar dynamic, praying for God's power to meet personal concerns. These programs attract people from other religious traditions, whether Christian, Muslim or Hindu.

Other Christian organizations both inside and outside of Pakistan address the societal needs of poverty, injustice and education in practical and material ways, as well as provide a platform for believers to participate in compassionate relief efforts. These ministries stir the imagination of local believers to the possibility of becoming catalysts for social change by living faithfully and effectively as followers of Jesus within a Muslim context. The relief efforts accomplished after the floods of 2009, 2010 and 2011¹⁶⁵ in cooperation with foreign mission agencies are an example of this, as well as the ongoing work of Christian hospitals.

The increase in conversions and household churches over the last decade is not due to increased foreign missionary presence, since there are fewer foreigners serving as missionaries in the Sindh than in the previous decade.¹⁶⁶ While one reason is likely the fruit of years of labor by mission agencies, another cause is undoubtedly the effect of globalization that has exposed Sindhis to other worldviews and perspectives resulting in increased interest in other ways of believing and living. For these believers, the Christian influence is viewed as a positive part of the change affecting their context. But the opposite reaction of aggressively protecting traditional beliefs and practices that appear to be threatened is also evident in the Sindh. Christian influence, for these people, becomes symbolic of a negative coercion undermining their cultural values,

¹⁶⁴ This could be viewed as an application of the “insider movement” or C5 approach to Muslim evangelism. See 6.5.11 for further explanation of this phenomenon.

¹⁶⁵ Our mission agency, Fellowship International, worked with two indigenous organizations in the Sindh to bring water and food relief to many villages suffering due to flooding and a rise in the water table. Although the effort was small relative to the efforts of national and foreign government services, it was not insignificant and was appreciated by the local people.

¹⁶⁶ The government of Pakistan effectively placed a cap on the number of foreign missionaries allowed in the country by issuing “missionary visas” in the late 1980s. People coming to serve must replace someone who has left and there are currently a number of vacant visa replacements available.

priorities and lifestyle. In her treatise on religious fundamentalism, Armstrong (2000:xvi) explores the historical and sociological reasons for these distinct and opposite reactions. She notes that it is very difficult to be conventionally religious in the brave new World. Modernization has always been a painful process. People feel alienated and lost when fundamental changes in their society make the world strange and unrecognizable.... Fundamentalists feel that they are battling against forces that threaten their most sacred values.... Modernization has led to a polarization of society....

While such etic analyses contribute to our understanding of how the presence of a minority religion can impact a people group, the concern of this study is to explore emic expressions of self-reflective understanding among the Sindhi people in order to identify theological trajectories taking shape. These shifts cannot be divorced from the societal dynamics, but the desire is to provide opportunity for believers to give voice to their changing faith as it is perceived within the cultural and societal interactions of their lives.

4.3 The Current Muslim Sindhi Context

Muslim Sindhis are a diverse and complex people group united by a common language, heritage and religion. The following considerations of the living conditions faced by Muslim Sindhis do not focus on the richness and beauty of their history, culture and lifestyle. Instead, the topics chosen are limited to those concerns that have relevance to the research: the social, political, economic and religious realities that impact the values, beliefs and worldview of Muslim Sindhis.

4.3.1 Politics and Power

Pakistan has been rated one of the most dangerous countries in the world.¹⁶⁷ Political and religious clashes, tensions and uncertainties are regular fare in both local and international news reports. While these clashes impact Sindhis in a variety of ways, including the political and economic climate and their religious outlook, Sindhis are seldom the instigators of violence and uprisings and tend towards a more pacifist approach to life. They are known more for their poetry and agrarian lifestyle than aggressiveness. The landlord-serf paradigm, ubiquitous in the rural areas, contributes to this mentality. Although some chafe under this societal structure, they are unwilling to pay the price to disrupt it.

Karachi, the largest city in Pakistan and one of the largest in the world with a population

¹⁶⁷ As one example among many, Olsen (2010) at Forbes.com ranks Pakistan near the top of the list using combined statistics provided by *iJet* and *Control Risks* that develop their rankings from crime rates, police protection, civil unrest, terrorism risks, kidnapping threats and geopolitical stability. Olsen also considers recent travel alerts from the US State department in the assessment.

of around 18 million (Lieven 2011:303), is a port city of the province of Sindh. But Karachi can hardly be called a Sindhi city since, according to 1998 statistics, less than 8% of the city's population are Sindhi-speakers (:310). Disruptions, ethnic clashes, power struggles and religious attacks (largely between Sunnis and Shias) that occur in the Sindh province are primarily located in Karachi. As one example of the violence that has plagued Karachi over the years, the Research Directorate, Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada (1996) published an extensively referenced account of the Pakistan government's actions against the Mohajir¹⁶⁸ Quami Movement (MQM), Karachi's dominant political party, in 1995-1996. The arrest and detention of thousands of ordinary MQM supporters and Mohajirs is mentioned along with extrajudicial execution, beatings, torture and extortion. In addition, the article reports that there were daily killings in clashes between "armed ethnic, sectarian and criminal groups," as well as vendetta murders.

After partition in 1947 and again after the 1971 civil war when East Pakistan separated and became Bangladesh, Urdu-speaking Mohajirs migrated to Karachi (Mir 2011). In 1998 21% of the population of Sindh were Urdu-speakers, compared to 59% Sindhi-speakers. However, in Karachi, Mohajirs were 48%, Punjabis 14%, Pashto-speakers 11% with another 8% made up of Gujarati-speakers (the same percentage as Sindhi-speakers) (Lieven 2011:310). The Mohajir influence has continued to increase over the years and calls for a separate "Mohajiristan" from the MQM have become stronger. Although there are Sindhi sections of the city, the power base is not in the hands of Sindhis nor is their presence particularly noticeable; it is the national language of Urdu that is commonly spoken, rather than Sindhi. This is especially obvious in the transportation sector with many more Mohajirs and Pathans¹⁶⁹ driving taxis and trucks than Sindhis. An indication of the decreasing influence of Sindhis in Karachi can be seen by comparing Lieven's (2011:303) experience in 1989 when there was fighting between Mohajirs (majority) and Sindhis (minority), to his experience in 2009 when the fighting was between Mohajirs and Pathans. By that time Sindhis were not significant enough to play a role in the power struggle. It is the Rangers, a paramilitary corps with the Pakistan army, who carry much of the load to keep peace within Karachi and the rest of the Sindh.

Outside of Karachi the Sindh is probably the least dangerous of the four provinces, with the spillover of unrest from Afghanistan due to the war against the Taliban affecting the other three provinces far more than the Sindh. Even when there is some action related to Afghanistan,

¹⁶⁸ Mohajir is the popular term in Pakistan for Urdu-speaking immigrants.

¹⁶⁹ Pathans (or Pashtun) are Pashto-speakers originally from Afghanistan and northeast Pakistan.

the instigators are not usually Sindhis, but members of a national group with leaders coming from other areas. For example, in 2010 while my daughter was working as a nurse at a hospital in northern Sindh, a number of oil tanker trucks were intercepted and burned a short distance away. While the billowing smoke was obvious to all, there was little fear for safety. It was understood that this did not stem from the anger and rebellion of local residents but was an orchestrated attack by members of political parties outside of the area.

Political parties, even those regarded as “secular,” such as the People’s Party of Pakistan (PPP), founded and controlled by the Bhutto family, have significant religious appeal. Many local politicians are from families of hereditary saints (*pirs*) and owe much of their prestige and power to this ancestral connection (Lieven 2011:125). The connection between landlords, *pirs* and local politicians contributes to the stability of the landlord–serf paradigm (:327) and established families with longstanding chieftain or *pir* status generally make up the ruling elite. Lieven (2011:138) provides the example of a PPP politician from the family of a *pir* who accepts as his due the unquestioning devotion of his followers. He concludes that

in practice the *pirs* and their families cannot genuinely advance either local education or local democracy, as this would strike directly at the cultural and social bases of their own power.... The traditions and structures which prevent Islamist revolution and civil war also help keep much of the population in a state of backwardness and deference to the elites.

While the judgment concerning “backwardness” demonstrates a cultural bias against Sindhi values, it is true that the dynamic does militate against structural change.

About halfway between Shikarpur and Larkana, the two cities in the northern Sindh where we lived from 1985-1999, lies the Bhutto village of Garhi Khuda Bux. The Bhutto family has been the most politically influential family in the Sindh and is a prime example of how, as Lieven (2011:204) states, “patronage and kinship form the basic elements of the Pakistani political system.” Politics in Pakistan is a struggle between landlords, urban bosses and tribal chieftains for dominance as each attempts to attain patronage with the state by pledging their allegiance and their followers’ loyalty to the existing dynasties (:207). The Bhutto family has thrived in this political climate. Zulfikar Ali Bhutto was Prime Minister of Pakistan from 1971–77 and his daughter Benazir Bhutto was elected twice as Prime Minister from 1988–1990 and again in 1993–1996. From September 2008 until May 2013 when a national election handed over the governing power to Nawaz Sharif and the Pakistan Muslim League, Benazir’s widower, Asif Ali Zardari, was the President of Pakistan. He had apparently inherited the co–leadership of the PPP party

through conditions laid down by his late wife's will (Lieven 2011:238).

The Bhuttos' political aspirations have not been without cost, as the cover of Fatima Bhutto's (2010) book, *Songs of Blood and Sword*, testifies. On it is written "Fatima Bhutto: Granddaughter of Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, executed 1979; Niece of Shahnawaz Bhutto, murdered 1985; Daughter of Mir Murtaza Bhutto, assassinated 1996; Niece of Benazir Bhutto, assassinated 2007." At Garhi Khuda Bux stands the impressive Bhutto mausoleum built of gleaming white marble. Erected over the family cemetery, Benazir Bhutto started building the elaborate structure after 1988 as a monument to her father (Lieven 2011:233) and she is now buried there as well. People come daily and every time I have visited I have observed Sindhis praying and casting rose petals on the tombs. Each year the death of Zulfikar Ali is remembered with prayers and the laying of wreaths. On the 33rd anniversary of his death in 2012 tens of thousands of people from all over Pakistan were present. The arrangements required 6,000 policemen and 1,000 Rangers "along with a bomb disposal squad and commandos" (The Nation 2012). Such dedication reveals the deep kinship allegiances that permeate Sindhi society with respect to the Bhutto clan.

Devotion to the Bhutto name is based upon kinship and partisan loyalties and the perceived benefits of supporting such a power base, rather than confidence in their ability to rule with integrity. Fatima Bhutto (2010:384-388), Benazir's niece, provides a list of corruption allegations against Benazir and her husband, Zardari, during Benazir's second term as Prime Minister. This includes the claim that "the couple stole somewhere between \$2 billion and \$3 billion from the Pakistani treasury" and that they bought an estate in England for approximately \$4 million. In talking to a PPP supporter I asked about allegations of corruption against the Bhutto family and he concurred that they were likely true. However, he believed that all politicians would act the same way, so why not support one from which his family may benefit?

Power breeds corruption and the absence of the rule of law is evident in the injustice that occurs on a daily basis in the Sindh. Lieven (2011:334) recounts the actions of a local chieftain who was using his private army of gunmen to seize land from small farmers. He was able to act with impunity because his brother was a provincial minister. Bribery is rampant and taken for granted with the poor suffering the most. Those refusing to take bribes are noticeable and referred to with respect. A judge we knew in the city of Larkana was a Christian who stood out not just because of his religion, but because he had no car or chauffeur and lived relatively simply. It was obvious that he refused to take bribes, although the pressure to do so was significant. Other forms of corruption are also considered acceptable. One acquaintance informed me that he had

opportunity to study at Jamshoro University near Hyderabad. I was surprised to hear this because he did not come from a wealthy family. However, he informed me that an uncle managed to get a supervisory position with a European Non-Government Organization (NGO). The goal of the NGO was to provide veterinary services to improve the health of cattle in the Sindh. My acquaintance had been appointed by his uncle to be a veterinarian in a certain district. I was surprised at this and asked him how he acquired such a skill. He laughed and replied that he knew nothing about the job and did not even visit the district. Instead he travelled from Hyderabad each month to collect his salary out of which the uncle received a portion, and with the rest he obtained his education.

People tend to be skeptical of the judicial system in Pakistan, considering it so corrupt that only the wealthy and powerful can hope for justice. Nonetheless, as Lieven (2011:84) notes, it would be a mistake to assume that people are innocent victims of an arrangement that only benefits the elite since everyone conforms to this reality and takes advantage of the system. It is too cynical, however, to observe with him (:84) that “everyone with the slightest power to do so tries to corrupt and twist the judicial system to their advantage in every way possible.” It is better to recognize that people have accepted the reality that life works according to the patriarchal, patronage and kinship dynamics of the country. The assumption is not that there is a universal, objective rule of law that governs a clear perspective of justice, but that any system of power must be navigated through the use of “*rishvat, rishtedari ya safarash*” (bribes, relationships or influence) to ensure a beneficial outcome. Furthermore, there are three distinct legal systems that Sindhis have to navigate carefully and use to their best advantage: the law of the state, religious law (*Shari’ah*) and local tribal or community law (*jirga*) (cf. Lieven 2011:87). Many people believe that the tribal *jirga* system, though harsh, is more just. When the law of the state clashes with local tribal law, the chieftain may be called upon to intercede and ensure the protection of his people. Depending on the condition of the political alliances and relationships between local officials, the state authorities may leave the decision to the chieftain.

The use of power and coercion is plainly seen in the electoral system because, although Pakistan is a democracy with a one person/one vote law, the reality is that the patriarchal systems at play are in sharp contrast to the individual freedoms that are the basis of Western democracies.¹⁷⁰ Lieven (2011:205) describes it in this way:

¹⁷⁰ This socio-cultural reason for a weak democratic system should be nuanced by other factors that create difficulties for democracies in the Islamic world. Benazir Bhutto (2008:136-138) lays

Every new Pakistani government comes to power making two sets of promises, one general, one specific. The general promises are to the population, and are of higher living standards, more jobs, better education and health services, and so on. The specific promises are to smaller parties and to individual politicians, who are offered individual favours to themselves, their families or their districts in return for their political support.

Party loyalty is weak compared to tribal loyalties and the desire for personal advantage, and so much work has to be done by politicians in order to guarantee the support of tribal leaders. When an agreement has been struck with a chieftain in a certain district, the chieftain makes sure that the vote of his people goes towards the candidate. This can be as innocuous as arranging for busloads of villagers to come to the voting booths and instructing them how to vote, or it could be the more sinister act of interfering with the polling booths. Friends in the school system have informed me that schoolteachers traditionally have the role of overseeing the voting stations to ensure that everything is done in an orderly and fair fashion. However, if men from the chieftain arrive with “extra votes” to put in the boxes, they are helpless to interfere without putting their families and communities in danger.

It should not be imagined that everyone is chafing under such lack of freedom or that they rebel against the corruption. For the most part, it is accepted as the norm and people tend to be cynical about the integrity of any of the parties, knowing the strength of the patronage and kinship dynamic. Moreover, living in a hierarchical system seems appropriate to the average Sindhi whose goal is to develop right relationships for their own advancement rather than dream of challenging the status quo. Although a Punjabi from Karachi, a young office worker interviewed by Lieven (2011:221) sums up the attitude that would be similar to the majority of Sindhis I have talked with, except that where we lived the Muslim League had little support:

I voted PPP in the last elections because it was the will of my uncle, the head of our family, though actually I think the Muslim League has done a better job in government. In previous elections, sometimes he said to vote PPP, sometimes Muslim League, depending on what they promise him, whether they have fulfilled promises in the past, and which of his friends or relatives is now important in that party. He owns a flour mill. He helps us find jobs, gives us the transport to take us to the polling booths, so it is natural that we give him our vote in return. He is respected because of his wealth and because his mother and aunt are the two eldest ladies in our family. Everyone listens to them on family matters. They arrange marriages and settle

the blame on two elements. The first is factions within Islam that seek power at the expense of the people. The second is the inconsistent moral and strategic actions of the West in Muslim countries that have either undermined attempts at democracy or have created cynicism towards the West's true motive or intention in promoting democracy and human rights.

quarrels. They are very much respected, so uncle is too. But he decides in political matters. The women can't do that because they don't go out of the house. They can't even remember which candidate is which. If you ask them the next day, they have forgotten which is which. That is why we have symbols for parties. They can't read or write, so we tell them about politics. But I must obey my mother in all personal things. If she had said I can't take up this job, then I can't.

4.3.2 Economics and Education

Economically Karachi dominates not only the Sindh, but the whole of Pakistan. "As of 2010, Karachi generates around a quarter of Pakistan's state revenues and GDP, and contains more than half of Pakistan's banking assets and almost a third of Pakistan's industry" (Lieven 2011:309). However, since Karachi is a different environment from the rest of Sindh and because the majority of the people engaged in business in Karachi are not Sindhis, economic considerations are limited to the interior of the Sindh province.

Unemployment is high. Many families have few breadwinners making the extended family network critical for survival. With unemployment rampant, a single breadwinner can place the entire extended family in jeopardy if they should lose their job. UNICEF (2010) claims that 23% of Pakistan's population is below international poverty line of US\$1.25 per day. However, the official Sindh government site (About Sindh 2011) gives a figure for the Sindh of a per capita monthly income of R1036 or US\$0.37 per day. Some people are used to living on one meal a day, steady jobs are hard to come by and government jobs that provide income security are coveted.

The floods of 2010 and 2011 affected millions of people and displaced hundreds of thousands in the Sindh province,¹⁷¹ with many living alongside highways or driven into cities where they were dependent on government support and aid from foreign NGOs. Such catastrophic events created further ethnic and economic instability with hundreds of thousands of Sindhi and Pathan rural workers "driven from their swamped lands and wrecked villages into Mohajir-dominated Karachi" (Lieven 2011:305). Despite the deprivation and difficulties faced by many Sindhis, they have been remarkably resilient, finding ways to survive in a physical and political climate that can be unforgiving. Organizations, including the relief agency of the mission I am employed by, Fellowship Aid for International Relief (FAIR), have worked with families over a number of months to re-establish them into their flood ravaged villages in a sustainable manner.

Education is important in the Sindh as a status symbol and for the hope it brings for a

¹⁷¹ The worst hit areas in the 2011 flood were the southern districts, such as Badin in which over a million people were affected and 80,000 were displaced (Youngmeyer 2011).

more stable economic future. Although there are both government and private schools, the private schools are preferred by the general population who express their frustration over the lack of quality education in the government regulated schools. Government salaries for teachers are not considered a living wage for a family and teachers take on other jobs to supplement their income.¹⁷² In many cases they will tutor students after school for a fee, and this is often the forum where students gain the education they need, rather than the public school system. I have heard complaints from parents of students who are upset that tutoring is required for their children to get a decent education, as well as from teachers who are forced to tutor for the extra income. Sindhis will make great financial sacrifices in order to provide their sons, and sometimes daughters, with the best education possible. However, when there are many children the cost can be too great and only a few, usually sons, are able to access the educational opportunities. It is not uncommon for children to be apprenticed into technical or practical skills, such as auto mechanics, at an early age and never learn to read. I have seen children as young as five sitting in a mechanics shop ready to run errands for a few rupees a day. But as they grow, they become involved in the work, develop a marketable skill and are established as a valuable part of society earning sufficient funds to support their family. On the other hand, children are sometimes employed in cigarette or fireworks factories where they work in unsafe conditions and do not learn marketable skills. A close friend grew up working in a rug factory; he did not learn to read until later in life and was not able translate his experience into a marketable skill.

UNICEF (2010) gives a literacy rate of 54% for Pakistan, while the official Sindh government site (About Sindh 2011) provides a figure of 45.29% for the province. However, among the poorer, rural populations illiteracy is more prevalent, especially among women. One man explained to me that his caste would not allow girls to attend school past grade five. It was considered pointless since a girl's role is in the home, and dangerous because socially destabilizing ideas could result. UNICEF (2010) claims that 60% of children in Pakistan complete their primary school education and the percentage of children attending secondary school is 35% (male) and 29% (female).

4.3.3 Worldview and Cosmology

Despite the diverse expressions of Islam in the Sindh, there are underlying worldview and

¹⁷² During a trip to the Sindh in March 2013, the driver of a taxi I was using one evening informed me that during the day he was a teacher in a local school.

cosmological assumptions accepted as unquestionable realities for Sindhi Muslims. Many of these reflect theological doctrines common to historical Islam such as the unity of God (*Allah-hu*), the existence of angels and *jinn*, the role of prophets in communicating God’s Word, the resurrection of the dead and the Day of Judgment (*qiyamat*) and the fate of the righteous in paradise (*jannat* or *bisht*) and the wicked in hell (*jahannam* or *dozak*). An understanding of the Sindhi perspective is important for the research question that explores theological trajectories emerging within this Islamic context and worldview.

For Sindhis, God is the same God for all, whether Christian or Muslim. Allah is same as *khuda*,¹⁷³ who is the God of Abraham and Isaac and Jacob, the God of the Bible and the God of Jesus. When Sindhi Muslims commit their lives to Jesus, their understanding of God and their relationship to God changes, but they have not exchanged one god for another. This is evident through the continuity of theological vocabulary and discourse as well as through the Islamic and Christian assumption that God is one. While arguments abound that the proponents of other faiths have misrepresented or misinterpreted God, the common assumption in the Sindh is that the God of Jesus is the one living creator God.

During our time in Pakistan, I was particularly intrigued by the paradoxical stance of Sindhi Muslims towards some of their worldview assumptions. The presence and activity of God in every day life is taken for granted, yet many believe that God does not hear their prayers. They believe God is good, yet fear that God will crush them for minor offenses.¹⁷⁴ They believe God sends people to hell for bribery and lying,¹⁷⁵ and yet these practices are common.

Regarding the nearness yet inaccessibility of God, *bismillahi* (in the name of God)¹⁷⁶ is probably the most common idiom used in the Sindh, a saying that recognizes God’s presence and power in all events. “*Bismillahi*” is breathed out as prayer when sitting down after a tiring journey and said as an invitation at the beginning of a meal. In contrast to our Canadian usage, there is no commonly used neutral word in Sindhi for “natural” (as in the phrase “naturally curly hair”) to

¹⁷³ The Persian form of “God,” *khuda*, is used commonly as a synonym for “Allah” in Sindhi and is the translation of choice for *el* (Hebrew) and *theos* (Greek) in the Sindhi Bible.

¹⁷⁴ I have been informed a few times that being rude to strangers is dangerous because they may be special servants of God and God would be sure to punish anyone who mistreated such a person.

¹⁷⁵ The Sindhi saying, “Both the giver and receiver of bribes go straight to hell,” is a generally accepted truism, but when confronted with it most Sindhis will respond that they are “*majbUred*” – forced against their will – into conforming to social pressures.

¹⁷⁶ The transcription of Qur’anic phrases follows Saheeh International in *The Qur’an* (2004:iv).

refer to an unguided process by non-sentient forces. The Sindhi equivalent is *qudrati*, which refers to *God's* power.¹⁷⁷ Any disaster is attributed to God's righteous anger. "God has revealed his anger on people's sin" was the response of one of our Bible translators to the news of the earthquake in Kashmir in 2005. God is as close as our breath and yet at the same time far above us and unknowable. In general, people do not expect to have any personal contact with God and do not want divine *attention*, although they desire and seek God's *favor*.¹⁷⁸ Many establish relationships with or commitments to *pirs* or Sufi saints in order to find someone who can mediate for them or show them a way to gain a mystical connection to God, because the Unknowable cannot be approached in and through daily life. The expectation of the afterlife is that those blessed of God will live in paradise (*jannat*), but the focus is on rewards and pleasures, rather than intimacy with God.¹⁷⁹ Instead God is exalted on the divine throne, which is the seventh heaven and inaccessible to humans.

God's good yet harsh nature is seen in the way Sindhis judge actions based on a respectful fear of God. This is not a pathological fear often voiced in the West that God will "interfere" in unwanted or destructive ways in our lives (e.g., "an act of God" is always negative), but an acceptance of God's declaration¹⁸⁰ as the righteous standard of life and the human response to live in unquestioning conformity to that declaration: we must not be careless with God. At the same time, there are examples of the abuse of power that reveal a sense of patriarchal privilege. Even though a person may treat the helpless¹⁸¹ so unjustly and cruelly that others exclaim, "He has no

¹⁷⁷ *Qudrati* is related to the Arabic title of God, *QAdr*, and refers to the absolute power and ability of the Divine. *Qudrati* is the opposite of "human-made" and is thus "natural," interpreted by Sindhis as "from God"; anything *qudrati* is created or caused by God. A possible neutral synonym is the Sindhi word *fitrati*, which means "according to its nature," however *qudrati* is the more common and preferred description.

¹⁷⁸ A revealing anecdote illustrates this perspective. I was talking to a Muslim Sindhi who informed me that prayers said in a mosque were more advantageous than those done at home. I was curious as to his reasoning and he informed me that it was like buying oranges. "If you buy only one orange," he said, "you will look at it carefully and see the flaws. However, if you buy many oranges, then you will not examine each one so carefully." Similarly, God will not take note of our flaws so readily if we pray in the communal setting of a mosque, rather than individually.

¹⁷⁹ This perspective can be seen in Qur'anic quotes provided by *The Meaning of Islam* (2012).

¹⁸⁰ The Sindhi word for "declaration" (*farman*) refers to an authoritative and creative act of speech that brings into being what is being declared, such as God's word in the creation account of Genesis 1. This is comparable to perlocutionary speech acts in which we cause something to exist through speech, like a judge declaring an accused person innocent (Vanhoozer 1998:209). However, when applied to God this is to be taken in an absolute sense.

¹⁸¹ The Sindhi word for "helpless" (*miskeen*) is very expressive of a person with little or no power

fear of God!” yet there is a sense of impunity on the part of the powerful as if being in a place of authority is, in and of itself, justification for one’s actions. This reflects a common view of God’s authority in the Sindhi mind, which is mirrored in the actions of those who view power as an ordained right, rather than considering God’s authority as the context within which their actions will be judged. God’s concern in the Old Testament (Ex 22:21-22) that the widow, orphan and stranger be cared for speaks strongly to such a worldview. The command was given during a time in Israel’s history when patriarchy was dominant with only qualified men having rights in society. The rights of others were derivative, depending on their relationship to the patriarch.¹⁸² Although the Sindhi context is not as extreme as in the ancient world, there are sufficient parallels with respect to power and control that make God’s injunction especially relevant.

A worldview that insists that God punishes the wicked commands high moral standards, yet Sindhis constantly complain that their society is plagued with injustice, corruption and lies. Such a God-centered framework enjoins strong family values, yet there are anecdotes of abuse and discord. While the fundamentalist solution to the dissonance between the ideal and every day reality is the imposition of *Shari’ah* law (and there has been a shift towards this in Pakistan and other areas of the Islamic world),¹⁸³ the Sindh has resisted such a movement. The reason for this aversion to a more militant approach to Islam is likely due to the stability of the current hierarchical structures that marry political authority with the mysticism of *pirs* and Sufism (Lieven 2011:327). Conformity facilitates stability and in such a traditional context conformity is a high value. This is not primarily expressed in rigid adherence to Islamic practices, but through pride in the symbols of Islamic dominance. It is the identity of being a Muslim that is important, rather than fulfilling moral or ritualistic obligations. The recitation of the first *qalma*,¹⁸⁴ the practice of circumcision and the prominent display of the Qur’an covered with bright cloths and flowers are significant symbols of their faith. If attendance at the mosques is any indication, relatively few practice the five required prayers on a daily basis, but many more gather for prayers on Friday and *Eids* (holy days). Many find the month long fast of *Ramadan* to be onerous, yet

or rights; someone lacking a patron.

¹⁸² This is the assumption lying behind Deuteronomy 23. Only adult Israelite males are considered members of the “assembly of the LORD,” that is, citizens with legal rights or “true” Israelites (Craigie 1976).

¹⁸³ The recent so-called “Arab Spring” (e.g., Blight, Pulham & Torpey 2012) has seen a number of secular dictators toppled to be replaced by more overt and strict versions of Islamic government.

¹⁸⁴ Or *shahada*, “There is no God but Allah, and Muhammad is the prophet of Allah.”

they will participate for a few days in order to declare their relationship with the broader community. As a result, there is affirmation of the Islamic worldview and belief system combined with laxness in daily practice.

The primary worldview assumption that guides the average Sindhi Muslim is that God is supreme and demands total submission. God is one and the same whether described in the Bible or the Qur'an, and the divine nature provides the primary framework of life. The preeminent status of the Divine as creator and master requires a servant attitude in all matters and at all times. Almighty God is perceived through a patriarchal grid and blesses those who have proved to be faithful servants. While acknowledged daily through the idiomatic use of Arabic sayings,¹⁸⁵ submission to the will of God is particularly evident at the death of a loved one or in the face of a major disaster. Coupled with grief is the acceptance of God's will and people comfort each other with the assurance that what occurred is rightly situated within God's domain. There are no bitterness or insolent comments against God as if the Lord of creation has no right to interfere in our lives. This submissive posture is reflected in references to humanity's relationship as "slaves"¹⁸⁶ (Sindhi *ghulAm*) or "servants" (Sindhi *bbAnO*) to the "Master" (Sindhi *mAlik*). A Sufi story related to me illustrates this Sindhi value (my translation).

A king had a servant that he loved above all others and because of this the other servants became extremely jealous. The king was aware of the tension and so one day he called his servants together and placed a valuable jewel before them. "Take this hammer and destroy the jewel," he commanded. The servants looked at each other in dismay and began to protest. "But Sire, the jewel is extremely valuable. We don't want to destroy such a precious treasure!"

The king then turned to the servant he loved and gave the same command. The servant immediately seized the hammer and shattered the precious stone. The king turned on his servant and rebuked him. "Why did you do that? Don't you know that this was a valuable jewel? You have destroyed it beyond repair!" At once the servant bowed his head and said, "I am sorry. You are right. I should not have done that."

Then the king looked at his other servants and revealed his lesson. "This is why I love this servant more than any other. I commanded and he obeyed. I rebuked and he did not defend himself."

This parable would cause objections and concerns in North America due to the potential for abuse

¹⁸⁵ Two common sayings are *insha'allah* (if God wills), used in anticipation of a future event, and *masha'allah* (God has willed it), used to refer to a blessing received or resignation towards harm suffered.

¹⁸⁶ The Sindhi term for "servant" (*bbAnO*), when referring to God as Master, implies absolute obedience and submission, but without the overtones of oppression and abuse associated with the English "slave." See further explanation in a footnote found under 10.2.

when someone submits to another in such an absolute fashion. Rather than relying on a possible evangelical Christian answer that God is good and cares for us and is, therefore, worthy of submission even if we don't understand, the Sindhi Muslim acknowledges God's absolute right to our full obedience, *whether or not* it is for our good and without any suggestion that our understanding should be a consideration.

Sindhis generally do not consider there to be a conflict between faith and science. Unlike the perception of some evangelicals in North America,¹⁸⁷ there is no sense of threat to faith from science and no need to justify faith in light of scientific declarations. The enlightenment way of knowing based on rationalism and experimentation is not considered superior to the authoritative declarations of their faith and, therefore, there is no need to justify their beliefs within a rationalist paradigm.¹⁸⁸ For example, the Islamic belief in seven heavens, accepted without question by Sindhi Muslims, does not require scientific verification. The truth of this belief cannot be touched by scientific discovery since science is assumed to be limited in application and scope. Seventh heaven (Sindhi *arsh azeem*) is God's throne representing absolute and incontrovertible authority and their lives and culture are shaped by that belief. All scientific claims and benefits are explored within the broader framework of a personal all-powerful Creator God.

4.3.4 Values

Within the God centered worldview exhibited by Sindhis, all of life is viewed as a gift, not to be controlled or used, but experienced and appreciated. "Why do you say 'Allah' when you sit down?" I asked a friend. He was puzzled at my question and replied, "God has given me rest. Why should I not express my appreciation?" Historically speaking, Sindhis are backward looking, valuing tradition and maintaining customs, rather than looking to the future, being innovative and seeking change. They focus on stability and rely on God to act rather than taking the initiative and pioneering breakthroughs. Because of this mindset, Sindhis tend to experience an event rather

¹⁸⁷ For example, in a section called "Principles of Biblical Creationism," the website of the Institute of Biblical Creationism (1995-2013) states that "All things in the universe were created and made by God in the six literal days of the Creation Week described in Genesis 1:1-2:3, and confirmed in Exodus 20:8-11. The creation record is factual, historical, and perspicuous; thus all theories of origins or development that involve evolution in any form are false."

¹⁸⁸ It is true that some verses in the Qur'an are quoted as predicting scientific discoveries, and that biblical integrity is attacked on the basis of logical inconsistencies (e.g., light is created before the sun in Genesis 1). But such statements are not provided as a defense against a perceived undermining of their belief system by science. Rather Sindhis tend to selectively choose evidence that affirms what they already believe is true.

than seek to control it with a concern for time and task. They develop and value relationships and status with others more than accomplishment. Life is complex and interwoven with mysterious forces rather than categorized into either/or scenarios. Tomorrow is in God’s hands, not ours, and so acts of prevention and preparation are an illusion. We cannot alter what God has decreed.

These Sindhi values differ sharply from a Western orientation. Some time after I returned from Pakistan in 1999, I took Lingenfelter & Mayer’s (2003:19-35) Basic Values Questionnaire, which consists of six basic values pairs. I was not surprised to find that the Sindhi orientation for all six dichotomies is in direct contrast to Canadian values:

Table 5 *Cultural Dichotomies*

Sindhis tend to be	In contrast Canadians tend to be
Event oriented	Time oriented
Person oriented	Task oriented
Holistic thinkers	Dichotomist thinkers
Concerned about status	Concerned about achievement
Non-crisis oriented	Crisis oriented
Unwilling to expose vulnerability	Willing to expose vulnerability

The value contrasts between Canadians and Sindhis for each of the dichotomies can be seen in the following illustrations.

Event versus Time: Canadians prefer to begin and end meetings on time. Sindhis will often begin events two to three hours past the scheduled time. Early on during our ministry in Pakistan I posted a schedule on my door to indicate my availability; the times indicated were ignored. Once I realized the futility of the attempt, I removed the sign.

Person Versus Task: It is a grave insult in the Sindh to greet someone at the door with the query, “What do you want?” The implication is that they are selfishly using their host rather than valuing them. The appropriate response is to invite the guest in and let them introduce the purpose of the visit. The necessity of initially refusing an invitation to eat is based on the desire to express the purpose for the visit is to enjoy the host’s company, not to gain materially from the encounter. Greetings are extensive and revisited often during a conversation. In Canada, the value is to “get down to business.” Greetings are brief followed by a quick summary of the request so that the other’s “valuable time” is not wasted.

Holistic thinkers versus Dichotomist thinkers: The high value on the separation of church and state in a Western context is an example of dichotomist thinking that is reinforced by the

tendency to view faith as private and individual and, therefore, to be kept separate from public education and from politics. During a current controversy over Trinity Western University's (TWU) proposal to open a Law school, the Canadian Council of Law Deans challenged the application prompting the Vancouver Sun (Newman 2013) to ask "Is there room in Canada for real ideological and religious diversity in higher education? If Canada's law deans had their way, the answer would seem doubtful." While TWU's application is unlikely to be rejected, the objection illustrates the belief that religious convictions should not play a role in education. In contrast, the majority of Muslims views all aspects of life as integral with the religion of Islam and, according to a Pew Research Center report (2013), supports the implementation of Shari'ah law in their countries. The report states that "most adherents of the world's second-largest religion are deeply committed to their faith and want its teachings to shape not only their personal lives but also their societies and politics," illustrating a more holistic understanding of the relationship between the state and religion.

Status versus Achievement: In Canada status is context specific, depending on the ability or training of the individual. A teacher and student can switch roles depending on the subject matter. For Sindhis, such a scenario creates inner tension. Those accepted as teachers or leaders maintain that status in all situations. When a person of greater status walks into the room, the person of lesser status rises and gives a greeting of respect. The person of greater status remains seated when their inferiors enter the room. In the Sindhi context status is conferred by the community, rather than through evidence of what has been personally achieved or learned. This is why a Sindhi will generally focus on the status gained through education and emphasize the titles bestowed on them, while a Canadian will tend to downplay titles and emphasize ability and knowledge.

Non-crisis versus crisis orientation: Minimizing risk is a high value for Canadians. Although there has not been a serious earthquake on Vancouver Island for decades,¹⁸⁹ all public buildings are erected at great expense to ensure that they are "earthquake safe." Disasters are evaluated leading to the revision of laws so that harm is minimized or prevented. The mentality in the Sindh is different. Outside our door in Larkana, a man had a small store. One day he informed me that his house had collapsed and members of his family had been killed. "*Masha'allah* (it is God's will)," he said through his tears. Such tragedies happen because people add more storeys to

¹⁸⁹ In 1946 an earthquake of 7.3 magnitude was recorded which did "considerable damage" but no lives were lost despite the collapse of some structures (Natural Resources Canada 2010).

their houses even though the original structure was not constructed to bear the weight.

Willingness versus Unwillingness to expose Vulnerability: In Canadian evangelical culture Jesus' injunction in Matthew 18 to correct someone "just between the two of you" (Mt 18:15) is often literally applied; such an approach is assumed appropriate and generally appreciated. In Sindhi culture it took me a while to realize that when a person came and spoke of the faults of someone else, they were not gossiping or seeking to defame the other person, but presenting an opportunity for me to act as mediator. To confront someone directly about a wrong they have suffered is disrespectful to that person and exacerbates the situation because of a potential loss of face.

Augsburger (1986:110-143) argues for a theory of "controls" in which "anxiety, shame, and guilt are the natural, normal, and universal sequence of controls in human personality in every culture" (:113). All three processes are evident in each culture but to varying degrees and influence. Roland Muller (2000) proposes that these controls can be based on a theology of culture from Genesis 3. Just as the three primary colors produce all the colors of the rainbow, so Adam and Eve's response of shame, fear and guilt after they sinned demonstrate the fundamental human responses that are the "building blocks of worldview" (:16). Each negative reaction has a corresponding virtue: shame is offset by honor, fear is overcome by power, guilt is restored to innocence. Muller claims that "all three building blocks are present in all cultures and worldviews, but how much of each one is present, determines the actual type of culture that emerges" (:16). Muller's theology of culture is a simple model aiding the comparison and contrast of the guilt–innocence orientation of Canadian culture with the shame–honor orientation of Sindhi culture.¹⁹⁰ Evaluating my original presentation of the gospel against this grid demonstrates that Sindhis see guilt and forgiveness as relatively minor concerns.¹⁹¹ To forgive guilt is to be magnanimous, and why should not God override legal concerns if it is the divine will? However, shame and honor deal with issues of relationships and status and to offend the divine Patriarch is a weighty matter. Sometimes the offense must be purged and wiped clean, which is a frightening thought. Defense for the purity and sanctity of Islam, the Qur'an and the nature of God, in this view, become the supreme value.¹⁹² Widespread reactions in Pakistan to portrayals of the prophet

¹⁹⁰ This does not imply that fear, guilt and shame are not integral parts of both cultures, only that shame in the Sindhi context and guilt in the Canadian context have a greater and contrasting influence on people's values and actions in certain aspects of society.

¹⁹¹ See a description of this presentation of the gospel in 4.1.3.

¹⁹² Malina's (1981:25-50) description of honor and shame as pivotal values in the first century

Muhammad, the desecration of a mosque or the burning of the Qur'an illustrate this point.

As a further example of a contrast with Canadian values, I was shocked to see parents in Pakistan blatantly lying to their children, thus cultivating a habit of deceit. Later I realized that the value driving this action was not deception but the ethical priority to preserve another person's honor.¹⁹³ From this viewpoint, it is a small matter to misrepresent a fact in order to protect a person's dignity and status. A Sindhi friend I was travelling with informed a stranger asking for a ride that we were heading in a different direction than he desired. Even though the person could see us driving off in the direction he wanted to go, my friend believed that the stranger appreciated the misinformation rather than a stark and shame-provoking refusal. However, a typical Canadian response would be that there should be no compromise with "truth" (defined as conformity to *facts*), even if someone's pride is hurt through the process.

AJ Gittins' (1989) book, *Gifts and Strangers*, explores the cultural dimensions of hospitality, greetings and the roles of hosts and guests, with a particular emphasis on the obligations of the missionary in the role of a stranger bearing the gift of the gospel of grace (:106). The importance and significance of the interpersonal cultural acts explored in Gittins' book are exemplified within the Sindhi context. Honoring a guest is highly valued demanding considerable sacrifice in order to attend to them and provide for their needs. A guest should never be left alone, and the host will ensure that someone is always present in case the guest has a request or would simply like to chat. Admiring an article in a Sindhi home is a precarious act because the host's response will be to insist that the guest take the article home. This is precarious because any gift given carries with it an obligation. The gift giver and the one who receives the gift are bound together in a way that impacts their future interactions. I erred with respect to gift giving with a Sindhi friend. He had given me a gift and I was anxious to relieve myself of the burden of reciprocating, so I bought him a gift a couple of days later and presented it to him. He was less than pleased and informed me that my quick response was actually an insult. The message was that I did not want to be obligated to him and therefore did not want to pursue a relationship. Waiting a few months before responding with a gift allows the obligation to remain, thus bonding the giver and receiver together in friendship.

Sindhi people live in a society Hofstede (2002:290) terms as "collectivist," as opposed to "individualist" societies dominant in North America and some other Western countries. In

Mediterranean world parallel the Sindhi dynamic.

¹⁹³ See further on the basis for a cultural dimension in ethics in 7.6.

collectivist groups “personal opinions’ do not exist: they are predetermined by the group.” Family conferences are necessary in order to deal with new issues (:292). Deviation from group norms is, at the very least, bad manners. Religious shift, in particular, can cause a societal tsunami, which makes this value especially pertinent to this study of those who are experiencing a shift away from traditional beliefs and religious loyalties.

The collectivist value of Sindhis is one motive driving the practice of *Karo Kari*.¹⁹⁴ Unlike the Canadian priority of individual rights and issues of justice, a key concern for Sindhis is the preservation of communal standards and identity. Where a clash is perceived, the patriarch’s responsibility and priority is to sacrifice the individual for the good of the many. Purging the rot is painful, but the act is deemed necessary to sustain the life of the community. The collectivist orientation also drives the communal approach to marriage. In Canadian society people choose their own partners with little interference from family members because the relationship is viewed within an individualist paradigm. In contrast, Sindhi marriages are arranged based on contractual agreements between two families with a view to providing secure, safe and stable relationships.

Sindhis can also be classified as high power distance (HPD) as opposed to the low power distance (LPD) orientation of Canadians. HPD refers to hierarchical structures, such as the patriarchal family organization of Sindhi Muslims, in which the senior authority has decision making power over other members in all aspects of life (Storti 1999:130; Naylor 2008b). In HPD contexts, the leader’s suggestions are neither questioned nor challenged directly without grave consequences. In LPD contexts, a leader will welcome suggestions and challenges to their proposal because of the value that greater input allows for a better final product. HPD contexts have a greater concern to maintain stability through a uniform affirmation of the leader’s authority. This has serious ramifications for Bible translation and the task of bringing God’s message to Sindhis. To be presented with a book that claims to be God’s word speaking to them in their language is not to be taken lightly because it claims their allegiance and they are called to grapple with the implications.

A HPD orientation goes hand in hand with the phenomenon of high context cultures. High context cultures rely on a large amount of implicit information in the physical environment that members are expected to be aware of and to act in a manner consistent with that understanding, as opposed to requiring explicit messages (Hall 1977; Hofstede & Hofstede 2005:89). In the Sindhi context, titles are used carefully and the way one dresses communicates

¹⁹⁴ See an explanation of this practice in 4.2.2.2.3.

information about their status, particularly with respect to uniforms. I once carelessly sat in a visa officer's chair and was sharply reprimanded by his secretary; I had not appreciated the symbolism inherent in a superior's chair.

Dodd (1998 [1982]:43) describes four roles that vary depending on the cultural context: age, occupation, friendship and gender. Each of these roles is expressed in a distinctive manner in the Sindhi context. (1) *Age*: Elders in the family hold decision making powers. (2) *Occupation*: The landlord–farmer (Sindhi *zameendar–hari*) relationship is a sharply maintained distinction that illustrates the prevalence of hierarchical occupational roles. This is preserved not only through economic control but also through the subservient attitude of the farmer to the owner reflected in deferential speech and action. (3) *Friendship*: Relationships in the Sindh come with economic expectations. To be a “family friend”¹⁹⁵ carries requisite social and financial responsibilities. (4) *Gender*: Gender roles are well defined and any male–female interaction is maintained with propriety through the use of familial language; a man will use the Sindhi equivalent of “aunt” or “mother” for an older woman, “sister” for someone of similar age and “daughter” or “son”¹⁹⁶ for a girl or woman who is significantly younger than him.

4.3.5 Christian–Muslim Relationships in the Sindhi Context

There is always a tension for Sindhi Muslims who are attracted to the Christian faith because of the implications for their identity as members of a Muslim community. Within the Muslim community and historically among Protestant missionaries,¹⁹⁷ there has been a desire to maintain a distinction between followers of Christianity and followers of Islam. But at the time of conversion, whether of an individual, family unit or a larger community, the distinction is often not immediately obvious and may not become established for some time. Converts may be afraid to reveal their faith, or they may hold the perspective that their commitment to Jesus has occurred within Islam, not sensing a conflict on a *personal* level between the faiths, even though *socially* the divide is significant and obvious. Because Sindhis are used to following teachers (*murshids*)

¹⁹⁵ See 7.3.4 for a description of how this dynamic impacted our ability as foreigners to function in the Sindhi setting.

¹⁹⁶ Girls can be addressed as “son” as a term of endearment.

¹⁹⁷ In referring to Christian conversion among Hindus, Forrester (1991:67) states that it is “generally assumed by Protestants at any rate, that converts must separate themselves from the Hindu social context, ‘break caste’, and enter a new – and exclusive – community.” This same assumption exists in the Punjabi Christian community and generally among Protestant missionaries in Pakistan for Muslims who become followers of Jesus.

through the influence of Sufism and the *pir* phenomenon, this latter scenario is a real possibility. One Sindhi believer related an interaction with his mother who was distressed about his commitment to Christ. She tried to convince him to visit the gravesite of a local *pir*.

“I already have *pir*,” he stated.

“That is good,” she said, pleased to hear this. “Who is it?”

“It is Jesus,” he replied.

“You can’t have Jesus as a *pir*,” she objected.

“Why not?” he asked. “Why do you insist I follow someone who is dead? Why can I not follow Jesus who is alive?”

Because of the negative reaction towards Sindhis who have become identified as followers of Jesus, the issue of open identification as “Christian” is controversial. Reinkowski (2007:409) introduced the term “crypto-religious” to designate “the status of people whose real religious views and practices are not in accordance with their official religious affiliation and who frequently may seek to hide this fact from the larger public.” Part of the difficulty for Sindhis is that the term “Christian” is considered a caste name associated with non-Sindhis who are identified as Christians because of their family tradition. One Sindhi convert asked me, “Do I have to call myself a ‘Christian’?” “That depends,” I replied cautiously, “What do you mean by ‘Christian’?” He then began to describe the common understanding of Christians as Punjabi street sweepers. We agreed that he was not a “Christian” in this sense. So I asked him, “How would you describe yourself?” He said, “I am a follower of *Isa* (Jesus).”

The issue becomes even more serious in light of the necessity to have one’s religion displayed on a government issued identity card. Changing one’s identity officially from “Muslim” to “Christian” can lead to persecution and discrimination when the conversion comes to the attention of government officials. It also creates problems to have a Muslim name with “Christian” listed as the religion. One believer registered his children as “Christian” with difficulty because he maintained his Sindhi caste. The person registering the children was reluctant to classify them as “Christian” because they were obviously from a Muslim home.

Punjabi Christians are also reluctant to accept Muslims who have expressed faith in Jesus into their community. Because of their precarious existence living among Muslims and the fear of betrayal from those who do not remain as Christian believers, their hesitation is understandable. While living in the city of Larkana in the late 1980s, I was told by leaders of the Punjabi congregation with whom I worshiped that Muslim seekers were not allowed to attend a service until they were baptized. A Sindhi friend of mine was baptized and so I brought him to a church

service. An elder took me aside and chastised me and so I explained that the young man had been baptized. He replied, “What is his name?” I told him and he said, “That is a Muslim name.” He then asked, “Where does he live?” I replied that he lived at home. The elder declared, “That is a Muslim home. Until he changes his name and lives in a Christian home, he is not welcome.” The religious identity of individuals is intimately connected to their community, which, in turn, is the source of their personal identity. These relationships are expressed through a person’s given name and caste. Personal conversion without a change of community identity is contrary to societal expectations since such allegiances are integrated with all aspects of life. The gatekeepers within the Christian and Muslim communities, those sensitive to protecting the community from harm, are diligent in maintaining clear divisions between the two groups.

The dilemma for evangelical missionaries to Sindhi Muslims is clear. The desire is to invite people into a personal relationship with God through Jesus Christ so that there is positive societal transformation through this new allegiance. However, those Sindhis who make such personal commitments find themselves in danger of being ostracized and persecuted because the integrity and stability of the community has been threatened. The gatekeepers are alarmed and the believer is subject to reprisals. The primary concern for reprisals¹⁹⁸ against those who have become believers is from other family members. Although there may be consequences stemming from community, mosque or legal authorities, the responsibility to act belongs to the family so that they can restore their honor. Soon after one convert expressed his faith, he went to a local tea shop. After drinking his tea, the owner came over, took his cup and smashed it on the floor declaring that it had been defiled and the convert was no longer welcome. The person’s father then threw him out of the house in order to maintain the family honor in the community. Expulsion from the home is the most common way heads of families express their displeasure and, although there may be further punishment, it does not extend to taking the life of the family member. There has been ostracism, persecution, physical attacks, threats and financial difficulties, but no one has been killed among those with whom we have been associated. At the same time, following the move towards a more conservative Islam in some parts of the world, reactions may be harsher in the future.

4.4 Scripture and Bible Translation

The Sindhi Bible has been of considerable influence in drawing Sindhis to faith in Christ and

¹⁹⁸ The issue of potential persecution for converts is discussed in 2.1.2.

shaping their theology. The exploration of a local Christian theology emerging from within a Sindhi context is the subject of this thesis and the relationship of the Bible to the believers' changing faith is a key dynamic in that development. In the research a NT passage is presented to Sindhi participants in order to stimulate their engagement with the message. Sindhi Muslims' perspective on sacred scripture and their view of the Bible is therefore one aspect of the cultural dynamic that forms the background for the research. In addition, this section describes the importance of Bible translation to evangelical missions, outlines the development of the Sindhi translation of the Bible and explains my role in the translation process.

4.4.1 The Sindhi Muslim view of Sacred Scripture

Even though reverence for scripture is a significant religious commonality between Muslims and Christians, the evangelical perspective on the Bible contrasts with Sindhi Muslim attitudes towards scripture in some respects. Many believe that the Qur'an has power beyond its role of communicating a message. Rather than engaging the text rationally or looking to it to shape their lives, they use it as a talisman or as an icon by means of which God's blessing can be obtained. They wear verses in pouches around their necks, kiss the book reverently and decorate it with flowers on a special shelf. Local *pirs* write verses on paper, then wash the ink off into a glass and give it to their followers to drink as a means of dealing with sickness or some other felt need. When visiting a friend, my wife was surprised to see a woman she knew to be illiterate studying the Qur'an. On listening closely Karen realized that the woman was not reading but running her fingers over the text while quietly repeating "*bismillahi*" (in the name of God) over and over. Evangelicals would find these practices strange and label some of them superstition.

It is commonly believed that the only text in which the Qur'an can truly exist is Arabic, its original language, which is beyond the ability of the average Sindhi to comprehend. Rather than a mix of human language and divine message, the text consists of the spoken words of God transmitted through the angel Gabriel directly to the prophet Muhammad. The language itself is therefore considered sacred¹⁹⁹ and boys in *madrassas* spend hours memorizing the Qur'an in Arabic, even though their comprehension of the meaning is limited. One day at a railway station in Karachi I was surprised to walk into a waiting room and find it full of Sindhi *maolvis* (Islamic

¹⁹⁹ The introduction to Saheeh International's *The Qur'an: English Meanings* (2004:iii) states, "It must be remembered that the Arabic Qur'an, being the words of Allah, the Exalted, far surpasses any human endeavor in linguistic excellence and is indeed the standard of perfection for all Arabic expression."

clerics). I discovered that they had been at a convention in which the primary attraction was a competition. There was a prize for the person who could best quote the whole Qur'an from memory and one for the person who could best give the call to prayer. I had my picture taken with the winner of the contest to quote the Qur'an in Arabic. In contrast to this value, evangelicals give little thought to the physical form of the Bible, giving priority to discussions of the *message* of the text in their own language, viewing the original languages in a pragmatic fashion in order to exegete or nuance the meaning of a passage.

Coupled with reverence for the language and the physical text of the Qur'an there is also a respect for the message that is similar to evangelical concerns about the Bible. God is the author who addresses the reader. The correct posture before the text is submission, which allows the message to speak authoritatively into our beliefs, values and actions. If an argument can be proven to have scriptural support, then the appeal to authority trumps any consideration of logic or reason. We cannot improve upon what God has revealed, and we disobey at our peril. The attitude of the Naga people in encountering the written word of God parallels the reverence that Sindhi people hold towards sacred scripture, "[God's] commands and promises, frozen in time by the power and the technology of the written word, could not easily be ignored or forgotten" (Eaton 1999:20).

At the same time, there are subtle and important distinctions. God's word in the Qur'an is always direct speech, whereas in the Bible God speaks in and through history. Because God is unknowable and totally "other," any translation of the names and attributes of God "is surely an impossibility, for even in Arabic they cannot represent more than an approximation limited by human understanding" (The Qur'an, Introduction 2004:iii-iv). The Qur'an, for the Sindhi Muslim, is the supreme expression of God's will and nature uncorrupted by human sin or weakness. In that sense, their reverence for the Qur'an closely parallels the Christian view of Jesus. The Christian view, while acknowledging the limitations of human language to adequately describe God, focuses on the accommodation of God in revealing the divine nature and will through human culture and language. The incarnation is the ultimate expression of God revealed not just *to*, but *in* humanity. "The Son is the image of the invisible God" (Col 1:5 NIV). Jesus is therefore not merely a prophet of God *proclaiming* a message, but he is in *essence* the Word of God, a revelation of God in the person of Christ; God "translated" into human flesh. As a result, "for Christians, mission has come preeminently to mean translation, for Muslims mission has stood

stubbornly for the nontranslatability of its Scriptures in the ritual obligations” (Sanneh 1989:7).²⁰⁰

4.4.2 The Sindhi Muslim Orientation to the Bible

In my experience, apart from a small percentage of Sindhi Muslims who view the Bible as corrupt and a force undermining their society, the majority of Sindhi Muslims respect the Bible as God’s revealed word. Even if they do not consider it authoritative for them and they may be unsure of its reliability due to human error or deliberate distortion, they approach the Bible as a sacred text that needs to be treated with care. While the message is attended to with respect, honor is also extended to the physical material of paper and ink. Following the custom of placing the Qur’an on a stand or in a clean, raised place, the Bible is treated by Pakistani Christians in a similar fashion, which is approved of and appreciated by Sindhis. The meta-message for Sindhis is that this is a sacred book from God that requires attention. Furthermore, because sacred names of God and of prophets are written in the book, it needs to be handled with reverence. I remember seeing an old man pick up a scrap piece of paper and place it in a crack in a tree. The man was illiterate but his concern was that the paper might have a holy name written on it and should not be stepped on. When handing a Bible to a Sindhi Muslim, they will often kiss it and hold it to one eye after the other, demonstrating how precious it is to them.

There are common objections to the Bible that stem from Islamic teaching. Islamic apologists such as Ahmed Deedat²⁰¹ and Maurice Bucaille²⁰² have raised questions about the Bible that many Muslim readers of the Sindhi Bible bring to the text. There are frequent questions about deliberate corruptions in the text, the title “Son of God” used for Jesus, as well as speculation that the mention of the Holy Spirit in John 14 as *parakletos* is actually a reference to the prophet Muhammad. Apart from these familiar protestations, there are two issues with which the thoughtful reader of the Sindhi text of the Bible struggles. The first is the puzzle of dealing

²⁰⁰ In his summary of the orthodox Islamic view of the Qur’an, Sanneh (1989:211-214) notes the “preeminent, exclusive role of the sacred Arabic” in the historical “Islamization” of the Muslim world.

²⁰¹ Ahmed Deedat was the president of the Durban-based Islamic Propagation Centre International and has been described as “one of the most combative exponents of religious polemics in South Africa and a figure of international renown in the Muslim world” (Vehan 2008). He died in 2005, but his debates and lectures are available online and continue to be popular.

²⁰² Bucaille’s (1976) book, *La Bible, le Coran et la Science: Les Écritures Saintes examinées à la lumière des connaissances modernes* has been translated into many languages and continues to be popular throughout the Muslim world. Many bookstores in Pakistan have Urdu copies for sale.

with a *translation* of scripture in their own language. Since the Qur'an must be read in the original Arabic,²⁰³ and it is that text that is memorized and studied in the *madrassas* as well as in the public schools, a presentation of a translation of the Bible as God's word is disconcerting. This is compounded by the presence of a variety of translations in different languages because contrasting translation choices reveal discrepancies that can undermine the readers' confidence that the text is God's authentic and unadulterated word.

Despite the prevailing assumption about the importance of the original language and text, Sindhis are well equipped to understand the translatability of day-to-day conversation since the average Sindhi is fluent in two or more languages. Thus while they assume a sacredness of the Arabic with respect to understanding the Qur'an, there is a certain level of cognitive dissonance caused by a daily experience of communication occurring across language barriers. They are therefore much more likely to deal with the concepts presented in a passage of the Sindhi Bible than dismiss it outright based on the technicality that it is not in the original language. Even though they would have a predisposition to consider the biblical text as less authoritative than the Qur'an and many have reservations concerning the authenticity of the message, the natural inclination is to consider and discuss the content in a reverent manner. This phenomenon both contrasts and parallels Sanneh's (1989:187) report concerning the translation of scriptures in Swahili.

When missionaries translated the Christian Scriptures into Swahili, they were tacitly measuring the Bible against the Holy Book of Islam. There the advantage lay with the Muslims, who could claim that translation conceded the inferior status of the message whose original is to be encountered in the pristine, untranslatable Arabic of the Qur'an.

The contrast is that the first inclination of Sindhi Muslims would be to consider the message of the text and compare it to their faith stance. However, the assumptions framing the discussion would follow Sanneh's description.

Another insightful objection was raised by a *maolvi* who read a copy of the New Testament I had given him and then returned to announce, "This isn't God's word; it *contains* God's word." I asked him what he meant and he explained that while passages like the Sermon on the Mount (Mt 5-7) were a message from God and therefore could be classified as God's word,

²⁰³ As noted in 4.2.2.1, there have been Sindhi translations of the Qur'an for centuries. However, the view that the Qur'an can only exist in the original Arabic is the prevailing assumption (cf. Sanneh's (1989:7) comment of the "nontranslatability" of the Qur'an mentioned in 4.4.1). Any translation of the Qur'an is usually considered an *interpretation* as is obvious from the titles of some English translations such as Pickthall's (1930) *The Meaning of the Glorious Qur'an*.

the narrative passages were merely history or descriptions and therefore not a message from God. The expectation that scripture requires God's direct speech impacts the Sindhi readers' ability to engage the message.

4.4.3 An Evangelical Perspective of the Bible

Since the Reformation call of *sola scriptura*, the Bible has consistently played a central role in Protestant missions. As evangelicals, our conviction is that the Bible, as God's message to humanity, is critical to the impact and spread of God's reign throughout "all the nations." God has spoken and that communication to humanity has been, and continues to be, successful in revealing the divine character and will. The statement of faith of our Fellowship of churches in Canada (FEBC 2012) is typical of Christian evangelical denominations and explains this commitment:

We believe the Bible to be the complete Word of God; that the sixty-six books, as originally written, comprising the Old and New Testaments were verbally inspired by the Spirit of God and were entirely free from error; that the Bible is the final authority in all matters of faith and practice and the true basis of Christian union.

An evangelical²⁰⁴ is "one who holds that the truth of God's revelation given in scripture is transcultural and therefore the final authority in theology" (Dyrness 1990:17). I affirm the use of "transcultural" to claim that biblical revelation is relevant for all humanity, that the "truth" of God's revelation needs to be distinguished from the words and structures of the original text, and that there is authoritative revelatory intent that (1) can be communicated in all languages and (2) must be engaged with integrity. "Final authority" affirms that the truth gained from the text cannot be rejected while simultaneously maintaining an evangelical commitment of obedience to God.²⁰⁵ The evangelical position "assumes that the Bible has a unique God-given authority which transcends our experiencing of it" (Nicholls 2003:43). Thus, an orthodox view of scripture is assumed²⁰⁶ that affirms its authority, truth and revelatory nature: authority because it is a record of

²⁰⁴ See also 5.12 for an explanation of "evangelical."

²⁰⁵ This does not avoid the inevitable subjective and finite process of interpretation that occurs within culturally shaped environments in order to access that truth. Instead, these are the fundamental assumptions and attitudes required to adequately approach the text; affirming both the possibility that God's truth is accessible and that the appropriate human stance is submission to that truth. Epistemological and hermeneutical assumptions are developed in 7.6 and chapter 8.

²⁰⁶ Affirming Green's (2004:391) distinction between *validation* and *signification* with respect to biblical narrative, this thesis is concerned solely with the *significance* of the meaning of the text and assumes its *validation*. It is acknowledged that perceived attacks on the integrity of the Bible from within a modernist paradigm have led to inordinate efforts on the part of evangelical scholars to validate scripture's historical veracity and scientific conformity. This thesis bypasses

the Creator who speaks and communicates to those created, truth because God is a God of truth and thus speaks only what is true, and revelatory because in entering history through interactions with people the divine nature is revealed. The ultimate expression of the revelatory word of God is found in incarnation of Christ, the Word become flesh (Jn 1:14). A corollary of this evangelical concern with regard to the development of contextualized theology is that those who create theology are responding to God's truth as received from scripture; they are in dialogue with God's revelation of the divine nature and will.

A key evangelical position is that theology begins with God speaking, which is based on (1) the witness of the Bible itself to the reality that God desires to communicate, (2) the effectiveness of the divine communication and (3) the evidence of that communication with humanity recorded sufficiently and effectively in a written text. Throughout scripture, God is the initiator in the Divine-human communication, from the communion with Adam and Eve (Gen 3:8,9), to the calling of Abraham (Gen 12:1), to prophets appointed to deliver often unwelcome messages, to the ultimate revelation of the divine nature, the *logos*, in human form (Jn 1:1,14). The effectiveness of God's communication is seen in the act of creation when the earth is proclaimed into existence (Gen 1:3), the initiation of Jesus' ministry in the Gospel of Mark with the declaration of the divine purposes (Mk 1:1-3) and the primary impact of the Spirit at Pentecost in the initiation of the witness of the church through the proclamation of the gospel message in several languages (Acts 2:4-11). The presence and power of the biblical text in shaping people's faith throughout the world confirms the sufficiency and effectiveness of the written Word.

The Bible is God's revelation of the divine self as the primary *subject* with whom humanity relates, and the primary *object* of our concern. However, culture is the *locus* of biblical revelation, both because language is an aspect of culture and because all revelation has an historical, contextual reference. All that we can understand from scripture and formulate about God and the divine relationship to humanity comes to us through culturally formed meanings transmitted via human witnesses. The marriage of text and context is neither a perversion of the truth nor an absolute and complete declaration concerning the God of the universe. It is not a question of giving "preeminence" to context over text, a fear that evangelicals express concerning the praxis method used in Liberation theologies (Sanchez 1996:295), nor does it imply that "that the Bible and the sociocultural context are equally authoritative" (:301). A question of authority is misplaced because it is *people*, not the context, who are the active theologizing agents and who

those concerns accepting by faith that the message is relevant and impacting.

create meaning by engaging the text in dialogical tension with the context. Instead, this dual affirmation is based on the promise and guidance of the Holy Spirit, so that theology, understood as the outworking of the Bible within a particular context, is believed to be capable of demonstrating a limited and developing, but simultaneously true and divinely guided, representation of the divine message.²⁰⁷

4.4.4 The importance of Bible Translation in Evangelical Missions

Due to this preeminent position of the Bible, the call to have the Bible translated into the “vernacular,” renewed with vigor during the Reformation movement in Europe beginning with Wycliffe’s translation in the 14th century, has continued unabated to this day among evangelical Christians. The engagement of God’s Word through the translated text in the establishment of church life and ministry follows a long history in the modern missionary movement (Smalley 1991:6). Evangelical missions history cites two missionaries of the 20th century, Donald McGavran and Cameron Townsend, who played a key role in the promotion of Bible translation and who are considered to be initiators of the “Third Era” (1935 to present) of modern missions (Winter 2009:274). McGavran is credited with the term “homogeneous units” to describe self-identified people groups with social and cultural distinctives. His intention was to point out that the intimate life of the members of a people group is limited to their own society (McGavran 2009 [1955]:335) and so spiritual needs must be met in ways that correspond to their particular ethnic identity. As a pioneer, Townsend has been compared to William Carey and Hudson Taylor (Winter 2009:274) because of his recognition of unreached²⁰⁸ tribal groups and the need for them to access the Bible through a translation in their mother tongue. The legendary comment of an Indian leader to Townsend has become symbolic of the motivation behind Wycliffe Bible Translators (WBT), which Townsend founded in 1934: “If your God is so smart, why can’t He speak our language?” (:274) Currently WBT (2012) are on track to see a Bible translation program begun “in all the remaining languages that need one” by 2025.

Bible translation has proven to be a unifying force for missions around a central conviction that God has spoken and that message is relevant and necessary for all people in all

²⁰⁷ These assertions are worked out in greater detail in chapter 8.

²⁰⁸ An “unreached” people group is defined as “a people group among which there is no indigenous community of believing Christians with adequate numbers and resources to evangelize this people group” (Joshua Project 2012a).

languages.²⁰⁹ It has been at the forefront of the spread of the gospel and the establishment of local churches. Bible translation has contributed to the self-theologizing of churches established in different contexts. JNJ Kritzing (2003:547) notes that “there would have been no African theology or Black Theology, let alone African Initiated Churches... if the Bible had not been translated into all the important African languages.” Despite the theologically narrow perspectives of some evangelical mission agencies, the importance of allowing the Bible to speak freely to people in their own language contributes to the development of contextualized theologies.

Sanneh (1989:1) has pointed out the “destigmatizing” effect of translation upon the cultures into which the Bible (and Christianity as a whole) is translated. That is, the act of translation validates the language and culture into which the Bible is being translated. While this creates a text–context tension²¹⁰ between the concept of a single gospel and a multitude of cultural perspectives, that tension is creative, not destructive. The dual convictions that the God who has spoken is the Lord of all and that the New Testament affirms all languages and cultures as sanctified environments in which God can speak, provide confidence that this text–context dynamic will further the *missio Dei*. Sanneh (1989:29) refers to this as “mission by *translation*.” That is, the recipient culture becomes “the true and final locus of the proclamation, so that the religion arrives without the presumption of cultural rejection.” Thus the “translatability” of Christianity, of which Bible translation is a key aspect, from its inception is a key reason for the continued spread of Christianity among the nations.

Furthermore, an imperative of Bible translation deflects attention from the missionary to the message. In Islam, Christians are known as “people of the Book” and this has been the means by which Muslims have been introduced to the Bible. The missionary is not the focal point, instead they are channels by which the authoritative message of God is delivered. The delivery of the message requires recipients to engage the Bible and in order to facilitate that engagement, the messenger is driven to translate.

²⁰⁹ WBT has enjoyed almost universal support across denominational lines. However, the 2011 controversy over the translation choice to avoid familial language in some translations intended for Muslim people groups has caused some denominations, most notably the Presbyterians in the USA, to consider withdrawing their support (Potomac Presbytery 2011). The issue has even impacted the Sindhi Bible translation work in Pakistan where the Pakistan Bible Society has severed ties with WBT (Lamuel 2012). Fortunately, the World Evangelical Alliance (WEA) has served evangelical missions well by spearheading a resolution to the conflict through translation recommendations that have been accepted by SIL International (2013) and their strategic partner, Wycliffe Global Alliance (2013).

²¹⁰ This is one dimension of the faith–text–context triangle introduced in 5.4.

Kritzinger (2003:546) also points out that the emphasis on Bible translation among Protestants has resulted in a focus on education and literacy. While the outcomes of this have been not always been beneficial,²¹¹ literacy remains a key value in terms of economic and social development. In Pakistan, RM teaches adult literacy to Sindhi Muslims using Bible stories, thus tying a felt need for societal advancement to the Christian mandate of proclaiming God's Word.

4.4.5 History of the Sindhi Bible²¹²

The complete Bible in the Sindhi language was first published by the Pakistan Bible Society (PBS) in 1954 (P Brown 2006:268). A formal translation style was adopted that used educated Sindhi vocabulary and closely followed the idiomatic rendering of the original languages. Due to changes in the Sindhi language over the years and the desire that the message be more accessible to poorly literate Sindhi populations, the Pakistan Bible Society sponsored a new meaning-based and common language²¹³ translation. The aim of the translation project was to make God's word comprehensible to any Muslim Sindhi with a sixth grade education which included sensitivity to the general population's use of Islamic terms.²¹⁴ American missionary Hu Addleton began the project in 1972 and with the help of his colleague Ralph Brown and a team of Sindhi translators and reviewers, the common language Sindhi New Testament was completed and published by PBS in 1985 (P Brown 2006:270). SIM Canada missionary Charles Noble initiated the common language translation of the Old Testament in Sindhi in 1989. I was invited to join the Sindhi translation team as an exegete²¹⁵ to check Sindhi manuscripts for accuracy and four years later assumed supervision of the project when the Nobles were unable to return to Pakistan. Eighteen years later, in December 2007, the translation was completed and then published in 2009 as a companion volume to the New Testament. Currently, the 1985 common language Sindhi New

²¹¹ Perhaps the most notable detriment has been an undermining of some benefits inherent in oral cultures. In a rather technical manner, de Vries (2000) explores the relationship between orality and Bible translation seeing the written translation entering an oral society as another genre (:107) that reflects shifts in that society.

²¹² A history of the Sindhi Bible can also be found on the Northwest Baptist Seminary website (Naylor 2010f).

²¹³ See 5.16 for a distinction between "meaning-based," "formal" and "common language" translations.

²¹⁴ A notable example is the use of *Isa* as the name of Jesus; the 1954 Sindhi version followed the PBS Urdu Bible (1992 [1870]) and used *Yasu*, the common rendering among Christians.

²¹⁵ The role of the exegete or "scholar" is to ensure the accuracy of the translation. A language consultant who is not a member of the specific translation team is also provided by PBS for quality control and to recommend the translation to PBS for publication.

Testament for a Muslim audience is being revised along with the preparation of a parallel Sindhi New Testament for a Hindu audience. The difference between the two versions is primarily religious vocabulary. I continue in the role as both supervisor of the project and primary exegete.

4.5 Summary

This chapter provides the backdrop for the research project. Our family's ministry or insertion among Sindhi Muslims is described together with lessons we learned about humility in approaching the wisdom and depth of another cultural context. An introduction and history of the Sindhi people is outlined with a focus on influences that have shaped their religious outlook, worldview assumptions and cultural values. Of special interest is the religious environment of Islam and the impact of Sufism that have molded the identity of Sindhi Muslims. The current situation in the Sindh province is examined with a brief description of the political, economic and educational climate within which Sindhis live. Implications for Muslims who become followers of Jesus Christ are also considered. Finally, Sindhi Bible translation is discussed with a view to the Sindhi Muslim orientation to the Bible and a history of PBS Sindhi Bible translation projects. The following chapter defines key terminology.

CHAPTER 5. Terminology

The arguments for the theoretical framework of this study of Christian theology emerging within a Muslim Sindhi context begin in this chapter with a description of key terminology.

5.1 Bible

Various expressions are used to refer to the sacred texts of the Protestant Christian faith: Bible, God's Word,²¹⁶ God's revelation,²¹⁷ God's declaration, scripture,²¹⁸ biblical text. Although these terms all denote the same text, consisting of 66 books of the Old and New Testament, a closed canon (Bruce 1988:22),²¹⁹ they connote a variety of nuances and emphases. For example, "God's Word" focuses on what God has declared, "God's revelation" emphasizes that the Bible reveals to us God's nature and will, and "biblical text" underscores the written nature of the Bible.

5.2 Believer and Submission

"Believer" in the context of this research is not limited to the common evangelical sense of one who is a committed disciple of Jesus as Lord and Savior (i.e., a subset of those with the identity of "Christian"), nor is it used to designate those who have a commitment to a particular faith (i.e., followers of a religion such as Islam or Christianity). Rather, it is used in a precise sense to refer to those who approach the translated Sindhi Bible as a revelation from God that has implications for their lives and must be heeded. Believers are those committed to shaping their lives according to the divine authority of the biblical text. They are Sindhis who desire to submit to the authority of God's will and exhibit "self-consciousness as a people under the Word" (Wink 1973:10). The abandonment of one's self to a teacher (*murshid*) is well understood by Sindhis and it is this attitude towards God's Word that is important, rather than marks of identification within a particular cultural or religious group.

The concept of "submission" can have negative or even oppressive connotations for

²¹⁶ Or sometimes simply "Word." When "Word" is capitalized it refers to the Bible or to Jesus as the incarnate Word of John 1:14. "God's word" (not capitalized) focuses on God's communicative action.

²¹⁷ While recognizing that God's revelation is not limited to the Bible, in this thesis it is generally used in a limited sense to refer to the Bible as God's communication to human beings.

²¹⁸ Although "scripture" can be used to refer to the sacred texts of other religions, the term is primarily used in this thesis to indicate the Bible.

²¹⁹ Any canonical debate is beyond the scope of this study and the references to the Bible in this thesis conform to common modern day Protestant usage. Nonetheless, discrepancies, particularly the extra canonical books found within Catholic versions of the Bible, are a relatively minor topic of concern and debate among believers and Muslims in the Sindh.

Western readers, but like “fear of God” in the Sindhi context it is considered not only appropriate but a necessary posture of human beings before the Almighty. The theological shift from Master to Father in the believers’ relationship to God identified in this thesis is unlikely to create cognitive dissonance concerning the need for submission. The patriarchal hierarchy of Sindhi society as it is ideally envisioned assumes and values a submissive attitude on the part of the child and caring concern on the part of the father. The persistence of this posture among believers is not unexpected considering the assumption that a theological “trajectory” is not necessarily a *break from* Islam but rather a *nuance of* the teachings that have been formative of the their faith (worldview, beliefs, values) before encountering the gospel. The ideal of submission to God’s revelation inherent in the word “Islam” is not questioned, it is their perspective of the One to whom they submit that has shifted.

The primary access to scripture for Sindhi believers is the Sindhi translation, which they accept as authoritative. They “come to scripture with dispositions of risky openness to a reordering of the world, repentance for attitudes of defiance of the grace of God’s self-revelation, hospitable to a conversion of [their] own imagination” (Green 2007:59). They have accepted scripture’s aim “for its readers to embark on a journey of theological formation bounded only by the character and purpose of God” (:61).

In contrast to this orientation, a technical reading of the text places the words and concepts into an academic and analytic framework that can be separated from life commitment. Such a stance distances the reader from the intent of the text and, while this is possible for all readers whether or not they are believers, it is a particular danger for the Bible translator who can reduce the sacred task to a mechanical exercise.²²⁰ To establish a credible theological position from which the theological trajectories of the believers can be evaluated, this study includes interviews with those who are *not* believers but belong to the same cultural and religious milieu. From their perspective, scripture is viewed as a repository of theological or spiritual content that can be understood objectively and contemplated *without the need for response*.²²¹

Believers approach the text as *sacred* – “God is speaking and I must listen.” Although God’s message is revealed to them in and through their matrix of life, this is not a logical or analytical process that is reflected upon for validation and then later applied in a two-step

²²⁰ The orientation of the translator to the task of translation is explored in 8.2.2.

²²¹ A third possible approach, not particularly relevant for this study, is to use the Bible as “proof-texting” to support one’s presuppositions. Rather than listening for God to speak so that the Word can critique us, we use the text as authority to validate issues we control and define.

process. Rather, the posture is one of receptivity; “hospitable” to God’s reordering of character, thought and action. Furthermore, it is a reading with a desire for *metanoia*; repentance expressed in a change of mind (Davis 2003:16). Goldsworthy (2006:18) refers to this as “hermeneutical conversion” in which the “Bible will never be the same again to us because we, as believers, have made a quantum shift from unbelief and rejection of God’s Word to faith and trust in that word, and submission to it.” It is this orientation that results in transformation. “Our response to scripture will encompass more than just our head. A hermeneutic of engagement will involve a readiness to respond with all we are to the call of God to us through scripture.... Understanding the Bible as divine discourse... encourages us to come to the Bible from a stance of trust” (JK Brown 2007:234). It is our prior commitment that determines what is received. When there is submission and commitment to God’s Word, impact occurs in the way life is perceived and lived. It is these transformations that constitute the emerging theology of the believer.

An illustration of the definition of the word “believer” is found in one of the research interviews. Although the speaker would identify himself as a Muslim, and would not see his faith stance as embracing a new religion, his orientation to the New Testament indicates the validity of considering him, for the sake of this research, a “believer.” Of particular note is the posture of submission to both the Qur’an and the Bible.

Our faith is this, that our book, the Qur’an, tells us things clearly. In the holy Qur’an God tells us what to do with every rising and sitting. In the book of Jesus, God tells us everything. What is a person, how does he go, how does he come. How should he sit and rise. Everything is clear.... We can gain everything from the book. We read it and study it. This is a demonstration of the love of God. If we did not have the book, what would happen? We don’t know. But we do have it and so can read and understand what God has declared and what he has described, and what we ought to do, what we ought not to do, what is true, what is holy, what is clean and what is unclean.... We see that truth is truth. We read that God is truth. By understanding truth [emphatic], we can understand (H Interview 13B).

Believers are those who “perform” the word of God as they allow the authoritative message prescribe the “plotlines” of their lives similar to Green’s (2007:67-68) analogy of musical or theatrical performance:²²²

Performance speaks to creative fidelity: “fidelity” in the sense that the notes on the score or words in the playscript predetermine the parameters of performance, “creative” in the sense that life is too particular and unruly to be carefully scripted, but [the players] can nonetheless be persons shaped by this script as well as persons who understand the plotlines of life according to its lines and measures.

²²² This musical analogy is developed further in the 8.1.4.1.

Believers maintain “fidelity” to God’s word as they respond creatively to what they hear as God’s message to them.

Although using the word “believer” in this manner runs the danger of being confused with the more common uses of the term, it is deliberately chosen. The intent is to reflect an important and powerful faith dynamic at work, although the object of belief is the translated text rather than the person of Jesus Christ, a primary distinction from the common evangelical use of the term. Some of those interviewed may consider themselves “Christian,” accepting identity with a particular religious group, others may not. Nonetheless, all consider themselves followers of Christ to some degree in a way that is indicated by a desire to allow the Bible to speak authoritatively into their lives.

Second, this reflects an orientation to the Bible as God’s word that is grounded in the historical evangelical roots of FEBCC, the tradition to which I belong.²²³ “We can expect God to speak as we open the Bible. We can come ready to hear from God and be engaged by God” (JK Brown 2007:234). This commitment continues to be emphasized and passed on to those whom we teach and influence.

Third, the ethnic distinctions and tensions between the primarily Punjabi Christian communities and the Sindhi Muslim communities have resulted in a defensive posture among the Christians concerning whom they will accept as an authentic believer.²²⁴ Due to the fragile nature of their minority status in a dominant Muslim society, their fears are understandable but detrimental to the spread of the gospel message outside of this minority group. The cultural biases and fears of established Christian communities hamper the development of relationships with outsiders who make a commitment to Jesus. While the point of the definition used in this study is not to alter the meaning of the term within Christian circles, it does reflect a personal conviction that the condition for identifying a true “believer” is not caste or religious identification, but a person’s orientation to God’s self-revelation. Charles Kraft (1979:240-245) distinguishes between a *directional* and *positional* basis for faith that supports this stress on orientation to God rather than on conformity to the demands of group membership. “It is the *direction of the process* in which a person is involved that is crucial, not the *position of the point* at which he or she stands”

²²³ See 4.4.4 for an explanation of the importance of Bible translation for evangelicals.

²²⁴ See 4.3.5 for a further description of the Punjabi orientation to Sindhi believers.

(:242). Another model is that of bounded, centered and fuzzy sets.²²⁵ Bounded sets view people as either under God’s reign or outside of God’s reign, saved or unsaved, whereas centered sets that focus on the reign of God as the focal point for a community view people’s *location* as less important than the *direction* in which they are moving. Fuzzy sets provide “loose” boundaries in which some aspects of “either–or” thinking occurs but with the recognition that there is the directional movement of the centered sets (Bradshaw 1993:154-156). Thus this definition of *believer* relates to the orientation of the individual to scripture rather than their overt commitment to a religious tradition or a statement of doctrinal faith.

5.3 Faith defined as Worldview, Belief and Values

Hofstede & Hofstede’s (2005:7-8) diagram of concentric circles called the “Onion” describe “manifestations of culture at different levels of depths.” The innermost circle is designated “values” referring to the “core of culture... [in which there are] broad tendencies to prefer certain states of affairs over others.” As seen in the revised diagram, I add two other circles²²⁶ to the inner “values” to show the even deeper layers of worldview and beliefs on which values are based (Naylor 2007).

Values have a negative and positive aspect. “Values are feelings with an arrow to it: a plus and minus side” Hofstede & Hofstede (2005:7-8). For example, “abortion is wrong,” expresses a value judgment. *Beliefs* answer the question “why” when exploring a value, thus the deeper designation in the diagram. When asked *why* abortion is wrong, the reply may be “the unborn fetus

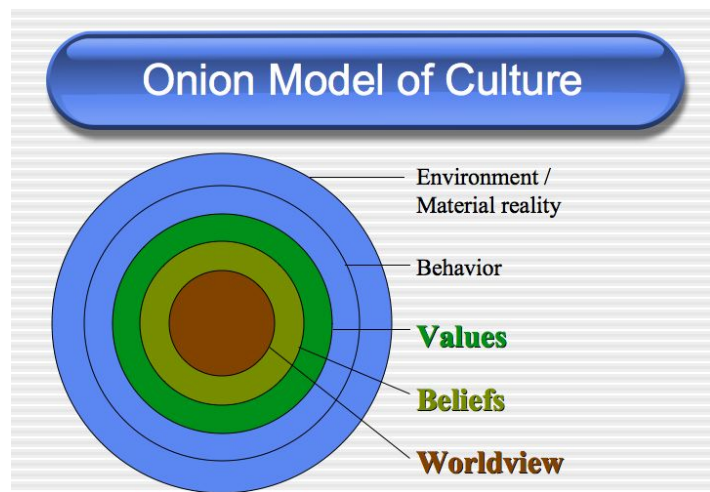


Figure 3 *Onion Model of Culture*

²²⁵ Frost & Hirsch (2003:47) provide an illustration of wells and fences found in Australian farming communities. Some farmers fence in their livestock, while on large rural farms a well is bored that creates a focal point to naturally draw the animals to the water source.

²²⁶ I use this diagram when teaching church groups a grassroots approach to evangelism called *Significant Conversations*, through which people develop skills to talk to others about significant issues in life (Naylor 2009d). This research project could be seen as an example of *Significant Conversations* stimulated by the presentation of a passage of scripture and evaluated according to the inner three circles of the diagram.

is a human being with the right to life.” This is a claim of reality that undergirds the value and is thus a statement of belief. *Worldview* answers the question “why” when exploring statements of belief to discover the basic assumptions or matrix of reality to which a person is committed. When asked why a fetus has the right to life, the reply may be “God has declared human life sacred.” This is a claim to a fundamental framework that requires no deeper level of support; it is a basic assumption of reality. This conforms to Kraft’s (1979:54) depiction of worldview as the underlying perspective of reality at the core of culture which is disclosed in the way culture organizes and relates all aspects of life within a community of people, and Paul Hiebert’s (1985:45) description of the “basic assumptions about reality which lie behind the beliefs and behavior of a culture.”

“Faith” primarily refers to the totality of an individual’s or group’s reflection on and conviction about life, inclusive of their worldview assumptions and the resulting belief and value responses as they interact with their context. That is, faith includes all assumptions about their relationships, environment and reality as a whole, as well as the outworking of those assumptions in their orientation towards what they believe to be ontologically true and morally right. This is roughly equivalent to Hofstede & Hofstede’s (2005:2-5) definition of culture as “mental software,” those “patterns of thinking, feeling and potential acting that [are] learned throughout [one’s] lifetime.” This is to be distinguished from both universals of human nature and idiosyncrasies of individual personality, as well as from external cultural objects. Instead, “software of the mind” refers to the “cultural programming” that gives meaning to all that is experienced in life. It is this totality of meaning-making comprised of worldview, belief and values created at a communal level and experienced both collectively and individually that is designated as “faith.”

This definition is in contrast to common understandings of faith as a subjective act of trust²²⁷ or reference to a body of religious doctrine. It may be closer to Foder & Hauerwas’ (2004:76-77) concept of faith as “performance” in that convictions about reality must be lived out in relationship rather than contemplated and objectified. The primary use of faith for this study is

²²⁷ Traditional scholastic theology distinguished *fides qua* (the faith ‘by which’ we believe – subjective) from *fides quae* (the ‘things’ we believe). A subjective view of faith is closer to the New Testament presentation of faith and belief as abandoning one’s self to God in Jesus Christ (John 14:1; 20:31; Gal 3:7-9), which should not be confused with the primary concern of this thesis. Nonetheless, this subjective sense is used occasionally to describe a believer’s act of commitment or trust and, if so used, the nuance will be obvious within the context.

to refer to all the assumptions about what is real and true that find their expression in thought, word and action.

5.4 The Faith–Text–Context Triangle

A three–fold relationship between faith, text and context describes the dialectical²²⁸ framework being studied. This can be represented as a faith–text–context triangle (see diagram) with reciprocating arrows between each aspect. The arrows indicate the interactive dynamic or creative tension that occurs between each of the three pairs:²²⁹ faith–text, faith–context and text–context.²³⁰ *Context* refers to the place where people live their lives, all aspects *outside of* themselves that constitute their environment or locus of existence. This includes the economic, social and political environment as well as their personal and impersonal relationships within that environment. People live in a *context* and their *faith* (worldview, beliefs and values) is the “grid” through which they give meaning and order to that context. *Tension* is primarily used to describe the three relationships in order to emphasize that each dichotomy represents an interaction involving challenge and critique that calls for resolution. The dynamic is an engagement that results in movement, extension and change.

When the biblical text is introduced, the believer engages both the text and their context in a reciprocal fashion that shapes their faith. In turn, the text is interpreted according to faith

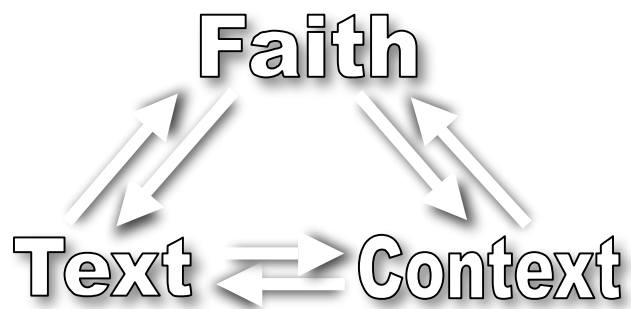


Figure 4 Faith-Text-Context Interaction

assumptions, and the context is impacted by the believers’ faith. The text–context side of the triangle refers to the cultural concepts that are used to communicate the message of the text. This is evident not only in the expressions used by believers to explain the text, but by the fact that the

²²⁸ The terms “dialogical” and “dialectical” are used as near synonyms with this distinction: *Dialectical* focuses on the interaction between two interlocutors or concepts with *a view to a resolution or synthesis*. *Dialogical* refers to the interaction between two interlocutors or concepts with *a view to identifying* the positions of the interlocutors and/or the nature of the interaction irrespective of a resolution or synthesis.

²²⁹ Although the literary style states that the tension or interaction lies between two impersonal concepts or realities (text and culture), it should always be understood that human interlocutors are intended. Even when a reader engages a text, they are dealing with the author in a covenantal relationship (see 8.1.3) and when they wrestle with the implications of culture, they are negotiating meaning with other meaning–makers in their context.

²³⁰ The pairs may also appear reversed as text–faith, context–faith and context–text without indicating any difference in meaning.

text is a *translated* text. The sacred writings of the Bible – the text – have been crafted using the forms and concepts of the believers’ language – the context – thus presenting an interpretation of the original message; translation is a hermeneutical process. The text impacts the context through the introduction or emphasis of terms and concepts that may be unfamiliar to the readers. Believers thus engage God’s Word through the translation to form theological convictions reflected in their life according to existing values, beliefs and worldview, that is, their faith. The translation itself, as the medium through which the original message is engaged, thus plays a critical part in influencing the emerging theology.²³¹

5.5 Resonance

As described in my (Naylor 2004:7-8) Masters dissertation on contextualized Bible storying, “resonance” refers to the way a person perceives and responds to the relevance of a passage of scripture. Similar to the meeting of “horizons of meaning” (e.g., Bate 2001:17, cf. Gadamer’s (1989 [1975]:447-448) “fusing of horizons”), resonance goes beyond comprehension to describe the impact of a passage upon the faith (worldview, values and beliefs) of the reader or hearer.²³² It indicates the level of emphasis or priority an issue is assigned by the members of a people group so that it is deemed important and impacting to their life.

The idea of using “resonance” to describe the relationship of a concept to a person’s values and beliefs stems from [my] exposure to the Sindhi word *laggarna*. *Laggarna* is used to describe one’s sense of “fit” or “rightness” towards an idea or proposal. It assumes understanding but goes beyond to provide a value judgment according to the code of life to which one is committed. However this does not mean that a challenge to or contrast with cultural values is not possible. The concept of resonance refers to any concept which speaks either negatively or positively to the reality within which the person lives. The point is that it speaks relevantly and significantly (Naylor 2004:7-8).

As stated in the quote, resonance is not limited to a positive reception by the group but includes dissonance; the defining characteristics are impact and significance. For example, in the Sindh people seek protection from evil spirits by tying black threads around their children’s wrists or wearing verses of the Qur’an written out by *pirs*. For the average secularized Westerner this has no meaning. Even if they understand cognitively the significance of the black thread for Sindhis,

²³¹ The implications and validity of this dialectical framework are explored in 8.1 and 8.2.

²³² Although “reader” is the preferred term to describe participants who interact with a translation of the New Testament, “hearer” or “listener” may also be used at times. The essential aspect is that a person is engaging the text, rather than specifying if they are reading the text themselves or listening while another reads.

there is no resonance because the values and beliefs associated with the thread by the Sindhi are lacking for the Westerner; neither the perceived danger nor the defensive response are legitimate in the mind of the secularized person. In contrast, the abortion issue *resonates* with both pro-life and pro-choice groups in the West because they are concerned with the implications the issue has upon their lives. Although their views are in sharp contrast with each other, the issue *resonates* with both.

Resonance is distinct from *relevance*; a concept or item may be relevant to a particular context but not resonate with the members of that context. For example, providing a tool may be appropriate to the setting, but it will not create impact until those who must use the tool come to appreciate and desire its use. Therefore, resonance implies a level of emotional response that demands personal engagement beyond that of mere acknowledgment of relevance.

5.6 Referents

The term “cultural referent” is based on semiotics and communication theory²³³ and refers to the reality in the environment to which a sign refers as perceived by the speaker and audience. “Textual referent,” as a subset to cultural referent, refers to the identifiable portion of the presented text used in the interviews conducted during the research process. In contrast, Schreiter’s term “culture texts” (1985:61) is used to refer to the expressions used by participants in the interviews to describe the way they understand and respond to the textual referents.

5.7 Mapping Theological Trajectories

Grassroots interpretations occur through the conversations and acts of believers as they articulate and apply God’s word within their context. These expressions emerge as believers rephrase the message of the text through words and actions within their worldview and life context and they deserve the label “theology” as much as academic papers that describe the subject. Schreiter (1985:1) affirms that theology is “the reflection of Christians upon the gospel in light of their own circumstances.” Indeed, there may be a greater likelihood that such theological reflection “built on the pillars of confession and surrounded by the scaffolding of reflection” will cultivate virtues that constitute a practical Christ-centered wisdom for life (Wells 1993:100), a dimension neglected in rationalist or empirical academic approaches (cf. Netland 2006:17).

This focus is not intended to denigrate or marginalize the importance of academic theological pursuits. Just as competent artists demonstrate dexterity, finesse, and excellence to

²³³ Communication theory is developed in 8.1.

warrant praise and attention, we also need to value those academic theologians who provide careful and insightful exegesis within traditional, historical and logical parameters. They remain an integral part of the theological orchestra against which grassroots interpretations need to be heard and appreciated. At the same time, all believers should be validated for initiatives to explore their faith as one dimension of an ongoing theologizing process.

The concept of “theological trajectories” recognizes that Christian theology develops from a previously established theological position; no community acts as a *tabula rasa*, expressing external cultural or religious influences without alteration. There are worldview assumptions, beliefs and values within every people group that determine which influences are acceptable and which are not. Although there are individual distinctions and degrees of sophistication within common perspectives of Sindhi Muslims, this research assumes a basic theological uniformity from which believers deviate as they engage the Bible. The point is not to prove this assumption or even develop parameters that would clarify a fixed starting point from which an emerging trajectory away from the standard belief can be quantitatively measured. The important issue, as seen in the analysis, is that the believers themselves demonstrate a contrast either with their previous understanding of God or with the general Sindhi Muslim perspective. Believers brought up in Islam read the Bible in continuity with the theological filters and presuppositions into which they were enculturated. Theological trajectories describe an emerging theology, one that is continuous with the believers’ previous understanding yet developing in new ways that would not have occurred without their submission to God’s Word. Readers engage the text through the lens of their enculturated belief while their covenantal commitment to the text creates the possibility of movement towards a theology consistent with its message. Any movement from a perceived established theological position, whether considered a deviation or an unexpected yet legitimate development, represents a theological trajectory and, from the believers’ perspective, denotes greater conformity to the will of God.

While reductionist or syncretistic elements may be present in an emerging theological trajectory, what is of more critical concern is its potential and the direction it is heading because inappropriate aspects will be refined in time if the direction holds true and God’s Word continues to be engaged with integrity. The unsure and faltering steps of a toddler are cheered and appreciated for their potential, not denigrated as missteps. This gracious attitude is imperative, not only to give believers space to make their own adjustments as they further engage God’s revelation within their context, but it is a caution for outsiders to recognize that we are *all* on

similar journeys and *our* trajectories also need continual adjusting as we learn together. From God's perspective at least, we must all be theological toddlers.²³⁴ At the same time, there are parameters within which theological trajectories can be validated.²³⁵

The concept of "trajectory" flows naturally from the description of believers as those who are oriented to the Bible as God's Word speaking authoritatively to them.²³⁶ Since it "is the *direction of the process* in which a person is involved that is crucial, not the *position of the point* at which he or she stands" (Kraft 1979:242), it is appropriate to ask what movements are occurring in the life of the believers that are stimulated by their orientation to God's Word. An examination of trajectories reveals the theological significance of a professed commitment to hearing and obeying the scriptures in terms of *content*, *direction* and *impact* as believers allow God's Word to change the way they think and act.

Although the term "shift" is also used to describe a change or deviation in theological perspective at a particular point in time, trajectory emphasizes theological development as a process without an ideal resolution or even necessitating a deviation since it could be an extension or ongoing development of what is already present. The concern is not to consider theological trajectories as clearly delineated contrasts to a particular theological standard or statement of faith, but to identify how the worldview, beliefs and values of a select group is developing in a different or unexpected manner. Mapping is accomplished through comparison to a previous belief or by considering how the new orientation deviates from the traditional position held by others in the same people group. This process recognizes that we are all culturally bound subjects and unable to achieve absolute knowledge, but also affirms the possibility of significant and adequate perspectives of truth²³⁷ that require ongoing correction and development. Our cultural milieu enables us to perceive, think and communicate, a milieu that is relative, limited and in need of correction because as humans we all "fall short of the glory of God" (Rom 3:23). Our interactions and perspectives are constantly being challenged and shaped as God speaks into our lives.

The theological trajectories concept can be contrasted to a two-step process that assumes

²³⁴ Smalley's (1991:180) list of syncretistic elements that affect theological development in the North American setting includes (1) Greek philosophy and Western rationalism, (2) a theology of nationalism, of national security, of capitalism and anticommunism, (3) a theology of individualism, (4) scientism or secularism, (5) a theology of prosperity (6) a theology of manifest destiny, saving the world by transforming others into our political, economic and cultural image.

²³⁵ For a discussion of validity see 7.3.2 and 3.1.2.3.

²³⁶ See 5.2.

²³⁷ See further development of this thought in the critical realist position described in 7.6.

that application follows and is distinct from understanding. In evangelical churches preachers commonly explain a passage and then move on to “application,” thus creating the impression that the second step, while building on the first, is distinct. The theological trajectories model acknowledges that there is an ongoing process whereby understanding *shapes* response, but both understanding and response are formed within the individual’s context so that there is an indivisible interconnectedness between exegesis and contextualization. Following Gadamer’s (1989 [1975]:340) aphorism, “all reading [i.e., understanding] involves application,” JK Brown (2007:234) speaks of “the fluidity between exegesis and contextualization.” Because understanding occurs within the context (the environment that is the locus of the individual) and worldview (the internalized “grid” by which the context is perceived by the individual) of the one who understands, meaning must relate and be relevant to that which is already known and, therefore, applicable only to what is known.

“Shaping” and “impact” are two other terms that are used in conjunction with theological trajectories. *Shaping* focuses on the theologizing agents who develop their perspectives as they engage a Bible translation. Through a dialectical process they *shape* their perceptions and expressions of theology so that there is a transformation of values and beliefs as they hear God’s truth speak into their lives. *Impact* describes the way theological development affects the hearer, similar to Kraft’s (1979:149) use of the term referring to communication beyond a cognitive level that affects integral belief and value systems.

An example of theological trajectories that form when people become followers of Christ is seen in a question raised at a Christian gathering in the Sindh. I was surprised to hear a man ask, “Are women [to be classified as] human?” The first generation of believers among this tribal Hindu people group is still alive and a new theology of humanity is emerging. The status of women in this patriarchal people group, including Christian families, is low compared to the status of women among Punjabi Christians, who have been Christians for generations, although originally they, too, belonged to a Hindu context. A derogatory Sindhi proverb that refers to the cognitive ability of women is commonly quoted with a laugh by men in this tribal people group, “A woman’s brain is the heel of her foot.” The importance of the question posed by that man is not so much to do with the underlying assumptions concerning the value of women, but with the reality that *those assumptions are being challenged by biblical teaching*. A theological trajectory has been initiated with the potential to change the way men and women relate, even though it will take generations.

“Mapping” refers to the identification of theological trajectories and the analysis of their parameters as they relate to the translated biblical text, other Christian theological positions and the theological beliefs of members of society who are *not* committed to the Bible as authoritative for their lives. The term is intended to reflect, in a metaphorical manner, the discipline of topography that creates symbolic, two-dimensional representations of the shapes and contours of the earth’s surface. This is comparable to Andrews’ (2009) description of local theologies²³⁸ as maps. He suggests that we need to view theologies as “relative maps” of biblical truth

rather than objective theological propositions. Just as a topographical map and a road map give us different perspectives of our geographical terrain, African theologies and Latin American theologies will give us different perspectives on the biblical nature of reality. Each theology will operate as a theological map that will provide one perspective of... biblical truth. The more theological maps we can produce, the better we will be able to perceive biblical truth. This will obviously produce tension. If you are looking for Route 66 on a topographical map, you are going to be frustrated. The agent of contextualization needs to resist the Western temptation to resolve this tension and just learn to live with it in a dynamic way.

The map of theological trajectories produced through this study exhibits a uniqueness that both compares and contrasts with other local theologies. It compares because the participants are dealing with God’s Word and the universal concerns of humanity. It contrasts because it reflects the questions, concerns and perspectives of Sindhis.

Mapping trajectories differs from a foundational approach²³⁹ that deconstructs theology according to assumed universal assumptions using a rational and logical methodology to build an internally consistent system of thought. It is also different from a systematic theology that examines the way a local theology has constructed categories or a biblical theology that discovers overarching narratives from the biblical record. Instead, mapping assumes that theologizing is a journey and form of praxis that takes place within a pre-existing theological environment that is dynamic and in flux and therefore focuses on the changes taking place due to exposure to scripture. Mapping is the comparison and contrast of theological movement generated and brought to light through the intersection of the two horizons of the translated text and the context of the reader.

The mapping of theology is not exhaustive, but contrastive. It does not provide a comprehensive analysis, but plots trajectories and identifies emphases. It is like a chart: totally

²³⁸ The phrase “local theology” is used synonymously with “contextual theology.”

²³⁹ See Grenz & Franke’s (2001) critique of this rationalist approach in *Beyond Foundationalism: Shaping Theology in a Postmodern Context*.

other than that which it represents, but within the parameters of the intended meaning it can facilitate understanding of the subject. Schreiter (1985:23) proposes that charting interactive relationships among gospel, church, and culture by means of a “map” provides both an “orientation and evaluation” for a local theology. The theology can be *oriented* with respect to its development and *evaluated* according to strengths and weaknesses. Mapping as a contrastive exercise marks the deviation from a normative position (cf. Schreiter’s “orientation”) as well as demonstrating relationship to the biblical text (cf. Schreiter’s “evaluation”). The mapping methodology describes those expressed beliefs and actions of Sindhi believers that are developing with different “shapes and contours” than their surrounding Islamic context.

5.8 Cross-cultural and Intercultural

“Cross-cultural” and “intercultural” follow the meanings expressed by Ting-Toomey (1999:16),

The term “cross-cultural” is used in the intercultural literature to refer to the communication process that is comparative in nature (e.g., comparing conflict styles in cultures X, Y, and Z), while the term “intercultural” is used to refer to the communication process between members of different cultural communities (e.g., business negotiations between a Dutch importer and an Indonesian exporter).

The research interviews are intercultural, with the collection of data done in a conversation format by an outsider who engages members of a specific ethnic group through the presentation of a Bible passage. The analysis involves some cross-cultural elements through comparisons of the participants’ theological interpretations with perspectives from those unacquainted with the culture.²⁴⁰ But the focus of the study is the intra-cultural comparisons and contrasts between believers and those participants who are not believers in order to identify emerging trajectories. “Cross-cultural” is also used to describe those change agents who are intentionally engaging a culture that is not their own.

5.9 Church

In the Sindhi context, “church” refers primarily to the current development of household gatherings that follow natural familial networks. At the same time, church can refer to a variety of expressions of Christian group identity and is not limited to any particular form. My (Naylor 2009a) preference is to speak of “expressions of church” so that “any activity that fulfills in some way a community aspect of God’s people is an *expression* of church.” The point is that first order

²⁴⁰ This study does not qualify as cross-cultural research, since cross-cultural research contrasts phenomenological patterns identified between cultures (Ember & Ember 2001:5).

descriptions – “such as discipleship, participation in God’s mission to the world, commitment to the way of Christ, and prayer concerns” – should take precedence over second order concerns that focus on form. This could include groups that may not normally be considered under the rubric of church, such as parachurch organizations (Naylor 2009b). Although the primary use of church in this thesis refers to local communities of believers, the term can also serve as a collective for all Sindhi believers, such as in the phrase “the emerging Sindhi church.”

5.10 Missions

“Missions” is equivalent to *Christian mission* or, when the context allows for the distinct nuance intended, *mission* in the singular. It is narrower in scope than *missio Dei* and less inclusive than the entire enterprise of the Christian movement that seeks to live under and in anticipation of the reign of God in transformative ways within every cultural context. Missions is patterned after the incident of Acts 13 when the Antioch church, under the direct command of the Holy Spirit, sent Paul and Barnabas away to bring the gospel message to those who have not heard. This is interpreted as a contextual outworking of the Great Commission (Mt 28:19,20) and Acts 1:8 mandate. The important aspects of this definition are that a church appoints and “sends”²⁴¹ dedicated people to cross boundaries beyond the reach of the local congregation and initiate gospel centered communities of believers. These boundaries refer to differences that divide communities of people into self-identified groups and can include cultural, linguistic, or geographic boundaries. While the intent is the establishment and empowering of a community of believers in another context according to the gospel mandate, the activities of missionaries are varied, complex and holistic demonstrating partnership with the local believers in all the stages of spiritual and transformational development. Nonetheless, the two essential factors are (1) the appointing and sending out from a church and (2) the gospel centered initiation and establishment of communities of believers who live under the reign of God.

5.11 Insiders and Outsiders

“Insiders” refers to those self-identified or “native” (Schreiter 1985:19) members of a specific ethno-linguistic group. The term emphasizes the impact of enculturation that gives a person the right to belong and to speak authoritatively to the values and perspectives of the group. “Outsiders” are those “expatriates” and “cross-cultural ministers” (:19) whose outlook has been

²⁴¹ Although this passage does not use the Greek word *apostello* (to send), the concept is implied. The word *apostello* is the basis of the Latin *missio* from which the English *missions* is derived.

shaped by a different cultural context than that of a particular ethno–linguistic group. They are not members of that group, but they have a relationship with some of the group’s members.

5.12 Evangelical

The phenomenon of evangelicalism is hard to define precisely because it is an umbrella term for a mosaic of emphases ranging from charismatics seeking mystical experiences to reformed theologians who define their faith according to centuries old propositional statements of faith. In this thesis “evangelical” refers to those churches and believers who hold to a conservative theology including the centrality of the cross for salvation, accept the Bible as God’s authoritative word and stress the importance of individual salvation coupled with a desire to share the gospel message with others. While affirming these “key ingredients” of evangelicalism, Noll (1994:8) observes that such beliefs have “never by themselves yielded cohesive, institutionally compact, easily definable, well–coordinated, or clearly demarcated groups of Christians.” Nonetheless, in general, evangelicals would confirm these traits as the primary marks of identification.

5.13 Syncretism

In this thesis Kraft’s (1996:375-376; 2005a), Taber’s (1991:154) and Nicholls’ (2003:29) understanding of “syncretism” is followed. Taber views syncretism as “the blending of cultural and religious elements that are not truly compatible or that are quite incompatible, with resulting distortion of one or both elements.” Kraft contrasts “appropriate Christianity” (i.e., contextualization) with syncretism defined as an “undesirable... blend or mixture of Christianity with pre–Christian beliefs and practices relating to supernatural beings and powers” that undermines basic Christian faith. Nicholls describes syncretism as “the attempt to reconcile diverse or conflicting beliefs, or religious practices into a unified system.” However, this should not be interpreted as a judgment on the legitimacy of the emerging thought of a people group who are seeking to “make Christianity genuinely theirs” (Kraft 1996:376). The word is used in recognition that essential elements of an original belief system, whether Christianity or another religion, have been altered to the extent that advocates of the original traditions would view the innovation as a deviation or heresy. Throughout the history of Sufism there has been an uneasy and often violent relationship with more fundamentalist expressions of Islam due to perceived syncretistic tendencies. As one example, consider the perspective of Behari (1993:xvii) that clashes with the exclusive claims of orthodox Islam: “all mystics of the world constitute one eternal brotherhood ever seeking new avenues to meet God.” This is not only inclusive of others

beyond Islam – “all mystics” – but claims that there are “new” and innovative “avenues” through which people can come to God.

Schreier (1985:144-145) critiques this “negative stance” towards syncretism in Christian literature by recognizing that there is a spectrum between syncretism on the one hand and dual systems created from a lack of appropriate cultural accommodation on the other. While these extremes are possible, the actual dynamic of accommodation of a message within a cultural context is more complex and multi-faceted. His model of syncretism draws upon a semiotic description of culture and is evaluated from the “dynamic of social change” in which he identifies four syncretistic possibilities as points on a compass (:151-157). Cultural groups try to incorporate a new incoming message through the use of some combination of these four possibilities. In the first possibility, *similarities* are given priority so that elements of the incoming message are adopted and reinterpreted according local understandings. A second form is *filling the gaps* in which the incoming message is added to already existing beliefs and practices because it provides a good response to a cultural dilemma. A third accommodation is *indiscriminate mixing*. When a culture is in disarray, people may be more susceptible to a new message. However, as the culture seeks stability people incorporate a mixture of the old and the new to create a new system. The fourth point on the compass is *domination* in which the incoming message takes over completely introducing and importing a new sign system. In Schreier’s model, syncretism is not just about theology, but is multi-dimensional and inclusive of several cultural elements. Syncretism, in this system, describes a process of transformation that occurs within a way of life. Religion “cannot be reduced simply to a set of ideas.”

While affirming Schreier’s analysis which demonstrates that the contextualization process cannot be described in simple black and white terms, for the purposes of this thesis, “syncretism” is used in a negative sense. This narrow nuance does fails to convey the deeper dynamics of social change, but it helpfully indicates the possibility that a message can be so changed that it has lost the original meaning and power intended by the authors. “Contextualization,” on the other hand, affirms that a message can be changed to new expressions in a different setting and still maintain integrity with the original intent.

5.14 People Groups

Jenkins (2002) defines a people group as “an *ethnolinguistic group* with a common self-identity that is shared by the various members,” which is sufficient for this study. In considering a

strategic approach for cross-cultural missions initiatives he proposes that a people group be defined as “the largest ethnolinguistic segment or affinity group within which the gospel can spread through ‘natural’ social networks.” The Joshua project’s (2012b) “Ethnic Peoples Tree” gives a hierarchy of designations from “affinity blocs” (e.g., East Asian peoples) to “people clusters” (e.g., Chinese-Hui) to “people groups” (e.g., Hui, Muslim Chinese). Winter & Koch (2009:534) offer a more detailed consideration of people groups with their “four approaches” including *Major Cultural Blocs*, *Ethnolinguistic Peoples*, *Sociopeoples* and *Unimax peoples*. While “people group” can be equivalent to “ethnic group,” the term provides the added benefit of stressing the self-identity of the ethnic group based on their social networks.

5.15 Folk Islam and Animism

“Folk” or popular Islam refers to rituals and practices that are outside of formal Islamic doctrinal oversight or recognized orthodox practice. Bill Musk (1989) examines this dynamic of the Muslim world from a theological and anthropological perspective in his book *The Unseen Face of Islam*. The “Folk-Islamic” worldview (:176) includes “other-worldly” powers such as spirits, *jinn* or Satanic forces that must be contended with through the intervention of saints or *pirs*. This includes the use of incense, amulets, charms and talismans to protect from harm or “cancel offensive magic” (:187). In *The Flaw of the Excluded Middle*, Hiebert (1982) points out that the worldview assumptions of Western Christianity create difficulties in dealing with the unseen spiritual powers perceived in some cultures. Orthodox Islam suffers from a similar weakness resulting in syncretistic practices from animistic sources of those seeking power to overcome forces of evil or to gain blessing. “Animism” follows Hiebert’s (2009:83) definition as the “belief that the world is full of spirits, witchcraft and magical powers.”

5.16 Meaning-based, Formal and Common Language Translations

“Meaning-based” is a technical term used to describe Bible translations that follow Eugene Nida’s (de Waard & Nida 1986:7-8) translation theory of “functional equivalence” that gives preference of meaning to the comprehension of the receptor audience. In contrast the orientation of “formal” translations (Strauss 2005:153) is towards the original languages. Translation by definition requires interpretation and, therefore, all Bible translations are in a broad sense meaning-based because they intend to communicate the message embedded in the original text. However, using the term in a technical sense, meaning-based Bible translations are distinguished from formal translations by the free use of “functionally equivalent” forms of the receptor

language for ease of communication, whereas formal translations seek to maintain the forms and idiomatic structures of the original text. While somewhat simplistic, this dichotomy reflects Nida's (1975 [1960]:47-57) explanation of "formal nonidentity" of messages and cultural symbols across linguistic boundaries requiring receptor sensitive alternate forms to ensure communication. The "common language" approach to Bible translation is usually employed in conjunction with meaning-based translation philosophy. "Common language" refers to the use of vernacular vocabulary, while "meaning-based" emphasizes clarity. In these translations "the translators have tried to avoid words and forms not in current or widespread use.... Every effort has been made to use language that is natural, clear, simple, and unambiguous" (GNB 1976:preface).

CHAPTER 6. Anthropological Assumptions

Chapter 6 develops the social and cultural aspects of the theoretical framework. Assumptions that guide and shape the description and evaluation of the Sindhi context are presented. Contextualization is used to describe the intercultural dynamic guiding both Bible translation and the researcher's interactions with Sindhis. Because the believers are addressing God's Word from within a Muslim context and yet their posture towards the Bible has changed significantly from traditional Islam, the phenomenon of conversion is addressed in detail. Finally, a theoretical basis for analyzing *culture texts* as data is provided.

6.1 Society, Culture and Worldview

While "society" is the network of relationships that form a community, "culture" is the "total process of human activity" which comprises "language, habits, ideas, beliefs, customs, social organization, inherited artifacts, technical processes, and values" (Niebuhr 1951:32) within any given community. "Worldview" is the "evaluative dimension" (Hiebert 1985:31) of culture, which is "the culturally structured set of assumptions... underlying how a people perceive and respond to reality" (Kraft 1999:384).²⁴² Worldview is "the foundational cognitive, affective, and evaluative assumptions and frameworks a group of people makes about the nature of reality which they use to order their lives" (Hiebert 2008:25). It is the core framework of reality – the assumptions of life – that both lies behind and arises from "the interpretation and response of a community or society to its context" (Naylor 2006a). There is an interactive relationship between worldview – the cultural and personal interpretive "reality grid" – and the environment – the external *locus* that includes social relationships – within which the community lives; worldview provides the "lenses" (Newbigin 1989:38) through which the external reality is perceived, evaluated and prioritized by members of the community, while interaction with their context simultaneously shapes that worldview.

The following list of cultural and social functions served by worldviews is adapted from Hiebert (2008:29-30).

1. Worldviews provide answers to the ultimate questions of life, such as "What does it mean to be human?" and "What is the nature of the world?"
2. Worldviews give emotional security by providing a rational story within which humans

²⁴² Kraft (1999:384) includes values, commitments and allegiances in his definition. However, I prefer to limit worldview to the broad framework or reality grid that *generates* values, commitments and allegiances as described in 5.3.

can find identity.

3. Worldviews provide psychological reassurance that the world we see is “real.”
4. Worldviews validate cultural norms and standards, which are used to evaluate the experiences with the surrounding environment and to choose appropriate courses of action.
5. Worldviews integrate culture into a cohesive whole.
6. Worldviews monitor change and are the basis for an analysis of and response to that change.

The last point is integral to the goal of this research project and follows Kraft (1979:56) who notes that the worldview of a group does not determine the perception of each of its members. There will be conformity to many general perspectives due to the enculturation process of living within a particular context. But people will shift their concept of reality and move away from the conditioning provided by their worldview due to other stimuli (:56). Thus, there is simultaneously continuity and change in worldview shift as a person absorbs new information, experiences and concepts and responds by adapting what they believe to be true.

Even though culture is, by definition, communal – “culture is public because meaning is” (Geertz 1973:12) – there are both individual and communal aspects of culture to be considered as well as their impact on each other. Even as a tree in a forest has a symbiotic relationship with the other plants surrounding it, so individuals are dependent upon and reflect the community and culture within which they live. At the same time, each person has individual priorities, values and beliefs based on their unique vantage point of experience and history within their cultural group. The uniformity of the group must not blind the researcher to those individual strains of thought and influences that can impact the entire community. Alternatively, the uniqueness of individuals must not overshadow the common assumptions and beliefs that define the identity of the group. An introduction to an individual is a window onto the group, and the examination of the group provides the context within which an individual’s actions can be assessed and understood.

This interactive dynamic of culture, as well as the assumption that the worldview of any given culture is not stagnant but continually being renegotiated, revised and reshaped, is the impetus behind this research project. Accepting the thesis that people selectively borrow traits from other cultures and reinterpret them in a way that corresponds to their own underlying worldview (Hiebert 2008:14), the aim of this research is to explore how Sindhi believers are engaged in this process with regard to the shaping of their faith (worldview, belief and values) as

they interact with a New Testament passage.

6.2 Systems of Human Organization

Systems of human organization are more complex than indicated by a focus on culture and worldview. In their seminal work, *Toward a General Theory of Action*, social scientists Parsons & Shils (1962) present the work of a team of sociologists, anthropologists and psychologists who developed a systematic way to view human organization. They identified three “configurations,” social, cultural and personal (:7), that interact internally and with each other to form the broader system of human organization. The personal “is organized around the one organism and its life processes” (:23). The social refers to the interaction of two or more members, “ego and alter in interaction with each other” (:23), that is more than the sum of the individual personalities. Cultural systems are indicated by “consistency of pattern” (:21) that provide internal coherence throughout a particular human organization and exist “as a body of artifacts and as systems of symbols” (:7). Hiebert (1996:141) has placed these configurations into a diagram entitled *The Systematic Nature of Human Organization*:

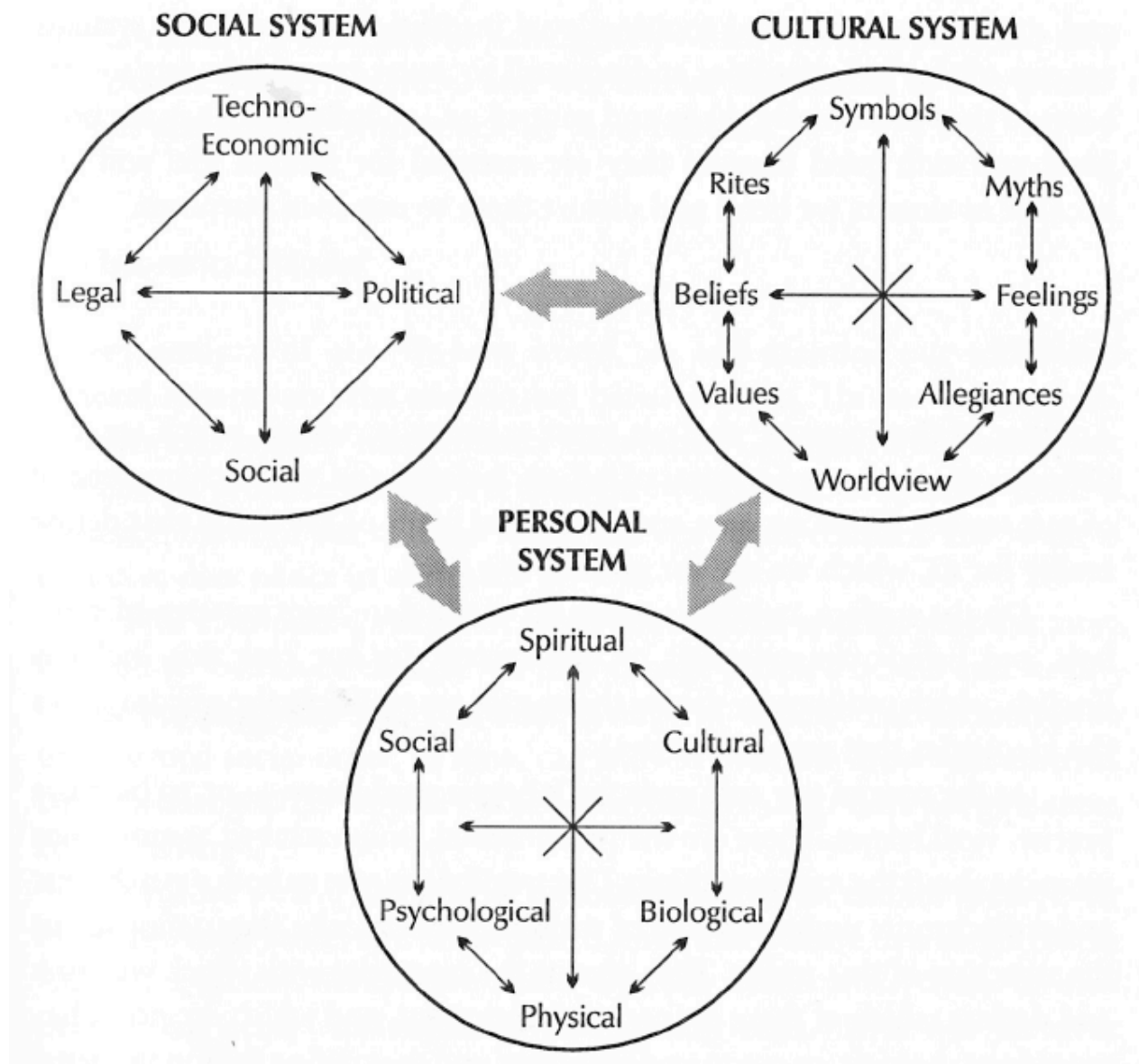


Figure 5 *Systematic Nature of Human Organization*

Each of the three systems has a number of dimensions that describe key aspects of how a people group is organized.

The social system is not a plurality of personalities but focuses on the way people relate to each other. The *social dimension* refers to the definitions and allocations of social relationships; for example, the roles of “teacher” and “students” indicate a particular relationship with status, responsibilities and acceptable behavior. There is a *legal dimension* that defines what is legitimate and just, a *political dimension* that determines the definition and distribution of power, and an *economic dimension* that refers to the allocation and use of resources. Every human social system demonstrates each of these dimensions, whether families, corporations, cities or nations.

The personal system refers to the individual perceptions of the external world. These are defined by and integrated with the other two systems, but this system recognizes that each individual will develop their own perspective and set of experiences of the cultural and social systems within which they are enmeshed.

The cultural system refers to the “mental maps of the world that define reality for us” (Hiebert 1996:142), or using Parsons & Shils (1962) terminology, consistent patterns of symbols that are accepted in a corporate or communal sense. This includes values, beliefs and worldview, as well as rites, symbols, myths and religious loyalties. It is this latter system that exhibits the greatest relevance for this thesis. While all participants in the research are influenced by social and personal factors that are reflected in their responses, the aim is to catch a glimpse of their faith (worldview, beliefs and values) – the “mental maps” that reflect a consistent pattern – on a *cultural* level through their *personal* responses that occur within familiar *social* structures.

The research portion of this thesis illustrates the interactive dynamic of the three configurations identified by Parsons & Shils. The presentation of scripture into a section of society acts as a catalyst to generate personal perceptions of faith that are guided by societal definitions and allocations. The verbal interaction and negotiations between the systems provides opportunity for the outsider to observe and identify dimensions of culture that would otherwise be hidden. None of these systems are static but are shaped by dialectical processes, both internal and external. Members of society are therefore compelled to express their thoughts as they explore changes and reaffirm convictions with each other. Of particular concern for this thesis are the expressions of an emerging church that is discovering and shaping its identity and faith. As this faith – a dimension of the cultural system in terms of worldview, belief and values – creates tension in family dynamics and interpersonal relationships, the social system is impacted, and as believers struggle with their own convictions and the decisions and actions required by those new beliefs, the personal system is influenced.

6.3 Validity of Exploring Cultural Diversity

A basic assumption of this research project is that intercultural interaction and evaluation is both possible and beneficial, and that emic expressions of one culture can be meaningfully explored and comprehended by members of another cultural group. There are many cultures in this world²⁴³ and the assumption of this thesis is that a universal commonality of humanity exists that

²⁴³ The Joshua Project (2011) lists 16,700 distinct peoples; the World Christian Database (2011)
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provides grounds to explore cultural diversity. A biblical basis for commonality and potential unity is the declaration that all the nations (Heb. *goyim*) are descended from a single couple (Gen 2:7,22). The essential humanity of each individual stems from the revelation that this couple was created in God's image (Gen 1:27) and this serves as a bond between all peoples of all cultures in the world. "Beyond the diversity of human frames of reference, human beings participate in a pervasive common humanity" (Kraft 1979:300). In addition, the distinction of language and culture is both enacted (Gen 11) and validated (Acts 2) by God, thus declaring the inherent value and right to diversity in the midst of commonality. Schreiter (2002a:24) also sees the incarnation of Jesus as a basis for honoring culture. Becoming a human being in a specific culture and speaking a particular language affirms that the gospel can be accepted in any culture and must become an integral part of those cultures. Thus the intercultural minister steps both confidently and humbly into another cultural realm; confident because our human commonality ensures true relationship and interaction, and humble lest our cultural biases cause us to devalue those we encounter or assume that our particular understanding or expression of the gospel is universal and deserves unquestioning acceptance by others. This attitude is reflected in Bosch's (1991:489) reference to "a bold humility – or a humble boldness" by which we proclaim the gospel, "not as judges or lawyers, but as witnesses; not as soldiers, but as envoys of peace; not as high-pressure sales persons, but as ambassadors of the Servant Lord."

Sociological studies demonstrate cultural universals, the existence of intercultural relationships across cultural boundaries affirms the reality of commonalities between cultures, and the experience of communication that occurs through the acquisition of any language serve to underscore assumptions of the unity of humankind. All three are consistent with the scriptural claims concerning the nature of creation and of humanity's status before God providing a theological basis so that we can expect intercultural interaction to be possible, meaningful and necessary.

6.4 Culture Change Agents

Cultures are constantly changing and being shaped through the influences of their environment.²⁴⁴

lists over 13,000 peoples. These statistics are based on an understanding of people groups in an ethno-linguistic sense.

²⁴⁴ As Kraft (1996:360) notes, this claim needs to be balanced with the observation that cultural change occurs coincidentally with cultural stability. "The inventory of a culture is, of course, very large.... [Many] things remain pretty much the same" (:360-361). This stability is best described

People “have different cognitive categories by which they organize their world, and so a change in basic meanings often occurs” (Whiteman 2006:56). Hiebert (2008:31) affirms that

we now see human systems, including cultures and their worldviews, as organic, dynamic systems in a state of constant flux and change, so that any attempt to define them at a given moment is only an approximation. We must realize that ultimately meaning in our lives is found not in an understanding of our human structures, but in our human stories.

These forces of change are increasing rapidly through the influence of globalization,²⁴⁵ which has brought people in touch with worldviews different from their own, often to an overwhelming degree. Such changes have resulted in rapid shifts in cultural values and lifestyles, as well as the phenomenon of fundamentalism, a reaction to the instability caused by outside ideologies that erode established beliefs and patterns of living. “They fight back and attempt to resacralize an increasingly skeptical world” (Armstrong 2000:xi).

Intercultural ministers of the gospel are change agents or “outside advocates of change” (Kraft 1996:400) and thus contribute to this cultural shift. Jesus commanded his followers to “go and make disciples of all nations” (Mt 28:19),²⁴⁶ which is a call to act as change agents across cultural boundaries. But this can only be accomplished with integrity and sensitivity when the change agent lives among and identifies with those “nations.” In their “pastoral circle” used to describe a pattern of social influence and analysis, Holland & Henriot (1983:8) speak of the “insertion”²⁴⁷ of the minister into “the lived experiences of individuals and communities.... We

as “persistence” rather than “lack of change” because it refers to customs and practices *persisting* even in the midst of change (:364). Just as “no one can step into the same river twice,” so no culture remains the same over time. Even as it *persists*, it simultaneously *changes*.

²⁴⁵ Globalization does not imply a “leveling of the playing field” in cultural exchange but only an increase in intercultural encounters, which gives the advantage to the more powerful and assertive cultures. As Riad Aziz Kassis (2012) has pointed out from his perspective as a theologian in a Middle Eastern country, “Globalization has resulted in the universalization of the western model [of doing theology].”

²⁴⁶ It would be difficult to overstate the importance of this phrase as the impetus for evangelical missions. It has been expounded upon with impact by both evangelical missiologists such as McGavran (1955:2) and missions minded pastors such as Piper (2003:164-167). Karl Barth’s (2009 [1961]) exegetical study on the passage has been influential, particularly in the development of the missionary nature of God leading to the fulfillment of the universal divine reign (:30). The development of the understanding of the meaning of the Greek word for “nations,” *ethne*, which refers to the social and cultural distinctiveness of people groups (:24-27) has also contributed to the impact of directing missions towards distinct people groups.

²⁴⁷ Mason (2002:55) refers to this as “immersion” into the context. The concepts are synonymous and, as introduced in 1.4.2.1, the term “insertion” is used. A theological alternative is “incarnated”

gain access to these by inserting our approach close to the experiences of ordinary people.” It is by becoming part of the context and learning to speak and act according to the rhythms and assumptions of the community, that one learns the “language” (in a metaphorical sense) that resonates with the soul or identity of the people. This means that the outsider lives in such a way that there is not just acceptance, but engagement in such culturally relevant ways that the unspoken assumption of identity has been obtained: “he/she has spoken for *us*.”

The framework and background for this research project is my insertion into the Sindhi context.²⁴⁸ Without those fourteen years of living together with Sindhis in their setting, as well as the ongoing interaction in the Sindh for two months out of each year since 1999 for Bible translation, this project would have little validity. My insertion has been a means whereby Sindhi believers have been exposed to outsider theological perspectives and has played a part in shaping their theological trajectories. That my theological orientation should have influence is inevitable, since the motivation for bringing the gospel message to Sindhis stemmed from my conviction that I have been called as a change agent.²⁴⁹ But this experience has not only affected change within the Sindhi context, it has also created the means by which that change can be observed. Familiarity with Sindhi language, culture and faith was a necessary prerequisite to Bible translation as well as providing a depth of insight and understanding by which changes affected by the Bible can be identified and evaluated.

A more powerful culture change agent than the human messenger is the Bible. Bevans & Schroeder (2004:238) state, “God's word has its own energy and power to spark ever–new inculturations.” It, too, can be “inserted” into the culture through translation, which allows it to be identified as part of the cultural setting. Believers who hear, interpret and act upon its teaching

which emphasizes the attempt on the part of the missionary to identify with a people group. However, I am reluctant to adopt this terminology for two reasons. First, the original incarnation of the Son of God refers to a complete identification with humanity; Jesus became an “insider.” For me, this level of identification with the Sindhi people has never been possible; I remain, in the eyes of both Sindhis and others, an outsider. Second, the incarnation sought after is an incarnation of the *gospel* so that it is not viewed as an imported belief, but as part of the identity of Sindhi believers. Other terminology, such as “involvement” and “agency” (Kritzinger 2010), or even “identification” would be suitable. However, the image of an outsider deliberately immersed within a context for the purpose of learning, interacting and communicating is expressed well with the term “insertion.”

²⁴⁸ See 4.1 for the background of my life and ministry in the Sindhi setting. See 1.4.2.1 for an explanation of how my insertion among Sindhis serves as the framework for the research project.

²⁴⁹ This claim does not diminish the reciprocal impact of change that the experience had on me as indicated in 4.1.

affect change in themselves, their family and their community. The translation becomes the way God speaks to them, a part of their context rather than a foreign book. Because the Sindhi translation of the Bible demonstrates a skillful and competent use of the language – a key component of cultural pride for Sindhis – the text itself conveys a meta-message that the book is for them and part of their identity. It exists in interaction with all Sindhis who study and engage it as linguistically part of the Sindhi context, even though its origins and message are from and through outsiders. One believer, an illiterate woman who gathers neighbors together to do crafts, has distributed several copies of the Sindhi New Testament because of this dynamic. While engaged in working on the Sindhi handiwork, she asks one of the literate women present if she would read to her from “the book of *Isa*.” When opening the book they are astonished to see that it is written in their mother tongue. The appeal of seeing a known sacred book in their own language compels them to ask if the book can be borrowed and taken home. Because the book is in Sindhi it has appeal as an artifact of their culture and therefore the potential has been created for the gospel message to become identified as part of the culture as well.

6.4.1 Contextualization and Inculturation

The call to obey Jesus’ command to “go” (Mt 28:19) coupled with a desire to respect the integrity of other cultures resulted in a theology of “contextualization” or “inculturation”²⁵⁰ among missiologists during the 20th century. Although a critical distinction between contextualization and inculturation is given below, the two words are usually used synonymously in missiology. Contextualization is “the process of learning to express genuine Christianity in socioculturally appropriate ways” (Kraft 1996:376). JK Brown (2007:25) appropriately connects contextualization with scripture by stating that “Contextualization is the task of bringing a biblical author's meaning to bear in other times and cultures.” Shorter (1988:11) explains inculturation as referring to “the on-going dialogue between faith and culture or cultures” and “the creative and dynamic relationship between the Christian message and a culture or cultures.” However, while “dialogue” and “relationship” are critical aspects of the inculturation dynamic, they seem to fall short of describing the essence of bringing change while preserving the identity and integrity of the culture. Inculturation must

include the actual transforming work of faith/gospel within a culture in a way that is

²⁵⁰ *Inculturation* is to be distinguished from *enculturation* which is the process by which insiders learn the traditional content of their culture and assimilate its practices and values from the time they are born.

integral to that culture.... True inculturation can be compared to salvation as God does not dominate by destroying our essential humanity, but transforms us, both preserving intact our essential being and drawing out from it. He develops and promotes that which conforms us into Christ's image in a way that gives full expression to our unique being in a way not otherwise possible. In the same way the inculturation of the gospel preserves yet transforms culture so that it may become more of itself than was possible without the gospel (Naylor 2003:2).

Following a description from Fr. Pedro Arrupe SJ, Shorter (1988:11) and Schineller (1990:20) refer to inculturation as being more than the Christian life and the Christian message finding indigenous expression in a particular cultural context. It must also result in a transformation and reshaping of the culture so as to bring about a "new creation" (2 Cor 5:17).

Contextualization avoids "either a homogenizing globalization on the one hand or an atomizing relativism on the other" (Flemming 2005:311). It "resists the oppressive dimension of globalization; it affirms the necessity of doing theology in a particular, local context" (:310), while affirming the universality of the gospel and the need for all people to conform to the will of God. The dangers at either extreme in intercultural ministry are a colonialist imposition of an etic cultural expression on the one hand, and on the other hand an emic monocultural development of theology that rejects dialogue with other contextualized theologies. Hiebert (1987:111) noted these dangers in his call for "critical contextualization [which] does not operate from a monocultural perspective," but welcomes outside critique and, in the words of Whiteman (2006:58), learns to "share its insights with and learn from the global church, instead of remaining isolated from other Christians."

NT Wright's (2005:126-127) and Foder & Hauerwas' (2004:81)²⁵¹ metaphors of musical improvisation express the heart of contextualization. In order to appropriately improvise, the musician must be disciplined and listen carefully to the other voices around with "constant attention to the themes, rhythms and harmonies of the complete performance" (Wright 2005:126). At the same time, the invitation is to explore fresh expressions of the music, provided they are in harmony with the original musical score. The artist works creatively to express the message or beauty within their soul that has been inspired by the score, but within the tension of remaining true to both the essence of the original and the boundaries set by musical tradition. Freedom and extemporization are essential, but bounded by integrity with the music of the original artist even while it is being expressed in a new way. Similarly, as the biblical text resonates with believers,

²⁵¹ Foder & Hauerwas' analogy is used in 8.1.4.1 to illustrate the dynamic of being "read" by scripture.

they respond creatively through a desire to express the meaning of the passage within their context. This requires a development of their faith, an *improvisation*, as they conform to the implications of the text, while simultaneously shaping the meaning according to the “grid” or paradigm of worldview assumptions by which their life is defined. In this analogy the New Testament and theological expressions of the rule of God in history are the music – “the ultimate multi-part harmony of God's new world” (Wright 2005:127). These expressions form the parameters that both define and call for the improvisation, that is, the contextualization, of reading scripture and living out the gospel in a particular context. “All Christians, all churches, are free to improvise their own variations designed to take the music forward. No Christian, no church, is free to play out of tune” (:127).

As in previous papers (Naylor 2003:3-4, 2004:9-10), I would like to make a distinction between the terms contextualization and inculturation in a way that focuses on the *agents* – insiders or outsiders – rather than the *content* – the gospel. Contextualization is used in Protestant missions with a greater focus on the effort of the cross-cultural minister *as an outsider* to express the gospel in relevant ways to a people group.²⁵² Inculturation²⁵³ is the more common term in Catholic writings with an emphasis on the *intra*-cultural expressions of the gospel as they emerge among and are developed by *insiders* of the people group.²⁵⁴ The terms are used with these distinct emphases in mind when referring to the agents who are expressing theology within a specified cultural setting. Outsiders *contextualize* the message for those in a people group other than their own, while insiders perform *inculturation* as they theologize for their own context. Nonetheless, in concert with the common use of missiological literature, the term “contextualized theology” is used as synonymous with “local” or “contextual” theology in reference to an *inculturated* expression of theology that has its identity with a particular people group without

²⁵² For example, in *Unveiling God, Contextualizing Christology for Islamic Culture*, Parsons (2005:xxiii) attempts as an outsider to “express christological monotheism using the *emic* conceptual categories that are widely used in the Islamic context to conceive of God's unique identity.”

²⁵³ “Self-contextualization” has been used by some Protestant missiologists for this concept (e.g., Goldman 2006:12), but the term has not yet gained wide acceptance.

²⁵⁴ Flemming (2005:18) attempts a distinction of these two terms by stating that inculturation “focuses more narrowly on the cultural dimension of human experience,” while contextualization embraces “the gospel’s interaction with all kinds of contexts, including social, political, economic, religious and ecclesial settings.” However, this distinction is not particularly helpful since “culture” would include the other contexts he mentions and the distinction has not been followed by other missiologists.

specifying its origin or the influences and agents that have shaped the theological position.

The Bible can be used as an illustration of the distinction intended. Accepting the biblical claim that “all Scripture is God–breathed” (2 Tim 3:16) and that “prophecy never had its origin in the human will, but prophets, though human, spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit” (2 Pet 1:21), there is both a human and a divine aspect to the inspiration of scripture.²⁵⁵ Because God is speaking into a particular human context, this can be considered a *contextualization* of the message through an accommodation to the linguistic and cultural setting of the receptors. However, from the perspective of the human authors, they engaged in an *inculturation* of the message as they communicated God’s word in forms that resonated with them and their audience.

This research project is concerned with the emerging contextualized theology of believing Sindhis without necessarily distinguishing whether the insiders’ expressions of faith have been shaped by contextualization or inculturation. As argued elsewhere,²⁵⁶ the Sindhi’s contextualized theology corresponds to Schreiter’s (1985:11) third “adaptation” model of constructing theology. While the Sindhi Bible translation is a product of what Schreiter (1985:7) refers to as the “translation” model, it can also be used as the “seed” within the agricultural image of the “adaptation” model to provoke a faith–text tension among Sindhi believers that generates a local or contextualized theology. This research project takes advantage of this dynamic to discover and generate emic or inculturated expressions of theology²⁵⁷ through the presentation of a scripture passage. While acknowledging a multiplicity of influences upon these formulations,²⁵⁸ the role of “agency” (Kritzinger 2010:8) of those identifying with a particular theology through the faith–text and faith–context tensions lies ultimately with the insiders of the culture.²⁵⁹

R Horton (1993:315) notes that early writings on conversion in Africa “failed to provide any kind of explanation why, despite its enthusiastic acceptance in some areas, the ‘message’ was

²⁵⁵ The Bible as both human and divine is further explored in 8.2.1.

²⁵⁶ See 7.5.1.

²⁵⁷ See the introduction of chapter 3 for the argument that the generated expressions of the interviews can be considered emic.

²⁵⁸ See the introduction of chapter 3 for a discussion of the influences due to globalization.

²⁵⁹ Examining the response of a people group to a translated text of scripture is limited to the dialectical interaction between the three nodes of concern in the faith–text–context triangle. A more complex or broad process of contextualization can be seen in Van Engen’s (2005b:206) description of four “domains”: Word, Church, World and Personal Pilgrimage, and in Bosch’s (1991:431) statement that the “best models of contextual theology succeed in holding together in creative tension *theoria*, *praxis* and *poiesis* – or, if one wishes, faith, hope, and love.”

flatly rejected in others.” He goes on to conclude that

there is now a very general agreement that the phenomenon of ‘conversion’ can only be understood if we put the initial emphasis, not on the incoming religious messages, but rather on the indigenous religious frameworks and on the challenges they face from massive flows of novel experience.

If this is a reasonable assumption, then acceptance of a message requires both resonance with the context, as well as a reinterpretation of that message according to “indigenous religious frameworks.” Resulting expressions of faith by the new believers (inculturation), even though influenced by the message brought by the outsiders (contextualization), can therefore be considered authentic emic developments of faith (contextualized theology) that have emerged out of the traditional structures.

Charles E Van Engen (2005a:183-202) describes five “perspectives” of contextualization that suggest levels of penetration of the gospel within a particular context: *Communication*, *Indigenization*, *Translatability*, *Local Theologizing* and *Epistemology*. These “perspectives” can be used to illustrate how a movement from contextualization to inculturation occurs leading to an “incarnation” of the gospel within the context.

- a. *Communication* is the work of the outsider to the culture who presents a biblical message in culturally appropriate forms. This is equivalent to the definition of contextualization.
- b. *Indigenization* is the movement by insiders to express their faith in ways that reflect the local context. This describes the act of inculturation.
- c. *Translatability* is the “incarnational nature of the Gospel” in which Christianity has become so much a part of the identity of the people that it is seen as natural that new expressions of faith have begun to arise from the people. It remains the message of God, but “translated” into the “native tongue.” This describes a goal or result of inculturation resulting in personal and communal descriptions of contextualized theology.
- d. *Local Theologizing* refers to the impact of faith on all aspects of life that occurs when the transforming power of the gospel becomes evident on a social level. It is coupled with a self-conscious reflection on the process. This is a further aim of inculturation expressed in theological praxis that is deeper than conceptual formulations and is evident in social expressions of contextualized theology.
- e. *Epistemology* indicates a perspective that engages the worldview in a “countercultural” sense. There is a recognition that the worldview into which the gospel has taken root and flourished is being radically transformed through a process of broadening and deepening

their understanding and participation in God's mission. This is also part of the inculturation process that has impacted the culture at its deepest level.

Apart from the initiating *communication* perspective, the distinctions proposed by Van Engen should not be understood as chronological stages, but as a variety of dimensions that occur during a process of transformation as a people group engages the gospel. In order to adequately contextualize, the outsider's communication must stimulate and reflect *relevance*, *resonance* and *commitment* where *relevance* means that the biblical message addresses local concerns in ways that are recognizable as felt needs in the culture, *resonance* indicates that it connects emotionally and deeply to confront, challenge and attract the hearer, and *commitment* requires a response of acceptance as a natural result. This triad corresponds to the cognitive, affective and conative dimensions of human existence – the head, heart and will – and all three elements are evident in Peter's (inculturated!) presentation of the significance of the cross in Acts 2. The fulfillment of Joel's prophecy is *relevant* to the Jewish audience, the realization that they are responsible for the death of God's Messiah *resonates* with them, and they respond with *commitment* to the message by being baptized. The role of the intercultural change agent is to facilitate an appropriate²⁶⁰ initiation that leads to inculturation on the part of insiders to the culture.

The five characteristics of DJ Bosch's (1991:423-424) epistemological framework for appropriate contextualization validate research into the way Sindhi believers perceive the impact and relevance of God's revelation for their lives.

First, he calls for a "theology from below" where the "main interlocutor [is] the poor or the culturally marginalized" (:423). Rather than assuming that knowledge is neutral, a "pseudo-innocence" which allows the powerful outsider to control theological formulations, the expressions of faith emerge from the insiders of a context. Not only does a concept of "theology from below" affirm the interview approach of this project, but the importance of encouraging theological expressions that serve the interests of the insiders, address their questions and resonate with their cultural reality is emphasized. Such an orientation is facilitated by the stance of the outsider as an attentive listener rather than a dispenser of knowledge.

Second, legitimate contextualization seeks change. Missionaries are to be change agents, not maintainers of the status quo. This is true logically (we do not live in a perfect world) and

²⁶⁰ "Appropriate" reflects Kraft's (2005a) perspective of "appropriate contextualization," an approach that emphasizes, rather than assumes, cultural integrity, scriptural integrity and integrity with respect to the *missio Dei*.

biblically (we have an eschatological hope and prayer for the God's reign). The world is not a "static object which only has to be explained" (:424). Within this broken world Jesus has provided an eschatological vision of the reign of God (Mt 13) that is to be both hoped for and strived after. This validates the insertion of a translation of the Bible within a cultural context in order to create a faith-text tension that culminates in God's reign.

Third, the gospel must be lived out, not just preached in the abstract. It must work towards a deliverance of the oppressed and not be an affirmation of systems that undermine the dignity of humanity. This occurs on a number of levels, social and spiritual, demonstrating uncompromising love and grace driven by contentment with God and discontent with evil. Such commitment to the poor and marginalized leads to an emphasis on "orthopraxis, not orthodoxy" (Bosch 1991:424). Thus the outsider change agent cannot be satisfied with hearing right theology, but desires to see change that impacts lives in positive ways.

Fourth, "the theologian can... only theologize credibly if it is done *with* those who suffer" (:424). This is the idea of an "incarnational" approach to mission. As much as the expectations of total identity implied by this word are misplaced with respect to an outsider becoming part of another people group, the sentiment of identifying with those in pain is correct as Jesus clearly taught (Mt 25:31-46; Lk 10:25-37) and lived out through the cross. This requires interpersonal connection, respect and validation of others so that we do not distance ourselves from the anguish people face. This is true, not just for the outsider who evaluates the theology of others, but for those insiders who profess to know what God is doing in their midst. Duane Elmer (2006) captures the essence of the required posture in the title of his powerful and challenging book, *Cross-cultural Servanthood: Serving the World in Christlike Humility*.

Fifth, "the emphasis is on doing theology" (:424). Despite the validity of Bible translation and the importance of hearing the way the gospel is being lived out in a particular context, the bottom line, the *telos*, is not our perceptions and understandings of theology, but the living out of theological convictions in redemptive action – theological praxis. This study strives to do the former in hope that it validates and promotes the latter.

This seemingly smooth process of contextualization and inculturation towards conformity to God's reign needs to be tempered with the reality that culture is not only the *means* by which the gospel brings transformation, but it also creates *obstacles* to change. The message may be rejected, or twisted so that it is no longer a means for redemption, or there may be fundamentalist reactions against the message. Such reactions probably indicate that the gospel has made inroads

into the identity of the people group. The fundamentalist's primary response is usually not against the outsider, but against the insider whose choice to adopt the message appears to threaten the stability of the group.²⁶¹ Fundamentalism fears change and seeks to maintain the status quo of its ideology. An outsider and the outsider's message are not a threat unless they impact the essence and identity of the community. Thus, the change agent not only introduces tension between people and scripture, but also between believers and those who reject the message, a tension that can disrupt relationships. This is the meaning of Jesus' words "I did not come to bring peace, but a sword" (Mt 10:34 NIV). Nonetheless, such obstacles are part of contextualization; they are the burden of the change agent who truly seeks transformation. The incarnation of the gospel results in a new creation, a new birth; however, birth brings not only rejoicing but also pain.

6.5 The Phenomenon of Religious Conversion

Conversion has been an identifying hallmark of Christianity from its inception. Matthew records the final command of Jesus to his disciples as "make disciples of all nations" (Mt 28:19). The disciples' actions in the rest of the New Testament after Pentecost (Acts 2), particularly in the life and record of the apostle Paul, demonstrate how seriously they took this responsibility to follow their Messiah in calling others to a lived out faith commitment. With varying degrees of intensity, diverse strategies, and a range of purposes and theologies, but usually with dedication and sacrifice, Christians throughout the ages have engaged in evangelism with a view to conversion as a basic tenet of their faith.

Even though it follows a biblical injunction and well-established tradition, the insertion of Christian missionaries and a translation of the Christian sacred text into a Muslim context for the purpose of facilitating change raises questions about the nature of that change. Furthermore, the unique use of the term "believer" and the specific concept of "theological trajectories"²⁶² need to be located within the broader phenomenon of religious conversion. Their usefulness as parameters for the research concerns of this thesis is dependent upon a legitimate connection to the conversion dynamic. As a change agent, I have been seeking to initiate and facilitate conversion,

²⁶¹ For example, there is far more condemnation against a convert from Islam to Christianity in the Sindh than towards a minority Christian community that has an historically distinct social identity from the majority Muslim community. This dynamic is also reflected in the motive behind attacks against the Shiite community in Pakistan by Sunni militants who view the Shiite identification with Islam as a threat to their own ideology. See Armstrong's (2000) *The Battle For God* for a fuller description of fundamentalist movements.

²⁶² See definitions in 5.2 and 5.7.

but how is that expressed and defined in the Sindhi context? What are the parameters for conversion and how is it identified or evaluated within those parameters? In particular, how does mapping theological trajectories enable an assessment of the impact made by change agents in their task of initiating conversion and how does the identification of these trajectories provide insight into the conversion dynamic experienced by Sindhi believers?

The following “descriptive”²⁶³ reflection on conversion includes an overview of relevant scholarship. While intended as a scholarship review providing a general background to the conversion element of this thesis, relevance to the specific phenomenon under study is made explicit. Special attention is given to research on cosmological shifts that occur within the belief systems of converts because of the close relationship to this research project’s concern for theological shifts. After reviewing the scholarship on the phenomenon of individual conversion, the *micro* level, a consideration of current research on people movements is provided to illustrate conversion on the *macro* level. This is followed by a consideration of phenomenological studies that deal with religious conversion to faith in Christ among Muslim people groups within the modern era of evangelical missions. A selective examination of theological shifts within Islam is also outlined. A covenant paradigm for conversion is then proposed within which the key concepts of “believer” and “theological trajectory” fit and play a significant role. Finally, the covenant metaphor is applied to the current controversy of “insider movements” in evangelical missions. It is proposed that the lack of clarity between inculturation and conversion evident in the debate can be addressed through the research methodology of this thesis so that both biblical integrity and contextual sensitivity are maintained.

6.5.1 Conversion as Fundamental to the Human Experience

The literature on religious conversion is vast; the reason for this interest is not hard to find. In his influential work on faith, Fowler (1981:14) states that faith

is the most fundamental category in the human quest for relation to transcendence. Faith, it appears, is generic, a universal feature of human living, recognizably similar everywhere despite the remarkable variety of forms and contents of religious practice and belief.... Faith is an orientation of the total person, giving purpose and goal to one’s hopes and strivings, thoughts and actions.

²⁶³ Following Rambo’s (1993:6) distinction between a “normative” approach to conversion, which is formulated according to a specific theological tradition, and “descriptive,” which delineates “the contours of the phenomenon, with little concern for what the ideology of the group says is happening.”

It therefore follows that to “change one’s religion is to change one’s world, to voluntarily shift the basic presuppositions upon which both self and others are understood” (Buckser & Glazier 2003:xi). The ubiquitous reality of this phenomenon prompts these scholars to raise difficult questions: “What can prompt such an abrupt and total transformation? How is it achieved, and what are its effects? What does conversion mean for anthropological theories of agency and the cultural construction of reality?” (:xi)

Such questions reflect the cool curiosity of the academic to an observed phenomenon. But studies have also been driven by the deeper passions of those who are committed to a particular religious system and strive to know what triggers such a drastic change and how it can be initiated or prevented (e.g., Rambo 1993). Massimo Leone (2004:x-xiii) studies what he refers to as the “vertiginous depths of religious conversion” by which he means the experience in which “the ‘religious self’ of a person is destabilized by the encounter with a different system of religious ideas and becomes aware, for the first time, as in an attack of vertigo, of the precariousness of its previous stability.” He accomplishes this “semiotic approach” to his research by treating religious conversion as “a story, which converted people constantly recount to themselves in order to consolidate their identity and eliminate the feeling of vertigo which seizes everyone who has lost one’s own spiritual equilibrium” (:xii).

Even without Leone’s poetic description, it is obvious that religious conversion is a complex, holistic phenomenon, involving many aspects of life and existence, internal and external, individual and communal. The dynamic of faith change includes

both the formally describable operations of [the converts] knowing and valuing and the structuring power of the symbols, beliefs and practices of the faith community of which [they are] a part. In faith both the ‘forms’ and the ‘contents’ exert power in shaping a person’s life–sustaining, life–guiding meanings (Fowler 1981:273).

In his aptly named article “Change of heart,” Heirich (1977:674) sees the conversion event as not a point in time phenomenon, but as a reorientation of “root reality.”

Conversion also remains one of the more provocatively controversial events in the life of a society, with the upsetting fear of change causing ostracism, persecution and, occasionally, death.

Conversion

is arguably one of the most unsettling political events in the life of a society. This is irrespective of whether conversion involves a single individual or an entire community, whether it is forced or voluntary, or whether it is the result of proselytization or inner spiritual illumination. Not only does conversion alter the demographic equation within a society and produce numerical imbalances, but it also

challenges an established community's assent to religious doctrines and practices (Viswanathan 1998:xi).

Religious perspectives are a significant force shaping the lives of Sindhis.²⁶⁴ Changes in faith convictions and commitments are momentous occasions that cause unsettling ripples at the levels of the individual, family and society. Both individually, with respect to personal loyalties, worldview orientations and life decisions, and communally, in terms of interpersonal relationships and traditional practices and rituals, there are positive and negative consequences to changes in a person's faith. Nonetheless, the human yearning for that which satisfies continues to drive Muslims Sindhis to the exploration of other spiritual paths, whether inside or outside of socially acceptable expressions of Islam.

6.5.2 Approaches used in the Examination of Religious Conversion

Faith change has been explored from a variety of perspectives and is an ongoing conversation involving theologians, anthropologists, sociologists, psychologists and historians. Early in the 1900s, William James (1902) described the phenomenon of religious experience in psychological terms. He described a converted person as someone in whom "religious ideas, previous peripheral in his consciousness, now take a central place, and [those] religious aims form the habitual center of his energy" (:193). He, therefore, considered the phenomenon a "change in equilibrium" in which there is a "movement of new psychic energies towards the personal center and the recession of old ones towards the margins" (:210). Since that time, others have elaborated on the categories introduced by James.²⁶⁵

Conversion has been examined as an individual existential or psychological phenomenon (e.g., Barnhart & Barnhart 1981; Holte 1992; Paloutzian 1996; Savage 2000), a dynamic of the social matrix (e.g., Buckser & Glazier 2003), and as religious movements among people groups (e.g., Eaton 1999). The research has, in turn, been tested and challenged (e.g., Heirich 1977; Suchman 1992). In addition, the consideration of conversion to (and from) different belief systems, including Christianity, has been studied and written about extensively²⁶⁶ and summaries of the research and theoretical development are available (e.g., Spilka, Hood, Hunsberger &

²⁶⁴ These are documented in 4.2.2.

²⁶⁵ Hopson & Openlander (1995:57-60) provide an overview of the development stemming from James' work.

²⁶⁶ Paloutzian (2005:331) claims that the "change called 'religious conversion' was one of the first psychological topics ever studied scientifically."

Gorsuch 2003:341-374; Paloutzian 2005:331-334; Buckser & Glazier 2003:xii-xiii; Austin-Broos 2003:1-12; Zinnbauer & Pargament 1998:162-166; Yates 2000:124-137).

Rambo's (1982) limited bibliography of pre-1980 scholarship provides "an understanding of the options available in terms of disciplinary foci, methodological strategies, and interpretive frameworks" (1982:146; see also Capps, Rambo & Ransohoff 1976:98-102). His bibliography concentrates on the disciplines of anthropology, sociology, history, psychology, psycho-analysis, and theology. Leone's (2004:xii footnote) list of scholarship on conversion is divided into four points of view: (1) psychological, (2) sociological, (3) theological or philosophical, and (4) historical, geographical or confessional milieus. The perspective of conversion within these studies ranges from personal conversion experiences to social transformation. Some approaches use case studies (e.g., Eaton 1999), focus on one particular methodology, such as ethnographies (e.g., Buckser & Glazier 2003:xii), or examine one specific type of conversion, such as "spiritual conversion" (Zinnbauer & Pargament 1998:161), to describe the contours of this phenomenon. An examination of the variety of forces that contribute to conversion has also been undertaken by a number of scholars (e.g., Paloutzian 1996; Rambo 1993; Spilka *et al* 2003).

From the possibilities offered by these disciplines, the approach in this thesis can be classified as a case study of one people group in which the phenomenon of conversion has been observed. An examination of the theological or philosophical perspective of Sindhi believers is attempted in order to discover the way shifts in belief and personal allegiances are being expressed. One methodology of qualitative interviews is used, supported by ethnographic insights (Spradley 1980; Creswell 1998; 2003; Martin *et al* 2002; Payne *et al* 1981).²⁶⁷ While recognizing that there are a number of forces that contribute to the conversion process, attention is given to impact caused by the insertion of a translation of the New Testament into the Sindhi context.

6.5.3 Defining Religious Conversion

With such diversity, it comes as no surprise that a clear definition of conversion remains elusive. Heirich (1977:654) observes that in "both religion and the social sciences one finds a wide range of usage for the term 'conversion.'" It can be "a dramatic turnabout," or "a qualitative change in experience and in level of commitment," or there can be "levels" of conversion that require particular signs or rituals. Suchman (1992:15-18) uses a variety of terminology to identify the phenomenon: religious mobility, realignments of belief, affiliation shifts, a change in which one

²⁶⁷ See 1.4.1, 1.4.2 and 1.4.3.

adopts a new religion, realignments in cosmology, values, and self-image, and an aspect of the sociology of deviance.

In describing how it has been defined in academic literature, Coleman (2003:17) refers to it as a “fuzzy” term. Spilka *et al* (2003:344) outline the difficulties inherent in defining conversion because of the religious influences that lie behind the phenomenon as well as the various approaches used to examine the phenomenon. While Paloutzian (2005:331) does provide a general definition of religious conversion as a “process by which a person goes from believing, adhering to, and/or practicing one set of religious teachings or spiritual values to believing, adhering to, and/or practicing a different set,” he points out elsewhere that different models of conversion depend on the theory of conversion held by the proponent of the model:

Sudden conversion corresponds to an emotional/psychodynamic theory; gradual conversion corresponds to a cognitive need theory; religious socialization corresponds to a social learning theory... [Some models] emphasize the interaction between chance life events, personal needs of the convert, and strong social forces within the group. There are a variety of personal and social motives for joining traditional or new religious groups including a feeling of alienation and a need to belong (Paloutzian 1996:265).

Accepting the necessary ambiguity of defining conversion does not pose a problem for this study. A metaphor of covenant²⁶⁸ is used as a framework by which conversion can be considered, rather than proposing a single definition. Definitions insist on boundaries to provide meaning, while metaphors²⁶⁹ create images of understanding that resonate with common experiences. It is the resonance of metaphorical language with the experience of insiders that reveals the cultural developments of faith, and these cannot be adequately represented by outsider descriptions of a universal phenomenon.

6.5.4 Parameters for the Study of Religious Conversion

Perhaps the most helpful approach for the researcher who desires to study conversion is to define parameters that, while not narrowly defining conversion, provide sufficient limits within which a rational examination can take place. For example, Spilka *et al* (2003:345) establish some “empirical criteria” to define the contours within which conversion can be studied.

First, conversion is a profound change in self. Second, the change is not simply a matter of maturation, but is typically identified with a process (sudden or gradual) by which the transformed self is achieved. Third, this change in the self is radical in its

²⁶⁸ See 6.5.10 for the covenant framework.

²⁶⁹ The importance of metaphors, especially in relationship to culture texts, is developed in 6.6.1.

consequences – indicated by such things as a new centering of concern, interest, and action. Fourth, this new sense of self is perceived as “higher” or as an emancipation from a previous dilemma or predicament. Thus conversion is self-realization, or self-transformation, in that one adopts or finds a new self. The process also occurs within a social medium or context. Specifically, in religious conversion this entails a religious framework within which the transformed self is described, acts, and is recognized by others.

In his influential book, *Understanding Religious Conversion*, Rambo (1993:6-11) attempts a broad yet detailed descriptive approach to conversion, with a desire “to delineate the contours of the phenomenon” that takes into account the “structural, ideological, theological, and personal demands of both advocates and potential converts,” as well as considering the cultural, social, personal, and religious systems studied by the disciplines of anthropology, sociology, psychology, and theology. He emphasizes that conversion needs to be examined as a process rather than a singular event, approaching conversion as “a series of elements that are interactive and cumulative over time” (:18). In this way, Rambo presents a holistic view of conversion that integrates all the “accurate, helpful, but fragmentary efforts at explanation” from previous scholarship into a “state model” that offers “a deeper, more complex understanding of the multilayered processes involved in conversion” (:17). Although he presents his model as a series of sequential stages, he cautions that “there is sometimes a spiraling effect - a going back and forth between stages.” The stages, developed throughout the rest of his book, each with a cluster of themes, patterns, and processes that characterize it, are *context*, *crisis*, *quest*, *encounter*, *interaction*, *commitment* and *consequences* (:18).

This stage model builds upon previous scholarship such as found in Alan Tippett’s work. Tippett (1977:204-205) provides a “schematization” or framework of conversion to a Christian commitment in which one can “arrange, classify and discuss data.” He affirms the spiritual aspect of conversion, but leaves that aspect out of his framework since “we cannot measure it” (:206). Tippett finds three “clearcut units” for a conversion process. The first “period of awareness” describes the development of an awareness among a people group that there is a different understanding of the world and spiritual realities (:207-208). This is followed by a “period of decision” when there is either an acceptance or rejection of the new message or way of relating to God (:208-210). Finally, there is a “period of incorporation,” when particular norms and identity are established through rituals (:210-212). Each of these periods is carefully nuanced to indicate a variety of ways they can be expressed during a conversion process. He further separates the three sequential periods by two transitional points. The point of realization occurs when “the passage

from the old context to the new is not merely an idea. It is a possibility” (:212-213). The point of encounter is the “climax of the period of decision.... The old way is terminated” (:213). Despite the starkness of this language, as if conversion is a total rejection of the past through the embrace of a faith system disconnected with previous beliefs, Tippett recognizes that there will always be a modification of the message by those who accept it based on *a priori* assumptions (:210).

As they relate to the study at hand, these stages or periods of a conversion process are of limited interest. What is of concern is the reality that such a transition has taken place in the minds of the believers. The details and history of the transition, as well as the various forces that contributed to the faith change, are acknowledged but not necessarily identified. Instead, it is the interpretation and implications of that change for the believers as they consider the relationship of their faith to their current context that is being explored. In particular, the *result* of the conversion experience in terms of a modification of previous values and beliefs is of primary concern.

Of greater relevance to the study at hand are Rambo’s (1993:13-14) five “types of conversions” that describe the degree of social or cultural adjustment experienced by the convert. The shifts described illustrate a variety of nuance to conversion that acknowledges both continuity with the past and an altered faith perspective. *Apostasy* is “the repudiation of a religious tradition or its beliefs by previous members.” *Intensification* is “revitalized commitment.” *Affiliation* involves the “movement of an individual or group from no or minimal religious commitment to full involvement with an institution or community of faith.” *Institutional transition* is “the change of an individual or group from one community to another within a major tradition.” *Tradition transition* “refers to the movement of an individual or a group from one major religious tradition to another.” Nock’s (1933:7) distinction between conversion and what he terms “adhesion” is similar. Conversion is “the taking of a new way of life in place of the old,” in which people change their identification with or commitment to one particular religious tradition in order to adopt the belief system and rituals of another already existing religious tradition. Adhesion, on the other hand, is the “acceptance of new worships as useful supplements and not as substitutes.”

For the current study, these parameters relate to the distinction made between the believer and traditional focus groups. Some of the believers would fall under the categories of apostasy and tradition transition since they would no longer consider themselves Muslims but relate to Christianity as the adopted religious tradition. However, many would *not* express their shift as repudiation but see it as affiliation with a community of other believers. In this sense, Nock’s distinction becomes somewhat fuzzy as some believers in a position of *adhesion* may find

themselves faced with a *conversion* decision. External challenges from “traditional” Muslims or from “converts” to declare an identity that excludes other traditions could force this decision, or it may be caused by personal struggles as the believer faces cognitive dissonance created by a clash between traditional assumptions and a commitment to biblical teaching.

In a similar vein to Rambo’s writings, Lofland & Skonovd (1981:373-385) propose six “conversion motifs” that are inherent within the conversion experiences themselves and are not a product of the researcher’s “conceptual blinders.” They suggest that the subjective experiences of conversion “actually vary in a number of acute, qualitatively different ways” and in their paper they attempt to “blend” objective “distance” with “phenomenological fidelity” through the description of these “motifs” which result from an intersection of subjective experience with “objective situations” (:374). The six motifs are *intellectual*, *mystical*, *experimental*, *affectional*, *revivalist* and *coercive*. These motifs are subject to five major variations: degree of social pressure, temporal duration, level of affective arousal, affective content and belief–participation sequence (:375). Spilka *et al* (2003:355) point out that such conversion motif typology assumes three “levels of reality.” The first level is “the actual truth of conversion, which is only imperfectly available to the social scientist.” The second level is the “convert’s experience and interpretation,” and the third is “the analytic interpretation provided by the social scientist.”

While acknowledging Lofland & Skonovd’s motifs as valid distinctions to describe the levels of impact found in conversion, the motifs are not particularly helpful to identify theological trajectories. Some of these motifs can be identified in the interview data, but the focus is on the participants’ own interpretation of their developing faith which necessitates a different categorization process. That is, the participants may express their faith in *intellectual*, *mystical* or *experimental* terms, but Lofland & Skonovd’s particular categorization schema is not used.²⁷⁰ However, the “levels of reality” in Spilka *et al* (2003) are beneficial and cannot be ignored because this study is an “analytic interpretation” (third level) of the data derived from the “convert’s experience and interpretation” (second level).²⁷¹

A less helpful means of delineating the parameters of conversion (mentioned for completeness sake) is negatively: declaring what it is *not*. Generally, the phenomenon of religious conversion has been distinguished from the process of natural change that occurs over time within

²⁷⁰ See chapter 9 for the categorization schema that was used in this study.

²⁷¹ The implications of distinguishing a level of analysis from the level of experiential knowledge have been considered in 1.1.1 using Mouton’s (2001:137-142) three “worlds” terminology; world 1 and world 2 correspond respectively to Spilka *et al*’s second and third “levels of reality.”

religious groups, such as described in Bellah's (1964) *Religious Evolution*. Thus, conversion is considered distinct from personal faith development within an individual, such as the "growth and gradual transformation of the structural–developmental paradigm" discussed by Fowler (1981:270), and from the schisms that occur from time to time within religious movements. However, this latter parameter becomes fuzzy when, after the schism forms, people move from one group to another due to a change in conviction.

6.5.5 Cosmological Shift in Religious Conversion

One aspect of conversion that relates closely to the concerns of this thesis is the possibility of cosmological shift within a person's or community's worldview narrative. Cosmology refers to assumptions about the ontological order and structure of all that exists, the primary framework of reality. Cosmology is distinguished from worldview in that cosmology is limited to the broader considerations of "origin, structure, and space–time relationships" (Merriam–Webster 2011), while worldview is inclusive of the interpreted connection of that structure to the history and day–to–day lives of individuals and communities. This distinction is well illustrated in Pearl S Buck's (1931:90) classic novel, *The Good Earth*, in which Wang Lung cannot comprehend "what the rich men had to do with [the fact] that the heaven would not rain in its season" when confronted with a young man protesting the system that keeps him in poverty. His cosmology viewed all the order in the earth as controlled by the gods, even to the determination of who was rich and poor. His worldview was the outworking of a cosmology that gave meaning to his daily narrative in which he was poor and others were rich because of the decisions made by spiritual powers beyond his control. A shift in worldview perspective that would conceive of the poor controlling their destiny and overthrowing the rich, the message that Wang Lung was listening to, would seriously challenge his unexamined cosmological assumptions.

When a conversion event occurs, the new commitment and loyalties played out in the values and beliefs of a people group as their worldview is adjusted may result in a cosmological shift.²⁷² The Sawi people accepted Jesus as the "Peace Child" (Richardson 1976) within their worldview perspective, but the working out of the implications of their faith altered their cosmological assumptions. The Father of the Lord Jesus Christ increasingly renders the power of the local gods ineffective so that they become less and less relevant to daily concerns and

²⁷² This dynamic of cosmological shift is more complex than a simple "cause and effect" explanation; there is a dialectic between worldview assumptions in daily life and the corresponding cosmological framework consistent with that evolving worldview.

therefore their role in the cosmos diminishes. Similarly, movement away from a forensic view of the atonement, coupled with a conviction that the love of God is ultimately dominant, has caused some Western pastors to readjust their concept of hell as a place of eternal judgment and torture (Bell 2011; MacDonald 1986 [1886]:83-86). It appears that the initial message must first be understood within the framework of accepted worldview assumptions in order to be compelling. However, when the broader implications of the conversion experience are worked out resulting in a worldview shift, corresponding adjustments to cosmological assumptions are also required.

R Horton (1975:220-221) proposed what he termed the “Intellectualist” theory of cosmological shift in examining conversion movements to Islam and Christianity in Africa. His view is that the indigenous religions with their focus on the “tier” of lesser spirits would retain that cosmological perspective when the people are confined to their “microcosm” of existence with little contact with the outside world. However, when exposed to the “macrocosm” of people with other belief systems that include the “tier” of a supreme being, their cosmology would change because of the “groping towards a more elaborate definition of the supreme being and a more developed cult of this being.” He views this process as “highly selective” so that “what is accepted and what rejected will be largely determined by the structure of the ‘basic’ cosmology.”

The Intellectualist model is valuable because it emphasizes the active, reflexive character of human beings when faced with new or conflicting belief systems, which is a key assumption of this thesis.²⁷³ People “actively evaluate and adjust their understanding as demands and circumstances change” (Hefner 1993:119). Such a “groping” towards a more developed understanding of a supreme described by Horton (1975:220) takes place within a *dialectical dynamic* of accommodation and adjustment that reinterprets and affects both the received message and the cosmological framework of the people group. Rather than a simple “selection” resulting in the acceptance or rejection of outsider concepts, a more complex interactive and reflective process is indicated that requires time for dialogue and development. In criticizing the Intellectualist model, Hefner (1993:119) notes that it seems to assume that people make the cosmological adjustments in a somewhat objective, rationalistic manner as if they are standing back from social commitments and moral and political implications in order to do so. However, these latter implications are “intrinsic aspects of the conversion experience” and adjustments made in the

²⁷³ The argument here is not that a similar cosmological shift as observed by Horton is occurring among Sindhi believers, since Muslims and Christians share a similar theistic worldview. The comparison is with the *dynamic* of change, not with the *content* or *extent* of such a shift.

cosmological arena will occur in concert with shifts occurring as people wrestle with worldview implications in their daily lives. Nonetheless, a rational resolution of cosmological dissonance is not necessarily implied by worldview challenges to daily living. People have the capability of living comfortably with contradictory beliefs.

Richard Eaton's (1999) examination of religious conversion in Nagaland has some significant parallels to my research of identifying theological shifts among Sindhis. While the methodology is different, Eaton's conclusions about the Naga's cosmological shifts resonate with the concerns of this thesis. Rather than relying on personal interviews to mark one moment in the beginning of a shift in faith, he uses documentation of over 100 years to examine the Christianization of Naga communities in northeastern India. While I am more interested in changes currently occurring in Sindhi believers' perspective of God, Eaton focuses on the dynamic of group conversion and the "changing cosmologies of the people actually undergoing conversion" (:3). He records that through "creative adaption," his term for inculturation, the Naga have "self-assertively [made Christianity] an indigenous Naga religion, just as Europeans had earlier 'made it a European indigenous religion'" (:29). This was facilitated by an identification of the Christian God with "Alhou [high god]. This translation strategy seems to have greatly facilitated the cognitive transfer from the old to the new; perhaps more accurately, it involved no real transfer at all, but only a refinement and elaboration of a thoroughly indigenous conception" (:24). Thus, Eaton concludes, the Naga were able to both accept the Christian faith from within their original cosmology and make cosmological shifts as they worked out the implications of the new faith in their lives. In this research project, I am looking for a similar dynamic – theological adjustments made within a consistent worldview – as I facilitate the exploration of a text of scripture for Sindhi believers within their context.

Another case study of cosmological shift concerns the Central Kerala Dalit conversion among the Pulaya people in the 19th century (Oommen 1997). In this case, contrary to the Sindhi context, the image of a loving, accessible and approachable supreme being was in complete contradiction to the Pulayas' traditional religious experience and established beliefs. However, it appears that the missionaries, in seeking to communicate the gospel message, used the religious vocabulary and idioms of the Pulaya and, therefore, "may have given room for converts to continue to interpret Christian teachings in a traditional Pulaya way." The result was that "the most effective communicators of Christian teaching (even if not adequately understood) were Pulayas themselves, their headmen, who spread these new ideas through their own idiom" (:91).

This case study illustrates the reality that a message communicated through the religious vocabulary and idioms of a people group will first be understood within their cosmological framework. A meaning-based translation of scripture, such as that used in the current research, provides this kind of resonance with the people group by being sensitive to both the context of the people group and the message. In order for readers to access the message in an understandable way, they must engage the revelation of God in a way that connects with their current view of reality. Such an approach uses the available cosmological framework to create the possibility of faith while initiating a reciprocal dynamic of an ongoing faith experience that affects the conceptual framework. This latter aspect in terms of theological shift is the focus of my research.

6.5.6 Conversion as an Individual Phenomenon

As a phenomenon of an individual decision, some have explained conversion from a purely naturalistic, psychological point of view (e.g., Barnhart & Barnhart 1981). William James' (1902:186) classic definition of conversion as a "process, gradual or sudden, by which a self hitherto divided, and consciously wrong inferior and unhappy, becomes unified and consciously right superior and happy, in consequence of its firmer hold upon religious realities," provides a similar perspective, but without an *a priori* dismissal of divine intervention. Still others describe conversion as one aspect of "spiritual transformations" that deals with "meaning-system change" and, therefore, is a complex phenomenon defying a single, comprehensive model (Paloutzian 2005:332-333). In the latter perspective, religion is understood as a "cluster of schemas" (Ozorak 2005:219) or a "lens" through which reality is interpreted and engaged and which centers on that which people consider as sacred (Park 2005:295). The sacred content is reflected in the convert's convictions, goals and emotions (:295). Research data is cited on the effects of religious conversion that reveal individual alterations in factors such as the purposes towards which one strives, specific goals, values, attitudes, identity, or self-definition (Paloutzian 2005:332), in emotional factors such as security or fear (:335), as well as in cognitive factors and involvement in ritualistic practices (:335). The conversion experience may involve the total overhaul of a person's belief system, or only reflect "changes in strength or type of one or more specific elements of the system" (:338). Heirich (1977:674) adds that conversion

involves a conscious shift in one's sense of grounding. Whatever the outcome, it involves examination of core senses of reality, identifying aspects which must be responded to with the whole being and which presumably will affect action choices for the convert thereafter.

While agreeing that religious conversion “occurs through the mediation of social, cultural, personal, and religious forces,” Rambo (1993:xii) goes further and adds a supernatural element by declaring that “authentic conversion... [is] a total transformation of the person by the power of God.” It is a “radical” event, “striking to the root of the human predicament... [that] requires the intervention of God to deliver me from the captivity that I perceive ensnaring me.”

In this study, faith is considered as both an individual and communal phenomenon. The communal context establishes the framework, concepts and vocabulary that define a people group’s worldview, beliefs and values. However, the ongoing negotiation, development and exploration of those parameters occur through the interpersonal interaction of individuals.²⁷⁴ Furthermore, each individual will have a personal and unique perspective of the communal faith and their own convictions. Such convictions are not separate from or external to the community, but are integrated with and shaped by forces both within and external to the community. The individual has a voice, but the language and framework for that voice belong to the community. This individual–community dynamic requires an exploration of faith change at both levels. This exploration of theological shifts is accomplished through an interview process that encourages individuals to express their own understanding, while encouraging responses from others in the group sessions and locating those expressions within the faith commitments of the broader community.

6.5.7 Conversion as a People Movement

Conversion on a macro societal level is referred to as a “people movement” within evangelical missiology, following the terminology of Donald McGavran (1955) in his influential book, *The Bridges of God*, in which he deals with the question, “How do Peoples become Christians?” “People” refers to a group with a “unifying ethnic identity” based on the meaning of the Greek *ethne* as used in the New Testament (McGavran 1955:2, cf. Piper 2003:161-167). McGavran (1955:12-13) explains that people movements occur as follows:

Peoples become Christian as a wave of decision for Christ sweeps through the group mind, involving many individual decisions but being far more than merely their sum. This may be called a chain reaction. Each decision sets off others and the sum total powerfully affects every individual. When conditions are right, not merely each sub–group, but the entire group concerned decides together.

²⁷⁴ This phenomenon was observed during the research interviews as the participants worked out their thoughts and negotiated concepts in their interactions with each other (cf. Mason 2002:64).

Many of these people movements have been studied in some depth (e.g., Eaton 1999). In describing the movements to Christianity in India during the 19th century, Forrester (1991:65) affirms this analysis by noting that “large-scale conversions were on the whole a new experience... not simply because the numbers involved were unprecedentedly [*sic*] large, but because the converts came in groups rather than individuals.” Oddie (1991:108) adds that

while in some cases, isolated families were prepared to act without waiting for others, in other cases there was wide-ranging discussion at especially convened meetings of the caste *panchayats*, such as the one that took place between the Waddars and Erkalas in the Warangal district in about 1906 and 1907.

In considering the dynamic of conversion in Oceanic people groups, Tippett (1977:204) focuses on “group” conversions as distinct from individual or “mass” conversions. Because his concern is with “multi-individual movements” that deal with “individuals, not in isolation, but within groups and sub-groups,” it may be argued that the distinction between group and mass conversions is primarily numerical or that he is examining a similar phenomenon from a unique vantage point, that of the role of the individual in a group process. Nonetheless, his “schematization” and “exposition” of the conversion process (:205-214) is also applicable to people movements.

The people movement dynamic is a factor in determining whether a particular conversion experience will endure and transform the society or if it will be rejected over time.

People movements are important in group-oriented societies. Converts who come to Christ one by one are often ostracized by the group, and they have little witness among their kin and neighbors. When a number of families become Christians together, the village cannot reject them without destroying the community (Hiebert, Shaw & Tiénon 1999:365).

In considering the diversity of religious traditions within Hinduism, Oddie (1997a:2) writes in a similar manner of “conversion movements,” which refer to

some sort of change in religious belief and/or affiliation, a change which is often thought of as communal and which is expressed symbolically through the performance of ritual... For Christians it might be the act of baptism, for Muslims or Buddhists a very simple statement or confession of faith and for modern ‘Hindus’ involvement in ceremonies associated with ‘shuddi’.

In Hiebert *et al*’s (1999:347-368) overview of the phenomenon of religious people movements, they note that while “change is a constant factor in all religions, many important religious movements are characterized by revolutionary shifts in worldviews” (:347). “Most religious movements emerge out of severe cultural crises generated by major physical disasters, or by collision with more powerful cultures such as the colonial expansion of the West” (:347-348).

Conditions such as “cognitive dissonance” and “social disorganization” or a serious challenge to the way of life can give rise to a new religion or the embrace of an existing religion that provides people with “a new workable identity” (:348). Downs (1991:172) describes the convergence of factors that are required for a people movement to occur:

A social perspective is also required [to understand extensive conversion movements], one that provides the historian with insights from the fields of anthropology, sociology, economics and political science. Political and ecclesiastical developments cannot in themselves account for such large numbers of people turning to Christianity. Only when one begins to look at the role of Christianity as the central agent of acculturation in a situation where traditional societies were giving way to the process of modernisation does one gain a balanced insight into those movements.

The current phenomenon of believers found among Sindhi Muslims cannot be termed a people movement as defined in the literature cited here. Nonetheless, there are similarities that are significant. The emerging pockets of believers that are interconnected and which share common relationships with ongoing Christian ministries, both foreign and national, exhibit the potential to develop into a people movement. The shift from individual conversions that create ostracisms to the development of household churches is a movement towards a level of stability and sustainability for believers previously unknown in Sindhi society.²⁷⁵ McGavran’s (1955:12) reference to a “group mind” communal decision to convert has not been observed among the Sindhi people and the key to household churches thus far has been an influential individual within the home whose witness, coupled with opportunity over a long period of time, has convinced others to believe.²⁷⁶ The role of such an individual to initiate a people movement has been dubbed the “man or woman of peace” strategy (Chard & Chard 2011:147-148) after Jesus’ instruction to his disciples to look for such a person when they were sent out on mission (Mt 10:11, Lk 10:5-6). This dynamic illustrates the inseparable individual–community tension in the conversion process. Individuals have personal convictions and facilitate group change; simultaneously, the group maintains the context within which such change has meaning and can develop.

Hiebert *et al* (1999:353-354) also point out that Christianity does not “replace” traditional religions even when a religious movement takes place:

Traditional religions often persist as undercurrents after people become Christians... independent movements belong neither to traditional religion, nor to the engulfing high religion, both of which are often hostile toward them. Most are local indigenous religious responses created by the common people which incorporate elements from

²⁷⁵ See 4.1 for an explanation of household churches.

²⁷⁶ Ahmed, mentioned in 4.1.5.2, is an example of this dynamic.

both the tribal and high religions in various ways.

This latter comment is critical in understanding people movements. In essence, the new religion being embraced has become inculturated. The new belief system has resonated with the needs of the people so that they are able to make better sense of their context *because* there is continuity with the way they view the world. Hiebert *et al's* (1999:363) examples of new religions from Latin America, Japan, the West, as well as various movements among the African Independent Churches illustrate this dynamic. “The AICs represent a serious attempt to bring the gospel into the African culture by expressing it in images familiar to African people and in responding concretely to their needs and aspirations.”

In this research, the concern is to investigate the inculturation of the gospel within Sindhi concepts and vocabulary. The message is becoming integrated into an ongoing way of life in a manner that shapes both message and lifestyle. All aspects of their faith have continuity with prior beliefs; simultaneously, the outworking of that faith transforms their lives. A mapping of the believers' shifting theology provides insight into this dynamic.

Anthony Wallace's (1956) contribution to the people movement analysis was to identify a process that new religious groups go through in their conversion experience that includes cultural and political as well as spiritual concerns. At the heart of the process is the attempt of group members to construct a worldview that fits with their changing experience of reality. Wallace (1956:265) describes “revitalization” movements that are “a deliberate, organized, conscious effort by members of a society to construct a more satisfying culture.” This parallels the observed people movement phenomenon in that persons identified with a particular group feel that their current cultural system is unsatisfactory and so adopt a new system. Wallace (1958:119) provides a five stage process:

- I. Steady State
- II. Period of increased individual stress
- III. Period of cultural distortion
- IV. Period of revitalization
 1. Revelation
 2. Communication
 3. Adaptation
 4. Cultural Transformation
 5. Routinization
- V. New Steady State

The first three stages describe the breakdown of a cultural system. “Revitalization” restores the

“Steady State” of a stable culture that endures stress within acceptable limits through the following process: A message or vision is received by a particular individual (*Revelation*), who passes that vision on to others and they become committed to the message (*Communication*). There is resistance from powerful people in the society requiring some level of adjustment (*Adaptation*). As the movement gathers popularity due to its perceived superiority over the previous system, there is sufficient momentum to make an impact on cultural structures and norms (*Cultural transformation*). Over time, the movement settles in to an established expression of routines and rituals (*Routinization*) resulting in a new “Steady State” (1956:268-275; 1958:119).

As a critique of Wallace’s process, it is probably an overstatement to insist that the old system no longer works. Most scholars are quick to emphasize continuities as well as change.²⁷⁷ A new message may resonate with the culture and be perceived to fulfill a spiritual felt need without necessitating a prior breakdown of the current system. If the new message connects with the context in unexpected ways that are considered better than the old, or perhaps even perceived as a fulfillment of the current system,²⁷⁸ the resulting contrast and tension could displace the old as less desirable without necessitating outright rejection. For example, if a culture functions within a context of fear of evil spirits for generations and the message of God as a loving father who conquers the spirits is perceived as a superior way of life, this new orientation can be accepted even though the previous way of life is sustainable.

Paloutzian’s (2005:335-336) three steps of spiritual transformation allows for a continuity of the old coupled with an emergence of the new. Rather than Wallace’s emphasis on social disruption followed by restoration to a steady state, Paloutzian observes that “(1) input pressures prompt (2) internal change in one or more components of the meaning system that (3) shows expression as altered outcomes that are connected to those internal components of the meaning system that have been affected.”

Nonetheless, both Wallace and Paloutzian provide parameters that resonate with the emergence of believers in the Sindhi context. It could be said that the initial stages of

²⁷⁷ The collection of articles in *Religious Conversion Movements in South Asia: Continuities and Change, 1800-1900* edited by GA Oddie (1997a) is an example of scholarship sensitive to both the dynamic of continuity as well as change (see also Oddie 1997a:11).

²⁷⁸ Don Richardson’s (1977) examples in which the gospel message has been received as the fulfillment of ancient prophecies demonstrates continuity within worldview and belief systems, rather than requiring a sharp break from them.

“revitalization” – “revelation” and “communication” – are now occurring as individual believers interact with the scriptural message and introduce that message within their family structures. Part of the pressure prompting these events comes from the *insertion* of the Sindhi New Testament into Sindhi society. As believers interact with the message and work out the implications as understood within their context, there is a change or development of their faith (worldview, beliefs and values) that remains contiguous with their past and their current context.

Oddie (1997a:1) describes the emergence of

new forms of religious identity, involving different ways of understanding the individual, community and cosmic order [that] have been closely linked with the development of new types of ethical and social behaviour. Most of these movements, with the possible exception of some types of asceticism, involved the development of new forms of social organization, while the new adherents invariably developed their own distinctive forms of culture, historical consciousness and attitudes to a range of general issues including economic activity.

Evidence for Oddie’s perspective can be seen in the people movement that occurred within the Punjabi Chuhras, a Hindu people group of northern Pakistan. In 1873 a Chuhra named Ditt became a follower of Christ and initiated a movement away from idolatry within the people group. The movement expanded through a revival during the time of “Praying Hyde” who had come to the Punjab in 1892. “By 1935 nearly half of the Chuhra caste had become Christians” (P Brown 2006:227) and by the middle of the 20th century the Chuhra caste in that part of Pakistan ceased to exist because all the people identified themselves as Christians. The majority of Christians in Pakistan trace their roots to this people group (P Brown 2006:226-267; Stock 1975:64-101; McGavran 2009 [1955]:342-343). Stock (1975:70-75) documents the conditions at the beginning of this movement that contributed to the indigenous nature of the movement. He notes that there was considerable social unrest because of the Chuhra’s “outcast” status, and concludes that “caste structure can be an effective channel for the gospel.” This was a “multi-individual” rather than a “mass” movement in which “hordes of untaught masses blindly made a decision for Christ with little understanding of the step they were taking” (Stock 1975:72). Evangelism was not initiated by missionaries, but by the Chuhras themselves. Ditt refused to stay on a missionary compound and instead traveled “from village to village, telling his people about Jesus Christ and His death for their sins. He never learned to read, but preached and taught the scripture he memorized” (P Brown 2006:266). The impact of his preaching is evidence that the message – a message interpreted through his cultural grid – resonated with the Chuhra people. As the movement expanded a few foreign initiated influences are cited, such as medical work and

schools (Stock 1975:88-94), but it was the work of putting the Psalms into Punjabi meter²⁷⁹ that has had, arguably, the greatest ongoing impact of establishing a sense of Christian identity.

A similar pattern of societal transformation could very well be repeated in the Sindh if the current movement of believers within the Sindhi people continues. Of particular interest is the “multi-individual” dynamic that has communal impact. While the movement has been initiated through the work of outsiders inserted into the Sindhi context, it is the interaction of the insiders with each other as they explore the implications of the message that creates new theological expressions. Because they are identifying with scripture as believers committed to God’s revelation, they are driven to find appropriate expression of that message in ways that “make sense” or resonate with their context. The expressions currently developing among Sindhi believers have impact upon the continuation and direction of the emerging movement.

Continuity with prior beliefs shapes the form and development of the conversion process.²⁸⁰ In describing a movement to Christianity in Bengal, Oddie (1997b:72) notes that, “pre-Christian ideas played an important part in the conversion process.” Elsewhere, he (Oddie 1997:8) comments that scholars should “think more about preconversion systems of thought and belief and the way in which indigenous ideas and perceptions relate to conversion,” observing that some converts to Jesus Christ within Hinduism

were quite adamant in describing themselves as “Indian” or “Hindu” Christians. They were rather like people who keep “dual citizenship” where the experience, memories and culture of the old world continue to permeate and flavour the new and where the old concerns and values are not always left behind (:6).

Powell (1997:50-51) adds that most of the converts from Islam and Hinduism in India during the 19th century sought “to publicly maintain their ‘Indianness,’ in ways which sometimes involved bitter conflict with the missionary hierarchy.” Or as Downs (1991:170) wryly notes, “The discontinuity between Christianity and the old way of life was not so great as those who read missionary pronouncements on the subject or observe modern town life might suppose.” An iteration of what Schreier (1985:6-9) describes as the “translation model”²⁸¹ may have been the ideal in the minds of some missionaries, but Downs (1991:170-171) continues with a description

²⁷⁹ See 4.2.2.2.1 for a description of the impact of this work.

²⁸⁰ This is congruent with the argument in 5.7 that there is no *tabula rasa* in the development of theological positions; they are always in some way connected with and defined by prior beliefs.

²⁸¹ See 7.5.1 for a description of this model. In this approach a perceived objective stance outside of the given cultural context is given privileged position to critique the emerging faith. The “all truth is perspectival” critical realist assumption is described in 7.6.

of people movements among the hills tribes of North-East India that is closer to reality, reflecting an expression of faith embedded in or emerging from the existent worldview:

At its best [Christianity] liberated people from a world-view in which they were socially and psychologically enslaved by fear of spirits. Belief in spirits continues but it is no longer the dominant thing that it once was. Christ's power is seen to be greater than that of the spirits. Theology replaced animism. Belief in a loving God, the reality of whom was made meaningful in the loving concern shown towards them by missionaries and Christians of neighbouring communities or tribes, had a strong appeal. It also provided them with a framework in which they had a place of importance in the larger world. It provided an ideological undergirding for living under the new circumstances resulting from the introduction of the process of modernisation.

This concept of faith embedded in or emerging from an existing worldview is a basic assumption of this research project. The existing communal faith assumptions of Sindhi believers are not being *replaced*. Rather, through an engagement of the gospel message they are being *transformed*. This study identifies and articulates a portion of that transformation in terms of an emerging theology.

6.5.8 Conversion to Christianity among Muslim People Groups

One of the benefits of this research is that the phenomenon being studied is indicative of a potential people movement of Christ-centered communities. While in embryo form and therefore cannot be classified as a church planting movement (CPM),²⁸² the emerging *Isa Jama'at* in the Sindh are not unique within the Muslim world and the establishment of Christ-centered communities in other Muslim communities demonstrates that the possibility of a CPM is not unrealistic. This section provides some examples of such movements occurring today.

Muslim communities have been among the most resistant to the gospel message. Nonetheless, there have been exceptions. Unfortunately, the sensitivity of conservative Muslims to conversion from Islam makes it expedient for those studying the phenomenon, particularly where large groups of people are involved, to be circumspect in their reports. Even though some would claim that “in the Qur'an, besides the threat of eternal condemnation, no indication what the worldly punishment for apostasy from Islam should be is given” (Reinkowski 2007:416), the

²⁸² The concept of church planting movements is understood to be a modification of McGavran's “people movements” defined above (see 6.5.7 and a footnote in 4.2.2.4) that focuses on self-identified local communities of Christ-followers, rather than individuals or groups without reference to local worshiping communities. Church planting movements are “a rapid multiplication of indigenous churches planting churches that sweeps through a people group or population segment” (Garrison 2011:9).

reality is that converts from Islam are often persecuted and some lose their lives.²⁸³ The following is a sample of Muslim groups who have embraced Jesus as Lord and Savior.

Jim Slack (2011:12-13) manages the assessments of church planting movements for the International Mission Board of the Southern Baptists. After applying strict parameters to movements that qualify, assessments were done on 19 out of an identified 200 possible church planting movements. These assessments have been compiled since 2000. Three church planting movements among Islamic people groups were confirmed:

Table 6 *Church Planting Movements*

Church Planting Movement	Total years in assessment	Number of churches in year 1	Number of churches in final year
West African	7	85	450
North African	11	11	80
Asian	7	53	4,222

R Brown (2009:706-707) recounts a movement to Christ initiated by a Sufi master. The account was investigated and verified by Christian leaders in the country. Concerned that his followers looked to him for salvation on the Day of Judgment, but being unsure of his own salvation, he prayed for God to show him the way. Through a vision he was directed to a leader of a “growing movement of Muslims who follow Jesus.” Through the leader’s teaching and guidance, the Sufi master eventually baptized 250 of his leading disciples, who in turn baptized others. In one day “several thousand people were baptized into the kingdom of God.”

Shah Ali & Woodberry (2009:715-717) explain a movement in which a “conscious effort has been made to foster the movement of groups rather than just individuals to Christ.” Using Islamic terminology and rituals, the movement of a majority of people in a number of villages to become followers of Christ has resulted in the establishment of “messianic mosques.” Former Imams have continued their role as spiritual leaders, but in the name of Jesus.

Due to reports of the establishment of *Isa Jama’at* in a neighboring country, a few Sindhi believers went on an exploratory trip in September 2005 to evaluate these groups and develop a greater vision for what could occur within the Sindhi setting. Based on their observations and the discussions held, certain strategies were adopted while others were affirmed in a manner that has

²⁸³ As one example among many, Gupta (2004:5) reports that during his seven years in the horn of Africa “the majority of the believers in Jesus Christ were systematically hunted down and persecuted, with many martyred by adherents to Islam.” His report documents a total of 450 interviews in 48 countries “where persecution was and is an everyday occurrence.”

strengthened the current effort to establish a movement of household churches within the Sindh. The evidence of such movements within other Muslim contexts supports the possibility that a similar movement may occur among the Sindhi people.

6.5.9 Theological Shifts in Islam

As evidenced by the vast number of movements and distinct religious groups in the Muslim world, the phenomenon of theological shifts within Islam is common. Even the primary division in Islam between Sunnis and Shi'as, while initially an historical dispute over caliphal succession, does have theological nuances that continue to affect their daily lives and actions. For example, each movement demonstrates distinct responses towards pain and suffering. In exploring this difference among Sunnis and Shi'as in the Sindh, I discovered that while both view pain and suffering as the hand of God,²⁸⁴ Sunnis interpret it as *punishment* indicating a need for change on their part in order to achieve God's blessing; "a sign that in some way the believers were lacking in the required submission, faith or obedience" (Geaves 2005:99). This is based on the "Manifest Success" phenomenon taken from the Qur'anic *Surah al-Fatah*:

Indeed, We have given you, a clear conquest
That Allah may forgive for you what preceded of your sin and what will follow and
complete His favor upon you and guide you to a straight path
And [that] Allah may aid you with a mighty victory (Qur'an 48:1-3).

This understanding inspired the religious revivals of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries as Sunnis struggled to discover a theological explanation for Western domination. Defeat "could only be interpreted as a sign of God's disfavour. To restore favour to his last community it was necessary to be self-critical, and seek revival and the reform of Islam" (Geaves 2005:101).

Shi'as, on the other hand, are more inclined to react as if suffering is a *test* of their faithfulness, to the point of glorifying martyrdom as a means by which their purity can be proven. Visual symbolism of this orientation can be observed in Pakistan and throughout the Muslim world during the month of Muharram when Shi'as take to the streets to inflict pain upon themselves in solidarity with the martyrs Ali (Muhammad's cousin and son-in-law) and his son Hussain, revered as faithful servants of God.

While a stabilizing and unifying influence in Islam,²⁸⁵ the Qur'an has also played an

²⁸⁴ As noted in 4.3.3, when the Kashmir earthquake occurred in 2005, one of our translators, a Sunni Muslim, attributed this to the wrath of God.

²⁸⁵ Lippman's (1982:59) comments on the impact of the Qur'an in the Muslim world are accurate

impacting role in the theological trajectories evident in Islam. *Ijtihad*, the interpretation of the Qur'an and Hadith, is a complex historical phenomenon that early on resulted in four distinct schools that focused on “a different aspect of the current body of revelation at the time of founding” (Geaves 2005:68).

For Sindhis, theological shifts and the adoption of new allegiances *within* Islam are not uncommon either historically or culturally. One shift that impacts this study within the Sindhi context is the mystical orientation of Sufism. In contrast to the *master–servant* paradigm of orthodox Islam that encourages conformity to the *Shari'ah*, including expressions of ritual and liturgy, Sufism is the outworking of a longing for a deeper, significant and experiential relationship with God, even to the point of speaking of God as “lover” (*mahaboob*).²⁸⁶ It is not unusual for Sindhis to pledge themselves to Sufi masters (*murshids*) or saints (*pirs*) with a desire for spiritual revitalization or because of personal need, such as illness or barrenness. Such practices encourage the exploration of other spiritual paths and people are quite open–minded about such allegiances providing they are not perceived as undermining the family or tribal honor.

Within this context of spiritual sensitivity, respect for religious texts and the possibility of pursuing new theological paths, the message of the gospel can gain a hearing. Not only are the *Injil* and the name of *Isa* honored, but the spiritual hunger evident in Sufism opens the door for Sindhis to consider the gospel message. As one example among many, the familial promise that we can be children of the heavenly Father found in Jesus' teachings (e.g., Mt 5:45, Lk 6:35), while suspect in orthodox Islam, resonates with Sufi thought. Even though the line between Islam and Christianity remains sharp in terms of identity, religious traditions and political implications, the message of the gospel is attractive to Sindhis. Because of this background of theological diversity and openness to spiritual exploration in Sindhi culture, the phenomenon of theological trajectories among those who have become believers is neither unexpected nor unusual.

6.5.10 Conversion framed in terms of Covenant

The paradigm that best represents my understanding of religious conversion – one that resonates

and well verified:

Committed to memory by schoolchildren. Recited on every important occasion, it is a ubiquitous spiritual and cultural force, unequivocal, chastening, comforting. In a religion that spurns statuary, tabernacles, and images, the Holy Book is the physical symbol of the faith, illuminated by calligraphers and carried on dashboards by cabdrivers.

²⁸⁶ See 4.2.2.2 for a description of the influence of Sufism in the Sindhi context.

well with this study – is based on the act of *covenant making*. Religious conversion can be described as a change of allegiance or commitment from one overarching narrative²⁸⁷ – “the unfolding plot within which our lives and destinies find the proper coordinates” (M Horton 2011:17) – to another. In narrower evangelical terms, the object of the commitment in conversion to Christianity is the person of Jesus Christ, and the posture of the convert is that of full surrender to him as “Lord and Savior.” This parallels the vows performed and commitment entered into by a couple on their wedding day. Their relationship now has an exclusive aspect that regulates their relationship with other individuals; every aspect of their life takes into account the concerns and needs of their spouse. Similarly, a convert to a living relationship with God in Christ is no longer free to explore spiritual fulfillment outside of this relationship. A covenant is not the same as a contract. A contract is an agreement: “If you do this, I will do that.” In contrast, a covenant does not depend on the performance of an obligation by the other party. Instead, it is an act of abandonment and vulnerability, an unreserved giving up of oneself to another. The new covenant of the gospel is found in the Jesus’ abandonment of self in his death. The corresponding response of his followers is the abandonment of themselves in the name of Jesus. The two distinct actions on the part of converts are first the commitment to abandon themselves and second living in accordance with that commitment. This understanding of conversion resonates with Paloutzian’s (2005:332) description of conversion as the adoption of a “new life narrative that highlights the importance of [a] turning point in the story and its consequences, and that which serves as the ultimate concern.” There is a “turning point” of a commitment to an “ultimate concern” and the living out of “its consequences.”

This covenantal perspective on conversion was developed in concert with a growing appreciation of Sindhi values. The research of my (Naylor 2004:71-74, 86-87) Masters dissertation on contextualized Bible storying revealed a fundamental commitment to the teacher–student relationship that stems from hierarchical assumptions ingrained in their worldview. If a

²⁸⁷ M Horton (2011:15-17) suggests that the postmodern concept *metanarrative*, a term deliberately avoided here, is “a story (narrative) that pretends it isn’t one” and that imagines it has transcended “cherished values, expectations, and convictions [that] are creations of a particular time and place.” He argues that Christianity is therefore *not* a metanarrative, but a “confession of faith, a personal act of witness to the God who has entered our history in and through a particular narrative that cannot be ‘translated’ or demythologized in secular terms.” He prefers the concept of *meganarrative*, a term parallel to “overarching narrative” used here, that affirms God’s mighty acts in history, rather than accepting the implication lying behind the term *metanarrative* that the “myths” of biblical history symbolizing universal truths have been dispensed with.

student accepts a person as their teacher, their commitment is complete and absolute, even to the point of absurdity. A favorite illustration is the student's expected response to their teacher's command, "Jump in the water, but don't get wet!" The first thing a student should do is jump in the water. The second thing they should do is apologize for getting wet. One result of this orientation is seen in the contrast to Western evangelical sensitivities for "assurance of salvation." "Assurance" has never been a felt need among Sindhi believers in my experience. They know they have made a commitment of their lives to Jesus and any questioning of that would be inappropriate. When writing the book entitled "*Tati Thadhi Kha*"²⁸⁸ about the next steps of discipleship for new Sindhi believers, I (Naylor 1993) deliberately did not include a section on assurance with the view that it was unnecessary, despite that fact that most other discipleship books from a Western perspective include a whole chapter on the issue.²⁸⁹ The book is sensitive to the Sindhi context and addresses the issues believers face.

However, it must be acknowledged that even as the marriage covenant analogy ignores the emotional, spiritual and psychological dynamics of the couple's relationship, so the covenant metaphor of conversion deliberately sets aside other dimensions that would be required in a more holistic examination of religious conversion. This is done in order to focus on the will and convictions of Sindhi believers as revealed in their faith expressions. For instance, the aspect of social allegiance, although important in a "thick description"²⁹⁰ of the conversion dynamic, is not considered. That is, the concern of this study is not to discover the *causes* of conversion or the sociological forces that have influenced this change in religious orientation. Moreover, rather than cataloging value changes, examining shifts in personal goals and purposes, noting redefinitions of self and identity, or considering the role of the Spirit of God in conversion, this study is limited to changes in the believers' faith (worldview, beliefs and values), identified as theological shifts, as interview participants interact with the Sindhi translation of a New Testament passage.

²⁸⁸ The English title is *Pressing On in the New Life*, and the Sindhi title is taken from a poem by Sindh's favorite poet, Shah Abdul Latif. Loosely translated it means, "Whether hot or cold, keep going!" An interactive book encouraging readers to determine their own response in light of God's Word speaking into their context, it is intended for a Sindhi audience and the primary manuscript, though prepared in English, was designed as a base for the final Sindhi version. The work of translating into Sindhi was a joint effort with a Sindhi friend (name withheld for security reasons) to ensure quality literary style in the final text. The book is still in use and was recently revised and reprinted.

²⁸⁹ In contrast, a separate chapter is devoted to the subject of suffering, a critical challenge for new believers, but notably lacking in North American discipleship books.

²⁹⁰ See 7.6.1 for an overview of a Geertz's (1973:5,6) "thick" description.

Nonetheless, this is a sufficient focus because a reshaping of the converts' faith is a crucial aspect of the phenomenon of religious conversion and the seriousness and depth of commitment represented by covenantal imagery accounts for a drastic reformatting of the worldview contours.

Based on the definition of believer²⁹¹ and the believers' professed commitment to the *Injil* as God's revelation speaking authoritatively to them, their posture to scripture can be considered a form of conversion that has covenantal connotations. The reshaping of believing Sindhis' "worldview filter" as part of a conversion process can be identified and evaluated from the ongoing interaction between their faith and the biblical text, the object of their commitment. Following Eaton (1999:1) in his study of Naga communities, conversion is not a "passive acceptance of a monolithic, outside essence," but "creative adaptation" in which a fruitful tension or "dance"²⁹² between the new message and a faith (worldview, belief and values) located within a specific context occurs, which is why this study among Sindhi believers is also considered part of a conversion dynamic. This shaping of faith is reflected in the accepted and familiar forms, concepts and cosmological expressions of the people group. A dance is the artistic cooperation of two people who complement each other in their actions resulting in one unified expression. Both partners initiate and respond to each other in the creation of a sequence of coordinated movements. Similarly, the message of the text finds new faith expressions (the artistic movement of the dance) as it is shaped by the context in creative ways. Believers engage the message harmoniously²⁹³ within their context, resulting in the creation of new commitments, beliefs and rituals that culminate in transformed action. The acceptance of the message to the extent that religious conversion occurs requires recognized continuity with the current cultural context (relevance), emotional impact (resonance) and a covenantal commitment to conform to an authority beyond their cultural norms.

²⁹¹ See definition in 5.2.

²⁹² Green (2007:57) refers to the "discursive dance" of the reader with the text. Both "creative tension" and "dance" indicate the cooperative and complementary movement required to form a cohesive whole through a dynamic of response and counter-response. An antagonistic struggle indicating non-resolvable static immovability that is sometimes associated with "tension" is not in view.

²⁹³ "Harmoniously" does not imply that there will be no clashes with the faith of the people group, that is, their values, beliefs and worldview. The emphasis is on the reality that, in order for the message to have both meaning and significance, it must first be shaped according to contextually acceptable symbols and concepts. The *meaning* of the message must be harmonious with contextual constructs to be understood; the *significance and challenge* of that meaning to their faith assumptions may instigate theological shift.

In discussing the phenomenon of conversion, R Norris (2003:171) explains the continuity of historical religious meaning within a conversion experience:

Since the symbols and practices of any religion have developed historically within a specific context, they cannot convey the same meaning to both native practitioners and converts. Given that cultural beliefs and practices shape experience, and that the meaning of religious language and ritual is grounded in embodied experience, converts initially understand the symbolism and language of their adopted religion through the filter of their original language and worldview. This applies not only to ideas but also to gesture, posture, and ritual, which involve deeply ingrained associations and learned relationships between bodily practice and inner states of consciousness.

This must be kept in tension with the reality that a “society wide conversion movement would involve a change in the identities of both the humans involved and the superhuman beings with whom they interact” (Eaton 1999:2). In this study of Sindhis, the results of the dance between faith and message, the *faith-text* side of the faith-text-context triangle, in terms of a change of the perceived characteristics of God (the “superhuman being”) and the identity of the believers is explored. But it is being explored in terms of inculturated theological expressions that demonstrate continuity with prior faith convictions – the dance between faith and culture, the *faith-context* side of the faith-text-context triangle.

A further benefit of the covenant metaphor is that it expresses both *individual* personal dynamics (a major area of concern in the scholarship on religious conversion), as well as *group* commitments, such as in the family setting. This latter aspect reflects Old Testament images of covenantal agreements and fits well with the patriarchal orientation of Sindhi families.

6.5.11 Insider Movements Controversy

A current and divisive controversy in evangelical missiology, commonly referred to as “insider movements,” demonstrates the value of the covenant metaphor for understanding conversion in an Islamic context. The controversy centers on the question of whether or not Muslims can become true followers of Jesus and maintain their Islamic identity. The contentiousness of the issue can be seen in the theme “Can we Trust Insider Movements?” given to the September-October 2005 issue of *Mission Frontiers* journal and Ralph Winter’s (2005) editorial comment, “First of all, be warned: many mission donors and prayer warriors, and even some missionaries, heartily disagree with the idea.” In April 2011 Salaam ministries separated from the mission agency Frontiers in Canada because of a sharp disagreement over the issue. Frontiers remains open to those who want to pursue this methodology, while Salaam ministries considers the approach illegitimate (Nikides

2011:6). The practice has also been referred to as “C5 evangelism”²⁹⁴ (Travis 1998) and “messianic Muslims” (Travis 2000:53). R Lewis (2007:75) defines an insider movement as

any movement to faith in Christ where a) the gospel flows through pre-existing communities and social networks, and where b) believing families, as valid expressions of the Body of Christ, remain inside their socioreligious communities, retaining their identity as members of that community while living under the Lordship of Jesus Christ and the authority of the Bible.

The dialogue around this issue has been extensive, lasting a number of years with unfortunate misunderstandings and misrepresentations common to sensitive topics that people fear may lead to heretical practices or the neglect of key Christian rituals such as baptism or the celebration of the Lord’s Supper.²⁹⁵ However, the interaction has led to some distinctions and parameters that can guide the practitioner towards appropriate contextualization. TC Tennent (2006:101-115), in his examination of C5 contextualization, provides one of the more coherent and thoughtful critiques of the methodology. His conclusion is that it is *not* legitimate to encourage “a C5 ‘Muslim’ to identify himself or herself as a Muslim, fully part and parcel of the religious and cultural life of Islam... after they have accepted Jesus Christ as Lord and savior” (:104). Focusing on the primary issue of religious identity, he considers three areas: biblical exegesis, key theological concepts such as soteriology and ecclesiology, and ethics. Concerning the exegesis of biblical passages used to support insider movements, he concludes that these passages exclude the continuity of any religious identity that would contradict key tenets of the Christian faith. Because Islamic religious identity requires adherence to the prophethood of Muhammad, the sacred perfection and superiority of the Qur’an and a rejection of Allah’s Triune nature, he views a concurrent identity as a follower of Christ irreconcilable with the passages examined (:107). Regarding theology, Tennent is concerned about the downplaying of traditional orthodox doctrines among advocates of insider movements, particularly the affirmations of the

²⁹⁴ The C1 to C6 spectrum provides a scale of distinctions from a non-contextualized, outsider approach that incorporates converts into an outsider setting (C1) through to converts who remain secret believers within their social context (C6). C5 refers to “Christ-centered Communities of ‘Messianic Muslims’ Who Have Accepted Jesus as Lord and Savior” (Travis 1998) in which converts retain their Muslim identity and practices. This is distinct from C4 which maintains insider language, culture and “biblically permissible” religious forms but the members are not identified as Muslim.

²⁹⁵ For example, during an open discussion on Insider Movements at the ISFM Orlando conference, HL Richard (2009:180) comments that “some will say, ‘Baptism is tradition, we can do away with it’ and others will say ‘No, no, no, Baptism is not tradition, but any way you want to do it is fine,’ but still others think the Bible insists on baptism being done in one particular way.”

Trinity, Jesus' deity and his resurrection (:110). He distinguishes between a minimal understanding required for the personal justification of the *individual* which will change and grow, and the more stable confession of the *church* that establishes a common faith declaration for the community (:110). "Undoubtedly, millions of people come to Christ every year with a deficient theology. But it is central to the task of discipleship to help new believers conform their faith to the faith of the church. Pragmatism and cultural accommodations can never be allowed to trump the theological integrity of the gospel message" (:112). In the third section regarding ethics, he questions the legitimacy of claiming an identity as a Muslim without acknowledging the critical discontinuities between orthodox Islam and Christian claims about Jesus (:113).

This research project addresses some of Tennent's fears from a somewhat oblique angle that allows believers the freedom to work out their own definitions and identity without dismissing the validity of his concerns. Following a bounded-set versus centered-set distinction,²⁹⁶ a centered methodology is employed as opposed to the assumed boundary approach that defines "Muslim" and "Christian" camps in which people must find their identity. Beginning with a covenant commitment instead of a religious identity, the individuals or communities are called to work out their faith according to that covenant within their context. Rather than asking believers to make a choice between two identities and to explore theological implications tied to religious tradition, they are encouraged to focus on the implications of the covenant they have made with respect to Jesus and the Bible.²⁹⁷ This does not mean that there will not come a time when outside pressures will demand a declaration concerning an exclusive identity within a broader community. However, by focusing on a covenantal commitment coupled with an ongoing process of discovering and developing theological expressions of their faith, individuals and communities have time and contemplative space to explore the implications of their faith in order to confidently understand and declare their place and identity within broader faith communities.

Using this covenant paradigm, Tennent's exegetical concerns can be dealt with via a dialectical relationship between the faith of the community and the text. This in turn can be supplemented by establishing a dialectical relationship with other believing communities to test and affirm their faith. By establishing an ongoing process centered on covenantal concerns, the

²⁹⁶ See 5.2 for a description of these concepts.

²⁹⁷ The latter restriction of submission to the authority of the Bible is deemed sufficient to consider a participant in the research a "believer." Nonetheless, even though this limits the application of the thesis to the controversy, the overall pattern advocated in this section demonstrates how the parameter of a covenantal relationship with Jesus could also be considered.

implications of identity are deflected until other outside pressures require them to choose a bounded–set answer.

Similarly, theological concerns are addressed through a movement *towards* a community faith declaration, rather than assuming a static doctrinal formulation. Engaging a biblical or Christological focus of the covenantal commitment creates theological development that, if done with integrity, should lead to a biblically sound faith. Again, this can be supplemented by interaction with the faith expressions of other believing groups.

Finally, the ethical concerns raised by Tennent can be addressed by members of the group as they struggle with the dissonance created by their new faith commitment. This is not a matter of ignoring or downplaying critical discontinuities, but of regarding them as secondary to the primary concern of exploring the faith–text tension within their own life context. This theological development becomes the lens through which the community can speak with integrity concerning the contours of their identity within the broader Islamic community. This does not assume that the community will consider itself a part of Christianity or, alternatively, a branch within Islam. Instead the desire is to initiate a process by which members of the community work out the implications of their faith commitment centered on Jesus and on God’s Word and allow that dialogue to be the primary influence that shapes their identity. The approach of Kritzinger’s (2010) praxis matrix to ask penetrating questions around core concerns is an example of how such a dialogue could be initiated and guided towards a positive outcome.

6.6 Culture Texts

The data consists of *culture texts* drawn from interviews with Sindhis. Culture texts are the units of thoughts and expressions generated²⁹⁸ by interview participants as they reflect on the presentation of a scripture passage and are communicated in a variety of forms, styles and genres. The term “culture texts” is adopted from Schreier (1985) and replaces the phrase “cultural elements” used in my (Naylor 2004:11) Masters dissertation. Schreier (1985:61) explains that

the culture text is the basic unit of analysis. It can consist of a single sign, but more commonly it is a series of interlocking signs, held together by a set of codes and/or by a common message. One culture text can serve as a subset of a larger culture text as well (e.g., the gestures that are part of a ritual; the gestures can be understood as a separate sign system).

The two terms are nearly synonymous, but with distinctions important to this research project. By

²⁹⁸ See 2.1.1.4.6 for an explanation of how the culture texts are “generated” in the interviews.

cultural elements, I (Naylor 2004:13) referred to the

verbal ‘signs’ or reference points that the insiders of a culture will utilize to express the way a particular concept or item has affected them. They represent the culturally shaped perspective of reality within the person’s mind. They are the symbols of the cultural experience that express values and beliefs which are self-evident to the insiders.

While similar to this description, “culture texts” is a more helpful term for four reasons. First, it is a more commonly accepted phrase in academic circles. Second, while both terms refer to signs that point to cultural realities, culture texts is narrower in focus by only referring to those elements of culture that convey a particular message. So, for example, while the cultural element of “narrative” can refer to the *medium* of a story or event irrespective of the content, Schreiter’s term more appropriately emphasizes the *meaning* of a particular narrative that has significance for the community. Third, Schreiter (1985:61-70) views culture texts within a semiotic consideration of culture. This approach understands culture as a system of communication in which messages “circulate,” “speak” to the identity of the group and are expressions of social change. In particular, he notes that culture texts found in artistic and religious expressions provide rich and complex insights into the deeper forces of culture (:63). These dynamics make culture texts useful for mapping theological trajectories. Fourth, culture texts emphasize the community as the author of meaning. In contrast, cultural elements point towards the “inward perception of reality... as perceived by and which has significance for the hearer” (Naylor 2004:13). While this still allows cultural elements to refer to “the ‘signs’ which point to the society’s deeper concerns” (:13), the emphasis of culture texts on community as the locus of meaning is more helpful when determining the theological trajectory of an emerging church.

To illustrate this, consider the earrings my wife, Karen, wears which consist of 3 concentric circles. They are a cultural element that expresses an aesthetic value concerning beauty and gender. However, they are not culture texts because they are not *signs* that convey a message. My wife could invent a text (for example, circles refer to eternity, and the three circles indicate the Trinity), but this would still not be a culture text that relies on the community for its meaning. On the other hand, if she wore crosses on her earrings, this would be a culture text since it is a sign that has meaning beyond the preference of the individual.

Schreiter (1985:62) reminds us that “texts can be verbal and nonverbal, visual, auditory, and tactile, simple and highly complex. A culture can also be viewed as a hierarchy of such texts, where one text incorporates another.” Any combination of signs that carries a particular message

within a culture is, therefore, a culture text. In this study, the important culture texts are those that express perceptions and beliefs beyond the interviewees' own personal preference and which are primarily found in narratives and statements that disclose the participants' "perspective of God." The identification of culture texts is narrowed further by insisting that they correspond to referents within the presented passage. They are not necessarily *descriptions* of the textual referents, but are "representative of the referent" (Naylor 2004:53). Thus culture texts meet at least two criteria:²⁹⁹ (1) they communicate a cultural message beyond the personal preference of the individual and (2) they have an identifiable connection to the Bible passage read. In essence, culture texts provide a bridge between the context and the passage that communicates the participant's faith as stimulated through an understanding of the passage using contextually identifiable meanings. Thus culture texts are a communication of the dialectical relationship created by the presentation of a text of scripture as diagrammed by the faith–text–context triangle.³⁰⁰

The interview participants encounter the meaning and significance of the translated text through referents in their cultural setting. The generated culture texts reveal the understanding, images and emotions evoked by the translation choices in the passage as the participants engage God's Word according to their frame of reference. This interconnection between two sign systems, one of the text and the other of the culture, shapes and reveals the insiders' faith. When interconnections between the sign systems make sense to members of the culture this would ordinarily "come as a new insight into behavior and identity, which reinforces the individual's or the community's sense of what they are about, who they are, and where they are located in the world" (Schreier 1985:56). That is, their faith is challenged to respond to the text–context tension in order to maintain or restore equilibrium³⁰¹ between what they assume to be true and the input from the passage, and this response is in the form of culture texts. A repeated application of this interview methodology could stimulate the development of the believers' theology, driving the hermeneutical spiral upward³⁰² if the community maintains an ongoing dialogue centered on a text–faith tension.

6.6.1 "Perspectives of God" and Metaphorical Language in Culture Texts

Since all theology is a human construct, it is *Sindhi* expressions of the nature and character of God

²⁹⁹ See 9.1.1 for four criteria used to identify the research data, including the two mentioned here.

³⁰⁰ See Figure 3: *Faith-Text-Context Interaction* in 5.4.

³⁰¹ A description of four possible responses from readers to restore equilibrium is in 1.4.4.

³⁰² See 8.3 for a description of the hermeneutical spiral.

that are pertinent and reveal their “perspective of God.”³⁰³ Sindhi believers use cultural images to express their posture as believers before God in a covenantal relationship.³⁰⁴ This perspectival concept stems from a critical realist assumption that any understanding of God is culturally defined. From a *Christian* critical realist standpoint, God is real in an absolute sense but beyond our ability to perceive and experience in an absolute fashion. Nonetheless, our ability to develop knowledge of God is possible based on the assumption of God’s self-revelation and occurs through the medium of our cultural and societal grids. In this orientation to reality, knowledge is intersubjective and relational which implies that the only way we can describe God is through the concepts, images and metaphors we have access to in our context, and it is by these means that God reveals the divine essence. We interpret and experience our connection to God through the tools we have at hand and into which we have been enculturated.

Another way to express this is to recognize that all our experiences and knowledge of God are metaphorical.³⁰⁵ Metaphors facilitate communication because they relate concepts to symbols and experiences familiar to us. Metaphorical language does not *obscure* reality, nor is it *less than* what we can know about a particular phenomenon via propositional statements. The metaphor is itself the channel through which we come into the closest contact possible with a particular aspect of reality.³⁰⁶ McKnight (2007:37,38,39) explains that

Metaphors are not in need of decoding or unpacking but of *indwelling*.... We cannot unpack the metaphors to find the core, reified truth in a proposition that can be stated for all time in a particular formula. We have the metaphors and they will lead us there, but they are what we have.... [The] Christian claim is that metaphors do work: they get us there.

I (Naylor 2010c & 2010d) have argued elsewhere that a contextualization of the gospel message requires the discovery of relevant metaphors already present in the receptor culture in order to communicate the significance of the unique event of the cross. The meaningful connection with a reality already known within a culture is the means by which the gospel can be engaged.

³⁰³ This is an objective genitive referring to the believers’ concepts about God. See 1.2 in which the phrase is used to frame a research question dealing with theological trajectories.

³⁰⁴ See 6.5.10 for the covenantal framework used to describe conversion.

³⁰⁵ This understanding of metaphor is consonant with the critical realist epistemology described in 7.6.1 that views our experience of reality as perspectival, and also with 7.2 that outlines God’s revelation of the divine nature in and through human cultural constructs.

³⁰⁶ Wen-Shu Lee (2000:217-224) provides support for this claim through the examination of idiomatic language in intercultural communication. Idioms are the means by which relevance of a concept to a person’s “lifeworld” is obtained.

Identifying and generating perspectives of God within a people group is equivalent to discovering familiar metaphors present within the culture that resonate with the hearer as appropriate descriptions of the self-revelation of God. These metaphors connect to a network of cultural images and experiences that enhance, develop and deepen the participants' perspectives on the nature of God. In claiming that all theology is "a variation on a sacred text," Schreiter (1985:80) provides a similar thought using the language of semiotics. A culture text with theological content conveys a message by maintaining the same codes (the cultural metaphor), but varying the signs (what the metaphor signifies). In the same way, the interview participants' perspectives of God are revealed through the images, narratives and descriptions that have cultural significance for them. While in one sense any human attempt to describe God is woefully inadequate, in another sense, it is precisely this vehicle of language that God has granted humanity through which we may communicate the deepest relationships and meanings of our lives. It is through such expressions that the hearer may approach the speaker's intent, as opposed to propositional statements that fail to communicate the significance of a personal connection with God.

Schreiter (1985:69) explains further that metaphors are generated when two distinct signs are linked and all the other associations with those signs are then connected in creative ways. For example, when the apostle John describes the church as the bride of Christ (Rev 21:2,9), he links two signs together which contain separate messages – "church" and "bride" – but in a way that expands the understanding of "church" to include many of the characteristics of "bride." In fact, both concepts carry more meanings than before they were linked. In this way metaphors are the essence of culture texts. When describing their perspectives of God, the participants link two signs, such as "God" and "father," to reveal the nature of God by means of their own cultural experiences. Because of the metaphorical nature of such expressions, culture texts are the language of their lives by which they can communicate their perception of God.

Conversely, the inability to connect with a metaphor destroys the communicative intent. For example,

a number of Muslim guests that I entertained in Pakistan would express disagreement over the concept of calling God "Father." Their arguments were logical, based on literal and biological assumptions: "God is Spirit, a father must have a body" and "To be a father, a person needs to have physical relationships with a woman," and "We are creations of God, not his physical offspring." Because of their rational critique they were unable to enter into a relationship with God as father; they failed to embrace the metaphor in the way it was intended (Naylor 2010d).

Metaphors are more important than logical explanations because they allow us to connect a concept, in this case “God,” to experiential reality, where we *live*. Just as knowing my family in a relational and experiential sense is more important to me than knowing *about* them, so metaphors function as the connection with experiential life that allows us to know God. It is by means of these metaphors, the connection to common and shared cultural experiences, that the participants’ perspectives of God are revealed.

6.7 Summary

Chapter 6 provides the anthropological dimensions of the theoretical framework. The validity of exploring diversity and change within cultural contexts is argued for and a theoretical basis for the contextualization of an outsider message is proposed. Contextualization as the effort of the outsider to present the gospel message to insiders is described as distinct from inculturation which is the action of insiders incorporating the message as an integral part of their faith. The phenomenon of conversion is studied based on the assertion that this research project is an exploration of an ongoing conversion event occurring among Sindhi believers. Parameters for conversion are developed through consideration of shifts in cosmology, individual versus group conversions and the phenomenon of theological shifts in the Islamic world. For Sindhi believers, the metaphor of covenant in terms of a change of allegiance is employed as a framework for considering the conversion event out of which theological trajectories emerge. Finally the concept of *culture texts* is developed as expressions generated through interaction between the biblical text and the participants’ context that reveal their faith. The following chapter continues the development of the theoretical framework through a consideration of theological and epistemological assumptions. Since the primary concern of this thesis is the identification of theological trajectories, an explanation of theological praxis, narrative theology and contextualized theology is presented, followed by arguments for a critical realist epistemology.

CHAPTER 7. Theological / Epistemological Assumptions

If faith is defined as the entire range of meaning-making encompassed by worldview, beliefs and values, then theology is the articulation and act of faith shaped by a commitment to and reflection on God's revelation of the divine nature and character within a cultural context. This relationship between theology and faith allows for an identification of a contextualized theology among a local community of believers. As God's Word speaks into a particular context, the listeners' faith is challenged and shaped leading to new and altered convictions about God's relationship to the world and to themselves. It is these verbal and acted out convictions developed from a reflection on God's revelation that constitute theology.

While affirming the validity of the grassroots nature of an emerging contextualized theology by local believers and the need for it to be heard, this does not assume an *a priori* affirmation of the theology, nor does it require a neutral stance on the part of the researcher. The trajectory may very well be in a direction that undermines the intent of scripture, is based on a misunderstanding of a particular passage of scripture or it may involve syncretism.³⁰⁷ Nonetheless, any critical stance on the part of an outsider must be done cautiously and with humility for "what we observe in the faith experience of many Indigenous communities is the practice that we contemptuously call syncretism, but for them it is the living of their faith" (Tamez 2006:22).

The focus of this study is on the trajectory or direction in which the theology of grassroots theologians is heading at the time of the research, rather than identifying a theological starting point or the influences shaping their faith. This is a missiological application of the "redemptive-movement hermeneutic" of Webb (2001:31) or the concept of "progressive revelation" (Mickelsen 1963:352) whereby God brings us on a journey deeper and deeper into divine truth. While Webb and Mickelson are referring to the chronological development of God's revelation throughout biblical history, the application of that dynamic within ethno-linguistic expressions of the reign of God is argued for and tested in this thesis based on the *missio Dei*.

7.1 Missio Dei

Missio Dei or the mission of God is the broader reality within which the biblical text must be viewed in order to find an adequate framework for our interpretation and theology. Bosch (1980:75-83) gives biblical support for the priority of God's mission in his book *Witness to the*

³⁰⁷ See an explanation of the negative connotation of syncretism intended in 5.13.

world, and he (1991:494) states unequivocally that

theology, rightly understood, has no reason to exist other than critically to accompany the *missio Dei*.... It is not a case of theology occupying itself with the missionary enterprise as and when it seems to it appropriate to do so; it is rather a case of mission being that subject with which theology is to deal. For theology it is a matter of life and death that it should be in direct contact with mission and the missionary enterprise.

CJH Wright (2006:41) declares that the biblical story must be read in the light of Christ, a “messianic reading,” and according to the “missional story... that flows from the mind and purpose of God in all the scriptures for all the nations. That is a missional hermeneutic of the whole Bible.” This is fully compatible with the claim that theology is reflection on the nature and character of God because God is revealed in and through the divine purposes and actions in history. God’s actions are both the source of our relationship with the one that Jesus taught us to call “Our Father” (Mt 6:9) and our incorporation as partners in the divine mission.

A theology of *missions*, therefore, begins and ends with God’s mission. The source and locus of missions, defined as the role and responsibility of the people of God in fulfilling the Great Commission (Mt 28:18-20), must be God’s mission to the world. The missionary God is present from the pursuit of Adam and Eve in the garden of Eden (Gen 3:9), to the *Shekinah* glory “for all nations” in Zion (Ps 96:1-6), to the ultimate revelation and salvation found in the Son who was “sent” by the Father (Jn 17:8). The Son sends his followers to join in the mission (Jn 20:21), but at no time is the primary role of God as the missionary God displaced. When the apostles are commissioned in Acts 1, they are instructed to go to Jerusalem and “wait for” the Holy Spirit. The coming of the Spirit did not signify the “passing of a baton,” but rather an affirmation of their participation in God’s mission. Peter’s message in Acts 2 affirms this theological basis for missions because the resurrection of the Messiah means that Jesus’ exaltation has resulted in, not the displacement of the primacy of God’s mission, but the continuation and expansion of that mission through the “pouring out” of the Holy Spirit upon God’s people (Acts 2:33). It has often been noted that the “Acts of the Apostles” would more appropriately be called the “Acts of the Holy Spirit” because of this emphasis. Finally, the eschatological culmination of the *missio Dei* is not accomplished *by* the church, but *for* the church through Jesus Christ’s return (Rev 21:1-4). Therefore,

we should not understand mission in terms of the church, but the church in terms of mission. And that the one multi-dimensional mission is *God’s* mission, a gracious divine initiative rooted in the Trinity. The church’s mission (or missions) is then human participation in God’s work in the earth. This clearly requires a good

pneumatology, since it is the Holy Spirit who establishes that delicate correlation between God's work and human work, God's gracious initiative and our faithful participation in it (Kritzinger 2010:5).

The assumption that God continues to work out the divine mission of redemption for all nations through the Holy Spirit provides hope of finding theological trajectories among local believers in a specific context. As they interact with and submit to God's revelation, the Holy Spirit continues the work of redemption through them and transforms their hearts and minds in Christ Jesus (Rom 12:1-2).

7.2 A Theology of Contextualization

A primary assumption behind the concept of contextualization is that Christianity opposes the idea of a "hermetically sealed culture as the exclusive conveyance of God's truth" (Sanneh 1989:30). An argument for this assumption is important in light of the negative view towards contextualization in some Christian evangelical circles. Many in the fellowship of churches in which I have membership adhere to a reformed doctrine that is considered to be a universal expression of God's truth.³⁰⁸ From such a perspective contextualization can be viewed as a potential compromise of the gospel. It is therefore important to demonstrate that God is the primary example of how the divine message is contextualized, and that our call to "go and make disciples of all nations" (Mt 28:19) is a call to contextualization.

God is the initiator of communication. The revelation of the divine self requires an interpretation or presentation of truth in a way intelligible to people. As such, "every theological revelation and construction is contextual and indigenous" (Yeo 1998:2) whether done by God *for people* or done by people *for themselves*. Scripture gives clear examples of how theology is conveyed in and through the language of the people being addressed. As the one who is the first and primary speaker (Gen 1:3), God communicates the divine nature through creation, and at the apex of creation through Adam and Eve (Gen 1:27). The declaration of creation as "good" and the creation of humanity in the divine image as "very good" indicates that God's revelation can and does flow through creation in ways human beings can comprehend. Consistently throughout

³⁰⁸ At the time of writing I am engaged in the promotion of a leadership development project that uses the "Socratic method" of dialogue (LeadersFor 2012) which is, in essence, a contextualizing method of helping students engage the scriptures and each other with a view to the concerns and perspectives of their context. Nonetheless, many of the promoters of the method view the materials used as purely biblical and universal, despite the North American theologically conservative slant in the texts.

biblical history, from Adam and Eve in the garden when God walked and talked with them, to the tower of Babel when *Yahweh* “comes down” to see what people are doing, and on to communication through the prophets, God accommodates to the local context. *Yahweh* speaks the local language, addresses the cultural questions and uses local rites and symbols to communicate the divine message. God engages people within all the facets of human experiences, narratives and meaning-filled expressions. In a word, *Yahweh contextualizes*, limiting communication to the range of our comprehension. “Scripture reveals the gospel to us in terms of the Triune God's actions in relation to a particular people in all the particularities of their time and place in the world over many generations” (Shenk 2006:9).

God did not create a world in which a neutral, non-culturally shaped, absolute theology would be possible and equally accessible to all. Rather, all the divine messages, even the ultimate *logos* become flesh (Jn 1:14), come culturally shaped and are translated and interpreted into a myriad of cultures thus creating several windows onto reality. The culturally diverse nature of indigenous theologies cannot be resolved or integrated by our limited perspective. That is neither required nor desirable, because while God is a God of order, the divine Trinity is also one of diversity. Contextualized perspectives of revelation come together in an eschatological hope that in the last day these finite windows onto the infinite Truth will serve to reveal that Truth in a multifaceted way. They are like threads of a tapestry; we can only explore a limited number, but ultimately the complete tapestry will be revealed in all its glory.

Peter Enns (2005:27) suggests that the creation stories of Genesis could be a contextualization of ancient near east (ANE) stories already in existence, such as the Babylonian *Enuma Elish*. It may be that the Genesis narratives deliberately follow the patterns common to the time and context for the sake of providing a contrast to the gods depicted in those stories. The “God of Israel is *truly* mighty and... *solely* and *fully* in control of the cosmos. His creation of the world is an act of his will, not the result of a power struggle within a dysfunctional divine family.” It could therefore be argued that the Bible begins with a contextualization, not only because it is in the Hebrew language and uses the concepts familiar to the people of that time, but also because it applies narratives common to the time that resonate with the hearers in order to communicate truths about God’s nature.

As a further example of contextualization within scripture, Peterson (2007:119) discusses the use of Hittite covenant formulas in the Pentateuch noting that God adapts the cultural form of the “suzerain-vassal treaty” already in existence in the ANE context, thus creating both continuity

and discontinuity by taking what was familiar to the Children of Israel and using it for a new purpose to establish the divine relationship with the nation.

Peterson (2007:121) also points out that circumcision was neither new nor unique to the Hebrews. Circumcision was already practiced in that context, in Egypt as early as 2400 BC, well before Abraham was commanded to circumcise in Genesis 17. However, God maintained the significance and impact of the ritual while transforming the meaning so that it represented the special relationship of *Yahweh* with the covenant people, creating “a new, powerful *message* about who He is and how He acts.” That is, God contextualized the message through a known ritual that would resonate with Abraham and his descendants.

In the New Testament, the incarnation of Jesus is the key paradigm for a theology of contextualization. He is the *logos* of God, the ultimate word that the creator God speaks in order to reveal the divine nature (Jn 1:1). That Word becomes human (Jn 1:14) and is the basis of the Christian belief in the incarnation – God in human flesh. God accommodates to us by contextualizing the divine nature in one body, at one point in history, in one culture. Thus, as Christians we believe that God can be known and the gospel message heard through contextually specific human interaction, even as Jesus revealed the Father. Yeo (1998:2) goes further to state that the incarnation of Christ speaks not just about the *possibility*, but the critical *need* for the truth to become flesh. The incarnation reveals the necessity of a complementary revelation–culture dialogue; it is not only that God’s revelation impacts us, but our situation also “cries out for God’s response.”

The four Gospels tell four different versions of the story of Jesus, each with its own theological interpretation of the narrative and each designed for a distinct audience (Flemming 2005:297). This encourages us to recognize that diverse cultures reveal different facets of the gospel as they ask their own culturally specific questions and engage God’s word according their unique perspectives.

Furthermore, Jesus’ method of teaching is an example of contextualization. Flemming (2005:21) points out that Jesus consistently used local resources to reveal his theology. When he preached he used the language, concepts and rhetorical forms common to the Jewish culture of his day. Jesus communicated using the familiar, concrete objects of daily life. Even the miracles revealing his glory dealt with the direct concerns and daily needs of the people: wine, food, diseases and demons.

From the book of Acts on, the gospel mission to the Gentiles was one of

contextualization, a creative exploration of discovering and developing the meaning of the gospel within the contexts of the day. The Spirit's coming at Pentecost is probably the strongest declaration that the gospel can and must be contextualized. The impact of the Spirit was not to change all spoken languages into one, but to sanctify the many languages by having the one gospel spoken in many tongues. Bible translation is a form of contextualization that has its roots in this act of the Spirit. The *missio Dei* is the force behind translation through which the boundaries of the proclamation are enlarged (Sanneh 1989:31). Sanneh (1989:47) goes on to affirm two aspects of the “incipient radical pluralism of Pauline thought” which are that God does not “absolutize any one culture” as the standard for all, and that all cultures “have upon them the breath of God's favor, thus cleansing them of all stigma of inferiority and untouchability.” All cultures are suitable environments for the gospel. Not because they are pure, holy and deserving of God's presence, but because they are suitable vehicles to display the glory of God and thereby develop purity. This is reflected as well in the individual and corporate nature of human beings: even though we are fallen, we can also become temples of the Holy Spirit (1 Cor 3:16, 6:9).

The battle over circumcision for the Gentiles (Acts 15, Gal 2:12; 5:11-12), a watershed moment for the Christian faith, was an issue of contextualization that revealed the struggle to present a Christian theology for a non-Jewish context. The handling of that issue by the apostles in the first century is a model to us of how we are to work through the text-context tension in a manner that preserves the integrity of the gospel while honoring and embracing cultural distinctives. It is not the concluding admonitions of the council (Acts 15:20) that should be considered universal, but the process by which they struggled to discern the way the gospel was to be expressed in a new setting.

Each of the metaphors of the gospel is a cultural expression, and therefore an aspect of contextualization, that connects the meaning of the cross to concrete realities of day-to-day life.

The gospel message originates with God and is communicated through his word, but the medium of communication is the culture of the hearers. To communicate the meaning of the cross to the first century believers, many everyday metaphors, familiar to them, were used: sacrificial images, redemption/ransom pictures, salvation/deliverance metaphors, judicial/forensic language, concepts of forgiveness. Many of these connected with the action of God in the history of Israel (e.g., concepts of salvation, redemption and sacrifice) while others drew on common social structures of the time (e.g., familial, slavery and judicial images) (Naylor 2010d).

One could even say that the gospel does not exist outside of culture. Without the means of expression, there is no possibility of proclaiming or hearing the “good news.”

Flemming (2005:297) points out that the epistles draw out the theological and ethical implications of the gospel message for different communities of believers. The authors “tailored” their theological reflection to the circumstances and pastoral needs of particular churches. They articulated the good news using their own “styles, literary genres, vocabularies, perspectives and persuasive strategies.” All of this is an application of contextualization as the apostles expressed Christian truth in the thought patterns of those to whom they wrote (Kraft 1978). The apostle Paul is an obvious example as he contextualizes Israel's scriptures into the life situation of the New Testament churches using the gospel as an interpretive matrix³⁰⁹ (Flemming 2005:167). Sedmak (2002:17) describes specific actions that reveal Paul's contextualizing efforts:

- Paul lived with the people.
- He spoke a language that reached them; he preached the gospel "not with wisdom and eloquence" (1 Cor 1:17).
- He used the language of the local people (Rom 3:5; 6:19; 1 Cor 3:2).
- He adapted to the lives of his hosts (1 Cor 9:20-22; Phil 4:11).
- He used the circumstances of life to determine the measurement with which to judge (Rom 2:12; Mt 7:1-2). "Give no offense to Jews or to Greeks or to the church of God" (1 Cor 10:32 ESV; see also 1 Pet 2:12f).

This approach on the part of the apostles would not have been done by design *against* their natural tendencies, rather it indicates that their assumptions about communication were based on an Old Testament model, the life and teachings of Jesus and the affirmation of language and culture in the Pentecost event.

7.3 Theology as Praxis

Praxis refers to the “constant interplay between theory and practice, acting and thinking, praying and working, towards any kind of transformative religious or social goal” (Kritzinger 2010:7). Holland & Henriot (1983:8) describe this dynamic as the “on-going relationship between reflection and action.” Reflection has two aspects, a social analysis that evaluates the effect of action on the context as well as the need for further action, and a theological reflection that considers the implications of faith commitments in the context of those actions. Theological

³⁰⁹ For example, in the book of Romans, as was made evident to us in the Sindhi Bible translation work, Paul references Abraham, the father of the Jewish nation, as justified by faith, not by the works of the law (Rom 4:1-3).

reflection must make a difference in people's lives to be valid; contemplation must also lead to action (Schreier 1985:17). Kritzinger (2010:9-10) describes a "contextual mission praxis" that is contextual by dealing with a specific community, integrative because it deals with a variety of dimensions in the society, and refers to a reflective group process in which change agents "rethink their theology and activities in the light of their context analysis." Sedmak (2002:79) speaks of "doing theology," a phrase that reflects the essence of praxis, as an attempt to make our hidden values explicit in action and response. This implies that theological engagement needs to be sensitive to the dynamics of a particular culture, enter into ongoing dialogue with that culture and ultimately impact the culture in transforming ways.

Traditionally, the praxis model has been associated with liberation theology. However, as Bevans (1992:66) points out, one can "theologize by acting reflectively and reflecting on one's actions" without requiring a liberation theology. Bevans & Schroeder (2004:71) write that praxis is accomplished through action done out of commitment to the gospel in order to effect social change. Driven by a gospel commitment, Christians respond to their setting, reflect on the results of their action through social analysis, consider the value of the initiative through scriptural reflection, and "then act again in a more enlightened and, it is hoped, a more effective way."

For this thesis *theology as praxis* or *theological praxis* represents a nuanced version of these definitions. First, in evaluating an emerging Christian faith in a Muslim setting, the theological reflection from an evangelical standpoint centers on God's revelation³¹⁰ that engages our deepest convictions and commitments in ways that shape our lives. While acknowledging the influence of Christian traditions and theological formulations that are part of the believers' theological reflection, scripture is given ultimate authority as the word of God that speaks into the lives of believers. Interpretation of scripture is always influenced by the presuppositions brought to the text, such as those formed by other traditions; however, the orientation of theological reflection for this thesis emphasizes how scripture impacts faith in the text-faith dynamic.

Second, theological praxis in this study is concerned with the fundamental paradigm shift or covenantal commitment³¹¹ that fuels transforming action coupled with theological and sociological reflection. Even when praxis among believers is not as reflective and intentional as in

³¹⁰ God's revelation is not limited to scripture, a reality affirmed by the Bible itself (e.g., Ps 19), but the primary concern in this thesis is with the biblical text.

³¹¹ See 6.5.10 for the significance of covenant in the conversion dynamic.

Bevans & Schroeder’s description, the perception that monotheists³¹² have of God, whether consciously or not, is reflected in the choices and actions that they make each day, and this also impacts society. For example, relationships and roles in the family are patterned after underlying beliefs concerning the way God relates to us. If God is revered as a passionate, jealous³¹³ patriarch, this validates a similar orientation for a father within his family. If God is viewed as a stern judge, a father will seek to make dispassionate and fair rulings according to a perceived standard. If God is accepted as a compassionate parent with a desire to bring about the best for his child, this will be reflected in the family dynamic (cf. Vanhoozer 2007:52). Therefore, theological praxis includes a reconstruction of reality, in particular a revelation of and commitment to a new relationship with God manifested in Jesus Christ that serves as the *motivation* behind reflection and action. This aspect of theological development is the “radical conversion(s)” referred to by Newbigin (1989:64) as

not only a conversion of the will and of the feelings but a conversion of the mind – a ‘paradigm shift’ that leads to a new vision of how things are and, not at once but gradually, to the development of a new plausibility structure in which the most real of all realities is the living God whose character is ‘rendered’ for us in the pages of scripture.

Thus both the “plausibility structure,” which is equivalent to the “perspective of God,” and the outworking of the implications of that new perspective in action constitute what this thesis considers to be theological praxis. Among Sindhi believers this emerging “plausibility structure” is the development of theology this study maps, expressions of the “conversion of the mind” revealed when believers encounter the authoritative Word and respond. However, the development of this theology is not through abstract formulations, but through the ways their belief is expressed and lived out within their context, whether or not there is planned and intentional action designed to impact society. Thus, along with the faith–text dynamic, the faith–context tension (or dance) in the faith–text–context triangle³¹⁴ is the arena of theological praxis. As people face the challenges brought to their faith by God’s revelation, there is a “conversion of

³¹² In principle, this statement holds for all people even if they do not have a theistic worldview because worldview has to do with perceptions of reality and thus acts as a guide to life according to that which is perceived as true. However, since this study considers the faith expressions of those within a Muslim context, the observation is limited to their monotheistic assumptions.

³¹³ In Sindhi the word used to translate the Hebrew *qanna* and Greek *zelos* (“jealous” and “zealous” are common English translations) is *ghErat*, which is a positive term that refers to the passion required by honor to destroy any deviation from that which is true and good and right.

³¹⁴ See Figure 3: *Faith-Text-Context Interaction* in 5.4.

the mind” leading to implications for action in their context.

The “plausibility structure” or “perspective of God” is revealed through the culture texts generated from reflection on scripture. Rather than attempting to discover and articulate theological *content* in terms of doctrinal affirmations or propositions,³¹⁵ the emphasis is on the theologizing *dynamic* by discovering how the believers’ relationship with God leads to new actions, orientations and roles in life. Unless the believers’ faith is lived out in their context so that their actions and responses demonstrate a reorientation to society because God has spoken, there is no theological trajectory. But at the same time, the “conversion of the mind” as the motivation for acts of obedience is also a critical part of the theologizing dynamic. Action in community together with articulations of the motives driving those acts work in tandem to reveal the believers’ theology.

7.3.1 Theological Validity

Based on this understanding of theological praxis, parameters can be established for what can legitimately be described as theology. As Schreier (1985:17) notes, “Not everything any community says or does can be called theology: otherwise theology itself becomes an empty concept.” He goes on to explain how the role of “community as theologian” ensures an adequate theology, that is, when people put expression to their faith and demonstrate transformation in conformity to their understanding of God’s will for them. In addition, the dialectical engagement between faith and text *coupled with* an interaction of faith and context provides a two-sided focus essential for a valid theology. First, this orientation acknowledges that God has spoken and, just as legitimate missions is located within the broader context of *missio Dei*, legitimate theology must be rooted in God’s revelation.³¹⁶ Second, a local theology cannot be validated by comparison to a proposed universal theology or a statement of faith created by believers in another time and place, but through the attitude of submission to God’s word lived out with integrity as believers apply the meaning in their context. This claim is based on the reality that any and all theology is a specific contextual and historical outworking of God’s revelation that is simultaneously limited by and revealed through human language, concepts and actions. This is not

³¹⁵ The point here is not to reject propositional statements of faith as illegitimate, but rather to recognize they are of “second-order importance” (Grenz 1996:171) as they provide one avenue of expression in the primary relational theology of praxis.

³¹⁶ The presence of the Bible and God’s communication with humanity assumes that appropriate and adequate comprehension is *possible*, as argued in 8.1. However, a mere possibility, while providing hope for communication, does not guarantee it.

to say that any one group can ignore the theological development of other cultures and eras or that humans are capable of attaining a satisfactory expression of their faith that does not need correction or reshaping. However, the development of acceptable theology must be founded upon an orientation to God's revelation that is reflected in community interaction – an ongoing communal contextualization that embodies God's mission within a particular setting, reflects the priorities determined by local challenges and engages in ecumenical dialogue (Kritzinger 2013) – rather than mere affirmation of one culturally and historically shaped theological formulation. Such a formulation will naturally emerge, even a series of contextual theologies (Schreiter 1985:25), but the initiation and ongoing vitality of that theological development primarily occurs through the dialectic of the faith–text tension worked out in daily life. A metaphor of music (Foder & Hauerwas 2004:81; NT Wright 2005:126-127; Green 2007:67-68; Kritzinger 2013) is again helpful. As the music of the gospel resonates within the praxis of the believing community it takes on an improvised or remixed form that is unique while remaining faithful to the original song, creating new melodies that enrich the church beyond the boundaries of the community itself.

Hirsch's (1967) concepts of "coherence" (:54) and the distinction between "meaning and subject matter" (:58) establish parameters that help assess and validate theology. Coherence is the concept that any implication must fit the entire pattern of meaning. When applied to theology, the question is whether there exists an appropriate "fit" or adequate coherence between the meaning of the text and the way the meaning is being contextualized in the new setting. Does the reconstruction of the passage reflect with integrity the author's intended purpose? This parallels the concept of resonance in which the reader adequately connects the meaning of scripture to their way of looking at the world so that there is impact. Hirsch's distinction between "meaning" and "subject matter" refers to the difference between a person's intention in referencing a concept, and the full implication of that concept. Hirsch (1967:59) illustrates this with the word "tree." A person can speak of a tree (meaning) without implying all there is to know about a tree (subject matter). The grassroots theologian does this intuitively by making sense of a passage (meaning) within their setting without exhausting the full implication of the passage (subject matter). By bringing both of Hirsch's concepts together, we can say that adequate theologies express coherence between biblical revelation and a context without exhausting the meaning of the text. As long as there is integrity with the text in that coherence, the theology communicates God's truth, yet it remains limited and only one facet of all God has revealed, demonstrating the need for

interaction with other contextual theologies. These parameters raise two questions: Who determines the author's original intent? And who determines adequate coherence? Briefly, the answer is through dialogue with the broader community of believers trusting in the guidance of the Holy Spirit as envisioned by the apostle Paul (Eph 3:14-20).³¹⁷

This perspective assumes that there is no single objective standard or universal theology against which a local theology can be measured to determine orthodoxy. Because theology is a human product, no theology is "normative" and we all suffer from "ideological captivity" in which our perspective is inevitably formed and conditioned by our particular mind-set (RM Brown 1978:78). All theologies, by definition, are cultural theologies. Theologies are like translations: human attempts to communicate the divine word. They are the outworking of a dialogue or interaction between God's word and experienced reality. Theology requires reflection, which is "the intellectual struggle to understand what it means to be the recipient of God's Word in this present world" (Wells 1993:99-100). It is making God's word relevant within a particular context at a particular time to meet particular needs.

Despite the diversity implied by the nature of theology, there have been proposals for a critical method or a set of standards that can act as a guide to determine the validity of emerging theologies.³¹⁸ Hiebert (1994:101), for example, attempted to develop a "metatheology," which was not an attempt to produce an objective or standardized *theology*, but rather consisted of a *set of procedures* "by which different theologies, each a partial understanding of the truth in a certain context, could be constructed." He was not promoting theological *certitude*, but was concerned with identifying the real possibility of *deviance* from the truth of God's Word. Inappropriate theology³¹⁹ could arise through a misunderstanding of the meaning of the text, a lack of submission to the text, or a lack of integrity in living out the contextual implications of the text.

Hiebert's (1994:102) attempt to propose a metatheology was based on

the principles used by the Anabaptists to test the orthodoxy of theologies. One principle is that the primary test is the scripture itself – the divinely superintended record of God's acts in history. Another principle is that humility and the willingness

³¹⁷ Interdependence among believing communities to affirm interpretations is discussed in 3.1.2.3.

³¹⁸ Shortly after the term contextualization became popular with missiologists, Haleblan (1983) provided an overview of attempts to standardize contextualization for the purpose of assessing local theologies, which included the definitions of Buswell, Kraft, Taber and Padilla. Although all provide insight into the concerns surrounding contextualization and local theologies, none have received broad acceptance and the conversation continues.

³¹⁹ This phrase is a play on words on the title of the book *Appropriate Christianity*, a collection of missiological papers edited by Charles Kraft (2005).

to be led by the Spirit are vital to the reading of scripture. The final principle is that the hermeneutical community checks interpretations and seeks consensus.

His first two principles correspond with the above mentioned assertion that theology needs to be rooted in God's Word and that an attitude of submission to the truth of God encountered in scripture is critical. The call for a strong pneumatology that flows from the *missio Dei* described in the second principle is also important. As Larkin (1988:100) notes, "Evangelicals who view Scripture as given in culture-bound or time-bound language hold that the Holy Spirit serves as teacher and guide to bridge the gap." Jesus' promise of the helper that will lead us in all truth (Jn 16:13) is the basis of our confidence that God will fulfill in us all that is in the divine plan (Phil 1:6). "Scripture in concert with the Spirit has the power to change us and to change our world" (JK Brown 2007:250).

Hiebert adds a third or "final principle" for validating theology. The principle of the hermeneutical community³²⁰ acknowledges that the unity of the truth of God requires reflection in the church of God. Believers and congregations are called to test each other's theology and be open to critique. Whiteman (2006:60) states, "in today's globalizing world, self-theology is not a license to develop theology in isolation from all others." Dialogue between theological positions allows for both critical evaluation of questionable theologies and for exposure to the insights gained from other people groups. Such interaction around the interpretation of scripture requires a spirit of humility and a willingness to learn (Hiebert 1994:31), postures essential to healthy dialogue. These three principles are not tools or algorithms by which a theology can be adjudicated, nor do they describe standard theological content. Rather they represent the orientation of the theologian and the theological method and are the minimum parameters of theological praxis that describe appropriate Christianity.

In describing a biblical pattern that goes beyond theological *method*, Hiebert (1994:95) also suggests core *content* for his metatheology.

[The apostles were willing] to accept a range of theological interpretations (1 Cor. 1:11-12) centered around the key affirmation of the lordship of Christ (1 Cor. 12:3; 1 John 2:22-23), his death and resurrection (1 Corinthians 15), and the historicity of God's acts in human history. These affirmations were the "givens," the implied information shared by early Christians who lived in primary, face-to-face communities, in which much of the information was shared through oral communication. In such a setting the question was one of theological limits.

³²⁰ The believing community as a hermeneutic of the gospel is developed in 2.5.3.2.

While affirming these truths as essential to Christian faith, I would argue that to introduce content is to go beyond *metatheology* to *theology*. That is, this statement is a human interpretation of God's revelation and therefore, by definition, an expression of a local theology. It is better to initially assess theologies based on a critical method of *doing* theology, such as with the praxis model employed in this study, than to assume a specific universal *content* without recognizing the contextual or faith influences that lie behind all theological formulations.

Similarly, Smalley (1991:181) refers to the role of the translator to represent the "original meaning" of the Bible for the purpose of establishing "a base line from which theological thinking can grow and against which theology can be evaluated." While it is true that an appropriate and careful translation limits distortion and communicates effectively, this expectation fits more with an epistemology of naïve realism. Translation is in and of itself a form of doing theology, a contextualizing that represents God's Word in cultural phrases and concepts, and so the "base line" proposed is somewhat of an illusion. Furthermore, any discussion of this "base line" carries with it assumptions and pre-understandings that shape the meaning of the text.

Van Rheenen's (1991:142) call to Western missiologists to "become better theologians, doing biblical theology, in order to formulate a theology of the kingdom" so that the gospel can be adequately preached also suffers from the same critique. This is not because a deeper comprehension of scripture is unnecessary, but because an assumed universal biblical theology is insufficient as a base line without a corresponding dialogue with the context. Instead, the call should be to stimulate emerging and interactive expressions of *culturally shaped* biblical theology.

Along the same lines, Kraft (1979:293-294) speaks of "ethnology," an etic approach of discovering "universally applicable theological categories of Christianity on the basis of analyses of many emic varieties." He states that the aim of "ethnology" is to create "transculturally applicable perspectives." Conn (1984:158) affirms this possibility seeing the analysis of emic theologies as a movement that "ends in etic theology as a product of that process." However, an analysis of emic theologies still produces an invariably relative and culturally shaped theological position because they can only be viewed from within a cultural context. The identification of "supracultural meanings" (Kraft 2005c:113) requires an abstract description that only gains meaning when passed through cultural filters. To assume that "universally applicable theological categories" are somehow more valid than the other culturally specific theological propositions is to fall into the trap of seeking the lowest common denominator

as the evidence of truth. Instead, it is precisely at the point of *difference* that the importance of emic theologies can be found as they present unique facets of the Christian faith. Those who end in a universal etic theology that is considered superior to emic theologies have deceived themselves on two fronts. First, the quality of being etic implies that it is not culturally shaped and second, that its universality makes it more valid or authoritative than any particular emic theology.

These critiques are not a rejection of the importance or validity of Hiebert's (1994:95) "key affirmations." They do not contradict a high view of scripture nor do they imply that a comparison of cultural theologies is invalid. They are not intended to undermine biblical theology nor claim that etic critiques of emic theologies are inappropriate. Rather, the point is that holding a set of affirmations or assuming that the Bible can be accessed as a "base line" to determine universal standards against which theological positions are measured is an insufficient methodology for critiquing or validating local theologies *because such approaches are also culturally shaped*. Kirkpatrick (1996:290) acknowledges that "Reason's failure to capture the original intent of Scripture through historical critical inquiry alone is actually itself an argument for the dialogical thinking that characterizes the hermeneutical spiral." Critiquing local theologies requires dialogue between text and context in the production of the translation, between faith and text in the understanding of the translated text, and between theologies to challenge, correct and affirm. In each stage the cultural dynamic is maintained and affirmed rather than passed over in favor of an assumed "supracultural" theology.

7.3.2 Theological Critique

Even though a "base line" of universal standards is not a valid concept, a critique of contextualized theologies is still possible and essential. In order to consider the possibility of an "upward spiral" of development or progress in theology, a critique or evaluation is implied. How can this be done without naïvely assuming access to an absolute standard or elevating our own cultural bias as the standard? At the other extreme is the danger of overemphasizing the influence culture has to shape our perspectives so that we consider ourselves incapable of challenging contextual theologies. Is it possible to discover and apply legitimate principles of critique without (1) forcing theologies to conform to a relative standard or (2) helplessly affirming all theological expressions because we lack an objective basis from which to judge? The argument here is that *critique is required to truly validate a contextual theology*. A rubber stamp of approval because of

unwillingness or inability to engage and evaluate is not validation, but an insult. True confirmation must come from engagement and testing otherwise it is empty of meaning. And without the possibility of disapproval and rejection, an assessment is neither honest nor valid. Contextual theology deserves an attentive orientation of “active listening”³²¹ with empathy and openness; however, such a posture does not imply a bias towards that theology. True respect and validation require the same level of rigorous examination as would be expected for any theological position, with the understanding that openness to correction is mutual.

The importance of mutuality cannot be underestimated, for a fair judgment of another’s work is not possible if the one judging assumes that their own position is inviolate. Such a posture is untenable for two reasons. First, it naïvely and incorrectly assumes that the culturally shaped assumptions that they hold do not need correction. Smalley (1991:178-179) points out that “people from different backgrounds inevitably read the Bible in partially different ways and... inevitably reach partially different understandings.” The cultural and historical localization of our thought means that we are not only incomplete in our understanding, but also mistaken to some degree. Secondly, an absolutist stance prevents the evaluator from truly engaging the presented theology. Because it is being evaluated against an assumed standard that has been developed in a different context, the presented theology is forced to answer questions it was not designed to address. Fortunately, while it requires vulnerability and courage, it is possible for a person to “bracket” (Creswell 1998:52) their own perspective and seek to view the presented work according to the values and assumptions of the other theologian. This is not agreement with or acquiescing to the other position, but a necessary prerequisite to truly understand. It is the basis of dialogue that allows both parties to engage each other and grow as “iron sharpens iron” (Prov 27:17).

From a biblical perspective, the call to “test the spirits” (1 Jn 4:1) is another motivation to critique contextualized theologies. Sanneh (1989:32) notes that we have “a substantial body of material in the Gospels that justifies adopting a profoundly critical stance toward culture by putting the interests of God above those of the culture.” The primary function of the prophetic role in the Old Testament was to correct wrong beliefs and actions evident in the lives of God’s people. As change agents, missionaries are called to take up that prophetic mantle because God speaks into cultural contexts in order to bring transformation. This implies both the possibility that

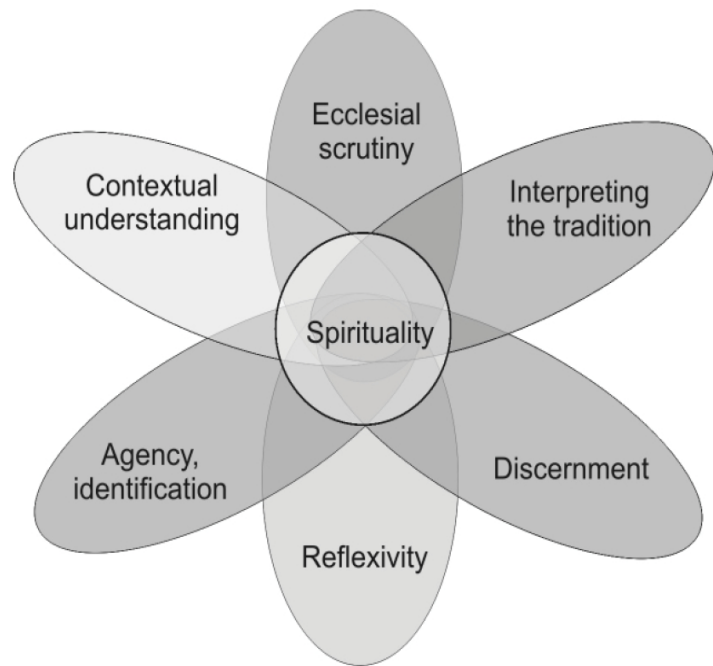
³²¹ See 3.1.2 for the approach of active listening to local theologies.

God’s message can be misrepresented and that there is a responsibility for both insiders and outsiders to address issues that do not do justice to God’s revelation.

Based on these arguments as well as a conviction that communication is possible and that there is determinate meaning to God’s revelation of truth,³²² the assumption of this thesis is that valid evaluations are both possible and necessary. They are *possible* because the act of God speaking into the human situation indicates that truth can be known. They are *necessary* in order to distinguish that which draws us closer to God’s truth from those teachings that deviate from what God has revealed.

7.3.3 Praxis Matrix

Based on the proposal of Holland & Henriot (1983) and through interaction with other South African scholars, Kritzinger (2010; Kritzinger & Saayman 2013:4) has developed a praxis matrix to examine mission activity by a faith community. It can be used to evaluate the “sent” or “incoming” (2010:13) agents of change, as well as examine the impact



within the “adopting” community of insiders whose faith has changed. The matrix is the interpretive framework used in this thesis to explore identified theological trajectories of the “adopting” community of Sindhi believers. While the praxis matrix does not explicitly consider issues of movement, direction or resolution and so does not establish a basis for *identifying* theological trajectories,³²³ it is a tool that can be used to analyze the *impact* of theological shifts within a cultural context.

Whereas *missio Dei* expresses the “horizontal” width of God’s mission, the matrix provides a framework for the dynamic of mission that is embodied in a specific context (Kritzinger 2010:7). There are seven integrated dimensions in the praxis matrix that facilitate a “critical–and–creative reflection” on Christian mission exploring the *breadth* and *depth* of a

³²² See the hermeneutical argument for these claims in 8.1.2 and 8.1.3.

³²³ Potential theological trajectories are identified when the believers’ culture texts given in response to scripture contrast traditional positions. See 5.7 and 8.3.

community's theological praxis. I am using *breadth* to refer to the number of dimensions in the matrix that have been altered, while *depth* refers to the extent to which each dimension has been impacted. The seven dimensions of the matrix are to be considered "common sense" aspects of mission that "any responsible Christian group" must address "if it wishes to make a meaningful difference to a specific situation" (2010:8).

Kritzinger (2010:8-9; Kritzinger & Saayman 2013:4-6) does not describe the seven dimensions in a propositional manner, but presents them as a series of questions that help practitioners address their context by reflecting on the missiological principles indicated by each dimension. This is an ongoing, interactive process, rather than an objective measurement or comparison to a set standard. Exploratory questions preserve and enhance the listening intent of "bracketing" (Creswell 1998:52) the researcher's bias in favor of a transparent representation of the community's perspective. Moreover, the themes do not focus on theological *content*, but address issues of process and interaction, similar to Hiebert's (1994) "metatheological" concerns. The matrix thus acts as a tool by which the theology of a people group can be examined without prescribing the content of that theology. When applied in this thesis to theological trajectories, the process can reveal which dimensions are being impacted and to what extent.

The seven dimensions can be described as follows:

- *Agency* refers to the "agents of transformation" and their relationship to the community within which they are working.
- *Contextual understanding* considers the perspective that the agents of change have of that community and the way those views affect their approach.
- *Ecclesial analysis* examines the structure and function of local church(es) and the change agents' relationship to them.
- *Interpreting the tradition* reflects on the way the change agents are contextualizing the biblical message in light of the previous three considerations.
- *Discernment for action* considers how the teaching and theological perspectives of the change agents are being revealed through practical involvement with the community.
- *Reflexivity* refers to the way the change agents respond to and reshape their message and approach due to experiences within the community.
- *Spirituality* describes those practices of the change agents, such as worship and prayer, that express rootedness in their faith.

These dimensions are intended to be explored within the context of the praxis dynamic,

which Kritzinger (2002:149-150) describes as having three aspects. First, it must be “collective,” a group working together towards a common cause, as opposed to an individualist endeavor. Second, it needs to be “transformative,” seeking to see God’s reign established within a given context. Third, it must be “integrative,” requiring interplay between theory and action as well as between each of the seven dimensions.

7.3.4 Analyzing Insertion with the Praxis Matrix

Kritzinger’s praxis matrix is used in this section to evaluate the “sent” (2010:11) or “insertion” (Holland & Henriot 1983:8) dynamic of our mission agency³²⁴ serving in the Sindh. The focus of the evaluation is from the time our family joined in 1985 to the present day. Using the matrix to examine that insertion (1) provides insight into the impact our missionaries have had, (2) reveals background interaction and understanding that influences this thesis, and (3) illustrates the value of this interpretive grid for research analysis. It also offers a glimpse into the ministry breadth and depth of this group of missionaries who are focused on serving Sindhis.³²⁵

Intentional insertion into Sindhi society for the purpose of bringing gospel transformation ensured that we would engage each of the seven dimensions. As a group of missionaries working together to see the reign of God established in the Sindh according to the teachings of the Lord Jesus Christ, we fulfill the three aspects of the praxis dynamic: collective, transformative and integrative. The “sent” or “incoming” praxis is evaluated according to the questions reproduced from Kritzinger’s (2010:8-9) article.

Agency: Who are the agents of transformation, in relation to the community in which they work for change? What is their social, economic, gender, class position in relation to the “others”? How are they “inserted” into the social space that they share with that community? What are the power relations prevailing between them? How do these factors influence their approach? Who are their “interlocutors”, who help “set their agenda” and determine their priorities? How do all these factors shape their approach?

As cross-cultural “agents of transformation,” we were appointed and sent by North American evangelical churches following the pattern of Acts 13:1-5 with the common goal of

³²⁴ As a mission agency fluctuating between approximately 10 and 20 missionaries, we coordinate our efforts, divide tasks, encourage each other and pray and worship together. Our ministries have included evangelism, church planting, a hospital for women, literature distribution and publication, literacy, radio programs for health and evangelism, Bible translation, a Bible correspondence school and relief efforts.

³²⁵ Chapter 4 describes my personal ministries of church planting and Bible translation.

planting churches among Sindhi Muslims³²⁶ through a variety of activities. As foreigners we were outsiders with a status that provided several benefits. First, the Sindhi value of hospitality ensured a warm welcome since Sindhis generally consider it an honor to entertain Westerners. Second, we were automatically given the status of “*Sahib*.” Only the rich and powerful are accorded that status and, coming from an egalitarian society, we initially found this designation uncomfortable and distasteful. But we came to realize that people wanted to accord us respect and to attribute a level of authority and power to us that was above the average Sindhi. Within the Sindhi hierarchical social structure, this designation was inevitable. Being labeled in such a manner afforded us a great deal of freedom to relate to people of all classes and allowed us to develop relationships without being an economic or social threat. Negatively, this status came with expectations that we were unaware of and, when being made aware, were either unable or unwilling to fulfill. As an example, we would provide employment (expected) with a living wage and pension well above the average (happily received). However, our expectation was that a living wage encouraged independence and our responsibility for the employee ceased with a paycheck. This was neither comprehended nor acceptable according to Sindhi values. In Sindhi culture the tradition of patronage is strong. Poor wages and high dependency is the norm and our practice of giving high wages and benefits did not offset the demand to provide for those who became dependent upon us through employment over and above contractual agreements. It is an ongoing struggle to be financially generous and avoid creating an unhealthy dependency. Social and financial realities create a power disparity that allows us to act with considerable freedom in organizing ministries, but it emphasizes the position we hold as outsiders and often prevents us from empowering nationals for ministry.

With some Sindhis, we developed a familial relationship as “brother” and “sister.” Even though familial terms are always used in casual conversation – “uncle” for older man, “aunt” for older woman, etc. – to be involved in a “family friendship” in which men and women mingle is unusual. Our expectation and desire was to move beyond mere acquaintance to friendship. However, we soon discovered that the North American boundaries for friendship are not acceptable in Pakistan. Instead the demands for a “family friendship” come closer to the expectations experienced within close families in Canada. The cultural boundaries we took for granted in our home country, such as which rooms in the house are “private” or the appropriateness of asking for money, are not the same in the Sindh. While opening us up to

³²⁶ A few missionaries focused on the receptive Hindu tribal groups.

cultural insights we would not otherwise have been exposed to, these relationships proved difficult at times as expectations were often at cross purposes.

We were also inserted into the culture as spiritual leaders. I unwittingly became a *murshid* (teacher) figure to the believers with responsibilities and authority closer to that of a patriarch than a fellow believer.³²⁷ Sindhis expected us to discuss spiritual topics and offers to pray for them were well received. In fact, the hunger for spiritual mediators among Sindhis brought people to us so that we could pray for a particular need they had, and seldom would a person leave without an opportunity to pray. At the same time, a more equitable sense of spiritual responsibility and accountability was established with a number of Sindhis. Although we may have had different areas of responsibility and authority, mutual respect was developed that enabled us to support and encourage each other. This was due to accommodation on both sides of the cultural divide concerning the expectations of relationships.

The relational nature of Sindhi society caused us to be more people than task oriented (Lingenfelter & Mayer 2003:77-89).³²⁸ Although a stressful environment for North Americans seeking to be “productive,” the relational demands ensured that we would become proficient in navigating the language and culture, often through trial and error. In order to survive and continue our work as missionaries we supported and guided each other, but it was our interaction with Sindhis that taught us to navigate cultural challenges and solve many of the dilemmas we found ourselves in. We have developed close friendships with those who act as our “cultural confidants” from whom we have gleaned insights into effective ministry. Through their guidance our ministry has been significantly and positively impacted.

Contextual understanding: How do the change agents analyse that specific context? How do they “read the signs of the times?” What are the social, political, economic, cultural factors that influence the society within which they are working and witnessing? How does their perception of these factors shape their approach? (Kritzinger 2010:8)

The following are examples of how social, political, economic and cultural realities³²⁹ affected our approach to ministry among Sindhis. The distressing lack of quality medical care for women and infants inspired our mission agency to establish a women’s hospital with in-patient facilities as well as health care for surrounding villages. This was founded on a holistic model in

³²⁷ See 4.1.5.1 for a description of my relationship with believers in discipleship.

³²⁸ See 4.3.4 for a description of Lingenfelter & Mayer’s (2003) six basic value pairs of which *people versus task* orientation is one.

³²⁹ See 4.3 for a description of these cultural factors.

which medical care is coupled with a desire and plan for people to hear the gospel. The demonstration of love and concern over the years has created deep appreciation for the ministry as well as openness to the spiritual motives that drive the work. I was walking by the hospital when a man stopped me and said, “I don’t get it. Why is this hospital here?” I was puzzled and gave the obvious answer, “It is here to provide medical help for women and children.” “I understand that,” he replied, “I have just come from there with my wife and she received the best care possible, better than anywhere in Pakistan. But we hardly had to pay anything. There are foreigners there who could be earning a lot more in their own country. Why are they here?” “Ah,” I answered, “What you are seeing is the gospel of Jesus. Jesus left his place in heaven with God to come and give his life for us. He told us to follow him, and this is what they are doing – following him.”

Sindhis are spiritually minded. While many do not practice the five pillars, they respect those who do and identify closely with Islam. In addition, the influence of Sufism creates openness to explore other spiritual paths³³⁰ as they try to discover ways to connect with God. We have addressed this spiritual hunger through Bible translation and publication, Bible bookstores, and Bible correspondence courses. In addition, the relational nature of Sindhi society together with a willingness to explore spiritual and religious ideas required us to spend many hours in lively discussions around the purposes of God, religious practices and examining scripture to discern its meaning for the Sindhi context.

Ecclesial analysis: How do the change agents perceive the church, and particularly their activities in that community? Did it give the church(es) a good or a bad name in the community? Do churches have positions of power and privilege or influential public contacts? What are the physical and institutional structures of the churches and how are they utilised in or for the community at large? What are their leadership patterns and structures? How do these factors shape their approach? (Kritzinger 2010:8-9)

The church in Pakistan is primarily made up of Punjabi Christians.³³¹ This has created ongoing challenges and opportunities for agents of transformation who are from outside both Punjabi and Sindhi cultures. There are significant linguistic, cultural, social, traditional, religious and historical divides between Punjabi Christians and Sindhi Muslims. Punjabi Christians in the Sindh generally live in ghettos called *bustis*, which provide protection from the majority Muslim community and allow for a measure of religious, social and political independence. Within the

³³⁰ See 4.2.2.3 for further descriptions of religious diversity in the Sindh.

³³¹ See 4.2.2.4 for the influence of Christianity in the Sindh.

busti there is often a place of worship and a council of Christian elders who govern and resolve disputes. Strict *purda*³³² is not kept and so the community allows more freedom for women. Their mother tongue is Punjabi, but most are also fluent in Urdu, the national language, and Sindhi, the regional language, while the languages used in worship are Punjabi and Urdu. Historically, they are descendent from Hindu castes and socially they are considered “sweepers.” This last designation is pejorative and although it is the task of many Christians to sweep the streets or clean latrines, they often cover their faces when working in order to hide their identity.

Our dilemma as agents of transformation was how to relate to Punjabi Christians while working to introduce Muslims to the gospel. Do we seek to bridge the divide between Punjabi Christians and Sindhi believers from a Muslim background? Or do we maintain the cultural and social divide with two separate churches? While some people have crossed the divide, they are the exception and the default arrangement is two separate communities with suspicion and hurt between them.³³³

In terms of ecclesial structure, Sindhi churches are primarily household gatherings and other forms of *Isa Jama'at*.³³⁴ Punjabi communities are formed around centralized places of worship with ordained pastoral leadership and appointed elders. Anglican and Catholic churches have hierarchical structures that guide the church beyond the local expressions, while churches that have had an evangelical influence and history tend towards greater autonomy. Hierarchies in local congregations that control the decision making reflect the social power structures of the neighborhood. The health of the church rises and falls with the spiritual dedication and integrity of the leadership.

Interpreting the tradition: How do the change agents (re)interpret the Bible and their theological tradition in the light of the questions raised by the previous three dimensions? Is there a unique formulation of the Christian message that is arising in this context? How do these theological insights shape their approach? (Kritzinger 2010:9)

Examples of how the biblical text is contextualized,³³⁵ including a reshaping of the gospel

³³² Christian women keep their heads covered in public or when praying, but do not wear a veil. Men and women worship together and meet in community gatherings.

³³³ The personal anecdote in 4.3.5 of the friend I brought into a Punjabi worship service illustrates the difficulty.

³³⁴ See 4.1.5.2 for a description of household churches and 4.2.2.4 for *Isa Jama'at* or “Jesus congregations.”

³³⁵ See 8.2.2.1.

message³³⁶ so that it resonates with the Sindhi context, are given in other sections. The use of Islamic religious terminology in the Sindhi Bible translation also influences the readers' understanding, sometimes beyond the restraints of the original context. For example, Jesus' reference to *gehenna* (e.g., Mk 9:43), the valley of the sons of Hinnom outside the walls of Jerusalem, has been translated as *jahannam*, a place of eternal fire and torture. While Jesus' reference goes beyond the physical valley to communicate concepts of rejection, judgment and destruction (Bietenhard 1976:208-209), the excessive descriptions found in Islam, such as illustrated in the children's book, *Hell: Pits of Punishment* by Moazzam Zaman (undated), go far beyond the biblical text.³³⁷

A high illiteracy rate and the influential role of oral tradition over the written word for a significant portion of the Sindhi population has also affected the way the gospel message is communicated. The Chronological Bible Storying method³³⁸ has become a popular means for passing on Bible stories. One missionary, DB, has developed a storying quilt to take advantage of a common communal craft practiced among Sindhi women. Sixteen blocks of material provide symbolic references to a set of Bible stories from Genesis to Revelation.

Music is also valued in the Sindh with traditional instruments and forms of music that accompany Sufi poetry. Some missionaries have devoted their energies to working with artists³³⁹ to prepare Christian expressions of spirituality within the Sindhi context.

Discernment for action: What kind of concrete faith projects or organisations are they involved in, particularly in relation to the community at large? What kind of plans are they making to embody their theological insights in the community? How broad is the theological agenda and how does it actually shape their actions? (Kritzinger 2010:9)

A variety of "concrete faith projects" have been initiated or supported by the agents of transformation.³⁴⁰ The women's hospital established by our mission agency is a relief and development project that stems from theological convictions about Jesus' concern for the poor and oppressed. Literacy initiatives with biblical content address felt needs, encourage economic development and provide biblical teaching. Schools, orphanages and water projects are also

³³⁶ See 4.1.3.

³³⁷ Similarly Dante Alighieri's (1948 [c. 1310]) "Inferno" has impacted Western readers' understanding of *gehenna* translated as "hell."

³³⁸ See the bibliography of my (Naylor 2004) Masters dissertation for a list of influential books and websites promoting Chronological Bible Storying.

³³⁹ RM mentioned in 2.1.1.1 is an example.

³⁴⁰ See 4.2.2.4 for other examples of Christian influence in the Sindh.

common and occasional disasters, such as the flooding of 2010 and again in 2011, which threaten the lives of impoverished people, are met with outside help.

The evangelical focus on the word of God is reflected in Bible translation, Bible publication and the printing of other books that communicate the gospel message. In addition, Bible lessons in Sindhi that have been produced through our organization are broadcast from outside the country.

The primary concern of our missionary endeavor has been to develop communities of believers whose lives conform to Jesus' vision of the reign of God in fulfillment of the Great Commission (Mt 28:19-20). The priority has been to empower individual believers who are the heads of their families so that as spiritual leaders they may function in transformative ways within the established structures of society, principally their extended families.

Reflexivity: Do the change agents consistently and honestly reflect on the impact and results of their work in the community? Do they learn from their experiences? How does this shape their approach in the community? Does this reflection lead to renewed and deepened agency, contextual understanding, interpretation of the tradition, spirituality and planning? (Kritzinger 2010:9)

While reflexivity as an explicit and consistent practice is not as prevalent as it could be, nonetheless as cross-cultural workers we are constantly learning and adjusting. At the beginning of my ministry I erred seriously by not recognizing the significance of the hierarchical and communal nature of Sindhi households; the strongest social construct is the extended family headed by a patriarch. One young man became a baptized believer through our ministry and returned the next day to inform me that he had been cut off from his family by his father. I was distressed, but because I had not developed a relationship with the father, I had no opportunity to meet with him. Instead of bringing the gospel into the home, we had caused a divisive and alienating response.³⁴¹ We have since learned that we need to engage the whole family and particularly the patriarch; a commitment to the gospel of Christ can only be impacting and lasting if it finds root within the family structure. As a result of this insight, three mission organizations working among Sindhis, including our expatriate group and two headed locally by Sindhi believers, have joined together for the purpose of establishing a movement of household churches.

I confess to a lack of reflection on the impact of my efforts until my family's return from Pakistan in 1999. However, since that time my studies have forced me to critique and evaluate

³⁴¹ A satisfying end to this story was related in 2.1.2.1.

our ministry among Sindhis. This reflection has helped me in Bible translation, my interactions with colleagues still in Pakistan and in my current work as Coordinator of Intercultural Leadership Development (CILD) with Fellowship International and Northwest Baptist Seminary. I also teach courses to our cross-cultural agents of transformation during which they reflect on how the cross can be communicated in a contextually sensitive manner within their various settings. The reflection on my own journey is a stimulus for this teaching.

Bible translation involves ongoing reflection and dialogue centered on renderings of the original text for a Sindhi context. The interaction of translation team members in workshops, as well as a system of review by other readers provides feedback on how the text resonates with their understanding of life and relationship to God. The interview methodology in this research project is another example of reflexivity that adds a further level of feedback to the translation process.

Probably the greatest strength of missionaries in the Sindh is their immersion into Sindhi society through the development of deep and reciprocal friendships. Ongoing dialogue with both believers and other Sindhis has led to adjustments in lifestyle and thought resulting in more effective ministry. As one example, we have learned to rely on those we trust in order to determine who should receive financial aid and in what manner. Our most successful efforts have occurred when we have acted upon the safeguards and restrictions recommended by those who have an intimate understanding of the context.

Spirituality: What type(s) of spirituality is/are practised by the change agents? What is the dominant spirituality among them? Is this a source of inspiration and encouragement to the group? How do these factors of spirituality shape their approach? (Kritzinger 2010:9)

As evangelical Baptists our spiritual disciplines focus on corporate worship, Bible study and prayer. Because of a tradition emphasizing the priesthood of all believers (1 Pet 2:9), we do not follow a liturgy, but our spiritual songs constitute a liturgical form through which corporate confession and praise is expressed. Although orthodox Muslim practice excludes music as a form of worship, Sufi influences of spiritual poetry and song create openness among Sindhi believers to incorporate music as appropriate expressions of worship.

Prayer was our lifeline for survival in Pakistan. Faced with our helplessness and incompetence on a number of levels, as well as being overwhelmed with the task of being change agents, we had to trust that this mission was not ours but God's. Our weaknesses drove us to prayer because the only hope we had was for God's Spirit to work. Prayer as a posture of

dependence on God resonates with Sindhis on two levels. First, the conviction of Sindhi Muslims of God's greatness and their unworthiness, reinforced by hierarchical societal structures, has resulted in a tradition of seeking mediators who can approach God on their behalf. Second, the orientation of dependence on God is a recognized and appreciated characteristic of those considered spiritual.

The preeminence of the Bible in spiritual formation for evangelicals is a key aspect of this study.³⁴² This belief in God's revelation as the basis for ordering our lives is reflected in personal devotions, family worship and corporate gatherings in which the Word of God is read and meditated on. It is a practice admired within Sindhi society as a sign of spiritual vitality.

A conviction that we are involved in God's mission and that our actions are an expression of what it means to follow Jesus provides encouragement and determination when there is little fruit or when the obstacles seem overwhelming. When faced with deliberate bureaucratic obstruction we remind each other to treat people with love knowing that "our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms" (Eph 6:12). This corporate support network is critical for ministry effectiveness and perseverance. Although we are an extension of our churches in North America, it is the relationships within the team setting that determine our ability to continue.

7.4 Narrative Theology

Narrative theology refers to those representations of faith found in story rather than through systematic categorizations and deductions from foundational assumptions.³⁴³ In a general sense, narrative theology can be defined as "an overall aim and ongoing plot in the ways of God as these are revealed in Scripture and continue to express themselves in history" (Green 2004:392). The Bible is replete with expressions of theology revealed through the shaping of people's stories.³⁴⁴

³⁴² The importance of the Bible for evangelicals is discussed in 4.4.3.

³⁴³ This is not to discount the value of a propositional or systematic approach to faith. Rather, it is argued that the narrative approach engages faith at a deeper level than propositions and that propositions only find their true meaning and impact within a narrative. When disconnected from narrative presentations the value of a propositional approach is undermined. See Wisse's (2005) argument for the referential nature of narrative that links the two approaches rather than requiring a strict dichotomy. While claiming that narrative theology is not incompatible with the referential nature of a propositional approach, Wisse also deplors the "nature of traditional systematic theology, in being so loosely connected to the true form in which Revelation came to us."

³⁴⁴ Green (2004:392-393) provides examples such as the sermons in Acts that interpret the history

The Christian story is centered on Jesus as Lord and as the ultimate revelation of God in relation to the experiences of life.

Narrative theology is one example of the shift away from the individualism of the Enlightenment into a more social understanding of life recognizing that there is a “socially constructed reality as the primary influence that shapes the formation of individuals within society” (Van Gelder 1996a:37). Wisse (2005) refers to a “narrative turn” in the second half of the twentieth century in which theologians began to represent faith through narrative rather than developing propositional arguments through the application of logical inferences to biblical revelation. Walhout (1999:130) describes the greater theological depth possible through this narrative turn with his assertion that out of the “matrix of innumerable narratives expressing the full range of human experiences, aspirations, and disappointments arises an unending flow of possibilities for seeing and interpreting the world of God’s creation.” Hauerwas’ (2001) three examples of the way Christian theology intersects with life illustrate the necessity of a narrative approach leading to a theology of praxis. First, the Christian believes that life is a gift received from God. This results in a rejection of autonomy and independence and embraces dependence, obedience and service, which is “true freedom” (2001:224). This attitude can be seen in Christ Jesus who, while accomplishing the salvation of humanity, did so through complete submission to the Father and through loving others as God loves the world (Jn 3:16). Second, the ethical basis of life for a believer is not ultimately acting on principles, but “learning to imitate another” (:223). We do not establish an ethical framework through conforming our actions to a “categorical imperative” but by being “accepted as disciples and thus learning to imitate a master” (:225). Third, our character and moral life is one of *conversion*, not *development* (:223). There is a “conversation” with the people in our lives so that the stories and roles we inhabit come about through choices made influenced by others. In particular, moral growth for the Christian is the conformity to the narrative of Jesus through whom God’s way is revealed (:228).

Accepting Hauerwas’ (2001:245) suggestion that the self is most appropriately described in terms of narrative, it follows that narrative theology is the best means by which the integration of faith and life can be expressed. That is, a depth of theology cannot come through systematic development from absolute truths discerned abstractly, but through the interaction and

of Israel as culminating in the advent of Jesus (e.g. Acts 7:2-53; 13:16-41) and he goes so far to claim that “the Bible is nothing less than the record of the actualization (and ongoing promise) of [the] purpose of God in the history of the cosmos” (:393).

expressions of life. The reflective way we act in living out our faith *is* the faith that guides our actions. While this may sound logically cyclical, in practice it leads to a hermeneutical spiral in which knowing occurs in and through living and living is sharpened through reflection. The “upward spiral” of narrative theology gains its direction from the presentation of God’s revelation. That is, there is an absolute reality outside of us that speaks into our reality. It is the “enfleshment” of that revelation in the “matter” of our lives that becomes our lived out, or narrative, theology. Hauerwas (2001:247) refers to this as “a sustaining narrative sufficient to bind my past with my future.” This description is particularly appropriate in the task of discovering the emerging theology of believers that “binds” the reality of life to the gospel message. The theological narrative is not their ability to articulate their faith, but that they “be the truth” (:252) in their daily lives. Nonetheless, even though the reality of theology is found in the believer’s life, it is proposed that the communication of this faith to an outsider is possible. Part of their theological development is the reflection of how God speaks into their lives and the resulting expressions that reveal and communicate the ways their faith is being lived out.

There is an important connection between narrative theology and the parables of Jesus, one of which is used as the presented passage in the research interviews. Even as narrative theology is the integration of text and context as believers work out the significance of God’s word within their lives, so Jesus used images and metaphors from within his cultural context in order to communicate his message of God’s reign. Theology of the nature and will of God is wrapped up in the actions and priorities of the characters in the parables. Many scholars (Bailey 1983; Linnemann 1966; Jeremias 1972; CH Dodd 1935; Via 1967) have explored the way culture shapes stories and thereby have provided insight into how the parables function as theology. Bailey (1983 [1976]:ix) speaks of a “rediscovery” of the intended teaching of parables made possible through cultural perspectives that reveal the theology of the parables.³⁴⁵

The focus of this thesis is on local articulations of narrative theology that understand faith in a contextually sensitive and holistic manner. A key assumption that guides this is that God’s primary desire is not to teach us principles, rules and laws for living, but to lead us into relationship with the Divine. If relationships are at the heart of life and reality, it follows that the essence of theology must also be relational, which demands contextual expression and not abstract formulations. Relationships are not understood objectively through dissection, analysis and propositions but through holistic experience, from the *inside*. Narrative facilitates this by

³⁴⁵ This follows an argument presented in my (Naylor 2004:29) masters thesis.

drawing the listener into the faith of others, a communal development that creates a deeper impact than is possible through a cognitively preferenced propositional approach.

Part of the complexity of relationships and therefore of narrative theology is the reciprocal or dialectical nature of the interaction. We “participate in the shaping of our own narrative story as we live within a social context, and this context in turn is guided by various narratives that give it meaning and direction” (Van Gelder 1996a:37). Putting this same thought in the negative, we could say that any expression of our understanding of and relationship with God that is phrased propositionally and abstractly without seriously addressing personal and community history is incomplete at best and deceptive at worst. Our understanding and application of ultimate things comes through *integration with* life, not through objective observations made *outside of* daily expressions of life. Narrative theology as praxis that integrates contemplation with lived out metaphors of faith in community with others³⁴⁶ is evident in the research interviews through the believers’ verbal expressions of their faith, not only what they perceive to be true but how that faith is lived out.

The concern of narrative theology is to make sense of life, a holistic concern through which the belief system provides comprehensive and relevant meaning to a situation. Lindbeck (1984:131) notes that religion, and therefore theology, is not susceptible to disproof, but its “confirmation or disconfirmation occurs through an accumulation of successes or failures in making practically and cognitively coherent sense of relevant data.” Thus narrative theology is the working out of a belief system in order to make “cognitively coherent sense” of a community’s context. Green (2004:392) suggests that the story we accept as our theological framework determines what we believe to be true, normal, and good. “It serves as a conceptual scheme that is at once *conceptual* (a way of seeing things), *conative* (a set of beliefs and values to which a group and its members are deeply attached), and *action guiding* (we seek to live according to its terms).” Lindbeck (1984:129) also comments that “religions, like languages can be understood only in their own terms, not by transposing them into an alien speech.” Again, this insight also applies to theology. In working out their faith within a particular context, members of the believing community use the “language” or narrative of their lives to work out what it means

³⁴⁶ As Van Gelder (1996a:38) points out, this orientation includes the dimension of listening to the biblical narrative through “the historic interpretation of the Christian tradition.” The “others” with whom we interact are more than those in our immediate community. While acknowledging this influence as important to shape the faith of a community and a dialogue that deserves to be cultivated, this thesis is limited to local believers’ interaction with the biblical text.

to relate significantly and faithfully to God. It is the articulation and communication of the multi-dimensional applications of faith that constitutes narrative theology.

7.5 Contextualized Theologies

The importance and validation of contextual theologies flows from a critical realist epistemology³⁴⁷ that all truth can only be known from a given perspective (Van Gelder 1996b:120). In this thesis, the aspect that makes theology “Christian” is that the “truth” of primary concern is God’s revelation in the New Testament. Local theology is the believer’s perspective of God generated from the interaction between text and context. Hiebert (1994:30) claims that theology in a critical realist mode deals with the reality of scripture through our particular and situational human understanding and interpretation, and this approach affirms

the priesthood of all believers, and recognizes that they must and will apply the universal message of the Bible to their own lives and settings. It holds that the Holy Spirit is at work in all believers who are humbly open to his guidance, leading them through the Scriptures and the Christian community into a growing understanding of theological truth and its meaning for their lives.

Each believing reader owns a privileged glimpse into and interpretation of that revelation through a dialectical relationship with the context that enables encounter, reflection and communication. The presence of the word of God within a new culture and language creates the possibility for a new way of seeing and being – a contextualized theology. To rephrase Van Gelder (1996a:38), “every [theology] by its nature is culturally bound, and every [theology] affects the reading of the biblical story.” This subjective nature of contextual theology is natural, intended and a gift. What appears as a weakness from a universal foundational point of view is actually a strength through the incarnation of God’s revelation into a particular context. This creates both confidence and humility; confidence that God speaks to our specific context and humility as we recognize the finiteness of our formulation. Such humility causes us to respect the interpretation of others and prevents us from elevating our own interpretation as the last word.

The text exists both within and beyond the context. It exists *beyond* the context because the origins and existence of its intended message are not dependent on the context, and it exists *within* the context because of a deliberate linguistic formulation and *insertion* by outsiders to stimulate interaction between the message and the context. The “fusing of horizons” between text and context is the dynamic intersection that generates contextual theologies. Conn (1984:128), in

³⁴⁷ See 7.6.

his analysis of Kraft's (1979) *Christianity in Culture*, describes this way of doing theology as "human interaction with divine truth perceived and defined according to cultural, contextual settings." Sedmak (2002:4,7) describes it as the study of our relationship with God embedded in our "human situation" and CJH Wright (2006:42) insists that local theologies

argue that contexts do matter, that in the act of reading and interpreting the Bible, the questions of who you are, where you are, and whom you live among as a reader make a difference. The Bible is to be read precisely in and for the context in which its message must be heard and appreciated.

A local theology is therefore a dialogue that occurs between the biblical text and a reader situated in a particular context that leads to a unique perspective of God; *unique* because the cultural orientations, values and priorities are distinct from other contexts, a *perspective of God* because it results from the communication of divine revelation. Bailey (1992:28) suggests that "if theology is created by simile, metaphor, parable, and dramatic action, then the culture of the theologian and his/her people is a critical key for unlocking the theological intent of the metaphorical language." Song (1990:136) affirms that an indigenous connection is critical for *inculturation* declaring that Christian theological activity must "take place within a culture with which Christians are related, especially by birth." Even before an introduction to scripture, people are always asking theological questions, questions of origins and ends, of meaning and hope. The questions may have universal validity, but they will have identity with that context and be shaped in ways of particular importance to its members. In the first instance these may not be explicitly articulated positions, but they are at least implicit theologies (Sedmak 2002:13), even if not Christian theologies. Thus the insertion of the biblical text into a context does not *initiate* theological thinking, rather it shapes the believer's *existing* theology so that it becomes *Christian* theology. Some of the impact may be traumatic, some incremental, some strengthening in the same direction, some resulting in rejection and some may move the local theologian on to new priorities or emphases. Because these theologizing agents engage God's word while living in contexts that facilitate their meaning-making capabilities, the introduction of the Bible to create theology is not like erecting a sign in bare ground where it passively sits, as much as it is planting a sapling in fertile soil.³⁴⁸ The spring rains, summer heat and winter winds, as well as a myriad of other environmental forces, interact with the sapling to shape its form even while the tree maintains integrity with its essential nature.

³⁴⁸ This analogy compares with Schreier's (1985:11) agricultural imagery of the adaptation model of local theology. See 7.5.1 for a further description.

This recognition of the key role of the agent of theology does not deny determinative meaning in the text,³⁴⁹ only that local theology emerges from *dialogue with* that meaning, or more precisely, with the agent's *perception* of that meaning. It is important to distinguish the stability of the text with determinate meaning (JK Brown 2007:88) from the reader's *experience of* that text. Comprehension of and resonance with the text is in flux due to the contextual and personal variations of the reader. In fact, every time we address the text we bring different questions as we face different issues in our lives. The contextual reality leads to different emphases and therefore different insights. Smalley (1991:233) affirms that people interpret the Bible through "their own presuppositions, their own experience, even their own preference, because the message of the Bible, or anything else, never passes from the mind of the writer into the mind of the reader unchanged." This "filtering" of the text has resulted in a great range of differences in interpretation, and "clarity of translation will not eliminate divergence, nor should it, because multiple reader perspectives are very important" (:233). Each perspective adds a culturally influenced dimension to our understanding of scripture that challenges us to engage the text in a new way.

Another way of understanding contextual theologies is through an application of Austin's (1962:108) speech-act distinctions.³⁵⁰ A "locutionary" act is any utterance that has "sense and reference" and which is "roughly equivalent to 'meaning' in the traditional sense." An "illocutionary" act indicates the intention of the utterance, such as greeting or informing. A "perlocutionary" act refers to what is achieved in the hearer through the utterance, such as convincing or persuading. Communication occurs when all three aspects received by the hearer conform to the speaker's intention. With respect to contextual theologies, it is possible that a biblical locution that produced one effect (perlocution) in the original audience does not result in a corresponding effect with a different audience. In that case, mere replication of the locution does not do justice to and may misrepresent the author's intent. Inculturation that results in the development of a local theology is the altering of the locution in order to fulfill the intended perlocution. That is, in order to express the meaning of the text in their lives, the believers reshape the message into a culturally resonating form that expresses the intended result.

Theology must not be limited to cognitive perceptions or the shaping of perspectives, but

³⁴⁹ The hermeneutical basis for this assumption is explored in chapter 8.

³⁵⁰ This description follows a similar application of Austin's distinctions by JK Brown (2007:268-269) in her clarification of "recontextualizing."

goes beyond that to living out the message. JK Brown (2007:124) refers to this as “the actualized communicative event” in which the reader both understands the passage and responds “in other intended ways.” Contextualized theology is therefore the actualization of the author’s intent by considering and seeking to live out the kind of community or individual revealed in the text. To accomplish this, the perceived intent must be negotiated with the context to determine an authentic experience. It cannot reside in statements or abstractions, it must find an “actualization” that impacts life.

Schreiter (1985:21-22) reminds us that there is an important third element together with text and context that shape local theology – Christian tradition. Local theology is “the dynamic interaction among gospel, church, and culture..., a *dialectical* relationship” (:22). The messengers do not present a pure gospel message, but one shaped by their own church tradition. The hearers receive the message through a filter of prior exposure to Christian tradition. These assumptions are interwoven into the text–context dynamic and play a critical role in shaping the faith of all the participants, insiders and outsiders, through their interactions with each other. When a believer abandons the traditions of their former faith, the void is often filled by embracing the traditions of established believing communities. During a time when I was focused on developing spiritual community between Sindhi believers, one man surprised me by declaring that our times of worship required a pulpit and pews, a Western import common in other Christian communities.

The creation of local theologies signifies a critical development in the life of a believing community. The emergence of theological reflection and praxis is an indication that inculturation is occurring. It is a declaration of identity with the scriptures as part of the culture and not a foreign import. Insiders become the agents of theology and the emerging theology addresses a local audience as the people of God (Schreiter 2002b:vii). Expressions of local theology demonstrate reflection and engagement with God’s word that has led to spiritual impact and change within a person’s and a community’s life. The forms used are ones that speak to people, such as poetry, proverbs, and stories. “Theology is taught and written, danced and sung, sculpted and painted, even dreamed and cried” (Sedmak 2002:11). The preparation of the *Punjabi Zabur* (Psalms)³⁵¹ is an example of local theology in a form that reflects the heart of the culture. They are not just a translation of scripture, but a rewriting and reshaping of the Hebrew poetry into the poetic depth of the Punjabi language so that they express the deepest spiritual yearnings of the

³⁵¹ See 4.2.2.2.1 for a description of the impact of this work.

Punjabi people.³⁵²

Schreiter (2002b:viii) also observes that local theologies make us aware of the dynamics involved in creating theology such as personal experience, evaluations of cultural and local history, re-interpretation of tradition, quests for identity and the need to address social change. Local theologies also point “the way to a return to theology as an occasional enterprise, that is, one dictated by circumstances and immediate needs rather than the need for system-building” (Schreiter 1985:23). In other words, local theologies tend to emerge from the questions and requirements of the believers as they work out their faith rather than through more abstracted systematic study.

Although contextualization presupposes an element of foreignness to the gospel when introduced into a new setting, the development of contextual theologies mitigates the negative impact of strange ideas and language. Although unfamiliar concepts may be introduced, the development of these concepts through the culturally sensitive engagement of local theologians can create meaning and richness for the Christian community. This dynamic is well illustrated by the members of our Sindhi Bible translation team who are changed and shaped by their work. Descriptions that seemed odd or impossible at the beginning of the translation process have become possible as the translators’ understanding has expanded. For example, in Sindhi the idea that God is “faithful” to the divine promises seems odd. It is not a description used of God from their theological perspective. God is “true” (Sindhi *haq sach*) and does not change as an aspect of the infinite divine nature, but the concept of faithfulness carries with it the limiting concept of being bound which is not a comfortable description of God within their theological framework. However, when the concept was discussed in depth exploring the biblical picture of God’s self-binding through the divine promises, it was accepted as both appropriate and necessary. This recognition opens the door for further contextualization by addressing the significance of the biblical covenants as God establishes relationship with people chosen to share in the divine glory. The nature of the covenantal God revealed in history challenges believers to consider the implications for their own context.

Conversely, misleading assumptions by the hearers that obscure the gospel message can be corrected over time because, as Smalley (1991:175) notes, biblical terms come in a biblical

³⁵² A limitation of research projects such as this one is the inadequacy of words to express the theological depth of these forms. The hope is that the reader, having experienced a depth of God’s presence in their lives through similar forms, will be able to envision the power and reality that such expressions have for those who are members of other cultures.

context. The context of scripture impacts the meaning of those terms that communicate inadequately so that they gain a more holistic and appropriate meaning and thus enrich the community's expression of faith. An example is the familial language of "Father" used by Jesus for God which gains impact and depth of meaning through teaching such as the parable of Luke 15:11-32 considered in this study.

Newbigin (1986:8-9) also points out that an inculturating dynamic of theological development serves to correct elements of cultural invasion brought in by the missionary, stimulates theological dialogue between insiders and outsiders for mutual correction and provides opportunity to expose and correct syncretism. Moreover, a theological tradition that is being constantly modified by each new generation as believers strive to be faithful in expressing and living out the gospel message creates a "hermeneutical circle operating within the believing community" (:56) that keeps faith alive and growing.

Furthermore, a plurality of contextualized theologies is important because, as Yeo (1998:5) points out, "a monocultural reading of the gospel can easily be idolatrous." Whatever we have within one culture can never be absolute but it can be easily mistaken as such if it is never challenged. So reading theology from different cultural perspectives opens our eyes to facets of God's word that we would not have otherwise seen and this challenges us in our culturally limited readings of the biblical text.

Sedmak (2002:126) summarizes well the purpose and benefits of local theologies in terms of (1) finding expression within the setting as they "appreciate and relate to the local context," (2) simultaneously addressing the setting from beyond because it is God who speaks and therefore they "challenge, relativize, and transcend the local context" and (3) providing spiritual transformation in the lives of individuals and the community because they "inspire and encourage participants to live more deeply."

7.5.1 Models of Local Theology

Schreiter (2002b:vii) proposes that (*inculturated*) local theologies emerge because of the inadequate nature of the outsider's (*contextualized*)³⁵³ theological presentation. There is a lack of fit with the environment of the insider and "burning questions" are not being addressed. The models of local theology,³⁵⁴ which he organizes under the categories of "translation,"

³⁵³ See 6.4.1 for a description of the distinctions indicated here.

³⁵⁴ Some of Bevans' (1992) six models of contextual theology – *translation, anthropological,*

“adaptation” and “contextual” (Schreiter 1985:6-21), clarify the emic and etic dimensions of theological development. Each model can be distinguished from the others by the way it addresses three key aspects: (1) sensitivity to the cultural context, (2) the theologizing agent and (3) the role of the gospel message. Schreiter’s models are considered according to their application to this research.

The “translation” model (Schreiter 1985:6-9; Bevans 1992:37-53) is described as a “kernel and husk” approach, in which the kernel of the gospel message is given a new cultural husk in order to be communicated within a new context. In this model the pre-existing message, either in the form of a text or a theological interpretation, is primary and “supracultural” with culture viewed as the vehicle of communication. It requires

a two-step procedure. In the first step, one frees the Christian message as much as possible from its previous cultural accretions. In so doing, the data of revelation are allowed to stand freely and be prepared for the second step of the procedure, namely, translation into a new situation (Schreiter 1985:7).

Cultural sensitivity is limited to the benefits needed for adequate communication. The theologizing agent is the outsider who wraps the message in culturally appropriate forms with the intention of expressing the message with equivalent meaning, significance and impact.

While Bevans illustrates the model from both an evangelical (Hesselgrave) and Catholic (Pope John Paul II) perspective, Schreiter uses the “dynamic-equivalent” approach to Bible translation as an example, which is more applicable to the concerns of this thesis. This approach uses local imagery (the husk) to communicate the text (the kernel) rather than imagery within the translator’s context (the discarded husk). The theologizing process, as is true in varying degrees for all the models, is dialectical in that the imagery is negotiated between local translators who interpret and express the imagery in their own setting, and the outsider exegete who navigates between three worlds: the world of the text, their personal context and the local context. A variety of local concepts are explored until there is mutual agreement that the meaning has been expressed with integrity, if not with clarity. This is an accurate description of the Bible translation process I have been engaged in over the years, of which I have been the primary exegete. Schreiter (1985:7) notes that this process requires “more familiarity with what has been done in the church tradition than what is done in the local cultural setting [and for] that reason it can be done by persons foreign to the local setting....”

praxis, synthetic, transcendental, countercultural – overlap with Schreiter’s models.

Schreiter (1985:8) points out two weaknesses of this approach as a method of creating a local theology. The first is that the focus on the message with a pragmatic approach to cultural analysis tends towards a shallow and positivist consideration of culture. Parallels and patterns are quickly sought and adopted without rigorous exploration of the extent to which those parallels actually exist. Nor is there extensive reflection upon the complexity of meaning and particular use of each term within the local context. “More attention is given to the surface patterns of a culture than to its deeper meanings or to the interconnections between different cultural patterns.”³⁵⁵ The second weakness is critical because it reflects the underlying kernel and husk assumption. Confidence that the truth of God’s revelation was intended to be and, therefore, can be communicated across cultural boundaries is the driving force behind this model. But this confidence can lead to the assumption that the outsider is privileged with a supracultural perspective of God’s revelation that needs only the wrapping of the husk of a new culture. In response, Schreiter observes that not only are these perspectives the products of an *enculturated* rather than *supracultural* individual, but within the text itself the kernel and husk are given together. “The kernel and husk are intimately bound together” (:8) in any and all expressions of God’s revelation. The gospel cannot be accessed without communication in human form (Bevans 1992:43). Thus, the limitation of the “translation” model is the control exerted by the outsider to maintain one particular etic representation (kernel *and* husk) of God’s revelation. Bevans (1992:43) comments on the same problem by noting that viewing revelation as a communication of propositional doctrines presupposes that “every culture is roughly similar to every other culture” and therefore a transfer of the same concepts will produce the same effect. However, this can easily result in an imposition or colonization of thought processes where differences are profound. Bevans (1992:44) exposes an additional weakness in that reducing God’s revelation to

³⁵⁵ In Bible translation, the pressure of schedules and finances demands the acceptance of choices without full and exhaustive explorations of all nuances and usage. However, all choices are negotiated until one option has received the approval of both insiders (for *contextual* appropriateness) and outsiders (for *textual* appropriateness). Bible translation is considered a team effort using skills of both insiders, for their ability to judge the suitability of the terms, and outsiders, for their exegetical and translation training. Furthermore, the limitation of making choices without full knowledge is mitigated to a large extent through the never-ending dialectical process of negotiating meaning between the original text and the local context. One example was the translation of the Hebrew word *miqdas* (holy). We chose a parallel term in Sindhi (*pAk*) and began to use it consistently. However, we soon discovered that the nuances of the term in Hebrew were different from Sindhi requiring a variety of phrases in order to communicate adequately. Thus, both the original translation process and the ongoing revisions provide ample opportunity to revise terminology for more appropriate equivalence.

a list of propositions ignores the “the manifestation of God’s presence in human life and in human society.” Biblically speaking, God’s interaction with humanity goes far beyond the dispensing of information.

The strength of the translation model is the immediate accessibility of God’s revelation within linguistic categories that resonate with the culture, albeit through a text given to another culture in another time and mediated through outsiders. The weakness is that the message can remain alien and the faith imported rather than incarnated. Faith requires “a more fundamental encounter between Christianity as it has been elsewhere, and the culture in question” (Schreiter 1985:9), and this model is insufficient in and of itself to achieve this. The realization of this limitation in the task of Bible translation was a major impetus that inspired me to pursue this research project and I am rectifying that weakness, to some extent, by looking beyond my role as exegete – what the translation “should be” – to exploring how it is actually being interpreted and lived out. A purpose of this study is to determine how a product of the translation model (the Sindhi New Testament) can serve as one *contextualization* step to initiate an *inculturation* process that results in a *contextualized theology*. Rather than seeing the translation model as flawed or incompatible with the other models, it can be viewed as a valid part of a more “fundamental encounter,” one instrument in an orchestra that acts in harmony with the others. Thus, the apparent “kernel and husk” weakness is mitigated by a refusal to demand absolute status to the translated product and by recognizing that there are other dynamics at play that affect the nature of the local theology.

Under the “adaptation” category, Schreiter (1985:9-12) considers three separate models, of which only the third has significance for this project.³⁵⁶ Agricultural imagery is employed to describe this method as “one of planting the seed of faith and allowing it to interact with the native soil, leading to a new flowering of Christianity, faithful both to the local culture and to the apostolic faith” (:11). In this model, there is no supracultural philosophy or theology that is “translated.” Instead the message is seen as the seed, and the culture as the soil. What emerges is a product of both. This imagery resonates with the purpose of this research. The word of God has impact upon believing and submissive hearts that hear the voice of God and respond. What will emerge are expressions of wisdom, beauty and significance that are part of the believers’ identity.

³⁵⁶ The first model examines the philosophical basis of the local culture using Western philosophical methods and categories. The second approach is based on Reformation concepts of the early church with a desire to give “greater fidelity to New Testament witnesses” (Schreiter 1985:10-11) than is evident in the first model.

In contrast to the translation model, this approach (1) takes the local culture more seriously, (2) keeps control primarily in the hands of insiders but in concert with outsiders, and (3) maintains the role of the gospel message as central. With regards to the first point, culture is taken more seriously because time is allowed for the local community to engage, reshape and inculturate the message according to its own categories. In the second point, the theologizing agents are primarily insiders to the culture rather than outsiders. In the translation model, the outsider controls the translated text like a caged bird. In this model, the bird is let go so that it may fly freely. In order to give up control, the one initiating the process must have faith in Jesus as the “author and finisher of our faith” (Heb 12:2) and as the one who will build his church (Mt 16:18). There must also be a humble and realistic acknowledgment of our own culturally imposed limitations to understand and live out the gospel.

The third point notes that the gospel has the central role as the initiating influence – the “seed.” However, Schreier (1985:11) views this scenario as idealistic, since “certain patterns of Christianity are already lodged in the culture, for better or for worse” that affect the interpretation and application of the seed. Furthermore, as with the translation model, there is no supracultural seed that can be planted. Any expression of Christianity, any translation or interpretation of God’s Word that requires a human act, is an *enculturated* seed. That is, the seed of the gospel always exists as an aspect of culture, whether of the outsider’s culture or in a contextualized form appropriated for communication to insiders. This research project proposes that the translated Sindhi text, produced through an application of the translation model, is a legitimate and suitable seed contextualized by the outsider to initiate and encourage the adaptation model. The text acts as the focal point to stimulate a dialogue between God’s word and the people in the context, thus establishing a text–faith tension. This aspect points to a dynamic that is perhaps better expressed through Bevans’ (1992:88-102) description of the “synthetic” model that moves away from a “correspondence understanding of truth and [views] truth more in terms of relation, conversation, and dialogue” (:93). A dialectical process is the means by which the contextualized seed germinates into a contextual theology.

Successful application of these models in this thesis depends upon keeping the translation model, a preliminary stage of the research process, distinct from the adaptation model. In the translation stage, the meaning of the text is controlled by the outsider. In the application of the latter model, the Bible translation has been “set free” to be engaged, reshaped and reformed according to local cultural patterns through the believers’ theological formulations. Believers

allow the translated word to “read”³⁵⁷ them and develop theological expressions of their faith, as is evident with those poet musicians who create songs to express the impact of the gospel in their lives.³⁵⁸ The research methodology identifies culture texts that are expressions of faith emerging from the believers’ reflection upon God’s Word. A second key to success is the value placed upon the communal development of theology through dialogue as proposed in the synthetic model as opposed to imposition by hierarchical authority or the dominance of an individual. The evangelical belief in the autonomy of the local church underscores the need for a communal engagement to hear God speaking, for people to explore the implications for their context with each other and to act accordingly.

Schreiter’s (1985:13-16) final category of “contextual” models is initiated by reflection within the local context. The questions of the culture set the agenda and Christian theology is developed out of the immediate concerns and needs of the people rather than posed by outside Christian groups or based on the concerns of systematic theologies. The first of his two distinct models is an ethnographic focus on the identity of the community that promotes dialogue with Christian faith in order to build into and enhance that identity. The second model considers the redemptive approach of liberation theologies that “concentrate on social change and discontinuity...” (:15). The goal of these two models is to couple the realities of a people group with the word of God and thus forge communal bonds, build hope and enrich people’s lives.

The cultural sensitivity displayed in these models is the strongest of the three categories and insiders to the culture have the primary theologizing role. Integrity with the gospel message depends upon the connection of the driving metaphor that arises from the social context to the people’s submission to the nature and guidance of the gospel message as revealed in the life and teaching of Jesus. The faith of the community’s leadership in the way of Christ determines the path that is chosen, and there will be social and cultural challenges that threaten to compromise commitment to God’s revelation. This is, of course, true for all the models, but is of particular concern in this latter category in which the agenda is driven by contextual concerns rather than arising primarily from a desire to submit to the gospel.

This latter contextual model is not followed in this thesis. Nonetheless, as with the translation and adaptation models and the dialectical dynamic of Bevans’ synthetic model, we need not view these models as necessarily in conflict with each other. Whether the consideration

³⁵⁷ See 8.1.4.1 on how scripture “reads” us.

³⁵⁸ See 2.1.1.1 for a description of the musicians.

of a culture's identity or ills comes first followed by a theological development that addresses those issues or if there is an initial commitment to the gospel message that is then worked out in society, in both cases there can be contextually sensitive theological development when the participants engage God's Word. In the complex reality of life, it is unlikely that one model will exist without being influenced by the application of other models. In reference to this thesis, the primary desire is to identify culturally emic theological expressions of those who are submitted to God's word as authoritative for them personally. But as they express what they understand, they do so through the grid of their culture with all its implications for identity and with all its struggles and injustices. If the seed of God's word does develop into an enculturated expression of the gospel, then they will be called upon to grapple with those contextual questions in a manner that reflects the way of Christ.

In summary, the translation model is the approach used to create a Sindhi representation of God's revelation as given in the Bible. The research explores how that "seed" impacts Sindhi believers to generate a contextual theology as part of their identity in a way that is divergent from traditional Islamic expressions.

7.5.2 Generating Local Theologies

Keeping Schreiter's adaptation model in mind as the primary paradigm for generating a local theology, it is helpful to consider examples of gospel or biblical presentations given to stimulate theological considerations within another culture. Despite the focus in this section on the stimulation of theological thought by outsiders, this is not intended to negate the critical aspect of engaging and listening to another culture³⁵⁹ in order to connect with relevance and resonance. Schreiter (1985:28) affirms that "the theological process should begin with the opening of culture, that long and careful listening to a culture."³⁶⁰ The voice and language of theology is always cultural, the deep meanings of reality are given shape and form through all the elements that facilitate communication within society. With the understanding that intimate connection with the culture by an outsider is a prerequisite to stimulating a local theology, a few examples help to illustrate the orientation toward contextualized theologies considered in this thesis.

Smalley (1991:182) realized the potential development of a contextualized theology

³⁵⁹ See 3.1.2 for a development of this orientation in generating a local theology.

³⁶⁰ Schreiter has in view the contextual model in which the culture sets the theological agenda and therefore an analysis of culture is only a step away from constructing a local theology. Nonetheless, the sentiment is equally applicable to any outsider approach to another culture.

through the engagement of scripture when conversing with a Buddhist Thai teacher who listened to scripture with the assumption that the world is populated by many kinds of spirits. As Smalley read the first chapters of Mark, which include several stories about Jesus' confrontation with evil spirits, she would stop him and relate stories of her own encounters with spirits. The Gospel stories were speaking to her where she lived. Smalley concludes that "Jesus had power to cure people afflicted by spirits was intriguing to her, the beginning of a potential theology." This example underscores the reality that any and all theologies are not exclusively informed by the Bible and that the theology of an individual or of a group may be precarious, from a Christian perspective, as they explore different possibilities. The theology may be rejected or ignored due to other influences or it may grow in directions that have little to do with biblical revelation. On the other hand, it may become steadily more influenced by the Bible and be expressed through "worship, sermons, the telling of Bible stories, or through direct reading" (Smalley 1991:183).

When Don Richardson (1976) told the story of Judas' betrayal to the Sawi people of New Guinea, he was horrified by their reaction. Because they considered betrayal a virtue, the elders of the tribe were thrilled with Judas' cleverness and considered him a hero. Richardson despaired of communicating the gospel message in such a setting; then he discovered the practice of the "peace child." In order to create peace and reconciliation between tribes, a baby was offered by the chief of one tribe to the chief of the other. As long as the child was alive and well and brought up by the other tribe, there would be a truce; betrayal was unthinkable and viewed as a great evil. Richardson was able to use this tradition as a reconciliation metaphor of the gospel – Jesus is the "peace child" offered by God to reconcile humanity to the divine self. This contextualization³⁶¹ can be used to illustrate the application of Austin's speech-act distinctions.³⁶² The "locution" of Jesus as the friend or master of Judas resulted in a "perlocution" of admiration among the Sawi elders rather than dismay when informed of the betrayal. Changing the "locution" to a consideration of Jesus as God's "peace child" resulted in the appropriate response of grief thus entering into the intended purpose of the story.

Vincent Donovan (1978:48) illustrates a contextualized theology or perspective of God among the Masai. In criticizing the choice of a word being used for "faith" that meant "to agree with," a Masai elder explained that faith was more like a lion attacking its prey. The lion uses all

³⁶¹ While this is a *contextualization* by an outsider rather than *inculturation* by insiders of the culture, the impact of the adjusted presentation provides a clear illustration of the principles.

³⁶² Austin's speech-act distinctions are described in 7.5.

of its energy and power to attack and strike the killing blow. It then envelops the animal in its legs “pulls it to himself, and makes it part of himself.” The way a lion kills with total abandonment is the true picture of faith. The elder then explained that through the coming of “Padri,” Donovan’s title among the Masai, they had discovered that they had not been seeking the High God. Instead, “He has searched for us. He has searched us out and found us. All the time we think we are the lion. In the end, the lion is God.” This integration of faith as abandonment to the gospel with the metaphors and values of the Masai highlights the essence of contextualized theology within the “adaptation” paradigm. The gospel message of God’s “aggressive” mission of salvation in the life and work of Christ and the call to humanity for a corresponding faith has taken root in the Masai context through imagery, values and beliefs that existed before the coming of the outsider while maintaining the integrity of the biblical text. The inculturation process overcomes the limitation of the missionary’s attempt to contextualize resulting in a narrative that resonates.

The orientation towards contextual theologies outlined in this section is based on certain epistemological assumptions. The following section explores the implications of those assumptions in order to validate the research design of identifying emerging theological trajectories through the observation of the text–context dynamic within a particular cultural context.

7.6 Epistemological Assumptions

The epistemological position assumed by this research project follows Taber (1991:171-173) and Barney (1981) in that the only Absolute is God and, as human beings located in historically, socially and culturally bounded contexts, we have only relative access to God. “*God is and human beings become*” (Barney 1981:174) and therefore all theology “needs to be understood in sociocultural context” (:174). Truth and reality *not* subject to the common conditions of human knowledge are only found in God, not in our concepts of God nor in our statements about God. Our access to the Absolute is through personal experience that is culturally shaped. Yet the Christian conviction is that it is true and significant access, because God is the Triune Creator who communicates with creation. “Total relativism destroys the possibility of meaning” (Taber 1991:172) and the faith stance that *God is* and that the Absolute communicates successfully with humanity affirms the possibility of meaning.

Adeney (1995) and Freeman (2010) provide a similar perspective with respect to intercultural ethics in their exploration of the way ethics change from culture to culture. They

remind us that ethical values and priorities, as well as the way they are expressed, are culturally shaped. We do not have access to an absolute standard against which those values can be assessed. Nonetheless, God has revealed the divine nature and will in the Bible, so that a dialogical process between text and context as well as with believers in other contexts moves us towards a contextually relevant Christ-centered ethical praxis and enables us “to test and approve what God’s will is – his good, pleasing and perfect will” (Rom 12:2).

7.6.1 Critical Realism

The epistemological assumption of this thesis is *critical realism*, the assertion that while there is an ontological reality that exists independent of our ability to perceive it, we can only experience that reality through our personal and cultural lenses. As early as the turn of the twentieth century, CS Peirce (1955:74-97) made philosophical claims about phenomenology that are significant for a critical realist epistemology. He referred to three modes of being: “firstness, secondness and thirdness.” “Firstness” describes the mode of being of a subject regardless of anything else. This corresponds to the concept of an independent reality. “Secondness” is the mode of being created by relation to a second object, which relates to the perspectival nature of critical realism. “Thirdness” is the mode of being that “consists in the fact that future facts of Secondness will take on a determinate general character” (:77). “Thirdness” can be seen in the given generalizations or assumptions concerning reality found within society and culture.

Critical realism has support as the epistemological basis for missiology from scholars that are well respected in evangelical circles such as Hiebert (1999:68-96), Newbigin (1989:27-38) and NT Wright (1992:31-46). This epistemological assumption is attractive because it avoids both extreme positivist objectivism as well as the relativism of postmodern approaches, with the premise that a reality does exist “out there.” This stance affirms the ontological reality of God’s creative act, while at the same time recognizing that our access to that reality is perspectival, thus reserving absolute claims for God alone. There is an insurmountable gap between God’s absolute knowledge and human perspectival knowledge (Clark 2003:147) that refutes any claim to an absolute or purely objective human perspective. While our perception is defined and described by our personal and cultural viewpoint, God speaks from an absolute perspective. But when God communicates with humanity, there is inevitable accommodation so that understanding occurs within our cultural grids and perspectives. Similarly, while revealing spiritual truth and reality, the Bible does so through culturally shaped representations of that truth and reality. This assumption

contrasts the optimism of Enlightenment epistemology, which assumed that what is perceived could be accounted for with certainty “by objective and publicly available methods” (Taber 1991:117). Instead, critical realism denies that there are uncontested facts from which a rationalistic process can produce certainty. As Newbigin (1989:33) notes, “there is no knowing without believing, and believing is the way to knowing.”

Hiebert (1994:22) contrasts “naïve realism,” “critical realism” and “instrumentalism” to clarify this position. Naïve realism assumes that we have objective access to an objective reality. Critical realism, while acknowledging an objective reality outside of our perception of it, insists that we only have subjective, albeit true, access to that reality. That is, there is a vital distinction between reality and our knowledge or perception of that reality. They are not one and the same and others may have separate, but also true, perceptions of the same reality. For example, a child’s view of a tree (something to climb) is different from a logger’s view (potential lumber) or an artist’s view (shades of color and light) or a dendrologist’s view (a living plant). But these can all be considered true perspectives of a real tree. Hirsch’s (1967:58) distinction between “meaning” (limited perception) and “subject matter” (the totality of the item considered) presents a similar position.³⁶³

Instrumentalism also makes a distinction between reality and our knowledge of that reality, but refuses to make ontological claims about reality. That is, critical realism accepts that while we only have a subjective window onto reality, the image is of something real existing outside of the perception. We actually deal with a reality outside of ourselves, and not just ideas about reality. Instrumentalism is more skeptical about our ability to interact with a reality outside of ourselves and rather than making truth claims about an “outside” reality, accepts only pragmatic *results* as valid.

Hiebert (1994:25) develops the concept through an analogy of building blueprints. Rather than having a photograph of a building (naïve realism), or no access to the building apart from our blueprints to help us navigate the building (instrumentalism), critical realism is the use of blueprints (our cultural and individual perspectives) to interpret and understand a building that we truly experience. Different perspectives of reality are analogous to a variety of blueprints of the same building – perhaps showing different angles of the architecture or describing the electrical wiring – that result in an expanded understanding, similar to the tree example above in which various views give a multi-faceted perspective of the one tree. Each view has potential to be a

³⁶³ See 7.3.1 *Theological Validity*.

true perspective of an experienced reality, but will be partial, limited and based on past experiences. There is always bias in our knowing since no one views reality in an absolute way but it is nonetheless true knowledge of a reality that is “there.” For the Christian, what gives confidence that this knowledge is true is trust in a Creator God who desires to communicate with creation, is capable of doing so and has done so.

A vital component of critical realism is that it is “essentially a *relational* epistemology, as opposed to a detached one” (NT Wright 1992:45). Any knowledge, represented by the blueprints or perspectives above, is never independent of the knower, although the realities exist apart from the knower. The “stories” created by the knowers are about the interrelationship of humans with the rest of reality and are constantly confirmed, fine-tuned or disputed through interaction with the stories of others (:45). The concept of “stories” leads to the corollary that there is no one-to-one correspondence between language and reality.³⁶⁴ All communication is in the form of signs and representations that are at least one step removed from our experiences. Through our experiences we engage a reality that exists apart from us, but our only interaction with and perception of that reality is through our subjective filters. Reality in our human condition is therefore *relative* in two senses. First, it is dependent upon an Absolute that we cannot approach except through cultural grids. Second, reality is relationship and relationship is reality. We only “know,” in the deeper biblical sense beyond cognitive acknowledgement, through communication with that which is beyond us or “other” than us. And that communication only occurs through those culturally shaped forms and structures that have meaning for us.

Through a critical realist approach, human reality “is inescapably subject to interpreted understanding, not objective understanding” (Taber 1991:118) and this leads to a more penetrating, multilayered description of culture, because the meaning of any action is dependent upon the interpretation assigned by the group. It requires what Geertz (1973:5,6) calls a “thick” description, which he illustrates through the phenomenon of winking. A “thin” description is the movement of an eyelid. A “thick” description is the intended and interpreted meaning that lies behind the physical movement, the symbolic communication in society or between the sender and receiver of the sign. He states, “Believing, with Max Weber, that man is an animal suspended in webs of significance he himself has spun, I take culture to be those webs, and the analysis of it to be, therefore, not an experimental science in search of law but an interpretive one in search of meaning.” Working from a similar understanding, Kraft (1991:82-84) concludes that rather than

³⁶⁴ The relationship between language and reality is explored in 8.1.

seeing meaning in the “external world” or in the symbols used to describe that world, meaning is “a personal thing, internal to persons rather than a part of the world outside.... Meaning is the result of interpretation. And interpretation is the subjective interaction of one or more persons with a situation.”³⁶⁵ By moving beyond an objective, positivist perspective of seeking “knowledge” – a focus on the reality out in the “external world” – there is opportunity to explore the inner reality of faith in terms of worldview, belief and values. This approach frees us “to interpret culture from within real life experience and not outside it, as if we ourselves were hermetically sealed from it” (Scotchmer 1996:161). In acknowledging Geertz’s “thick description” approach as critical in constructing contextual theologies, Schreier (1985:28) states that only “through trying to catch the sense of a culture holistically and with all its complexity will we be in the position to develop a truly responsive local theology.” That is, only by recognizing that meaning lies within the agents of interpretation as they interact with their context and with God’s revelation can a theology be constructed. Wink (1973:52) points out that the nature of communication is such that understanding can only occur by going beyond the spoken or written word. Adequate listening requires the belief that “the text itself is an answer to the question which occasioned it. But questioning means also going outside what is said in the text and encompassing other possible answers.” The implication is that all knowledge and comprehension, indeed any reflective experience of reality, is mediated through meaning-making humans, which requires a “thick” description.

I would add one theological caveat to Geertz’s insights, God connects the divine self to people by speaking into those webs of significance. God creates an order (e.g., the natural world), revelation (e.g., the prophetic word) and relationship (e.g., the incarnation) that, even though expressed culturally and contextually, results in eternal meaning for humanity. It is this faith stance that prevents critical realism from leading to skepticism and a despair of knowing anything at all, such as is evident in postmodern reflections found in the writings of Derrida (1976) and Fish (1999). Instead, there is hope that meaning is possible and transferable, not because we as finite beings can reach out to an impersonal absolute, but because the personal Absolute created

³⁶⁵ As explained in chapter 8, acknowledging the subjective aspect of interpretation does not discount the role of the author of a text in determining meaning nor does it deny the presence of the message within the text. Communication through a text demands that the medium relate to the attentive reader an appropriate representation of the author’s intended message. Readers “may consume linguistic signs; but if they do not believe in authors, they fail to perceive the agency at work in the text and go away as empty as they came” (Vanhouzer 1998:240).

us as communicators and then has communicated to us. We have been created as “meaning-makers” (Scotchmer 1996:161) and placed in a world where we have a medium (our cultures) through which we give significance to what we perceive as reality.³⁶⁶ Basing his comment on neuroscience, Green (2004:391) suggests that “meaning-making is central to our day-to-day experience, and that we will go to great lengths to construct stories that provide a context for understanding and interpreting what we perceive to be true.” These stories are equivalent to Geertz’s “webs of significance.” NT Wright (1992:64) affirms that even though in this scenario “misunderstanding is likely, perhaps even inevitable, [nonetheless] through patient listening, real understanding (and real access to external reality) is actually possible and attainable.” In other words, assuming a common reality “out there” and sufficient commonality of being, language and culture, people are capable of a communion with reality and communication of that reality to each other.

Clark (2003:144-146) calls this “soft epistemic relativism” (as opposed to “strong perspectivalism”) that avoids the extreme or radical position that two people’s perspectives can be totally different. There is a commonality of being people created in the image of God³⁶⁷ that limits relativity and generates hope for movement towards life that conforms increasingly more fully to the nature of the Absolute. It denies the skepticism that claims there is no possibility of determining what is true between conflicting perspectives (:145). The critical realism followed here accepts logical, consistent and true experiences of a world “out there” as not only possible, but expected; not only individual, but with communal and interpersonal continuity. In this view, culture is not seen as fatally flawed, but as an appropriate medium through which reality is experienced with integrity. Certainty is not an option, nor can we reach beyond our perspective, but this epistemology creates room for our perspective as a gift of God that connects us with the divine Reality.

Because of the lack of certainty inherent in the critical realist position, some people³⁶⁸ see this as undermining confidence in God’s Word. But far from being a problem for theology or Bible translation, this epistemology is freeing, for it validates cultural expression as

³⁶⁶ A possible biblical basis for this “meaning-maker” theology is Adam’s naming of the animals (Gen 2). In order to name an animal, the meaning and significance of the beast from Adam’s perspective had to be attributed. This creative ability to shape reality from a human perspective is the basis of culture and an outworking of being created in God’s image.

³⁶⁷ A biblical basis for the assumption of commonality is provided in 6.3.

³⁶⁸ I have encountered this perspective a number of times through correspondence with pastors and leaders in our fellowship of churches.

communicative and meaningful without driving us to the hopeless task of separating our culture from a “pure gospel.” That would be like a raccoon washing a sugar cube; a raccoon washes its food before eating and if given a sugar cube will wash it until it disappears. Or to refer again to the “kernel-husk” analogy, there is no “kernel” of truth that can be perceived apart from the “husk” of culture. As Schreier (1985:8) notes in pointing out the weakness of the “translation” model³⁶⁹ of constructing local theologies, the image of an onion is more appropriate with the kernel and husk “intimately bound together.” It may be tempting to search for a supracultural meaning, but without the lens of culture nothing can be seen and any claims to the contrary are illusory. The “idea that one can or could at any time separate out by some process of distillation a pure gospel unadulterated by any cultural accretions is an illusion. It is, in fact, an abandonment of the gospel, for the gospel is about the word made flesh” (Newbigin 1986:4). Thus a local theology or a Bible translation among an emerging church is by nature a “re–enfleshment” of the original culturally shaped message.

Grenz’s (1996:167-174) “contours of a postmodern gospel” parallel the epistemological concerns expressed here. While acknowledging the arguments of Foucault, Derrida and Rorty that forcefully undermine modernism and Enlightenment epistemology, he charts a course that functions within postmodern parameters in a distinctly Christian manner. He encourages an embodiment of the gospel “in a manner that is *post–individualist*, *post–rationalistic*, *post–dualistic*, and *post–noeticentric*” (:167). “Post–individualist” accepts the reality that faith is highly social, found in community and relationships rather than in the individual, detached “knower.” “Post–rationalistic” privileges other ways of knowing above the reductionist categories of rational certainty. While scientific exploration unravels the structures of creation and discovers the powers that hold the material universe together, it fails to connect us with the *meaning* of creation. When dissecting a frog, the scientist loses sight of the reality that the frog no longer exists. Faith in a postmodern context is about “a personal encounter with God in Christ” (:170), not the acknowledgement of correct facts. “Post–dualistic” reunites body and soul into a whole. This puts “the human person back into the social and environmental context that forms and nourishes us” (:172). “Post–noeticentric” points beyond the accumulation of knowledge to the “attainment of wisdom” (:172) that guides our interpersonal relationships. All four of these “contours” serve to place the meaning of being human within our local context, yet connected to God who has spoken with meaning and purpose into our lives.

³⁶⁹ See 7.5.1 for a description of this model.

The claim that we “access reality only through subjective appropriation” (JK Brown 2007:89) and that it is a *true* access flows from a biblical theology that situates humanity as part of the creative order (Gen 1,2). We are designed to be finite, which is not a flaw but part of what God calls “very good” (Gen 1:31). “Our finitude means we are contextually located and our way of knowing truth is mediated.... [Finitude] is part of our creaturely, pre-fall condition, and so is a gift from our good Creator” (JK Brown 2007:89). While sin distorts our interpretations of reality, the promise of redemption (1 Jn 1:9), the assurance of making all things new (Rev 21:5) and the guidance of the Holy Spirit (Jn 16:13) give us hope that an appropriate relationship to reality is possible, although the experience in this life will be imprecise and tentative. Such an orientation undermines the human tendency to pride. JK Brown (2007:89) suggests that “sin's effect on interpretation might also show itself in an arrogant stance that privileges our particular readings of the text above all others.” The biblical prerequisite of humility before an almighty God rebukes such an arrogance that refuses to doubt, question and explore. In essence, the critical realist stance finds biblical support in two ways: first, through the affirmation that there is an absolute truth (found in God's personhood) that can be sought after, and second, by recognizing the limitations of our finiteness that points to a dialectical approach as a means to discover contextual expressions of that truth. This ongoing dialogue is required because of our human condition: (1) we are located within our assumptions about the world that need to be challenged, (2) as meaning makers, we interpret with only partial understanding and (3) we all deal with the corruption of sin.

From a Christian critical realist point of view, the state of constant interpretation without certainty is not a problem, but a blessing. Being limited and distant from others is essential in order to create unity and relationship. There is no unity in solitude, only uniformity. It takes two separate persons to create the synergy of relationship (MacDonald 2004 [1867]:428). It is our finiteness and distance from God that enables us to connect with God. The *necessity* of interpretation points towards a reality that is truly “other,” while the *impreciseness* of interpretation requires ongoing self-correcting interaction leading to deepening relationships. Thus the “critical” in “critical realism” does not imply a *criticizing attitude* but the recognition that “the only access we have to... reality lies along the spiraling path of *appropriate dialogue or conversation between the knower and thing known* (hence ‘critical’)” (NT Wright 1992:35). In my relationship with my wife, Karen, there is never a time when all has been said. The beauty of our relationship is in the impreciseness with which we know each other that provides “room” for growth. At the same time, it is a relationship with a real “other” that creates opportunity for

dialogue, surprises and occasional confusion. The condition of always interpreting each other's speech and actions is not a *problem*, as if being distant from each other in this way is unfortunate; instead it is the *means* by which we engage each other and connect. Rather than abandoning the intersubjectivity of ongoing dialogue in order to focus on "objective facts," the practice of dialogue leads us into the true meaning of an ever-deepening relationship. Conversation *is* the relationship (Scott 2004:97). This perspective reflects Bosch's (1991:24) emphasis on relational and intersubjective knowing based on "critical hermeneutics." Our search for truth and reality is indicated by an ongoing dialogue constantly expressed in imprecise terms that signify connection with, but not objective certainty of, a true reality "out there."

JH Olthuis (2001:73-74) takes this a step further by placing the identity of our humanity in the realm of faith, by which he means trust and the commitment to "*being-with*" (:167-173). The impreciseness and uncertainty of relationship can only exist in the presence of faith. We can only dialogue with integrity if there is a giving and receiving of trust that allows us to be vulnerable with and true to the "other." In this way we can know and be known and thus connect with the deepest reality. "Who we are is determined by who and what we love" (:74). The connections we make with others is the "beautiful risk" that brings us in touch with what is truly real and life-giving.

Another dimension of the critical realist position important to the cultural analysis and underlying missiological assumptions of this thesis is that reality is not merely engaged individualistically or abstractly, it requires an interpretive community.³⁷⁰ Kritzinger (2010:4) explains that missiological knowing is "communal and ecumenical, taking place 'together with all the saints' (Eph 3:14-20), constantly open to correction and journeying deeper into the truth (John 16:13)." This orientation is similar to the postmodern worldview that "operates with a community-based understanding of truth. It affirms that whatever we accept as truth and even the way we envision truth are dependent on the community in which we participate" (Grenz 1996:8). However, critical realism denies the radical postmodern view that "relativity extends beyond our perceptions of truth to its essence: there is no absolute truth; rather, truth is relative to the community in which we participate" (:8). From a critical realist point of view, the denial of absolute truth is, as Vanhoozer (1998:212) claims in critiquing Derrida, to "derive ontological conclusions from an epistemological problem." It is our human *perspective* of absolute truth that is always relative and limited; we cannot claim that absolute truth does not exist simply because

³⁷⁰ See 8.3.2 for the importance of an interpretive community.

we cannot access it absolutely. Thus, while community provides the only hermeneutical path to an experience of reality, it is not the author of that reality.

7.7 Summary

As part of the theoretical framework, theological and epistemological assumptions are presented and argued for. The *missio Dei* is given as the most comprehensive framework for theology. The concept of contextualization flows from the *missio Dei* as the action of God speaking *into* a context by speaking *through* cultural constructs. An understanding of theology as praxis – an ongoing interplay between reflection and action – along with an exploration of narrative theology establishes parameters for the creation of appropriate contextualized theology. Local theology as dialogue that occurs between the biblical text and readers situated in a particular context leading to a unique perspective of God is proposed and models of local theologies are evaluated. Finally the argument is made that a critical realist epistemology allows for the perspectives of human beings to be legitimate but limited expressions of reality.

CHAPTER 8. Hermeneutical / Translation Assumptions

Communication does not occur outside of culture and Christian faith cannot be expressed except through the strictures of a specific context. The eternal will and nature of God has been revealed in distinct historical, geographical and contextual milieus out of which has come a text of universal impact that is that basis of that faith. This section outlines a theory of interpretation for believers as they hear and engage the word of God that takes seriously both the sacredness of the message and the pervasive role of culture. Evangelicals are wary of a lack of regard for the intention of the biblical authors. They recognize the danger of allowing the world (in its negative Johannine sense – 1 Jn 2:15-17) rather than God’s reign to set the theological agenda. In order to avoid this error while facing the reality that culture determines our interpretations, an adequate hermeneutic is required that reflects respect for the reality of contextual communication as well integrity towards the meaning of the text.

The nature of language, communication and meaning are considered with special concern for the nature of meaning in a text, the dynamic of Bible translation and the distinct orientations of translator and reader towards a translation of scripture. The concept of the “hermeneutical spiral” provides a theoretical basis for identifying theological trajectories. Following an exegetical overview of the passage used in the interview process, the chapter concludes with teleological considerations.

8.1 Language, Communication and Meaning

Language and communication involve the sharing of speech and behavior patterns to transfer meaning (Malina 1981:12). The impreciseness of language has caused some to question the possibility of accessing another’s message, particularly from ancient texts. The argument is made that a message can be transferred as participants of a communication event construct and reconstruct meaning. Semiotic theory, social constructs and a covenantal concept to describe the connection between author and reader are proposed as the basis for this claim. Furthermore, communication as information transfer is shown to be insufficient without social and personal impact upon the reader. “Just as an analysis of human being is incomplete if it remains on the level of chemical analysis, so an interpretation of texts is incomplete if it remains on the semiotic, linguistic, or historical levels and does not proceed to the semantic and intentional levels” (Vanhoozer 1998:419).

8.1.1 The Problem of Language

Although I affirm a high view of scripture as God's revelation of the divine will and character revealed in human history, I also hold to what may be considered a low or weak view of language. Language is, by nature, imprecise and ambiguous. "We can never be certain what the other person means – whether in speaking or writing. To put it another way, language can never fully express our meanings" (Scollon *et al* 2001:21). I agree with Hall (1977:57) who wrote that

language, the system most frequently used to describe culture, is by nature poorly adapted to this difficult task. It is too linear, not comprehensive enough, too slow, too limited, too constrained, too unnatural, too much a product of its own evolution, and too artificial.

A corollary to this perspective that stems from a critical realist epistemology is that there is no one-to-one correlation between language and reality. "Words are human attempts to wrap labels around reality" (Cavey 2007:234) and reflect culturally defined categories and perspectives. "Words are arbitrary and conventional symbols used to signify [the] meaning... attributed to [them] by a particular sociolinguistic group" (Strauss 2005:153). Words "seldom have a single, all-encompassing meaning, but rather a range of potential senses." All choices made in translation (as well as in everyday speech) "are approximations of meaning" (:161). It is not possible to construct an international language that captures the ideas and concepts present in cultures, for any and all terms are shaped by the history, priorities, values and relationships currently at play within a particular context. The world "out there" is always filtered by human perceptions and language is a part of the *perception*, not part of the supracultural reality. Language is not precise, says Kraft (1991:97), because to use language "we are required to categorize life and experience according to pigeonholes that have been set up by members of previous generations whose experience and perspectives may have been quite different from ours." The hearer requires contextual and logical connections that are functionally equivalent to the speaker's context and logic in order for meaning to be adequately transferred. Even when a word is used with considerable overlap of experience between the cultures, it cannot carry the variety of insight and awareness brought to the term by the various speakers and hearers. Sapir (1921:13) illustrates this with the symbol "house" which is "first and foremost, not a single perception, nor even of the notion of a particular object, but of a 'concept,' in other words, of a convenient capsule of thought that embraces thousands of distinct experiences and that is ready to take in thousands more." Newbiggin (1986:80) provides the example of being able to pick his wife out of a crowd of 1000, but not being able to describe her so someone else could. If our ability to perceive reality is

culturally shaped so that our perceptions cannot be considered a one-to-one correspondence with reality, how much less are the symbols we call words capable of carrying all that we perceive and experience?

The implications for the interpretation of the Bible is profound because the logical corollary is that while God's truth may be accessible, it is only comprehended through the limitations of fallible human interpretation. Furthermore, it suggests that the Bible (original texts as well as all subsequent translated versions) is an enculturated text, not a supracultural, universal or normative theological standard against which contextualized theologies can be objectively adjudicated. The lack of certainty implied is difficult for some and the hermeneutical and epistemological positions espoused in this study are by no means representative of all evangelicals. Rather than focusing on questions about the way culture conditions our theological understanding, evangelicals have traditionally emphasized issues of inerrancy and infallibility (Nicholls 2003:38) in order to affirm the absolute truth of scripture. Hesselgrave (2005:258-259), for example, objects to this weak view of language stating that the notion that "there is no one-to-one correlation between language and the world ultimately makes tenuous any objective knowledge of God that can be attained from creation and Scripture." He believes that such a position leaves us unable to move beyond the variety of languages used by linguistic and religious communities to describe God, which reduces the meaning of scripture to "whatever a particular Christian community might choose to make of it." However, Hesselgrave confuses the *representative* nature of language to communicate reality with an assumption that language is *sufficient* to communicate reality. That is, while we have no *absolute* knowledge of God (if this is what he means by "objective") we do have *culturally expressed* knowledge of God, which can be a true but limited window onto the absolute reality. Language in and of itself is not *sufficient* to communicate truth and represent reality. Instead, language requires context and words are symbols adopted by a community to represent experiences, objects and concepts common to all.

The inability to achieve certainty and preciseness through the use of language because it refuses to carry the full weight of meaning has been explored by Bible translators who have noted that the limitation exists because language is a *derivative* of culture. Words are a shortcut or convention designed for convenient communication that refers to a commonly perceived complex reality. Walrod (2007:254) affirms that "[l]anguage is language only in its cultural and situational context" in his argument that language cannot be reduced to "decontextualized code." In any communal situation language is situated in an ongoing dialogue that integrates linguistic forms

with social functions and cultural meanings (:239). Harries (2006) expresses the idea that language is dependent upon culture by stating that “[w]ord impacts are found to be suspended in an ebb and flow of life that varies enormously between peoples and occasions.” He illustrates this concept effectively through the absurdity of trying to describe one sport using the vocabulary of another. For example, a football player, in order to contextualize and use a cricket player’s language to explain that he has scored a goal, may say that he has scored a run. Someone who knows both sports will immediately spot the disparity between a “run” in cricket and a “goal” in football even while acknowledging the similarities. This illustrates the lack of one-to-one correspondence that exists between cultures and is therefore lacking between language and reality. That is, meaning in language is tied directly to culture rather than to an absolute reality. Smalley (1991:176) explains that the price of making the Bible available in another language through translation is often the use of a weak equivalent that does not reflect the richness of the original. He illustrates the loss of meaning and distortion through the use of the word “law” in English to translate the Hebrew “*torah*.” Because “law” is not equivalent to the “theological overtones of forming the Jewish people into God’s covenant nation” found in “*torah*,” the term “law” cannot carry the depth and significance of the original concept, even when capitalized to indicate that it has significance beyond its normal use.

The weakness of language outlined here has corresponding strengths. The power of language to impact culture has been argued through the Sapir–Whorf hypothesis explored in the following section, but some additional points can be made. Ting–Toomey (1999:94) argues that because language is so tied to culture, it “is more than a communication tool.” It is also a means whereby the worldview, beliefs and values (*faith*) of a people group are expressed and reinforced creating unity and identity. It is a window onto the deep convictions about reality as experienced by a particular cultural group. It is “the garment that gives shape, decorum, and vitality to conscious life, enabling us to appreciate the visible texture of life in its subtle, intricate variety and possibility” (Sanneh 1989:200).

Ting–Toomey (1999:94) adds that language functions as a “gatekeeper” in categorizing, prioritizing and selecting what is perceived to be significant in the social environment. Language “serves as a prism” allowing people to communicate their interpretations of the reality “out there.” Because language is a function of culture and is defined by culture, it also shapes people’s expectations and perceptions to the extent that the irrelevant is filtered out. Language can be

thought of as a stabilizing grid within which “symbolically mediated” thoughts are expressed and understood over long periods of time.

As a technical point, language ensures stability and consistency in communication because communally accepted rules of speech establish systematic repetition of meaning while allowing for “the potentiality of endless generation of new expressions” (Nida 1975 [1960]:63). The mechanics of sounds and shapes within the semiotic systems of language means that we can describe our environment and experiences in a consistent and reproducible fashion and therefore can use this often arbitrary and irregular tool to “test reality” and perceive the universe (:64).

8.1.1.1 Sapir–Whorf Hypothesis

The Sapir–Whorf linguistic hypothesis deserves special attention because it represents a seminal work in connecting language to culture and because of its relevance to this research project. As a flip side to Blount’s (1995:vii) sociolinguistic position that “context shapes the creation and use of language,” the basic thesis of Sapir and Whorf is that language influences the way people habitually think and the way they perceive the world. Languages have different linguistic categories resulting in different thoughts and interpretations of the world. What we see is circumscribed by our cultural patterns. Sapir (1963 [1949]:162) explains that a community’s worldview or perception of reality is “to a large extent unconsciously” created through the “language habits of the group.” Languages are never sufficiently similar that they represent the exact same social reality. Different societies thus have distinct worldviews, “not merely the same world with different labels attached.” Sapir (1963 [1949]:162) compares this to poetry which requires a “full comprehension of the whole life of the community as it is mirrored in the words” in order to be understood, a condition that lies far beyond an interpretation of the individual words. In such an instance the reader is able to access the meaning because the “language habits of [the] community predispose certain choices of interpretation.”

The implication is that language establishes categories in the minds of members of a cultural group that result in predetermined ways of thinking and viewing reality. Language acts as a grid or filter by which the experience of reality can be ordered and interpreted, with the corresponding result of creating limitations in our ability to perceive the scope of reality. “Human beings do not live in the objective world alone, nor alone in the world of social activity as ordinarily understood, but are very much at the mercy of the particular language which has become the medium of expression for their society” (Sapir 1963 [1949]:162). “Language is

heuristic... [in the] sense that its forms predetermine for us certain modes of observation and interpretation” (:10). Hiebert (2008:18) expresses this aspect of the Sapir–Whorf hypothesis as implying that “there are many different forms of thought, each associated with a particular language that embodies its way of seeing reality.” A practical conclusion drawn from this theory and relevant to the interview assumptions of this research is that the thoughts and statements generated from a people group are a reflection of their perspective on reality. Conversely, the articulation of those thoughts, such in the case of theological trajectories, shapes the interlocutors’ view of reality.

Whorf (1966 [1956]:221), Sapir’s student, in describing what he called the “linguistic relativity principle,” wrote of linguistics as

essentially the quest of MEANING.... [I]ts real concern is to light up the thick darkness of the language, and thereby of much of the thought, the culture, and the outlook upon life of a given community, with the light of this “golden something,” as I have heard it called, this transmuting principle of meaning (:73 emphasis in original).

Linguistics is therefore far more profound than the study of words and syntax, but examines the way we “cut nature up, organize it into concepts, and ascribe significances as we do” (:73). Language is a society’s agreed organization of perceived reality “codified” into accepted patterns. On the individual level, everyone is constrained by these patterns and is forced to work within the accepted restraints in order to create and communicate meaning. Without cultural and linguistic similarity in which people hold to the same picture of the universe, there is no shared meaning (:213-214). This fundamental interrelationship between the individual and society, between meaning and communication and between language and culture suggests that, theoretically, the touch of one individual connects us with a social network that can reveal a depth of worldview, belief and values, if we have eyes to see and ears to hear.

Some scholars disagree with the Sapir–Whorf hypothesis and believe that, at least to a certain extent, cognitive development occurs independent of language. Carroll (1966 [1956]:28) considers it “a moot point whether such differences in language structure are associated with actual differences in ways of perceiving and conceiving the world.” Fong (2000:211) describes the hypothesis as stating that “language structure is necessary in order to produce thought,” and claims that this is “deterministic.” Others have pointed out that researchers have found it difficult to evaluate the extent to which the structure of a language influences worldview because this requires a methodology of assessing worldview independent of the language they speak (R Brown 1976; Carroll 1966; Kay & Kempton, 1984). Carroll (1992:212) summarizes that

in general, the Sapir–Whorf hypothesis has come to be regarded as either unconfirmable or incorrect. . . . most linguists and psychologists believe that evidence offered in its support is flawed. . . . If the hypothesis can be sustained at all, it implies only a weak influence of language structure on thought.

Despite disagreements with this principle, Sapir–Whorf’s hypothesis concerning the impact of language on culture is a key assumption of this thesis and research project, as long as it is not taken to Fong’s “deterministic” extreme which would leave little hope for cross–cultural communication (Livermore 2009:114). A softened view would be that language shapes and influences the way people perceive their culture and the world. Dodd (1998 [1982]:120) affirms this softer view by explaining that support for the theory does not imply “unequivocally that people of one culture cannot think of objects for which another culture has plentiful vocabulary.” The point is not that people *cannot* think according to other categories, but that they *have not done so*; such matters are unimportant or irrelevant to their lifestyles. Therefore, “we might sense things in our environments or in relationships because the culture reinforces the terms and meanings for those things,” not because we are incapable of using other categories. Sapir’s (1921:218) clarifications of culture and language are also instructive, “Culture may be defined as what a society does and thinks. Language is a particular how of thought. . . .” Other “hows” of thought are possible, but any particular “how” will be intimately related to that culture. Whorf’s (1966 [1956]:211) more informal description of his hypothesis clarifies the issue that the language used influences the perspective of those using the language. He states, “users of markedly different grammars are pointed by their grammars toward different types of observations and different evaluations of externally similar acts of observation, and hence are not equivalent as observers but must arrive at somewhat different views of the world.” Admittedly, the power of particular words to shape the concepts of reality is anecdotally affirmed, although it could be argued that this does provide a small element of proof. Instances in which the perception of words shape the way people respond and react to their environment are those who see “empty” gasoline drums as harmless and who consider a “blower” (fan) as only appropriately functional for pushing rather than drawing air (Whorf 1966 [1956]:134-137). This latter example effectively demonstrates how one particular value or virtue of an object can be elevated over another by the description used for it by a group of people. In the same way, descriptions, virtues and properties of an object or relationship can take on a particular flavor depending on the needs and perceptions of the group.

One final comment by Whorf (1966 [1956]:137) demonstrates a core principle relevant to

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this thesis. He notes that “we always assume that the linguistic analysis made by our group reflects reality better than it does.” This bias exists because the group experiences the linguistic analysis as functionally consistent and reinforced through repetition. Because of this internal group bias, language is not just a reflection of culture or a tool for communication within culture, it directs the perceptions of its users so that experiences are habitually viewed according to predetermined categories. Therefore, in topics or circumstances in which languages differ markedly from each other, there will be significant and formidable barriers to cross-cultural communication and understanding (Hoiyer 1976:116). The focus of this thesis is to research how the “language habits” of a particular people group shape their interpretation of the Bible and how this interaction affects the descriptors used to portray their perspective of God.

8.1.2 Communication Theory

Communication theory for this thesis has both a semiotic and a social dimension.³⁷¹ The semiotic dimension considers communication as a process of encoding and decoding signs that point to a perceived reality. Successful communication involves an interpretation of the encoded signs that is equivalent to the meaning intended by the encoder. The social dimension emphasizes that meaning does not exist in the signs but in socially assigned significance. Sillars & Gronbeck (2001:143) observe that “[s]ymbol systems are both outwardly and inwardly directed social structures.” Communication occurs because there is a network of relationships and commonly assigned definitions and assumptions about reality. Communication involves a negotiation of agreements that relies on the fundamental social aspect of dialogue. These assumptions are the basis for theory of interpretation argued for in the following sections.

Meaning is not located in an external reality or in words, but in people (Kraft 1991:82); it is socially constructed and individually perceived.³⁷² Meaning cannot be directly transferred from one person to another, but must be *signified* by means of a sign. This semiotic model has been

³⁷¹ It is acknowledged that communication is more complicated and could be evaluated in greater depth than this dual focus considered sufficient for the concerns of this thesis. Samovar & Porter (2004:16-21), for example, point out the nature of communication as symbolic (using “discretionary and subjective” codes), systemic (dependent upon interactions with larger systems), inferential (creating equivalent meaning in the mind of the hearer) and complex, thus generating the potential for a variety of understandings.

³⁷² This aspect of communication theory is proposed in 7.6.1. Larkin (1988:178) provides support by referring to the polysemy and homonymy of language coupled with social convention that arbitrarily assigns meanings to words. That is, a single word can have many meanings, and two words can have different meanings while sounding the same.

proposed by scholars such as Schreier (1985:49-73), Sillars & Gronbeck (2001) and Sperber & Wilson (1995:24). A message is sent by encoding in symbols (words) the meaning the sender wishes to convey. In essence, words are selected and joined together to indicate a specific meaning drawn from the potential range of meanings supplied by the words and phrases used in the participants' joint sociocultural environment. The arrangement of the words in the sentences and phrases narrows or sharpens the meaning intended. To understand the message, receptors reverse the process. They decode the message by assigning meaning to the words and sentences drawn from their cultural and social understanding and experience. Successful communication is gauged by the equivalence of the receptors' decoding to the meaning the sender wished to convey.

The semiotic model underscores the impreciseness of communication because no two people experience the world in the exact same way. But even though *absolute* communication is not possible, Nida (1975 [1960]:90) argues for *effective* communication based on three realities:

- (1) the processes of human reasoning are essentially the same, irrespective of cultural diversity;
- (2) all peoples have a common range of human experience, and
- (3) all peoples possess the capacity for at least some adjustment to the symbolic "grids" of others.

Nida's third point is the human ability to act empathetically, to perceive reality from someone else's standpoint so that there is awareness of both differences and similarities between I and you, us and them (Malina 1981:18). This points to the social dimension of communication.

While an understanding of communication from within a semiotics model is insightful, it is insufficient without the consideration of social and cultural dimensions. "Culture and communication are intertwined and dynamic" (Martin *et al* 2002:9). Yeo (1998:3) notes that "codes are not autonomously universal; rather they are networks framed and conditioned by sociocultural factors." In order for semiotic codes to be operative they must be situated within personal relationship because it is people who are the meaning-makers and who define the social conventions that express their meaning. Interrelationship, a common history and environmental experiences make up the broader social dimension within which the codes can be said to hold meaning. Words depend upon a prior agreement with others concerning reality in order to function as communication. For example, the word "God" can only be spoken or heard with significance when the speaker or hearer has a mental concept to attach to the term. That mental concept is formed within a common cultural milieu. Language in and of itself is not the reality, nor should words be strictly equated to the message. Rather, words are the means or vehicle

through which the hearer encounters the message of the speaker, and the message, in turn, is a reference to a culturally shaped reality jointly perceived in agreement by both speaker and hearer.

The social dimension recognizes that communication is more than the transfer of information. It also seeks impact, response and change. There is an intentional consequence of relational impact between speaker and hearer. Hall (1977:57) observes that language is not a process by which thoughts and meaning are transferred from one mind to another, but rather “a system for organizing information and for releasing thoughts and responses in other organisms.” While this “releasing” of thoughts can be understood as the “decoding” in the semiotic model that is the interpretive step in the communication process, this is not the completion of the communication process. Nida (1975 [1960]:77) points out that “language has a double purpose. It not only symbolizes concepts but is also used for the promotion of purposes; that is to say, it has not only psychological but also cultural and behavioral functions.” There are *perlocutionary* requirements to communication beyond the *illocutionary* intentions.

A single communication act between speaker and hearer cannot be evaluated in black and white terms of “understood” or “misconstrued.” Because the speaker and hearer will not be situated in equivalent contexts, history and experiences, the “releasing” of the thoughts in the hearer or the perlocutionary impact will never be exactly the same as the thought that prompted the communication. This calls for an ongoing dialogue with response, testing, correction and affirmation so that both speaker and hearer can move towards a clearer perception of each other’s thoughts and emotive concerns. A successful communication process will usually require back-and-forth dialogical movement between interlocutors similar to the hermeneutical spiral.³⁷³

In addition, these approaches to each other are “conditioned, colored, and limited by our human finiteness, our human sinfulness, and our human cultural, social, and historical contexts” (Larkin 1988:178). Multiple movements are therefore required between the perceived content of the message and the world experienced by the participants of the conversation. Interpretation could be called the participatory dimension of communication in which both parties shape and reshape the message as they integrate their understanding with the accepted conventions, assumptions and perspectives of their cultural context. Another way of viewing this is that the interlocutors bring their context with them as they engage the message. There is an overlap of context and message that is integral to the interpretation process. As the parties engage each other in conversation they are shaped and impacted so that what they have received and what they have

³⁷³ The hermeneutical spiral is considered in 8.3.

given have merged with their present reality to form a new and altered perspective. Yet at the same time it is not “totally other” but rather is a new perspective on what has always been present but not perceived. Furthermore, if language is a *stimulus* to generating thoughts and responses, then those thoughts and responses need to be heard so that both speaker and hearer are affirmed in their God ordained roles as meaning-makers.

8.1.3 Meaning in the Intersection between Text and Reader

The basic principles concerning language, communication and meaning in the preceding sections are now applied to written texts with a specific focus on scripture. In particular, the need for the social dimension beyond semiotics in communication theory will be important in considering how communication occurs through texts. This parallels Ricoeur’s (1984:53) observation that semiotic theory is limited to the literary text while hermeneutics “is concerned with reconstructing the entire arc of operations by which practical experience provides itself with works, authors, and readers.” NT Wright’s (2005:125) analogy of the Bible as an accurate map³⁷⁴ that helps us reach our destination demonstrates a text’s limitations as well as its relevance in doing theology and can be used to illustrate Ricoeur’s observation. Like a map, the Bible points towards and demarks reality; it is not the reality itself. In this metaphor, *semiotics* is the connection between the symbols on the map and the reality, *hermeneutics* is how those symbols are “read” by the interpreters who recognize the connection between the map and the original communicative intent from their own perspectives, while *theological praxis* is the ongoing dialectic of recognizing and acting upon the implications of the map in light of the readers’ current context. With respect to the Bible, the Holy Spirit is the guide who uses the text to direct the faithful believer to the goal. Because the author’s context is different from the readers’ context, there are a number of issues (language, culture, worldview assumptions) that complicate the communication and interpretation process when reading the Bible that do not apply to conversation between two living interlocutors. This section outlines some of the limitations and complications as a reader seeks to draw meaning from a text and then, following Vanhoozer (1998), proposes a philosophical orientation of covenant with the author in order to obtain that meaning.

A major difference between verbal conversations and reading scripture is the variance

³⁷⁴ Although the reference to a “map” is the same as Andrew’s (2009) quote cited in 5.7, the analogy is distinct. Andrew’s concern was to describe the limitations of local theologies in their ability to portray reality thus calling for a multiplicity of maps, whereas Wright connects the symbolic function of a map as a guide to the way the Bible is to be read.

between the context of the original author/audience and the context of the modern day reader. The Bible is a text with divine significance revealed to an audience that lived in different historical, geographical, cultural and linguistic contexts than today's readers. "Every reading of the Bible today is in some important sense an exercise in cross-cultural communication and understanding" (Green 2007:10). The reader approaches the text with contextually derived worldview assumptions and culturally determined comprehension skills and concepts that shape the way the message is received. These perspectives are significantly different from the original audience and adjustments are required to engage the message with relevance and integrity. Our "embodied human life performs like a cultural, neuro-hermeneutic system, locating (and, thus, interpreting) current realities in relation to our grasp of the past and expectations of the future" (Green 2004:392). Because we are enculturated into patterns of interpretation that contrast the assumptions of the author, there are inevitable communication gaps that need to be overcome. Implicit information assumed by the author will not be comprehended by the reader, oblique references will be misconstrued and even obvious references will lack equivalent impact. The interpreter must fill in those gaps that occur because of "shared assumptions between the writer and the authorial audience [that create] interpretive obstacles for the twenty-first-century audience who is not so intimate with the first-century world" (Green 2007:8). The ambiguity of language³⁷⁵ is also compounded in a written text creating uncertainties for the reader. Words and phrases can have multiple meanings and, unlike conversations, the precise meaning cannot be clarified through dialogue. What orientation to the text is possible in order to adequately encounter the message the author wished to communicate?

Vanhoozer (1998:77) examines the issue of meaning through an ethical approach³⁷⁶ to deal justly with the author so that "the author's intention serves as ground, goal and guide of interpretation." It is the author who initiates discourse, the one who "*means*" (:232). He proposes three fundamental questions:

- 1) the metaphysical question: "What is the author's intention, and where is it located?"
- 2) the epistemological question: "Can we gain knowledge of an author's intention, and can we know when we have done so?"
- 3) the ethical question: "Why should we strive to recover the author's intention?"

³⁷⁵ Ambiguity in language is discussed in 8.1.1.

³⁷⁶ In JK Brown's (2007:127) three-fold ethics of reading, the reader must read scripture "on its own terms," respect the author's communication as "a voice distinct from our own" and conform to the moral imperative of allowing God "to examine and shape us." The second point parallels Vanhoozer's concern, while the third point is developed in 8.1.4.1.

Vanhoozer's orientation towards the author rescues us from the pursuit of a disembodied message and is the approach advocated here. It is also comparable to Walhout's (1999:66) insistence that "the meaning of a text is not something that is cut off from and made independent of the actions involved in producing and interpreting a text." By means of the established critical realist framework,³⁷⁷ I am trying to navigate a path between a strict realist position that naïvely assumes an absolute congruence between the deliverance and reception of a message through a text and the unanchored position of postmodernists who do not have an "outside" reality that can be located. This parallels Vanhoozer's (1998) approach in which he addresses Fish's reader-based hermeneutics that all interpretation is community bound (:168) and Derrida's claim that the text transcends all attempts to know it (:186). While appreciating Fish's insistence that meaning is communally constructed in culture (:168) and Derrida's recognition that the reader violently subjects the text into a system of ideas (:185), he counters with the equally valid ethical question of the need to adequately "encounter" the author (:186). Vanhoozer (1998:187) proposes a way between the unethical claim of a "God's-eye" view of knowledge and a morass of complete disconnect, "Fortunately, there is an alternative between the absolutely knowable and the absolutely undecidable. A proper fear of the other, of the *author*, is the real beginning of literary knowledge."

Adopting this respect for the author, my approach is to frame the question of meaning in terms of relationship based on the assumption that communication can and does occur. That is, through the medium of the text there is a relationship between author and reader that is "true." The reader encounters the author by approaching the text with the desire and intention to comprehend and engage the message provided by the author. While the reader can only perceive the message using the symbols and concepts that have meaning for them, the assumption is that there is sufficient overlap or commonality between the symbols used by author and reader to enable a corresponding level of consistency between the encoded and decoded message. The commonality of communication intention coupled with adequate overlap of similar contextual cues between reader and author allows the reader to take a leap of imagination from their "known" (their reconstruction of the message from the text) in order to adequately perceive the author's intention.

This also implies that it is the *message* that is critical, not the specific words or language

³⁷⁷ See 7.6.1.

used. The message may be dependent upon the form of the text for communication, such as is evident in a *genre* like poetry, but should not be confused with the message.³⁷⁸ Using semiotic language, the words and linguistic structures serve as symbols pointing to cultural referents through which the culturally situated reader comprehends the message. It is this integrating personal event between text and cultural referents where meaning lies. Interpretation is not passive retrieval of information, as if meaning exists externally as a package, but the active reconstruction of an assumed coherent message. The reader's own context and worldview are the structures through which the text is interpreted and by which it is re-expressed in forms that reflect relevance and impact for that particular setting. As George MacDonald (2004 [1867]:88) notes

A man will hear but what he can hear, will see but what he can see, and, telling the story again, can tell but what he laid hold of, what he seemed to himself to understand. His effort to reproduce the impression made upon his mind will, as well as the impression itself, be liable to numberless altering, modifying, even, in a measure, discomposing influences. But it does not, therefore, follow that the reproduction is false.

The honest effort of the reader to connect to the author is the key to communication. With sufficient contextual cues to reconstruct the meaning, the reader can assume adequate correspondence with the author's intent to make that imaginative leap and appropriate the author's message. Indeed, for the sacred text, it is only as readers bring the message to life through contextual reflection and change in actions – the “imagination” of the Word in a new context – that the communication of the divine word can be considered complete and successful.

At the same time, the creation of meaning in communication is not an individual but communal affair; all assigning of "meaning" to symbols is done by culture. “There are no universal symbols immediately apprehended by all mankind” (Nida 1975 [1960]:58), nor can the

³⁷⁸ This distinction between form and message should not be interpreted as suggesting that the message can necessarily be understood in a propositional sense *apart from* the form. While there are propositional elements to God's Word, the attempt to reduce certain literary forms, such as metaphors and poetry, to their “basic meaning” in a propositional form is illusionary and inappropriately views such forms as extraneous rather than an essential part of the message. *Explaining* poetry does not bring one closer to the meaning of a poem any more than a scientific explanation of the colors of a sunset enhances its beauty. This reality does not make translation impossible, rather it provides confidence that, while not an easy task, cultural forms are sufficient to communicate the intended message. A history of translations affirms that equivalent cultural forms can be used to sufficiently communicate the message and can therefore appropriately be described as “scripture.”

meaning of any symbol of communication be assumed by only one person. Thus, the reader–author relationship occurs within broader contextual parameters to which they are bound if communication is to take place.

In describing this communal dynamic, Scollon *et al* (2001:7) view meaning in language as “jointly constructed by the participants in communication.” A critical word in this formulation of the dynamic is “jointly;” when the reader “constructs” meaning from a text, it cannot be ethically disconnected from the author’s initial creation. Assuming that adequate representation has been effected, the reader can sufficiently reconstruct the author’s meaning from the textual cues. Such an understanding of the function of meaning in the text prevents the extreme of assuming an overpowering author and passive reader as well as the opposite error of viewing the text in a reader–centered model as if the text is merely a mirror of the reader’s thoughts (JK Brown 2007:124). Readers are not passive before God’s Word as if *disconnected from* their environment nor are they dominant, *forcing* their way of thinking onto the text. Instead, the readers respond to contextual cues identified in the translated text that enable and guide a reconstruction of the author’s message.

Another way to phrase this understanding of the relationship between meaning and text is to suggest that there is *potential* meaning in the text that the reader encounters. This meaning should not be confused with the text itself, which is a symbolic form of the message, nor should it be confused with the hearer’s environment that acts as the cultural referent facilitating engagement with the text to access the message. Instead, meaning occurs in the interpretation event at the time the reader engages the text, which is the medium used by the author (or translator) to communicate the message.

An example of this dynamic can be seen in my (Naylor 2009c) exegesis of the Hebrew *manoh* in Ruth 3:1 translated as “rest” in the ESV, “My daughter, should I not seek rest for you, that it may be well with you?” Naomi is intent on bringing Ruth to a place of “rest.” Within that patriarchal setting her concern is for status, identity and security based on a significant relationship with a patriarch, in this case for Ruth to become the wife of Boaz. The linguistic cue of “*manoh*” points to a complex social system that defines gender roles, individual rights and communal responsibilities along with the appropriate processes through which these are negotiated. The Bible translator seeks a suitable linguistic cue for the members of a different context that will stimulate an equivalent reconstruction of the meaning of “rest” in the minds of the readers. Thus the GNB renders this verse, “I must find a husband for you, so that you will

have a home of your own,” making explicit the aspects of “husband” (ESV: “rest”) and “home” (ESV: “well with you”) which are culturally equivalent relationships and symbols of security and identity for a modern day Western English-speaking audience. Heeschen (2003:125) describes this hermeneutical dynamic in translation as “a metacode that monitors differences in content and balances formal differences.” The process involves “the destruction of differences at word- and sentence-level unities and the creation of global equivalences on the level of whole texts.” Heeschen’s “destruction” and “creation” terminology refers to the decoding of the meaning from textual and cultural cues in one context and the recoding of the meaning into the appropriate symbols that stimulate equivalent meaning – “global equivalences” – in the new context.

The inexactitude of the translation process compels us to use terminology such as “adequate,” “sufficient” and “equivalent” rather than “accurate,” “identical” or “correct.”³⁷⁹ Numerous factors determine adequate comprehension of the message and the limitations of language coupled with disparity between contexts, to say nothing of individual experience and ability, prevent exactitude in communication. The translator interacts with the recipient culture in order to discover terminology that adequately represents the meaning of God’s message. Yet the terminology chosen comes with philosophical, historical and emotional baggage that differs in significant ways from the words, phrases and categories of thought used to formulate the original text. As the contemporary readers encounter the text, they construct the message using the conceptual filters of their culture and thus begin the dialectical dance or “improvisation” (NT Wright 2005:126-127; Foder & Hauerwas 2004:81) of shaping their theology through the intersection of God’s revelation with their own cultural view of the world.

In order to communicate spiritual realities God chooses to use human languages and any language is sufficient.³⁸⁰ However, the strength of language through the provision of communally designated signs, or shortcuts, to signify a known contextual description of reality, is also its weakness since it is impossible for language to signify the meaning of any concept beyond contextual limits. It can only indicate the communication intention and the readers, while

³⁷⁹ Steiner 1998:428 states,

A “perfect” act of translation would be one of total synonymy. It would presume an interpretation so precisely exhaustive as to leave no single unit in the source-text – phonetic, grammatical, semantic, contextual – out of complete account, and yet so calibrated as to have added nothing in the way of paraphrase, explication or variant. But we know that in practice this perfect fit is possible neither at the stage of interpretation nor at that of linguistic transfer and restatement.

³⁸⁰ The argument for the sufficiency of language is developed in 7.2.

recognizing the concept as having meaning related to their perception of reality, at the same time must go beyond and recognize or empathetically imagine³⁸¹ another aspect or facet or depth of meaning beyond that common culturally defined meaning to which the particular terminology refers. This does not relativize meaning or make it inaccessible. It is not an invitation of “the text into a transformation of its original meaning, into a new application geared toward our thought forms; rather, the text invites us into a transformation of allegiances and commitments, which will manifest itself in behaviors appropriate to our social worlds” (Green 2004:395). While never fully comprehending the culturally defined philosophical, historical or emotional aspects inherent in the text, sufficient resonance is possible for the theological understanding of the readers to be shaped as they engage and live into “the theological imagination inscribed in the biblical text” (Kirkpatrick 1996:279).

JK Brown (2007:117) argues for meaning as “fundamentally or intrinsically” stable and unchanging, with all perceptions or formulations of that meaning designated “contextualizations.” However, this is problematic as it envisions meaning as an entity existing outside of the interlocutors and the interpretation event. Better is Vanhoozer’s (1998:206) concept of a “covenant of discourse” with two dimensions, “the inter-subjective bond between speakers and the objective bond between language and reality.”³⁸² Similar to the imagery of covenant used to describe conversion,³⁸³ covenant language concerning discourse between author and reader maintains meaning within relationship and tied to the interpretations and formulations of the participants. That is, both author and speaker engage each other – even though at distinct times separated by millennia – with an assumed covenant that they will address the encounter with integrity. The author forms the text with an honest attempt to communicate through the use of cultural symbols commonly understood and accepted by the intended audience. The reader commits to understand the message through the reconstruction of the meaning from the text

³⁸¹ Cf. Ricoeur’s (1984:71) notion of “*mimesis*₃” in his “threefold *mimesis*” which “marks the intersection of the world of the text and the world of the hearer or reader.” “*Mimesis*₁” is the imaginative dimension of the text relating to the human world, “*mimesis*₂” is the narrative’s formulation of its own world (Ricoeur 1984:52-87; Wisse 2005). “*Mimesis*” is a Greek word that means “imitation.”

³⁸² The concept of an “objective” bond is problematic since the relationship between language and reality is cultural and stems from intersubjective interactions. Perhaps it would be more appropriate to refer to a *designated* bond between language and *common perceptions* of reality. This avoids jumping from epistemological assumptions to ontological conclusions. It may also be helpful to make explicit the semiotic assumption that lies behind this “bond.”

³⁸³ Conversion framed in terms of covenant is developed in 6.5.10.

according to contextually defined use of linguistic forms.³⁸⁴

8.1.4 The Text–Faith Tension

Establishing meaning as occurring in the intersection between the text and the reader leads to a consideration of the impact of meaning on the reader, which is at the heart of this thesis. A submissive posture before a sacred text creates opportunity for the reader’s faith to be shaped through an encounter with the meaning of the text. As represented by the faith–text–context triangle,³⁸⁵ when people are exposed to a text and resonance between the meaning derived from the text and their faith occurs, potential is created for their faith to be altered. Change is *initiated*, *facilitated* and *revealed* through exposure to a text. The presence of the text challenges the reader to re–evaluate their faith stance in light of the perceived meaning (*initiate*), the concerns of the text create the parameters for discussion (*facilitate*) and the culture texts generated from the reader *reveal* the impact. “Faith interrogates the biblical text in order to make possible a theological formulation with contemporary relevance” (Kirkpatrick 1996:276). However, change only occurs when there is a perceived contrast between the current faith perspective and the implications of the text, that is, a *tension* results that requires resolution. If people submit to the meaning and allow it to shape their faith, this impacts the way they view and respond to their world. Tension is generated as the reader thinks, “How does this message impact the way I (we) understand and interact with my (our) context?” Thus, while an initial tension is created between faith and text, context is integrally involved as the *locus* for faith–text tension. Faith can only be expressed in context and thus any tension between text and faith finds its articulation in the relationship between faith and context.

8.1.4.1 How the Text Reads Us: Text–Faith Dynamic of Inculturation

One way of looking at the faith–text tension is not to consider how believers read the text, but to examine how the text “reads” believers (Weber 1996, Green 2007). That is, how does the text shape the readers’ beliefs and actions so that there is a transforming effect in their lives during the interpretation process? In referring to a poem by P Maitland, EM Wainwright (1995:136) writes about the “‘unwrapping’ of ourselves as the text reads us enabling us to ‘discover rooms we never guessed at.’” M Brauch (1996:viii) explains the “formation and transformation” that occurs when

³⁸⁴ The simple genitive, “meaning of the text,” is used in this thesis with this hermeneutical perspective assumed.

³⁸⁵ See Figure 3: *Faith-Text-Context Interaction* in 5.4.

the Bible “reads” us as being “encountered, challenged, questioned, critiqued, involved, engaged” by the Word of God. R Bell (2005:60) adds that “inspired words have a way of getting under our skin and taking on a life of their own. They work on us. We started out reading them, but they end up reading us.” This concept is illustrated well by HR Weber (1996:xiv) through a story told in East Africa:

A village woman used to walk around always carrying her Bible. "Why always the Bible?" her neighbors asked teasingly. "There are so many other books you could read." The woman knelt down, held the Bible high above her head and said, "Yes, of course there are many books which I could read. But there is only one book that reads me."

Weber (1996:xv) expands on this by explaining that a “reversal of roles” takes place in which the reader, as subject, engages the text, and through the experience encounters the

someone who looks at us, speaks to us, and gives us guidance. The object of our enquiry becomes the subject who addresses us and understands us better than we do ourselves. We are confronted with the living God who acts in creation and history, in our personal life, and in the world of nations.

This orientation leads Weber (1996:29) to describe the Bible as “Drama” which calls people to “participate in [past acts of salvation], to make them present and to reenact them” and, therefore, Jesus’ command to “Do this” at the last supper refers to more than a call to establish a practice; it compels us to enter into the pattern of his life (:40). This concept is echoed by Kirkpatrick (1996:292) who states that the hermeneutical process of theological development “ultimately spirals back to the theologian who, as interpreter, is not only the subject of interpretation but also the object.” Although in the beginning of the process the reader interprets the meaning, in the end it is the Spirit who “interprets” the reader, that is, brings to light the meaning of the Word as it impacts the reader’s life.

Jenson (2003:30) suggests that scripture is not only in the church, “but we, the church, are within scripture – that is, our common life is located *inside* the story scripture tells.” He decries the assumption that what we are reading is “*not our* community” (:31) and insists that the actors in the Bible have continuity with us, the readers. We are all part of one community “diachronically.” This approach emphasizes the need to “fit into scripture’s story” (:34), which means that we give priority to the text to define our lives. The Bible provides a “theological vision that incarnates itself in our ways of experiencing and interacting with the world around us” (Green 2007:23). What is being proposed is sensitivity to the perlocutionary purpose of Bible reading. When the Bible reads us so that we are conformed to the message, then the *telos* of God’s word is being

achieved, as promised (Isa 55:11).

Allowing the Bible to read us has a powerful biblical heritage. The Old Testament prophets proclaimed the word of God in order to provoke response and conformity to God's will. Transformation resulting from response, such as the Ninevites' repentance (Jon 3:10), gains God's favor while the skeptics and stubborn bring judgment and condemnation on themselves, such as the "false prophets" who mocked and rejected Micaiah's prophesy (1 Kings 22:23-25). This posture requires a conviction of the "immediacy of the scriptures" (Green 2007:33). As with the development of theological trajectories,³⁸⁶ the believer is not considering a two-step process of first understanding the passage in terms of its historical context and then applying principles disconnected from a passage to their own life according to a modern, rationalist process. Instead the believers hear the word as speaking a fresh challenge to them. Scripture is approached with the assumption that the purpose is to conform and be transformed. For example, when the believer hears James address "you" in his epistle, the first thought is not directed to the original audience, but a personal reflection or adoption of the term. The believer addresses the scriptures as participant, not as objective, and sometimes critical, observer.³⁸⁷ For the believer, the assumption is that they are already part of the community; they make their "home in the world of scripture" (Green 2007:56).

This contrasts a rationalist approach to scripture that assumes that anyone, by use of logical categories, common sense or an analytical process can come to an accurate understanding of the Bible.³⁸⁸ JK Brown (2007:128) insists that reading solely for information or knowledge "diminishes" the value and purpose of scripture. It is only by an act of submission to the text that affects faith and action that we can know God's Word in the way intended by the divine author. This communicative dynamic or way of reading the text has been compared to the rendering of a

³⁸⁶ See this argument as it relates to theological trajectories in 5.7.

³⁸⁷ The focus here is on the *posture* of the reader, not the *interpretive process* which is more complex than a one-to-one application without sensitivity to contextual dynamics. This distinction is developed further in the following section.

³⁸⁸ Hauerwas (1993:47-62), in an entertaining sermon, makes this point through the Emmaus road incident. He suggests that Jesus was not recognized by the two disciples because they were incapable of seeing him for who he was. Jesus needed to reconstruct for them the meaning of the scriptures because their categories of understanding were insufficient. They were called upon to enter into this new story that was being written through Jesus' death and resurrection, rather than fit Jesus into their familiar and comfortable approach to scripture. They needed a "training that would instill in them a whole set of practices that would give the text a whole different reading" (1993:56).

musical score (Davis & Hays 2003:3; Green 2007:67-68)³⁸⁹ and parallels the musical analogy used previously to describe contextualization/inculturation.³⁹⁰ Just as classical musicians “extemporize the melodies, keys, rhythms, and other musical elements set forth in their respective tradition” (Foder & Hauerwas 2004:79-80), so the “score” or topic provided by God’s Word speaking into the believers’ context is taken up and “extemporized” or “negotiated” within the restraints and framework of their prior faith assumptions. The score can be studied, copied, and memorized. But until it is played through instruments to produce music, it has not fulfilled its purpose. Until musicians embrace the *spirit* of the piece through a performance, they will not do justice to the intent of the author. When applied to God’s Word, the “instruments” correspond to cultural images and metaphors, while the “spirit” is the integration of the biblical message into the life and rhythms of believers. By playing the “musical score” of the text with their cultural “instruments,” believers allow the Bible to “read” them so that they live out God’s purposes. Their reading finds expression in transformed practices. “Behavior serves as a display case for our deepest commitments” (Green 2007:20). Even though there are elements of risk and potential error, there is a “creative fidelity” (:20) with the text since the orientation of the true believer is that of submission to the Word. Furthermore, Jesus promised the Holy Spirit as the transforming power that empowers, guides and interprets the entire process (Jn 14-16). Just as a musician has confidence that they have grasped the spirit of a piece of music, so we as believers can experience the Holy Spirit’s affirmation that we are truly living out the spirit of the Word (Rom 8:9-11).

Foder & Hauerwas (2004:81) clarify this improvisation as “a kind of suffering, a pause in or cessation of movement, an undergoing, a receptivity” like contemplative prayer. It demands a level of “attentiveness, attunement, and alertness” in which the one who prays or reads becomes one with and absorbed by the focus of their attention. The music plays the performer to the extent that the musician is pulled along into the compelling beauty of the piece. In the same way the message compels the attentive, attuned and submissive person or community. This active engagement and creative expression of the message within a particular faith context constitutes the meaning of the “text reading us.”

³⁸⁹ This musical image parallels Bailey's (1983 [1976:35; 1980:xiv]) piano analogy. In order to hear the music of the piano we must be “attuned” to the same musical rules and tones experienced by the author of the music. The “known pattern of life” – attitudes, relationships, responses and value judgments – assumed by the setting of the story is the “piano” on which the storyteller plays.

³⁹⁰ See 6.4.1.

This orientation should not be misinterpreted as a self- or human-centered approach to scripture as if our needs are the primary concern. In hearing the story as our story and being absorbed into the message we are not to lose sight of the author, the “other” whom we engage and have covenanted with through our embrace of the implications of the divine message. “Reading the Bible as scripture accords privilege to the role of this text in divine self-disclosure” (Green 2007:11). The primary shaping of the text in our life as believers is the transformation of our relationship with God, the relationship that defines us as the bride of Christ. The most intimate of human relationships becomes the metaphor for the *telos* of God’s Word in our lives – to be one with God in Christ (Gen 2:24; Jn 17:21; Eph 5:31,32; Rev 21:2,3). Another critical biblical image that carries the same relational message is the status of being children of God. We are not slaves who follow instructions with imposed conformity, but children who hunger after the heart of God and seek to be like the Father (Mt 5:48; Gal 4:21-31). This is the essence of Jesus’ comment to his disciples, “I no longer call you servants, because a servant does not know his master’s business. Instead, I have called you friends” (Jn 15:15). Our orientation towards God experienced through the text therefore shapes our actions towards each other. If God is viewed through Christ as a gracious and merciful shepherd who sacrificially cares for the sheep, then those who enter into the story of Jesus will respond likewise. Addressing God’s word in this way is to encounter the author which exposes and transforms the fundamental convictions and perspectives of reality that shape our relationships, values and actions.

8.1.4.2 Being Read by the Text: An Evangelical Approach

In evangelical circles there is a proverb quoted by those who take a *non*-critical realist stance to the Bible, “If the plain sense makes good sense, seek no other sense.” This ignores the influence of culture, history and context on interpretation. It is an ethnocentric position that comes from identifying one’s own cultural story as universal (Malina 1981:10). Because this mentality has been and continues to be prevalent in the context of my life and ministry, it is appropriate to argue for the hermeneutical approach advocated here as a valid alternative to the one implied by the proverb. Rather than an assumed linear connection between the Bible’s commands and our obedience found in the “plain sense” hermeneutic, the alternate proposes two other crucial steps that focus on the shaping of our belief system by interaction with God’s revelation of the divine nature. Under the paradigm espoused in this thesis, Christians live not by thinking about God’s commands in the Bible and conforming their lives to that pattern in a one-to-one correspondence.

Instead, they live according to what they believe is right and true and good in a belief system (*faith*) that has been shaped by scripture. That is, the primary function of the Bible is not as a book

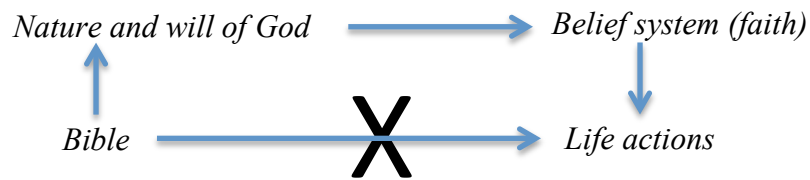


Figure 6 *Interpreted Impact of Bible on Life Actions*

of instructions, but a revelation of God’s will and nature that speaks into and shapes our contextualized belief system. As per the accompanying diagram, our life actions are not impacted directly by the Bible as if through some non–interpreted process, but by our faith that is fashioned by our understanding of the nature and will of God, which in turn is drawn from our reading of God’s Word.

As human beings, each of us has a system of fundamental beliefs about God and reality that guides how we interact with our world and read texts; a theology or faith that determines our view of reality, our moral compass, our conscience and our spiritual vitality. Conversely, the Bible speaks into that belief system and provides God’s revelation of truth in order to shape our faith in conformity to the nature of God and the divine intentions in this world. Therefore, both our reading of the Bible and the Bible’s reading of us is *always* guided and limited by a particular hermeneutic and theology.

Once we are aware of this reality and approach scripture with this dynamic in mind, we do not focus on the details as directly applicable and disconnected from the author (e.g., “read the passage and discover a command to obey or a promise to claim”), but on the revelation of who God is and the Creator’s desire and plan for us as human beings. This is accomplished by engaging the Word with what we already believe. We are in a continual dialogue or creative tension between our understanding of truth and what God is saying in the Bible. Thus no command of God should be taken out of the context of our broader belief system or contextualized theology and obeyed “as is.” There is no noncontextualized “as is” command. For example, this would be the case if I believe that under God’s rule men and women are co–equal inheritors of the Spirit, but because of Paul’s command in 1 Tim 2:12 I do not allow women to preach in the church *even though this seems to contradict my theology*.³⁹¹ Rather, the approach is

³⁹¹ The caveat here is critical. I must believe my complementarian fellow evangelicals who do not see a contradiction between accepting that women are co–equal inheritors of the Spirit and

to take all that we have come to know of God through our years of spiritual discipline and interaction with scripture as Christ followers and use that as the context within which the command is considered. For example, when we read about the man stoned to death for violating the Sabbath command (Num 15:32), we do not apply that directly to our situation as a universal command of God. Instead, we read it within the context of Jesus, who was accused of a similar crime, and his response (Mk 2:27-28).

The fundamental principle is that our primary concern is not with the individual commands of God in the Word, but with the God who makes those commands. R Brown (2008:24) claims that “God has designed the Bible” so that it revises our concepts of God and the realities of life. Our worldview is “reformed” through interaction with God’s word in which some erroneous concepts of God are eliminated, new attributes are embraced, and appropriate existing perspectives are strengthened. It is this development of God revealed in Christ that guides the believer. To focus on the commands in an authority–obedience paradigm without taking into account the grand themes of scripture and the vision of God’s rule proclaimed by Jesus is to misapply scripture and miss out on what God is seeking to develop within us. Theological formulations created through the approach to scripture advocated here will relate what God said in the biblical context to our view of reality by intentionally asking questions that represent our faith assumptions. In this way we challenge both our own assumed theology *and* our interpretation of scripture with a desire to construct a vision of God and the divine will that can guide our lives. Geddert (2005:27) affirms that “when we carefully observe how each text provides glimpses of God’s will for the specific situations they were intended to address, we gain a heart of wisdom, so that we can discern God’s responses to the situations we face.”

This approach not only allows, but also encourages disagreement with scripture. But it must be a disagreement that is paradoxically coupled with full submission to the will of God if scripture is to “read” us. Such a disagreement is an honest grappling with the message based on light previously received. To summarily reject that light based on a perceived “plain meaning” is to do an injustice to the Spirit’s work in our lives. Acquiescence to a particular understanding that is against our previous development elevates a human interpretation to the status of biblical authority. Any reading that contradicts our theology *must* be questioned with the goal of

forbidding them to lead and preach. If I did not see a contradiction, I, too, would be inclined to appropriate Paul’s command in a literal fashion. However, it is the perceived contradiction that is the point being made.

conforming our understanding to the will and nature of God, if we are to allow God's word to read and shape us. God is one and therefore what is written must be consistent with God's character and will. It is precisely those points of discomfort with scripture with which we need to wrestle, not simply live with cognitive dissonance and ignore the beliefs we have gained through a broader theological development. Nor, on the other hand, must we assume perfection in our theology, for all our perspectives are but a human view of God's revelation, and we must be ready and willing to alter our theology to fit with what God is saying and doing.

As a further example, the conviction that people are created in the image of God (my faith stance) guides me and convicts me in my view of and interaction with people. I do not think "I should love this person because Jesus said so and I am his follower so I will obey," as good as that attitude may be. Rather, because I am Jesus' follower *in spirit*, my belief system is being conformed into his image and I love because I am learning to see people as Jesus sees them. The command becomes redundant in terms of direct motivation as my theology is lived out. We may prefer to live by standard answers and permanent rules that resolve our problems, but "we are far better off with a Living Word" (Geddert 2005:28). Algorithms are straightforward, relationships are complex. Life is about relationships rather than mere conformity to patterns and rules. The praxis revealed through our relationships with God, others and creation demonstrates how the Bible reads us. Such an orientation is the fulfillment of Jeremiah's prophetic vision (Jer 31:33) of the law of God written on human hearts; our spirit in tune with God's Spirit in desire and passion so that our actions and relationships reveal the kingdom of God within our context.

8.2 Hermeneutical Considerations for Bible Translation

This section focuses on the text–context dynamic of the faith–text–context triangle. Translation is the reconstruction of a perceived message encoded into patterns, forms and symbols meaningful to a specific people group so that by engaging the text with integrity they are capable of accessing the message of the original author. If, as has been argued,³⁹² the transference of a message across linguistic barriers is possible but not without interpretation, then Bible translation is a hermeneutical process from the beginning to the end, "one in which cultural relativity plays an unavoidable role through and through" (Taber 1991:172). Interpretation does not cease upon the publication of the text but continues on through readers who interact with the text from both personally and culturally shaped perspectives. God's message given in another time for another

³⁹² See 8.1.3.

people group and shaped according to their socio–historical categories of meaning is embodied in a new language with different categories of meaning. Nonetheless, a translation crafted with care and integrity confronts the reader with God’s message. But even more than this, a successful translation provides readers the opportunity to interpret the meaning of God’s *Word* for their context and so develop contextual theologies that reflect the way they engage God’s *word*³⁹³ in their lives.

8.2.1 The Bible as a Human and Divine text

One hermeneutical assumption in considering the biblical text is that it is simultaneously God’s word and a human creation. The Bible is God’s word in a way unique to human history. Scripture is an intersection of the infinite Divine *beyond* culture and history with limited humanity located *in* a specific time and context. Moreover, the Bible itself is historically and culturally located while having relevance to all cultures at all times. It contains messages from God written *to* specific people in particular circumstances and cultural settings. At the same time, it is God’s Word *for* all people in its revelation of God’s character and will. It is because the Bible is a revelation *of* God, and not merely a localized message *from* God, that it has universal, authoritative claim on all humanity.

At a linguistic level, the text uses human constructs that reflect localized, culturally defined values and concepts. As such, the Bible functions like any other book in which information is communicated through forms that are already known. Therefore, the Bible is not the word of God in the sense of God performing a “speech–act” or speaking with illocutionary force³⁹⁴ directly to the reader’s context every time a passage is read, such as calling light into being as described in Gen 1:3. It is not God’s word in the sense that *logos* is used in John 1:1, as the “divine self–expression” (Köstenberger 2004:25), nor can the Bible be considered the word of God in the sense that Jesus is declared the embodiment of the divine *logos* (Jn 1:14). Instead, the biblical text, in whatever language presented, is a *vehicle of communication* subject to the

³⁹³ See 5.1 for the distinction between God’s Word (capitalized) referring to the Bible as a text, and God’s word (not capitalized) indicating God’s communicative action.

³⁹⁴ In using JL Austin’s (1962:6,98) “performative utterances” and “illocutions” and JR Searle’s (1969) consideration of “speech–acts” as a description of God’s creative word, I am not suggesting that to speak of God’s word as having illocutionary force implies the same limits as with human speech–acts. Rather, these acts are similar in *kind*. Human speech–acts function within the laws and conventions of a cultural context and enact a *conditional* reality (e.g., such as a judge pronouncing someone “not guilty”). God’s speech–acts occur as an expression of his eternal nature and thus enact reality at a *higher* level.

strengths and limitations of language to point to and represent all of the aforementioned *first-order* expressions of the “word of God.” In essence, the reader becomes an *observer* to the word of God using the text as a window through which the revelation of God is revealed. The Bible is therefore both a human and divine creation; human authors communicated the divine message using the contextual forms familiar to them, a message contextualized by the Holy Spirit in and through the authors leading to understanding and impact within their context (2 Pet 1:21).

Considering the nature of the Bible in a similar fashion, Nida (1975 [1960]:225) concludes that while the divine author is absolute, the Bible is not. The linguistic vehicle necessary for communication is culturally and historically bound which both enables and limits the transfer of the message. Based on this reality, Nida concludes, “all divine revelation is essentially incarnational.” In order for the message to be understood, it must draw its meaning from the context in which it speaks. Any concept that cannot be referred to within a culture cannot be comprehended by the members of that culture.

The word of God understood functionally as God’s act of communication has three distinct aspects. First, the biblical *text* is the word of God because it contains a message from God. Second, the *message* is the word of God because it communicates God’s truth. Third and ultimately, the word of God is the *truth* to which the message refers; God’s ultimate speech-act, the *logos*, Jesus. Each of these ways of speaking about God’s word has a different implication. The text is arbitrary; it is a vehicle for the message and is an aspect of human culture, not divine. It represents God’s accommodation to humanity by speaking to people in a language they understand. Other linguistic vehicles can be substituted without affecting the status of the message. For example, the original manuscripts of the Bible are written in Hebrew, Aramaic and Greek, and all of the books in the canon are considered equally the word of God without depending on the linguistic vehicle for their canonical authority. Jesus’ teaching can be understood equally well in either Aramaic or Greek which is, presumably, the logic behind the Gospel writers’ decision to translate his teaching into Greek (Cavey 2007:236). The arbitrariness of the words, text and language as a vehicle for the essential message is the premise behind Bible translation and is one difference that distinguishes Christians from Muslims with respect to their sacred books.³⁹⁵

This implies that the *message* as God’s word is more critical than the text. The Bible contains a true and necessary message from God for humanity revealing, via human symbols and

³⁹⁵ See 4.4.1 for a further description of the contrasts.

concepts, the nature and will of God. That is, through the cultural description of the *text* the *message* is communicated at the highest level of significance that the phrase “word of God” represents – the revelation of God. The message speaks of things that exist apart from the message itself. Even if the message did not exist, the realities to which it refers (e.g., God’s creative speech, the significance of historical events) would still be there. Thus the power of the message does not exist in the *meaning* of the message, but in the reality to which the message refers. For example, the power of the resurrection is found ultimately not in the Bible’s declaration of the resurrection (the text), nor in the power of the concept (the message), but in the literal resurrection of Jesus from the dead (the reality). The actions and speech of God are the word referred to in the message communicated through the text and it is this word that is sharper than a two-edged sword (Heb 4:12) and accomplishes divine purposes (Isa 55:11). This tiered action of communication and its relationship to reality can be represented as follows:

Text (words/symbols strung together. For example: the, door, is, closed)

is constructed to communicate a

Message (information communicated about a door described as closed)

which is constructed to represent

Reality (there is an actual, physical door that is not open).³⁹⁶

In summary, although the Bible is in a very real sense God’s word, God’s word is not limited to the Bible, nor is God’s word primarily the *text* of the Bible, nor even the *message* of the Bible. Rather the message is a representation of God’s speech-acts existing beyond the symbolic limits of the text itself, similar to the way a house is real beyond our limited ability to describe it in words. From this perspective, the Bible is a case study or description of God’s intervention into human history. It is a window *onto* God’s speech-acts. The biblical text is not God’s word in any ultimate sense, but gives us a message *about* God’s word, that is Jesus. The Bible is not “God speaking” in the illocutionary sense of Genesis 1; it explains how and what God has declared. Scripture’s power is not in the words or text separate from the meaning; the communicated message brings us in touch with the power and reality of who God is.

As one example of how the Bible is God’s word in these three dimensions, consider Jesus’

³⁹⁶ This argument holds even for non-historical passages, such as the Parable of the Two Lost Sons because such passages point to a reality beyond the story itself. I.e., the *text* communicates a *message*, which, in this case, is a parable providing a metaphor of a father-son relationship to describe the *reality* of God’s relationship with humanity. Thus the communicative intent of the author to imply a meaning can go beyond the surface presentation of an entertaining story.

commission to his disciples in Acts 1:8 (NIV), “you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.” By taking the context seriously, we recognize that this description was not given *to* us, the modern day readers. It was given to the apostles, those present at the time of Jesus’ speech. Even in recognizing ourselves as potentially part of Luke’s intended audience, the presentation is not a “you” directed to the implied reader, but to the original apostles. It would be a misreading on the part of contemporary readers to take what was given to someone else in another time and place and assume that it applies directly to them. Growing up in Sunday School we sang a song, “Every promise in the book is mine, mine, mine!”³⁹⁷ This is not true in any *direct* sense; Abraham’s promise to be a great nation is *not* mine.

Furthermore, in Acts 1:8, Jerusalem, Judea and Samaria are all contexts relevant to the disciples not to those readers who came afterwards. Although we can visit a city called Jerusalem, it is unrecognizable on a number of levels from the one Jesus was referring to. Moreover, the provinces of Samaria and Judea, let alone the cultural and religious distinctions with their specific biases, are long gone. It is also difficult for the contemporary reader to envision the phrase “ends of the earth” with the outlook and orientation of the 1st century disciples.

But although Jesus’ command was not written *to* us modern day readers, that does not mean that the verse is not *for* us. Believers are required through this hermeneutic to recognize the implied invitation and enter into a relationship with Christ through a commitment to his ongoing mission. When the extent of the statement and the work of establishing God’s reign is recognized, they dedicate themselves as a part of that commission; they become part of the story. At some level all readers of the Bible in every cultural, geographic and historical context must engage the text as God’s word *for them* in order to access the message. Every promise, every command, every word in the book *is* ours, but none are for direct application. Paul informs us in Gal 3:29 that Abraham’s promise *is* true for us, albeit indirectly and collectively, “If you belong to Christ then you are Abraham’s seed, and heirs according to the promise.” Narrative theology is thus created by readers entering into God’s story, or, more accurately, by integrating their story with God’s story. That is, by embracing God’s story they do not leave their story behind, but begin a transforming dialogue as the Bible “reads” them.

This perspective on the relationship of the word of God to scripture provides

³⁹⁷ I remember a story, probably apocryphal, my father told of a person who became Christian and was so excited that he wanted to tell others. However, he read the verse in Paul’s writings that the gospel was “to the Jew first” (Rom 1:16) and so he went to find a Jew before he told his family.

hermeneutical validation for Bible translation, and particularly meaning-based translations, that is complementary to the theological validation derived from the Pentecost event.³⁹⁸ By recognizing that the culturally shaped message points to a reality beyond itself, the contours of that message can be altered for a new context without affecting the essence of the message, as long as that same reality is represented in an adequate and authentic manner to the intended audience. In fact, in order for the message to indicate the equivalent reality, adjustments to cultural forms and concepts will be required if assumptions of the original context differ from the context of the translation. Secondly, recognition that the translated text provides cultural cues for the communication of the message means that any composition of the text is legitimate as long as an equivalent and authentic message can be reconstructed.

As an example of the latter dynamic common to both formal and meaning-based translations, consider the translation of the Hebrew *aryeh* and the Greek *leon* which, in English, is usually rendered “lion.” The textual cues for Hebrew and Greek audiences (*aryeh* and *leon*) have been substituted with a symbol suitable for English-speakers (lion). To illustrate the former aspect of shaping not just the text but also the *message* according to cultural requirements, consider the same word used as a metaphor in Ps 22:13 and 1 Pet 5:8 to describe a merciless and violent enemy. In Sindhi an appropriate word for the *animal* is *shehan*, but, when used metaphorically, *shehan* refers to a courageous, powerful and honorable person. To prevent this misrepresentation of the idiom, the Sindhi translation in these verses has been rendered as *baghaRa*, equivalent to the English “wolf,” thought of as a dangerous, cruel animal to the average Sindhi. While at odds with the literal animal in the original text, it more accurately represents the metaphorical intent of the passage. This rendering allows the Sindhi reader to enter into the intended narrative without confusion.

8.2.2 A Philosophy of Translation

In his classic work on translation theory and process, *After Babel*, George Steiner (1998:436) defines translation “proper” as “the interpretation of verbal signs in one language by means of verbal signs in another.” Despite this semiotic description, as accurate as it is, translation as a process of interpretation is best understood as a work of art rather than a technological process that can be accomplished by following a particular methodology or by linearly and systematically

³⁹⁸ See 7.2.

applying a set of rules.³⁹⁹ Although it does involve learned skills and the precise use of indispensable tools such as linguistic and exegetical scholarship, the translation process is comparable to that of the sculptor or painter in oils;⁴⁰⁰ the original message must first pass through the translator in a process of interpretation and be shaped by the translator in order to find its expression in as full a manner as possible. Heeschen (2003:128) states that “translation of texts requires, to a certain degree, the capacity to evaluate problems of style and artistic form, to be an artist oneself.” Translation is the task of using “verbal signs” of one language to communicate the message of another language, but it cannot be *reduced* to the choosing of signs any more than a Rembrandt can be understood as the dabbing of paint on canvas.

In the house of an acquaintance I noticed above the head of her bed a pair of “paint by number” copies of the *Blue Boy* by Gainsborough and *Pinkie* by Lawrence. They were a mechanistic representation of the original works but so reductionist through the application of monochrome colors within designated numbered areas that they were painful to look at. The methodology required to complete those pictures did not necessitate either a grasp of the essence of the original artwork or an artistic sense to express that meaning within the new form. Like a painted doll that is a parody of human likeness yet lacks the depth and essence of life, so those paintings failed to communicate or interpret the original works of art in any significant way. Similarly, translation is not a method of discovering matching words, but of immersing oneself into the emotion, the profundity, the complexity, the assumptions and the style of expression of the original author and then reproducing the essence of that message with all its dimensions using the symbols of communication of another language so that the reader of the resulting text finds a significant and equivalent rendering of the original message. On the basis of the internalized meaning the translator carefully chooses the words and thus shapes the text in the target language

³⁹⁹ While not using the imagery of art, Steiner (1998), in seeking to detail the communicative process of translation and argue for the reality of communication, does speak of the translator submerging their sensibilities and the genius of their own language into that of the original (:327), seeking to bridge the gap between the original and their own language (:339), and paraphrasing to construct a text that the original author would have produced if they had composed it in their own language (:351).

⁴⁰⁰ An application of Foder & Hauerwas’ (2004:81-82) musical analogy used in 8.1.4.1 is appropriate here. Translation is a creative and improvising process that finds expression within the deliberately limited contours of seeking to maintain integrity with the original text while using forms that communicate to the target audience. These forms compare to the rhythms and harmonies of music; the framework within which the freedom and creativity of the musician is expressed. The musical score of another artist would be the “message” that is “communicated” with integrity by the musician.

so that the original message given in one particular time and place, built on culturally specific concepts and assumptions and written by another person, is communicated to a new audience of a different time and place by using an entirely different set of culturally specific concepts and assumptions.

Such an orientation to scripture requires a deep appreciation for the sacredness of the task. Like Moses, the translator is treading on sacred ground (Ex 3:5) because it is God's message that is being communicated. Words of life are being handled that have the power to transform people's lives into kingdom living. The translator therefore approaches the text humbly as Isaiah struck dumb before the awesome image of the Lord filling the temple with the divine glory (Isa 6), yet compelled as Jeremiah by "the burning fire shut up in [his] bones" to proclaim the message of the Lord (Jer 20:9). The conviction of the translator is that the message, even though newly crafted for a people with a different culture and language than the original recipients, remains in essence God's word. The resulting translation is not merely a representation, but actually *becomes* God's word for the believing reader. It is a sacred, inspired text because God speaks through the translation. The translator must never lose sight of the honor of standing in such a privileged place.

The desire for the message to impact the lives of others is the primary motive for an emphasis on Bible translation in the modern missions movement (Townsend 2009 [1963]:327-38). Jesus' call to his followers to bring witness to all the nations (Mt 28:18-20) with a view towards transformation is the basis for believing that Bible translation is not only possible but mandated. The ongoing Christian global task of rendering scripture into thousands of human languages reinforces the conviction that God can speak through each and every language to communicate divine truth and that the reception of that truth brings spiritual redemption, reformation and renewal. The conviction that transformation is the goal of translation is the impetus behind a receptor oriented or meaning-based⁴⁰¹ approach to Bible translation. The role of the receptor in the final step of the communication dynamic by interpreting, accepting and acting on the message has been given a preeminent place when considering the nature and function of the task (Nida & Taber 1974:1-4; Kraft 1979:147-148; Smalley 1991:8). Prior to this insight, the key concern was a consideration of whether the translation was "faithful" to the original manuscript with a focus on the technical aspect of translation rather than on the intended audience (Nida & Taber 1974:23). While concern for faithfulness and integrity to the original text is critical

⁴⁰¹ See 5.16 for a distinction between "meaning-based" and "formal" translations.

involving word, sentence and discourse analysis (:102), as well as historical and contextual considerations, it must be coupled with sensitivity to the way the translation is being read and interpreted by the receptors. Using Austin's (1962:108) speech-act distinctions, the responsibility of the translator is to communicate the *illocutionary* force of the original text according to the usage of the receptor language so that there is an equivalent *perlocutionary* result. While meaning-based translations attempt to provide the equivalent illocutionary force of the text *for the receptor audience*, formal translations assume that the reader will read with an understanding of the illocutionary force intended *within the original manuscript*. The following examples from 1 Sam 17:26 in the "meaning-based" CEV (1995) and "formal" NRSV (1997) illustrate this point.

CEV: David asked some soldiers standing nearby, "What will a man get for killing this Philistine and stopping him from insulting our people? Who does that worthless Philistine think he is? He's making fun of the army of the living God!"

NRSV: David said to the men who stood by him, "What shall be done for the man who kills this Philistine, and takes away the reproach from Israel? For who is this uncircumcised Philistine that he should defy the armies of the living God?"

The underline type points out the rhetorical style of the question in the CEV which helps the reader understand the illocutionary force of David's comment in that he is not asking for information about Goliath's name, but communicating disapproval of his actions. The bold type illustrates that the CEV picks up on a possible illocutionary force of the word "uncircumcised" (Hebrew *aval* = "with foreskin") for Western readers. The translators interpreted the point being made as pejorative, not merely a physical description denoting a foreigner or someone outside of the covenant community. By being uncircumcised the Philistine is considered "unclean." Another conceivable translation to catch the emotive impact for the intended audience could be "that *filthy* Philistine." It is also possible for contemporary Western readers, if the NRSV phrase is read out of context, to view the *latter* word, "Philistine," in the phrase "uncircumcised Philistine" as pejorative and the former as merely descriptive.

It is too easy for translators familiar with the original text to suffer from the "curse of knowledge" because they are reading the translation with the original message in mind and therefore assume that the translated text communicates the intended message. Thus "reader response" (Nida & Taber 1974:1) from those without the translators' perspective is required to assess communication. Appropriateness and success of translation is not based on the correspondence between the original and translated manuscripts, but based on the correspondence of understanding between the respective receptor audiences. But, as implied by the sacredness of

the message, translation is not primarily about information; the translator looks for relevance and resonance leading to action and transformation on the part of the readers (Nida & Taber 1974:24).

The frailty of the human aspect of translation must not be forgotten; the ideal of translation can never be realized (Steiner 1998:428). Perfect communication of the original message into another set of symbols is never possible because “each human language maps the world differently” (:xiii). Even as culture is a lens through which we can engage the “external world” and which simultaneously distorts that world, so a Bible translation accesses the message through an interpretive grid. Yet imperfect communication is still valid communication. Despite the imperfections and lack of ideal in translation, the goal of the translator is to prepare a text that allows the receptor audience to sufficiently reconstruct meaning so that if the readers of the translation should have the opportunity and ability to engage and understand the original text for themselves, they would discover essentially the same message; or, at the very least, they would be assured that the integrity of the original had been preserved and communicated in its new, translated form. “To dismiss the validity of translation because it is not always possible and never perfect is absurd. What does need clarification, say the translators, is the degree of fidelity to be pursued in each case, the tolerance allowed as between different jobs of work” (Steiner 1998:264).

Contextual variety results in different nuances and shades of meaning in the translated text, but continuity of meaning and connection between author and reader still exists. The transference of the message is possible because languages and cultures are neither equivalent nor totally unique. If the latter were true and languages and cultures entirely foreign to each other, communication between cultures would not be possible. If the former were true so that equivalence was uniform, then translation would be unnecessary. It is the commonality of human nature, the oneness of the human race as represented by the creation story⁴⁰² – we are all “sons of Adam and daughters of Eve” (Lewis 1950:38) created in God’s image – that provides the *theological* ground for the communicability or translatability of scripture. Similarities between languages are the *linguistic* grounds for assuming translatability. The consistent and logical repetition of the thoughts of an author located in another time and place entertained within a different language and setting provides confidence for cross-cultural communication.⁴⁰³ The

⁴⁰² A biblical basis for the assumption of commonality is found in 6.3.

⁴⁰³ Steiner (1998:263-264) argues cogently against the “proofs” of those who would claim otherwise, assessing them as “trivial.”

message of scripture has been locked by the author within the original language forms,⁴⁰⁴ but the commonality of humanity allows for the unlocking and transference of meaning to another context. On the other hand, the differences between people groups create the nuance and flavor of understanding that is unique to each culture and language. This uniqueness is first revealed through the dynamic of bringing God's Word to expression within another language (*contextualization*) and then through the way God's word comes to be expressed by the insiders (*inculturation*) as their local theology emerges from the interaction between text and culture.

Steiner (1998:xvi) argues that while there are no "theories of translation," no scientific methodologies by which translation can occur, there are "reasoned descriptions of processes." He proposes a "narrative process" or "four-beat model of the hermeneutic motion in the act of translation" comprised of *trust*, *aggression*, *embodiment*, and *restitution* (:312-319).⁴⁰⁵ *Trust* refers to the orientation of the translator to the original text in assuming that there is a communicable and understandable message, which resonates with Vanhoozer's (1998:77,206) covenantal language and concept of respect for the author.⁴⁰⁶ *Aggression* is the activity of grasping and internalizing the message, coming to terms with the meaning within its original context. During the *embodiment* stage the translator imports the meaning using the structures of the target language. These first three stages describe the primary work of the translator and relevant scholarship and technical support⁴⁰⁷ is available to the translator so that the work may be

⁴⁰⁴ While the discipline of textual criticism reveals occasional discrepancies within the form of the original manuscripts, it is assumed for the purpose of this study that this diversity does not significantly affect the communication of the message.

⁴⁰⁵ Similar to the "four-beat model" presented here, Nida & Taber (1974:33) provide a three-step process of Bible translation consisting of analysis, transfer and restructuring, while Shaw & Van Engen (2003:83-92) suggest a comparable "four horizons as a missiological hermeneutic." Rejecting Gadamer's "fusion" of horizons, they propose separate but interactive horizons and expand the number of horizons in the hermeneutical dialogue to four. Apart from the two horizons of the text and the reader, they include Carson's (1984:17) additional horizon of those to whom the reader communicates a message. This is equivalent to the perspective of the audience for which the translator translates. In addition, Shaw & Van Engen (2003:84) make a distinction of horizons within the text between "God's context-specific intended meaning in revelation found in the Old Testament" and "God's revealed intended meaning in the New Testament that involves a new understanding of the Old Testament." This latter distinction is not of particular relevance for this study.

⁴⁰⁶ See 8.1.3.

⁴⁰⁷ Currently in our Bible translation projects we use the United Bible Society's (UBS 2011) program, *Paratext*, to assist the translation process. The checking tools, access to numerous translations and commentaries, linguistic and exegetical tools and search functions not only cut years off of projected completion dates, but reduce the amount of errors significantly.

brought to this stage of completion. However, it is Steiner's final stage, *restitution*, that is most helpful for this study. Restitution is "the 'equalizing transfer' which completes the hermeneutic cycle," an establishment of "adequacy" between the original and the translated text (:416).

The primary concern of this study is to discover if communication has occurred, God's word has been engaged and theology is being created. However, the negative aspect needs to be acknowledged as well; the translator must have the courage and humility to face inadequacies within the translation that distort the original meaning and to consider possible revisions to correct the weakness. Steiner (1998:416-417) provides several causes for poor translation including ignorance, haste and personal limitations.⁴⁰⁸ There could also be a lack of adequate representation in the receptor language or, in the other direction, insensitivity to the author's intent. More subtle inaccuracies may occur through paraphrasing a difficult section, inflating the importance of a point or smoothing over an offensive description. The translator may misrepresent the text by communicating less than is there, by overstating one aspect of the original, or by fragmenting and distorting the coherence of a passage due to unexamined needs or cultural myopia. In each case "imbalance" has resulted that calls for a "restoration of radical equity." The research methodology of exploring a passage of scripture provides opportunity for this level of evaluation and correction. As the receptors of the translation grapple with and reflect its meaning, the translator is exposed to their interpretation and thus also to the weaknesses and strengths of the translation.

In addition to these unintended translation errors, the deliberate choices of the translator to alter the translation due to influence from the receptors should be mentioned. Such input creates ethical dilemmas for translators who may make a decision based on pragmatic considerations to ensure acceptance by the intended audience. In the case of the Sindhi Bible, the translation team made a deliberate choice to use euphemistic language in particularly explicit passages in order to not offend the sensibilities of the intended audience. This softened the impact of the original but allowed the translation to be considered acceptable for female listeners. In another example, there was debate about whether to use a Sindhi word indicating fermented drinks in instances when the biblical reference was positive. The concern was that the meaning of the passage would be lost due to the inevitable distraction and debate about a relatively minor point since Sindhi Muslims

⁴⁰⁸ Shaw (1988:191-228) explores the exegesis and principles involved in "transculturation" and describes the stages or elements of Bible translation, including possible errors such as incorrect vocabulary, lack of idiomatic phrasing, improper syntactical or grammatical construction, choppy presentation of concepts, lack of clarity in meaning, awkward style, questionable figures of speech, structural disorder and insensitivity to language dialects.

view the consumption of alcoholic as a sin.⁴⁰⁹ The choice to follow the LXX in Isaiah 7:14 and use “virgin” rather than “young woman” as indicated by the Hebrew manuscript, was prompted by members of the non-Sindhi Christian community and was required so that the translation would not be banned. Nonetheless, a meaning-based philosophy of translation does recognize that to be receptor oriented is to introduce another point of view that must be taken seriously and goes beyond concerns of intelligibility to a consideration of the “total impact the message has on the one who receives it” (Nida & Taber 1974:22).

The potential for error is so great that the translator could theoretically be paralyzed into inaction. There will never be complete agreement about the semantic range of terms, let alone the priority of connections and resonance with aspects of the culture. However, the dialogical nature⁴¹⁰ of the translation process as well as trust in the experience of communication⁴¹¹ and possibility of contextualization⁴¹² encourages the translator to move forward in a task that may never be complete, but which is sufficient for God to speak through scripture into another context. As the message is translated (contextualized) in a way that reflects the communicative intent of the passage (the assumed purpose of the existence of the text) and is faithful to the character and will of the divine author (the broader canonical perspective as well as the image of God seen in Christ), translators fulfill their role in the communicative act.⁴¹³ The integrity of the text is preserved by honoring its communicative intention for the original context while allowing the message to speak through the text into the new context of the reader.

At the same time, human and linguistic limitations prevent any claim of a final “correct” translation and call for ongoing revisions. “We should never be presumptuous about the extent to which we are successful in communicating a message” (Nida 1975 [1960]:76). This posture relates well to the research concerns of this thesis to discover the meaning receptors give to the text. That is, what narratives do the readers create in their thinking as they process the communication through their cultural filters? Such explorations are essential to the translator and all those who seek to contextualize the gospel. The research methodology of listening in a

⁴⁰⁹ A less familiar and archaic word for “wine” was eventually chosen which does not have the emotive impact of the other Sindhi words for alcoholic beverages.

⁴¹⁰ See 8.2.2.2.

⁴¹¹ See 8.1.

⁴¹² See 7.2.

⁴¹³ However, the *purpose* of the communicative act is not fulfilled until there is impact within the life of the reader as indicated in 8.1.4.1.

dialogical setting is one path by which those narratives can be heard and discoveries made about how the readers' stories of God are being shaped as they engage scripture.

8.2.2.1 Translation as Interpretation

This section explores the implications of the *embodiment* stage of Steiner's (1998:312-319) "four-beat model of the hermeneutic motion in the act of translation." Interpretive choices in Bible translation impact the formation of the readers' theology. When theologies are evaluated they are usually compared to or contrasted with the meaning of scripture – what God has revealed. That is, theological expressions are evaluated according to the extent they reflect, illuminate and inculturate the message of the text. What should not be overlooked is the reality that in a translated text the phrasing chosen by the translators has inordinate influence upon the meaning as understood by the reader. A translation is never a clear pane of glass through which the reader engages a pure rendering of God's Word as originally given. Instead, two distinct levels of understanding and interpretation occur simultaneously as readers engage scripture. On one level, they consider the *meaning* of a passage as it speaks to their lives. On another level, that meaning is mediated through the cultural referents; they reconstruct the meaning based on the words and phrases chosen by the translators to communicate the message. The readers of the text "supply from their own cultural context the implicit information and the meanings they know for the explicit terms. [They assign] denotative and connotative meaning to the terms of the message, and... identify those referents in reality to which the message points" (Larkin 1988:179). The unique relationship between the communicated message and cultural referents mediates the meaning that shapes a contextualized theology. The particular choices of the translator create a unique cultural perspective from which God's revelation is perceived. Because it is God's word that is being rendered, the value and impact is assumed, but is it at all times an *interpreted* word.

For example, due to the influence of the PBS Urdu Bible (1992 [1870]), the Sindhi Bible uses *khudA* for God (Heb. *El*, Gk. *theos*) and *khudAvand* for LORD (The tetragrammaton in Hebrew). The Hebrew *el* and the Greek *theos* are generic references to deity, usually to the God of the Hebrews but also more generically to other "gods," whereas the word *khudA* in Urdu and Sindhi is considered to be the *name* of the one supreme God and Creator of all. In Hebrew, the tetragrammaton is the name of God revealed to Moses, while *khudAvand* is a derivative of the name of God referring to a more generic description of "master" or "lord."⁴¹⁴ This reversal of the

⁴¹⁴ This translation choice does have valid precedence as many copies of the LXX as well as the

impact of these terms within the translation affects the readers' understanding of God and the relationships implied in the use of the terms.

As a further example, the PBS Urdu Bible (1992 [1870]) has translated the word for sour wine (Gk. *oxous*), a common beverage, in John 19:29 as *sirko*, which refers to an acidic substance unsuitable for drinking. As a result, in the churches of Pakistan the action of the man who relieves Jesus' thirst on the cross is interpreted as further torture and not as an act intended to bring Jesus some measure of relief. Correcting this misunderstanding is difficult because the commitment to this interpretation is embedded into one of the more formative times in the Christian calendar. A more appropriate translation in the Sindhi of *sAdi mai* (simple wine) creates unintended tensions between the emerging Sindhi believers and Punjabi Christians who rely upon the Urdu translation.

A requisite aspect of hermeneutics that enables the two levels of *meaning* and *mediated meaning through cultural referents* to function harmoniously and adequately is the submissive orientation of believers to the text. Believers have placed themselves in a position of submission to scripture that allows the text to "read" them – the perlocutionary impact. The contours of the readers' hermeneutic are provided by their worldview. At the same time, and conversely, the Bible impacts the believing readers' worldview as an interpretive grid through which the world can be understood and reality encountered. It engages the reader with *Life* beyond our existence and *Truth* beyond material facts. It leads the reader to positive living, living connected with God. This thesis could be viewed as an examination of the merging of or tension between two hermeneutical grids:⁴¹⁵ the text as God's voice being heard from *within* the reader's worldview (the worldview as one grid) and the message simultaneously *redefining* that worldview (the biblical text as the second grid). Underlying this dynamic are the translation choices that have interpreted the text and shaped the message for the reader through conceptual and vocabulary choices.

8.2.2.2 The Dialogical Dynamic of Translation

The limitations of language, communication and translation, coupled with the inevitable subjectivity of translators, call for a dialogue between knowledgeable people in order to ensure adequate communication of the message encoded in the original manuscripts. Translation is

Greek text of Old Testament verses in the New Testament use *Adonai*, usually translated "Lord" in English versions, in places where the tetragrammaton is used in the Hebrew text.

⁴¹⁵ The image of a "merging of grids" can be understood as equivalent to Gadamer's (1989 [1975]:447-448) "fusing of horizons."

always a representation of the interpretation of a text and is therefore approximate to the author's message, rather than an exact duplication. This limitation is mitigated through a "multitude of counselors" (Prov 11:14 KJV), including dialogue with the intended audience.⁴¹⁶ Rather than striving to maintain control of the translation, a more appropriate and productive posture on the part of a translator is to seek the cooperation of willing partners, which implies dialogue. Translators act as catalysts to stimulate dynamic interaction between all concerned parties to facilitate the merging of the outsider message with the insider context.⁴¹⁷ Translators who are outsiders can play a significant role but they cannot unilaterally bring message and context together; this merge must be accomplished *together with* insiders.

This dialogical imperative is based on a number of realities. (1) Limitations of the translator parallel the limitations of the researcher,⁴¹⁸ such as theological commitments, assumptions about reality and personal priorities. These biases need to be challenged by those who hold other perspectives. (2) We are all fallible human beings and prone to error, needing others to correct us. (3) Outsiders are limited in their ability to navigate the intricacies of another context and need support. "[W]ith the best will in the world, missionary agents are at the mercy of first language flux and reflux" (Sanneh 1996:10). Elsewhere Sanneh (1989:5) elaborates,

It does not take long before what is a calculated, simple, short step brings the translator into the quicksand of indigenous cultural nuances, and this helplessness may lead the translator to turn matters over to indigenous experts who, in any case, may feel called upon to challenge missionary leadership in a field where, by any yardstick, they have the advantage.

(4) However, the solution is usually not so simple as "turning matters over to indigenous experts," because while such "experts" abound, biblical experts do not. Paul's metaphor of the church as the body of Christ (1 Cor 12:12-31) teaches us that we need each other in order to be complete. To ignore this is to "deny, in effect, the genuine humanity of the church" (Lochhead 1988:35). Our translation team preparing the Sindhi New Testament for Hindu audiences is an example of this principle of complementary talents, training and background that serve to complete the whole group. Each one of the four participants brings to the team an important perspective and unique contribution. PM is a Christian belonging to a community of former Hindus. He informs us of the vocabulary currently being used in their worship services. CS is a Hindu Sindhi capable of

⁴¹⁶ See 3.1.2 for the importance of dialogue with the intended audience.

⁴¹⁷ The familial language controversy described in a footnote in 4.4.4 is an example of the failure of a translation team to take into account all those who would be impacted by their translation.

⁴¹⁸ See 2.1.1.3.4 on limiting researcher bias.

determining vocabulary acceptable to the Hindu Sindhi community. GMA, a Muslim with years of experience in Bible translation, is able to formulate elegant yet simple literary Sindhi along with asking penetrating questions to ensure that the right meaning is being expressed. My role is based on my education in Bible and theology. Our conversations as we challenge and inform one another serve to sharpen and improve the translation. (5) The “curse of knowledge” can cause translators to assume a correct translation of a verse when others may read it differently. This calls for dialogue with those outside of the team as well as revisiting the translation at a later date when satisfaction for a particular translation has abated allowing the translators to be more critical and read the text with fresh eyes.

The translators’ role is to recreate the relevance of scripture within a new cultural context and language without imposing their own cultural constructs in the process. This insistence upon facilitating the conscious critical reflection on scripture implies a “relativizing” (Sanneh 1989:29) of the translators’ culture and insists that the comprehensive and universal revelation of God is “revealed in a localised cultural milieu and geographical space” (Geaves 2005:55). This localizing or relativizing is a driving force for the dialogical imperative. If scripture is to be incarnated into the culture of another people group, the insiders and “knowers” of that people group are required to participate in the process. The essential and exclusive knowledge owned separately by insiders and outsiders necessitates dialogue and cooperative interaction. Eaton (1999:16-17) describes this dialogical dynamic from his experience among the Naga people. Both missionaries and Naga converts “sought points of entry of Christian terms and ideas” in order to accommodate Naga doctrine and cosmology. They worked together “to assimilate Christian ideas, names, and terms into the Nagas’ own linguistic and hence religious, universe.” The pride people had in their own language, a near universal phenomenon, was reflected in the converts who believed that their language was sufficient and “deep enough” to accommodate the concepts. By discovering, through insiders, the means by which scripture can be communicated using their language, God’s Word comes to be identified with the culture of the people.

Furthermore, the process of translation itself requires a posture of giving up control and submitting to others. The first relinquishing comes from an orientation of submission to the message as from God which is sacred and supreme to any preformed theology. The second submission develops within the relationships of teamwork in which the strengths and abilities of others are given preeminence over one’s own preferences. This may be the scholarship accessed in the exegetical process, the choice of terminology and phrasing from insiders of the culture or

the preference of believers in their theological expressions. Thirdly, the translation releases the message into new cultural forms to insiders who then have control of the interpretation based on a clearer cultural perception of the intricacies and nuances of meaning. Interpretation precedes translation in the mind of the translator, but the message received by those who seek to hear God speak to them can develop in unexpected directions. “When one translates, it is like pulling the trigger of a loaded gun: the translator cannot recall the hurtling bullet. Translation thus activates a process that might supersede the original intention of the translator” (Sanneh 1989:53). For example, the concept of the Holy Spirit for a Western evangelical is formed by theological assertions concerning the third member of the Trinity. But for the Sindhi Muslim, that phrase speaks not to the essential nature of God, but to the power of God at work in the world. An emerging theology exemplifies a move away from the control of the translator and into the arena of dialogue.

8.2.3 In Front of the Translated Text

Paul Ricoeur⁴¹⁹ is credited with the descriptions “behind the text,” “in the text,” and “in front of the text” for the dimensions of a written text (Turner & Green 2000:4, Green 2007:101-122). “Behind the text” focuses on issues such as the concerns of the authors, the historical settings, the reasons for writing and the audience being addressed (Turner & Green 2000:4). The “in the text” dimension refers to the nature of the written material, including how it is structured, descriptions of the theme, the plot and the character development. The third dimension, “in front of the text,” asks questions concerning the response of the reader: how does the reader engage the text and how does the reader’s context affect the interpretation of the text?

Although these three dimensions are generally applied to original written texts, such as biblical manuscripts, I would like to adapt the terminology and concepts in order to describe the process of Bible translation with the *translated* text as the reference point. “Behind the *translated* text” refers to the work of the Bible translator between the original manuscripts and the completed translation. “In the *translated* text” looks at structure, theme, plot and character development similar to “in the text” concerns, but through the lens of linguistic, cultural and communication norms of the receptor audience. The concern is neither the translator (encoding a message) nor

⁴¹⁹ Ricoeur (1984:53) speaks of a “threefold *mimesis*” in which “*mimesis*₂” mediates between the two sides of the text. See also Ricoeur’s (1985:81-82) consideration of three levels in a narrative. There is the “told” story that the narrative is about, the “utterance” that is the narrative itself and the discourse of the narrative presentation.

reader (decoding a message) viewpoint, but the function and content of the message itself. The third dimension – “in front of the *translated text*” – is in contrast to the perspective of the translator “behind the *translated text*” and refers to the way the reader views the receptor language text from the other side of the textual divide. The reader approaches the text as God’s Word from which a sacred message is encountered.⁴²⁰ The contextualization–inculturation distinction clarifies the difference between translators’ and readers’ orientations. Translators as *outsiders*⁴²¹ are engaged in *contextualization* in order to communicate the message in forms that resonate with the receptors of the translation. The readers on the other side of the textual divide are engaged in *inculturation* as they interpret the message as insiders to their context.

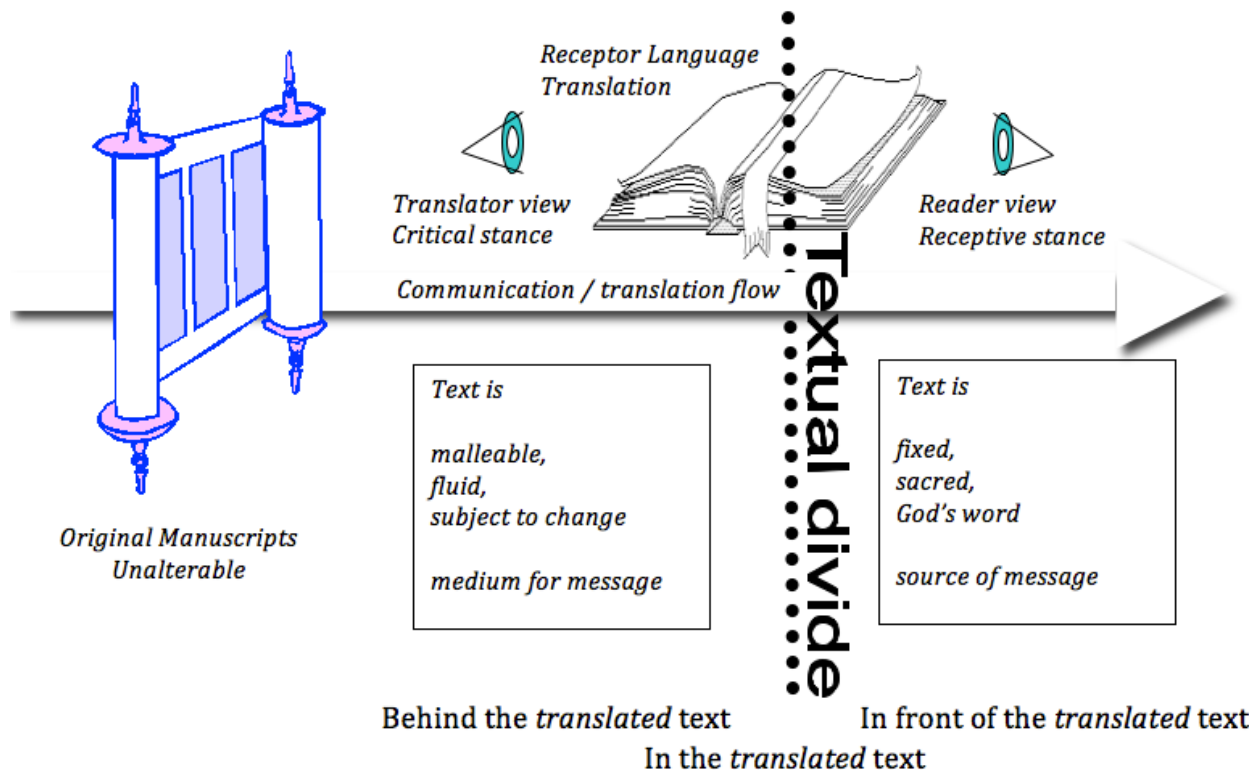


Figure 7 *Textual Divide*

“Behind the translated text” concerns are more narrowly focused than “behind the text” issues with emphasis on the orientation of the translators as they prepare a text for a specific audience. From this perspective the translated text is malleable, fluid and subject to change,

⁴²⁰ It should not be assumed that these distinctions are impassable. It is possible for the translator to approach the translated text as God’s Word and for the reader to contemplate original text meanings. The desire is to point out the orientation from which each *generally* views the text.

⁴²¹ Even though there may be insiders to the culture on the translation team, they qualify as *contextualizers* since their orientation to the translated text is “behind” the translated text. That is, they are dealing with an outsider message and rendering it using insider language.

change that is initiated and guided by the translators. They freely and deliberately manipulate the receptor language text to communicate the interpreted meaning, knowing that ultimately it is the original and not the translated text that determines the meaning. The parameters for the translators' decisions are circumscribed by the original unalterable text coupled with the strengths and weaknesses of the receptor language to express that interpretation. The receptor language is seen as the medium through which the meaning of the original text is communicated.

When considering "in front the text" issues for the original biblical texts, a long history of interpretation is examined involving many cultures, languages and settings. All readers of the Bible are influenced by those who have interpreted and lived out the text in the past. Centuries of commentary and actions shape the way individuals and communities interact with the text. However, when considering the more recent appearance of a *translated* text within a specific community, a message presented using the forms and concepts of that context, the consideration of "in front of the *translated* text" allows for a narrower focus on the response of one specific people group. While the *message* has an extensive history of interpretation, the particular form and communication of a translated text confronts the reader with a specific interpretation presented by the translators that has intimate ties to their identity, societal expectations and cultural expressions.

Although the competent translator is sensitive to how the prepared text is being read by the intended audience and will have reviews and checks during the translation process, the orientation of the reader "in front of the translated text" is fundamentally different from that of the translators. The message for the translator exists *apart from* the receptor language text and is being expressed *through* the text. In contrast, for the reader the source of the message *is* the text and is obtained *from* the text. For the translator the text is the *medium* and therefore *malleable*, for the reader the text is the *source* and therefore *fixed*.⁴²² The translator assumes a *predetermined* meaning that they indicate by the use of appropriate linguistic symbols. The reader "decodes" the symbols to *discover* a meaning consistent with commonly accepted linguistic and contextual clues. The reader, even though aware that the text is a translation, accepts the meaning drawn from the translated text as having the same authoritative meaning that exists in the original manuscripts. Because the translator considers the *locus of the sacred* (what *God* is saying) to be the message

⁴²² This is a generalization since many readers will understand the text to be translated from a manuscript that exists in another language. However, the concern is with the *orientation* to the text. While the reader approaches the text to *attend to the meaning*, the translator evaluates and critiques the text with an assumed *a priori meaning*.

drawn from original manuscripts, the receptor language text is *one possible medium* for the communication of that sacred meaning rather than the *source* of meaning, and so the translator reads it critically to determine if it appropriately represents God's message. However, the believer approaches the text as sacred ground to hear God speak.

Sanneh's (1989:31) comment on the "shifting of the ground of comprehension" reflects to some extent this dynamic. He refers to the movement of the comprehension of the message from one culture to another that is facilitated by the translator. In the translation process the translator begins by comprehending the message in one culture and ends by reading the message afresh together with other believers in a new culture. It is this latter "fresh" reading of scripture that occurs in the mind of the *reader* that is the concern of this study. The believing reader understands through the "lenses" of their own culture and a transforming dialogue between God's Word and their worldview ensues. There are many influences that shape the response of readers to the translated text,⁴²³ influences that impact the cultural "lenses" through which understanding and interpretation occurs, including the communal assumptions of values, beliefs and worldview (*faith*). The context of the believer is represented by the faith–context tension in the faith–text–context triangle, and the act of engaging the message "in front of the translated text" is represented by the faith–text tension. We do not come to the Bible and assume that God has transcended or removed cultural shaping; we view divine truth *through* the biblical and our own cultural viewpoints – we see "through a glass darkly" (1 Cor. 13:12). We can only move closer to an understanding that conforms us to the nature and will of God as we maintain a dialectical relationship between the text and our experiences of reality within our context. An intentional and sincere interaction with God's Word signals the beginning of an emerging contextualized theology.

The dance analogy⁴²⁴ as an expression of the faith–text and faith–context tensions captures the complementary dynamic. Through the mind of the believing hearer, the context shapes, prioritizes and flavors the received message while that message simultaneously impacts the worldview of the believer in an interactive "dance." Approaching the text as God's Word with the expectation that a word will be spoken to us that is relevant for our situation, we encounter a message that alters our lives, our faith and our praxis. Newbigin (1986:60) explains this

⁴²³ The influence that local Christians have had on Sindhi Muslims is outlined in 4.2.2.4, the impact of cross-cultural missionaries "inserted" into the culture is discussed in 6.4, while the introduction to chapter 3 considers the impact of globalization.

⁴²⁴ The dance analogy is introduced in 6.5.10.

engagement of scripture as far more than a private, mental adjustment. It means involvement in the public world

since the God who is "rendered" in the Bible is the God of nature and of history as he is of the human soul. The way in which we must read scripture today is controlled by the fact that we are, from moment to moment in the complex events of our time, dealing with and being dealt with by the same living God who meets us in scripture, seeking his will, offering our obedience, accepting the share he allots to us of suffering, and looking for the final victory of his cause.

Smalley's (1991:7-8) explanation of the older brother's reaction in the Parable of the Two Lost Sons (Lk 15:11-32) illustrates the reality that a hearer "in front of the translated text" is active and not passive. The older son was not just a passive listener; his role in receiving the message was just as active as that of the servant who delivered it. The message was processed and interpreted by all of the memories and experiences of his brother. The perceived harm caused by his younger sibling resulted in a response of frustration and resentment. The father's response was not to change the message but to help the older son interpret it according to a spirit of redemptive joy. The older son had a choice whether he would embrace the father's narrative or stubbornly insist on his own. Similarly, Jesus was giving his hearers opportunity to enter the narrative of the gospel story that he was living out before them. He was giving up control of the narrative to the hearers for their response, just as the father in the story did not coerce, but invited the older son to enter into the spirit of his redemptive action. Jesus was "stimulating them to change the perspective with which they viewed his behavior when he befriended and ate with people who were religiously contaminated, ritually impure" (:8). Similarly, by engaging the translated scripture, the believer reads the message within their own context and is faced with an invitation to enter the narrative, a response that shapes their theology and may be in contrast to their current interpretation of reality.

The believers standing "in front" have a different orientation to the translated text than the translator standing "behind" the translation and thus are open to experiencing the invitation for their context. If the translation has been appropriately crafted, the believers will encounter the message as God speaking relevantly to them, the same message the translator has first received and responded to "behind" the translation. They will be placed in a position from which they must respond at the level of faith (values, beliefs and worldview). The technical orientation of the translator as a channel of communication for another's message bears fruit with the deeper heart engagement of the reader.

8.3 Theoretical Framework for Theological Trajectories

Hermeneutics is the consideration of how one moves from text to theological formulation taking into account the complexity of the process. The heart of this study moves beyond arguments concerning the *best* process to formulate theology to a consideration of the *actual* process of theological development that occurs within believers located in a specific context. Participants read and interact with the text according to the assumptions that they bring to the text and their perspective of its relevance to their context. This section builds on the definition of theological trajectories⁴²⁵ by providing a theoretical framework based on the concept of a “hermeneutical spiral” and by outlining the process by which theological trajectories are formed. The identification and analysis of trajectories in the research stem from these developments.

Carson’s (1984:13-15) “hermeneutical spiral”⁴²⁶ is illustrative of the process proposed here concerning the formation of theological trajectories. As people interpret the word of God through their cultural grid there is an ongoing dance stimulated by the text–faith and faith–context tensions that is not a linear process, but involves a cycle, or upward⁴²⁷ spiral. Even though the process is not *linear* there is *direction* because the dialectical dynamic is an attempt to resolve the challenge the text brings to a prior faith stance. Fundamental questions are formed, not by the text alone nor



Figure 8 *Hermeneutical Spiral*

by the culture alone, but by the intersection of the two in the faith of the inquirer. This is a process of questioning dialogue “that spirals with each question toward a better understanding of the salvation that comes through faith and that leads to grace and humility” (Kirkpatrick 1996:277).

The spiral diagram illustrates theological divergence with direction and movement moving away from prior perspectives. The narrowing spiral is a product of the interactive dynamic⁴²⁸ of

⁴²⁵ See 5.7.

⁴²⁶ Shaw & Van Engen (2003:79-82) provide a more detailed explanation of the complexities involved in the hermeneutical spiral than developed in this section. In particular, they note that the text is a “theology from above” implying a dialogue between the reader and the Divine leading to the “discovery of new faith dimensions.” The concerns of this thesis are limited to a consideration of theology as the perspective and conviction of the reader.

⁴²⁷ “Upward” implies an ever increasing conformity to God’s revelation. This is the hope but cannot be assumed. A process of validation for the identified trajectories is required. See 7.3.1 and 7.3.2 for consideration of how theologies can be evaluated.

⁴²⁸ The interactive dynamic essential to the concept of theological trajectories is more complex than indicated here. GR Osborne (1991:6) refers to the distance between reader and text, the

the faith–text–context triangle. The interaction is first a dance between faith and text with faith functioning as the interpretive grid that determines the understanding of the text and simultaneously allows the meaning of the text to shape faith assumptions. The second phase of the interaction is the dance between faith and context in which the adjusted faith perspective is tested for consistency and benefit within the life experiences of the community. The image of the spiral points to the hopeful expectation that each turn of the cycle (or movement in the dance) will provide increasing insight into how God’s revelation speaks into the life and context of believers resulting in a convergence between the meaning of text and the outworking of that meaning in understanding and action. It is this convergence within an emerging faith that is considered a theological trajectory.

This process can be contrasted with Nicholl’s (2003:46) concept of “progressive deculturation” in which undesirable aspects of the culture are “progressively weakened and eliminated.” Such a scenario assumes access to an objective biblical message that “is not dependent on the relativity of the interpreter’s own culture or the culture into which he contextualizes it” (:45). This static imagery of “replacing” cultural elements with biblical truth like puzzle pieces is not the dynamic assumed by this thesis. Rather the concept is one of the shaping and re–shaping of a theological perspective like modeling clay, an integration of flour, water, salt and oil. The gospel message is believed, assimilated and worked out in an integrative fashion *within* the receptor context resulting in transformation that is both continuous and different from the believers’ previous faith stance. It will be continuous with the terms, images and actions that create meaning for the people, such as their word for “God.” It will be different as they allow the biblical presentation of God’s nature to shape their understanding and choices.

The meaning–based philosophy of translation⁴²⁹ is analogous to emerging theological trajectories. Linguistic word-for-word translations that do not take into account the textual or receptor audience’s contexts regularly distort the message because meaning is more than the sum

problem of two distinct historical horizons, the plurality of interpretation and the interpreter’s prior understanding as factors that impact the process. He notes that moving from text to theological formulation along the spiraling continuum is qualified by “the text’s interpretive history, the significance of the text for the history of Christian thought, the metaphorical implications of the text’s language, and the social contexts that invariably influence hermeneutical approaches.” Since the participants in this research intuitively and implicitly “work” the spiral to create theological formulations through the dialogical process such a detailed description is not required. It is the *product* of the participants’ theological development that is of primary concern.

⁴²⁹ See 5.16 for a distinction between “meaning–based” and “formal” translations.

of the parts (Rottenburg 2003:39). There is a social dynamic that gives the text power to communicate and to ignore this falsifies the potential meaning. On the other hand, meaning-based translations assume that “meaning is determined by culture” (Naylor 2009c) and so translators create representations of the original text that integrate two diverse contexts: the original context (“behind the translated text” issues) and the context of the intended readers (“in front of the translated text” issues). “Behind the translated text” implies integrity with the intentions of the author within the original setting. “In front of the translated text” refers to relevance and resonance with the readers’ context. “In the translated text” then describes the artistic creativity of the translator in bringing a message of the past to life in the symbolic forms of the receptor audience. The dance that occurs between faith, text and context in the conversations of believers as they engage a passage of scripture demonstrates a similar dynamic. Even as the translated text is a new creation that maintains integrity with the original text, so the believers’ faith is the birthplace of new theological insights as they wrestle with the received message according to the dynamics of their context (which includes social structures, religious assumptions and power hierarchies). As believers engage the text and consider the implications for their context, they are seeking an integrated faith that simultaneously maintains consistency with both text and context and better reflects God’s will for their setting. The ongoing shaping of faith is both individually reflective and communally interactive as the complex implications of the text are worked out in dialogue.

Steiner’s (1998:312-319) four step hermeneutic of *trust*, *aggression*, *embodiment*, and *restitution* that describes the process of translation,⁴³⁰ can also be used to outline the dynamic of identifying theological trajectories by applying the steps to the perspective of the theologian rather than to the translator. The hearer approaches the text with an attitude of *trust* and openness that there is a message of importance and relevance worthy of discovery. The meaning of a text is wrested from the passage (*aggression*) and brought into the readers’ own context. The meaning becomes *embodied* within the faith of the readers and adjustments are made in tension with prior commitments. The concept of *restitution* can be applied to the way the implications of the message are brought into action coupled with an ongoing revisiting of the original text in order to ensure congruence, equilibrium or resolution between the text and the new context into which it is being appropriated.

⁴³⁰ Steiner’s (1998:312-319) four step hermeneutic is introduced in 8.2.2.

8.3.1 Dialogical Dynamic of Theological Development

The dialogical dynamic of theological development refers to the creative interaction of believers as they engage and are challenged by others. *Dialogical* emphasizes the personal interface of the dialectical process rather than the outcome or resolution.⁴³¹ We relate to others in conversation, including the author of the text, not to master the message, but to hear and connect with the heart of our interlocutor (JK Brown 2007:73). The development of theology is a conversation in our human attempt to hear and connect with the heart of God. Dialogical thinking and personal reflection that demonstrates the relevance of faith in a context must include all parties in the conversation – whether text, antagonists, teachers or assumptions – in a way that seeks congruence with and within a particular worldview. The interaction with our environment, personal history, traditions, common knowledge, a friend’s conviction or disdain all play a role in the conversation that shapes theological trajectories. All these interactions are between *persons*, not impersonal concepts or abstract ideas. Even when it is stated, for example, that there is a creative tension between text and culture, the locus of meaning is in the personal interlocutors, whether human or divine, rather than in the concepts themselves. The reader deals with the author of the text and enculturated humans interact with other meaning-makers in their particular cultural context.

The primary interlocutor in the theological conversation is God’s word. Christian theology is the product of a creative tension between the Bible as God’s revelation of the divine nature and will and the faith of the believer within a community of believers. Theology

is rooted in God's authoritative revelation and is... a human activity and discipline, and thus it is subject to and reflects the characteristics of those who do theology. Theology is thus an ongoing conversation by fallible human beings, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, who reflect on God's authoritative revelation in light of current realities (Netland 2006:16).

Dyrness (1990:30) presents a diagram of such an interaction adapted from Schreiter’s (1985:25) work in which the preaching of the gospel stimulates the attempt towards obedience. In his diagram themes encountered in scripture find resonance with contextual concerns with the result that the message becomes embodied in cultural forms and expressions. The formation of contextual theology impacts the reading of scripture, which in turn serves to shape the contextual theology leading to an impact on culture; the ongoing dialogical dynamic between scripture and culture indicates the incarnation of God’s message into the life and action of believers. A key

⁴³¹ See an explanation of the distinction between *dialogical* and *dialectical* in a footnote in 5.4.

lesson is that theology is not developed in isolation by a scholar who draws objective and absolute truths from a text. Even though the diagram fails to capture the complexity of people's interaction with scripture within their context, it demonstrates the ongoing dialogical and interactive process involved in developing a contextual theology. Admittedly, there are influences (and therefore dialogues!) missing in the diagram including other theologies, the impact of traumatic events on faith as well as political and economic factors. However, the concern of this study is the intersection of the two primary sources of theology from an evangelical position: the Bible and believers living within their contextual reality.

8.3.2 The Community as a Hermeneutic of the Gospel

The formative interactions and relationships that make up the dialogical nature of theological development occur within the believing community. Newbigin (1986:56) speaks of the "hermeneutical circle *operating within the believing community*" and titles one chapter of his book, "The Congregation as Hermeneutic of the Gospel" (:222)⁴³² to draw attention to the communal aspect of theological development. Schreier (1985:4) believes that the community "takes much more responsibility in shaping theological response" than professionally trained theologians. Semnak (2002:15) affirms that "theology is a communal enterprise" with affirmation and correction being received and given from a number of sources. Yeo (1998:11) adds that a personal and communal orientation towards theological inquiry requires "mutual interaction, with tradition, and with postulations." Hiebert (1994:30) states that the interpretation of the gospel in Paul's writings is clearly the task of the church as a hermeneutical or "discerning community" and not just the responsibility of individuals or even of leaders. All believers stand in relationship to others and within a tradition of interpretation that shapes their theological praxis. This requires an authentic correspondence between the gospel message preached and the theological expression of that gospel lived out in community. The living out of the message is the inculturation of scripture within that context. Even as "one can only properly understand selfhood and community in terms of story and narrative" (Smith & Venema 2004:17), so it is the story and narrative of a believing community that gives a true expression of the gospel.

⁴³² In that chapter, Newbigin (1986:226-233) identifies six characteristics evident in the praxis of a community that lives out the gospel. It is a community (1) of praise that maintains the centrality of a God of forgiveness and grace, (2) of truth that rehearses the story of the gospel, (3) of service to others, (4) of priests who "stand before God on behalf of people and... stand before people on behalf of God," (5) of mutual responsibility in living out the new social order of God's rule, and (6) that lives out an eager hope based on the resurrection.

A communal pattern of theological development is seen in the church in the New Testament. Hiebert (1994:97) asserts that the early church was more concerned with establishing theological *processes*, which require communal dialectical interactions, than creating dogmatic *statements* of faith. The question of the place and role of circumcision, a seminal question for the early church that determined the nature of Christianity, was worked out in community (Acts 15). Although he had received his apostolic commission directly from Jesus (Gal 1:1), Paul set the gospel message he preached before the apostles for their consideration (Gal 2:2). Individual development of Christianity in the New Testament without the input and testing of others was not an option (1 Jn 4:1), and the struggles of the disciples to work out the meaning of the gospel in context is a model for the practice of God's people throughout history. This emphasis on the communal pattern can be seen in the concern of the apostles, especially Paul, to establish local groups of believers. "A peculiar characteristic of the Bible itself is its concern to establish a community around that reality to which it bears witness" (Wink 1973:76). It is also clear that the books and letters of the New Testament were written so that members of local churches would engage the message and grow in unity (Jn 17:20-23, 1 Cor 12:12-30).

The establishment of this communal pattern can be supported from church history as evidenced from the councils (e.g., Nicea, Chalcedon) and creeds (e.g., Apostles', Nicene) that developed in the first centuries of Christianity (Latourette 1975:112-192). In his example of Anabaptists among whom "the church as a whole acted as a hermeneutical community," Hiebert (1994:100) explains that the believers relied on each other to correct personal biases and to be made aware of sins that they refused to admit to themselves. This corporate nature of interpreting scripture ensured that one individual interpretation of the Bible was not dominant to the detriment of the insights of others.

JK Brown (2007:90) argues for the interpretive role of community by suggesting that we are compelled to intentionally read with others because we all access meaning in partial ways. This is both a validation for what *I* read, for I will see things in a unique way, and for what *others* read, indicating a need to listen. We are therefore encouraged to read *carefully*, for we depend on each other's understanding, and to read *in community* so that we can learn from each other. As a community engages the Bible, "God's people are formed as persons who embody scripture" (Green 2007:67). Furthermore, we need to read "with and across communities, intentionally and humbly" in order to expand our limited horizons (JK Brown 2007:90). We live within contexts that privilege particular interpretative orientations. This raises the possibility that we are "blind

and deaf to the voice of God” that others are hearing in these texts (Green 2007:78). Practicing a broad inter–community dialogue with diligence will ensure that our interpretive biases will be exposed and our own thinking sharpened as we face the challenge of those with whom we may not agree.

In a sense, we cannot help but read in community since it is community that provides meaning for us and we have all been enculturated into different communities, whether family, church or educational cohorts. We are influenced by interpretive communities and have “inherited and absorbed” different ways of reading the Bible (JK Brown 2007:133). “We all work out of the position of hermeneutics, of principles of interpretation that shape various plausibility structures for understanding reality” (Van Gelder 1996b:135). Wink (1973:11) argues in a similar fashion that since, from a human perspective, truth is approximate and relational and not absolute “its relevance can only emerge in the particularity of a given community's struggles for integrity and freedom.” That is, the reality of the nature, character and will of God as expressed in this world is filtered through our limited and perspectival cultural lenses. Even though the Christian faith is that the Absolute has spoken authoritatively and that the Holy Spirit will lead us into truth, within a critical realism epistemology we recognize that our movement towards truth is, at best, relative. This calls us to a dialogue with those who are “not like us” so they can assist us in “hearing those melodies in scripture for which we would otherwise have no ear” (Green 2007:79). The assumptions that we have implicitly adopted need to be challenged so that they can be proven, corrected or discarded. When we recognize how we have been shaped by community, we come to appreciate both the necessity and the power of an ongoing reading in community in order to continually question, nuance and develop our thinking. The community of God’s people acts as a “pivotal interpretive constraint” protecting us from a “myopia” that would result in “substituting our word for God’s” (Green 2007:73). Through “dialogue in community, we are in a better position to move toward the communicative intention of the biblical text” (JK Brown 2007:134).

Since our human limitations, designed by a loving Creator, drive us to interdependence, we should not bemoan a lack of certainty but embrace the potential of living out the gospel in community. The development of theology within human interactions and in the midst of the events, complexities and demands of life prevent us from abstracting the gospel from what is immediate and personally or communally significant. JM Neal (1999:87) affirms that reading God’s Word in community “relocates written communication in an event-centered world view. Ideas are not abstracted from reality, but come to life in the context of a particular dialogue or

moment.” As we live in faithfulness to the gospel message we not only experience the truthfulness of the way of Christ, but we also exhibit compelling evidence of redemptive relationships with God, others and our world.

The hermeneutical function of community as the author of theology does not assume that the community acts as the final authority to truth. The final authority lies with God as the ultimate Reality. The church’s role is to work out a praxis that is consonant with all the shaping influences that God has granted us: the Holy Spirit, God’s self revelation in the Word, other communities of believers, the challenges of other traditions both historical and global. As Schreiter (1985:24) notes, “One cannot speak of a community developing a local theology without its being filled with the Spirit and working under the power of the gospel.” Our theological conviction centers on a God of grace who delights in us as children and engages us as Father. Our confidence is not in our ability to grasp the absolute, but that the Absolute has reached down to grasp us in and through our need for each other.

Schreiter (1985:17-18) helps us understand that the perspective of community as the hermeneutic of the gospel requires a balanced approach that appreciates both the professional theologian as the guide of theology *and* the community as the locus of theology. “To ignore the resources of the professional theologian is to prefer ignorance over knowledge” (:18). The community needs the theologian’s knowledge so that its praxis is grounded in God’s revelation of the divine will and nature. Conversely, the theologian must not dominate but remain the servant of the church. Theology *perceived* by the theologian becomes theology as *praxis* in community. The formulations of theologians are challenged through the questions raised as members of the community live out their faith, different answers are proposed and solutions are authenticated that are “genuine, authentic, and commensurate with their experience” (:17). Thus a creative tension exists in which theologians navigate the teachings of scripture for the people of God and the people of God respond by affirming or critiquing the analysis as it resonates with their life experience. Without the prophetic and pastoral voice of the theologian God’s people can distort the message of the Word. Without the reality of praxis by the people of God, the theologian’s writings become mere dusty tomes. Even though it is specific individuals within the community who actually shape the theology, this “does not play down the important role of those communities; it only puts it in a clearer context” (:17). The theologian is sensitive to the context, listens to people, is immersed in the scriptures and observes other communities. But it is the community that initiates the theological process, lives out the reality of the gospel and reflects

back its re-interpretation in terms of local theologies (:18).

8.3.3 “Mapping” as a Hermeneutical Process

A third level of interpretation beyond that of the translators and the theologizing agents occurs in the researcher’s observation of theological trajectories. Faith (worldview, values and beliefs) is the hermeneutical grid people use as they engage reality. For believers, that grid is shaped by both text (through a covenant with the biblical author) and the context of their lives. It is the intersection of these two influences that creates a dialectical dynamic resulting in congruency, conflict and resolution in the believers’ faith perspective that can be identified as a theological trajectory. Mapping is the act of the researcher who observes and records the merging and resolution of these influences by evaluating expressions of the believers’ hermeneutical grid – their faith.

The interpretive dynamic on the part of the researcher in the mapping process is analogous to topography,⁴³³ but a skillfully crafted topographical map is only a *representation* of a particular terrain, not the terrain itself. The topographer has chosen an interpretive grid that deliberately excludes other ways of viewing the terrain in order to emphasize and clarify particular aspects that are considered important and are consistent with the parameters of the grid. Similarly, the researcher mapping theological trajectories of a group of believers will produce a representation or description of their theology. But this is not equivalent to the reality of the theological praxis that permeates the lives of the authors of that theology. Recognizing that the biblical message has moved through three stages – translation, theological development and mapping – to be finally mapped helps clarify the distinction. Each stage involves separate agents, different purposes and a shift in hermeneutical grids. The following chart summarizes the stages:

⁴³³ The analogy of topography is used for mapping theological trajectories in 5.7.

Table 7 *Stages towards Mapping of Theological Trajectories*

Stage:	Translation	Theological Development	Mapping of theological trajectories
Interpreting Agent(s):	Translators (Insiders and Outsiders)	Insiders	Researcher (outsider)
Interpretive focus:	Appropriate representation of message	Appropriate expression of God's will in life	Appropriate representation of theological shift
<i>Telos</i> (ultimate purpose):	Translated text (contextualized message)	Inculturated faith	Description of theological trajectories
Dialectic:	Original manuscripts and receptor culture	Bible translation and context	Local believers and a passage of scripture
Hermeneutical grid:	Covenant with biblical authors (<i>behind</i> the translated text)	Covenant with biblical authors (<i>in front of</i> the translated text)	Covenant with theological agents

The researcher works within a hermeneutical grid of covenant with the theologizing agents. The believers express with integrity their perspective on how God's word intersects with and impacts their lives, and the researcher represents those expressions as honestly and clearly as possible. The dialectic from which the researcher generates the data is the interaction between local believers and a passage of scripture that acts as a window onto, or one example of, the broader dialectic experienced by the theologizing agents as they integrate the message of the Bible translation with their context. The *telos* or ultimate purpose of the interpretive focus for the theologizing agents is an inculturated faith, while the *telos* for the researcher is a clear and appropriate description of that faith.

8.4 The Exegetical Prerequisite

The mapping dynamic of identifying theological trajectories requires an adequate exegesis of the passage used to generate culture texts to ensure that "in front of translated text" interaction corresponds to the "behind the translated text" communicative intent. The word of God perceived from the translated text by the believing readers must reflect the intended meaning in order to be a *biblical* theology. This assumes, of course, that the primary data of the translated passage appropriately communicates the biblical message so that a creative tension between text and faith is established that maintains the integrity of the message within a new context. This exegesis is complex; readers are not only dealing with the filter of their own culture in order to understand the meaning of the passage ("in the translated text" issues), but they are also receiving the message through the filter of the cultural setting of the original text ("behind the text" issues). There is much implicit information that shapes the message, such as theological presuppositions,

values, and cultural norms that, if not adequately taken into account, will hinder comprehension or even mislead. Because all of us stand in another time and another context than the original writer, we cannot assume direct application. Rather we must receive the message *through* our context in a way that is *consistent with* the biblical context. This requires careful navigation between the two contexts and if one context is not appropriately considered then interpretive problems arise. This does not mean that only one correct interpretation is required, only that an *incorrect* or *insufficient* understanding of the passage will undermine the readers' ability to form an adequate theology. Such a possibility occurs when the meaning of a particular concept in the reader's cultural context does not correspond adequately to the intention of the text. If resonance of the phrase for the reader stems from cultural preconceptions that distort the biblical emphasis then the meaning of the text is obscured.

An example of an incorrect understanding occurred during research for my (Naylor 2004:57) Masters dissertation on contextualized Bible storying. Some of the interview participants understood Judas Iscariot of John 13:2, identified as the one to betray Jesus, to be the same as Simon Peter because Judas is referred to as the "son of Simon." From this misperception they concluded that there was a "connection between the refusal to have the feet washed and the rebellion associated with Satan." Because this was a flawed interpretation, they were not dealing with the true message of the passage. Sindhis' assumptions about the meaning of *bisht* (paradise) that impacts their understanding of Jesus' promise of rewards⁴³⁴ is an example of misunderstanding that relates to contextual influences.

One responsibility of the translator "behind the translated text" is to explicate "behind the text" issues sufficiently so that the message can be appropriately communicated without adding information that is unnecessary to the message or that is not implicit in the passage. For example, in John 4:20 the woman at the well informs Jesus that "our ancestors worshiped on this mountain," in which "this mountain" refers to a mountain visible in the distance. However, in Sindhi, a formal translation would lead the reader to believe that they were standing *on* the mountain. As a result the meaning-based translation has the equivalent of "that mountain over there." Implicit "behind the text" information is explicated "in the translated text" in order to facilitate appropriate exegesis for the reader "in front of the translated text."

This dynamic suggests a methodology tied to the translated text that provides some measure of validating theological trajectories. A clarification of the meaning and significance of

⁴³⁴ See 3.3 for this misunderstanding and how it was handled.

the parable in light of the cultural and textual context is one parameter by which the participants' comprehension of the passage can be evaluated. By accessing the scholarship and exegetical support used by translators "behind the translated text," a representation of the translators' intended communication can be constructed and compared to the readers' understanding of the biblical text. While not *sufficient* as a means for determining validity, a critical review of the passage provides a window onto the intended message. Adequate convergence between scholarly exegesis and the insiders' perspective creates confidence that the theological trajectory has been initiated through an appropriate, rather than mistaken, comprehension of the passage. The following is an examination of contemporary scholarship representative of that used for the translation of the passage chosen for the research portion of this thesis. This forms an exegetical overview against which the understanding of the readers can be evaluated.

8.4.1 Exegetical Review of Passage used for Presentation

Discussion in the interviews centered on Jesus' Parable of the Two Lost Sons found in Luke 15:11-32. The concern of this section is to establish the meaning of this parable according to Bible Society translation standards and biblical scholarship.

8.4.1.1 Purpose of an Exegetical Review

An exegetical review of Luke 15:11-32 applies textual, cultural and theological insights to reveal the message of the parable as it would likely have been interpreted by the original hearers.⁴³⁵ There are three main benefits to be gained from this review. First, as discussed in the previous section, these insights into the parable can be used in the data analysis as a comparison to and

⁴³⁵ The strict identification of the audience or author is not a major concern of this review. Even as there are levels of meaning in the story there are levels of authors and audience. Luke is regarded as the author of the gospel, but it is unlikely that he was present when Jesus told the parable. He received the teaching from others (Lk 1:1-4). So the authors of the story are Jesus as the original speaker, Luke who relates – and probably translates from Aramaic – the story in written form, those disciples who were present and presumably passed the story on to Luke, and the Holy Spirit who guided the process as a communication of God's revelation (2 Pet 1:21). There are three distinct audiences. The original audience recorded in the gospel consists of the disciples, the Pharisees, teachers of the Law and the "sinners" (Lk 15:1-2). The second audience is the readers of the gospel that Luke had in mind and to whom he wrote, principally "Theophilus" (Lk 1:1). The third audience is those reading the account but who were not included in Luke's initial consideration. The assumed intention of Luke as the author of the gospel is that the readers engage the story as told by Jesus within his immediate context. Therefore, the exegetical review is concerned with the meaning of the parable within the context of the passage and as a commentary on the original hearers who were present as Jesus told the story.

contrast with the interview participants' response to the parable in order to validate to some extent their interpretation of the parable at an illocutionary level.

Second, the way the parable "reads" the participants, that is, the application of the parable as a revelation of God that impacts their lives, can be compared to and contrasted with the scholarly understanding of the impact of the parable on the original audience. Congruence between the original and contemporary audience of the perlocutionary effect of the story provides further validity.

Third, the implications for translation revision are also considered. *Similarities* in either the understanding or impact between the original audience and the participants in the study affirm the success of the translation to communicate the intended message. *Misunderstandings* of the passage by the participants point to a lack of communication and may indicate a weakness in the translated text. A *lack of understanding* of intended aspects of the message is more complicated. This lack indicates that the relation between text and context in the participants' setting is sufficiently different from the relation between text and context in the original setting that a point understood by the original audience has not been communicated to the audience of the translation. The recourse for that difficulty is often the use of extra-textual material.

Several factors can account for the reality that any translated text fails to communicate the full message of the original. Some layers of meaning within the parable will always be lost on the hearers. These factors can be categorized into three major areas: *cultural divergence*, *audience relevance* and *linguistic dissonance*.⁴³⁶ *Cultural divergence* refers to a lack of resonance between the contexts of the original hearers and contemporary readers with respect to social, cultural, theological, worldview, historical and moral contrasts. For example, accepted norms of inheritance assumed in the parable are not equivalent to the norms of today's readers. *Audience*

⁴³⁶ These rather broad categories are my own and reflect concerns in Bible translation scholarship, even though the foci and emphases vary. Fee & Strauss (2007) include a section on linguistic issues and one on culture, but say little about audience (while devoting one section to issues of style and presentation). Shaw (1988) describes culture and worldview as well as linguistics and semantics, and includes one chapter on the perlocutionary aspects of translation as it affects the intended audience. Richards & O'Brien (2012) have one chapter on linguistic issues with a primary focus on cultural dissonance and how that affects readings of scripture between the original and modern audiences. Nida (1975 [1960]) is largely concerned with communication theory, but covers the three categories well with sections on social and cultural contexts, psychological relationships in communication that deal with audience issues and linguistic and semantic aspects. Beekman & Callow (1988 [1974]), in a technical work on Bible translation, emphasize linguistic and semantic concerns while touching on cultural and audience issues only secondarily.

relevance considers the contrast between the intellectual perspective, the purpose of engagement and the emotional investment of the two groups of hearers. For example, included in the original hearers were Pharisees and readers of the translated text have no personal experience with Pharisees. *Linguistic dissonance* refers to the inability of other language concepts and vocabulary to “carry” the full weight of the original text or, conversely, to the unavoidable and unintentional “baggage” of receptor language concepts and vocabulary which are lacking in the original text. For example, the concept of “Father” as a metaphor for God has different implications for a first century Jewish audience than a twenty-first century Muslim audience. When there are complications of this nature, the *communicative distance* between the original message and comprehension by contemporary readers needs to be assessed. The level of impact that a communicative deficiency has on the ability of readers to access the message⁴³⁷ determines the method of communication⁴³⁸ used to adjust the translation.

An examination of scholarship on Luke 15 is important both philosophically and practically. Philosophically it recognizes and validates the reality of an intended message that the reader can either comprehend or misinterpret.⁴³⁹ Practically, awareness of the cultural, social and linguistic dynamics at work in the original context is required to address the levels of meaning woven into the story. This can be compared to the common iceberg analogy used to explain the complexity of culture. Worldview is the hidden part of culture that is actually the dominating framework essential for understanding the significance, meaning and impact of an action. One day in Pakistan a visitor asked for a drink but when I brought him a glass of water instead of immediately drinking the water he looked around expectantly. Finally he squatted down and drank the water. Puzzled, I later asked a cultural informant to explain the man’s actions. I was informed that since the prophet Muhammad always sat down to drink, so do all good Muslims. Because there was no chair present, the man was forced to squat. I saw his actions but the meaning was hidden from me and I could not interpret them without an explanation of the

⁴³⁷ Translation teams use reviewers for feedback to determine how well the text communicates the message.

⁴³⁸ From greatest to least communicative impact, the primary methods of communication are (1) explicit insertion of material into the text, (2) footnoted explanation, (3) glossary explanation, (4) left unspecified with the assumption that the information can be accessed through teachers or commentaries. The choice of method used is dependent upon the impact an aspect of the passage has upon the readers’ comprehension of the assumed primary message.

⁴³⁹ This claim is based on the epistemological and theological assumptions presented in 7.6 and 8.1.3.

significance of that cultural value. Similarly, reading a biblical passage without being aware of the underlying cultural and societal assumptions, as well as the nuances implied by idioms and terminology, reduces the story to a simple narrative that lacks impact and significance for the readers.

Another metaphor that underscores the value of examining scholarly exegesis is the political cartoon (Bailey 1992:49). Encountering a political cartoon without adequate awareness of the historical referent results in puzzled frowns and shrugs. However, when an incident is fresh in the reader's mind, the clever, unexpected and amusing perspective of the cartoonist can be understood and responded to. The full weight of the cartoonist's point cannot be felt without sufficient familiarity with the history, language, religion and culture of that people group. Similarly, a lack of comprehension of the background information familiar to the original audience of the parable can cause the reader to miss the impact of the message. Bailey (1992:49) points out that "we must stand at the back" of the crowd listening to Jesus in order to appreciate the impact of the message. We must listen carefully to discern "the various aspects of truth that Jesus is creating for his first-century Jewish audience" (:50).

8.4.1.2 A Translator's Approach to Understanding Luke 15

Sangrey (2010) proposes "a top-down approach to translating" and uses Luke 15 to illustrate his perspective. He presents three "views" of the text that should influence the translator's understanding when preparing a translation. Reading the passage three times while focusing on each dimension in turn draws the translator into a holistic experience of the story that would be missed if only one view was considered. It is important for these three views to be mutually supporting and not contain internally contradictory information. This does not deny ambiguity; however, a sense of unity between the big picture, the details and the flow of the passage is required in order for translators to be confident that they have grasped the essence of the passage.

(1) *The big picture of the text.* In this view the broad themes of the chapter are considered to determine the intent of the author in terms of major connections or concerns of the passage. This perspective can be generated by an attempt to create a title for the chapter that encapsulates the essence of the narrative. It takes into account the primary thrust of the stories within the setting they were told in order to grasp the "big picture."

(2) *The details of the text.* The "top down" aspect of translation is emphasized by having an analysis of the details follow the comprehension of the big picture. The difference between the

younger son's rehearsal of his speech and the way it was delivered to the father is an example. The entire reason for his return is omitted when spoken before his father and all that remains is his confession of failure and repentance. Sangrey (2010) interprets this as the impact of the father's "shameful running" which has reoriented the son's thoughts of self-preservation to one of total submission.

(3) *The development of the text.* This view considers how meaning is communicated through the structure of the passage like a "wave." The focus is not on the message so much as on how the author raises questions in the hearers' mind and then either resolves the issues or leaves the hearer with a choice to be made. The unworthiness of the younger son to be restored, explicated though the elder brother's indignant reaction, contrasts with and brings into sharp relief the father's orientation of forgiveness, love and relationship. The response of the older son to the father's will is not resolved but left for the hearers to determine. The way the story is told "builds interpretive context as well as anticipation as the text develops" (Sangrey 2010).

8.4.1.3 Exegetical Perspectives on Luke 15:11-32

The Parable of the Two Lost Sons is one of the most popular of Jesus' parables and the innumerable writings on its "inexhaustible content" (Bailey 1983 [1976]:158) means that the following analysis only highlight those aspects of the passage that facilitate the purpose of this study to examine the theological shift of Sindhi believers in their view of God. Nonetheless, the attempt is made to be both representative of relevant scholarship and to highlight the main themes of the story. In the last section of the exegesis translation issues that could affect the Sindhi reader's interpretation of the text are explored.

8.4.1.3.1 Title: Two Lost Sons

The story is traditionally called "The Prodigal Son" in English translations and the Sindhi translation has the title, "The Example of the Lost Son," using the pattern of the previous two parable titles: "The Example of the Lost Sheep" and "The Example of the Lost Coin." Titles help readers identify the passage at hand, separate distinct discourses and break up large blocks of text for easier reading. The downside is the unavoidable interpretation they place on the text. Not only does the heading separate this parable from the previous two parables and the introductory narrative in the first two verses of the chapter, but the focus on the younger son detracts from the

father's interaction with the older son in the second half of the story. Many have noted⁴⁴⁰ that it is inadequate to focus solely on the younger son and the suggestion has been made that it be entitled the *Two Lost Sons* (e.g., Keller 2008:XIV; Snodgrass 2008:118). The parable opens with the mention of *two* sons and the older son's response to the younger's return indicates that he, in his own way, is "just as lost as his younger brother" (Nouwen 1992:21). "The older son... seems to have a tenuous hold within the house, but in reality he too stands outside" (Bailey 2005:90). Indeed, considering the original audience of "tax collectors and sinners..., Pharisees and the teachers of the law" (Lk 15:1-2) and the closing interaction with the older son, it may be that greater emphasis is placed on the one who did *not* dishonor his father.

Nonetheless, from the contrast between the Pharisees – indicated in the story by the older son – and the tax collectors and sinners – indicated by the younger son who has left the father – it would seem that the focus of "lostness" as intended by Jesus would be on the younger son. This is supported by other comments made by Jesus elsewhere such as "the Son of Man came to seek and to save what was lost" (Lu 19:10) at the occasion of Zacchaeus' repentance, a tax collector. This understanding also parallels the first two parables of the lost coin and the lost sheep in which an item of importance has gone missing from the owner, a description that fits the "lost" condition of the tax collectors and sinners and matches the departure of the younger son in the latter parable. According to this perspective the added description of the older son, lacking a parallel in the previous two parables, could be seen as a climactic addition to all 3 parables given as a stark contrast to the concerns of the shepherd, the owner of the coin and the father. Considering the importance of the interaction between the father and the older son, it would be unfortunate not to indicate this aspect of the story in the title.

Others have focused on the father as the central figure with titles like "the parable of the Father's Love" such as suggested by Jeremias (1972:128).⁴⁴¹ This naturally picks up on the theme of God's celebration at finding the lost in all three parables of Luke 15. Considering the focus of this study on how responses to the parable reveal Sindhi views of God, this may be the better title. However, rather than *primarily* a story of unconditional love, the impact of the story is more likely intended to shatter categories of self-righteousness (Keller 2008:10). The older son is as lost as his sibling because of his lack of grace towards his brother, his lack of sensitivity to the

⁴⁴⁰ As early as Irenaeus (1953 [A.D. 325]:517) in *Against Heresies 4:36-7* this parable has been referred to as the "story of the two sons."

⁴⁴¹ Cf. Nouwen's (1992:92) suggestion that Rembrandt's painting "The Return of the Prodigal Son" could have been called "The Welcome by the Compassionate Father."

father's concern, the inappropriate standards used to judge the legitimacy of sonship and because of his greater focus on his father's *things*, rather than the father *himself* (Kruger 2001:24-26, Keller 2008:49-50,53-56,58-59,62, Nouwen 1992:20-21). In all these areas, he was as careless with the father's love and desire as was the younger son, albeit expressed in a different way. "Both sons are seen as rebels needing a visible demonstration to win them from servanthood to sonship" (Bailey 1983 [1976]:206). "The parable exhibits two types of sin. One is the sin of the law-breaker and the other the sin of the law-keeper" (Bailey 2005:87). Even though the research of this project focuses on the nature of the father and because of a desire to be inclusive of the father's relationships with *both* sons, I follow a more traditional designation and refer to the parable as "the story of the two lost sons."

8.4.1.3.2 Textual Parameters

The Parable of the two lost sons has been analyzed within a number of parameters, including its own story or narrative context, the context of the immediate passage and its placement within the broader Lucan setting. It has been evaluated according to the teachings and person of Jesus – a Christological approach – and also through the lens of the cultural context as the "language" through which spiritual meaning is communicated. Bailey (1992:50) suggests that all parables, including this one, should be engaged on four levels: the entertaining story, ethical patterns, theological revelations and Christological claims. Blomberg (1990:171) classifies the parable as one of the "monarchic" parables in which the main character, a king figure, relates to two subordinates. He notes that, as with much of Jesus' teaching, these parables turn "conventional expectation on its head" (:172). It is outside the scope of this thesis to explore all these avenues and so the textual parameters are limited to a consideration of the Luke 15 context.

Bailey (2003:57-64) argues convincingly that the whole of Luke 15 was intended as a "single unit" with the trilogy of parables to be read as "three parts of a single parable" (Bailey 1998:34). There are common elements to all three parables, such as the meals and a trilogy of metaphors for God (shepherd, woman, father) that draw attention to the main teachings. In each of the three parables there are three sets of individuals indicated⁴⁴² and there are three sets of people

⁴⁴² In the Parable of the Lost Sheep, the three sets are the sheep, the shepherd and the friends and neighbors. In the Parable of the Lost Coin, the three sets are the coins, the woman and the friends and neighbors. In the Parable of the Two Lost Sons, the father, the two sons and the servants in the household constitute the three sets.

in the original setting where the stories were told.⁴⁴³ The passage itself calls the three stories “one parable” (Lk 15:3) and the style of writing suggests that the trilogy of characters is embedded in a trilogy of stories as an indication that there may be correspondence with the trilogy of people in the immediate audience (Sangrey 2010).⁴⁴⁴

A possible theme of the chapter is “lostness” (Bailey 1992) defined by broken relationships and the conditions required for reconciliation. But more than that, Keller (2008:90) reads the narrative “in light of the Bible's sweeping theme of exile and homecoming” in which Jesus presented “the story of the whole human race, and promised nothing less than hope for the world.” NT Wright (1996:127) emphasizes the theme of exile and restoration, seeing the passage as an image of the “central drama that Israel believed herself to be acting out.” In this view, Jesus is not primarily dealing with the restoration of individuals but is underscoring his preaching on the incoming reign of God. The returning son refers to the redemption of Israel and the older son stands for the religious leaders that oppose this restoration celebrated by the Father (:130). Bailey (2003:197) concurs that exile and return is a theme of the passage but he also cautions that too close an identification of the story with specifics in the historical account results in “complications” (:198) that diminish other dimensions of the parable. Bailey (2003:17,205), with a desire to complement NT Wright’s work (:201), proposes that the story of the Two Sons intentionally corresponds to the saga of Jacob in Genesis 27:1-36:8, noting fifty-one common dramatic elements. Perhaps the best approach is to be inclusive and allow the story to speak on a number of levels without demanding strict correspondence, recognizing that Jesus is the one that fulfills the divine plan of God whether on a global, national or individual level.

The context provided by Luke indicates that the three parables are a reproach to the religious leaders who are present and listening to Jesus. The parables are presented as a response to the “Pharisees and the teachers of the law” who mutter, “This man welcomes sinners and eats with them” (Lk 15:2). People condemned by the law – the unclean, the immoral and the traitors –

⁴⁴³ The distinction between the three groups of people listening to the story is their orientation towards Jesus: (1) his disciples, (2) the Pharisees and teachers of the Law and (3) the tax collectors and sinners.

⁴⁴⁴ If there is a correspondence indicated, it is not entirely obvious and not necessarily one-to-one. The lost sheep, the lost coin and the two lost sons – one “set” in the parables – would need to correspond to *both* the Pharisees and the tax collectors and sinners – two “sets” in the audience – with the reference to Pharisees only obvious in the older son. Furthermore, the neighbors and friends are interpreted as “angels in heaven” by Jesus rather than referring to his disciples. Bailey (2003:57) argues that the three heroes of the stories (the shepherd, the woman and the father) “evolve into symbols for Jesus.”

felt accepted in Jesus' presence. So Jesus, in contrast to a vision of a God who condemns outcasts, paints a picture of God who is oriented towards redemption rather than rejection. The sheep is relentlessly pursued and returned, the coin is anxiously looked for and recovered, the son is embraced as returning back to life. In essence Jesus responds, "Do you really not understand why I embrace sinners and eat with them? I do this because that is the way God is! My Father runs to embrace these sinners and eats with them – he throws a loud and lavish party for them" (Kruger 2001:14). Or as Bailey (1998:34) expresses Jesus' response, "Indeed, I do eat with sinners. But it is much worse than you imagine! I not only eat with them, I run down the road, shower them with kisses, and drag them in that I might eat with them!" Bailey goes on to explain that Jesus' story is not only about himself, it reflects the character of God, "the father does what Jesus does." In this context, the climax comes at the end of the third parable which can be nothing less than a rebuke to the grumbling religious leaders; the father wants to party, but the older son refuses to join in (Lk 15:28).

8.4.1.3.3 Story Outline

The story of the parable is simple when summarized. A younger son takes his portion of the inheritance from the father and squanders it in wasteful living. His fortunes turn and he becomes desperately poor on the edge of starvation. He returns to his father acknowledging his sin and asks to be given opportunity to work for a living. The father welcomes him home with full restoration to his status as son and throws a party to celebrate his return. The older son is angry at this turn of events, refuses to join in the celebration and expresses his bitterness to the father. The parable concludes with father pleading with the older son to welcome his brother home. But even though the story is easily summarized, there are profound elements to be explored that have deep spiritual significance.

Bailey's (1983 [1976, 1980], 1992, 1998, 2003, 2005) work on the parable has been extensive drawing on years of reflection and study. His expressed goal to "rediscover its authentic Middle Eastern cultural assumptions and to understand its theological content in the light of those assumptions" (1992:109) makes his work valuable for this study. His chiasmic⁴⁴⁵ outline of the parable reveals the pedagogical emphases:

⁴⁴⁵ Bailey (1992:17,48) refers to this as "inverted parallelism" and provides other examples from the Gospel of Luke as well as Isaiah.

1. A son is lost – "Give me my share"
- 2 Goods wasted in extravagant living
- 3 Everything lost – "he spent everything – he began to want"
- 4 The great sin – "feeding pigs for gentiles"
- 5 Total rejection – "no one gave him anything"
- 6 A change of mind – "he came to himself – I perish here"
- 6' An initial repentance – " make me a servant (I will pay it back)"
- 5' Total acceptance – "his father ran and kissed him"
- 4' The great repentance – "I am no more worthy to be called your son"
- 3' Everything gained – a robe, ring, and shoes (restoration to sonship)
- 2' Goods used in joyful celebration
- 1' A son is found – "My son was dead and is alive, was lost and is found." (Bailey 1983

[1976]:160)

Chiasm is an aspect of Old Testament poetry in which the primary emphasis, or key message, is found in the *center* of the structure. Thus, according to Bailey's outline, the main point of the first part of the parable is the younger son's "change of mind" and "initial repentance." He finds a similar chiastic form in the second act relating to the older son, albeit with a glaring omission:

1. The son comes – "he heard music and dancing"
- 2 The younger brother is reported safe and there is a feast
- 3 The father comes to reconcile
- 4 The older son complains – "How you treat me"
- 4' The second complaint – "How you treat him"
- 3' The father tries to reconcile
- 2' The younger brother is proclaimed safe and the feast is fitting
- 1' MISSING: The older son reconciled and joining the feast (:191)

The focal point of the second act is a consideration of the older son's complaint. The father's lack of response to the complaint and his concern for the restoration of his younger son is a rebuke to the misplaced anger of the older brother. Bailey (:205) concludes that the omission of the final stanza leaves the older son without repentance and unreconciled to the father. This presses the Pharisee to see himself in the parable and choose his response. "[The parable brings] us face to face with one of life's hardest spiritual choices: to or not to trust in God's all-forgiving love" (Nouwen 1992:75; cf. Blomberg 1990:179).

8.4.1.3.4 Imagery of God as Father and Parable as Story

The character of the father⁴⁴⁶ as a reference to God is undisputed. However, the parable is a "story

⁴⁴⁶ The correlation between the younger son and the "tax collectors and sinners" and between the older son and the Pharisees also deserves examination. The father figure is given priority because the main research concern is to explore Sindh's *perspective of God* through interaction with the parable.

drawn from life” rather than an allegory (Jeremias 1972:128). Jesus is not directly speaking of God as if the father is *concordant* or *identified* with God;⁴⁴⁷ that would make the son’s confession of sinning against “heaven” and against the father sound odd (Blomberg 1990:175). Rather the actions of the father in this tale reveal something about the nature of God. The father *symbolizes* God (Bailey 1983 [1976]:159) and “the expressions used are meant to reveal that in his love he is *an image of God*” (Jeremias 1972:128, italics mine). Furthermore, the parable as *story* is important in that it resonates intuitively with the reader’s world, rather than requiring a one-to-one correspondence with a reality that lies *behind* the parable. This allows for a variety of interpretations bounded by the broad strokes of purpose indicated by the scriptural context, Jesus’ other teachings and the immediate audience. Thus we can see God *in* the father and yet allow that image to resonate differently with those whose experience and view of “father” has been shaped by life experiences divergent from our own. At the same time, that resonance must meet the contours of the parable itself as a revelation of God as Father. The picture of God painted by the Sindhi hearers within their context can still be true to the parable, while teaching a variety of lessons (Blomberg 1990:69).⁴⁴⁸ It can also be false by applications or interpretations that lie outside the parameters indicated by the parable. It is for this reason that an exegetical look at the parable is required.

The description of God as Father is difficult for Muslims because the general conviction is that the *will* of God can be known, but not the divine *nature*, and therefore God remains unknowable. However, due largely to the influence of poetic Sufi thought,⁴⁴⁹ for Sindhi Muslims this is not a hard and fast rule and there are convictions about the character of God as loving and

⁴⁴⁷ This clarification protects the parable from two extremes. On the one hand it avoids disengaging the meaning of the story from the author. Insisting that the author (either Jesus or Luke) is communicating a message with intent that is fundamentally *connected to the original context* ensures that it is not the reader alone who determines the legitimate reading. Secondly, it avoids the extreme of insisting on a one-to-one correspondence of meaning that undermines the metaphorical intent. There is a depth of meaning to the story genre beyond a simple one-to-one correspondence that not only allows for, but *insists on* a variety of perspectives as the story resonates with the reader’s life and experience. The parable as metaphor cannot be summarized into a single lesson. “Instead all one can do is describe the impact which it creates” (Blomberg 1990:35). That impact, or resonance, between what is being communicated through the parable by the author and the life of the hearer is at the heart of this research project.

⁴⁴⁸ Nouwen (1992) illustrates this well in his contemplation of Rembrandt’s painting in which he records his spiritual journey of identification with the younger son and the older son, as well as the father.

⁴⁴⁹ See 4.2.2.2 for the influence of Sufism in the Sindh.

forgiving that influence their reading of the parable. Although the father in this tale acts contrary to expectations concerning Middle Eastern patriarchs (Bailey 1992:157), it is precisely the unexpectedness of those demonstrations of love that provide the impact: he *does* divide the inheritance, he *accepts* his lost son rather than rejecting him, he *celebrates* rather than punishes.

8.4.1.3.5 Exegetical Parameters

The following limited discussion has the modest goal of providing scholarly insight into the details and flow of the passage so that a sufficient and appropriate understanding of the parable is possible. Of particular interest are commentaries with a Middle Eastern perspective (e.g., Bailey 1983 [1976, 1980], 1992, 1998, 2003, 2005) or a first century cultural background to the parable (e.g., Malina 1981), which are relevant to those values and perspectives that resonate within the Sindhi setting. At the same time, Snodgrass (2008:129-132) critiques recent interpretations that point to parallels between various times and cultures in order to illuminate the meaning of the parable. For example, he is judgmental of Bailey's approach that "uncritically assumes a continuity between first-century Jewish Palestine and modern Middle Eastern peasants impacted by centuries of Islamic rule" (:132). Snodgrass (2008:132) also disputes the sociological approach that seems to be "more intrigued with the culture than with the parable" and thus often focuses on what is *not* in the parable. While the analyses that Bailey and others offer can provide "background music for interpreting the parable," they are not the hermeneutical key. Such observations do have relevance in a general sense to better understand or illuminate patterns and cultural norms that will resonate with today's hearers. "Conventional stories of a father and two sons, one good and one prodigal, of attitudes toward rebellious sons, of OT themes of mercy and reconciliation, and of the cultural significance of the details of the parable" (:129) serve to enhance our understanding. However, we must be careful not to read such parallels back into the story when there is no specific referent to the presumed concept in the story itself. Whether referring to Old Testament narratives or modern day cultural norms, they do not constitute the prism through which the parable should be read.

Snodgrass' (2008:132) maxim should be heeded that "the more an interpretation focuses on what is not explicit in the parable the more likely it is to be wrong." Therefore, in the following exegetical overview, care has been taken to ensure that the meaning of the parable is drawn from the passage and that any dissonance with the cited cultural references outside of the parable is not ignored. The primary concern is that perceived connections with extra-textual information should

not mislead but clarify a particular aspect of the message.

8.4.1.3.6 Exegetical Overview

The Parable of the Two Lost Sons revolves around the interaction between a father and his two sons. The sons treat their father in inappropriate ways and the father's unconventional responses serve as the parable's message communicating the nature and will of God. The magnitude of the sons' mistreatment of the father is clarified through an examination of cultural expectations. The impact of the message is felt in contrast to the norms of the day through which the counter-cultural values of God's rule are revealed. Rohrbaugh (1997:145-146) points out three loyalties that were considered foundational in first century civilization. Each of these loyalties take precedence over our Western sensibilities for individual identity and each one was disdained by the younger son: family solidarity, village solidarity and social/religious solidarity. The family solidarity was broken by the "hurtful, offensive, and in radical contradiction to the most venerated tradition of the time" (Nouwen 1992:35) request for inheritance, implying that the father would be better off dead (Bailey 1983 [1976]:162; Keller 2008:18). The act of the father giving the inheritance to the two sons is so astoundingly counter-cultural and opposing common sense that Rohrbaugh (1997) titles the tale, "A Dysfunctional Family and Its Neighbours." NT Wright (1996:129) similarly speaks of the father as "being reckless, prodigal, generous to a fault." Bailey (1992:114) affirms that the request of the son would have been "unthinkable" to Middle Eastern sensibilities and the granting of the request "makes clear that the character of the father in the parable is not modeled after a traditional Middle Eastern patriarch." Nonetheless, as Bailey (1983 [1976]:205) states elsewhere, while the distribution of the inheritance is "exceptional," it is unlikely that the intent was to communicate a dysfunctional stance on the part of the father. Rather the message of the parable centers on his "unprecedented act of love." This act of love is expressed in the granting of "ultimate freedom: the freedom to reject the love offered" (Bailey 1992:118). God's love "cannot force, push, or pull. It offers the freedom to reject that love or to love in return. It is precisely the immensity of the divine love that is the source of the divine suffering. God, creator of heaven and earth, has chosen to be, first and foremost, a Father" (Nouwen 1992:95). Rather than a "dysfunctional" interpretation,⁴⁵⁰ the internal dynamic of the

⁴⁵⁰ Snodgrass (2008:133) falls to the other extreme by stating, "The father's actions are not so exaggerated and unexpected that they fall outside the range of human behavior. While some fathers may reject prodigals or require conditions for acceptance, others express tenderness and love." While true, it fails to acknowledge the counter-cultural impact of the parable. Even if a

parable speaks to a series of counter-cultural acts on the part of the father demonstrating forgiveness, generosity, graciousness and love. This interpretation is consistent with a similar motivation for Jesus' actions that were disapproved of by the Pharisees. The apologetic dimension of the parable answering the Pharisees' criticism of Jesus' association with "tax collectors and sinners" should be kept in mind. The father's nature, as revealed in the parable, is the basis for Jesus' authority to act in the same way. Through this "veiled assertion of authority," Jesus is declaring that he is doing the works of his father (Jn 10:37) and that he is "acting in God's stead" (Jeremias 1972:132).

The inheritance in question refers to land and the identity, life and wealth of the people was intimately tied to the land (Keller 2008:19-20; Rohrbaugh 1997:149). Thus in verse 12, the Greek states that the father divided his "*bios*," a word which has the nuance of "life" as in 1 Tim 2:2, "that we may live peaceful and quiet *lives (bios)*." However, we must be careful not to read too much into one word as if the father is literally dividing his "life," any more than supposing the English idiom, "making a *living*," assumes that a person has no life beyond his job. Nonetheless, the phrase denotes "land" as the resource that sustains the life of the family and is not to be taken lightly (Snodgrass 2008:131). It is a key source of identity and status intended to be passed on from generation to generation (Rohrbaugh 1997:148).

An understanding of the sacredness of the land underscores the shocking disregard for the family's honor and identity found in the phrase, "the younger son got together⁴⁵¹ all he had... and squandered his wealth..." (Lk 15:13). "The boy's request and especially his departure would have been viewed negatively by all Mediterranean societies" (Snodgrass 2008:131). Forced expulsion from the land indicates economic and social disaster, loss of honor and disintegration of the family (Rohrbaugh 1997:149). Yet the son accomplished this *voluntarily*. His actions showed a lack of care for his father and disrespect for any relationship with him. In his selfishness, he focused on the father's money, not the father (Snodgrass 2008:131). To sell the ancestral land and squander it with no thought for his father or family is beyond belief. Snodgrass (2008:125) comments, "in the ancient world disrespect toward parents (especially fathers) or failure to care for parents was condemned, even to the point of saying that neglect of parents was an imprisonable offense." This is underscored by the Old Testament law of which the listeners,

father was to be as generous as in the parable to an errant son, there would be cultural forces and personal tendencies that would approve of harsher treatment.

⁴⁵¹ Marshall (1978) suggests that the Greek term *sunago* means to "turn into cash" rather than "got together."

especially the Pharisees and teachers of the Law, would have been well aware. Disrespect for parents was punishable by death (Lev 20:25) and ownership of the land was a divine appointment so that the land should not be sold permanently but must be returned in the year of jubilee (Lev 27:24).

Issues of shame and honor, so critical in a Sindhi setting, have been dealt with elsewhere,⁴⁵² but it is such a “pivotal value” in the first century Mediterranean world (Malina 1981:25-50) with implications for this parable that it bears mentioning here. The impact of the younger son’s actions and the ferocity of the older son’s rejection at the end of the parable draw their power from concepts of honor and shame. The strength of this value needs to be kept in mind when assessing the father’s actions throughout the parable. Unless there is recognition of the shame the father absorbs within himself due to the higher value of reconciliation, the shock of his counter-cultural action will not be fully appreciated.

Rohrbaugh (1997:150-51) picks up on this dynamic to argue that the father deserves some blame because he has acted in a culturally inappropriate fashion by acquiescing to the inheritance demand. “He has given his place as head of the family to a son and thereby destroyed his own honour and authority.” However, this criticism of the father goes beyond the intention of the parable; he has stretched the metaphor beyond its limits. If Jesus expects the listeners to understand the father as a reference to God, it only requires a small leap of imagination to see in this description a reference to God’s generosity to human kind in giving us our inheritance in the blessings of this earth. The character of the father is not impugned by the improper response of the child any more than the Bible lays blame on God for humanity’s sin. God’s generous acts are never considered in a negative light in scripture, so it would be unlikely for the hearers to respond in that way to the story. Snodgrass (2008:133) castigates Rohrbaugh as “guilty of misapplying cultural information” in viewing the family as dysfunctional and the father’s actions as inappropriate. “Nothing in the parable suggests that the father acted shamefully.”

Village solidarity was broken by the implied rejection in the son’s travel to a far off city. A rightly balanced member of a first century society “is ever aware of the expectations, [*sic*] of others, especially significant others, and strives to match those expectations” (Malina 1981:67). However, even though communal identity is foundational to the thinking of the people of that time, this should not be taken as an aspect of the parable itself because there are no villagers mentioned. The focus of the story is always the father’s house in contrast to the “distant country”

⁴⁵² See 4.3.4.

which has only a negative connotation. All the actors in the story belong to the “distant country” and are therefore shown in a negative light (“no one gave him anything,” Lk 15:16), or they belong to the father’s household as family members or servants. While the family’s “honour and place in the village, its social and economic networks, even its ability to call on neighbours in times of need” (Rohrbaugh 1997:149) are culturally assumed background issues that place the story in a particular context, they do not speak specifically into the meaning of the story. Similarly, Bailey (1998:34) suggests that the son, upon his return, is in danger of the “*qetsatsah* ceremony” in which

the villagers would bring a large earthenware jar, fill it with burned nuts and burned corn, and break it in front of the guilty individual. While doing this, the community would shout, “So-and-so is cut off from his people.” From that point on, the village would have nothing to do with the wayward lad.

While the image of seeing the father run the “gauntlet” of villagers as an “unexpected visible demonstration of love in humiliation” (Bailey 1983 [1976]:182) resonates well with the message of the parable, Snodgrass (2008:133) rightly criticizes this as an imagined aspect of the story. It presupposes “that the farm was next to a village eager to punish offenders, but the parable has no mention of any of this, and no evidence exists that the *qetsatsah* is even remotely in the background of the parable.”

The social/religious solidarity broken by the squandered wealth and unclean living of feeding the pigs owned by a Gentile (Rohrbaugh 1997:146,153) is a valid observation that has not only cultural connotations but also resonates with Israel’s relationship to God in the Old Testament. “Jews were prohibited from raising swine at all since the OT labels them as unclean, to be neither eaten nor touched.... the analogy between the prodigal who joined himself to a Gentile to feed pigs and tax collectors who joined themselves to the Romans is obvious” (Snodgrass 2008:126, cf. Bailey 1992:126-129). Turning away from God results in the destruction of God’s blessings and idolatrous substitutes for the true God leave people destitute and hungry physically, socially and spiritually. The lost son is representative of the exiled Israelites as well as the current “tax collectors and sinners” who are all to be identified as broken people to whom God speaks words of comfort when they turn back in repentance.

The younger son’s prepared and delivered speeches are turning points in the story. In the prepared speech, the son “comes to his senses” and realizes that his life would be better in his father’s home working as one of the “hired servants” (Lk 15:17-19). This term refers not to the servants who worked on the estate and were part of the household dynamic, but were hired

“tradesmen and craftsmen who lived in local villages and earned a wage” (Keller 2008:21). The idea was probably based on an assumption that he would not benefit from the land and property as an owner or heir since he has wasted his portion, but rather that he would have opportunity to live off what he earned. Perhaps he saw himself as working off a debt in order to earn the right to be there (Bailey 1992:133-138) or even “to save himself” (Bailey 1983 [1976]:205-206). While Bailey’s speculation may go a bit far, it seems plain from the unstinting graciousness and acceptance received from the father that there is an intended contrast between human expectations of the limits of mercy and God’s abundance. Via (1967:169,173) suggests that more can be done about the dilemma than the son imagines. Without God’s revelation of the divine nature, a person cannot know God “as the one who forgives radically and does not know himself as accepted in spite of his unacceptability.”

Rohrbaugh (1997:155) sees the son’s “coming to himself” as a matter of becoming aware of his identity and a moment of “self recognition” of his place in the family. However, Via’s (1967:168) perspective that the son believed that the relationship with his father had been destroyed and he had “forfeited the right of sonship” seems more in keeping with the speech.

The son’s *delivered* speech (Lk 15:21) is truncated through the omission of his suggested solution and the context has altered so that the concern is no longer about hunger and need but about the father’s relationship with and desire for the son. The speech has been purged of self-centered concerns with only the acknowledged unworthiness of his actions and his confession of sin remaining. The future of the son hangs on a word from the father and it is his love and acceptance that makes repentance and redemption possible (Via 1967:173). The reception by the father turns the son’s remorse into repentance.

The father’s actions in the parable are shocking and unpredictable, not because they are shameful, but because the orientation of excessive love and graciousness that ignores material loss and dismisses concerns of status and honor clash with the cultural expectations of the hearers. Verse 20 describes the return of the son and is undoubtedly intended to be the crux of the story. While interaction with the older brother in the later verses addresses those who condemn others and fleshes out the implications of God’s orientation towards sinners, this verse is pivotal in setting the standard by which all judgments must be made. In the eyes of the right living Pharisees, the actions of the younger son require punishment and purging. Bailey (1983 [1976]:181) imagines that the father runs in order to “protect the boy from the hostility of the village and to restore him to fellowship within the community.” But this is not necessary; the

clash with the expectations of the listeners is sufficient. The “undignified” (Snodgrass 2008:126) and “humiliating” (Bailey 1983 [1976]:181) action of a nobleman running followed by an expression of exuberant and unconditional welcome for his son is the crux of the message that should not be undermined by speculation about other motives that are not mentioned in the story.

The symbolism of the robe, ring, sandals and feast are significant to clarify the extent to which the son has been received back as a son of the father. The father “publicly demonstrates his re-integration into the family with the robe, ring and sandals” (Rohrbaugh 1997:157). The relationship has been reestablished (declared by the feast), the status regained (the meaning of the ring) and all the destruction and loss has been “covered up” (the sandals and robe). This may reflect the Hebrew idiom of “covering” sin (Ps 32:1) that refers to its complete removal and not just hiding it, or it may be a reference to the “covering” over of complete protection and acceptance (Ps 31:19,20). For Sindhis, the mention of sandals is particularly significant since the bottom of the feet is a place of shame; deliberately exposing the underside of a foot or shoe to another is an insult. Although not equivalent, there are parallels to the first century setting as Snodgrass (2008:126) notes, “Being without shoes was a mark of degradation (or mourning).”

While Rohrbaugh (1997:157-158) views the feast as “a gesture of solidarity with and respect for those invited” as well as a regaining of honor, Bailey’s (1992:156) perspective seems more consistent with the overall message of the chapter. The feast is not to honor the son, but held in celebration of the reconciliation that the father has accomplished. “The shepherd's party is not in honor of the lost sheep, nor is the woman's celebration in honor of her coin. So here, the banquet is in honor of the father and the reconciliation he has achieved at such great cost.” A mistake of the older son was to conclude that the banquet honored the prodigal, whereas this is a celebration of success for restored relationship. “The father is the center of attention at the banquet, not the prodigal” (Bailey 1992:180-81).

The older son’s reaction to his father’s acceptance of the younger son brings to the forefront the attitude and reaction of the Pharisees to sinners. Rohrbaugh (1997:158) notes that the older son’s refusal to come in to the feast is “totally unexpected” and “shocking.” It is “a public humiliation of the family and the father.” The reaction of the older son would have made the listeners extremely uncomfortable as they grasped the implication of the story. The older brother’s uncompromising rejection of his sibling “allows the audience an objective view of themselves. Jesus offers a brilliant analysis of how a self-righteous spirit can dominate and poison any person” (Bailey 1992:172). Jesus was saying that the insubordination of the elder son was a

picture of the *Pharisees*' rebellion against God. Rather than being in tune with God's heart, they missed the purpose of their connection to God. God's desire is not conformity, but relationship. This hard hitting lesson is obscured by Rorbaugh (1997:159) who states, "The contrast here is not between the two sons at all. It is between the villagers and the older son.... The music and dancing signal that the villagers have indeed arrived and affirmed the reconciliation. The question then is whether the older son will follow suit." Not only does this put too much emphasis on imaginary villagers, but it also misses the point that the contrast in the parable is always between the *father* and the sons. The difference between the sons is secondary compared to the father's desire for and interaction with them (Snodgrass 2008:134). The father's nature and character is demonstrated as good, forgiving, generous and loving with an unstinting desire for restored relationship. In contrast, all the sons' orientations to the father are inappropriate, except for the younger son's returning attitude of full submission to his love. The question for the older brother is whether he will go beyond conformity to rules with an eye towards his own status and begin developing a heart like his father. In his meditation upon the parable, Nouwen (1992:128) comments that there are "three ways to a truly compassionate fatherhood: grief, forgiveness, and generosity." These responses are all aspects of the one desire for relationship. God wants to relate to people as children, to be to them as the father was to his sons. The divine Father wants to celebrate with us and give us joy even when the path to that relationship is painful.

The older son's speech (Lk 15:29-30) demonstrates a similar self-centeredness as in the prepared speech of the younger son. In this case it is not couched in terms of need, but of rights. Furthermore, he seeks to undermine and destroy the father's restitution of the younger son by embellishing the sin of his sibling whom he refuses to acknowledge as a brother by using the phrase "this son of yours." "He accuses his sibling of spending the inheritance on harlots, even though the story earlier left no such implication" (Rohrbaugh 1997:162). Unlike his younger brother, it is not his *actions* that are the problem, but his attitude and orientation to the family.

Keller (2008:39) points out that the elder brother has an opportunity to please the father by going into the feast. "But his resentful refusal shows that the father's happiness had never been his goal." Instead his desire is to have control of the family himself based on his perspective of honor and righteousness. "[D]oes he also want his father dead? Then he would have full control over the estate and be able to throw banquets at his pleasure!" (Bailey 1992:177). While claiming full obedience, he does not truly seek the father's will. The father acknowledges the right of the older son to all the material goods, but expresses his preference for and delight in a son that was lost

and is now found; was dead and is now alive (Lk 15:24,32). This terminology echoes the phrasing used in the previous two parables – “I have found my lost sheep/coin” – underscoring the point that this orientation to others is at the heart of the message. The older son demands justice based on the inheritance; the father acknowledges that right but dismisses it as insignificant compared to the restoration of the relationship. For the father, justice is making things right, a perspective which points to the value of relationships, not to material concerns.

A final comment on Christology in the parable should be made. Jesus does not speak of himself directly in the parable; he is not the father in the parable, the father is a reference to God. Jesus’ point is that he is patterning his actions after his Father, a relationship paradigm evident throughout the gospels (e.g., Jn 5:19; 10:37). However, even though Christology is not explicit in the parable, “there are christological implications” (Snodgrass 2008:138). The parable is a defense of Jesus’ actions and therefore it indirectly claims that he is God’s agent who fulfills God’s will towards outcasts and sinners. It has been noted that the “eldest son was also expected to take a leadership role in... family matters” (Snodgrass 2008:126) and the lack of generosity on the part of the older son contrasts with Jesus as the older brother who pursues us in order “to seek and to save what was lost” (Lk 19:10). The parable has “a missional force so that one is motivated not only to accept sinners but also to find them” (Snodgrass 2008:135).

8.4.1.3.7 Sindhi Translation Aspects of Luke 15:11-32

In contrast to the exegetical overview that describes the primary movements and emphases in the parable discourse, the following is a technical overview of the parable explaining *translation* issues that affect the interpretation of the text by the Sindhi reader. As with translation into any language, some of the characteristics of the Sindhi language facilitate the intent and the impact of the original text, while other nuances that would have been plain to the original readers are not fully understood by the average Sindhi reader. A description of the nuances implied in the translation choices helps clarify the meaning of the textual referents as interpreted by the participants. The point of the following descriptions is not to repeat the exegesis of the passage, but to explain, from a *translator’s* perspective, the influence of translation choices on Sindhi interpretation. This analysis of terms used in the text should also be contrasted with the explanation of key terms used by the *participants* during the interviews.⁴⁵³ The following terms are considered sequentially as they appear in the text. The English translation for this section is

⁴⁵³ An *Explanation of Sindhi Terms* is provided under each identified theme in 9.2.

taken from the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV 1997),⁴⁵⁴ unless otherwise indicated.

Verse 12

“He divided his property (Gk. *bios*)” (cf. vs 30). By using a Greek term that could be translated as “he divided his ‘life,’” it is possible that the author is underscoring the importance of the land or estate for the family and community (Keller 2008:19-20, Snodgrass 2008:131). The son asks for “property” (Gk. *ousais*), the father divides his “life” (Gk. *bios*). This would resonate with Sindhi hearers since land provides identity and status in the Sindh and landowners are influential. However, the word used in the Sindhi translation, *milkeat*, is a generic term for property that would refer to anything the father owned. The same word is used to translate both *ousais* and *bios*. Moreover, the sense that the son’s request implies that the father would be better off dead (Bailey 1983 [1976]:162; Keller 2008:18) would not be a natural Sindhi reading. Although such a request would be seriously frowned upon in Sindhi culture, the interpretation of the son’s character would be directed primarily towards his personal selfishness, rather than as an expression of harsh disregard for the father.

Verse 13

“He squandered his property in dissolute living (Gk. *zōn asōtōs*).” The Sindhi term, *Esh Esharat*, refers to extravagant, self-centered enjoyment without implying any specific action. The accusation of the older brother concerning prostitutes (vs 30) is not incongruous with this phrase and would be understood by Sindhi readers to be likely, but not necessary. Thus, they would tend to regard the older brother’s speculation, which went beyond the facts presented, as a correct description and reasonable assumption.

Verse 14

“He began to be in need (Gk. *ērksato hustereisthai*).” This was translated using a common Sindhi idiom, “*bukh marana laggO*” (he began to die of hunger). This has stronger implications than the original and it narrows the “need” to concerns about hunger. Nonetheless, hunger is the primary focus in the passage and the use of the phrase does capture the pathos of the situation in a natural way. The idiom is repeated in verse 17, “but here I am dying of hunger! (Gk. *egō de limō hōde apollumai*),” where it more closely matches the original sentence in terms of emotional impact.

⁴⁵⁴ The NRSV (1997) is used in this section as a more formally equivalent translation and thus better suited for an exegetical analysis of the Greek words and phrases. The remainder of the thesis uses the TNIV (2005) unless otherwise noted.

Verse 15

“So he went (Gk. *poreutheis*)” This word indicates a “change of place and, implicitly, of situation” (Reiling & Swellengrebel 1971). The impact of this word is lessened in Sindhi with the formal translation “*so hu... vayo.*” The verb in this sentence has no impact beyond indicating that action occurred.

A critical term for the meaning of the parable is *nokar*, one of the Sindhi words used for “employed servant.” This is the word used to translate “he hired himself out (Gk. *kollaomai*)” in verse 15, “hired hand (Gk. *mithios*)” in verses 17 and 19, “slave (Gk. *doulos*)” in verses 22, and “slave (Gk. *pais*)” in verse 26. *Pais* and *doulos* are synonymous for servant or slave (Marshall 1978). In verse 29 the word “slave (Gk. *doulos*)” appears again, but in the Sindhi *bbAnO* (servant) is used to capture the emotion of the older son’s objection, a word that has a respectful connotation of total dedication – a prophet is considered God’s *bbAno*. *Nokar* refers to a paid employee, whether the person works privately, in a company, or for the government. It can also be used pejoratively meaning that a person is serving for selfish or ulterior motives, which is why *bbAnO* in vs 29 is required. The older son is indicating that his service to his father has been pure and this usage is natural and impacting to Sindhi ears. The implication is that one is totally committed to the good of the one being served, with no thought of reward.

Nokar works well in verse 15. The intent of the original is to indicate “comparable relationships that come close to serfdom or peonage” (Reiling & Swellengrebel 1971). The point of the phrase is to indicate the dependency of the son on the citizen. In Sindhi culture this has implications of responsibility for the *citizen* towards the son, so much so that the citizen would be viewed as cruel and irresponsible in not fulfilling the obligations of an employer. This is reflected in Rohrbaugh’s (1997:154) understanding, “The younger son... seeks aid by becoming the client of a local patron.” Whether or not there was an implied responsibility on the part of the citizen, or if that is just the Sindhi perspective, the main point is communicated that the son is in dire straits and dependent.

The use of *nokar* in the son’s speech in verses 17 and 19 is an unfortunate translation and requires correction. The Sindhi currently implies that the son is asking for status and obligation on the part of the father. Although it is a far lower status, he is still, in the mind of the Sindhi reader, asking to be part of the household. Although he would not have “son rights,” he would still gain “servant rights.” But, scholarship indicates that he is asking to be a hired worker (Marshall 1978). He is asking for the opportunity to earn a daily wage, but *with no status or rights*. In Sindhi, a

better term is *mazdoor* which refers to a daily laborer⁴⁵⁵ who is dependent upon the grace of the landowner to give him opportunity to work and be paid a living wage, but there is no security for the worker or obligation on the part of the master beyond pay for work done.⁴⁵⁶ In contrast, the use of *nokar* in verses 22 and 26 is natural and fitting, referring to the household servants or slaves.

The emotional reaction to “pigs (Gk. *choirous*)” for Sindhis would parallel the feelings of the original hearers. The Sindhi term, *suar*, refers to both the wild and domesticated animal. While some Sindhis will drink alcohol and engage in other vices, there is a general feeling of disgust for pig meat, which spills over to feelings towards the living animal as well.

Verse 16

“Carob pods (Gk. *keration*)” are not known in the Sindh, so the translation uses “*suaran vArO khado*” (pig food). The meaning is less specific than the original, and it conjures up more unsanitary pictures of pigs scrounging to eat anything.

“No one gave him anything (Gk. *oudeis edidou autō*).” The Sindhi connects the giving to the pig food: “*ahO bi kahan na ThE ddinas*” (no one would give to him *even* this). This rendering is closer to the original meaning that nobody gave him “anything from the carob pods” (Reiling & Swellengrebel 1971).

Verse 18

“Father (Gk. *pater*)” (cf. verse 21). In the son’s prepared speech, this has been translated as “*Eh, bAbA*” (O Father), an affectionate and intimate term for father. While it is the same Greek word in the previous line – “I will... go to my father” – the descriptive “*piu*” (father) is used. Although “*bAbA*” indicates an intimate relationship, something to which the son no longer believes he has a right, this is the only term that would be natural and appropriate in order to show respect. In Sindhi the word can be used as a term of respect for any older gentleman with an emotional impact that fits the situation.

⁴⁵⁵ This change to the Sindhi translation of verse 19 was made post-interviews.

⁴⁵⁶ Keller (2008:21) believes this phrase indicates a desire on the part of the son to earn money in order to pay back what he had wasted. This is an unlikely scenario, since a laborer would be incapable of earning that kind of money. This idea comes more from a Western, pioneering, democratic system in which equality of opportunity is a high value. Alternatively, Keller may also be making a theological point about the Western hubris that we can redeem ourselves. Nonetheless, most likely the son’s intention is to be self-sufficient and thus care for himself through his own labors, rather than being a burden to the father (cf. Bailey 1983 [1976]:205-206).

“I have sinned (Gk. *hēmarton*).” The verb has been translated as a noun in Sindhi: “*Au... ddohari Ahian*” (I am the one who has committed offence of...). Even though the focus is on the *person*, rather than the *sin*, the phrases are equivalent in meaning. The Sindhi word used is *ddoh* (offense, crime) rather than *gunAh* (sin against God). Even though it is clear that the son recognizes his sin against God, the juxtaposition of the father with God requires the use of *ddoh* to reflect the story setting.

The euphemistic “heaven (Gk. *ouranon*)” has been made explicit with the Sindhi “*khuda*” (God).

Verse 19

“... treat me like (Gk. *poiēson* = make me)” is rendered in Sindhi as “*samjhi bEhArEo*” (understand me to be and cause me to stand/be established). This Sindhi idiom focuses on the authority and will of the Father. The RSV with “treat me” does not capture this aspect of the power of the father’s declaration to create the reality. The Sindhi emphasizes an absolute dependence upon the father to build up and establish.

Verse 20

“... filled with compassion (Gk. *esplagchnisthē*)” is translated as “*kahal*” (pity or compassion). This word conveys the idea of being impacted by someone in distress and wanting to reach out and help. This is the same word used for the good Samaritan who sees the man who was attacked by robbers (Lk 10:33) and also for Jesus when he meets the funeral procession at Nain (Lk 7:13). The reaction is, therefore, connected not to the son’s return, but to the son’s *condition of suffering* upon his return. This matches the desire of the main characters in the other two parables of chapter 15 to rescue and restore even before there is an expression of repentance. The implication is that the initiative for restoration for the latter parable also lies with the father (Marshall 1978). However, this parallel with the other parables would not be recognized by the interview participants since only the last parable was read.

“He ran (Gk. *dramōn*).” Bailey (1983 [1976]:181, cf. Snodgrass 2008:126) explains that this action would be “humiliating” for the father. However, this would have little or no impact for the Sindhi hearer. The impact of the verse is found in the way the father greets the son, “he... put his arms around him and kissed him (Gk. *epepesen epi ton tachēlon autou kai katēphīlēsen auton*).” Such a greeting between men, or fathers and sons, is common in Sindhi culture when a loved one has not been seen for some time.

Verse 22

The “best robe... ring... sandals (Gk. *stolēn tēn prōtēn... daktulion... hupodēmata*)” in Sindhi – *suThE may suThO vaggO... munDri... jutI* – would be understood as signs of status, honor and authority as well as a public demonstration of “his re-integration into the family” (Rohrbaugh 1997:157). At the same time, for the Sindhi reader, these symbols would have an even greater impact as expressions of love, compassion and restoration.

Verse 23

“... the fatted calf (Gk. *ton moschon ton siteuton*)” (cf. verses 27, 30). In Sindhi culture *vaddO gOshT* (the meat of large cattle) is not considered special and would usually not be served to guests. *NanDhO gOshT* (goat or lamb) is considered suitable for guests. This presents a translation difficulty. The father orders the calf, *vaddO gOshT*, to be slaughtered, while in verse 29 the older son complained that he did not get a goat – “cheap as compared with the fatted calf” (Reiling & Swellengrebel 1971). For the Sindhi, it is the goat meat that is considered special. The Sindhi version read out to the participants had “*mataro vahRo*” (healthy calf). This was strengthened post-interviews with the idiom “*thulhu mataro vahRo*” (fat and healthy calf) to stress the grooming of the calf for a special meal. In verse 29 the Sindhi reads “*chelO bi na ddinO*” (not even a goat) which indicates that the older brother considers such a gift insignificant. The practice of fattening up an animal for slaughter is a well-known custom among Sindhis. Leading up to the Muslim holiday, *Eid al-Adha*, some families in the Sindh will bring a sheep or goat into their home and care for it so that it is fat and healthy for the holiday. Because the animal has become a part of the family, the significance of the sacrifice is felt deeply.

“... eat and celebrate (Gk. *phagontes euphranthōmen*).” This description fits well with Sindhi culture. Celebration requires feasting. Congratulations given to the father by those at the celebration (Bailey 1992:180-181) would be entirely appropriate in the Sindhi mind.

Verse 24

“... dead... alive... lost... found (Gk. *nekros... anezēzin... apolōlōs... heurethē*).” The intention of the original is for these terms to be understood metaphorically. This is not a problem for Sindhis who are used to metaphorical language in their poetry and stories. The Sindhi equivalents in the translation – “... *marI... jEarO... gUm... milEo*” – are also used for the physical condition of people, but are here understood metaphorically.

Verse 25

“in the field (Gk. *en agrō*).” The son was presumably working and this would be the understanding of the Sindhi reader. Sindhi culture is largely agricultural and even for city dwellers the roots of their culture are found in the land.

“... music and dancing (Gk. *sumphōnias kai chorōn*).” This is also an important part of Sindhi celebratory customs that they would fully understand. The Sindhi idiom used to translate this phrase even has a poetic cadence: “*ggairana vajjairna*.”

Verse 28

The Sindhi version used in the interviews rendered “began to plead with him (Gk. *parekalei auton*)” as “*achI samjhAIIns*.” (came and explained to him). “Explained” has the force of “reasoned with him” or “convinced him.” The original has a stronger emotional impact as represented by words such as “entreated” or “begged” or “coaxed” (Reiling & Swellengrebel 1971). The Sindhi is nonetheless idiomatically correct with the emotion implied rather than explicitly represented. However, the use of the past tense was unfortunate because it implies that the father *did* manage to convince the son. The Sindhi Bible translation was changed⁴⁵⁷ post-interviews to “*samjhAIrna laggO*” (began to explain to him) so that the reader would understand that this only describes the father’s attempt. The son’s ultimate response to the father has been left indeterminate by the story teller (Bailey 1983 [1976]:191).

Verse 29

The older son addresses his father with a curt “Listen! (Gk. *idou*).” The rudeness is not lost on the Sindhi ear, which is rendered with “*ddisO*” (Look!), the equivalent Sindhi interjection. The son does not begin with “*Eh bAbA!*” (O Father!), and the absence of the polite form of address used by a younger person speaking to an older man is stark.

“I have been working like a slave for you (Gk. *douleuō soi*).”⁴⁵⁸ The Sindhi “*Au avhAn jO bbadhO bbAnO rahEO AhEAn*” (I have been remaining as your bond servant) could be misunderstood as a literal, rather than metaphorical, statement. After the research was completed this was changed to “*Au hik bbAnE vAngar avhAn jI khidmat rahEO AhEAn*” (I have continued to serve you like a servant). As mentioned in the consideration of verse 15, the word, “*bbAnO*,” used

⁴⁵⁷ This was changed as part of the current review of the translation that is taking place.

⁴⁵⁸ The NRSV translation is poor in this instance because the English idiom misrepresents the force of the original. The son’s point is not the strenuous effort he expended (the meaning of the English idiom), but his consistent loyalty in serving.

for “servant” is that of a dedicated, selfless volunteer worker whose motivation is service, not financial remuneration. In the change made, this understanding has been strengthened with the additional word “*khidmat*” (serve), which also refers to working for the benefit of another with no thought of reward. While Marshall (1978) interprets this as a complaint concerning his status, i.e., “I am nothing but a slave,” the Sindhi reader would see this rather as an expression of faithful service and a rejoinder that is fitting to the situation.

“I have never disobeyed your command (Gk. *entolēn*).” The Sindhi has made “command” implicit with “*kaddahan bi avhAn jI nAfarmAni na kayee atham*” (I have never been disobedient to you). This broadens the meaning beyond following the commands of the father to conforming his life to the father’s will and desire. This distinction is further developed in the analysis of the interviews because it affected the participants’ responses.

The son’s description of eating the goat with his friends as “*mojUn*” (celebrate) is noticeably more subdued than the more effusive word, “*khushiUn*” (celebrate), used by the father to describe the party held for the younger son. This emphasizes the contrast between the two events.

Verse 30

“But... this son of yours (Gk. *ho huios sou houtos*)” is constructed in the Sindhi version to emphasize a contrast between the sons, “*para avhAn jO he puT*” (But *this* son of yours). While this could be understood as contempt in the original text (Reiling & Swellengrebel 1971), for the Sindhi hearers it would more likely be interpreted as an acknowledgement of similar status, albeit with a stark contrast in mind (i.e., this unfaithful son, rather than me).

“... who has devoured your property with prostitutes (Gk. *ho kataphagōn sou ton bion meta pornōn*)” is translated as “*jahan ranDian may avhAn ji milkeat uddae chaddee*” (who threw away your property with prostitutes). In the Sindhi language some terms are considered “naked” and for propriety sake should not be uttered before children or unmarried women. If this ever occurs, girls blush and feel awkward and the person who spoke the term may be rebuked. These words were generally avoided in the Sindhi translation so that it would be more acceptable to a Sindhi audience. However, because of the harshness of the son’s accusation, the word used for prostitute is more “naked” than generally used in the Sindhi version of the Bible. It is only used here, and in other places softer, more euphemistic terms are used.

Verse 32

“... this brother of yours (Gk. *ho adelphos sou houtos*)” has been understood as a rebuke to the older brother’s implied rejection of the younger in verse 30 (Reiling & Swellengrebel 1971) or as an “invitation to restoration” (Green 1997). Although somewhat obscure in Sindhi, a facet of this dynamic would be evident through the Sindhi phrase, “*tuhanjo bhau*” (your brother). A reference to “your brother” rather than “my son” on the part of the father stresses the brothers’ relationship to each other.

8.5 Teleology

Following Kritzinger’s (2010:4-5) concern that missiologists clarify the goals and purpose of their research, a description of the intended audience of this thesis is provided. If, as argued above,⁴⁵⁹ truth is intersubjective and relational so that it must be discovered within an interpretive community, then the arguments and conclusions presented in this thesis must be considered within the context of an ongoing dialogue. The research question finds its definition and worth from real life interactions and any significance in what is discovered and evaluated requires validation from those who would benefit from, or at least be challenged by, the thesis and investigation. As the author I cannot control who will read or be impacted by what is offered, but the perpetual presence of an imagined audience in my mind affects the priorities and chosen content.⁴⁶⁰ In the first instance, I affirm with Kritzinger (2010:5) the general *telos* that “missiological research should serve the witness of churches, enhance the credibility and effectiveness of the Christian message, deepen the commitment of Christians to justice and the integrity of creation.” Specifically, I briefly outline the *who*, the *impact*, the *what* and the *posture* that constitute the parameters of the *telos* for this thesis.

The *who*. This thesis is directed in the first place towards the community of academic missiologists, those who wrestle with the questions of missiology – how the church is to be involved in the *missio Dei*. Secondly, evangelical missionaries are addressed, those who are engaged in cross-cultural ministry with the desire to see people become followers of Christ and live lives transformed by the gospel. The strength of the evangelical to ensure that the gospel message is heard and understood at a cognitive level is often coupled with a weakness of

⁴⁵⁹ See 7.6.

⁴⁶⁰ This scenario parallels a guiding principle of the meaning-based Sindhi Bible translation in which the translation team envisions the ideal reader as a Muslim Sindhi with a sixth grade education.

insufficient attention to the impact made. The hope is that cross-cultural evangelical change agents will become more capable of reflecting upon the purpose and impact of their actions as measured by awareness of the emerging theological praxis of those to whom they are ministering.

The *impact*: The dialogical methodology for the identification of emerging theologies will hopefully be accepted and promoted by other missiologists as well as stimulate practitioners towards greater sensitivity and skill in attending to the theological development of others. As expressed by RM Brown (1978:25), “Our initial theological task is to take these voices seriously.” Brown is speaking about the oppressed who “have been denied a voice and have been without hope.” I am expanding that application to all those among whom cross-cultural missionaries of the gospel minister. The views of the recipients of a Bible translation are seldom considered as significant and relevant contributions at an academic level and this methodology adds that dimension. If the conclusions of this thesis are realized through an increased attentiveness to the theological trajectories of others, the effort will have been worthwhile.

The *what*: The identification and validation of emerging theologies, particularly as they are listened to and engaged with in constructive dialogue, is the content of the *telos*. The methodology used to listen to emerging theologies is employed as the *means*, but the *end* is the affirmation, stimulation and generation of emerging theologies as people are called to engage God’s Word.

The *posture*: This thesis is presented as an example and an invitation. It is an example of how I, as a missionary, presented God’s Word to others and listened to their contextually shaped interpretations that revealed emerging theological trajectories. It is also an invitation for others involved in similar ministries to engage in dialogue with those who are impacted by God’s word in order to experience a comparable journey of discovery.

8.6 Summary

Chapters 5–8 provide the theoretical framework and background for the research presented in the following chapters. Key definitions (chapter 5) were followed by anthropological (chapter 6), theological and epistemological (chapter 7) and hermeneutical and translation (chapter 8) assumptions. A key concept is the faith–text–context triangle that represents the three dialectical tensions – faith–text, faith–context and text–context – being studied in order to identify theological trajectories.

Chapter 8 views communication as a covenant between interlocutors. Meaning lies in the

minds of speaker and hearer and the transfer of the message occurs through semiotic and social dynamics. The principles of communication theory are applied to the faith–text tension in terms of how the text “reads” us, as well as to the dynamics of Bible translation. Three separate interpretive stages for the biblical message are identified – translation, theological development and mapping – which have corresponding hermeneutical stances. As believers theologize “in front of the translated text,” the researcher attempts to interpret or “map” their theological development. The dialogical dynamic of theological development takes place as an application of the “hermeneutical spiral” within Christian community. Mapping theological trajectories is described as a hermeneutical process; the researcher evaluates expressions of the believers’ faith as they interact with the biblical text and identifies their perspective of God in contrast to traditional faith stances. The chapter concludes with an exegetical overview of the Parable of the Two Lost Sons presented in the interviews, as well as a few teleological considerations.

The following chapters deal with the results from the research. Chapter 9 identifies the culture texts from the interviews and sorts the data into themes. The data from the believer group is examined separately from the traditional group, although both sets of culture texts are evaluated according to common criteria.

CHAPTER 9. Analysis of Interviews

The analysis is divided into three distinct steps that build on each other. In the first step, the thrust of this chapter, culture texts are identified from the raw data of the transcripts and organized into theological themes. The focus is on the *commonality* of the relevant data between the believer and traditional groups. The sorting of the data takes into account the validity and reliability of the data and uses specific criteria to verify conformity with the research question. In chapter 10 data from the believers' focus group are *compared to and contrasted with* those of the traditional focus group for each theme in order to identify theological trajectories. The final step is an application of Kritzinger's (2010) praxis matrix as an interpretive framework for the purpose of determining the breadth and depth of the identified trajectory.

A critical realist assumption guides the analytical process based on the claim that "all truth is known only from a given perspective" (Van Gelder 1996b:120). The "truth" for the participants refers to the biblical text⁴⁶¹ with final and full authority as the inspired record of God in human history (Hiebert 1994:29), which is accepted as sacred by all participants and viewed as God's authoritative revelation by Sindhi believers. The "truth" for the researcher is the responses of the participants to a presented text of scripture (Luke 15:11-32), responses that are only partly accessible, but that provide insight into the way they view the world and the relationship of God to their lives. The participants have a grid of reality (faith), which both shapes their understanding of the text and is simultaneously being shaped as they engage the text and interact with others in the interview setting. Access to their faith and theological development comes through an analysis of those responses. Therefore "we have to use adjectives such as *contextual, perspectival, and interpreted* to define both the process by which we come to know and the content that we learn," thus shifting the discussion from epistemology to hermeneutics (Van Gelder 1996b:134). The analysis of the data generated from interaction with Sindhis is interpretive and purposeful towards answering the research question. As analyst I seek understanding and draw conclusions for the purpose of developing greater relevance and impact in future engagement with Sindhis.

9.1 Process of Categorization

It is neither the recorded interviews nor the translated transcripts that constitute the data. The data are the culture texts generated by the participants through interaction with the parable. Through

⁴⁶¹ This is, of course, relative to the participants' perspective since the text has been shaped through a translation process based on a particular hermeneutic. See 8.2.3.

the conversation dynamic of the interview process, the participants verbalize the resonance they perceive between the text and their faith. This verbalization of values and beliefs in forms that communicate to other Sindhis are the culture texts that make up the primary data. The culture texts from the transcripts are presented with interpretation and analysis clustered under thematic headings.

This concept of discovering “themes” in a cultural setting follows Fitzpatrick, Secrest & Wright (1998:22) who speak of “themes in what people do, say, and report as their experience.” It corresponds to Schreier’s (1985:41) “valid descriptions” which are “affirmed as true by a significant segment of the culture itself, and... understood by a significant number of persons from other cultures.” In a similar vein, Bailey (1983 [1980]:xiv) considers “variations on a theme” in the development of a musical analogy in which both the story teller and the hearer “tune in” to the same theme, a theme communicated within culturally recognized parameters. Luzbetak (1970:159-160) follows a similar process in his use of Opler’s theme theory to outline inquiries that can be used to “dig out” cultural themes. Similarly, for this study, the goal is to draw out themes through an analysis of Sindhi culture from “the viewpoint of its people, not by imposing themes on a culture from without” (Hiebert 2008:22).

9.1.1 Identifying Data from the Interview Transcripts

Interpretation and analysis of the data begins with the identification of culture texts. The criteria to facilitate this must be broad enough for a true reflection of the participants’ faith expressions as they engage the text, while establishing sufficient parameters so that the research question is addressed. Because “raw data have no inherent meaning” (Marshall & Rossman 1999:153), the initial stage of data analysis is to

isolate specific items or elements, patterns, and structures (or relationships among patterns in the data) that are related to the research questions.... [Items] that stand out because they occur often, because they are crucial to other items, because they are rare and influential or because they are totally absent despite the researcher’s expectations (LeCompte & Schensul 1999:150).

In this analysis, “items or elements, patterns, and structures” are limited to the relevant culture texts generated from the interviews. These are derived from the dialogue recorded in the transcripts “including its form and sequence, or the literal substance” (Mason 1996:54). Despite the “literal” nature of the dialogue, the choosing and analysis of these culture texts from the transcripts involve interpretive and reflexive elements. Culture texts reveal the participants’

personal reasons for the impact of the passage as expressed through cultural forms, but this is only obtained as data through my own “interface with the interaction” (reflexive) and the attempt to “read” the interviews for what I believe they mean (interpretive) (Mason 1996:54, 2002:78). Ultimately, it is the latter, interpretive, approach to the data that is of primary importance as I read “through or beyond the data” (Mason 1996:109, 2002:149) to discern the way the culture texts reveal the participants’ interpretations and understandings of God’s relationship with the world as stimulated through interaction with the scripture passage.

There are four *clustering* criteria⁴⁶² that guide the researcher in identifying culture texts and sorting them into themes so that the subjective element is minimized and trustworthy conclusions are reached. Each culture text must demonstrate a connection to (1) a theme common to both the traditional and believers’ focus groups, (2) a textual referent, (3) a faith referent, and (4) a cultural referent.

Common theme. For a culture text to be considered data, it must be relevant to a theme addressed by both the traditional group and the believers. Since the goal is to identify theological *trajectories*, there must be evidence of a common theological concern in order to “map” a deviation. The similarities of culture texts within both groups indicate the themes; the differences are evidence of theological deviation. That is, a theological shift or trajectory is identified by those contrasting culture texts that are expressed with respect to a theme common to both groups and thereby indicate a new focus or a changed priority.

Textual referent. The point of the research is to evaluate the responses of participants to the presentation of a text of scripture, in particular, the way believers allow God to speak authoritatively to them through the parable. Therefore, any comment must have a referent in the parable in order to be included as data. If a culture text generated by the discussion has no corresponding textual referent, it is discounted. The textual referent does not need to be explicitly mentioned but the connection must be obvious. Identified themes are more likely to emerge out of comments addressing the same textual referent, and this facilitates a natural grouping of culture texts according to theme and referent.

Faith referent. Culture texts of interest reflect the participants’ faith (worldview, belief and values). These may be given in the form of faith statements, narratives or personal experiences that illustrate their commitment to their relationship with God or a reflection upon the

⁴⁶² In my (Naylor 2004:53) Masters dissertation, only two of the four criteria were used to group culture texts, a textual referent and a corresponding theme.

nature of God.

Cultural referent. Culture texts must reflect a perspective beyond that of the individual to include the contextual assumptions of others within the community. The recognition of ideas or concepts common to Sindhi society is accomplished in few ways. First, the repetition of equivalent expressions or concepts in more than one interview points to a theme that goes beyond the individual. Second, the variety of *genres* used by one or more participants to communicate similar thoughts helps identify common expressions or ideas and indicates how deeply such ideas are rooted within Sindhi culture. The greater the variety of genres used to develop a thought, provide detail or reveal other dimensions of a topic, the greater the evidence that it is a significant part of the community. Third, a culture text that reflects aspects of the Sindhi context that can be validated through outside confirmation can be considered a legitimate part of Sindhi society even if noted by only one participant. This latter confirmation relies largely upon my experience of living in the culture.

9.1.2.1 Genre

Genre can be defined as "clearly demarked types of utterance" (Wardhaugh 2002:248). The generated culture texts are classified into the six distinct genres outlined in my (Naylor 2004:54) Masters dissertation – *explanations, traditional stories, personal narratives, metaphors, common sayings* and *dialogue* – plus an additional one, *poetry*. Two of the categories have been made more inclusive: *traditional stories* now includes traditional quotations, and *metaphors* has been changed to *illustrations* to indicate a variety of images including metaphors. While a brief description of each genre is provided in this section, illustrations of the genres, along with explanations of how they are used to identify and explicate the themes, are part of the rationale for the sorted data.⁴⁶³

9.1.2.1.1 Explanation

In response to pre-set questions, participants usually began by *explaining* what they heard in their own words. Implicit or explicit values, beliefs or priorities from Sindhi culture were used to describe an aspect of the parable. Even if some statements exhibited a less than clear connection to the Sindhi context, their relationship to other identified culture texts revealed further details beyond what was evident when considered alone. Of particular interest were statements that interpreted the meaning of the parable according to their perceptions about God.

⁴⁶³ The data is sorted in 9.2.

If a participant's explanation conflicted with other culture texts, that dissonance was explored through dialogue to stimulate further insight and clarification. Strict consistency is not necessarily a virtue when considering cultural values. There will be a variety of opinions, beliefs and perspectives within any cultural context. Furthermore, since the research goal is dependent upon contrasts between the believer and traditional group's explanations, there was particular sensitivity to differing views.

9.1.2.1.2 Traditional Stories or Quotations

In order to illustrate a particular teaching or value identified in the passage, participants occasionally told a traditional story or provided a, usually religious, quotation. Some of these were core stories, the "mythos" referred to by Armstrong (2000:xiii), that define the participants' identity or influence their values and priorities. Because such culture texts point to cultural pillars that bring stability and orientation to their lives, the stories and quotations connected those deeply felt values to what the participants perceived to be significant in the text.

9.1.2.1.3 Personal narratives

Personal narratives are those culture texts that relate an event or practice from a participant's life for the purpose of illustrating a value or belief drawn from the parable. The revelation of a participant's perspectives on life through those vignettes that are significant for them helps identify the way that value or belief has impact within society. Of particular interest were those narratives that described an ongoing personal or communal orientation to God.

9.1.2.1.4 Illustrations

The genre *illustrations* includes metaphors, similes and non-personal examples from Sindhi life to express a particular concept. When repeating events from the parable (*explanations*), the speaker references objects, relationships and experiences within the Sindhi context to illustrate the point. This category can also include descriptions of life in other countries and times even if they are not part of the Sindhi context, as long as it reflects the *local perspective* of the speaker when judging a practice based on a local value. For example, NN in Interview 10B noted that people of other countries eat pig meat. The implied condemnation of that practice reveals a *local perspective* of the speaker.

9.1.2.1.5 Common Sayings

Common sayings are familiar idioms that reflect a value or belief of Sindhi culture. This is distinct from *quotations* since they do not have an authoritative basis but reveal their worldview assumptions through “common sense” expressions of the culture.

9.1.2.1.6 Dialogue

When exploring a particular understanding from the parable, or to develop a theme further, or if there was disagreement, participants would engage in dialogue that challenged or clarified each other’s statements. This interactive dimension warrants a separate genre, although the content of the discussion overlapped with other culture text genres. There were also times when, in my role as researcher, I required further clarification or sensed that further development of a particular statement would be useful. The intent was not to add my view to the participant’s comment; instead, I would question them to elicit further clarification. Because the point of dialogue is the interaction between two or more individuals, this part of the data includes my contribution in shaping the interaction and thus the direction of the discussion.

9.1.2.1.7 Poetry

Religious poetry of Sufi reflection and meditation is highly esteemed in the Sindh.⁴⁶⁴ Poetry allows for an expression of emotion and values that strikes to the heart of Sindhi culture. If a person quotes one of the ancient poets in support of a particular point, their argument gains respect. Unfortunately, the impact of poetry is usually coupled with an enigmatic vagueness concerning the meaning of the passage quoted. At least part of the reason for this must be attributed to the reality that poetry does not facilitate logical thinking, but expresses a depth of feeling that cannot find utterance in ordinary discourse. However, since the poetry is generally quoted as support for a particular opinion, the intent of the speaker is often clear and the poetry serves, not as clarification, but as emphatic support.

9.1.2.2 Culture Texts Rejected as Data

During the interviews culture texts were generated that did not facilitate the research question or did not conform to the parameters of the methodology, including a lack of conformity to any one of the four clustering criteria. Culture texts rejected as data fall under three categories:

⁴⁶⁴ The impact of poetry in the Sindh is described in 4.2.2.2.1.

undue influence from the researcher, irrelevant comments and unhelpful deviations.⁴⁶⁵

9.1.2.2.1 Undue Influence

When trying to elicit responses and participants seemed confused or reluctant to respond, I would occasionally go beyond repeating their answers or asking about the text and inserted my thoughts into the discussion. This was unfortunate and unhelpful because it directed participants away from engaging the text to engaging my perspective, thereby invalidating their response. For example (M = researcher),

Interview 3B Hyderabad

M: I have a theory. In the way people understand God to be, so they will act. It will reflect their view of God.

N: What is the relationship to God?

M: If someone thinks God will give punishment and call to account, they will also. If they believe God will forgive, they will forgive. What do you think? Have you seen this in your life? Have you seen an impact upon you in this way.

N: Sort of. If I understand you. That is, will my treatment of others reflect the way I recognize/view God?

M: Yes, has the way you recognized God changed the way you treat people?

N: Yes. This example I gave you of my child....

9.1.2.2.2 Irrelevant Comments

The second category of culture texts considered invalid as data are those comments which failed to conform to the key criterion of demonstrating a connection to a textual referent. The following two examples, while demonstrating an expression of values, do not meet this criterion. In the first example, an explanation of a traditional story is provided, but the conversation has moved away from interaction with the passage. In the second example, the personal narrative did not come from an explanation of the passage, but as an illustration of a particular belief the speaker has about God's blessing upon him personally.

Interview 2T Hyderabad

LL: Then if humanity with or without knowing does evil and becomes [parjanya?=aware of this], and if after this he asks for forgiveness, [and says] "please forgive me," then God considers him in such [a position?] as if he has done worship. This is my [experience?]

⁴⁶⁵ My (Naylor 2004:57) Masters dissertation included "misunderstanding the narrative" as one of the reasons for rejecting culture texts as data. However, for this research project, misinterpretations are also helpful since the research question has different parameters. The goal is to discover the theological interaction that Sindhis have with scripture "in front of the translated text." For example, even though it is unlikely that the original intent was that the inheritance was divided equally between the two sons, this interpretation by several participants facilitated the exploration of God's character as just.

M: I didn't understand that last part.

LL: The angels were upset that humans were given more authority than them. They said, These humans will commit murder on earth. This is not right. [God said to the angels] I have given them a place above all creatures. And what they can do, you cannot. They can obey completely or not. They have authority. Angels must obey.

Interview 6B Hyderabad

R: God has not given me trouble or my parents or brothers. Rather he encouraged us with work we can do. Even as I said concerning our store. From the beginning we are able to feed each other. Now we have about 2-3000 customers. This is the first step, that we should work, show effort. And from this God is happy that we do work and in the work we are honest, no deception. What is the right price, that is the amount we charge. That's it. "No, please give it for less." "No, this is the price." Then we have an agreement in which there is not deception.

M: So where there is no deception, God is happy.

R: God is happy.

9.1.2.2.3 Unhelpful Deviations from the Topic

Sindhi Muslims are sensitive to theological controversies between Christians and Muslims. Disagreements that developed *from the passage* were, of course, encouraged and noted. However, the participants of the traditional group would occasionally be distracted from the topic if they thought some aspect of Islam needed to be clarified or defended. As noted in my (Naylor 2004:58) Masters dissertation,

Any expression that may contradict... theological concerns is addressed with commonly accepted and oft repeated religious teaching and rationale. The reason for this tendency is quite complex relating to a desire to defend the honor of their religion, a need to demonstrate the superiority of Islam and a sense of fulfilling the duty of a true Muslim. The degree to which any particular religious issue actually touches their worldview... is difficult to determine. Although many evangelical missionaries tend to engage Muslims on these issues, the discussions usually are on the level of logical arguments based on conflicting assumptions and are thus seldom fruitful. Furthermore, because the motives for defending these theological premises are complex, the relationship of the argument to the speaker's core values and beliefs is unclear... [whereas the research] goal is not to engage the people at a propositional, logical level, but to discover [their] core values and beliefs....

For example, in interview 2T, in asking for a response from the passage in terms of the nature of God, I carelessly used the phrase "what kind of God..." translating an English idiom that has a different nuance in Sindhi. Instead of responding to the passage, the participant immediately addressed the theological implication that contradicted a key precept of Islam.

LL: There are no "kinds" of God. God is one.

...

LL: God is God. There is no one else but God. Nature is one thing, "kinds" is another.

There are no “kinds” of God like in Hinduism. They have many different gods who do different works. In Islam we have one belief, that God is one.

Another question that was occasionally raised by the participants was the validity of the text as God’s Word. Because the research concern focuses on interaction *with* the text as presented, rather than a *meta*-discussion about the nature of the text, such comments were disregarded as data. For example,

LL: We have heard that [the New Testament] has been greatly modified. The original *Injil* is very different. We have the Qur’an, its translation, its Hadith, and we acknowledge the *Injil* and the other sacred books, *Zabur*. These are holy books that have their authority and are OK in their own time. But the Great God has given the Qur’an which shows up those changes, and it has no changes in it at all. No one can change it or twist it. It is evident in the whole world. It can be seen by any person.

Such comments from the traditional focus group stemmed from a perceived need to defend the faith of Islam. Since they were based on assumptions or fears brought to the interview, rather than stemming from interaction with the passage, they were discounted.

9.1.3 Validation of the Assumed Orientation to the Bible as God’s Word

A critical parameter that facilitated the research is the distinction between the believer and traditional groups based on their contrasting orientation towards the Bible.⁴⁶⁶ Believers are committed to shaping their lives according to the divine authority of the biblical text, while those in the traditional group are not. Because this is an *a priori* assumption, identification of this shift as a theological trajectory would be logically circular and self-evident. However, the believers’ orientation towards the Bible can be confirmed from the interviews and validates the assumption.

While all the participants expressed their faith during the interviews as it related to the text, their different orientations shaped their responses. The traditional group used the parable as a platform to explain their beliefs about God, the believers interacted with the passage as God speaking and shaping their belief in the interpretive process. Their understanding of God was not just brought to the interview, but was also modified through interaction with the parable and expressed in a way that related that understanding to their context. They heard the message in familiar cultural forms (the idioms and vocabulary of the Sindhi language in the translated text) processed it in a way that reflected a personal faith commitment (the message is accepted as authoritative for them) and then rephrased it to reflect the relevance and impact of the message on

⁴⁶⁶ See 5.2.

their daily lives. This rephrasing reveals theological trajectories that can be mapped by evaluating the contrasting culture texts of the traditional group.

Four postures of the participants towards the parable are provided in the table below. For the most part, the participants of the traditional group demonstrated respect and reverence for the text. At the same time, they were cautious and skeptical about the reliability of the passage as God's unadulterated word and did not exhibit submission to the message. Even those who did not raise the question of authority approached the passage with a level of uncertainty concerning the status with which it should be viewed. Most of the participants indicated that they were *tolerant* of the passage but it was being judged by their presuppositions, such as DS's (Interview 20T) questioning of the parable's representation of justice. For a few, the judgment was more harsh indicating *intolerance* and rejection of the passage, such as LL's (Interview 2T) dismissal of the implied reference to God as father. Because of their commitment to an agenda of keeping God's attributes superlative and beyond human limitation, the traditional group tended to distance themselves from the parable, as was evident in the oft repeated declaration that God's love was "more than" or "other than" what the parable represented.

In contrast, the believers listened and responded to the parable as a message from God to them. They submitted to the meaning of the parable in order to consider how it might *read* them and inform their actions as an expression of their spiritual commitment. They approached the story with an openness to adjust their categories, perceptions and actions according to the perceived teaching. Contrasts with prior beliefs were entertained and they were open to receive a new word from God or a fresh revelation of God's character.

A third response was from participants, primarily those with a Sufi orientation, who indicated submission to the message but as interpreted according to assumptions that may or may not correspond to the intended meaning. The story was filtered according to their sufistic beliefs.⁴⁶⁷ Rather than a position of *learning from* the text, they read it *as affirmation of* their beliefs but without the reservations of the majority of the traditional group or the openness exhibited by the believers. Thus the loyalty demonstrated was not to the text itself, but to Sufism and the text was a means by which their perspective could be illustrated.

⁴⁶⁷ See 4.2.2.2 for a description of this particular hermeneutic.

Table 8 *Participants' Posture Towards Parable*⁴⁶⁸

		Posture Towards Parable				
Participants			Submissive to intended message of parable	Submissive to personal interpretation of parable	Skeptical or cautious of meaning (<i>tolerant</i>)	Critical or rejection of message (<i>intolerant</i>)
	Believer focus group	Identity as previously Muslim	Yes (all)	(None)	(None)	(None)
		Identity as Muslim	Yes (all)	(None)	(None)	(None)
	Traditional focus group	Oriented towards Sufism	(None)	Yes (all)	(None)	(None)
		Identity with non-sufistic Islam	(None)	Yes (few)	Yes (majority)	Yes (few)

The shaded portion of the table refers to those who participated in the interviews. “Yes” indicates their orientation to the parable. The comments in parentheses indicate the approximate segment of interview participants of each type who exhibited the specified posture. The participants in the traditional group can be divided roughly into two types: those with an orientation towards Sufi thinking and those with a more traditional view of Islam and yet tolerant of those outside of their family who have other religious beliefs.

Another aspect of the interviews that indicated a shift towards the Bible as God’s Word by the believers was their use of biblical images and passages in their comments, revealing that their interpretation is influenced by previous exposure to the Bible. For example, D (Interview 18B) referred to the parable of the lost sheep and A (Interview 19B) mentioned Jesus’ promise of the Holy Spirit. The traditional group tended to quote from the Qur’an or from common Islamic stories or sayings in order to illustrate their meaning. One anomaly was the Sufi follower, IJ in Interview 14T, who paraphrased what was likely a Bible verse and attributed it to the Qur’an. No one contradicted him.

Evidence that the believers trust in and respond to God speaking to them through the Bible was articulated by AG (Interview 8B),

In the morning before breakfast I read out loud to [my wife] from the Bible. At first she would say to me [in amazement] “Are God’s words like that?” Yes, They are true,

⁴⁶⁸ A similar table of Sindhi attitudes towards the authority of the Bible is found in 2.1.1.1. Table 8 outlines the posture of the participants towards the parable during the interviews.

therefore it is written. Many say that it is not true. But they waste their words saying this. People call us “deliberate” [*hoskari* – that is, they have chosen the way of Christ for other motives than following the truth]. But we say that if we are “deliberate” then we would follow Satan! But God’s word is true.

9.1.4 Validity and Reliability of the Data

Validity refers to the accuracy or truthfulness of the data (Silverman 2005:210). It is confirmation that I am truly “observing, identifying or ‘measuring’” (Mason 1996:24)⁴⁶⁹ the data I am reporting and that “what is observed and described really corresponds to something in the world and not just the researcher’s own preconceptions” (Scollon *et al* 2001:18). *Reliability* refers to the claim that other research would discover equivalent data (:18).

9.1.4.1 Validation and Reliability in the Data Collection and Sorting Process

The validity of the data begins with the credibility of the participants. Trust in the suitability of those chosen for the interviews depended upon my prior relationship with many of the participants, as well as upon the contribution of colleagues in Pakistan to make suitable arrangements with people that fit the research criteria.⁴⁷⁰ But it is also the responsibility of the researcher to determine, with as much impartiality and insight as possible, which statements generated should be considered credible and worthwhile. Apart from the four clustering criteria used to *identify* legitimate culture texts and sort them *thematically* there were also four *validating* factors used to ensure the participants’ responses are *contextually* legitimate:

(1) *The culture texts develop the subject (theme)*. There needed to be continuity with and “value added” to the conversation that was taking place for a cultural text to be selected. Occasionally a participant would answer in a way that indicated they were not paying attention, had misunderstood or were promoting a personal agenda that deviated from, rather than enhanced, the exploration of the passage by other participants. When sorting the culture texts according to an identified theme this criterion ensures that the culture text supports and enhances the development of that theme.

(2) *A communication of their own life experiences rather than speculation about others*. Rather than commenting on what others may experience or believe, it was the participants’ articulation of how the passage related to their own life and beliefs that was considered to be valid. This was particularly important when they contradicted ideas that they assumed were held

⁴⁶⁹ Due to the qualitative nature of this study, the term “assess” is preferred over “measure.” The latter term indicates a more quantitative attribute.

⁴⁷⁰ Arrangements for interviews are found in 2.1.1.1.

by others. Although such comments may be beneficial in identifying the speaker's own perspective, the speculation of other's beliefs and values must be discounted.

(3) *Credibility in the relationship of culture texts to their culture.* The intent was to generate an insider's (emic) viewpoint on the passage, which required evidence that a participant's statement actually reflected their cultural frame of reference. Even though the uniqueness of an individual's belief is respected, connection to the broader worldview assumptions of the society validates the statement as a legitimate part of Sindhi culture. As Schreier (1985:41) points out, the demand is not that "members of a culture have enough perspective to describe their own culture objectively and analytically." It is not the participants' *objectivity* that is of interest, but their *subjective* perspective of how God relates to their context. Their comments must demonstrate a logical connection to cultural realities, but conscious consideration of the culture on the part of the participant is not required. In fact, their *unconscious* reference to the Sindhi context provides greater credibility. Rather than an idealistic presentation of Sindhi society, such comments more likely reflect a less biased scenario.

(4) *Positive reinforcement from other participants.* Repetition of ideas and the generation of comparable statements, whether in the same interview or from separate interviews, establishes a level of confidence that the participants have produced credible data. Assessing the reliability of the data according to the extent to which the participants agree with and affirm each other's comments is critical. Scollon *et al* (2001:21) assert that

communication works better the more the participants share assumptions and knowledge about the world. Where two people have very similar histories, backgrounds, and experiences, their communication works fairly easily because the inferences each makes about what the other means will be based on common experience and knowledge. Two people from the same village and the same family are likely to make fewer mistakes in drawing inferences about what the other means than two people from different cities on different sides of the earth.

The research capitalized on this dynamic and maximized the number of interviews and participants in order to gain comparable samples of the group's values and beliefs that would be as accurate as possible. "Repetition in data collection permits individual peculiarities to be noted and avoided and allows the common elements to be pinpointed" (Naylor 2004:46). This facilitates the desire "to understand observed regularities, patterns, commonalities, and/or themes in what people do, say, and report as their experience" (Fitzpatrick *et al* 1998:22).

Validity and reliability are also dependent upon the accuracy of the record of the

participants' responses and the use of a digital recorder was invaluable to revisit the interview.⁴⁷¹ Perhaps the greatest impact upon validity of the data is the intent of the participants to communicate honestly, an aspect that never seemed to be in doubt. Furthermore, my own intention to faithfully and consistently represent the participants' interaction in written form does create confidence that a sufficient and helpful data source has been provided. Reliability is dependent on the ability of the researcher to translate (Mason 1996:24) and although I cannot claim to have represented the data completely or with total accuracy, I attempted to do the work to the best of my ability. My experience in speaking the Sindhi language as well as Bible translation over the last 25 years made this a relatively easy task, with only a few terms or phrases requiring research to be sure of the proper meaning.

9.1.4.2 Triangulation

Scollon *et al* (2001:18) suggest four types of information which “provide a kind of triangulation or cross-checking to provide both reliability... and validity”:

1. Members' generalizations.
2. Neutral (objective) observations.
3. Individual member's experience.
4. Observer's interactions with members.

Because these four types of information are not specific to the research question, they are not sufficient to categorize the data. However, the four clustering criteria and the seven aspects of genre used to group culture texts into themes facilitate to a certain extent the purpose of this “cross-checking” grid. Because the primary concern of the analysis is to identify culture texts that are *theologizing* expressions (what people say they believe), the participants' “generalizations” – their interpretations and explanations which formed a substantial part of the data – can be taken at face value. Whether they are expressing their own belief or merely parroting accepted wisdom without being fully convinced, their statements provide a window onto existing beliefs about God. A deliberate deception is theoretically possible, but unlikely, considering the sacredness of the topic and the nature of the participants. Furthermore, Scollon *et al*'s other three types of information confirm this assumption. For example, the “generalizations” can be corroborated against other “neutral observations,” either through contributions from other participants or through comparison with my own observations about Sindhi culture.

Inconsistencies within these “generalizations” do not necessarily invalidate the data. It is

⁴⁷¹ The strengths and weaknesses of this methodology are considered in 2.1.1.3.4 and 2.1.1.4.2.

the nature of people, language and interpersonal dialogue to contain inconsistencies. In fact, such contradictions can be beneficial and enlightening, because “it is very common for members of groups to state both a general, normative principle of behavior and then to also state an individual departure from that behavior” (Scollon *et al* 2001:19). Moreover, the contrasts at this stage prevent unwarranted extrapolation of one person’s generalization as a representation of a larger group of people. For example, during the time we lived in the Sindh, I remember an acquaintance telling me that the formal form of address is dying out and people should use only the informal form in order to aid the development of a more egalitarian society. Because this was not a trend that I had observed, I curiously asked which form he used with his father. He admitted that he used the formal form of address and said, “That’s different!”

“Individual members’ experiences” (cf. the genre *Personal Narratives*) provide evidence for the explicit faith claims that are made. Personal examples demonstrate that a particular value or belief has moved beyond speculation and opinion and now plays a role in shaping a person’s life, and even beyond the individual to the community since many experiences involve relationship with others.

The final type of information, “Observer’s interactions with members,” refers to a triangulation process in which the conclusions drawn from one source are checked further with those about whom the statements have been made. At an earlier stage in the research, I had planned to include a second set of interviews to assess the results gained from the first interviews. The intention was to cross-check my categorization with some of the believers who were involved in the original interviews in the hope that this (1) would confirm or correct my analysis and further validate the themes and theological trajectories I had identified, (2) elicit additional narratives describing the way these themes reflect the conviction and experience of believers, and (3) demonstrate how the identified themes could be used by an outsider to explore theological shifts among Sindhi people.

The motive was understandable and I organized interviews for this purpose on a return trip to Pakistan in February 2010. However, it quickly became evident that this was not possible and I abandoned the attempt. I realized that I had only verified the warning given by Mason (1996:151, cf. Silverman 2005:212) concerning “respondent validation.” I had hoped to produce evidence for validity “based on the notion that research subjects are in a position to judge and confirm (or otherwise) the validity of the interpretations the researcher has made.” But this proved otherwise. Those I attempted to interview could not relate the previous interaction, done months previously,

to the themes or analysis without considerable explanation, to the point that the exercise was self-defeating. They had not expected the opinions they had expressed in the interviews to be categorized into themes or contrasted to produce “trajectories.” Rather than drawing out further opinions, I was instead educating them on the research and analytical process. This, of course, undermined the purpose of the interviews because they felt obliged to answer within the framework laid out by the researcher and my explanations diverted the conversation away from the desired content. Although interaction with Sindhis concerning the *conclusions* of this study in informal conversation has been stimulating and affirming, it does not facilitate the research aims since a direct correlation with the original interviews and analysis is lacking.

Nonetheless, interaction between participants within the original interviews did function as a triangulation in a limited sense. Contradictions and challenges provided some measure of self-correction, clarification and confirmation. This was helpful not only to identify valid data but also to cluster relevant culture texts into themes.

The number of interviews covering a range of people in different areas of the Sindh also functions as a triangulation because of the comparison and contrast that can be made between similar comments. Similar points raised in more than one interview or affirmed by more than one participant were therefore validated as culture texts or critical *themes*. This partially fulfills Schreiter’s (1985:41) suggested criteria for determining the validity of data, “If the cultural description can be affirmed as true by a significant segment of the culture itself, and can be understood by a significant number of persons from other cultures, then the description can be considered valid.” While the interviews represent only a small sampling of Sindhi perspectives, the similarity of responses would indicate that the culture texts identified are part of the cultural milieu. It is a matter of diligence and integrity to represent those comments in a faithful manner.

9.2 Data sorted according to Theme

Using the four clustering criteria, the culture texts are organized, associated with other culture texts, and linked into higher-order patterns (LeCompte & Schensul 1999:155) that demonstrate a common element or theme. As per the method in my Masters dissertation, the data is organized in a "non-cross-sectional" way (Mason 1996:128).

The goal is to look for the particular elements that indicate an underlying value, rather than quantitatively noting common elements used by more than one person. The data is not sorted according to the types of cultural elements [i.e., culture texts]... Instead the specific units of speech as given by the participants are kept intact as it is not simply the cultural elements individually, but also the relationship between the elements that

provides insight (Naylor 2004:53).

Due to the amount of raw data available, only excerpts necessary to legitimize the clustering process under identified themes are provided. Conformity to the four clustering criteria is demonstrated and the variety of genres illustrated in order to confirm that the data is *thematically* legitimate and the four validating factors are used to show that the data is *contextually* legitimate. The intention is to describe key themes according to the generated culture texts, demonstrate sufficient support for each theme from the data and ensure conformity to the parameters of the research question. The content and details of each theme, including priorities, values, similarities and contrasts are analyzed in the following chapter to identify theological trajectories.⁴⁷²

Each unit of speech is introduced with the participant's initials, including the initial "M" for my questions and comments. All translations from the Sindhi are my own and have not been verified by other sources. The interview number as well as the city in which the interview took place is provided so that the original transcripts can be referenced. Similar to the presentation in my Masters dissertation (Naylor 2004:59-60), the various genres used to express a particular theme are italicized in parentheses according to the following pattern:

Explanations (*expl*)
Personal Narratives (*pers*)
Illustrations (*ill*)
Traditional Stories or Quotations (*trad*)
Common Sayings (*comm*)
Dialogues (*dial*)
Poetry (*poe*)

Because the object of the research is to identify theological shifts that are occurring among believers, culture texts of the traditional group are separate from those of the believers in order to facilitate comparisons and contrasts during the analysis. A transliteration of critical Sindhi words is italicized in square brackets beside the English equivalent. Any cultural nuance vital to the meaning or impact of the comments is made obvious in the translation, while notes in square brackets provide either a clarification or indicate with a question mark uncertainty of the meaning. While not strictly word-for-word, the translation does at times reflect the broken grammar and incomplete sentences that are common in conversation.

Textual referents are translated from the Sindhi passage that served as the presentation in

⁴⁷² A complete record of the interview transcripts as well as the culture texts that were identified as data, sorted by theme and divided according to believer and traditional group interviews are available from the author.

the interviews unless otherwise noted. As with my (Naylor 2004:53) Masters dissertation,

although the referents are given as short phrases and sentences, very often the referent is broad enough to encompass the entire event, or intersects with other referents. Thus the phrases should be understood as *representative* of the referent which elicits the response, rather than as a precise description.

A section entitled, *Explanation of Sindhi terms*, is provided before the description of data clustering for each theme in order to define and discuss the vocabulary used by the participants. Some terms are taken directly from the Sindhi Bible passage, while others are synonyms or a paraphrase that interprets the meaning of the text. The explanations of the Sindhi terms are based on my understanding from years of work among Sindhis and in Sindhi Bible translation.

Theme 1: God is compassionate/kind/merciful/loving beyond our imagination

Explanation of Sindhi terms: As discovered during the translation of the Old Testament into Sindhi, the concepts of love, mercy, kindness and compassion overlap in Sindhi thought in ways that are similar to the Hebrew equivalents, using categories that are somewhat distinct from the common English usage of the words. Due to a different conceptualization in English, some biblical contexts, while using the same Hebrew word, require a variety of English words in order to communicate adequately. The Hebrew concept in Psalm 5:7 of *chesed*, for example, has a broad and inclusive range of nuance that necessitates various English translations depending on the context. The English words “mercy” and “kindness,” often used to translate *chesed*, have quite distinct semantic ranges and require careful and specific use in order to communicate appropriately. As a result some English translations use more than one term, such as “steadfast love” (Ps 5:7 RSV) or “faithful love” (Ps 5:7 NJB) in order to clarify the nuance in English.⁴⁷³ In contrast, some Sindhi words, such as *raham* (mercy/love/kindness), were used in a way that encompassed a broad range of meaning similar to the Hebrew *chesed* concept. Thus, in the translation of the following culture texts, while using a variety of English words, e.g., “love,” “mercy,” “kindness” and “compassion,” these do not necessarily indicate separate and corresponding Sindhi terms; it is the context that determines the word chosen in the transcription to capture the particular emphasis intended by the speaker.

⁴⁷³ Bratcher & Reburn (1991:5.7) state, “in most languages it is difficult to find a single term to express the various components contained in the Hebrew term (*chesed*).”

Traditional group interviews

Conformity to clustering criteria

Common Theme: The belief in God's love for humanity was consistent throughout the interviews. While a few used the familial language of the passage to a limited extent, most preferred to speak of the object of God's love as humanity in general, or to people as God's servants. This love has the dimensions of mercy, grace, kindness and compassion, with the implication that the Almighty is bestowing a great blessing on those who are totally dependent:

Interview 14T Khanpur

BB: He is always merciful [*raham karana vArO*]. He is merciful to all. He is so gracious [*fazal*], that we could never fathom it. Because of this, he is merciful to us and he forgives us (*expl*).

GMA's son: ... when a son returns with a true heart, then God has the character of mercy and grace.

Interview 20T Larkana

BB: When the person who had rebelled returned, then God's kindness came on him...

IJ: Sin is less than the greatness of God's mercy.

Almost without exception, participants expressed God's love as if it is in a category of its own without comparison. It is superlative and indescribable. A few suggested that human examples could give us an idea of God's love, but for the most part people were cautious in making such a statement. In the following example, the participant contrasts the love of a mother (*mumta*) to God's love in order to stress God's great love:

Interview 2T Hyderabad

LL: God loves [*mohabbat*] humanity [*insAn*] to a much greater extent (*expl*). Even if you were to gather together all the mother's love [*mumta*] in the world to a great volume, yet God would say that his love far exceeds that (*ill*).

Another saying repeated a number of times, sometimes with the number 40, sometimes 70, and once 100, stressed the superlative nature of God's love. Others made the same point with a simple contrast similar to the English "more than."

Interview 14T Khanpur

BB: In our practice of faith [*deen*], parents have a great love for their children. But God has love 70 times more than this (*ill, comm*).

Interview 20T Larkana

AB: In comparison to a father, God is more kind [*maharbAn*], 100 times more, way more than a father's (kindness) (*expl*).

IJ: According to my thinking, God is even more kind.

Textual Referent: The textual referent that stimulated the comment on the love of God was the love of the father to the younger son in the parable. This is especially evident in verses 20, 22-24 and 32 – the father celebrates the return of the younger son; the one who was dead is alive, he was lost and is found. Participants did not have difficulty recognizing the implication of the parable concerning God’s love, even by those who resisted the comparison, such as LL in Interview 2T. A few made the reference explicit:

Interview 1T Hyderabad

P: Just as a father will love his son, so God loves his servant (*ill*).

While not equating the father with God nor suggesting that the level of love is the same, P demonstrates his understanding of the parable as illustrative of the love of God.

Faith Referent: The love of God was expressed an essential part of the participants’ worldview and belief. Due to the nature of the parable, most comments focused on the mercy of God in forgiving the repentant sinner. However, some of the comments demonstrated a more comprehensive view of God’s love. In the following comment, BB interprets the meaning according to his beliefs or theological perceptions about God. He pictures the overwhelming mercy of God as revealed, not just by the father’s acceptance of the son, but also by the ability of the son to return:

Interview 20T Larkana

BB: When the person who had rebelled returned, then God’s kindness came on him... Because of his kindness, therefore the son found a way back. Without his kindness, he would not have found a way (*expl*).

Cultural Referent: The comments demonstrate cultural connections in at least three ways: common experiences, religious teaching⁴⁷⁴ and Sufi ideals. The common experience was seen in examples of familial love, whether stated positively such as in reference to the love of a father has for his son, or given in order to contrast human love to God’s love, such as the reference to mother’s love (*mumta*) (LL Interview 2T). The influence of Islamic teaching was evident from the religious stories and quotations. This demonstrated the cultural value of finding support for one’s

⁴⁷⁴ I am making a distinction between the *faith* (worldview, belief and values) of the participants, and religious teaching as the evidence of *cultural* influence. While allowing for overlap between the two, the former focuses on internal conviction as part of the participants’ perception of reality. The latter is a reference beyond the participants to the religious aspect of their environment.

argument by citing an authority, and the highest authority is God's Word:

Interview 20T Larkana

IJ: I will tell you that in the holy Qur'an, the chapters [*sifat*] that are full of grace and mercy, are very many. In each step and in each verse [*Ayat*], is about love [*shafqat*, *mohabat* and *piAr*], forgiveness and generosity. But there is one thing that we have read, one verse in particular which I remember even until now. In it is written this, I don't know which verse or chapter, that "Lord, the God who is slow in anger, and quick to love"⁴⁷⁵ (*trad*).

The Sufi ideal of God's love was expressed through a poem:

Interview 20T Larkana

IJ: There is a poem by Shah Abdul Latif that comes to mind. In his writings God declares,

"The one who is loved by me, I know his misdeeds,
He should never ask of me, or be angry and say, "why do you do this?"
But should realize that the master hides the weaknesses [*kamIUn*] of the one he loves." (*poe*)

IJ uses Latif's poem to speak of God's character and the appropriate posture for humanity before the Almighty. This expression of God knowing our sin but being merciful is also the faith framework within which IJ hears the parable.

Illustration of variety of genres

The variety of genres used to express their belief in the love of God underscores the importance of this theme to the participants' faith. In addition to the *explanations*, *illustrations*, *poetry*, *common sayings* and the reference to sacred texts (*traditional*) already mentioned, religious stories (*traditional*) were also related. In order to communicate the meaning of *mumta* (love), LL gave the story of Solomon's judgment of the two women who each claimed a child as their own:

Interview 2T Hyderabad

There was a child. And two women claimed the child as their own. How can you tell, whose is whose? The judge said "divide the child in two and give half to each." The true mother said, "no, give the whole child to the other woman." Then the judge said, "This one is the true mother. Give the child to her" (*trad*).

The one genre that was noticeably lacking was any *personal narrative* of an experience of God's love. The significance of this is explored in the remaining analytical steps.

⁴⁷⁵ Although this is not a direct quote (the words were Sindhi and not Arabic) the reference to the sacred scriptures for an acceptable description of God gives added authority to his statement. Although attributed to the Qur'an, this may actually be a biblical reference, e.g., Ps. 86:15, 103:8 or Ex. 34:6.

Validity and reliability of the sorted data

The contextual validity and reliability of the culture texts as they relate to the theme can be demonstrated according to the four validating factors. This same process is followed for both groups within each successive theme.

(1) The culture texts develop the subject (theme).

The logical relationship of the selection of the cited *culture texts*, as well as by other culture texts identified as data but not included here, to the theme of God's love is clear. The variety of genres used to express their understanding together with the presence of all four criteria to identify the theme affirms the validity of the data. In addition, the consistency of their responses with my own experiences within the Sindhi context also creates confidence that this theme is legitimate.

(2) A communication of their own life experiences rather than speculation about others.

Even though they did not relate any personal experiences of God's love, the participants demonstrated a commitment to belief in the love of God through cultural examples and quotations. Even though most comments reflected teaching they had received, they demonstrated personal ownership of the belief.

(3) Credibility in the relationship of culture texts to their culture.

This theme resonates with many influential ideas in Sindhi culture, some of which conflict with each other. For example, in the dialogue of the larger groups, the Sufi ideal of mystical intimacy with God that welcomes human metaphors of accessible love clashed with the insistence that God's love is incomparable and can have no earthly example. This conflict represents part of the "unconscious reference" to their context affirming that this theme is a legitimate part of Sindhi society.

(4) Positive reinforcement from other participants.

There was sufficient repetition of explanations and common sayings both within the same interviews and from separate interviews to confirm that the identified theme is a legitimate part of the Sindhi context.

Believer group interviews

Conformity to clustering criteria

Common Theme: God's love for people was expressed as a central message of the parable by the believer group. There is sufficient similarity of culture texts generated from both the traditional and believer group interviews to indicate that this is a common theme. While the terminology

used was similar, including concepts of acceptance, kindness, mercy and compassion, the use of the parable's familial language was more pronounced in the believers' descriptions:

Interview 3B Hyderabad

N: God, like a human father, loves [the son]. God is the example of the father.

M: Does this fit with your idea of God?

N: Yes. I am a father. My son is 1 yr and 8 months old and has begun to walk. So if he gets close to electricity or grabs a knife, I quickly act so that he does not come to harm. (*pers*) In this way God is like a father and he is concerned. (*expl*)

Interview 10B Rohri

NN: In this example, Jesus actually tells us what God is like. God is like a father and loves like a father. Like a father loves his children, that is what God is like (*ill*).

...

NN: 100% that he is like this [father in the parable] and is merciful and is looking for his sons, he is waiting for them. Even as the father was waiting for the return of his son in the parable, so today God is waiting for his lost sons to return to him (*expl*).

Interview 13B Shikarpur

H: God is [without exception?] greater than anything. Because the father is merciful [*raham*]. He says his son has lost his way or is lost, or dead. But he has returned and the father's love [*shafqat*] is such, but God's love is even more than that of human beings. But even as the father's love [*mohabbat*] was, so God's love is even greater [*afzal* = most excellent] – a lot. Even as a human being can love, even to the extent of a father, even more than that is God's love [*mohabbat*] (*ill*).

...

When people turn to God just a little bit, God's love is revealed, which is a lot greater. So even more than the father's love is God's love because it is only 1/40 of what God's love is. (*comm*) God is gracious [*kareem*], he created people. His love is great towards us. (*expl*)

...

[God says] He comes to me a little and I will show him love [*shafqat*], I will place my hand on him. God's kindness to humanity is that great. He cares that much because he made us (*expl*).

Even though H felt comfortable in viewing the father as representing God, he was also careful to clarify that God's love is far greater than human love. He explains that the greatness of God's love is seen in the extreme response to the smallest indication of love from us. Another participant made a similar argument by contrasting the response of the father to the reaction of a father in the Sindhi context:

Interview 21B Larkana

MM: When the lost son returns. This is very difficult to understand that God could be so merciful. If it was an example of a father here, he could not be as merciful. A person can be merciful up to a point. There is a limit with people. (*ill*)

Others interpreted the actions of the father as representative of God's love, but did not use the familial image of the parable:

Interview 3B Hyderabad

Q: ... a sinner when he returns to God, then God will show love. (*expl*)

Interview 8B Rohri

AG: About God we learn that he never rejects us [chaddarna] but always loves us. He always loves and never forgets us [in Sindhi, "forget" has a dual meaning of literally forgetting, and also dismissing or rejecting]. We may forget him, but he never forgets us. And God is always with us (*expl*).

Interview 16B Shikarpur

F: ... people discover that God is compassionate and they come in repentance to him and he shows mercy. (*expl*)

Interview 5B Hyderabad

AS: When we go on his path, then we are more beloved. When we go on his path, then he loves us more (*expl*).

...

AS: God does not love less. He always loves constantly [*barqrar*].

M: So even when a person does not go in God's way, he still loves them the same.

AS: When a person goes their own way, they are harming themselves. But God's love remains the same, constant [*qaim*]. (*expl, dial*)

The last example demonstrates the cognitive dissonance that occurs in dialogue that encourages careful exploration. While first declaring that God loves those more who are obedient, later in the interview AS expressed a contrary opinion. This is not a problem, rather it demonstrates the value of dialogue to permit opportunity for participants to better nuance their perspectives, develop their reasoning further or to correct a mis-statement.⁴⁷⁶ Along with AS's latter affirmation a number of believers stressed the egalitarian nature of God's love. For example,

Interview 19B Naodero

A: About God, [we can see] equality [*barAbari*]. Whether one is obedient, or disobedient, he loves the same. God's love is not distributed [*varail*] but it is one and the same for all. [*hik jahardo*] (*expl*)

Although most participants connected the love of God to the father's acceptance of the repentant son, some considered other aspects of the parable as evidence:

Interview 11B Rohri

M: Where is God's love seen in these verses?

RD: When the son asked for the inheritance, then God gave him what he asked for

⁴⁷⁶ This may also be an indication of a theological shift that is in process and not fully developed. See 11.1.4 for a discussion of this possibility.

(*expl*).

Interview 13B Shikarpur

H: God is [very?] kind.... Now the son takes the inheritance from the father. The father says, “Here is the inheritance.” The inheritance is not his [i.e., the son’s], to use as he pleases. But he goes and uses it in the wrong way of the world.

M: So how is this like God?

H: Like God? Humanity? Because of love [*shafqat*]. The father’s love is great, and God’s love is greater (*expl*).

Some participants extrapolated other ways that the God’s love is seen in Jesus’ life, particularly is bringing salvation.

Interview 9B Rohri

ASR: In Jesus’ life we see a lot about God, we see God’s compassion. Ordinary people, who are sinners, he came to give them salvation [*chothkaro*]. He revealed God’s presence [*vajood*], told about God. What is he like, how he is compassionate [*raham dil*], and what it is that God wants for humanity. In Jesus’ life we can see that for those who were sinners, he gave salvation and he gave sacrifice. From this we can sense [what God is like]. (*trad*)

...

ASR: Jesus sacrificed himself for humanity so that people could come to God in a new way [*nain sir*]. It is because of sin that a gap [*khal*] was created between God and people. Through his sacrifice, Jesus canceled [*khatam*] that gap. (*trad*)

Textual reference: the primary textual reference is to the father’s reaction to the returning son. H in Interview 13B connects the father’s extravagant response to the repentant son to God’s love for humanity with the comment, “When people turn to God just a little bit, God’s love is revealed, which is a lot greater.” Even apart from that one key aspect of the parable, the overall attitude of the father to his sons was interpreted as a revelation of God’s love for people. H expressed the consistent attitude of the father, even apart from the act of acceptance upon the son’s return as “Because God’s kindness is such that he will not be angry [*narAz*] because he has such love for us (*expl*).”

Faith referent: As with the traditional group, the importance of God’s love to the faith of the believers was evident. Their comments were not about an abstract idea unrelated to their lives, but provided several examples that revealed their reliance on and confidence in God’s love.

Cultural Referent: The primary cultural reference for God’s love for the believers followed the familial metaphor of the parable as they referred to their own relationships (N’s reference to his son in Interview 3B), or made general references to relationships in the Sindhi context (MM’s contrast of Sindhi fathers with the mercy of God in Interview 21B). R in Interview 6B and ASR in

Interview 9B made reference to the economic demands of the Sindhi context in which they look to the mercy of God in order to feed their families. Although not explicitly stated, the inheritance was mentioned a few times in the interviews. Inheritance is a serious issue in Pakistan and the source of much strife due to the rampant poverty and the limited number of people who own land. It is not surprising, therefore, that this aspect of the parable gained the attention of both those of the believer and traditional groups. The love of the father was seen in his amazing willingness to freely hand over the inheritance to the son, as reflected in RD's comment in Interview 11B. One participant referred to handicapped people, many of whom beg on the streets of Pakistan, as an analogy of our spiritual condition, requiring God's compassion and intervention:

Interview 13B Shikarpur

H: If a person is lame, or if his eye is missing, then what can he do? Can he do anything? But this is our situation and only by God's love can we do anything. (*ill*)

Similar to the traditional group, the use of *traditional* sayings and stories provide a cultural connection. For the believers, however, the majority of stories and sayings were from the Bible.

Illustration of variety of genres

The theme of God's love was affirmed through a variety of genres as noted in the preceding examples, *explanations*, *dialogue*, *common sayings* and *illustrations*, including a couple of variations of the most common saying given by the traditional group:

Interview 13B Shikarpur

H: [The father's love] is only 1/40 of what God's love is.

Interview 16B Shikarpur

F: ... God forgives because he loves his servants 72 times more than a mother loves her son. (*Comm*)

Traditional sayings and stories were not as prevalent in the believer group, but, as the following illustrates, the ones quoted were from both Qur'anic and biblical sources. The latter example concerning the death of Christ as evidence for God's love was made by a few participants:

Interview 13B Shikarpur

H: ... There is a verse in the Qur'an: [Arabic quote]. (*trad*)

M: This means?

H: If you remember me, I remember you. If you remember me once, I will remember you 70 times. (*comm*)

M: This is a Qur'anic verse?

H: Yes, If you remember me once, I will remember you 70 times. (*comm*) If you remember me on earth, I will remember you in heaven [*Asman*]. (*trad*)

M: And this means?

H: If a person says on earth, “O God!” then God will reply from heaven “Yes, my servant.” God remembers him. There is certainly love [*shafqat*] shown. Remember me and I will remember you. I will not desert you [*chaddendus*] if you remember me with your heart (*expl*).

...

H: Jesus was such a person, that those who were blind received such love because of Jesus’ kindness. Those who were lame, Jesus made whole. Those with shriveled limbs, were made well. This is a great example of love. And during his life he kept explaining and explaining, he never stopped. (*trad*)

Interview 18B Naodero

DW: Jesus died on the cross. This is how [God’s love] is revealed. He went on the cross for our sins. (*trad*)

DDS: There is no love greater than this.

DW: He could have saved his life instead of ours, but he didn’t do it.

D: He revealed God to us in this.

DDS: He showed us so much love that he gave his life. (*dial*)

A common genre for the believer group was *personal narrative*. A number of participants offered events or relationships in their life that they saw as evidence of God’s love. This includes the example given by N about his relationship with his son (N Interview 3B) that illustrated God’s love as father. Statements that attributed God’s love to daily provision:

Interview 5B Hyderabad

A: We had very little money [unclear]. We were sitting here hungry. [But God took care]

M: So this is evidence of God’s love

A: Completely. Then the pastor came. But I tell you that our faith is stronger than yours. 100%. I do not lie because you have everything to be happy and don’t know what it means to be in need. But we don’t have [much], yet we are happy. Because of this we are stronger believers. (*pers*)

Interview 6B Hyderabad

R: When we waste our life, God brings trouble. But God is the master [*mAlik*] and he cares for us [*sombhalarna*]. I am thinking that I have many children, lots of expenses. How are the expenses covered? I don’t know.... It is God that makes it complete, it is not in my power. God gives me confidence to pray for him to give the daily bread so that we can eat. And my family is happy, we have no troubles. (*pers*)

Other comments recounted spiritual blessings ascribed to God:

Interview 8B Rohri

AG: This is the way it was with us. We were sinners but when we accepted God, then he showed us his love. He always loves. He never forgets us (*pers*).

A few remarks indicated thankfulness for God’s intervention in difficult relationships:

Interview 12B Shikarpur

AA: There was a time when my relative was upset with me and rejected me [*Chaddi*] and if God by his kindness had not been with me [*satt*], then I would not have [survived?]. My relatives had rejected me, but God is my helper [*maddadgAr*]. God's graciousness [*qurb*] or I would have had to leave the city. But now with God's kindness, now we live in the city (*pers*).

Validity and reliability of the sorted data

(1) *The culture texts develop the subject (theme).*

As with the traditional group interviews, the logical relationship of the selection of culture texts to the theme of God's love, the variety of genres used to express this theme, the conformity of the data to all four criteria and the consistency of the responses with my own experiences within the Sindhi context supports the validity and reliability of the data.

(2) *A communication of their own life experiences rather than speculation about others.*

The participants related personal experiences of God's love, which revealed a belief that God was involved in their lives. The approach to the scripture passage as directly applicable to their life experience was evident.

(3) *Credibility in the relationship of culture texts to their culture.*

Many culture texts referred to significant relationships in their lives or to familial dynamics within Sindhi culture.

(4) *Positive reinforcement from other participants.*

Repetition of *explanations*, *common sayings* and *traditional* stories, even from separate interviews, as well as consistency with comments gleaned from the traditional group, gives confidence that the identified theme of God's love is both tied to the passage and a legitimate part of the Sindhi context.

Theme 2: God forgives those servants who repent

Explanation of Sindhi terms: Sindhi has two ways to speak about forgiveness that are generally considered synonymous but can be nuanced if the speaker is inclined to make the distinction (which is often not the case). The first word, *baksharna* focuses on the sin with the idea of "letting it go." That is, the sin and its consequences are ignored as if to say, "that doesn't matter," resulting in the person not being punished. In this case, there is no explicit aspect of restoring a relationship (this is, however, generally assumed). The second word, *muAfi* has a stronger focus on the person who is the object of forgiveness. In a sense, *muAfi* is a higher level of forgiveness. When the concept of forgiveness includes a view towards restoration, this is the more precise term

to use. The sin is no longer counted against the person and the aspect of the renewal of relationship is made explicit. Since the latter thought of restoration of relationship is an important aspect of the parable, it was the term *muAfl* that was primarily used in the dialogue.

tobA (repentance) refers to turning away from doing wrong and conforming one's intentions and desires towards pleasing God. This is distinct from *pashtAu* (regret), which focuses on the feelings, rather than on a change in action. *Ajazi* and *nivaRi* (humility) emphasize the submission of the lesser before the greater or the impure before the pure. There are three common words used for "sin": *gunAh*, *ddoh* and *ghalti*. *gunAh* is only used in reference to an offence against God or disobedience to God's law. *ddoh* can mean "crime" or "offence" and can be used for sin against either God or humanity. *ghalti* (or sometimes, but less commonly, *khata*) is also used for sin, but is closer to the idea "error" and focuses on the wrong action of the sinner, rather than an offence committed against another. However, unlike the English nuance of "error" that implies an unintentional act and therefore worthy of less condemnation because it needs to be excused rather than forgiven, the Sindhi concept can carry the equivalent weight that is given to the word *ddoh*. *bhiTkil* is a metaphorical description of the *act* of sinning that refers to someone who has deliberately "turned away" or "turned off the right path." *gUm* is similar and means "to become lost." However, in contrast to *bhiTkil*, the latter term does not necessitate deliberate rebellion on the part of the one who has become lost.

Traditional group interviews

Conformity to clustering criteria

Common Theme: There is no word for forgiveness used in the parable, either in the original Greek or in the Sindhi translation. Nonetheless, the parable was interpreted as a forgiveness event on behalf of the father towards the returning son. The parable was understood as a picture of God's merciful response towards those people who repent:

Interview 1T Hyderabad

M: what special aspect of God's nature do you see in this?

P: That God is a forgiving God [*muaf karana vArO*]. And that he is a loving God. He is both forgiving and loving. He demonstrates his love for his servant. At the time of forgiveness he shows both love and forgiveness. (*expl*)

Interview 14T Khanpur

RK: People ask forgiveness. So God has made us as people so we can at any time return. (*expl*) So whatever wrong [*ghalti*] things people do during the day, whether it is hurting someone or whatever, then your mind, what is inside will say, "I have done a wrong [*ghalti*] thing. Now, I need to ask forgiveness." (*ill*) Who is the one who

forgives? – God. From whom is forgiveness asked? – from the caste of God [*Allah ji zAt* = God’s own self] (*comm*)

Interview 20T Larkana

DS: God says this that if my servant [*bandO*] acknowledges his sin and is regretful, then I am kind and I will forgive him. (*expl*)

It was constantly stressed that God’s forgiveness is conditional on repentance. Those who are “wicked” do not repent, but God’s “servants” may sin and then repent. If one participant thought that the previous speaker did not emphasize the condition of repentance sufficiently, it would be reiterated:

Interview 14T Khanpur

BB: If a father has a son who is corrupt [*bigaReel*], off the right road, disobedient, then he can give him forgiveness [*muAft*], they can make him their own [?]. . . . He is forgiving [*Raheem*], merciful [*Kareem*], glorious [*jalal*], great [*jaleel*]. He is always merciful [*raham karana vArO*]. He is merciful on all. He is so gracious [*fazal*], that we could never fathom it. Because of this he is merciful to us and he forgives us. (*expl*)

GMA’s son: But only when he returns and repents [*tobA*].

BB: Yes, when he humbles himself [*Ajazee*] and says, “Almighty God, you are the forgiving one, forgive me [*baksh*]. You are merciful [*raheem*], you are gracious [*kareem*].” (*dial*)

...

M: So what you understand from these verses is that God forgives.

BB: But for the one who receives [*vaThe*] the forgiveness. The one who turns from sin [*gunAh*] and repents. That is the one that God receives joyfully.

Interview 20T Larkana

AB: Even though he sins [*gunAh*], God does not abandon him. If a servant [*bandO*] sins [*gunAh*], but comes back to the right path, then Almighty God comes alongside [*sAth ddE ThO*]. If there is a wicked [*gando*] person then God may abandon him. (*expl*)

Occasionally participants would stress that forgiveness for God is not difficult. God is far more forgiving than a human father. It is part of God’s magnanimous nature⁴⁷⁷ as expressed by the first verse of the Qur’an (2004:1), *bismillahi ar-Rahman ar-Raheem* (In the name of Allah, the Entirely Merciful, the Especially Merciful). For example,

Interview 14T Khanpur

BB: God Almighty loves his servants [*bandA*] 70 times more than this. (*comm*) When he comes before Almighty God, he [God] can forgive, this is not a great matter. He is forgiving [*Raheem*], merciful [*Kareem*], glorious [*jalal*], great [*jaleel*]. (*expl*)

⁴⁷⁷ It is this conviction about God’s nature that makes the forensic metaphor of the cross difficult for Sindhi Muslims. To suggest that punishment is required in order for God to forgive shows a lack of appreciation for God’s gracious attitude towards those who repent.

...
GMA's son: Because when a son returns with a true heart, then God has the character of mercy and grace. It doesn't matter how much sin [*gunAh*] he has committed, but God is the forgiver.

...
Shah: I believe that he [God] will give a great reward when people come with humility and with action before him, return to him. (*expl*)

Interview 20T Larkana

AB: More than a father, God is merciful [*maharbAn*]. If he repents, then God will come alongside even more. God will not abandon [him] in time of trouble [*dduk*]. (*expl*)

A contrast with human dis-inclination towards forgiveness was also noted and related to the older brother's attitude. While God willingly forgives over and over, human beings refuse to do so:

Interview 14T Khanpur

GMA's son: But God's love is such that he wants the cleansing of the path [i.e., restoration], that upon the return he forgives. It is such that even when it happens time and again – and in this instance, this is only one time – but if the person returns, then I will forgive. But human nature reckons [*hisAb* = an accounting] it like this: that if a person is off the right path and become bad [*huri*], desire for their good [*navazish*] is rejected. (*ill*)

M: So you see this as a comparison between God and humanity. If a person is lost [*BhiTki*], for that person there is little mercy. But God forgives again and again if a person is repentant.

GMA's son: Yes, that is it completely (*expl*).

...
NB: ... God says, "Anyone who comes near, at any time, whether once or a thousand times, again sins and again asks forgiveness, then I will forgive." But human beings say, "I will not forgive." (*expl*)

....
NB: And when we look at the other brother's character [*kirdAr*], speak about that. He is human. That is, he says, I am clean [*saf*], why should I not get [all things]? But God says, "whoever comes to me, I will forgive him all the time." There is a difference between the nature [*fitrat*] of people and God's mercy. (*expl*)

Repentance was described as a heartfelt turning away from wrong and rebellious actions. Satan was occasionally referenced as someone who could not be forgiven because of a rebellious nature and a lack of sincerity. Any act of repentance on his part would be hypocritical:

Interview 14T Khanpur

GMA's son: But if Satan should try to get his way [*sarkashi* = rebellious], he will not be forgiven. (*ill*)

BB: No, for him it is different. There is no place for him. Because he is like, what is the word? What is inside is not what he says. (*trad*)

GMA's son: It is just show.

BB: Show is nothing, but if someone comes with a complete heart [=total sincerity] and repents, then God has mercy. Then a person has complete assurance [*dill sikUn*] because he says, “I will not do such a thing in the future.” (*expl, ill*)

NB: Heartfelt admitting wrong [*dill tor pashtAu*]

RK: Humility [*Ajazi*]

NB: He acts on it in the future. (*dial*)

Interview 20T Larkana

DS: Hazrat Adam showed regret [*pashtAu*]. He received forgiveness and Satan did not have regret but remained in stubbornness [*zid*] and God threw him out. (*trad*)

In one interview, the symbolism of the ring, robe and sandals was explained as going beyond forgiveness (*bacharna*) to restoration of status:

Interview 20T Larkana

DS: when he [i.e., the son] showed that he was ashamed [*sharam*], therefore his father gave him a ring. Now, what is the meaning of the ring? What is the meaning of the shoes? Explain this further. Why did he do this? Because the son was regretful [*pashtAu*]. He acknowledged [*manyo*] his sin [*ddoh*], “I have sinned.”

...

IJ: When he [i.e., the repentant] returns, God hugs him in such a way, even as a father hugs his son. (*ill*) And the meaning of the ring, the shoes and the robe, is that he is restored [*bahal*] (*expl*).... He said, “Make me like one of your servants.” But the father responded even more so by granting him the status [*rutbo*] of son. (*dial*)

Textual Referent: In verses 11-13, 18-19 and 21-22, the son comes to his senses and repents, while the father forgives and lavishes gifts on him. This action is seen as illustrative of God’s gracious response to those who are repentant:

Interview 14T Khanpur

When he forgives, he forgives all the sin [*gunAh*]. In this way when the father forgives and gives him nice clothes and makes arrangements for eating and drinking, so God also gives of his own food. This character is also the character of God.

Faith Referent: The primary hope of acceptance with God for the Sindhi Muslim is based on God’s forgiving character. This is conditional on repentance that requires a humble and submissive attitude. Sincere repentance fulfills the requirement for God to refrain from punishing even the most heinous sin and to grant blessing. This basic faith assumption was clear from the interpretation of the father’s action in the parable as illustrative of God’s character.

Cultural Referent: The *traditional* quotes and stories used reflect an influential aspect of Sindhi culture. In both the public schools and the religious *madrasas*,⁴⁷⁸ Islamic lessons are mandatory and religious stories and sayings are pervasive in daily conversation. In addition, forgiveness is a

⁴⁷⁸ In Pakistan, the majority of students in these schools of Islamic teaching are young boys.

virtue that Sindhis value, although it may not be obvious in daily practice. In Interview 14T, GMA's son notes that while God's love and forgiveness knows no limit, the older brother's attitude is "human nature":

I see in this human nature. Even though the other [younger son] was his brother, but when he [younger son] went off the path, his [older son] concern [*mutasar*] for him did not remain. [The older did not care] that he [younger son] should get his [own] portion of the inheritance, that he should have good favor [*navazish*] and goodness [*behetri*] happen to him. So much so that when something bad happened, he [older son] said, "This person is not worthy [*laiq*]."

This was stated in contrast to God's nature to indicate a perceived failing that he has observed in his daily experience. Thus, while the lack of forgiveness is lamented, the value of forgiveness is plain. Acts of giving generously – the robe, ring, sandals and celebratory meal in the parable – as expressions of forgiveness and restoration are reflected in Sindhi culture, as illustrated by the believer who regained a measure of acceptance by his family and was sent a gift of money and clothes.⁴⁷⁹

Illustration of variety of genres

As an example of overlap with other genres, one discussion on repentance included a reference to a *traditional story* about Satan, *traditional quotes* from the Qur'an, *dialogue* with affirmation and clarification, *illustrations* of cultural experiences and *explanation*. One *common saying* used to express the need for forgiveness is equivalent to the English, "to err is human":

Interview 14T Khanpur

Shah: Yes, Human beings are the house of error [*khatA jO ghar*]. (*comm*) People are always making mistakes [*ghalti*]. They make great errors [*ghalti*] and then regret it [*pashtAu*].

Validity and reliability of the sorted data

(1) *The culture texts develop the subject (theme).*

The participants' interaction with each other in the group interviews to develop the concept of the need for humility and sincerity in repentance affirms that this is a valid aspect of Sindhi thought and culture. In addition, the repetition of the God's benevolence in the forgiving nature of the Divine in all the interviews provides support that the data is valid and reliable.

(2) *A communication of their own life experiences rather than speculation about others.*

While personal examples of forgiveness were not provided, God's forgiving nature was

⁴⁷⁹ This anecdote is given in 2.1.2.1.

consistently affirmed by the participants as part of their faith commitment with the understanding that forgiveness is conditional on repentance.

(3) Credibility in the relationship of culture texts to their culture.

As noted in the preceding discussion to identify the cultural referent, the theme of repentance and forgiveness resonates with Sindhi values, even when it is lacking in practice.

(4) Positive reinforcement from other participants.

There was sufficient repetition of this theme both within the same interviews and from separate interviews to indicate that it is a legitimate part of the Sindhi context.

Believer group interviews

Conformity to clustering criteria

Common Theme: As with the participants in the traditional group, the believers see the actions of the father in the parable as a picture of God's forgiving attitude towards those who repent. For example,

Interview 7B Jacobabad

Gh: But the father says, "No, he has confessed his sin and come back. He was dead and is now alive. Because of this we are happy." God treats us in the same way with love. We are sinners, but when we confess before God and say to God, "Please forgive. We have done wrong [*ghalti*]." Then God forgives and always loves. (*expl*)

Interview 13B Shikarpur

H: This is the kind of love God has for humanity. People are sinners [*gunAhgAr*], they sin [*gunAh*]. But when they repent [*tobA tAib*], then God forgives. God in his kindness, forgives. (*expl*)

The greatness of God's capacity to forgive is seen in the willingness to forgive any and all sin, a forgiving attitude greater than human forgiveness:

Interview 16B Shikarpur

MC: no matter how much a person may sin [*gunAh*], he receives forgiveness if he repents [*tobA*] and comes on his [God's] path. (*trad*)

....

F: No matter how sinful [*gunAh*] a person is, if they repent and come to God and say, "I am on a wrong path." If they have wasted their wealth and done wrong [*ghalti*] things, but if at the very last they understand that they have done wrong [*ghalti*] and been on the wrong [*ghalti*] path, "I need to go on the right path." Then if they are crying to God and ask, "O master, forgive." God is compassionate [*Bhajaro*], a forgiving God. (*expl*)

...

MC: So in this illustration, in the same way, the son says, "maybe the father will be kind." God is the one who cares for all [*palarnahar*] and is compassionate [*bhajaro*].

There is no limit to his kindness and mercy. (*expl*)

...

MC: the father showed kindness. But God is even more kind. When the sinner returns the father has mercy, forgives and celebrates.

Many of the believers affirmed the need for repentance in order to receive forgiveness:

Interview 18B Naodero

D: When we acknowledge [our sin]. Acknowledgement [*iqrar*] is necessary. He acknowledged that “without doubt, father, I am a sinner [*ddohi*], and I am not worthy to be called your son.” But, nonetheless, God’s love is there. He accepts him as his son. But there is a condition, that he confess [*iqrar*]. With confession, God’s love is more.

DDS: With confession he accepts his son and makes him his child. (*expl, dial*)

However, other believers pointed out the forgiveness of the father even before the confession and put the emphasis on a restored relationship, rather than an accounting of the wrong done:

Interview 21B Larkana

MM: The son asks forgiveness, but even before that the father has forgiven him. He was happy just at the return of the son. He didn’t condemn him and say, “You have sinned [*ddohi*]. You are a sinner [*ddohi*].” He didn’t go into details, and talk about the money that had been given. He didn’t ask for an accounting [*hisAb*] and say, “what about this?” and “where is that?” There was no hint of any accounting. He was just happy. There was no thought of “now that you have come back, give an accounting.” (*expl*)

While the believers often followed the parable in the use of familial language to describe humanity’s relationship to God, some shifted to “servant/slave” language when applying the parable to a person’s relationship to God:

Interview 16B Shikarpur

F: In this same way, if there is a servant [*bandO*] who has turned off [*BhiTkil*] the right way, a person who thinks, “I have erred [*ghalti*] greatly and have been disobedient [*nAfarmAn*], I will return and ask forgiveness of God.” Then God forgives because he loves his servants 72 times more than a mother loves her son. (*comm, expl*)

...

MC: “My lost [*BhiTkil*] son has come back to the path.” God acts this same way whenever his servant [*bbAnO*] has turned away [*BhiTkil*] has sinned [*gunAh*] but comes back to his path. When he comes back, God is like the father who is very happy to see his son back. But even more, God is the creator, so he is even more happy when a disobedient servant comes back to the path. All the angels and creatures in God’s glory also rejoice. (*trad, expl*)

Apart from general explanations, the believers were quick to offer *personal narratives* that illustrated their own experiences of forgiveness from God:

Interview 4B Hyderabad

Q: I was like the lost son. When I accepted Jesus, I found I was forgiven and had a relationship with God. There were many troubles, but God was there and accepted me and loved me and gave me proof of that. (*pers*)

Interview 18B Naodero

DW: I like this in that when we go astray [*gUm*] we can come back, like the son went astray into a life of sin [*gunAh*] and doesn't know what to do. Then when God works in our life, then we immediately come back to God. We pray and are saved from sin [*gunAh*]. (*expl*)

Textual Referent: The believers' descriptions demonstrated that the same textual referent as the traditional group was being referenced:

Interview 16B Shikarpur

F: This is about the character [*kirdAr*] of God. He [the son] had struggles, got into trouble and said, "I am alone in the world and am dying of hunger. The servants of my father have good food and I am eating this bad food, I am in great distress. What should I do?" That is, he began to think, "What should I do?" He realized that if he returned, this was his father who would certainly have pity [*raham*].

Faith Referent: The personal anecdotes gave clear testimony that the forgiving nature of God was a personal faith conviction and experience. The explanations offered concerning God's mercy and the possibility of forgiveness also provide evidence for their personal beliefs.

Culture Referent: *Traditional* stories and *common sayings* indicated a perceived connection to cultural values:

Interview 16B Shikarpur

F: The other son is like the angels who complain, "Why did you forgive." And God says, "I am compassionate. Whatever sinner [*gunAhgAr*] comes back to me and asks forgiveness, I will give it to him." (*trad*)

Some of the explanations also affirmed that such expressions of love and forgiveness as described in the parable also fit with cultural ideals:

Interview 16B Shikarpur

MC: ... So when he comes back after suffering this loss [*Dhak Khai*], then also the father is incredibly kind. In this world, it is an example of a father.

Illustration of variety of genres

As with the traditional group, a variety of genres were used to express the theme of God's forgiveness including *dialogue*, *explanations*, *cultural illustrations*, *traditional* stories and *common sayings*. One cultural anecdote paralleled the first section of the Parable of the Two Lost Sons, but without a redemptive climax and illustrated a *lack* of forgiveness among people.

Interview 6B Hyderabad

R: There is an example from Hyderabad where a son wasn't confident he would get his inheritance when his father died so he asked for it from his father. Similar to the story, he received the inheritance, about 18 lakh [Rs 1,800,000], and went to Karachi. There he did the same thing as the son in the story and lived improperly, gambled, lived for pleasure for about 2 years. Then he ran out of money and thought, "Now what do I do?" and he went insane. (*ill*)

M: He went insane?

...

R: He didn't go back to God, the person who went crazy. He had no one to care for him. He couldn't stand that and he went crazy.

M: So he went crazy because there was no father to save him.

R: Yes, there was no father to save him. But in the story, we see that God saved the person.

In addition, *personal narratives* were offered to illustrate their experience of God's forgiveness.

Validity and reliability of the sorted data

(1) *The culture texts develop the subject (theme).*

Many descriptions and examples expressed the theme of God's gracious character in forgiving those who repent.

(2) *A communication of their own life experiences rather than speculation about others.*

Personal examples affirmed their faith and experience concerning God's forgiveness.

(3) *Credibility in the relationship of culture texts to their culture.*

The culture texts provided in the preceding cultural referent section affirms the validity and reliability of the data according to this aspect.

(4) *Positive reinforcement from other participants.*

Both within the interviews and between interviews there was considerable affirmation and repetition of comments made that supports the claim that this theme can be identified in the data.

Theme 3: Concepts of rewards, punishment and the fear of God

Explanation of Sindhi terms: The Muslim Sindhi cosmology is Islamic with a literal paradise (*bisht* and *jannat*), heaven and hell. Paradise is considered to be one of the 7 heavens and is the place of reward (*inAm*) for those who have found favor with God. Seventh heaven is the eternal throne where only God resides. Hell is a place of fire and eternal torture, although the possibility of suffering for a time and then escaping is also a possibility. There is a place of the dead, similar to the "pit" (Heb. *sheol*) of the Old Testament, where the dead wait for judgment. The fear of God (*khudA jO khOf*) relates closely to the concepts of heaven (*Asman*) and hell (*dozak* and

jahannam). In Sindhi, “fear of God” has both a positive and negative meaning. A positive view of the phrase refers to a deep respect for God’s holiness that is sensitive to any act that would be careless about the will and command of God. A negative understanding of fear (*khOf, Drup*) of God envisions a wrathful (*gazabnak*) Deity who punishes (*sazA*) severely.

Traditional group interviews

Conformity to clustering criteria

Common Theme: The parable does not mention paradise, heaven or hell, but the concept of gifts (*tOfO*) received by the returning son was understood metaphorically to refer to immediate blessings in the humble repentant person’s life as well as rewards received at the time of eternal judgment. The positive message of rewards (*inAm*), used synonymously with “gifts” rather than something earned and therefore a right, was the primary focus of the traditional group, with only a couple of incidental references to hell and punishment and no negative view of the fear of God was expressed. It is this *lack* of negative perspectives on the fear of God by the traditional group that is in stark contrast with the perspective of many believers and which highlights this theme. Nonetheless, there were a couple of references to rewards and punishment based on the power or choices given to humanity (*insAn*) to do either good or evil:

Interview 2T Hyderabad

LL: [God says] If they do evil, I will give them punishment. If they do good, I will [bless?] (*trad, expl*)

Interview 20T Larkana

DS: In this we will not have any hurt [*dukh*] or trouble [*takllf*]. And we will live a good life and, afterwards, in the next life we will gain salvation [*chotkaro*]. (*expl*) ... But if we go down the wrong path, a path of the world, then we will be hurt and there will be no pleasure, and in this are many hurts [*nuksan*], both physical and spiritual, spiritual sicknesses will occur. This life will be bad and the next life as well. (*expl*)

Another participant, heavily influenced by Sufism declared that “We don’t acknowledge a God who sits in hell [*dozak* and *jahannam*] and also heaven [*jannat*] (*ill*)” (IJ Interview 20T). His point, made in the context of the belief that God is gracious and merciful, was that God is not arbitrary but constantly loves:

IJ: In [the Qur’an] is written this, I don’t know which verse or chapter, that “Lord, the God who is slow in anger, and quick to love.” (*trad*)

Some participants spoke of the rewards (*inAm*) that people who repent and come back to the “right path” will receive. For example,

Interview 14T Khanpur

RK: God becomes very happy with him, that the lost one [*BhiTkiI*] has come to the right road. So he gets an even bigger gift [*inAm*]. (*expl*)

...

RK: The son has gotten off the right path and discovered that there is no peace in his heart [*dill sikUn*] or satisfaction [*atmenAn*] in that situation, and he has come back to me, he has again discovered his need of me. Outside he was without rest or peace [*bay karar, bay cheen*], and lived in a shameful way [*zileet varay*], but has become dissatisfied [*bay zar*] and has chosen [*akhtIAr*] the straight path, so because of this he has become completely worthy [*laiq*] of reward [*inAm*]. (*expl*)

...

TT: If someone sins and goes off the right path and asks forgiveness from God [*sai = "sir"*], but if the person in the wrong asks for forgiveness, then there is a reward [*inAm*], even as the father gave a good robe and shoes to wear and slaughtered the fattened calf so that there is enjoyment [*mazo*]. (*expl*)

These rewards consist of peace, the enjoyments of paradise, seeing God, and being forgiven and loved.

Interview 14T Khanpur

RK: The rewards are these, the ones that we have in our religion: the big gift [*tOfO*] is paradise [*jannat*]. The troubles of life are temporary troubles. The original [*asali*] life in our religion is the after life [*akhra vAri zindagi*]. The life that comes after death never ends. In that life whatever desires, rest [*sikUn*], peace [*atmenAn*] and every kind of good thing that we have on earth to drink and to eat, it is all received with rest [*sikUn*] (*trad*). Paradise is that place where every delightful thing is present. And the most precious thing that is present is the sight of God [*Allah sAi jO deedAr*] (*comm*) – to see him. Every single thing from which we get rest [*sikUn*] – for example, a person gets so much rest [*sikUn*] from love [*muhabat*]. In the world this is the way it is. In a similar way, God has placed in his sight everything that has such rest [*sikUn*] and enjoyment [*mazo*] that the troubles of the earth will be as nothing. This is the greatest of all gifts [*tOfO*]. (*expl*)

TT: ... The final idea is that God has set aside many gifts for us. There are 3 rivers in Paradise [*jannat*], milk, honey and wine [*sharAb*]. And there are those who are *Adna* – that is, of Paradise – they will be given so much milk that it will be more than what the world has produced from Adam through to the end of the world. There are great rewards [*inAm*], virgins [*hoora*], every kind of new clothes, every kind of thing. Above all there will be rest [*sikUn*] of the mind and heart. (*trad*)

Shah: Everything that has been said is good and true. For those who have become dedicated [*qail*] and whole-heartedly becomes humble and dedicated [*qail*], and in becoming dedicated stand forgiven and loved as well. (*expl*)

Textual Referent: Verses 22-25 and 32 refer to the celebration and gifts given to the younger son, which are taken metaphorically to refer to heavenly rewards.

Faith Referent: The participants' conviction concerning the nature of God to reward those who repent from wickedness was evident. These rewards are not merely physical pleasures, but include

peace, being loved and, “above all,” having the privilege to “see God.”

Cultural Referent: Belief in the afterlife and the rewards that come from that stem from religious teaching in their homes, mosques, daily conversation and schooling.

Illustration of variety of genres

Apart from *explanations*, *traditional* stories and quotes were evident, particularly in the descriptions of paradise. The *common saying* of the privilege of seeing God (*Allah sAi jO deedAr*) is one that is used often in religious conversation in the Sindh. The cultural *illustration* that God does not sit in both heaven and hell, may have been the speaker’s own invention, but it has a strong Sufi flavor to it, and it fits in well with other Sufi quotes about heaven and hell.

Validity and reliability of the sorted data

(1) The culture texts develop the subject (theme).

The relevant culture texts dealt primarily with the concept of God’s desire to reward those who turn from wickedness to the right way, which includes rewards in paradise. Culture texts dealing with the fear of God’s wrath are lacking, but, as explained below,⁴⁸⁰ it is that lack which warrants an examination of this theme.

(2) A communication of their own life experiences rather than speculation about others.

While life experiences were not directly related, it was evident that the faith convictions were their own and impacted their orientation to life and to God.

(3) Credibility in the relationship of culture texts to their culture.

The tenets of the religion of Islam concerning the afterlife are an important part of the faith context that gives meaning to the participants’ life. This was reflected in the culture texts.

(4) Positive reinforcement from other participants.

Within one interview in particular, the participants were consistent in their thoughts about paradise and rewards from God. These perspectives are commonly expressed among Sindhis and confirm that these culture texts are valid and reliable.

Believer group interviews

Conformity to clustering criteria

Common Theme: The believer group interpreted the rewards given to the son as expressions of a renewed relationship with the father.

⁴⁸⁰ See 10.2.1.2.

Interview 10B Rohri

NN: The father saw him coming, even before he arrived, then joyfully he went to the son and put a ring on his finger. Then the son must have realized that the father had treated him as a son, because the ring is a symbol that “my relationship is that same as it was.” This means that he had thought that the father would not show mercy [*be raham*], but the father showed the same [relationship] as before. (*expl*)

Interview 3B Hyderabad

N: In the example is comfort/reconciliation; second, the father recognizes the son and is concerned for him. There is no fear. (*expl*)

Interview 19B Naodero

A: God in his own time, in the midst of suffering remembers his son. And whatever the need is, he gives to him. But the sad thing is that when we are in trouble [*dduk*], then, it is sad whether earthly or heavenly, but the son thinks, “My father doesn’t love me. He gives me nothing.” But in his own time he gives everything and does love. It means this that he does not forget his child. (*expl*)

There were some references to the idea of punishment and blessing, but these were minor compared to the focus on renewed relationship. For example,

Interview 6B Hyderabad

R: No, it wasn’t the will of the father. God doesn’t want his servant [*bandO*] to become bad [*karAb*]. But if he is stubborn and makes errors [*ghalti*], then God gives punishment, and he received punishment. If he was not wrong, and had the right thinking, then he would have had much money. He could have had a business and become rich. (*exp, ill*)

Some believers expressed a view of the rewards promised in Islam as an indication of greed.

Interview 15B Larkana

S: Or in [my former faith in Islam] doing good deeds I look for a reward, that is a motive of greed [*lAlach*]. Paradise, virgins, and 3 rivers. [laughter] (*trad*)

M: So you had the idea of the 3 rivers which provided a motive of greed.

S: Yes, greed. Virgins, rivers, and good clothes. But I’m not sure about the good clothes [laughter]. (*pers, trad*)

They also expressed rejection of the concept of performing certain actions in order to be acceptable to God. In their previous belief, even though they did these actions, there was no confidence that they would be accepted.

Interview 3B Hyderabad

N: [from my Muslim background] God is merciful and gracious, he is far from humans, and there is distance from his character so that it is necessary for a person to do good deeds. It is these acts that are the things acceptable to God.... And the things that allow us to come to God or to be acceptable to God, for humanity to meet with God, the things that make Muslims acceptable to God, prayer, fasting. Still it is up to God whether or not we are acceptable. (*expl*)

Interview 10B Rohri

NN: At the beginning I was very religious and did prayers [*nimAz*] regularly. But still I had no [confidence, comfort? *Taslls*?] that I would go to paradise, despite all my work [*kam*]. (*pers*)

The strongest narrative, repeated a number of times, contrasted the image of the forgiving father in the parable with an image of a frightening God they had previously feared before becoming believers.⁴⁸¹ Out of a fear of punishment, sometimes for seemingly minor errors, they tried to please God. The image of God in the faith they had turned from is described as hidden, far away, wrathful, fearful, angry, punishing, harsh, vengeful and frightening. They had the fear of hell hanging over their heads with every action they took.

Interview 3B Hyderabad

N: There is a messenger that takes an accounting and then God may be angry at us. (*trad*) There are 99 names of God (*trad*) and from our childhood we were taught to be afraid of God. If we did anything wrong then God would punish (kill?) [*mar ddearna*] us. He is a wrathful (*gazabnak*) God. (*expl*)

M: So before coming to Christ, your idea of God was that he is...

N: Hidden, far away and wrathful.

M: Your relationship with God was one of fear.

N: Yes, lest he be angry and throw us in hell, give us punishment, lest he give us a disease for which there is no cure, always we were afraid. Whoever we talked to we were afraid lest this was a special servant of God and if we give him trouble [*takllf*] then he may pray for God to hurt us. That is we were always afraid lest God do something against us. (*pers*)

...

N: Originally this is what we were taught from Islam, from the Qur'an, from the Hadith, from public prayers, from those we met. It is like having our kids think that there is danger everywhere they walk; then they walk slowly, carefully, with fear. Or we can teach them, "No, do not fear" then they walk freely. (*ill*)

...

N: Well, when there is an accounting, people are caught in their sins and then are cast into hell. (*trad*) This was the fear. This was the teaching we had in Islam from childhood. Work, work, because there will be an accounting! Even in small things. "Why is your shirt [*qamees*] up! This is wrong. You are in trouble." (*ill*) Even if it was only a small thing we were caught in, it was the fear of hell. (*pers*)

Interview 10B Rohri

NN: It is different. The way I was thinking before, God was harsh [*sakht*] and frightening [*Drijjarna vArO*], for example, the torture of the grave, what is the original [purpose?]. What will happen after death? Perhaps God is on one side and there is no comfort about what God [will do?] But now, it strikes me [*laggarna*] that God is not

⁴⁸¹ This narrative of God from their former faith is in contrast to the traditional group's perspective. See 10.2.1 for an examination of the different perceptions.

frightening, but loving. (*expl*)

Interview 11B Rohri

RD: At the beginning, I believed that God loved. But he destroys the sinner and certainly gets revenge [*ver*]. That was my idea before [becoming a believer]. (*trad*)

M: Now what is your idea?

RD: Now if we confess our sins and turn to him, he loves us and cares [*sambhal*] for us. (*expl*)

Interview 15B Larkana

S: I didn't see God as loving. If I did good things, it was done in fear, lest I be punished. (*pers*)

M: Even though you did good things?

S: Yes, a person doesn't do good things joyfully, but in fear. Only for this purpose that I may be punished. (*pers*)

...

M: This description that you have just given about God, which you said matches your understanding, has that been your understanding from the beginning, or did it change?

S: No, it came afterwards. My first idea was that God is just [*insAf*]. If we do right things [*naiki*] then we get a reward [*ajar*], we get good things. If we do bad things, sin, then we get punished.

M: This was your original idea that the emphasis was on God giving punishment to sinners.

S: God is just [*insAf*].

M: Because of this thinking, what did you feel [*mahasUs*]?

S: I didn't see God as loving. If I did good things, it was done in fear, lest I be punished. (*pers*)

The contrast as experienced by the believers centers on relationship with God performing the same actions towards people, but with a different intention. Instead of watching us in order to catch us in an offense, he watches as a father in order to care and protect.

Interview 3B Hyderabad

N: God always sees us and watches over us. Before there was a fear about the report that would be written about us. Now there is no fear of that at all. Now God says, "Don't worry. There is no need to fear." In this way there is no worry or fear. From childhood I did not know what would happen. But God says, it is not like that at all. God loves like a father and a father never wants to harm his children. (*pers*)

God is creator and is to be worshipped, but now, instead of worshipping in fear out of duty, the action is one of love because of God's relationship of love to people.

Interview 19B Naodero

A: For me God was fearful, we had to worship him. He was the creator of heaven and earth. But now this: God loves us like a friend [*dost*]. For me, this was the impact, that whatever the condition of a person, God loves them. (*expl*)

...

A: First, God was only there for worship. Now, God is for service, for love, and for concern [*fikr*] and sympathy [*ehsAs*].

...

A: [Previously] God was frightening [*Drijjarna vArO*] and we must worship him (*pers*)

M: Now what is God like?

A: Now God is love, and we need to serve him. (*expl*)

These believers interpret the action of the father as applicable to them in an immediate and relational sense, rather than as rewards in a future paradise. This is expressed in terms of comfort in the midst of trouble, as well as attributing safety to God's power of protection. In the following example, N adds a perceived motive on the part of those persecuting him as gaining "credits" to enter paradise.

Interview 3B Hyderabad

N: In my personal life I first had great fear of God, but now he has given me comfort [*tasalee*] when he came to me. It was a privilege, a gift of love to give me comfort. Many things he has given. For example, my relatives have given me a lot of trouble in the last three months. We prayed for God to shut the mouth of the one who was causing trouble. He complained to a religious leader about me saying I had left Islam and had gone away from Islam. There is only one punishment for that [i.e., death]. But God shut his mouth. This is a recent example of how God has acted like a father to me. He has protected me. (*pers*)

...

N: Those people are powerful. They have the excuse and opportunity to give punishment and torture and to make afraid. They have reasons to pursue me, because if they kill an infidel they will gain credits with God and will gain entrance into paradise. There was no one to protect me or help me. There was no elder or landlord to take my side. There was only God, who acted as father. (*pers*)

Interview 19B Naodero

A: God desires for his name to be blessed, for his work to be revealed and people to praise his greatness. And now whatever happens in my troubles, I recognize that God does these things for me. Love gives birth to love. I have seen that if I do not love God, then I will not love my brother or sister. If I do not do that then how can I love God who I have not seen? (*pers, trad*)

Textual Referent: While the textual referent includes the verses referring to the "rewards" received by the younger son in verses 22-25 and 32, the focus for the believers was on the evidence of the restored relationship of the son with the father that is evident in the parable.

Faith Referent: The primary faith referent was to God as the father who cares for them, in contrast to a wrathful God who looks to punish. A number of participants provided examples of how God relates to them as father in a personal manner.

Interview 10B Rohri

NN: And it is in this story that the lost son tried to be like his father or greater than his father or whatever, but when he realized [*ehsAs*], even as I realized, that even though I do good work, I am still a sinner. But I cannot go there [i.e., by myself], so I went back to him, even as the son went back to the father. But God treated me in such a way that he accepted me and made me his child. (*pers*)

Some *personal narratives* illustrated how their faith in God as a loving father affected their own relationships.

Interview 3B Hyderabad

N: Sometimes in my house I mistreat my wife. I really try in my household to treat my wife right so that she can see Christ in my life. But I ask for some things and she doesn't give it, then I respond by complaining and being irritated. My love is there, but because I am tired and haven't had chai and have a headache, then [I react badly]. I am praying over and over that I may not do this. Not be angry and that I can show love. But nevertheless things happen that shouldn't. (*pers*)

Cultural Referent: The participants referred to their exposure to teaching about God that was prevalent with their society in a number of settings: school, mosque, home, conversations. That such teaching exists is affirmed by Zaman's (undated) illustrated book written for children entitled *Hell: Pits of Punishment*, which I purchased in a bookstore in Karachi, Sindh. In addition, the impact of the relationship with God as a caring father in their lives was also given through personal examples.

Illustration of variety of genres

The most impacting of the genres is *personal narratives* that contrast the view of the father in the parable to the participants' experiences before becoming believers. In addition to *explanations*, there were *illustrations* from their culture, such as the reference to training children, and also references to *traditional* stories and quotes, such as the reference to the "messenger that takes an accounting" and the "99 names of God" (N Interview 3B) as well as biblical quotes.

Validity and reliability of the sorted data

(1) *The culture texts develop the subject (theme).*

The relationship of the culture texts to the theme of rewards, punishment and the fear of God, included all three, but focused on the latter two aspects. The concept of rewards was mentioned using similar culture texts as the traditional group, but dismissed as an inappropriate temptation to greed. Instead, blessings from God, both present and future, were viewed as gifts that reveal the caring and generous nature of the Divine. Illustrations of punishment and the fear of God were

given as contrasts to the message of the parable.

(2) *A communication of their own life experiences rather than speculation about others.*

Many personal examples were given to illustrate a contrast between previous beliefs and their current belief.

(3) *Credibility in the relationship of culture texts to their culture.*

The familial *illustrations*, as well as the quoting of *traditional* stories and quotes, can be verified by the broader cultural context and they also match my own experiences in the Sindh.

(4) *Positive reinforcement from other participants.*

The citing of personal references that were in accord with other interviews gives credence to their experience of fear before becoming believers. The consistent interpretation of the passage as a picture of their current relationship with God validates these perspectives as part of their context.

Theme 4: The relationship of human beings with God (child versus servant)

Explanation of Sindhi terms: The Sindhi has a number of ways to express servanthood.⁴⁸² *nokar* is closer to “employee” and indicates paid service or, in a pejorative sense, helping others in a self-serving way with an ulterior motive. Although *nokar* is generally descriptive, rather than pejorative, and used often in daily life, the connotation that a person is serving for financial gain and not from their heart makes this unsuitable for a description of one who serves God. The words *ghulAm*, *khAdam*, *bbAnO* or *bandO* are used to indicate total dedication to God without thought of reward. *ghulAm*, *bbAnO* and *bandO* are closer to *slave* than *servant*, with a focus on total commitment that includes a submissive and meek attitude. *khAdam* means “one who lives for service [of God or others]” and is a title used for pastors of churches in Pakistan.

The attitude associated with that of servanthood is one of submission or humility (*Ajazi*, *nivaRi*) and total dependence. The corresponding action is one of complete obedience (*farmAnbardAr*) to the master’s commands (*hukam*). The opposite characteristic is pride (*magrUri*) and its accompanying action is boasting (*fakhar*).

Although the inclusive term “child” is used in the title of this theme, the term “son” was primarily used by the participants, both because of the influence of the parable and because of the dominant masculine orientation of the Sindhi language and culture. The key word used for son (*puT*) has a broad range of meaning in Sindhi. It can be descriptive of a biological or social (e.g., adoptive child or “like a son”) relationship, be used metaphorically to express someone’s

⁴⁸² The Sindhi concept of servanthood is also mentioned in the exegetical overview in 8.4.1.3.7.

character (e.g., “son of Satan”), or act as a term of endearment for either adolescent boys or girls.

Traditional group interviews

Conformity to clustering criteria

Common Theme: This theme approaches the Divine–human relationship, first considered in theme #1 (God’s compassion), from a different perspective. Rather than exploring the attribute of God’s mercy in relationship to humanity, this theme identifies the preference of some participants to speak about the human relationship with God in terms of *master–servant* rather than *father–child*. Although the story is about two “sons,” the common Sindhi expression, based on the emphasis in Islamic teaching, of the human relationship to God is not familial, but of being servants to a master. This was the preferred terminology of the traditional group when interpreting the familial relationships in the parable as referring to way people relate to God.

Interview 1T Hyderabad

The second thing is that the second son is almighty God's obedient servant. He is also God's loved one who is with him. He [the son] accepts [*qabUl*] him [God] and acknowledges [*taslIm*] him. (*expl*)

Interview 2T Hyderabad

LL: You need to understand that in Islam, the concept of father and son for God does not exist. In the Qur’an it says that God is alone/unique. He is not born, neither does he give birth. (*Trad, ill*)

Interview 20T

DS: And if a son chooses instead a wrong road, then the father will be distressed [*dukh*], and he will want the son to come back to the straight path so that he can receive that which is good. (*ill*) In the same way, Almighty God wants each servant not to be disobedient and not to go down a wrong path, and if he does, then he wants him to show regret and come back to a straight path. In this Almighty God is happy and only in this is there benefit to the servant. (*expl*)

This preference became explicit if one participant showed a tendency to adopt *father–child* terminology in reference to the Divine–human relationship. Even when one participant used the “child” metaphor, the resulting dialogue often shifted to concepts of servanthood.

Interview 14T Khanpur

GMA’s son: ... if a son returns with humility, then the father will certainly forgive him. Even though his son may have been rebellious [*sarkashi*], gone against his father, nonetheless, the father can accept him again. (*expl*)

RK: Human beings are precious servants [*bbAnO*]. There is no other word for “*bbAnO*.” People are not animals, they are precious servants. They can return, but an animal will not ask forgiveness; it does not think. (*ill*)

The first son's decision to return and become a servant (verse 19) was not interpreted as someone lowering themselves below their station in life, but as recognizing their appropriate status. This reflected the type of relationship with God with which the participants felt comfortable.

Interview 14T Khanpur

BB: He came to his senses and admitted wrong. He said, "what I have done is wrong." Now he uses the word "servant." That is, he has become humble [*Ajazi*]. That is, he has repented from his sin, and said, I will become a servant. That is, in humility he [felt grief for his sin?]. Now he has arrived at the place where grace can come. When he went back he said, "I will be below a servant." That's the thing. And God, who is [gracious?] shows mercy. But for this the father said, "[clothe?] him" so that people can become holy [*pAk*] from sin. (*expl*)

The older son, even though his response to his brother was acknowledged as wrong, was seen as a "dedicated servant."

Interview 14T Khanpur

NB: He [the older son] wants to be the dedicated servant [*bbadho bbAnO*]. He wants to place himself higher up [*mathE*] so he boasts and is proud... (*expl*)

This emphasis on servanthood was coupled with a resultant shift from a focus on the relationship to a concern about "obedience to commands," and total submission. The older brother's anger and response to the father was interpreted as boasting, pride, arrogance and inappropriate, the opposite of the meekness required of a slave.

Interview 20T Larkana

IJ: Now, in the part [*sitran*] of the holy Bible that was read, any person who lives against God's commands [*hukam*], he will experience trouble. But if that person will return to God's commands, then it is as if he has come back to life because before he was living in opposition to God's commands. When he becomes sorry [*pashtAu*] and returns and begins to live a good life and is sorry for what he has done, then it is as if he has come back to life. (*expl*)

Interview 14T Khanpur

NB: ... in him [the older brother] is boasting [*fakhar*], and his own pride [*magrUri*] is obvious.... He has a boast in himself, Just as a man who is self-disciplined [*prEzgAr*] – this is an example – if he should be a *maolvi* or a pastor, he considers himself better than the average person. "Because I am close to God." (*ill*).

...

TT: The problem with the older son was his boasting. He thought that he was above [*mathE*] [everyone else]. And God says, "Whoever comes to me humbly [*hETH*], bows down, considers himself poor before God, he will come close to me" (*trad*).

Interview 20T Larkana

BB: Yes, his [the older brother] attitude towards the father was inappropriate and he should not have reacted against him in that way. He opposed his father. Whatever is

God's will should be accepted by us. (*trad, expl*)

Textual Referent: The relationship of the sons to the father throughout the passage is the referent interpreted as a “servant” relationship. The younger son's desire to become a servant in verse 19 was also referred to by some participants in their interpretation of the passage.

Faith Referent: The participants' conviction that their appropriate status before Almighty God is the meekness and total obedience of a slave is drawn from their identity as Muslims. From the emphasis on *deen* (conformity to religious commands and practice) over *Imaan* (belief) in the culture, to the posture of prostration in Muslim *nimAz* (prayers), this attitude is pervasive.

Cultural Referent: The attitude of total submission to the will of God is evident in the daily speech of the average Sindhi Muslim, although the corresponding action is often lacking. Furthermore, within this patriarchal society, the attitude of meekness and total submission is reflected in the employer–employee, teacher–student, father–children and rich–poor relationships. The divine *master–servant* relationship is a dominant traditional motif that is reflected in many ways within Sindhi society.

Illustration of variety of genres

Religious *illustrations* and *traditional* quotes or references revealed the *master–servant* theme. The word “*bbAnO*” (servant) is primarily used in a religious context and is a powerful image of meekness and submission that strengthens the imagery of other descriptions. These genres were supplemented by the *explanations* that corresponded to the theme.

Validity and reliability of the sorted data

(1) *The culture texts develop the subject (theme).*

The culture texts emphasize the servant posture that is the primary relationship of the participants' relationship to God.

(2) *A communication of their own life experiences rather than speculation about others.*

The *illustrations* and *explanations* that were given to connect their *traditional* quotes to the interpretation of the text demonstrate their conviction that such an orientation fits with their values and beliefs.

(3) *Credibility in the relationship of culture texts to their culture.*

The comments reflect Sindhi society both through constant reinforcement of the participants' beliefs through formal and informal teaching as well as through the social hierarchical constructs

that conform to the divine *master–servant* dynamic.

(4) *Positive reinforcement from other participants.*

There was uniform agreement of the supreme significance of this relationship to God.

Believer group interviews

Conformity to clustering criteria

Common Theme: The believer group also identified the human relationship with God as a primary message of the parable. Even as the father was identified with God, so both sons were considered to be analogous to human attitudes, characteristics or orientations in the way people relate to God. As with the traditional group, the vocabulary of servant was evident.

Interview 6B Hyderabad

R: God doesn't want his servant [*bandO*] to become bad [*karAb*]. But if he is stubborn and makes errors [*ghalti*], then God gives punishment, and he received punishment. (*expl*)

Jesus relationship with God was also described using servant imagery.

Interview 6B Hyderabad

R: God tests his servant [*bandO*]. He brings people into testings [*emptehan*] to see if they succeed or fails. Even as Satan said to Jesus, "If you say, you can make these stones bread." Jesus said, "People do not live by bread alone, but live for God." (*trad*)

Unlike the traditional group, the believers were comfortable using familial language, clarifying the relationship with illustrations from Sindhi culture. This familial language is used both for followers of Jesus and for Jesus' relationship with his heavenly father. The believers' connection to Jesus secures their own familial relationship with God.

Interview 15B Shikarpur

S: I like this part where the son says to the father, "O father" [*Eh bAbA*], even as we address God like this, "O father, give us this." (*pers*)

M: Why is it that you can call God "*bAbA*"?

S: It is a special title that we can give God because of Jesus. We are his children. Not physically, of course. (*expl*)

M: Very good.⁴⁸³

S: There is a second thing. Note that Jesus taught prayer to start with "*Eh bAbA*." Or the Messiah said on the hill, "O father, why did you desert me?" So he provided this special address. So wherever this is used by Jesus, it reminds us of this relationship. (*trad*)

M: So this is not just an example of father and son used to express something else, but it also demonstrates a truth [*haqiqat*] in the relationship.

⁴⁸³ Here, and elsewhere in the interviews, "very good" is a Sindhi interjection that affirms the person for speaking, not a value judgment on the content of their comment.

S: Yes, it is the truth itself fulfilled [*haqlqat pUrE ThIE ThO*].

M: Even as the Messiah said on the cross, “*Eh bAbA*” and taught in the beginning of the prayer, “*Eh bAbA*.”

S: Yes, it is a special sign of love [*mohabbat*], and in this is not only love, but also humility [*haleemAE*] (*expl*)

M: How?

S: *Eh bAbA* means “O my father” and indicates that he [Jesus] is less and his father is greater. (*expl*)

Interview 21B Larkana

MM: This is also human nature. The average father will also do this. He will treat his son, whoever it is, in the same way. We read in the papers about this. A son goes away and the father is very anxious. When the son goes away the father wants him to come back before his eyes, to be in his presence. He doesn’t reject him. (*ill*)

M: So your idea is that God is like this?

MM: Yes, God is like this. (*Dial*)

The impact of this relationship with God was expressed through one participant’s experience of prayer.

Interview 15B Shikarpur

S: Whenever I pray to God, I address him in this way. Or also, people make many errors [*ghaltIUn*], I also make errors every now and again. Then I have a great burden in my heart. But when I call on him in this way, then I feel that God does hear me. (*pers*)

Nonetheless, familial language is understood as metaphorical, rather than literal. This was made clear through explicit clarifications (“this is an ordinary example”), the use of simile (“like”), and comparison to other biblical Divine–human relationships (“master,” “creator”).

Interview 15B Shikarpur

S: Because God loves in the same way that a father loves his son. But actually, God loves us even more than that. But this is an ordinary example from which we can see the revelation of his love. (*expl*)

Interview 21B Larkana

MM: Whoever comes back under [God’s] rule [*bAdshAhi*], whoever accepts God’s rule over him, God becomes very happy even as with a son who returns. When one comes back close to God, into his rule, near to him, then God becomes happy. (*expl*)

...

MM: God is both master [*mAlik*] and creator [*khAlik*]. Because he is creator, he has affection for the thing he has made. (*trad*) The father is an example of this. If he has a disobedient son and then the son suddenly, for whatever reason, returns, then the father shows him even greater concern because he has returned to him. He becomes even more happy at his return. As creator, when his creation has returned to him, then he becomes even more happy. (*expl*)

Furthermore, the familial language does not detract from a servant attitude, rather it enhances the importance of such humility and meekness.

Interview 15B Shikarpur

S: From this we see that when we sin against someone, we need to confess it and confess it before God. Just like the son says, “*Eh bAbA*, I have sinned against you, and against God” and he also feels that “I need to call upon my Father and he will certainly listen to me or help me. Even though I am not worthy to be called his son, OK, but please treat me as a servant. Hire me as a servant.” So we see this as humans. (*expl*)

Textual Referent: The context of the entire parable with respect to the father relating to his two sons is the textual referent used by believers as reason to adopt familial language for their own relationship with God.

Faith Referent: The expressions of their relationship to God and God’s relationship to them indicate a personal impact of faith beyond conformity to cultural beliefs and practices.

Cultural Referent: As with the traditional group, the motif of the submissive servant is prevalent. Furthermore, the language used to describe God’s relationship to the believers as father is understood to be illustrative of common familial relationships in the culture.

Illustration of variety of genres

Apart from *explanations* given to describe the theme, there were examples of *dialogue* and *traditional* quotes. However, it is *illustrations* from culture as well as *personal narratives* used to express their relationship to God that best reveal the importance of this theme for the believers.

Validity and reliability of the sorted data

(1) *The culture texts develop the subject (theme).*

The culture texts reveal the importance of the servant motif as well as an appropriation of the parable’s familial language to describe the believers’ relationship to God.

(2) *A communication of their own life experiences rather than speculation about others.*

Personal examples were a significant part of the participants’ responses.

(3) *Credibility in the relationship of culture texts to their culture.*

Both in regard to the submissive attitude of a servant as well as the more intimate and intense relationship of a child, key relationships of the culture are represented in the culture texts.

(4) *Positive reinforcement from other participants.*

Comparable *illustrations*, *personal narratives* and *explanations* affirmed the validity and reliability of the data.

Theme 5: Issues of justice, honor and status

Explanation of Sindhi terms: In Sindhi there are two main words used for the concept of justice, *insAf* and *adAlat*. The latter refers to the act of judgment with the value of justice implied. If it is God's judgment (*adAlat*), then it is assumed to be right. *insAf* refers to the nature of the judgment as fair and appropriate. Equality (*barAbari*) implies that the same reward or status is accorded to those who are equally deserving. This aspect of justice is closely tied to the concept of doing an accounting (*hisAb*). There is a common belief that on the day of resurrection, two angels stand at the foot of the grave and do an accounting (*hisAb*) of the person's deeds, weighing good deeds against the bad to determine if a reward or punishment is required.

Status (*rutbo*) is understood in the context of relationship. It is bestowed by someone greater, or inherited through one's family. Honor (*izzat*) and dishonor (*bezzat, zilat*) or shame (*zaval*) are used to describe the position and role of a person within a community. Honor and shame result from actions done that reflect upon one's status. Both honor and shame are shared by those associated with or identified with the person who has either earned honor or acted shamefully.

Traditional group interviews

Conformity to clustering criteria

Common Theme: In the parable, both sons struggle over the appropriate status the repentant son deserves. The younger son believes that he should no longer claim the status of son, and the older son concurs. The issue of justice was tied closely to this concern and in one of the interviews this became a point of contention as the participants could not agree if it was an act of justice to receive the younger son back freely. One person argued that since the younger son had wasted his portion, he had no right to enjoy the inheritance of the older son. A follower of Sufism provided a counter argument that the father's act was justice because it reveals "that the love of the father is the same for all." In other words, one participant was arguing for equality (*barAbari*) of goods, while the other claimed that the true message of the parable was an equality (*barAbari*) of love. The former concept fits well with the common Sindhi understanding of justice, while the latter is unusual, reflecting both Sufi influence and insight into the passage.

Interview 20T Larkana

M: Is this just? [the reaction of the father to the older son]

IJ: Yes

DS: It is obvious that this does not resonate [*lagg*] as justice. Justice is this, that the share the son is entitled to is the portion he already took. If this is a matter of justice,

then when he returns to the father, then.... No, justice didn't occur. The other brother, who worked hard, gathered together, whatever, he was with the father, everything was his portion. Now the father, if this was a literal father who gives his inheritance, then it is his choice. But if it is the son's work [*kamaiee*], and he [the father] gives to the other from that, then that is not just.

IJ: In this the older brother says, "You didn't even give me a goat, so I could celebrate with my friends. But you gave this special, healthy calf, and celebrated with friends with comings and goings, eatings and drinkings. Why don't I get that?" He [the father] replies, "Son, your status is already set. You did not get lost. The one was dead and lost and did wrong things, so when he returns we cannot reject him." In this, in comparison with God, is the love of the father revealed. The love of God is even greater than humans (*comm*).

DS: But the question is, is this just?

IJ: Why not? This is justice.

DS: Even though he already had his portion?

AB: But he is giving to him from the father, not the other son.

IJ: This is not the point. The portion that he took, he didn't take it from the older brother's portion. That is not the point. If you think about it, the issue is that a person has been separated from his father. He suffers trouble because of bad things he does, so much so that when he leaves the city and comes to the village, he even tries to get work with the pigs, but no one gives him anything. He does not even get the food of the pigs. He came back. He saw the results of his actions and came back to the father. And he thinks, "Will my father accept me or not?"

DS: But if this is justice, then explain it. How is this justice?

IJ: It is just in this way that the love of the father is the same for all. (*dial, expl*)

This explanation did not satisfy the first participant who asked for clarification of how this could possibly be an act of justice. IJ acknowledged that if it is a question of dividing the inheritance, then the younger son did not deserve another portion. However, he saw the parable as an expression of relationship to the father. The restoration of the status of sonship was an act of justice because it was an act of love. Furthermore, the suffering of the son while away from the father is also an aspect of justice that the son suffered for his wrongdoing.

Interview 20T Larkana

AB: In comparison to a father, God is more kind [*maharbAn*]. 100 times more. (*comm*) Way more than a father's. The Master [i.e., God] can do this. So if this is just, then let's let the man explain how this is just.

M: Because this is the older son's complaint: "Father, you did unjustly." But how is this just? That is the question.

IJ: The father says to the son, "This is not unjust. You are always with me. You have my same greatness [*hesEat*]. All the city and village people know that you are the son of the landowner. But when this son left and rejected his father, then it was questioned as to what kind of son he is, people did not recognize him [i.e., as a legitimate son]. That which he had, he wasted in wrong desires. Afterwards no one considered him important. People considered him only fit for labor. Then he thought, 'I will go to my father and become a servant.'" (*expl*)

DS: This is an act of love, right?

IJ: Yes.

DS: But if someone would take this to court and make a case of it, and they were to say, OK give us some proof [*daleel*].... (*ill*)

IJ: If he was to say, "I have wasted my inheritance, now give me another." There wouldn't be any support for that.

DS: No, that is not possible.

IJ: In this the point is not that the father gave one inheritance and now is asked to give another.

All: No, this is not the point. No.

IJ: It is this that the father is giving the status [*rutbo*] back to the son. He becomes happy in this that the person who had become separate because of wrong actions, has now come back. The love [*shafqat, mohabat, piAr* – uses all three for emphasis] of the father, is the same for him. There is justice in this in that the person who left the father suffered trouble. (*expl*)

This argument found a measure of resolution through the agreement that a redistribution of the inheritance would have been wrong, and since it is not clarified in the parable this possibility was entertained. Nonetheless, the restoration of the status of "son" carries implications of rights to property in the Sindhi context that were disconcerting to the participants. One participant resolved the dilemma in traditional Muslim fashion by acknowledging that God is sovereign and therefore whatever he does must be right.

Interview 20T Larkana

DS: The person who was on the right path did the right thing.

IJ: If the father dies, or if alive, disappears, or appears or not. But when the lost son comes back then the older son will say, "Get out of here." This could be the result.

DS: But God is the master. It is his choice about what he does. (*trad*) If the son comes, then whatever he wants he will do.

....

IJ: About the justice issue, there is confusion if a person insists on thinking about the inheritance. The son says "make me a servant." The father says, "no."

AB: Yes, in that there is justice.

IJ: There is mention of an inheritance. But there is no mention of getting another inheritance.

DS: In this is the will of the father and if he wants, and the son shows regret and returns, then this is just. But if there is a question of inheritance of the older son, then if he asks for that, then you could say that this is not justice. (*dial*)

The distribution of the inheritance at the beginning of the parable was interpreted as reflective of the justice of God. People receive according to what is their appointed right. Therefore, even though the younger son was "bad," his status as a son requires an equal portion. This was perceived as an act of justice.

Interview 14T Khanpur

GMA's son: God is the one who gives. God is like this father in that he gives according to the person's worth/right [*ahar mutabiq*]. In the same way, the holy God gives people their daily bread [*rizzaq*]. People come into the world to get their portion [*hissu*]. (*trad*)

RK: There is equality here. The father has two sons. One is good [*sudrall*] and one is bad [*karAb*]. But according to their share, they are given property. That is, what they want to take.

M: So what do you think about God from this?

RK: God is like this, in that whoever he has created, he also gives them their share, according to their fate [*nasIb*], whatever property is theirs, they get their share. (*expl*)

NB: And when the one son brought the idea forward, the father divided it in half. Now it is up to the sons how they will use it. That is, this is now a matter of fairness [*adAlat* = justice].

M: How is this fairness [*adAlat*]?

NB: There was justice [*insAf*] in that he gave the inheritance equally, even though one was bad [*karAb*]. But he has relationship [*rishto* – i.e., status].

M: So the father, even though one son was good [*sudrall*] and one was bad [*karAb*], according to his righteousness [*haq*], did justice [*ins*].

NB: Yes, this is fairness [*adAlat*]. (*expl, dial*)

The equal division of the inheritance was described as fair by one participant, and therefore reflected an attribute of God, even though he also noted that a human father would not have acted in this way.

Interview 20T Larkana

BB: The teaching about God is this, he [the father] didn't distribute according to his will, otherwise the distribution would be uneven. He would have given one 3000 and the other nothing. But he gave evenly according to God's will. If he gave one 3000 and the other hardly anything, it would have been his [the father's] own law. (*ill*)

DS: He did justly. He distributed in a just manner. But after that when the son returned, but when the son returned, that's when we see the will [*marzi*] of the father. (*expl*)

M: This is a matter of justice. Equal shares. Is this according to your thinking about God? God is like this?

DS: Without doubt. There is no one who is just [*insAf*] like God. (*comm, dial*)

...

BB: You asked about the dividing of the inheritance. The father gives to the sons equally. The owner gives as he pleases. He didn't give more to one and less to another. He gives equally and fairly (*expl*).

The restoration of the status of the younger son was interpreted as a bestowing of honor based on the person's actions. Disobedience earns dishonor, repentance opens the door to God giving honor.

Interview 20T Larkana

M: So your meaning is that from this teaching God gives people, uh,

DS: Honor [*izzat*]

M: He gives honor?

BB: Honor and dishonor [*zilat*] is in the hands of the master [*mAlik* - ie God]. If the person is disobedient, then there will not be forgiveness because they are not following the right path.

....

BB: In this we see that God is kind and gives honor and dishonor. He turned his back on the father, he turned his back on God.

....

BB: He gives [the son who returns] honor, and encouragement [*himat afzAee*]. (*expl*)

Textual referent: The textual referent is verse 12, the dividing of the inheritance, as well as the acceptance and celebration of the younger son that the older son considers unfair in verses 28-32.

Faith Referent: The faith referent for the traditional group is primarily their view of God as being just and acting in a just manner. This assumption is not questioned and is reinforced by statements of God's sovereignty in acting. By definition, what God does is right because there is no standard above God. God is the ultimate essence and standard by which justice is determined. "The Master" (*mAlik*) is therefore the giver of both honor and dishonor and such decisions are just.

The Sufi perspective of God as relational and loving nuances this concept of justice. In restoring the son, the father makes things right in a way that raises the concern above mere equality about *things* to an equality of *status* and a focus on *relationship*.

Cultural Referent: The *value* that caused conflict was one of fairness and equality based on an assumed standard accepted as a universal norm in Sindhi culture. This is reflected in the implicit concern for equality (*barAbari*) in the dividing of an inheritance. This can be a contentious issue in Sindhi families.

The concern for honor and dishonor in this high context culture⁴⁸⁴ is evident in daily interactions, through the use of a polite form of address, through one's attire, or through deference to an authority. Many Sindhis will give up lucrative positions and opportunities without a qualm if they believe that their honor is at stake.

Illustration of variety of genres

The genre *dialogue*, especially within one interview, revealed the importance of justice and equality. *Explanations, illustrations, common sayings* and *traditional* statements supported the participants' claims.

⁴⁸⁴ See the definition of a high context culture in 4.3.4.

Validity and reliability of the sorted data

(1) The culture texts develop the subject (theme).

The culture texts revealed a concern for issues of justice, honor and status and their perspective on these concepts was disclosed through the dialogue.

(2) A communication of their own life experiences rather than speculation about others.

Although there were no personal references, the opinions were presented as their own beliefs. In particular, the questions raised and comments made about equality and fairness reveal their convictions about the nature of justice. The explanations were phrased as expressions of their own thoughts and not just quoting another authority.

(3) Credibility in the relationship of culture texts to their culture.

The concern for honor and sensitivity for equality (*barAbari*) is an integral part of Sindhi culture. The many examples of injustice in society create discouragement and expressions of distress among Sindhis. Court cases and more informal communal justice systems are common and their prevalence underscores the concern for this issue among Sindhis.

(4) Positive reinforcement from other participants.

Interaction within the interviews as well as the compatibility of ideas between the separate interviews demonstrates conviction around a common theme. Even when they disagreed, the discussions conformed to given assumptions about justice and the nature of God.

Believer group interviews

Conformity to clustering criteria

Common Theme: Participants in the believer group considered the equality of people's status before God of greater importance than the concern for an accounting (*hisAb*) for wrong actions. The restoration of relationship was seen as the primary way God makes things right, as opposed to rewarding or punishing with material things. It is not that everyone is equal with regards to sin, but that with regards to God's compassion, all have equal access.

Interview 9B Rohri

ASR: The good [*naik*] person should not boast. And the one who is great [*vaddO*] should not think, "I am great." But he needs to be small [*nanDhO* = humble]. He needs to think like this. He needs to feel that if my brother has made a covenant [*ahad*] to leave sin and come on a holy [*pAk*] path, that this is good. (*ill*) In the *Injil* is written, "The one who is great will be made small, and the one who is small, will be made great." (*trad*) That is the idea here. God is compassionate [*raham*] and the idea here is that everyone is equal. God's compassion is the same for everyone.

M: From this example what do you see that tells you that in God's sight all are equal?

ASR: Because the father said, the one son was saved from sins. This is how we know. The other son was righteous [*naik*] but he was kept from wickedness [*buchaRaian*]. But the other son who was saved from sin and came back into a good way of living, because of him the father was very happy. Because he had returned into living a good life.

M: So the father was happier with the younger. But this is still equality [*barAbari*]. Whoever repents from sin and the one who remains faithful, they are equal.

ASR: In terms of compassion [*raham dill*] [i.e., not in terms of their sin].

M: So in that sense they are equal in that God equally has compassion for them.

ASR: Yes. (*expl*)

Interview 18B Naodero

DDS: His father was one who loves [*mohabbat vArO*]. He loved all his children equally. He does not want for any child to go crooked and become bad [*karAb*]. (*expl*)

Interview 19B Naodero

A: In this we see that God loves both the sons equally and gives them an equal portion. The younger son, despite the love and kindness of the Father, of God, he disobeys. But God, despite the disobedience of the son, loves him like he loves the older son. In his love there is no difference. (*expl*)

...

A: Despite [*halank*] they are disobedient or here [in the passage] we have disrespect for parents. So even if God's chosen go astray, here we have a disobedient one, but he receives his portion. Even though he is disobedient, God's love is with him.

M: So the father's love...

A: What I have given is a summary [*nichOR*], we could still bring out more details. Despite our disobedience, God loves us equally. God's love does not become less. (*expl*)

The equality of the sons to each other is based on the superiority of the father. The sovereignty of God is the basis for equality between the righteous and the repentant. It is the perfection of God's love and compassion that creates this equality of grace.

Interview 13B Shikarpur

H: The true one is true [Sindhi saying] (*comm*). The true one is with him (the Father). One son went wrong [*bhulji vayo*], and the other was true. But in the midst of going wrong, when he suffered [*dhak laggO*], then he said, "I will return." Then the son who was there saw that his brother had come home to eat and said "no." But it is the father who is kind. God is kind. Kindness does not reject others. The brothers are equal [in the father's sight]. He thinks [*kayal*] of both equally. And the father is greater than them, they are not equal to him. The brothers are equal. (*expl*)

M: Both are. The one who was lost, and the one who was with the father.

H: Yes. But the father is greater than both. So he loves [*shafqat*] one, he loves the other as he pleases [*marzi*]. There is no one to question him. Is there anyone who can question God? No. No one can question God concerning who he is kind towards. He is compassionate in himself. He is the one who is master of the whole universe. The brother is angry [*narAz*] because they are equal. But the father's love is very

[perfect/pure? *nerali*]. The father was happy and God's favor and kindness was displayed. (*expl*)

A concern for restoring relationships as opposed to meting out punishment for wrongdoing was a common theme for the believer group. Rather than requiring an accounting for the dishonor caused by the son, the focus was on acceptance.

Interview 3B Hyderabad

N: In this example God appears as love. He is love and grace. He [the son] was not worthy. He committed such a mistake that if the father brought out a pen and paper to take an accounting of the money, disobedience, of the dishonor – this is a big deal, because if the neighbors see a son leave angrily, that is very bad, a matter of honor and dishonor. (*ill*)

M: So this is a matter of honor and dishonor.

N: Yes, but when the son returned, the father said, “he was lost, now is found. Was dead and now is alive. He has come to me.” In this we see an amazing love which God has for humanity. (*expl*)

...

Another thing about the father, when the son returned, he did not get a pen and do an accounting, like what would be expected in Islam. (*expl*)

Interview 7B Jacobabad

GR: He says to the oldest son, “the inheritance is yours, but this is my son.” For him, they were like his two eyes. (*comm*) There is no accounting [*hisAb*] in that.

N: Yes, that is the issue. He did not do an accounting [*hisAb*]. God is such that he does not do an accounting [*hisAb*] with us, otherwise we would not be able to complete our part.

GR: We cannot complete the test of the accounting. It is beyond us. For example, if a person has a debt and is thrown in jail, how will he pay the fine to get out? His brother has to pay the fine. But then can he repay? No, he can't give back the money and there is no accounting [*hisAb*] [expected]. (*ill*)

In this sense, one participant even went so far as to say love trumps justice. Even though this concept made him uncomfortable, due to a sense of unfairness, yet he found it inspiring and a source of spiritual guidance.

Interview 15 Shikarpur

S: I understand this about God that he is more loving than he is just. (*expl*)

M: Explain this.

S: Here we have a son that has served the father his whole life. And he says, “I have served you all my life and lived as your servant and obeyed your commands, nonetheless you did not even give me a goat to enjoy with my friends. But this son of yours which has wasted the inheritance in excessive living and been disobedient, for him you slaughtered the fattened calf.” So from this I see that if the main concern was justice, then he would say to his disobedient son, “That's all, I've given you your portion. Get out of here.” Or he would give to the other son a goat or a calf as well.

That is the meaning. That would be justice [*insAf*]. But more than justice, love is revealed.

M: What you mean by justice [*insAf*] is equality [*barAbari*], but there is no equality here.

S: Yes, if this was about justice for sin, then there would be punishment. If there was to be equal response.

M: How does this strike [*lagg*] you?

S: This is a bit surprising [*ajeeb*]. Actually, according to love this is correct. But this is a bit surprising that the [the older son], whose life is perfect, no imperfection or fault, obedient, for him there isn't even a goat. And the one who has lived his whole life in disobedience, but only comes back at this time, then the father is happy and killed the calf. This is difficult for me to understand. Love is good, but this is difficult for me. (*pers, expl*)

M: Your thinking is that the righteous person [*naik*] has come up short compared to the sinner.

S: Yes, that is the issue.

M: That which you have explained, what is the impact in your life? That is, because God is more loving than just, what is the impact?

S: The impact is this that I am also trying to love others. Because even though I am a sinner, God loves me, God is happy with me, so why should I not treat them the same way. So my attempt is to love others. (*pers*)

....

S: ... People dishonored Jesus and got angry at him, but still Jesus loved them. This is also a great love that for others' sins – it is sufficient for me to suffer for my own – but for other's sins... If I was to suffer for the sake of others' sins, then that is difficult. But Jesus did this and showed [his love]. (*pers*)

M: In this is not a matter of justice.

S: No, this is a matter of love. It was love that caused God to make this arrangement. It was because of love that the Messiah accepted this.

M: So love is greater than justice.

S: Yes it is higher. (*expl*)

One participant pointed out the amazing willingness of the father to accept dishonor for the sake his son. Although this is contrary to Sindhi values – the natural reaction would be to “make him suffer... [so that he would] feel the dishonor” – the action of the father was acknowledged as a virtue.

Interview 3B Hyderabad

N: It is written that he had pity on him and ran [emphatic] and hugged him! Even though he could have waited for the son to come to him and fall at his feet. He could have said, “I am the elder. Why should I go to him?” but he went himself. This is an amazing thing. In our culture, a father would never do this. The father thinks that son should honor him, not vice versa. The father is always looking for honor from the son. He is looking for the son to be obedient. But not here. (*ill, expl*)

M: What do you see here? Where is the honor here?

N: His humility and his grace/mercy and his love was such that he went himself.

M: He did not have concern for his honor.

N: No, it is not here at all. He goes and kisses him and hugs him. In our culture that kind of father is very rare. He didn't do an accounting, even though he was such a disobedient and dishonorable son, yet he didn't complain or get upset or get angry. Instead he was concerned about his clothes. He dressed him, gave him a ring and made him decent [*shAn*] and restored him. (*expl*)

M: If this story was about your culture, what would the father have done?

N: Would have struck him hard and beat him and made him understand "what is our honor?" Made him suffer, maybe put him in jail. Been upset, angry, beat him. He would certainly do something to make him feel the dishonor. (*ill*)

Textual Referent: The textual referent for the believers was primarily the contrast between the father's declaration of relationship to the younger son in verses 24 and 32, and the older son's seemingly justified feelings of offense in verses 29 and 30. In addition, the acts of dishonor by the younger son in verses 14-16, as well as the lack of concern of the father for his own honor in verse 20, were the stimulus for the participants' comments.

Faith Referent: The faith referent for the believers indicates tension between a high value for love and the importance of justice and honor. All three aspects are part of their worldview and belief, particularly with respect to God's attributes. However, this represents a challenge to their culturally assumed priorities as indicated by the following comments. The first one is about honor and the second justice:

Interview 3B Hyderabad

N: No, [concern for his honor] is not here at all. He goes and kisses him and hugs him. In our culture that kind of father is very rare. (*expl, ill*)

Interview 15B Shikarpur

S: I understand this about God that he is more loving than he is just. (*expl*)

Cultural Referent: The faith conflict arises from cultural *values*. There is sensitivity to fairness and equality, yet the need for love and forgiveness is also valued causing cognitive dissonance. As mentioned with the traditional group, the concern for honor and dishonor in this context affects their response to the values portrayed in the parable. Such tensions and clashes with the values expressed in the parable demonstrate *resonance*⁴⁸⁵ with cultural norms.

Illustration of variety of genres

Due to an exploration of the tensions between cultural values and the values noted in the text, *dialogue* was an important genre. *Explanations, illustrations, common sayings and traditional*

⁴⁸⁵ "Resonance" can both affirm and contrast cultural values. See 5.5.

statements provided both depth of meaning and affirmation of the existence of the theme.

Validity and reliability of the sorted data

(1) *The culture texts develop the subject (theme).*

As with the traditional group, the believers generated culture texts that expressed a concern for issues of justice, honor and status.

(2) *A communication of their own life experiences rather than speculation about others.*

The personal references demonstrated appreciation for the values of the parables, but the direct application of those values in their life experience was not clearly expressed. Nonetheless, the opinions presented revealed their own beliefs and values, at least as ideals.

(3) *Credibility in the relationship of culture texts to their culture.*

As with the traditional group, concern for honor, status and justice is evident in many aspects of Sindhi society. It is particularly noticeable and noted where there is perceived dishonor, a fall in status or an experience of injustice.

(4) *Positive reinforcement from other participants.*

With respect to the concern for equality (*barAbari*), there was considerable confirmation from others. In the individual discussions about the father's lack of regard for his honor and the concept that love trumps justice, even though these concerns were not directly addressed by other participants, nonetheless the cultural values of honor and justice that created the tension in the minds of the two who made those comments were affirmed in the other interviews. This is another example of an *unconscious* affirmation of cultural values. The participants' struggle with the concepts confirmed their existence.

Theme 6: The importance of obedience to God

Explanation of Sindhi terms: While related to theme 4, *The relationship of human beings with God (child versus servant)*, the focus of this theme is on the *action* and *orientation* of obedience, rather than on the relationship of the person to the one in authority. The Sindhi terms for "obedient" (*farmAnbardAr*) and "disobedient" (*nAfarmAn*) do not necessarily relate to a specific command or order given, but refer to the actions of a person that conform to or diverge from the will and desire of a person in authority. *nAfarmAn* is not as strong as "rebellious" (*bhAggi*), as it does not imply action *against* the authority, only a deliberate refusal to conform to the will of the authority figure. "Faithful" (*emAndAr*) is stronger than *farmAnbardAr*, and indicates trust and faithfulness to a person or creed. *farmAnbardAr* stresses obedient action, *emAndAr* refers to

uncompromising dedication and includes attitude and commitment. The concepts of “acknowledge” (*taslIm*), “recognize” (*samjhE ThO*) or “accept” (*qabUl*) are not as strong as “obedient” (*farmAnbardAr*), since they focus on a person’s willingness to recognize and accept the one in authority, but do not make their action explicit. Thus, a person could conceivably acknowledge (*taslIm*) the person in power, but then act in disobedience due to some other impulse.

Traditional group interviews

Conformity to clustering criteria

Common Theme: The concept of “disobedience” (*nAfarmAn*) is only found once in the mouth of the older brother in the parable, and there is no express command in the passage that would indicate that the younger son had failed to obey a specific statement of the father. However, this point was not in dispute by the participants who recognized the younger son’s actions as disobedient, going “off the right path,” and the older son’s actions as obedient to the will of the father.

Interview 1T Hyderabad

P: From this teaching we see that the lost son is one who is disobedient [*nAfarmAn*], who returns to God and asks forgiveness of his sins and God forgives him and makes him his own. The second thing is that the second son is Almighty God's obedient servant. He is also God's loved one who is with him. He [the son] accepts [*qabUl*] him [God] and acknowledges [*taslIm*] him. He has no difficulties [*taklIf*]. God acknowledges that he is with him and is obedient.

...

P: ... if a person is disobedient, but then repents and returns to become obedient [*farmAnbardAri*], he receives forgiveness (*expl*).

Interview 2T Hyderabad

LL: The father is honorable, the son is disobedient. (*expl*)

Interview 14T Khanpur

BB: If a father has a son who is corrupt [*bagaReel*], off the right road, disobedient, then he can give him forgiveness [*muAfI*]. (*expl, ill*)

...

A: Another thing is that the older brother was always with his father and always obeyed. Whatever the father said, working on the land, he did. (*expl*)

Interview 20T Larkana

DS: In the same way, Almighty God wants each servant not to be disobedient and not to go down a wrong path and if he does then he wants him to show regret and come back to a straight path. (*expl*)

One *traditional* story was used to contrast angels (obedient) with humans (disobedient). The point of the story is that even though humans may be disobedient, God values the humble attitude of repentance. Because they have not sinned, the angels are like the older brother in their arrogance of their own status and their rejection of those who are disobedient.

Interview 2T Hyderabad

LL: The angels were upset that humans were given more authority than them. They said, These humans will commit murder on earth. This is not right. [God said to the angels] I have given them a place above all creatures. And what they can do, you cannot. They can obey completely or not. They have authority. Angels must obey.

Interview 14T Khanpur

RK: I think this about the example. When God made Adam, then the angels [*farishta*] said to God, “why did you create such a creature who will go in the world and do evil? [*fasad* = rebellion] Bloodshed, fight with each other, and go and spread rebellion in the world. Why do you create such a creature? You have many creatures like us already who worship you. Why make them?” God Almighty declared, “What I know, you do not. This nature, like that of the other brother, I know already. Because those who are servants are many, God made many angels and many human beings. We who are servants, are servants of God. His nature I know... The angels are always obedient, but they do not ask for a reward [*inAm*]. They continually worship. But this human being which I made who disobeys. I gave him the portion of the inheritance and he went away. But when he realizes [*ehsAs* = feels his error] and comes back (*trad*). So this human nature is a little careless [*na-fikro*]. He is a sinner. Angels are not sinners, they are obedient, which is the example of that one son. And so there are two types of creatures, one like angels, obedient, and the other, humans. The angels say, “why did you make them?” (*trad*)

Textual referent: While the actions and orientations of the two sons is a concern of the entire parable, the younger son’s repentance in verses 18, 19 and 21, and the older son’s accusation in verse 29, are primarily in view.

Faith Referent: Obedience to God coupled with a humble, repentant attitude when disobedient is a fundamental conviction of the participants. This orientation of meekness and submission to God, who was constantly referred to as Almighty, Creator and Master throughout the interviews, was an unequivocal assumption that guided their responses.

Cultural Referent: Conformity and submission to God’s will is a key value for all Muslims, and it is no different in the Sindhi context. Dependence upon God for all things, the absolute authority of the Divine and the uncompromising need for obedience to the law of God (*Shari’ah*) is reinforced in a number of ways in the Sindh, including schools, television programs, mosques and the common references to God in everyday speech.

Illustration of variety of genres

Apart from one key *traditional* story, the majority of the references to obedience came as people *explained* the parable in their own words. Despite the limited genres used to express this topic directly, it was an unquestioned assumption that guided much of the discussion in the interviews. References to the younger son “going off the right path,” repenting, and the need for forgiveness point to the value of obedience.

Validity and reliability of the sorted data

(1) *The culture texts develop the subject (theme).*

The culture texts cited affirm the theme of obedience to God in the Sindhi context.

(2) *A communication of their own life experiences rather than speculation about others.*

Although there were no personal references, the opinions were presented as their own beliefs.

(3) *Credibility in the relationship of culture texts to their culture.*

The orientation of submission and obedience towards God is ubiquitous in Sindhi culture as described under the *cultural referent* above.

(4) *Positive reinforcement from other participants.*

The assumption of the importance of obedience to God was uniform, and when explicitly mentioned was affirmed by others. This perspective was evident in all the interviews.

Believer group interviews

Conformity to clustering criteria

Common Theme: Similar to the traditional group, the believers did not question the need for obedience to God and the freedom we have to be obedient or disobedient was also drawn from the parable. One participant referred to this as “authority,” “freedom” and “power” to conform to God’s will or not. He used an example of marriage to focus on the power of choice to either strengthen (obedience = right road) or undermine (disobedience = wrong road) the relationship.

Interview 21B Larkana

MM: That which we read, it is an example of Jesus. In the example, there is a man who had two sons. They are an example of the people of this world. One is like this, one is like that. God gives them authority [*akhtlAri*], that is the inheritance. The one son used that authority in wrong deeds [*ghalat kam*]. What this means for us is that we too can use our authority in either way. We have the power to use it in a right way or in a wrong way. We can waste it in excess and foolish ways. Wasteful living [*Esh Esharat*] is not just in eating and drinking, but in all kinds of activities. (*expl*)

M: So what you mean is that God gives us authority or freedom to use what we have been given.

MM: God gives us freedom.

M: He gives us what we need to live, and then it is our choice to choose either this road or that. The right or the wrong road.

MM: An example is a man and a woman who get married. God has given us the way and the command to be married. But we also have the power to have a relationship in a wrong manner, one that goes against what is good. But we still have the power. (*ill*)

M: Very good. Even as you explained the meaning of the first part of this parable, is this according to your way of thinking?

MM: Yes.

M: Is there anything here, a word, a phrase, a thought, that you especially like?

MM: The idea of authority, that we have freedom. We are not forced [*majbUr*] but according to the road we have been told about, we can choose that or not. (*expl*)

Others mentioned disobedience in contrast to the love of God. Even when we make decisions that go against the Divine will, God's response is to love us, despite our improper actions. In this case the focus is not on repentance and forgiveness as in theme 2, although this is implied, but on the love of God *in spite of* disobedience.

Interview 3B Hyderabad

N: Even though he was so disobedient and brought such dishonor on the father. He [the father] did not complain at all. "What is this? What have you done?" No, nothing at all. The son returned and the father was happy – *VAh!* (*comm* expression of amazement). He did not become angry and upset. (*expl*)

Interview 8B Rohri

AG: What I understand about God is that the faithful [*EmAndAr*] are already with God, but God also loves the sinner, because he (God) is the one who loves [*piAr kandarRa*]. (*expl*)

Interview 19B Larkana

A: When the son returned then the father had pity [*tars*] on him and despite the disobedience, he hugged him to his chest. And was happy for his return. (*expl*)

While it was assumed that the second son deserved the title of "servant" (*bbAno*) because of his obedience to the father, the focus for some participants was that the relationship of son bestowed on the returning son was one of *grace* and not because of his past actions or conformity to the father's will. That is, while an obedient character is important, the message of the parable suggested to the believers that this of secondary importance compared to the acceptance of the father. One participant related this to a "complaint" of traditional Muslims that they do not have their faithfulness rewarded.

Interview 7B Jacobabad

GR: The son obeys the father, so the one who obeys is his servant [*bbAno*], the one who doesn't is wrong, disobedient. (*expl*)

Interview 8B Rohri

AG: [The other son] said, “I am always with you. But you have never done anything for me so that I can go and celebrate with my friends. But your son who took all this wealth and wasted it, that is, among prostitutes and with alcohol, and now has come back and you give him a ring and good clothes, and have killed a calf and you celebrate for him.” But the father said, “You are always with me. Everything I have is yours. However this one who is my son was dead and is now alive, was lost and is found. *Now he is with me.*” (*expl* – italics added to underscore the point being made)

Interview 3B Hyderabad

N: This is the complaint of the holy, faithful Muslim: “I have prayed so much, but have got nothing. He is the one getting your praise.” That is, they cannot understand grace. They only want to get the reward of their works. (*ill*) Even as in the parable of the vineyard, some worked the whole day, some half, some an hour and in Jesus’ example they were all given the same. Those who came early were jealous and said, “Why were we given less money [than we deserve]?” So [similarly] the older son said, “I’ve always been with you.” (*trad*)

Textual Referent: The main section of the passage for the believers was verses 29-32, which highlighted the contrast between the obedient son with his expectations and the disobedient son with his experience of the father’s grace and restoration of relationship. Also verse 20 was referred to demonstrating the reaction of the father to the son in the context of the son’s disobedience.

Faith Referent: While the concept of obedience to God is affirmed, the faith of the believers connects with other messages in the passage that are of greater significance for them. Thus, while obedience is important, it is secondary to renewed relationship. The significance of this orientation is explored in the next chapter.

Cultural Referent: As with the traditional group, the believers live in a context in which values promoting conformity permeate Sindhi culture and obedience to God is superlative. The assumption of required obedience is unquestioned and a theme that resonates strongly, even though the response to that theme may be different from the traditional group. There is a reaction against the motive of obeying in order to earn rewards rather than serving out of a heart of love.

Illustration of variety of genres

Explanation, common sayings, illustrations, and traditional stories were used to express the believers’ perspective on Jesus’ teaching about obedience in the parable.

Validity and reliability of the sorted data

(1) The culture texts develop the subject (theme).

Most culture texts in the interviews did not focus directly on the theme of obedience, but all the other themes explored thus far are dependent upon the assumption that obedience is critical in our orientation to God. There is both a direct relationship to the topic in the parable, as seen in the older brother's accusation, as well as indirect assumptions from the actions of the characters (repentance of the son, comments of the father). The disobedience of the younger son was not prominently explored as a separate issue, but was a key influence in all the discussions.

(2) A communication of their own life experiences rather than speculation about others.

The convictions about obedience and disobedience were phrased in ways that demonstrated exposure to this religious duty and personal reflection on the place of obedience in faith. The idea of earning rewards through obedience was a challenge to one participant in his past interactions, while another had pondered the implications of having the freedom to choose.

(3) Credibility in the relationship of culture texts to their culture.

As mentioned, the theme of obedience runs deep in Sindhi culture, and this was reflected in the nature of the culture texts generated.

(4) Positive reinforcement from other participants.

As with the traditional group, obedience to God was either assumed or commented on with affirmations from others.

9.3 Summary

This chapter describes how culture texts are identified as data and categorized into six distinct themes through the application of clustering criteria and the consideration of genre. Four validating factors are used to determine the contextual legitimacy of the culture texts. The comments of believer and traditional groups are kept separate in order to facilitate the identification of contrasting theological perspectives in the following chapter. The themes are *(1) God is compassionate/kind/merciful/loving beyond our imagination, (2) God forgives those servants who repent, (3) Concepts of rewards, punishment and the fear of God, (4) The relationship of human beings with God (child versus servant), (5) Issues of justice, honor and status, and (6) The importance of obedience to God.* Chapter 10 examines the contrasts between the believer and traditional groups within each theme and identifies one overarching theological trajectory.

CHAPTER 10. Theological Shift

Sindhi believers' theological trajectories are identified through the mapping process in terms of *content*, *direction* and *impact*.⁴⁸⁶ The culture texts used by believers to express their perspective of God were analyzed in the previous chapter to identify the *content* in terms of six themes. In this chapter similarities and contrasts between the two participant groups are identified for each theme and categorized as aspects or expressions of one primary theological trajectory. Differences in faith between the two groups determine the *direction* of the trajectory. Emerging theological convictions of the believers represented by the theological trajectory are then evaluated according to the seven dimensions of Kritzinger's (2010) praxis matrix to determine the breadth and depth of cultural *impact*.

10.1 Similarities and Contrasts within Identified Themes

Of the four means by which people achieve worldview resolution when confronted with a concept that appears to clash with their current perspective,⁴⁸⁷ it is the last orientation of *acceptance* by adjusting prior convictions and accommodating to its implications that sets the believer group apart from the traditional group and is key to identifying theological trajectories. For each of the six identified themes similarities and contrasts between the believers and those in the traditional group provide the data from which theological shift is mapped.

Theme 1: God is compassionate/kind/merciful/loving beyond our imagination

Similarity: All interview participants strongly affirmed that God is merciful and accepted this message of the parable without question. Both groups explained that the parable is a limited picture that captures only a partial reflection of the full mercy and compassion of God. The inheritance was symbolic of the generosity of God to humanity. The home of the father represented the blessings that come about by obedience to the father's will, as illustrated by the older son's position in the household. Among both believers and members of the traditional group there was a variety of opinion about whether or not the father favored one son more than the other based on their actions, or if there was equality. But the conviction that God is overwhelmingly merciful beyond human imagining was consistent.

Contrast: The believers accepted the depiction of the father as an appropriate and true revelation

⁴⁸⁶ See the description of theological trajectories in 5.7.

⁴⁸⁷ See 1.4.4 for a description of the four responses to restore equilibrium.

of God's mercy. They related examples of divine mercy in their lives and in God's general dealings with the world as illustrations of a fatherly orientation to humanity. They willingly accepted the description of God's mercy as expressed by the love of the father towards the returning son. The believers viewed the parable as an expression of the vast love of God. For example, in referring to the father's response in the parable, one participant stated, "About God we learn that he never rejects us [*chaddarna*] but always loves us. He always loves and never forgets us" (AG Interview 8B). In contrast, the traditional group focused on the inadequate and limiting nature of any human metaphor to describe God. They emphasized the unknowability of God's mercy; it is far beyond, or other than, the meaning of the parable. They tended to *contrast* God's love with the father's love, with God's love being far greater, "70 times as great" (BB Interview 14T).

When asked for personal examples, the traditional group consistently replied in third person:

Interview 14T Khanpur

M: Does anyone have a personal experience? A personal example.

RK: No, no one has a personal example. But the point is this...

GMA's son: I have a personal example. We read this lesson that *Bayana* [?] prophet gave an equivalent treatment which is obvious to us. In the same way that parents distribute their inheritance, then all the sons consider this fair treatment.

In contrast, the believers provided personal anecdotes:

Interview 19B Naodero

A: I have had this experience. God not only loves in happy [*suk*] times, but in troubled times [*dduk*] as well. If God loves us in happy times, that is not a big deal. But if we are troubled [*dduk*] and he loves us, that is a big deal. (*expl*)

Interview 21B Larkana

MM: Yes, perhaps you remember that I gave one of my kidneys to my brother. This was at a time when we did not have a lot of [support?] from others. I had no children. This was four years ago. Suddenly my brother lost the function of his kidneys. No one else would give him a kidney. I was taking him to the hospital and looking after him by myself. I was very anxious about this, but I said, "No, I will give my kidney to him." I saw that if I did not, he would die. The doctor said he would not survive without this. A few people, including my wife, talked to me about this. They said it was dangerous, you do not have any children, perhaps if you do this you won't have the strength to have children at all. But I ignored all their warnings and said, "No, I need to do this in order to give him life and save him." And I gave my wife this testimony that even though I do not have any children, but my brother has 3 children. I don't have any children, therefore, I will not have regrets [*afsos*] [if I die]. If he dies, then this will have great impact on his three children. Therefore, this sacrifice is worth it. The fact that he is my brother is one thing, but he is also a fellow human being and

if he dies his wife and children will be alone. If he dies, who will care for his children?
How will they survive? (*pers*)

This was a matter of compassion on my part. When I had my operation and returned, people, followers of Islam, said to me that I was without doubt bound for heaven [*jannati*]. “You don't need to do anything else and you will certainly go to heaven.” But I said to them that I had no thought of heaven. I did not have this operation out of a greed for heaven. I did it because of the compassion that was in me. (*pers*)

Within the traditional group interviews there were two exceptions to the reservation of attributing human attributes to God and both participants were followers of Sufism (P Interview 1T, IJ Interview 20T). In contrast to the instinct of the average Sindhi Muslim to maintain a safe distance from God,⁴⁸⁸ followers of Sufism desire a mystical relationship with God and so they welcome the familial language. For example, when referring to the return of the younger son, P (Interview 1T) assumes a direct correlation between the father and God declaring, “God forgives and makes him [*barnairna*] his own son.” H (Interview 13B) illustrates the believers’ lack of reticence in shifting between references to God and to the father in his descriptions (references to God and the father underlined).

When he arrived, the father’s love came on him and the father was willing/pleased [*rAzi*]. God loved [*shafqat*]. It was God [emphatic] who, when people [*insAn*] turn to him, will accept them to himself. God’s love was greater than the son imagined. Yes, his idea was, “Where should I go?” Apart from God there is nothing else. “Because if I go to the father he will show favor [*sahAro*]” It is God’s favor [*inayat*] Do you understand, sir? Favor [*sahAro*] is the father’s, favor [*inayat*] is God’s which is a kind of God’s love (*expl*).

Theme 2: God forgives those servants who repent

Similarity: The condition of repentance in order to receive forgiveness was important to both groups. God's forgiveness and mercy is dependent upon the humble and repentant attitude of the servant. Stated in the reverse, God will not forgive those who refuse to repent. Even when someone strongly emphasized the incomprehensible mercy of God, another participant would often add a comment similar to GMA’s son (Interview 14T), “but only when he returns and repents.” An essential aspect of repentance is the attitude of sincerity, humility and submission. God’s forgiveness is comprehensive for any and all sins, if the repentance is sincere. Forgiveness implies restoration of God’s blessing reflecting the generous character of God. This characteristic was contrasted to the lack of mercy demonstrated by people towards those who do wrong.

⁴⁸⁸ See the “oranges” anecdote found in a footnote in 4.3.3 for an illustration of this perspective.

Contrast: The believers explicitly stated and affirmed that forgiveness means that God will forgo the accounting of the one who repents.

Interview 7B Jacobabad

NN: He did not do an accounting [*hisAb*]. God is such that he does not do an accounting with us, otherwise we would not be able to complete our part.

GR: We cannot complete the test of the accounting. It is beyond us. For example, if a person has a debt and is thrown in jail, how will he pay the fine to get out? His brother has to pay the fine. But then can he repay? No, he can't give back the money and there is no accounting [*hisAb*] [expected]. But if he turns to the right [*sudrE*] then [things can be made right].

They also expressed confidence in God's forgiveness as it relates to them personally. For some believers forgiveness was described as going beyond restoration to the provision of "full life" (DDS Interview 18B). Some believers contrasted the parable with a previous understanding of a legalistic Islam in which "we should pray [*nimAz*], do fasting and our sins [*gunAh*] would be forgiven. We were also taught that God does love, but also that we needed to follow the rules and have faith in Muhammad in order to enter paradise" (Q Interview 4B). In the same interview, Q declares his experience before his conversion as one of uncertainty, whereas he now has confidence: "The difference is this, that I have surety that my sins [*gunAh*] are forgiven and I have a relationship with God. Before there was no certainty if we would be forgiven or not. Now I know for sure."

In contrast, the traditional group did not comment that forgiveness results in the forgoing of an accounting, nor did they describe the result of forgiveness in terms of having a "full life" or relationship with God. They did not provide a personal illustration about forgiveness, nor did they express confidence that they have been personally forgiven. The participants in the traditional group were consistent in their confidence that God forgives the repentant but did not clarify the implications or contours of that forgiveness. While it would go too far on the basis of silence to conclude that the traditional group would deny the assertions of the believers, the prevalence of such concerns on the part of believers indicates that the experience of forgiveness is of greater importance to them. The harsh view of Islam by some believers, evident particularly in the interviews with Q (Interview 4B), N (Interview 3B), S (Interview 15B) and NN (Interview 10B) given as a contrast with their new faith, was not reflected in the comments made by the traditional

group and this may be the source of the different emphasis.⁴⁸⁹

Theme 3: Concepts of rewards, punishment and the fear of God

Similarity: Expressions of the reality of paradise and hell were similar for both groups.

Contrast: Some believers demonstrated an altered orientation towards God that affects their view of paradise and hell. They understand God as desiring their good and actively involved in saving them, rather than having a *primary* concern for divine glory and righteousness that would demand the punishment of sinners. That is, they have moved away from a deep sense of fear of offending God resulting in punishment to a confidence that God desires their best and acts for their good.

The traditional group did not express trepidation concerning their standing with God, nor did they view God as vindictive or harsh resulting in a sense of fear of punishment. Rather they expressed a loyalty towards their Islamic faith with a sense of trust in God's judgment. Their orientation of submission included confidence that God would act with justice, while the believers demonstrated a sense of excitement that God would care about and for them. This does not imply that either group would disagree with the other's orientation, since both were focused on positive attributes of God. However, the contrast lies in their perception of God's relationship with them that impacts their consideration of the afterlife.

The intensity of the believers' perspective appears to be based on a prior experience of Islam that was different from that expressed by the traditional group. Many of the believers formerly viewed God as judgmental and ready to pounce on any mistake they made. Now they consider God to be on their side, wanting them to succeed and even going so far as to provide a personal sacrifice so that they can be saved. In Interview 3B, N states that

from our childhood we were taught to be afraid of God. If we did anything wrong then God would punish (kill?) us. He is a wrathful [*gazabnak*] God.... [He is] Hidden, far away and wrathful.... [We fear] lest he be angry and throw us in hell, give us punishment, lest he give us a disease for which there is no cure, always we were afraid.

S (Interview 15B) saw the appeal of Paradise as "a motive of greed" that he now rejects. Another participant expressed his orientation to God in terms of friendship rather than fear of punishment or greed for reward stating, "Love gives birth to love." Rather than driven by fear to worship, his concern now is "for service, for love, and for concern and sympathy" (A Interview 19B).

⁴⁸⁹ The different emphasis is explored in 10.2.1.

Theme 4: The relationship of human beings with God (child versus servant)

Similarity: Both groups considered the terminology of “servant” (*bandO*) to be an appropriate description of our relationship with God and a good application of the parable. Although the parable is in the form of familial relationships, the interpretation was often phrased in terms of a master and servant relationship with references to commands and obedience. P (Interview 1T), a member of the traditional group with Sufistic leanings, states, “The second son is Almighty God's obedient servant. He is also God's loved one who is with him.” Also within the traditional group, DS (Interview 20T) describes the parable in terms of “father” and “son,” but shifts the metaphor to “servant” in his application (*italics added for clarity*).

If a son chooses instead a wrong road, then the *father* will be dismayed, and he will want the *son* to come back to the straight path so that he can receive that which is good. In the same way *Almighty God* wants each *servant* not to be disobedient and not to go down a wrong path.

The general consensus seemed to be that whether phrased as son or servant, God's will is to be accepted absolutely. “Yes, [the older son's] attitude towards the father was inappropriate and he should not have reacted against him in that way. He opposed his father. Whatever is God's will should be accepted by us” (BB Interview 20T).

Contrast: The members of the traditional group preferred the terminology of *master–servant* rather than references to a familial relationship with God. The familial concept was considered illustrative, relating to the story rather than to humanity's actual relationship with God. In explaining the parable, they often resorted to using *bandO* (servant). While willingly using the servant imagery, the believers also welcomed the familial language as an appropriate description of a new relationship with God.

Interview 15B Larkana

S: Whenever I pray to God, I address him in this way (O Father)....

M: Why do you feel that God hears?

S: Because God loves in the same way that a father loves his son.

In Interview 21B, MM interchanges the two metaphors demonstrating comfort with both concepts, “Whoever comes back under his rule, whoever accepts God's rule over him, God becomes very happy even as with a son who returns. When one comes back close to God, into his rule, near to him, then God becomes happy.”

Theme 5: Issues of justice, honor and status

Similarity: Both groups struggled with the unfairness of accepting the younger son back without consequences and were sympathetic to the apparent legitimacy of the older son's complaint. The primary concern was that the younger son would now have an unfair portion of the inheritance. The assumption was that God gives all people a fair share, not more or less than others. One participant insisted that because of the young man's status as a son, the father's initial dividing of the inheritance was fair, despite the son's bad character (NB Interview 14T). Another participant stated that God gives evenly, while people do not: "[The father] didn't distribute according to his will, otherwise the distribution would be uneven. He would have given one 3000 and the other nothing. But he gave evenly according to God's will" (BB Interview 20T).⁴⁹⁰ A primary unquestioned assumption held by all is that God is just because he *defines* justice. This contrasts the popular assumption of many in the West of an impersonal, abstract justice system that even God must submit to.

Contrast: While both groups orient their theology towards the idea of God's role as judge, the believers view the concern for justice as overshadowed by God's loving and caring relationship. In particular, the believing group took the view that God's great love overturned the need for an accounting. This created a tension for some believers concerning an apparent lack of justice that doesn't seem to be resolved. Love is considered to be greater than strict justice defined as fairness and requiring punishment for wrongdoing. This is accepted as good because it recognizes the supremacy of love, but the conclusion that love is somehow not fair is disconcerting. For example, in Interview 15B, S states,

[God] is more loving than he is just.... This is a bit surprising [*ajeeb*]. Actually, according to love this is correct. But this is a bit surprising that the [older son], whose life is perfect, no imperfection or fault, obedient, for him there isn't even a goat. And the one who has lived his whole life in disobedience, but only comes back at this time, then the father is happy and killed the calf. This is difficult for me to understand. Love is good, but this is difficult for me.

Despite misgivings, his application is positive: "The impact is this, that I am also trying to love others." His former interpretation of God as just was negative and fearful, the reorientation to a focus on God's love creates a context in which he can both experience and show love.

⁴⁹⁰ This assumption of "equality" doesn't reflect the likely scenario understood by the original audience. In Jewish law the eldest obtains "double the portion assigned to his younger brothers, cp. Deut. 21.17" (Reiling & Swellengrebel 1971).

Interview 15B Larkana

M: ... has [the concept of God as love] been your understanding from the beginning, or did it change?

S: No, it came afterwards. My first idea was that God is just. If we do right things then we get a reward, we get good things. If we do bad things, sin, then we get punished.

...

M: Because of this thinking, what did you feel?

S: I didn't see God as loving. If I did good things, it was done in fear, lest I be punished.

With a similar perspective, A (Interview 19B) explains, "Despite our disobedience, God loves us equally. God's love does not become less." Love is viewed as constant and greater than justice, putting punishment for disobedience in a disciplinary rather than punitive light.

The struggle between love and justice did not occur among the traditional group; there was no sense of comparing justice to mercy, or that God's mercy could be in conflict with justice. They spoke of both, but not in a comparing or contrasting sense.

Theme 6: The importance of obedience to God

Similarity: Despite the fact that there is no explicit reference in the parable to the obedience or disobedience of a specific command,⁴⁹¹ all participants interpreted the parable as portraying the younger son as disobedient and the older son as obedient to the father. Obedience as expressed by the participants was not about fulfilling explicit commands but conformity to the desire, honor and will of the patriarch. The importance of unity in the extended family provides the backdrop to the participants' evaluation of the sons. Sindhis value family solidarity, which parallels the concerns of first century Jewish civilization (Rohrbaugh 1997:145-146, Nouwen 1992:35). Because the younger son left and wasted the family inheritance, an action interpreted as opposed to the father's will, he was understood to be appropriately condemned. The older son remained at home and followed the rules of the house, an action that reflects Sindhi values of tradition and loyalty. Thus it was difficult for the participants to find fault with the older son who was seen as righteous and conforming to the father's will; even the reasons in his speech with the father were viewed as sensible and convincing. The parable as a story of "two lost sons" (e.g., Keller 2008:XIV; Snodgrass 2008:118) was not reflected in the participants' interpretation. The contrast that engaged their attention was limited to the view that one son is disobedient, the other obedient.

⁴⁹¹ The one exception to this may be the older son's refusal to go in and celebrate which was not interpreted as disobedience but as part of the message the son wished to convey. This is a culturally Sindhi way of communicating discontent that was assumed by all the participants.

Although the *content* of his speech was reasonable, the older son's *response* to the father was considered harsh and inappropriate. Even when a person has a good argument, it should not be used to oppose the patriarch. The participants also affirmed that the son did not have the heart, compassion and graciousness of the father. However, for the majority of participants, the basis of right standing with the father was conformity to God-ordained responsibilities rather than the father's desire for relationship. The older son was considered blameless in this regard, and the father's statement, "All that I have is yours," was taken as affirmation of the older son's claims and righteousness.

Interview 6B Hyderabad

R: He [the older son] did not do anything wrong, he always obeyed the father. He was on the right path. He did not do what was wrong, but went on the right path. He was happy with his father. He had everything. His father said, "All this wealth is yours. After me, all the inheritance is yours. You are the heir. This will not belong to the younger."

Contrast: The traditional group expressed the belief that disobedience is part of the created nature of human beings. God deliberately created humanity with a disobedient nature for divine purposes. This is reflected in a traditional story in which the angels ask, "Why did you make them?" and God replies, "What I know, you do not. This nature, like that of the other brother, I know already" (RK Interview 14T). In contrast, some of the believers stressed the idea that "we have freedom. We are not forced [*majbUr*] but according to the road we have been told about, we can choose that or not" (MM Interview 21B). As with the other themes, the contrast is not found in *contradicting* beliefs, but in the *emphasis* that is given. It is unlikely that these two participants (who were interviewed separately) would disagree with each other. However, the emphasis on the heavenly scene presents a more fatalistic view of humanity with an acceptance of our sinful nature. The believers, on the other hand, emphasized the freedom we have to choose *against* our sinful desires.

Some of the believers made a comparison between pious (*deendAr*)⁴⁹² Muslims and the older son. Those who are righteous and obedient have a weakness in that they cannot see past the legal requirements. "They cannot understand grace" (N Interview 3B). This is an implied contrast to their own posture of relying on God's mercy. Their view is that Islam favors the righteous

⁴⁹² The Sindhi words for religious, *deendAr* and *mazhabi*, although synonymous in one sense have different connotative impact. *DeendAr* has positive import describing a person who is faithful in following their religion. *Mazhabi* describes a hypocritical person who follows religious patterns but acts in unloving and unfaithful ways towards others.

exclusively and demands justice rather than mercy for the disobedient. “When the son returned, [the father] did not get a pen and do an accounting, like what would be expected in Islam” (N Interview 3B). It is significant that the traditional group’s acceptance of the father’s grace for the younger son as indicative of God’s nature contrasts the negative view of Islam assumed by N and other believers. This implies, as explored below,⁴⁹³ that the extent of the theological shift for the believers is *perspectival* in reaction to their understanding of Islam, an understanding notably different from the expressed beliefs of Sindhi Muslims in the traditional group.

10.2 Mapping a Theological Trajectory

The contrasts identified under each theme are now categorized under one dominating rubric proposed as the key theological trajectory for the believers as they engaged the parable. The primary shift that has taken place is from a *master–servant*⁴⁹⁴ paradigm of understanding and relating to God, to a *father–child* paradigm. Theme 4: *The relationship of human beings with God (child versus servant)* describes the primary distinction expressed by the participants in the interviews, and the argument below expands on this to demonstrate how all of the contrasts flow from this key reorientation.

While both groups provided evidence that these distinct paradigms are apt descriptions of their own theological stance, each group’s evaluation of the other paradigm appeared to be at variance from those who hold to that particular orientation. The traditional group considered the *father–child* paradigm to be inappropriate for the most part, or even *shirk*.⁴⁹⁵ Many in the believer group viewed the traditional group’s *master–servant* paradigm as evidence of a harsh perspective

⁴⁹³ See 10.2.1.

⁴⁹⁴ This could also be phrased as “master–slave” without misrepresenting the Sindhi Muslim view. To be the *slave* (*ghulAm*) of God is viewed and expressed as equivalent to *servant* (*bbAnO*) of God. However, because there are negative connotations for the Western reader in terms of abuse, degradation and forced compliance to an undesired relationship – concepts lacking in the Muslim Sindhi orientation – *servant* is employed to better represent the positive understanding of this relationship. However, the sense of absolute submission and uncompromising humility of the lesser to the greater inherent in the Muslim Sindhi orientation to God is somewhat obscured by the concept of *servant* and would be better represented by the term *slave*.

⁴⁹⁵ “*Shirk*” is the heresy of joining a created being to God and/or humanizing the Divine in some way. In chapter 42 of *Kitab At-Taweed* (book of monotheism or oneness, undated English translation :93), Muhammad bin Abdul-Wahhab (1703-1792 A.D.) refers to Surah 2:22, “Do not set up rivals (*Al-Andad*) unto Allah (in worship) while you know (that He Alone has the right to be worshipped).” He then quotes Ibn Abbas who explained that *Al-Andad* means *shirk* and referred to Umar bin Al-Khattab who stated that “Whoever swears by other than Allah has disbelieved or committed *Shirk*.”

of God. It is this latter perspective that reveals the significance of the theological trajectory for the believers. The *direction* of the believers' shift is from the *master–servant* orientation to God in Islam to a *father–child* relationship. The *extent* of that shift varies depending on whether the base line for the mapping is the believers' often negative narrative or the contrasting positive narrative held by the traditional group. The former narrative results in a dramatic shift with sharp contrasts while the latter is a less extreme shift with characteristics of the father in the parable applied to the *master–servant* metaphor. The distinction between the believer and the traditional groups' views of the *master–servant* paradigm in Islam is first outlined followed by a mapping of the theological trajectory.

10.2.1 Believer versus Traditional Group Narrative of God in Islam

Some believers' narrative of the *master–servant* paradigm in Islam is that God is cruel and terrifying, while the traditional group's narrative is that God is positive and gracious. Believers who have turned away from Islam remember being exposed to a fearsome, harsh and uncompromising God, a description that was not reflected in the interviews with the traditional group. The prevalence of this harsh view of God in Islam among believers may be indicative of why some Sindhi Muslims are attracted to the gospel message. The felt need created from such a perspective is met through acceptance of the gospel message, while Sindhis who do not entertain this negative narrative are not as likely to find the Christian message attractive. On the other hand, this may be evidence of “biographical reconstruction” (Rambo 1993:137-139) in which the transformation of the believer's consciousness and faith has resulted in the adoption of a negative rhetoric in order to put their conversion experience in sharp relief. The motive may be affirmation or expectations from other believers (:139) or a narrative of their “own story” (:137) as a rational construction to support the major shift in life commitment that they have experienced. Such considerations are beyond the scope of this study. Whatever the motive or source behind these orientations, they demonstrate a distinction in current theological perspectives between the believer and traditional groups.

These contrasting views of God in Islam are evident from the following diverse perspectives gleaned from the interviews. In each instance, both groups acknowledge a particular attribute of God emphasized in the traditional group's faith; the believers consider it in a negative light, while the traditional group views it positively.

10.2.1.1 God is unknowable/distinct from humanity

For some believers, the distance between God and humanity in Islam makes our current and future existence tenuous because, according to their former understanding, God does not have a relationship with us and therefore may not care for us. He may not be merciful.

Interview 3B Hyderabad

N: ... some things are difficult for me to understand that God is merciful and gracious [because] he is far from humans... he is far away from us. And the things that allow us to come to God or to be acceptable to God, for humanity to meet with God, the things that make Muslims acceptable to God [such as] prayer, fasting [do not satisfy].

Interview 10B Rorhi

NN: ... before [in Islam] I was afraid that God was not merciful.

For the traditional group, God's distinct existence separate from humanity is viewed positively; God's love is far greater than anything human beings are capable of. God forgives, when people may not.

Interview 14T Khanpur

BB: ... a father... can give him forgiveness [*muAft*].... God Almighty loves his servants [*bandA*] 70 times more than this. When he comes before Almighty God, he can forgive, this is not a great matter. He is forgiving [*Raheem*], merciful [*Kareem*], glorious [*jalal*], great [*jaleel*]. He is always merciful [*raham kararna vArO*]. He is merciful on all. He is so gracious [*fazal*], that we could never fathom it. Because of this he is merciful to us and he forgives us.

10.2.1.2 God decides who will be punished

According to the believers' prior understanding, God's judgment was frightening because God is "wrathful," responding with punishment to all that we do wrong.

Interview 3B Hyderabad

N: ... it is up to God whether or not we are acceptable. There is a messenger that takes an accounting and then God may be angry with us. There are 99 names of God and from our childhood we were taught to be afraid of God. If we did anything wrong then God would punish (kill?) us. He is a wrathful [*gazabnak*] God.

M: So before coming to Christ, your idea of God was that he is...

N: Hidden, far away and wrathful

Interview 15B Shikarpur

S: God is just [*insAf*].

M: Because of this thinking, what did you feel [*mahasUs*]?

S: I didn't see God as loving. If I did good things, it was done in fear, lest I be punished.

Interview 19B NaoDero

A: [In Islam] God was frightening [*Drijjarna vArO*] and we must worship him

However, the traditional group viewed this characteristic of God's judgments positively since God is not only just, he is also merciful and forgiving. Therefore, they are willing to trust that God's decisions will be kind and gracious to those who are humble and submitted to the divine will.

Interview 14T Khanpur

GMA's Son: Because when a son returns with a true heart, then God has the character of mercy and grace. It doesn't matter how much sin he has committed, but God is the forgiver. When he forgives, he forgives all the sin.

10.2.1.3 God decides who will be forgiven

Some believers portrayed their former faith in Islam as requiring an accounting for sins with no exceptions, even though a person may repent. It is solely God's choice and people have no certainty whether they will be punished or forgiven.

Interview 3B Hyderabad

M: your relationship with God was one of fear

N: Yes, lest he be angry and throw us in hell, give us punishment, lest he give us a disease for which there is no cure, always we were afraid. Whoever we talked to we were afraid lest this was a special servant of God and if we give him trouble [*taklif*] then he may pray for God to hurt us. That is we were always afraid lest God do something against us.

Interview 4B Hyderabad

Q: [In my former faith] there was no certainty if we would be forgiven or not.

In contrast, the traditional group was adamant that God forgives the person who truly repents. Having a right orientation towards God ensures mercy.

Interview 14T Khanpur

GMA's son: According to our belief [*aqeedo*]... God replied [to Satan], "OK, go ahead and deceive them. But know this. When they repent and turn to me, then I will always forgive them [*baksheendus*]." This is the forgiveness of God.

Interview 20T Larkana

IJ: According to my thinking, God is even more kind.... Sin is less than the greatness of God's mercy. But only when we recognize God as God, and ourselves as his servants.

10.2.1.4 God sees all that we do

In all the interviews there was an underlying assumption that God is omnipresent and aware of all that people do. Some believers expressed their former perspective of God as recording every mistake and fault in order to punish.

Interview 3B Hyderabad

N: God always sees us and watches over us. Before there was a fear about the report that would be written about us... people are caught in their sins and then are cast into hell. This was the fear. This was the teaching we had in Islam from childhood. Work, work, because there will be an accounting! Even in small things. “Why is your shirt [*qamees*] up? This is wrong. You are in trouble.” Even if it was only a small thing we were caught in, it was the fear of hell.

The traditional group views the omnipresence of God in a positive light. It creates a fear of God that keeps people from doing evil. The divine gaze on humankind is benevolent.

Interview 20T Larkana

DS: Almighty God wants each servant not to be disobedient and not to go down a wrong path and if he does, then he wants him to show regret and come back to a straight path. In this Almighty God is happy and only in this is there benefit to the servant.

10.2.1.5 God gives rewards in Paradise

Some believers were dismissive of the promise of future rewards in Paradise found in Islam, considering them an appeal to human greed.

S: ... [formerly in Islam] doing good deeds I looked for a reward, that is a motive of greed [*Alach*]. Paradise, virgins, and 3 rivers. [laughter]

M: So you had the idea of the 3 rivers which provided a motive of greed.

S: Yes, greed. Virgins, rivers, and good clothes. (Interview 15B)

In contrast, the traditional group viewed the rewards as appropriate with the caveat that the opportunity to see God is greater than all material rewards. This last point was added a few times by the traditional group and it probably indicates the influence of Sufism with its emphasis on a pure love for God without thought of reward.⁴⁹⁶

Interview 14T Khanpur

RK: The rewards are these, the ones that we have in our religion: the big gift [*tOfO*] is paradise [*jannat*]. The troubles of life are temporary troubles. The original [*asali*] life in our religion is the after life [*akhra vAri zindagi*]. The life that comes after death never ends. In that life whatever desires, rest [*sikUn*], peace [*atmenAn*] and every kind of good thing that we have on earth to drink and to eat, it is all received with rest [*sikUn*]. Paradise is that place where every delightful thing is present. And the most precious thing that is present is the sight of God [*Allah sAi jO deedAr*] – to see him.

10.2.2 Theological Trajectory towards a Father–Child Paradigm

This section answers in detail the main research question, “*What theological trajectories can be identified among Sindhi believers through exposure to a contextually sensitive Sindhi translation*

⁴⁹⁶ For example, see the story of the Sufi and torch in 4.2.2.2.

of the Bible?” and addresses the third sub-question⁴⁹⁷ concerned with identifying shifts in the Sindhi believers’ perspective of God. One primary trajectory is identified, the shift from a *master-servant* to a *father-child* paradigm. Other contrasts noted under each theme are encompassed within that trajectory. Integrated within this altered faith trajectory are shifts in the believers’ understanding of the *nature* of God – what God is like and how God is to be properly understood and described – as well as implications for the way God *relates* to humanity.

That we are dealing with a *trajectory* is evident from the theology of the believers that overlaps with the traditional group. Many of the assumptions about God are the same for both groups and, while there are some previous beliefs that are now rejected by many believers, most of what has been accepted as a new theology supplements or alters rather than contradicts or contrasts their prior faith stance. There is both *identification with* and *alteration from* traditional Sindhi Muslim faith. On a semantic level, the use of *khudA* (Persian) or Allah (Arabic) as the name of God maintains identification with the God of Islam and the use of *Isa* maintains an Islamic reference to the prophet of Christianity. There has been no transfer of loyalty from one deity to another or from the prophet *Isa* in Islam to the Christian Messiah. With respect to God there is movement from an emphasis on a transcendent, immovable deity to an immanent and personal concept of a caring Father *without a rejection of the former belief*. Concerning Jesus there is enhancement from prophet to the image of God as expressed in the title “Son of God,” *without a denial of those aspects of Jesus affirmed by the traditional group*.

The following sections provide evidence from the research data of a *father-child* paradigm shift by exploring the participants’ view of God as *Father, Just, Forgiving, Love* and *Redeemer*. This constitutes the *content* of the theological shift and each of these characteristics relates to one or more of the identified themes as well as to both groups’ contrasting narratives of God in Islam. The relational implications for the believer group are described for each of the five sections.

10.2.2.1 God as Father

The believers welcomed the concept of God as a caring father who can be trusted to do what is best for them and others. They were drawn to the relational identification of God with humanity and embraced the familial image with its implications for their lives. The theological trajectory in comparison to the traditional group is not based on a contrasting belief about the vastness of

⁴⁹⁷ The first sub-question evaluated culture texts, the second categorized them into themes. See 1.2.

God's mercy – both groups are adamant that it extends beyond the familial metaphor – but in the willingness of the believers to embrace an image of God as father as a means of expressing a deeper intimacy than merely abstract descriptions. A concern about “*shirk*” is overcome by hunger for the freedom to encounter God through earthly metaphors. For many of the believers, the fear of “*shirk*” is replaced with a delight to call God “Father.” In Interview 15B, S said, “I like this part where the son says to the father, ‘O father’ [*Eh bAbA*], even as we address God like this, ‘O father, give us this....’ It is a special title that we can give God because of Jesus.”

In contrast, the traditional group was generally uncomfortable about referring to God as Father. A sense of propriety prevailed with the need to speak according to given standards in Islam. Members of this group preferred to view God as *personally* distant stressing the otherness of the Divine in a way that emphasized the distinction of God from humanity. The human image of “father” threatens to limit God with human characteristics and clouds the stark yet clear image of the unknowable and immovable patriarch who is great beyond imagining. The desire to protect God from “*shirk*” was a higher priority than exploring the implications of the metaphor. One participant stressed, “God is holy, alone, one. No one is with him.... [No one] could be together with God. The idea of God having a son [is inappropriate]. God is alone” (RK Interview 14T). LL in Interview 2T was emphatic in his demand that there should be no hint of comparing God to any human attribute. Even when entertaining the imagery as illustrative, most participants in the traditional group tended to be cautious and sought to maintain the Divine–human distinction and avoid negative implications of familial terminology. At best, the image of God as Father was seen as a clumsy and inadequate approximation of the more appropriate view of God as Master and Creator.

A critical point of Jesus' parable is that relationship *with* the father is of more importance than what can be gained *from* the father, so the believers now rejoice in a heavenly Father, not because of an inheritance or assumed rights, but for the relationship. Nonetheless, it would be a mistake to assume that the traditional group's refusal to acknowledge God as Father stems from a self-centered desire to use God for the sake of gaining blessings, an attitude evident in both sons in the parable. Rather they are seeking to be faithful to the nature of their religion and be truly and totally submissive to God as Master. Relational depth and the humanizing aspects of the *father–child* paradigm are rejected for the less complex and more distant posture of being obedient servants. These are not people who put themselves in the position of the older son, but as servants in the household. The marvel for the believers is that they recognize themselves as the younger

son who has returned and been welcomed.

10.2.2.1.1 Relational Implication: We are children

In their cautious exploration of the description of God as Father, the traditional group exhibited a desire not to misspeak and bring about God's displeasure. The believers did not share this restraint. Their new status as children rather than servants was uninhibited and exhilarating. They spoke excitedly and freely, providing personal examples of God's care for them as children of the Divine. They exhibited a confidence in God's desire for their good that removed caution and even, if contrasted with some believers' former view of God, an elimination of fear. The new relationship is seen as a revelation of love, an affirmation of a humble, yet exalted, familial standing before God as well as an expression of their relationship to Christ – the Son who makes them children.⁴⁹⁸

In addition, the obedient–disobedient paradigm shared by all participants and emphasized by the traditional group has, for the believers, become secondary to the dominant relational metaphor. Their submissive posture before God and scripture has not changed, but their conviction about the divine Author's orientation to them and intentions for them has been transformed. The message of the parable that the younger son's relationship with the father preempted the son's disobedience – "My son was dead and is alive, was lost and is found" (Lk 15:24,32) – was obscured by the traditional group's concern about the obedient posture required in a *master–servant* paradigm. In contrast, the believers were quick to emphasize the dynamic of familial status as preeminent over the concern for obedience. The traditional group saw the story as an analogy of a repentant servant. The believers accepted the parable as an expression of a relationship deeper than that of servant. For the believers, obedience *flows out of* delight in the relationship. For the traditional group, obedience *is* the relationship.

Perhaps the most impacting indication of this theological shift is the personal applications generated in the believers' interviews. When asked for examples of the impact (Sindhi *asar*) of their perspective of God in their lives, they expressed how their faith in God revealed as Father has made a difference in the way they live. They spoke in the first person and freely expressed personal experiences that they interpreted as the hand of God. They responded with affirmation

⁴⁹⁸ The *father–child* paradigm is interpreted according to the Sindhi patriarchal perspective. It is the sons who have the right to inheritance, not the daughters. However, in the spiritual realm this relationship is understood to apply equally to both males and females. This reflects Sindhi sentiments noted in 4.3.5; daughters can be addressed as "*puT*" (son) as a term of endearment.

that they had confessed their sins and found forgiveness and that their relationship as children of God had impacted their lives in many ways. These personal experiences are a critical aspect of the theological trajectory revealing the believers' orientation as living inside a new relationship, sensing a relational closeness to God, confident of their place before their heavenly Father. They have gone beyond the affirmation of abstract beliefs and have lived through notable *events* that have personal and spiritual significance. AG and his wife (Interview 8B) not only spoke of forgiveness – “we were like that [son], and we confessed our sin and we now go in God’s way.... We were dead and since we have confessed our sin, like in the story, now we are alive” – and a closeness to God – “We were far from [God], now we are close [*nazdeek*]” – but also of changes in their actions and relationships to others – “This is our faith that God is working in our lives.” For example, AG’s wife⁴⁹⁹ related how she faced the anger of relatives by trusting in the protection of God and how she introduced prayer (*duA*) in unusual circumstances to the surprise of her cousin. AG added evidence of a shift of values by claiming that they no longer lie when dealing with others. These descriptions demonstrate an experience of God connected to life. That is, they are looking for impact in daily interactions and relationships that they attribute to God’s intervention as Father. There is a personal connection to God that resonates with the *father-child* metaphor. Prayer as a testimony to spiritual vitality and evidence of sensitivity to God’s closeness is an observed phenomenon among believers in the Sindh and this practice was affirmed through the narratives of other participants.

Members of the traditional group answered the request for examples of the impact of their perspective of God with general references in the third person, such as the phrase, “If people sin then...” (for example, DS Interview 20T). There could be a number of reasons for the lack of personal response from the traditional group. One possibility is that the individual or family setting of the believers’ interviews allowed for greater freedom to express personal experiences. However, reflection on the contrast as it relates to my understanding of the Sindhi context suggests other possibilities. Those of the traditional group who have consistently lived in a context of Islamic thought and loyalty and who have not had a conversion experience may not be inclined to interpret events in their lives as a personal intervention by God. Even though they live in a general context of belief and conviction about a forgiving God, they do not have the expectation of a personal experience of that belief, nor is the dissatisfaction/fulfillment dynamic

⁴⁹⁹ Due to cultural sensitivities AG’s wife name was not provided.

of conversion a part of expected religious experience;⁵⁰⁰ they are Muslim from birth. Thus the distinction between the believers' experience of conversion as opposed to assumed membership in the intergenerational context of Muslim community, a membership that does not require a personal choice, may have contributed to the disparity in the two groups' answers.

Another consideration is that God's action, from the perspective of the Sindhi Muslim, tends to be incidental to relationship. This is similar to Naomi's idea of God's hand of cursing on her (Ruth 1) as well as God's subsequent favor (Ruth 4). Events that happen are understood to be the work of God, but not with the sense or expectation of an ongoing relationship. God blesses and curses without interpersonal intimacy. The interpretation of a personal experience of God *within* daily life by the believer group also contrasts the Sufi concept of pursuing an experience of God *distinct* from daily life; Sufi mystics seek ecstatic transcendent encounters that are disconnected from everyday living. Although followers of Sufism in the Sindh do strive to live disciplined and ascetic lifestyles that reflect a sensitivity to God's desires, their primary focus is to separate themselves from the demands and distractions of life in order to connect with God, an attitude that has similarities with the devotional impetus evident in some Christian monastic movements.

The traditional Sindhi Muslim view that the Divine is both omnipresent *and* distant is encapsulated by the *master-servant* paradigm. Because nothing happens without God's knowledge and will there is a physical closeness to the Divine, but the distance from God is just as significant and can be expressed as one of *status*; we are insignificant before God. Because God is holy, as a general practice people can only enter the presence of the Almighty through the liturgy or protocol of *salat* (Arabic) or *nimAz* (Sindhi), and personal petitions (*duA*) are most effective after approaching Almighty God in the prescribed way. It is commonly accepted in the Sindh that only special servants of God can have a relationship with God and they are sought after as mediators because their prayers and blessings are considered effective. To have a direct relationship with God is a frightening, dangerous and holy proposition and only a few are granted this privilege. Most would prefer to enjoy the blessings of being a servant without such uncomfortable closeness.⁵⁰¹

⁵⁰⁰ See 6.5 for a description of religious or faith conversions.

⁵⁰¹ This orientation to God is explored in 4.3.3.

10.2.2.2 God as Just

From within the *master–servant* paradigm the traditional group views God as acting with impartial fairness to give both punishment and reward based on the actions of the servant. The concern is not relationship with God, but obedience to God’s commands. Obedient servants are rewarded, disobedient servants are punished, enemies (unbelievers) are destroyed. To judge disobedient servants, God will take other issues into consideration in order to act with mercy. This is not a contradiction to justice, but a critical aspect of it. The emphasis is on God’s righteous character as the absolute standard with the divine right as Creator and Master to judge creation.

The believers tended towards this same understanding of justice, but tempered by and viewed from within the *father–child* paradigm. While maintaining concepts of fairness and punishment for wrongdoing based on God’s character as the absolute standard, the context for understanding God’s action has shifted from the courtroom to the home. Two perspectives about God resulting from this shift contrast the traditional groups’ assumptions. The first is a conviction that even though there is punishment, it is for our good; it is corrective rather than merely punitive. The second perspective is that the compassion and care of God in the context of a loving, familial relationship mitigates or removes the just punishment we deserve. The basis for the conviction that God can be trusted as Father stems from their belief that love is greater than justice. God’s desire is not to make all things equal but to celebrate the relationship, especially the *restoration* of relationship, even if it means that some will get more than others. The response of the believers is gratefulness but with a sense of discomfort because such extravagant mercy creates an apparent conflict with their understanding of justice in terms of rewards and punishment.

A contrasting perspective expressed by a few participants considered justice as making things *right*, not making things *even*. IJ (Interview 20T), a follower of Sufism in the traditional group, argued that justice in the parable is not about the *inheritance* but the *relationship* or status of the son with respect to the father.⁵⁰²

The father says to the [older] son, “This is not unjust. You are always with me. You have my same greatness. All the city and village people know that you are the son of the landowner. But when this son left and rejected his father, then it was questioned as

⁵⁰² Others in dialogue with IJ did not seem to comprehend his point. DS responded with the commonly expressed belief that God can do whatever he wants and therefore it is right, even if it appears unjust. IJ’s point, on the other hand, was that this is a different standard of what justice is and we are *intended* to understand and embrace it. Justice is the restoration of *relationship*, not the equal distribution of *goods*.

to what kind of son this is, people did not recognize him [i.e., as a legitimate son]... The father is giving the status back to the son. He becomes happy in this that the person who had become separate because of wrong actions, has now come back.

The restoration of the returning son did not create tension with or even compromise justice, but was in fact a *revelation* of the justice of the father. The point of the dialogue with the older son was to reorient him to a relational sense of justice; the younger son's coming "alive" and being "found" constituted a deeper and more profound understanding of justice – making things right – than the mere meting out of rewards and punishments. This interpretation compares favorably with the exegesis of the passage.⁵⁰³ One of the believers expressed a similar thought, "He [the father] says to the oldest son, 'the inheritance is yours, but this is my son.' For him, they were like his two eyes. There is no accounting in that" (GR Interview 7B). That is, justice does not conflict with the restoration of relationship because it is a higher level of consideration beyond that of a mere accounting.

10.2.2.2.1 Relational Implication: We can trust God to do what is best for us

The traditional group, for the most part, considered eternal rewards and fear of punishment as appropriate motivators to righteous living. While such a view of God as Master and absolute judge involves an element of fear and fatalism, they consider this perspective to be positive and appropriate. The fear of God keeps us on the right path and equality and justice is assured and represented by appropriate rewards and punishment. For Sindhis the fear of God is generally viewed as positive. It is not terror but rather awareness that they must not be careless with God.

The believers, however, saw rewards and punishments as inappropriate motivators, viewing relationship with God as Father to be the highest ideal. While some believers previously envisioned God as the Almighty judge who will punish them without mercy, they now are confident that God will either remove the punishment completely or use it as discipline for their benefit. While still affirming God as judge, the shift in orientation to a caring Father means that the focus has changed from feeling condemned to believing they are saved and protected. Any punishment must be viewed with the higher ideal of relationship and caring leading to a positive and corrective end rather than punitive. The parable reinforced this since, for the most part, the believers interpreted the acceptance of the younger son as a picture of redemption, restoration and reconciliation that trumps justice. This latter conclusion may not be as sound exegetically or

⁵⁰³ See 8.4.1.3.6.

theologically as IJ's view of *making things right*, but their trust in the primary message that God's orientation is one of personal concern for us was evident. Rather than a fear of God's wrath there is conviction that God cares.

10.2.2.3 God as Forgiving

Closely related to the concept of God as just is the conviction that God forgives generously. Both groups agree that God has a forgiving nature and, with repentance as the critical prerequisite, forgiveness is certain. The traditional group considers this perspective as consistent with the understanding of God in Islam. Those believers who consider their faith as discontinuous with Islam affirmed this characteristic *in contrast to* their experience of God in Islam. Both NN (Interview 10B) and NA (Interview 3B) expressed their joy of experiencing forgiveness as a release from living with a constant fear of punishment. On the other hand, those believers who accept the Bible and Jesus from within an identity with Islam read the parable as new teaching that further reveals the nature of God in a manner *consistent with* previous convictions.

The contrast between the believers and the traditional groups' beliefs concerning forgiveness can be explained according to their orientation to God as either *Father* or *Master*. The traditional group, focusing on the latter metaphor, sees forgiveness as emanating from the character and nature of God; it is an aspect of the divine nature operating within a context of justice and fairness. Repentance and humbleness before God are the requirements that result in God's justice in terms of mercy and forgiveness. They believe they are sinners and trust that God will forgive and not condemn. God is the ultimate patriarch and judge and the orientation that motivates people to be honest and faithful is the fear of God (Sindhi *khuda jO khOf*). There will be an accounting (Sindhi *hisAb kitAb*) but God is merciful and accepts repentance and humbleness as part of that accounting process. A right attitude towards God together with a turning away from evil results in divine judgment to revoke punishment.

The believer group holds a similar view but *within the context of restored relationship*. The forgiving response of God is accepted as the reflection of a caring familial relationship towards humanity. The intimacy implied by the revelation of God as a caring father in Luke 15 is the controlling paradigm rather than the concept of God as distant and unknowable. As with other aspects of God's character, this familial concept need not conflict with the traditional group's conviction but each perspective results in a different emphasis. For the traditional group, God acts according to the divine nature; for the believer group, God is motivated by concern for humanity.

Rather than the scenario of a merciful judge, they are confident in a Father who delivers them from punishment. A critical concern for the traditional group was the issue of forgiveness for the wasted inheritance and the restoration of the younger son's status *as servant*, while the impact for the believers was reconciliation with the father and the restoration to status *as son*. ASR (Interview 9B) spoke of a "gap" that has been bridged by Jesus so that people can come into a relationship with God.

Jesus sacrificed himself for humanity so that people could come to God in a new way [*nain sir*]. It is because of sin that a gap [*khal*] was created between God and people. Through his sacrifice Jesus canceled [*khatam*] that gap... God hates sin and he loves people. God wants people not to sin. When people don't sin, they can come close to God.

10.2.2.3.1 Relational Implication: We are treated as treasured children

The believer group, for the most part, views the caring aspect of the *father-child* paradigm as a new and exciting revelation that fundamentally alters their perspective on how God views them. While the traditional group values forgiveness as a release from punishment and the promise of reward, the believer group views forgiveness, not as an end result, but as an essential means towards the establishment of a familial relationship. Many of the believers experienced the possibility of forgiveness in Islam as tentative and were overwhelmed by the repressive image of a demanding and unrelenting judge. Although not stated in this way by those in the believer group, the prospect of forgiveness in Islam could be understood as an escape *from* God, while forgiveness in Christ is an escape *to* God, a conviction illustrated in the parable. Once the *father-child* relationship was adopted as the dominating paradigm, the believers experienced release from the oppressive perspective that had overwhelmed them as Muslims. For a servant, justice is experienced in terms of punishment and reward. For a child, the goal is relationship with the father so that conformity to family values and honor are secondary to and dependent upon the primary relational concern. For those who are accepted as children of God, the prospect of an accounting has been replaced with a passion for reconciliation (MM Interview 21B).

For the believers, forgiveness is also primarily a current reality, experienced as a precursor to relationship with God. For the traditional group, current forgiveness can be deduced from an experience of blessing, but the primary focus is the future hope of mercy to be received on the Last Day for those totally submitted to the Master. It is the *father-child* paradigm that changes this orientation for the believers. There is not only confidence in the father to forgive, but an expectation of restored relationship in which the believer lives today.

10.2.2.4 God as Love

With the rise of Enlightenment thinking in the West, humanity gained a place of preeminence that tended to reduce the Divine to a “God of the gaps” (Drummond 1908:333)⁵⁰⁴ and placed humanity on the judgment seat with “God in the Dock” (Lewis 1994 [1970]).⁵⁰⁵ This philosophical influence is so strong that the church in the West struggles with questions such as “How can a loving God send people to hell?”⁵⁰⁶ as well as experiencing discomfort with biblical passages, such as Paul’s description of people as clay in the hands of God (Rom 9:21) that seem dismissive of inherent human worth. Such philosophical considerations are foreign to the Sindhi mind. God is not a partner in a negotiated reality; the Divine is the beginning and end of reality and truth. Humanity not only lacks importance, but we have no say or significance in any equation that seeks to relativize the place of God.

This philosophical context shapes both the traditional and believer groups’ paradigms. While this assumption is relevant to all the implications of the theological trajectory under review, it is especially critical when considering the participants’ concept of God’s love. Love in a relational paradigm is an intersubjective encounter; it exists in the interaction between two subjects. In contrast, love as an attribute of God is viewed in the Sindhi mind in terms of mercy and grace irrespective of any consideration of the recipient of that love. That is, mercy and grace exist as absolute or infinite characteristics within God in an unchanging fashion, and it is the hope of the Sindhi Muslim to benefit from that mercy and grace. As mentioned previously,⁵⁰⁷ the most commonly repeated phrase among Sindhi Muslims is *bismillahi ar-Rahman ar-Raheem*. God’s love is not viewed primarily as the caring compassion of a Father *towards others*, so much as the merciful conduct of an absolute patriarch who acts consistently according to Divine purposes. There is therefore no end to God’s love, nor can it be divided. The generosity of granting mercy or status has no limit and relies solely on the acting *subject*, not the *recipient* of such love.⁵⁰⁸

⁵⁰⁴ Drummond (1908:333) coined the term in refuting the concept, “There are reverent minds who ceaselessly scan the fields of Nature and the books of Science in search of gaps – gaps which they fill up with God. As if God lived in gaps?”

⁵⁰⁵ CS Lewis’ book entitled *God in the Dock* is a series of articles based on the premise that people with a modern Western mindset tend to put God on trial, rather than the reverse.

⁵⁰⁶ The impact of culture on cosmology and worldview is explored in 6.5.5.

⁵⁰⁷ See 4.3.3.

⁵⁰⁸ Although not a part of this thesis, the supposition that love can exist outside of the *other* is challenged by philosophy, notably Buber’s (1923) *I and Thou*, and by Christian theology’s emphasis on the interpersonal relationships within the eternal Trinity. Apologetical approaches that challenge Islamic theology have focused on the essential aspect of relationship for love to

This perspective on the love of God was evident from the traditional group's contrast of God's love with the father's love; God's love is far greater, "70 times as great" (BB Interview 14T). The participants tended to stress a love that so transcends human love that any comparison is misplaced and unworthy. Viewing God's love in the abstract protects it from the corrupting influence of human comparisons and interactions. Rather than seeing God's love reflected in our relationships, it is seen as totally separate and unrelated. As stated by LL (Interview 2T), "In this earth, this [interaction in the parable] is what happens between father and son, that is their nature. But when we come to God, God is God. There is no [kinship] relationship with Him."

The believers affirm the character of God as proclaimed by the traditional group, but rather than denying the humanizing aspect of God's love in relationship, it is this aspect that they have embraced and delight in. It is not the incomprehensible vastness of God's love, but the intentional focus of that love on them as children that is significant. The humanizing of God's love, ultimately expressed through the incarnation of Jesus in Christian theology, has impacted their orientation towards God. Rather than speaking of God's love in the abstract, that love is demonstrable in God's actions towards humanity and so the tendency is to focus on the *impact* of God's love, rather than descriptions of its *nature*. AG (Interview 8B) states, "About God we learn that he never rejects us [*chaddarna*] but always loves us. He always loves and never forgets us." While the descriptions of the traditional group deliberately maintain distance between God and humanity, the believers value the acts of God to bridge that "gap" (ASR Interview 9B) as expressions of love; rather than condemning, God's desire is to protect and save. "God loves us like a friend [*dost*]. For me, this was the impact, that whatever the condition of a person, God loves them.... And now whatever happens in my troubles, I recognize that God does these things for me" (A Interview 19B). Rather than fearing God's wrath, the wonder is that God cares for them, "Before there was a fear about the report that would be written about us. Now there is no fear of that at all. Now God says, 'Don't worry. There is no need to fear.' In this way there is no worry or fear" (N Interview 3B).

10.2.2.4.1 Relational Implication: We are loved and called to love

Believers have found the personalization of God's love within relationship and the belief that they are cared for as children of their heavenly Father fulfilling and freeing. They have accepted God's

exist. Leduc (2000) draws on the concept of "promise" in interpersonal relationship as an essential quality for love to exist, particularly referring to God's promise to humanity.

love as the basis of their orientation to God and the impetus to love each other. In the words of Manning (1990:77) they have had a “conversion from mistrust to trust” and are now on “a confident quest seeking the spiritual meaning of human existence. Grace abounds and walks around the edges of [their] everyday experience.”

10.2.2.5 God as Redeemer

While the previous four characteristics are explicit in the identified themes and the contrasting narratives of God in Islam, the concept of *redeemer* requires more explanation. The traditional group’s orientation to the human–Divine relationship is strongly Theocentric; God deals with people according to Divine purposes. Therefore, they see no contradiction between God being both merciful and cruel. “It is better to worship God, whether rich or poor because God is the one Master. He is cruel [*zulam*] and he is also merciful [*raham dil*]” (B Interview 17T). This perspective of Islam was affirmed by participants in the believer group, but cited as one belief they now reject. Their orientation to the human–Divine relationship continues to be Theocentric but with a shift in God’s priority from non–human related concerns (the unknowability of God’s purposes) to the good of humanity. Thus the believers’ reorientation moves from looking for blessings and favor from the Master’s hand based on obedience, to a *deliverance* from disobedience and death into a relationship with the Father. For the traditional group obedience is the choice of the servant, for the believer group restored relationship is the act of the Father. As before, these are not contradictory concepts, but inflections or emphases that reveal the more fundamental perspectives of God that shape their faith.

RD (Interview 11B) said, “At first, I believed that God loved, but [also that] he destroys the sinner and certainly gets revenge [*ver*]. That was my idea before [becoming a believer].” Similarly N (Interview 3B) reported,

we were always afraid lest God do something against us.... [This] is what we were taught from Islam, from the Qur’an, from the Hadith, from the public prayers, from those we met. It is like having our kids think that there is danger everywhere they walk; then they walk slowly, carefully, with fear.

The traditional group accepts God’s action as *defining* what is just and right, thus needing no explanation. The task of humanity is to please God and win divine favor. God shows favor to the chosen servants and destroys the wicked. The analogy is of an absolute monarch whose word is law. Within this paradigm the emphasis is not on the transformation of transgressors or redemption from sin, but on acceptance by God. Mercy is the forgiveness of sin without the

corresponding *saving from* sin critical to biblical redemption. What is lacking is the hope that we will be changed and become without sin, thus being worthy to live in God's presence. For the traditional group God accepts us as we are, in the weakness and frailty of our existence. Our sinful nature is part of the normal human condition, a limitation calling for strength of will and commitment, rather than a perversion requiring redemption. In the traditional group scenario God becomes reconciled towards us as we exist in our sinful condition. This is in sharp contrast to the Pauline concept of people being reconciled to God (2 Cor 5:18-21) – that is, the change is on the part of humanity in becoming righteous.⁵⁰⁹ While the believers did not express this biblical teaching in an overt way, they viewed obedience and a right relationship with God as the reward they sought, a scenario accomplished through redemption.

The believers would not deny the perspective that God defines what is right and, based on that standard, will destroy the wicked. However, this conviction is supplemented with, or perhaps even supplanted by the conviction that God's predisposition towards humanity is not as a neutral, unbiased judge; instead, the desire of the Divine is to have people experience redemption and restoration. They have looked into the "judge's face and see a savior there" (Card 1994). Even though in Islam the profession of God's mercy is ever present and ever stated, it is in Christ that they have experienced mercy and found it to be true. Rather than merely wanting the best *from* them, God wants the best *for* them and therefore goes beyond forgiveness and acceptance to restore people to a right relationship.

10.2.2.5.1 Relational Implication: We have been changed

The concept of redemption in terms of spiritual change and deliverance from sin was primarily evident in the believers' anecdotes of personal transformation, an aspect lacking in the traditional group. Examples are AG and his wife's (Interview 8B) altered relationships with others⁵¹⁰ as well as MM (Interview 21B) and his motive in giving a kidney to his brother.⁵¹¹

10.2.3 Analysis of Motives behind the Father–Child Theological Trajectory

While the *content* of the *father–child* theological trajectory is described above, this section examines the *motives* driving this trajectory categorized into three shifts: *religious*, *relational* and

⁵⁰⁹ The concept of God as redeemer also relates to the *missio Dei* (see 7.1), reflects the deliverance envisioned by Christ (Lk 4:18-21) and corresponds to the spiritual transformation found in Paul's exhortation to the church at Rome (Romans 12:1-2).

⁵¹⁰ See 10.2.2.1.1 for illustrations of the changes experienced.

⁵¹¹ See theme 1 in 10.1 for this anecdote.

christological. These conclusions are an interpretation based on the analysis of the data supplemented by my understanding and experience of the Sindhi context.

10.2.3.1 A Religious Shift: from God as Unknowable to Known

The traditional group's refusal to allow the parameters of the parable to proscribe limits to God's mercy and nature is consistent with their reverence for God as King and Master, but it also reveals a corresponding inability to experience God intimately. All human experience must be expressed in the forms of the world we live in, and the refusal to entertain the possibility of Divine interaction on a personal level according to relational metaphors limits our contemplation of God to abstract concepts. We cannot insist on God as wholly other or unknowable without rejecting invitations to be drawn into a personal relationship. By cautiously remaining distant from the message of the parable, the traditional group did not take advantage of the implied invitation of the story. In their understanding, Islam demands a respectful distance from God and so they were not open to the summons into a deeper relationship. The nature of God was not contemplated as a reality to be experienced so much as a religious concept to be protected. Similar to the religious elite of Jesus' day, the desire of the traditional group to maintain the holiness of God and remain loyal to their religion is to be commended, but because the message of the parable was subjected to an *a priori* religious system, their caution formed a barrier to the intended purpose. The Pharisees' complaint about the unorthodox familiarity with which Jesus spoke of God as Father (Jn 5:18) was a stumbling block to their reception of the message. Similarly, assumptions forbidding intimacy with God filtered the traditional group's reception of the parable and prevented its full impact.

In contrast, the believers embraced the parable's implications concerning God, a familial metaphor drawn from relationships preeminent in their society. Their openness to the possibility of experiencing God as Father gave them freedom to enter into the parable on a personal level, viewing themselves as the younger son being warmly accepted by God. One of Jesus' concerns in his ministry, as expressed in the parable, was that people not merely *contemplate* the wonder of God's mercy but that they *live out* the experience of it. The believers' orientation to the text and their openness to the possibility of enjoying a relationship with God placed them within the meaning and purpose of the parable. Their submission to the story, so that the story "read" them, allowed them to envision and discover the fulfillment of the text in their lives.

The hierarchical nature of Sindhi culture strengthens the perspective of God as a distant

patriarch. This value may have been reflected in the comment of one participant who corrected himself after making a comment that did not seem appropriate. When describing the older son, he said, “Then he got very angry and called his father..., no, he himself went to the father” (AG Interview 8B). The correction was likely due to the inappropriateness of a child summoning their father within a high context, patriarchal worldview. Similarly, the traditional group, functioning within the *master–servant* paradigm, does not view God as accommodating to human needs, but demanding obedience to divine commands. This is reinforced in the culture with the emphasis on *deen* (conformity to religious commands and practice) over *Imaan* (belief).

The believers, without denying the need for conformity to God’s commands, have altered their perception of God’s motive in giving commands. Rather than a desire for creation to conform to the will of God as the *primary* purpose of the commands, the conviction is that God’s desire is for *relationship*, as expressed in the parable. This has implications for cultural assumptions concerning the role of a Sindhi father since praxis is shaped by a person’s perspective of God.⁵¹² Conversely, a desire to be a loving father or experience a relationship with such a father creates a spiritual hunger for a significant connection with God. This is reinforced by the spiritual values espoused in Sufism that legitimize desire for God and make the gospel message attractive.

I suspect that the traditional group’s insistence that God is unknowable and distant⁵¹³ contributes to their lack of personal narratives. While I am not suggesting that Sindhis following the traditional Muslim religious path would never have personal narratives to share, it does seem logical to conclude that the biblical implications of the incarnation and self–revelation of God in and through creation and in the person of Jesus would lead to an interpretation of personal experiences and events as indicative of significant contact with God. For the traditional group, the fear of attributing human characteristics to God tends to keep them from entertaining the possibility of personal contact with God and results in three common and diverse religious expressions: the traditional *master–servant* paradigm, Sufi mysticism and Folk Islam. The orthodox position seeks to please God through obedience as a servant without expecting or desiring contact with God. Paradise is a reward without relational implication, a level of heaven

⁵¹² See 7.3 for an exploration of how theology affects a man’s approach to being a father.

⁵¹³ See a discussion of this perspective in 4.3.3 and 4.4.1. The “distance” described here is a distance of personal intimacy, as opposed to the concept of omnipresence or the sustaining power of God in and through creation. The former is shunned as humanizing God, while the latter is assumed by all.

lower than that of God’s dwelling place. While also maintaining distance between God and this world, the Sufi ideal is mystical intimacy with God, a oneness in which God is so intimate that the mystic’s individuality is lost.⁵¹⁴ Mysticism looks for a separation from daily life in order to enter into a transcendent spiritual state. Folk Islam assumes distance between God and the average Muslim, thus requiring the mediation of saints (Sindhi *pirs*). In each case God does not come down to the human level. For the orthodox worshipper that scenario is acknowledged and accepted as irrevocable, for the Sufi follower the gap is overcome through the transcendence of the worshipper into the essence of God, while the supplicant in Folk Islam requires the mediation of those close to God. The following table illustrates these orientations in comparison to the orientation of believers.

Table 9 *Religious Orientations towards God*

Religious Orientation	Perceived <i>distance</i> between God and the world	Perceived method of how worshippers can address the <i>distance</i>	Practices of the worshippers
Orthodox Islam	God is distant/transcendent	Submission to God <i>within</i> the world	Obedience to commands
Sufism	God is distant/transcendent	Seeking transcendence <i>beyond</i> the world to connect with God	Meditation and mystical experiences
Folk Islam	God is distant/transcendent	Seeking mediation through <i>pirs</i> <i>within</i> the world	Appeals to intermediaries
Believers	God is immanent (while remaining transcendent)	Personal intimacy <i>within</i> the world to connect with God through Jesus Christ ⁵¹⁵	Expectation of God’s personal interaction in their lives

There is a level of cognitive dissonance and tension in the Sindhi context due to these three religious expressions. One benefit of this reality is that the interaction between these diverse perspectives creates an openness to consider alternate approaches to God. Thus, rather than stressing God’s unknowability and distance from us, the believers are able to shift to the concept of knowing God through metaphors of human interaction as a key part of their faith. For the believers, the distance of the Divine from humanity is overcome through God’s accommodation to the experiences and relationships of humanity, primarily in terms of the incarnation of Jesus Christ. The following dialogue reveals the way the parable appeals to the heart and need of DDS (Interview 18B).

⁵¹⁴ The Sufi orientation is described in 4.2.2.2.

⁵¹⁵ Although the definition of “believers” relates to their orientation to the Bible, the data demonstrates the believers’ perspective that Jesus is the one who brings them into relationship with God. See further in 10.2.3.3.

DDS: I like this that God loves the difficult [*dukhi*] son.

M: He hugs him

DDS: He hugs him and is happy that his son has returned to him.

M: What do you understand about God from this? Why do you like this?

DDS: Because sometimes we are disobedient. Sometimes he comes to us, but we don't appreciate [*qadar*] him. He is always with us and doesn't reject us. He doesn't want his children to go down the evil [*burī*] path. He shows us what is right and true and the path of life. "Go this way, in this path. Eat this, don't eat that. This is for your benefit." This is what is in his heart.

Experiences and longings within their context resonate with the text to create a trajectory towards a different kind of relationship with God, a movement from *master-servant* to *father-child*.⁵¹⁶ The believers are confident that God's desire for them is reflected in the relationship of the father with the son in the parable. The traditional group does not view humanity as capable of attaining such a status in God's sight. For them acceptance by God is dependent upon an orientation towards God that produces either condemnation or mercy. One believing participant (A Interview 19B) put it this way: "Before [becoming a believer] God was only there for worship. Now, God is for service, for love, and for concern [*fīkr*] and sympathy [*ehsās*]." One way to understand the significance and extent of this shift is to recognize that the traditional group, and the Sindhi community in general, views God as *unaffected* by humanity. This is similar to a monarch who is so removed from the subjects of the kingdom that the interest and concern is one way, from subject to monarch. The subject desires to be a favored servant but also recognizes the right of the king to judge and punish. The subject seeks to please the monarch and fears the royal wrath; the idea of a relationship of familial love is lacking. Submission is key for the traditional group, a position that does not allow for familiarity or care on a personal level. Escape from punishment in order to be recipients of mercy and favor is the goal. For the believer, on the other hand, there is a hunger for more and therefore the amazing and life-changing message that God desires a relationship with them is appealing. As A (Interview 19B) said, "God is friend [*dost*]."

Another possible religious motive that lies behind this theological trajectory is a reaction against the tendency in the traditional group to focus on a prophetic paradigm. From the perspective of the Sindhi Muslim, God sends prophets who explain the right way to live, a way that leads to blessing, and warn against actions that lead to destruction. It is up to the servant to choose the right way and live. The believers, in contrast, hunger for God's involvement to be more

⁵¹⁶ Theoretically, a trajectory from a mystical or Folk Islam approach to God would also be possible, however, the dynamic expressed in the data relates more to the orthodox *master-servant* paradigm.

intimate and personal that includes, but goes beyond the prophetic paradigm; a hunger characterized by the ruler who had obeyed from his youth, yet was dissatisfied (Lk 18:18-30). They desire more than mandated conformity to a pattern of life and are attracted by a message that God not only desires relationship with humanity but has created a way for that to happen. A prophet *shows* the way, God in Christ *is* the way (Jn 14:6). The conviction that motivates believers is that first and foremost it is God and not us who has a hunger for relationship; the Unknowable has become known.

10.2.3.2 A Relational Shift: from Forgiveness to Reconciliation

For the traditional group, God is forgiving, but it is a divine accounting with an emphasis on an absolute law and the character of God rather than on an intimate and caring Divine-human relationship. The contrast with believers is illustrated through MM's (Interview 21B) perspective of God before becoming a believer and when he made a commitment to trust in the message of Christ. The similarity between the two scenarios is the belief that God is merciful. The contrast is the added dimension of compassion leading to a restored relationship that takes precedence over the concern for an accounting:

MM: Some of [my beliefs are] the same, some different. As it is said, "God is most merciful, most gracious." [*bismillahi ar-Rahman ar-Raheem*] (*trad*) God is merciful. The father is the example of this mercy because everything is [a gift?] from him. He doesn't take an accounting [*hisAb*].

M: This was your thinking before? That he doesn't take an accounting?

MM: No, but before was the understanding that he is merciful. But even as he is merciful, he also takes an accounting. This idea was very strong.

Although the older son was criticized for being unmerciful, the traditional group also considered him to be in the right when he insisted on an accounting. In contrast, some of the believers asserted that forgiveness implies a cancellation of the accounting. That is, with a change of heart and orientation, forgiveness moves beyond the need for compensation to a greater concern for reconciliation.

While God's merciful nature was affirmed by all participants, the claim by some believers that they had no assurance of forgiveness before becoming believers diverges significantly from the traditional group's confidence in God's forgiveness for those who turn from sin and repent. The difference here is likely due to a sense of personal inadequacy on the part of the believer as opposed to the willingness of the traditional group to trust in God's character of mercy. Those believers who have turned away from Islam were dissatisfied on a *personal* level, living in fear

that they could not measure up and therefore deserve God's forgiveness. The shift to a relational paradigm alleviated that fear and drew them into a change of allegiance. Q (Interview 4B) expressed it this way:

I am still a sinner [*gunAhgAr*]. When I was a Muslim, I was a sinner [*gunAhgAr*] but in search of a way to forgiveness. I was like the lost son. When I accepted Jesus, I found I was forgiven and had a relationship with God. There were many troubles, but God was there and accepted me and loved me and gave me proof of that. (*pers*)

The theological trajectory for the believers has therefore moved from the terror of punishment from a judge to confidence in a Father that cares for them. In contrast, the participants in the traditional group did not express such a need and were at a loss to provide personal examples. This does not mean that the traditional Muslims interviewed expressed an excessive or pathological fear of God or punishment. Rather there was both a respect for God as judge and confidence expressed in divine justice and mercy.

Nonetheless, it should not be imagined that the believers suffered from a misinterpretation of Islamic teaching found in the Sindh. Rather they were *negatively affected* by that instruction, whereas the participants of the traditional group seem *relatively unaffected* by the terrifying images of punishment. As an example of this teaching, consider the following lines of poetry from a full color, graphically illustrated book in English purchased in the Sindh and written for children to instruct them concerning hell. The book is part of a series written "for impressionable young minds to get to know the core beliefs (*Aqeedah*) that are held dear by Orthodox Muslims" (Zaman undated: back page). Such instruction is neither aberrant nor unusual, but reflects mainstream Islamic doctrine in the Sindh. The following is representative of images that drove some of the believers to embrace God as Father.

Hell: Pits of Punishment

Hell is already ablaze, Earth's fire is only one seventieth of Hell fire's heat,
A brain will boil in the head as two embers are placed under a person's feet.
Hell will fill with idolaters, makers of graven images, tyrants and the bad,
Proud disbelievers may mock it, but when they feel its pain they'll be sad.

...

In Hell, skin will be 42 cubits thick, and be forever burnt off and replaced
A tooth would be the size of Mount Uhud, big bodies ready to be disgraced.
Clothes will be fire and molten tar; boiling water poured from overhead,
And when Death itself is slaughtered, there'll be terror forever instead.
Nasty Zaquum Tree and ad-Daree' berries, will burn the belly right through,
But like diseased camels, inmates slurp in boiling water and blood-pus goo.
(Zaman undated:8,12,14)

10.2.3.3 A Christological Shift: the role Jesus plays in revealing God

Although little has been mentioned concerning the shift in the believers' faith in Jesus, it is valid to add a section for that purpose in recognition that the person of Christ has influenced the believers' perspective of God. The transcendent, unknowable God of the traditional group does not allow for the immanent, incarnational God revealed in Jesus Christ. The believers, however, readily embrace the implication of the significance of Christ who is Immanuel, God with us (Mt 1:23). While this conviction indicates a break from the fear of committing "*shirk*",⁵¹⁷ it should still be understood as a theological trajectory for the believers that is rooted in prior convictions about God. As they have studied Jesus through the New Testament they have come to accept him as a window onto the God of Islam, a revelation of the Divine character that they would not otherwise have considered. Although there is little mention of Jesus in AG and his wife's interview (Interview 8B), the concept of relationship with God reveals their commitment as followers of Christ. MM's (Interview 21B) use of kingdom language demonstrates the influence of Jesus' teaching. Other believers made a direct connection between the message of the parable and their faith in Jesus, "This is the story of the lost son. But it is also about us. We are lost and in a life of sin. Our Jesus Christ calls us to himself. So we are lost and we need to come to him and be rescued from sin" (DW Interview 18B).

For the traditional group, the role of Jesus is as a prophet delivering a parable. Although this line of enquiry was not explicitly pursued with the traditional group, it was evident that the role of Jesus within the message of the parable was not considered. Traditional Sindhi Muslim conviction is that God does not need others to intervene in order to forgive. "In the Muslim's belief, if one of God's servants [*bandO*] sins and goes to God asking for forgiveness, then God will forgive and make him his own" (P Interview 1T). For most of the believers Jesus is, somehow, the means by which God forgives. Jesus is the act of God to demonstrate mercy to humankind. Many believers saw Jesus as the fulfillment of the love and forgiveness of God expressed in the parable. In particular, the cross is the revelation of God's love that trumps any demand for justice. The priority is restoration and Jesus' life and death is the expression of God absorbing pain and punishment for the sake of restoration (AG Interview 8B, DW Interview 18B). The cross was expressed as the primary evidence of the love of God seen in Christ. "God is love, and we need to serve him... He gave his life for us. He is the atonement [*kafaro*]" (A Interview 19B). Nonetheless, a few within the believer group did express a view closer to the traditional

⁵¹⁷ See an explanation of "*shirk*" in 10.2.2.1.

group perspective, “God says, ‘I am the creator of the universe and earth. If one comes back to the path and I do not forgive him, then who will forgive him?’ There is no other who can forgive, there is no other God” (MC Interview 16B). This does not necessarily mean that the MC would contradict the other participants in the believer group, but it does indicate that he is processing God’s Word through a traditional Islamic grid.

The example of Jesus was also cited by some believers as an indication that God cares for them personally. Apart from the example of the cross mentioned by a few participants, MM (Interview 21B) adds thoughts about Jesus’ example of compassion, “[An] example which especially moves me is this, that Jesus was so compassionate. He healed the sick without asking them [for an accounting?]. From the beginning to the end, this is what he did, he showed mercy and forgiveness.”

10.3 The Impact of the Father–Child Shift on the Praxis of Sindhi Believers

The identified theological trajectory is now evaluated for *breadth* and *depth* using Kritzinger’s (2010:8-9) praxis matrix. *Breadth* refers to a consideration of each of the seven dimensions that have been affected by the identified *father–child* trajectory, while *depth* refers to the extent to which each dimension has been impacted. Consistent with the research methodology, the dimensions are considered in a qualitative rather than quantitative fashion. The questions are designed to address a self-identified Christian community living within a social setting inclusive of other faiths, in this case Sindhi believers. The application of the praxis matrix questions are constrained by relevance to the identified theological trajectory as it reveals the believers’ emerging perspective of God. The purpose of this exercise is to assess how the trajectory (1) affects their lives, (2) shapes their choices, values and priorities and (3) impacts the broader community. While the primary concern is the evaluation of believers, contrasts with the traditional group are noted to indicate the extent of the shift.

Agency: Who are the agents of transformation, in relation to the community in which they work for change? What is their social, economic, gender, class position in relation to the “others”? How are they “inserted” into the social space that they share with that community? What are the power relations prevailing between them? How do these factors influence their approach? Who are their “interlocutors”, who help “set their agenda” and determine their priorities? How do all these factors shape their approach? (Kritzinger 2010:8)

The agents of transformation are the participants in the believer group⁵¹⁸ and a consideration of the social dynamics among participants that affected the interviews has been considered previously.⁵¹⁹ However, a few additional comments can be made. While the social, economic and class position of the believers is comparable to the members of the traditional group, many of the believers have been impacted by their expression of faith in Christ and have suffered economic and social consequences that have rendered them less secure materially and socially. Social security is primarily through family connections and this has been jeopardized by perceived insult to the family honor. While the majority of participants continue to hold employment within their traditional community as, for example, police, bookstore owner and laborer, others have become employees within Christian organizations. All of the believers have connections with other believers in relationships of power and influence. In particular, RM and NN arranged meetings with believers who look up to them as teachers and spiritual guides. Those who became believers under our personal ministry while living in the Sindh still respect me as a spiritual teacher and guide, although the connection is now on a friendship level rather than in the context of an intentional or systematic teaching relationship. The family hierarchy ensured that the women, for the most part, would respond with a view approved by the patriarch.⁵²⁰ The “interlocutors” who influence the believers’ thinking and priorities have been considered in the introduction to Chapter 3. The shaping of the believers’ “approach” in terms of a dialectical relationship between *faith*, *text* and *context* is the subject of this thesis and has been evaluated and discussed extensively throughout.

Contextual understanding: How do the change agents analyse that specific context? How do they “read the signs of the times?” What are the social, political, economic, cultural factors that influence the society within which they are working and witnessing? How does their perception of these factors shape their approach? (Kritzinger 2010:8)

Based on the research data, a number of observations can be made about how the believers analyze their context. The influence of religious teaching has already been considered as a major aspect of this thesis. The most critical context for the believers as they work out their faith in

⁵¹⁸ The participants are described in 2.1.1.1.

⁵¹⁹ See 2.1.1.4.2.

⁵²⁰ This should not be misconstrued as a forced or insincere response on the part of the women, only that they gave their answers with sensitivity to the approval of the male leaders in the home. A discussion consisting of only women would have had a different dynamic, but it is unlikely that they would intentionally contradict the statements provided from this research. See also “Gender considerations” in 2.1.1.4.2.

consideration of the shift from an emphasis on God as Master to God as Father is their family relationships. N (Interview 3B) mentions a relative who sought to harm him by complaining to a religious leader. His response was to turn to God in prayer as his protector. Living in a context of honor and shame he also struggles with how he would react to his son's rebellion as compared to the parable. "When I think about honor and [self?], it's like the struggle the apostle Paul talked about [Romans 7]. [There are] two desires in me. I am human and weak." Similarly, with his wife there are cultural expectations and

Sometimes in my house I mistreat my wife. I really try in my household to treat my wife right so that she can see Christ in my life. But I ask for some things and she doesn't give it, then I respond by complaining and being irritated.... I try to be a good husband because I know that this is what I should be. But if I get angry, then I forget my good intentions and I get upset and emotional.

There are expectations and attitudes that he views as cultural norms, yet are contrary to biblical values. His desire is to be transformed so that he acts in a more Christ-like way. While these are personal issues, they reflect the societal challenges that believers face in the home, either from their immediate or extended family. Furthermore, N, as well as a few other believers interviewed, are employed by Christian organizations focused on helping Sindhi believers work out their faith within the Sindhi context. He organizes and participates yearly in a "family camp" in which spousal and family issues familiar to the camp participants are addressed in the light of biblical teaching.

Q (Interview 4B) was kicked out of his house due to his faith, but then he "prayed and God opened the way through my mother's sickness.... [My siblings] called me back and I was able to take my mother to a hospital and get her treatment. Through this I was able to be brought back to my family." This illustrates a servant attitude towards his family that he views as an outworking of his faith. Similar to N, Q relates marital difficulties that were resolved through prayer, "Her [Q's wife's] mother was egging her on to cause problems, but I was praying. Now there is a small worship group in the village. My wife is [now] a Christian and relatives are also in the worship group. So I received an answer." Such examples can be cited from other participants that demonstrate the way their faith impacts their analysis of the societal context.

Ecclesial analysis: How do the change agents perceive the church, and particularly their activities in that community? Did it give the church(es) a good or a bad name in the community? Do churches have positions of power and privilege or influential public contacts? What are the physical and institutional structures of the churches and how are they utilised in or for the community at large? What are their leadership patterns and structures? How do these factors shape their approach? (Kritzinger

Sindhi believers from a Muslim background do not integrate well into the established Punjabi churches.⁵²¹ Those proactively establishing worshipping groups among Sindhi believers are focusing on household churches.⁵²² The interviews reflect this movement in that the concerns expressed by the believers centered on their own family dynamics or ethnic group. The leaders within each home are the male believers who determine the extent of their family's involvement in the new faith. The established family dynamic within the Sindhi context alleviates the power struggles that can occur when the attempt is made to establish a worshipping community of men from different families.⁵²³ At the same time, the majority of leaders who are mentoring and teaching the household church leaders are employees of Christian institutions with connections to foreign mission agencies as well as to Punjabi believers. Thus the mission direction, strategic impetus and content of the teaching are influenced by the priorities of foreign change agents and the established church. While inevitable at this stage – without outsider initiatives and encouragement household churches would likely not exist – there does need to be a process of theological development and reflection by Sindhis that creates a separate Christian identity while maintaining dialogue with other traditions. It is hoped that the dialogical process of identifying theological development through the generation of culture texts as Sindhis engage God's word will provide some momentum towards that vision.

Interpreting the tradition: How do the change agents (re)interpret the Bible and their theological tradition in the light of the questions raised by the previous three dimensions? Is there a unique formulation of the Christian message that is arising in this context? How do these theological insights shape their approach? (Kritzinger 2010:9)

The primary formulation of the Christian message as identified through the research is the perspective of God as Father, with implications for a caring familial relationship. The believers embrace the concept of a loving Father who has a personal interest in their wellbeing and makes extreme sacrifices, as seen in the cross, to establish that relationship with them. This theology is, at least in part, the grid through which life and reality is understood and experienced. God is not just *theoretically* compassionate as an expression of a divine attribute shown to humankind in general, but *experientially* compassionate through those actions interpreted as directed towards

⁵²¹ This dynamic is explored in 4.2.2.4.

⁵²² See the definition and description of these *Isa Jama'at* in 4.2.2.4.

⁵²³ See 4.1.5 for a description of such an attempt.

them personally. This finds expression through gracious and generous interaction with others, whether family, relatives or those outside of the culturally defined sphere of responsibilities.⁵²⁴ There is not only forgiveness to clear our spiritual accounts so that we are not punished, but “full life” is granted in relationship with God. The excitement is not because sins are forgiven, a confidence expressed by the traditional group as well, but because of the implication that God as Father wants what is best for us. Such a conviction leads them to express a personal desire to live a life of forgiveness.⁵²⁵ Seeking rewards *from* God in terms of pleasures received in Paradise is dismissed as shallow and insignificant in light of the rewards found *in* God as they work out their relationship with their heavenly Father. This has created a less⁵²⁶ self-centered approach to life as they value their relationship with God above material comfort and gain.⁵²⁷ God as love is now viewed as supreme, trumping any punitive concept of justice. This removes their fear of God’s wrath, giving them confidence that God accepts them with the status of children, despite previous or current wrongdoing. Any trouble or problem in their lives is interpreted as discipline for their good rather than punishment to even accounts. Such a perspective is difficult for them to comprehend at times and challenges them in their relationships to show graciousness and love when retribution and punishment seem more appropriate.⁵²⁸ The importance of obedience to God⁵²⁹ is also impacted and shaped by a conviction of God’s relationship as Father. Rather than viewing disobedience as an unfortunate part of our nature that God is willing to overlook in some cases, obedience as an essential part of the familial relationship is accepted as the norm to which they have been restored. They obey not because they are afraid of the consequences of disobedience, but because they are learning to love the Father of their Lord Jesus Christ. The Sindhi traditional perspective of following the commands of God as the way of true living has not been rejected but enhanced through increased gratitude because of a transformed relationship with the law-giver.

Discernment for action: What kind of concrete faith projects or organisations are they involved in, particularly in relation to the community at large? What kind of plans are they making to embody their theological insights in the community? How broad is the theological agenda and how does it actually shape their actions? (Kritzinger 2010:9)

⁵²⁴ Examples are provided in 10.1, Theme 1.

⁵²⁵ See a fuller description in 10.1, Theme 2.

⁵²⁶ That is, as compared with their previous understanding of God, not necessarily as compared with the views of the traditional group.

⁵²⁷ See examples in 10.1, Theme 3.

⁵²⁸ See expressions of this response in 10.1, Theme 5.

⁵²⁹ The concept of obedience is explored in 10.1, Theme 6.

The primary “faith projects or organizations” that the believers are involved with have a close connection to foreign mission agencies.⁵³⁰ All the organizations receive foreign funding and provide opportunities for spiritual engagement as well as relief and development efforts. There are many who are impoverished or lack opportunity for education or medical assistance and the believers assume that attitudes of generosity and sacrifice for others are consistent with their faith. The spreading of their faith within their families is encouraged and promoted through camps, literature, visits and training sessions. While funded by mission agencies, most of the workers are local Christians, whether Sindhi or Punjabi. The need for community is strong within the Sindhi context and believers who do not have a local group with whom to worship welcome and encourage gatherings of trustworthy believers. A conviction about evangelism is exemplified through a Christian ministry within the Sindh that sends out Bible correspondence courses, and it is rare to find a Sindhi believer who has not been impacted by this organization at some point in their life.

Reflexivity: Do the change agents consistently and honestly reflect on the impact and results of their work in the community? Do they learn from their experiences? How does this shape their approach in the community? Does this reflection lead to renewed and deepened agency, contextual understanding, interpretation of the tradition, spirituality and planning? (Kritzinger 2010:9)

A few factors contribute to an environment of reflection in ministry. First, the lack of a significant breakthrough of the Christian faith among Sindhis prevents complacency and the challenges of the society that reject the gospel message are constantly being evaluated and discussed. Second, the material and physical needs, including hard living conditions, lack of education, a weak economy and poor medical facilities, challenge those who have an evangelistic concern to also consider where resources and energies should be spent. Third, tension between national workers and foreign agents is ongoing with different cultural, economic and historical factors shaping their diverse priorities. This results in many discussions as efforts are critiqued and evaluated. Fourth, Sindhis are generally people oriented, rather than task oriented,⁵³¹ and thus enjoy and

⁵³⁰ Because Sindhi believers are influenced by “outside advocates of change” (Kraft 1996:400), such as through Bible translation, medical ministries and relief work, an important ethical question is if these activities “genuinely contribute to the receptors’ well being in terms of the things they have a right to expect from life” (Kraft 1996:431). While beyond the scope of this thesis, the influences are so widespread and significant that there are likely both positive and negative aspects that could be fruitfully evaluated.

⁵³¹ For a description of this terminology see 4.3.4.

value spending more time talking about issues than is often appreciated by their more task oriented Western colleagues. The strength of their approach is the reflexive practice of ongoing evaluation. The shift to the development of household churches was accomplished through the interaction and planning of three key leaders, two of whom are Sindhi believers interviewed in this research project. Reflection by believers on their actions and the focus of ministry initiatives in light of a loving heavenly Father has been noted in the research analysis.

Spirituality: What type(s) of spirituality is/are practised by the change agents? What is the dominant spirituality among them? Is this a source of inspiration and encouragement to the group? How do these factors of spirituality shape their approach? (Kritzinger 2010:9)

Bible study and prayer are valued among Sindhi believers. The Bible is respected as God's word and study of the book is considered an important and sacred task, an attitude that derives from their Muslim context.⁵³² Similarly, prayer is natural for Sindhis and new believers seldom need to be taught how to pray. The difference for the believers is the increased confidence that their prayers are heard and accepted by a loving Father who will do what is right and best for them. Rather than seeking the influence of those considered "holy" in order to petition God, they speak confidently and extemporaneously as children to a God who delights in them. While individual Bible study and prayer is encouraged and many people study Sindhi Bible correspondence courses, corporate times of structured prayer and Bible study are often the primary means of the believers' interaction with the Bible and participation in prayer. Worship times are encouraged within the homes, and a number of families do have regular times set aside for prayer, Bible reading and the singing of worship songs. The theological trajectory of *father-child* enhances this aspect of household churches by giving preference to familial relationships. Corporate gatherings usually include the singing of worship songs in Sindhi and some believers are proficient musicians, thus contributing to this form of spirituality. The systematic style of liturgical prayer and worship found in Islam is not copied, but it has created a felt need for corporate, regular gatherings which follows the forms and styles of the Punjabi churches as well as those introduced by foreign missionaries.

10.4 Summary

A theological trajectory of Sindhi believers is identified by evaluating the similarities and contrasts from the interview data; the shift is from a *master-servant* to a *father-child* paradigm.

⁵³² See a further description of this attitude in 4.4.2.

Five characteristics of God – God as *Father, just, forgiving, love* and *redeemer* – illustrate the content of the trajectory. Three shifts – *religious, relational* and *christological* – reveal the motivational dynamic behind the trajectory. The breadth and depth of the trajectory are examined through the use of Kritzinger’s (2010) praxis matrix. Chapter 11 concludes this study by considering how the research benefits missiology as an academic discipline.

CHAPTER 11. Conclusions

This concluding chapter explores three areas within missiology to which this research makes a contribution: (1) The significance of theological trajectories in the exploration of conversion phenomena and in the development of contextual theologies, (2) Research methodology for identifying theological trajectories through the orchestration of a creative text–context tension and (3) Specific benefits of researching theological trajectories for the task of Bible translation. Finally, issues for further research are identified.

11.1 Missiological Significance of Mapping Theological Trajectories.

Mapping theological trajectories has missiological implications for both the understanding of conversion and the development of contextual theologies. The *backwards looking* dynamic of mapping theological trajectories that emphasizes contrasts with previous faith stances relates to the conversion event; the *forward looking* mapping dynamic that emphasizes the outworking of faith in the believers' lives reveals the emerging contextual theology. The research results demonstrate that mapping theological trajectories can be a significant tool for the outsider researcher to evaluate how the faith of a people group *has shifted* in terms of *content*, *direction* and *impact* with respect to the conversion process and how *ongoing shifts* in terms of *content*, *direction* and *impact* describe the development of contextual theology. *Content* refers to a dominant theme or primary metaphor that describes a theological emphasis. For Sindhi believers the metaphor of God as Father and themselves as loved children is the ruling metaphor identified. *Direction* is the contrast of the new perspective with a previous faith stance. There is a moving away from one narrative into expressions of a new narrative. The focus on *direction* is a notable strength of this methodology that recognizes and validates the fluctuating nature of theology within a community. It also affirms the concept of the hermeneutical spiral that moves towards resolution and appropriate theology through the dialectical relationship of the theologizing agent with scripture. The metaphor of God as Master and people as servants expressed by the traditional Muslim group is the contrasting narrative against which movement in the Sindhi believers' faith is mapped. *Impact* refers to the extent to which the new narrative or metaphor has influenced the believers' lives and can be explored through an application of Kritzinger's (2010) praxis matrix.

11.1.1 Identifying Theological Trajectories in Conversion

The *backward looking* aspect of mapping theological trajectories was explored through the

identification of a faith shift⁵³³ that has occurred and continues to occur within a Muslim society. Theological trajectories can be mapped to reveal the contours of a conversion process as long as that faith change occurs within a relatively consistent religious context, such as is occurring among Sindhi Muslims in the Sindh, Pakistan. This faith change is initiated and driven by the outworking of a covenantal commitment by *believers*, those committed to hearing scripture as God's word for them. Conversion as covenant⁵³⁴ is the catalyst for an alteration in faith that implies constancy of prior assumptions (content) as well as new convictions and change away from previous perspectives (*new content and direction*) and includes a working out of faith in life (impact). Conversion as covenant recognizes that there is both the choice an individual or community makes to *trust* and the living out of that commitment. The trust is on a *foreign insertion* (the Bible) made in the context, but one that relies upon the *assumptions and meanings of that context* to communicate.

Even though there is a backward looking dynamic when considering conversion through the mapping process, this does not mean that conversion necessarily occurs as a point in time; the implications of the commitment continue to be worked out in the individual's and community's life and this can be viewed as a conversion *process*. Even if there are rituals to celebrate conversion events and there is a point of declared commitment, this does not mean that there is a line of demarcation after which conversion ceases. Rambo (1993:18) describes conversion as a process and as a period of social or cultural adjustment,⁵³⁵ which parallels Tippet's (1977:210-212) "period of incorporation" and resonates with Hauerwas' (2001:223) view that "our character and moral life is one of *conversion*, not *development*."⁵³⁶ Moreover, individual or family acts of covenantal commitment within a community will be repeated if the forces that initiated the conversion process continue. At the very least, the covenant is the catalyst that stimulates ongoing faith change as believers work out the implications of their covenantal commitment through a consideration of the text–context tension.

As evident in the discussion of the phenomenon of religious conversion, there are different

⁵³³ The identification of faith change as a dynamic of the conversion phenomenon is based on Rambo's (1993:13-14) five "types of conversion" as well as Nock's (1933:7) distinction between conversion and "adhesion" discussed in 6.5.4.

⁵³⁴ Conversion framed in terms of covenant is developed in 6.5.10.

⁵³⁵ See 6.5.4.

⁵³⁶ See 7.4.

approaches and a variety of parameters that can be used to describe conversion.⁵³⁷ A key objective for evangelical change agents is to affect faith (worldview, beliefs and values) transformation that conforms to Jesus' vision of the reign of God. *Mapping* theological trajectories enables the outsider change agent to assess the impact that conversion has had on the insiders' faith. Mapping describes what conversion means *theologically* to converts who are still part of the broader community and subscribe to the basic faith assumptions of that community. The faith stance of the traditional community is contrasted with expressions generated from interaction with God's word so that the emerging and diverging faith of the converts is revealed. The mapping methodology allows change agents to step back from seeking to affect change according to their own theological agendas and instead gain a perspective on the emic change that is taking place.⁵³⁸ A commitment to scripture, the primary source of authority of God's word for the evangelical change agent, reveals a reorientation that has occurred and is occurring in the world of the participants. While there are other ways of evaluating conversion, this methodology can be used by the conscientious outsider change agent who seeks to validate and empower insider theologizing agents. The concern is not to hear regurgitated teachings the believers may have received, but to discern their own theological processing as they articulate their faith according to a perceived meaning of the text. Furthermore, because the recent development of household churches among Sindhi Muslims could be the initiation of a people movement,⁵³⁹ this methodology provides an early indication of how an expanding conversion process may unfold. Mapping theological trajectories is one way to describe the faith shift of converts within a distinct people group.

11.1.2 Identifying Theological Trajectories in Contextual Theologies

The *forward looking* aspect of mapping theological trajectories is the means by which local theologies are identified. The emphasis is not on the shift from a former faith stance, as with the consideration of the conversion process, but on the results from the text–context dialogue that has occurred through the interview process – how the participants express their faith within their context and in light of the text. The biblical text and the covenantal commitment of the believing

⁵³⁷ See 6.5.2, 6.5.3 and 6.5.4.

⁵³⁸ As clarified in the following section on the benefits of the methodology, the interviews are also a means of affecting change, but in a non–directive and facilitating manner that empowers the participants.

⁵³⁹ According to the parameters described in 6.5.7, the conversion phenomenon occurring among Sindhis cannot be described as a people movement, although the potential is there.

participants ensures that it is *Christian* theological development that is being observed. But it is not being described in terms of *distinction from* Islamic theology as if there is a sharp division between the two. Instead the theology is *developmental*, as the word *trajectory* signifies. It is not established theologies that are in view, but the unique constructions of theologizing agents within their context as they engage God speaking to them through scripture. The orientation of the researcher to the interview participants is as an audience whose desire is to hear and acknowledge the believers' interaction with God's word. The use of Schreiter's (1985:11) agricultural metaphor for theological development in which a meaning-based Sindhi translation of scripture is the "seed" inserted in Sindhi culture that produces the theological "plant" of Sindhi believers⁵⁴⁰ has been validated. The presentation of one passage of that seed – the *Parable of the Two Lost Sons* – to the believers in the interviews generated selective, but specific, evidence of that theological development.

The Sindhi believers interviewed demonstrated both theological continuity and discontinuity from the traditional group revealing their (re)shaped and (re)interpreted prior faith assumptions. This supports the claim that theological development occurs as trajectories diverging from pre-conversion perspectives of God. Comparing and contrasting the believer and traditional groups' expressions of identified themes is the mapping methodology that revealed the trajectories. These were subsumed under the overarching shift from a *master-servant* to a *father-child* paradigm. While the identification of a single overarching theme may not occur in similar studies, theological trajectories are a reasonable expectation when a group of individuals within a particular faith community commit themselves to following a religious text that is not part of the traditional belief system.

The *father-child* theological trajectory was identified through the interaction with one particular text of scripture, the *Parable of the Two Lost Sons* in Luke 15. Due to the primary father-sons dynamic within the story it is not surprising that the identified trajectory should follow that theme. Nonetheless, it would be too narrow to assume that this trajectory is only influential for the Sindhi believers as it relates to this one passage, that this faith commitment only impacts parent-child relationships or that the familial metaphor has limited application to their perspective of God. As evidenced by the participants' application of the trajectory to different aspects of their lives as well as references made to other biblical teachings, it is clear that this perspective of a *father-child* relationship with God is an important, perhaps even primary, grid

⁵⁴⁰ See 7.5.1.

through which they understand and live out their faith. This supports the proposal that even though this process deals with one small part of scripture and one narrow aspect of the participants' lives, the complexity and inter-relatedness of human beliefs, experiences and interactions allows for the identification of faith orientations that have far reaching implications beyond the narrowness of the subject matter being explored.

The personal narratives of the believers provide credibility for the relevance and truth of the scripture passage in their lives. The culture texts demonstrate what Patterson *et al* (2008:61) describe as the power of stories to “help individuals transport themselves away from the role of a listener who is rigorously applying rules of logic, analysis, and criticism and into the story itself.” That is, rather than assessing the meaning of the passage as an outsider and considering its merits from a logical or critical standpoint, as is evident in responses from the traditional group, the believers viewed their own life situation in light of the message of the parable. They are drawn in so that the story becomes a reflection of their own story. Personal narratives related from their lives indicate that the participants have made an emotional investment in the meaning of the passage because it represents a part of who they are. The narratives indicated that the participants do not merely “*sympathize* with the characters – having an intellectual appreciation for others' plight – they *empathize* with the characters” (Patterson *et al* 2008:62 italics added). That is, they place themselves emotionally and metaphorically into the actions of the characters.

Conversely, when a believer shares a narrative of their own life and relates the passage to a part of their world, this also indicates an emotional investment in the passage; the narrative connection affirms and deepens the previously made commitment to the text and demonstrates integration with many aspects of their lives. The message *becomes true for them* as it reflects those experiences, values and beliefs that make up their world. The experiences and narratives of the participants' lives have been integrated with the parable so that their beliefs about God are strengthened in a context broader than the parable itself. Because the believers consider the parable part of a sacred text, relevance is assumed and their inclination is to respond positively. This provides a cycle of positive feedback and consolidation of their faith as it relates to their context. As they connect the narrative of their lives to the parable, emotional reinforcement of their commitment to the text as God's word is created, which in turn opens them up to further exploration of its relevance and impact in their lives. This cycle of positive feedback leads to the

identification of theological trajectories as the text *reads*⁵⁴¹ the participants. The reserved stance of the traditional group, in contrast, is derived from their prior commitment to a different foundation that excludes acceptance of the text as God's word speaking to them.

The interview process is an intentional working out of the *faith–text–context triangle*. Theological trajectories are a product of this dynamic and mapping them affords the outsider a perspective on emic theological development. Such a process could be successfully repeated with Sindhis as well as used within other people groups where a shift in commitment has been noted or suspected so that theological trajectories stimulating life change can be identified. Moreover theological trajectories are not only *identified* through the initiation of a text–context dialogue, but the believers' faith is also *challenged and shaped*. In summary, the benefits of these results to the study of local theologies are (1) establishing a means for an outsider change agent⁵⁴² to gain an authentic perspective on the development of an emerging local theology in terms of content, direction and impact, (2) locating that perspective in the context of continuity and discontinuity with previous faith stances and (3) intentionally encouraging and validating insider theologizing. While the first two points have been described in this section, the latter is explored below as one of the benefits of the research methodology.⁵⁴³

11.1.3 Theological trajectories in the faith of Sindhi Muslim Believers

When considering the value of mapping theological trajectories, the particular benefit of studying Sindhi believers – a group of people whose theology has not previously been studied – should not be overlooked. This thesis presents a unique perspective on the theological development of believers within a Muslim context where there is no established church. The powerful relational *father–child* metaphor presented in the *Parable of the Two Lost Sons* has been embraced with enthusiasm in a way that can be contrasted with the dominant *master–servant* metaphor of the traditional group. However, this result would be more credible if another set of interviews had been held using a passage where familial language for God does *not* occur. Would the *father–child* metaphor be evident in the faith response of believers to that passage? Has the metaphor

⁵⁴¹ See 2.5.1.4.1 for a description of how scripture “reads” us.

⁵⁴² Although the focus throughout this thesis has been on providing a means for the outsider to map theological trajectories, it is assumed that insider change agents would be able to use this methodology with even greater ease and with similar benefits. Without the language and cultural barriers of the outsider, the insider is in a better position to recognize some of the tendencies and orientations creating theological shift.

⁵⁴³ See 11.2.

become part of the framework by which they read every text and think about God, or is this a limited response based on the influence of the parable? The results of this research are insufficient to answer the question with confidence, but future studies could test this thesis.

Positive response to this metaphor indicates the possibility of other relational perspectives of God as an aspect of Sindhi believers' ongoing theological development. Orthodox Islam lifts God above human metaphors into unknowable glory. In contrast, the incarnation of Christ in Christian theology encourages the use of contextual images to provide relational perspectives of God. The identified theological shift by Sindhi believers is not just adopting one new way to think about God, but the acceptance of a hermeneutic that *allows for and encourages* metaphors to be embraced as legitimate perspectives of God. A door has been opened to new reflections and ways of living through the possibility of knowing God in and through the experiences of life. Rather than the attitude of servants that look to the hand of the Master for blessings, believers are looking above the hand to the Master's face with a hunger for relationship that requires familial human metaphors to be satisfied. While the *father-child* metaphor is the significant image identified in this research, exposure to other biblical metaphors could uncover rich nuances and thick metaphors of who God is. The cultural texts offered by the believers indicate that embracing the metaphor has brought the truth of the gospel into their lives.⁵⁴⁴ They have discovered a hermeneutical posture from which they can develop new ways to understand, experience and live out their perspective of God.

The *Immanuel* of the Father image also indicates that a faith shift at a cosmological level is occurring because the dominant themes of God that shape their lives are being altered. This is not necessarily a *structural* adjustment, as if, for example, the universe is no longer described with seven tiers, but a shift in priorities and emphases. To have God relate to them as Father rather than Master softens the harshness of the universe from a place of testing, rewards and punishments to a place in which they are called to flourish as children. As indicated from the data, this has impacted the way they approach their interactions with others and is also being worked out as they face other challenges in their context.

11.1.4 Notable Lack of Theological Shift

As noted in the analysis, there are some theological developments on the part of the believers that seem incomplete or undeveloped. Some believers expressed discomfort with the implications of

⁵⁴⁴ Examples from the application of the praxis matrix to the data are provided in 10.3.

certain assertions or made comments that conflicted with the conclusions of other believers. Such incongruities may indicate an incomplete or insufficient theological shift that requires further adjustment in order to develop a faith consistent with both text and context. These discrepancies should not be viewed as a weakness or flaw, but as a necessary part of a process of discovery. Questions are often more important than answers, and when interaction with the text results in a challenge to cultural assumptions, that may signal the beginning of a new theological trajectory that will take time, reflection and ongoing dialogue to develop.

There was little difference between the believer and traditional groups' perception of God's forgiving nature, even to the point of insisting on repentance and submission in order to merit forgiveness. However, while welcoming forgiveness and reconciliation from a heavenly Father who is gracious beyond imagining, this has created tension and discomfort for some believers who sense that such generosity opens the door to a possible miscarriage of justice. The participants of the traditional group, in contrast, did not give evidence of this burden, seemingly content to trust in God's forgiving response to a humble and repentant spirit. The distinction, I believe, comes from a revelation of the Christian message that God forgives the *undeserving*, a thought both comforting and disconcerting. The traditional group looks to God's judgment as meting out what people *deserve*. Divine mercy is an integral *part* of justice, not an *annulment* of justice so there is no conflict in their theology. The believers, on the other hand, are faced with the complexity of a familial relationship that takes precedence over impartial punishment and this has not been entirely resolved.

While a resolution to the dissonance was proposed by IJ (a sophistic oriented member of the traditional group; interview 20T), who suggested redefining justice as *making things right*, a resolution consistent with the exegetical analysis of the passage,⁵⁴⁵ the believers for the most part are holding onto these two concepts without a satisfying outcome. That is, the believers are reshaping their theology in terms of a relational paradigm that attributes the motive of God's action towards humanity as personal care, yet at the same time affirming concepts of heaven and hell that relate to rewards and punishment. Thus, for example, S (Interview 15B) rejects the "greed" factor of paradise, preferring relationship with God rather than the promise of future bliss as the motive for salvation. At the same time he was uncomfortable with the lack of fairness indicated by the father towards the older brother in terms of inheritance and rewards when the

⁵⁴⁵ See 8.4.1.3.6.

younger brother is welcomed back.⁵⁴⁶

Related to this dissonance was uncertainty associated with the concept of God's love. Is God's love and mercy vast and immeasurable, or is it dependent upon the actions of the one receiving that love and mercy? The cognitive dissonance was not phrased in this way by the participants nor does it follow that these two concepts necessarily contradict each other. But some of the believers were troubled by the apparent conflict. Because members of the traditional group were content to contemplate God's character as beyond human understanding and therefore considered in the abstract rather than as a personally experienced belief, they affirmed the former concept and were untroubled by the latter question. For those in the traditional group, and for some believers, the logic is clear: God's immeasurable mercy is on the sinner who has turned away from their sin, not on those who refuse to repent. Although the son is loved by the father during his rebellion, welcomed home even before his speech of forgiveness and there is no accounting of the son's sins, all participants assumed repentance as a necessary *prerequisite* to acceptance and forgiveness by God. However, because the believers have embraced the image of God as relational and caring as revealed in the New Testament, there seems to be some confusion concerning the extent to which God loves humanity and initiates relationship. H (Interview 13B) is effusive in his appreciation for the love of God expressed in the parable but continually qualifies his comments by asserting that the love is initiated, not by God, but by humanity.

God is such that when Adam [ie humanity] turns a little to God, God turns a lot to him. When people look to God, God gives them all. When people [*insAn zAt*] turn a little to God, God shows them great love [*shafqat*]. Because when the son turns a little to the father, then his love [*shafqat*] increased. Do you understand this, sir? When people turn to God just a little bit, God's love is revealed which is a lot greater.... if the child just comes a little closer, then the father automatically goes down to the child. If he has come humbly [*nivaRi*], then I need to love [*shafqat*], no? The father immediately loved him and running hugged him. He made a sacrifice for him and rejoiced that "my son has returned for me."

In order to underscore his point, he quoted a verse from the Qur'an in Arabic (possibly Surah al-Baqarah, Aayah 152)⁵⁴⁷ which he translated as, "If you remember me, I remember you. If you remember me once, I will remember you 70 times."

⁵⁴⁶ As explored in 3.2.3, the lack of context concerning Jesus' dispute with the Pharisees contributed to the inability of the participants to read the actions of son in terms of an invitation to the Pharisees to "join the party" rather than through a legalistic lens.

⁵⁴⁷ "So remember Me: I will remember you. And be grateful to Me, and do not deny me" Qur'an 2:152 from Saheeh International text (2004:21).

The older son's complaint reflects this position because the father's grace was offered to someone who did *not* deserve it. Participants from both groups were sympathetic to this attitude and while affirming that God is merciful, it was only in the context of those who have repented, a perspective evoked by the parable with the image of the returning son. However, the deeper biblical truth that "while we were still sinners, Christ died for us" (Rom 5:8 NIV) was not explicitly expressed by the believers. The principle that humanity does not deserve salvation was affirmed, but initiation by humanity was emphasized. It may be that their affirmation of God's love for the unrepentant will develop if the status of humanity as God's children is further established as the fundamental paradigm within which they understand God.

While recognizing that this dissonance may need to be worked through by Sindhi believers, any lack of clarity or narrowness of focus probably reflects some of the limitations of this study. Only one biblical passage was used (Lk 15) in which the human agent – the younger son – initiates the reconciliation process. If other passages had been used, such as Paul's description of God's act of redemption in Romans 5, the responses may have been different. There is a delicate paradox between the action of God and the action of humanity⁵⁴⁸ and the affirmation of these different emphases is a sign of maturity in faith and theology. Moreover, since people in different cultures process and express paradox differently, this identified struggle may not as significant a problem in the eyes of the believers as assumed by an outsider raised in a different tradition.

The concept of equality before God for all, whether repentant sinner or one who has remained faithful, seemed to clash with the concept that God is more loving towards the repentant. The conviction of fair treatment as an expression of justice was important to most participants and led some of the believers to conclude that God must be impartial in his love even in light of people's sin. ASR (Interview 9B) was confident that "God is compassionate [*raham*] and the idea here [in the parable] is that everyone is equal. God's compassion is the same for everyone [whether sinner or faithful]."

This lack of a clear shift was evident in the comments made by participants of the believer group who, in separate interviews, stated that God loves those who repent more than those who have never strayed. For example, R (Interview 6B) insisted that "When a person repents and returns, when a person stops [*khatam*] everything and turns to God with the intention [*irado*] that I

⁵⁴⁸ For example, in Phil 2:13-14 Paul follows up the declaration that it is God who works within us with a command to "do everything."

will not do wrong [*ghalti*] [then God cares for that person].” AS (Interview 5B), even though he first expressed a similar view, later in the interview voiced an alternate perspective:

When we go on his path, then we are more beloved. When we go on his path, then he loves us more.... [Later:] God does not love less. He always loves constantly [*barqrar*].... When a person goes their own way, they are harming themselves. But God’s love remains the same, constant [*qaim*].

Some believers did demonstrate a more developed theology in this regard. A (Interview 19B) resolved the distinction from within the relational paradigm. The sinner who returns and repents is expressing a yearning for God,⁵⁴⁹ a yearning that is lacking from the one who enjoys God’s blessings without a deliberate choice for God. It is therefore the *repentant* who experiences a deeper and richer relationship with God rather than indicating a change in *God’s* love. In addition, the impact with respect to God is not viewed in terms of greater and lesser *love*, but greater and lesser *joy*. This thought may have been stimulated by the celebration of the returning son, or it may reflect exposure to Jesus’ statement in the same chapter which was not read aloud, that “there is rejoicing in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents” (Lk 15:10).

About God, it shows us that despite disobedience, he loves his children. And he is happy that the one who was dead is now alive, was lost and is found. That is, this is light about God. That when one of his children forgets him and then he returns, then God has double or four times as much joy (A Interview 19B).

The lack of theological development brought to light from the interviews does not indicate a weakness in the research methodology, but quite the opposite. It demonstrates the benefits gained from presenting one passage of scripture for discussion that goes beyond one subject and exposes other developing concerns that could be fruitfully explored through a similar process.

11.2 Benefits of the Research Methodology

The missiological benefits of mapping theological trajectories – the *end results* of the research process – are argued above. The suggestion is made in this section that certain aspects of the research *methodology* also make a contribution to missiological practice.

The three interactions of the faith–text–context triangle – faith–text, faith–context and text–context – create the impetus for theological shift and these dynamics suggested two methodologies used to identify and stimulate theological development. The *presentation* of a

⁵⁴⁹ Although not explicitly mentioned, this reflects the younger son’s reflection on the goodness of the father in Luke 15:17.

passage of scripture initiates a creative faith–text tension. The researcher sets parameters for a productive discussion without controlling the content of the interaction and emic expressions of faith are generated as participants interact with the text. *Presentation* fulfills a critical aspect of Christian theological development by ensuring that the participants interact with God’s word. It takes advantage of a conviction, common to both researcher and believers, that the message of the Bible is sacred and therefore submission to that message is imperative. All three interactions of the faith–text–context triangle occur as believers consider the implications of the text for their faith in light of the context in which they live.

Unlike *presentation*, the second methodology, *dialogue*, is common to qualitative research processes, but it bears mentioning because of the dialectical dynamic of the faith–text–context paradigm that points to the need for a research methodology consistent with that social reality. The triangle describes ongoing conversations, tensions and interactions between interlocutors that shape the faith of a community. Because people are meaning–makers and their expressions of meaning provide a window into their world, creating opportunities for them to share those expressions allows outsiders access to their perspective.⁵⁵⁰ A natural approach for exploring this dialectical dynamic is to engage members of that community through interviews. Assuming an “attending” posture helps the cross–cultural worker become aware of the transforming power of dialogue. When the outsider limits direct control and instead facilitates or draws out insiders through dialogue, the potential becomes evident. Listening on the part of the outsider is not a neutral posture, but an active power that creates change. But it is *non-directed* change that occurs through the willing participation and creative expression of the insiders. The insider participants are impacted as they articulate their own thoughts in conversation with others. This thesis is, therefore, a study in the importance of listening skills so that the researcher is able to not only understand, but stimulate and validate the theological developments of an emerging believing community.

If the argument is accepted that conversion is not limited to a point in time or a past event but is part of an ongoing journey, then the research act of generating data can be viewed as a factor in the conversion process. The interview becomes one more event in the outworking of the believers’ commitment to scripture that consolidates and gives expression to the covenant. Orchestrating a text–context tension generates data as interview participants consider how God’s Word reads them and how their submission to God’s will shapes their lives. The research design

⁵⁵⁰ See 1.4.6 for a description of the participants as “meaning–makers.”

thus functions not only as a method of identifying theological trajectories, but of encouraging ongoing development. Because this is a facilitating, rather than dominating act on the part of the researcher, the participants control the content within the parameters of the conversation topic. The interview setting provides opportunity for that commitment to be expressed and engaged.

These benefits are closely tied to the concept of empowering others, which is a motivation that drives this methodology. My response to Ahmed's question about marriage⁵⁵¹ reveals a core value in my approach to ministry. I do not want to be the source of answers or suggest ways of living, no matter how true, relevant or impacting they may be; the desire is to stimulate interaction between faith and text as believers consider their context. This value and approach to ministry is reflected in the research methodology that empowers people to take ownership of listening and responding to God's word. It puts the initiative to engage, understand and apply God's word into the hands of those who are the believers so that they are encouraged to be the authors of their own theology. I pointed Ahmed to scripture passages that I felt were relevant to his concern, but they were not selected according to a prior commitment to a "right" answer. Rather they were scriptures that appeared to contradict each other. My concern was not to lead him to an *answer*, but to a *process* of spiritual reflection and prayer that would insist on his own decision, and was therefore empowering. My vision in the Sindh was to see a viable, sustainable believing community established that can only come about when believers are empowered as the authors of their own theology. In order for such a community to be a "hermeneutic of the gospel" (Newbigin 1986:222), the triple faith-text-context interaction needs to be intentional rather than passively importing theology from other communities. Creating an environment where these interactions are normative stimulates gospel transformation, encourages replication of leaders and promotes interaction with other believing communities. Moreover, it promotes a *servant* leadership mindset in which the dynamic driving the transformation is dialogue, a learning posture which requires leaders to *listen* and *attend*, thus affirming and building up others in a non-directive fashion so that they develop their own theology. Such an approach to ministry will establish a robust expression of Christianity that is active, lasting and dynamic, a reproducible faith that will not die out due to stagnation, irrelevance or a lack of reflection about how God speaks into their context.

An empowering approach that does not emphasize content, answers or solutions represents an important shift for the cross-cultural evangelical missionary commissioned with a message to share. Where there are cooperative and enthusiastic participants willing to express their

⁵⁵¹ See 4.1.4.

understanding and beliefs, the guided interview structure provides a healthy and formative setting that encourages spiritual understanding and development. The process maximizes positive change through reflection on God's word and minimizes negative stress and the lack of impact seen in more confrontational or non-interactive teaching.⁵⁵² By using listening tools, the change agent can effectively initiate and encourage participants in their faith development and cultivate an environment in which the theological task of creative reflection on the text-context dynamics is normative and impacting.

The benefit of the research methodology can also be seen in how it conforms to the dialectical approach⁵⁵³ advocated by Martin *et al* (2002:3) that “emphasizes the *processual*, *relational*, and *contradictory* nature of intercultural communication.” This not only provides a measure of validation for the research design, but also suggests that this methodology can be used to examine dialectical dynamics within communities. The *processual* aspect was evident in the identification and examination of a theological shift occurring among Sindhi believers. The *relational* element was fulfilled through interpersonal interaction in the interviews as well as through the culture texts of the participants that were their personal stories, narratives and metaphors of life. The *contradictory* dynamic was revealed through the complications that accompany change along with the conflict of emotion that arises with a shift in beliefs. The three intercultural dialectics given by the same authors (Martin *et al* 2002:4-6) identified as relevant to this project were also apparent in the data analysis. The “cultural-individual” tension was evident in the believers as they embraced a perspective of God distinct from the *master-servant* paradigm of the traditional group. The “difference-similarities” dialectic was evident in the similarities and contrasts of the data which showed the importance of the concept of trajectories. The third dialectic, the “static-dynamic,” was demonstrated by the faith change that is occurring within relatively stable cultural patterns. There was continuity with the convictions of the members of the traditional group as well as an emerging divergence from their beliefs.

Similarly, Green's (2007:92-93) dimensions in developing a local theology⁵⁵⁴ – *Cross-cultural* interaction, *Canonical* considerations, *Historical* awareness, *Communal* sensitivity,

⁵⁵² Vella (2002), in her book *Learning to Listen, Learning to Teach*, affirms this contrast and sees dialogue as a process through which adult learners develop in their understanding and abilities. She contrasts this with the common monological approach of lectures that merely provide information about a topic rather than engaging the participants (:xiv).

⁵⁵³ Martin *et al*'s (2002:3) dialectical approach was addressed in 1.4.3.4.

⁵⁵⁴ See 3.1.2.3 for Green's (2007:92-93) dimensions.

Global perspectives and *Hospitable* practices – along with Sedmak’s (2002:71) two additional dimensions – *fidelity* to Jesus and *fruit* or practical consequences – are, in a significant way, addressed through the dialogical approach of identifying theological trajectories. *Cross-cultural* interaction occurred through the observing participant role of the facilitator, as well as through other outsider influences that shaped the thinking of the participants. *Canonical* considerations took place as interview participants engaged God’s revelation through a consideration of scripture. Interaction of believers within household churches and other forms of *Isa Jama’at* demonstrated *Communal* sensitivity. *Hospitable* practices were evident in the interview methodology in which perspectives of both believers and those with traditional views were heard and explored with respect. *Fidelity* to Jesus was encouraged through meditating on one of his parables and considering the implications for discipleship. *Fruit* or practical consequences were deduced from the culture texts generated from the participants and revealed further through an application of Kritzinger’s (2010) praxis matrix. Thus, the methodology applied in this research can serve the missiologist who desires to explore the dimensions of an emerging local theology.

The two most obvious dimensions lacking in the research process are *Global* perspectives and *Historical* awareness. An exegetical consideration of the passage⁵⁵⁵ addressed these dimensions as a test of theological validity by the broader “hermeneutical community” that, at the same time, did not demand conformity to a set of propositions created by outsiders to the Sindhi context. However, even though these two dimensions were considered on a theoretical level, they were not part of the research methodology. A more holistic development of a local theology would require dialogue between Sindhi believers and outsider scholars to ensure the believers’ developing faith is adequately challenged and validated through a consideration of *Global* perspectives and *Historical* awareness. As Schreiter (1985:19) notes,

the community has need of the theologian’s knowledge to ground its own experience within the Christian traditions of faith. In so doing, the theologian helps to create the bonds of mutual accountability between local and world church.

Because data from the interviews demonstrate theological *movement* and *direction*, the methodology is also useful in supplying a partial mapping of the hermeneutical spiral.⁵⁵⁶ The upward spiral of progress in the development of local theologies is made possible through encouraging and maintaining an ongoing dialogue between text and context as participants

⁵⁵⁵ See 8.4.1.3.6.

⁵⁵⁶ A theoretical basis for the application of the hermeneutical spiral was given in 8.3.

develop and give voice to their faith. Admittedly, what was researched is only one movement of a complex and multi-dimensional process of theological development that involves more people, more interactions and a broader exposure to God's revelation; none of the dimensions evident in the dialogical process are comprehensively dealt with. Even with these limitations, the impact of the interviews and interaction between the participants has played a significant role in theological development with implications beyond the narrow strictures of the research parameters.

Finally, one of the evaluative tools introduced in this thesis deserves to be mentioned as a benefit to missiological methodology. While there are four possible responses to a presented text⁵⁵⁷ – *rejection, redefinition, assimilation* or *acceptance* – it is only the latter response that creates the possibility of a theological trajectory distinct from the traditional community's accepted faith stance. Therefore, identifying these distinct responses in the participants' comments helps the researcher discern a potential theological trajectory through the participants' interaction with a sacred text.

11.2.1 Comparison to other Methodologies

The strengths and weaknesses of the methodology can also be highlighted through a comparison with other approaches. One obvious limitation is the narrow parameters; a comprehensive theology was not explored or described, rather a few theological topics were identified within one theological trajectory based on controlled exposure to one text of scripture. Scholars have proposed schemes to evaluate the content of a local theology in greater depth based on key biblical themes. While these are helpful frameworks to challenge and guide local theologies in exploring the breadth of God's revelation and they provide a more comprehensive framework, the *a priori* assumptions concerning the theological content are in contrast to this study. For example, Bevans' & Schroeder's (2004:34) six "constants" used as a guide to evaluate local theologies are framed according to

six questions that shape the way the church will preach, serve and witness to God's reign: (1) Who is Jesus Christ and what is his meaning? (2) What is the nature of the Christian church? (3) How does the church regard its eschatological future? (4) What is the nature of the salvation it preaches? (5) How does the church value the human? And (6) What is the value of human culture as the context in which the gospel is preached?

In a similar fashion, Flemming (2005:302-305) presents a test for authentic theology based

⁵⁵⁷ See 1.4.4 for this four-fold typology.

on the quadrilateral of Holy Spirit, Tradition/community, Gospel (scripture) and Mission/transformation. Schreier (1985:40) provides a framework formed by the theological concepts of creation, redemption, and community, which he considers paramount for a theologian wishing to listen to a culture: (a) *Creation*: How does a culture see its organization and how are the organizing factors expressed in behavior? (b) *Redemption*: What are the ills from which the culture suffers and what remedies are proposed? (c) *Community*: What is the quality of life together and how is that way of life developed?

The methodology employed here begins, not with theological categories or a framework of questions highlighting critical themes, but with a passage of scripture and stimulates interaction with the text in order to generate culture texts that reveal theological trajectories already present and developing among a group of believers. In contrast to the more comprehensive considerations of the scholars cited, the limitations and narrow focus of this research project are obvious. A robust ongoing development of the theology of Sindhi believers would do well to consider the categories mentioned. Nonetheless, the methodology advocated in this thesis is a means by which members of a believing community can maintain a dialogue between biblical texts and their culture, a dialogue critical to the development of grassroots theology. Such vibrant, illuminating and impacting interactions as experienced in this research should not be replaced by, but carefully complemented with, outsider theological concerns. This thesis is a call to missionaries, evangelists and other cross-cultural workers to focus on identifying and stimulating local theologies in this non-directive fashion rather than giving priority to outsider theological categories.

11.3 Implications for Sindhi Bible Translation

Because of the prominent place of Sindhi NT translation in this research project, one of the secondary interests is the question of how this research benefits Bible translation, and Sindhi Bible translation in particular. How should the exploration of an emerging theology of believers in a Muslim context through the consideration of a passage of scripture influence Bible translation? This question can be partially addressed by considering two dimensions: *formation* and *exegesis*. *Formation* considers the impact of the translation as a vehicle of communication on the participants' theological reflections, while *exegesis* focuses on the way Sindhi words and phrases were interpreted.

Formation requires attending to trajectories to determine if the Sindhi translation resonates

at a deeper level than mere comprehension of the message. Rather than a focus on *information* – that is, the participants’ understanding of the message – the concern is for *formation* – that is, does the specific use of the Sindhi language play a role in theological impact and life commitments. Many of the participants were capable of engaging the text in a language other than their mother tongue. But it is possible that the language and translation style affected their response to the message that would not have occurred through another language. As explained earlier,⁵⁵⁸ having scripture in the Sindhi language makes the Bible part of the culture, part of their identity. The *Injil* translated in their mother tongue is demonstrably appealing to Sindhis so that they have a greater desire to read it. This raises the possibility that resonance with the language may play a role in the formation of their theology. Such speculation relies on the Saper–Whorf hypothesis that the language and idiom of the text leads the reader to think within certain patterns of thought with all of its accompanying nuances.⁵⁵⁹ It is therefore suggested that the “language habits” (Sapir 1963 [1949]:162) of believers shape their interpretation of the Bible and, in turn, their interaction with the text affects the descriptors used to portray their perspective of God. For example, if believing participants in the interviews approached the text with a history of referring to God as “Father,” their orientation to and experience of the text will likely be different from those who consistently consider God in terms of “Master.” The implication is that the *master–servant* and *father–child* paradigms are not just culturally shaped and so *reflect* the orientation of the believers or members of the traditional group, but also that language preferred and embraced *determine* the user’s faith and perspective of God as well as impact the way scripture is engaged. While the research is insufficient to prove this speculation, the contrasting reactions to the text by the believer and traditional groups do conform to the expectations one might expect from the Saper–Whorf hypothesis, or at least the “softer” version suggested previously.

At the very least, the research underscores how language impacts, transforms and persuades. The choice of theologically loaded terms, such as familial language for God, plays a role in theological development. Such language can appeal or repel, depending on the orientation of the reader to the text and the possibility of describing a relationship with God in that way. Sensitivity to the emotional impact of idioms and descriptions upon the theological development of the intended audience needs to be of concern for the translator. For the most part interview participants affirmed the theological paradigm of “Father” used for God in the parable. It

⁵⁵⁸ See 6.4.

⁵⁵⁹ See a development of how language shapes patterns of thought in 8.1.1.1.

resonated strongly with the believers and a majority of the traditional group was also able to interact positively with the concept, even though the latter considered the imagery inadequate and avoided using the metaphor. The use of particular language, such as “Father,” by one segment of the culture promises to exhibit similar emotive and faith responses within the broader society because of the connection between culture and language. Thus, even though a limited number of people were interviewed, the interconnectedness of language and culture ensures a connectedness of thought and influence, even if not of faith. *Formative* issues highlighted by the methodology help the translator to be more aware of and sensitive to theologically loaded terms.

Exegetical concerns focus more narrowly on the meaning of the passage, rather than on theological formation. While it would be dishonest and manipulative to alter an appropriately translated text in order to facilitate a particular theological understanding that is not overtly addressed in the passage, it is critical for the translator to use a listening process such as described in this thesis to discover inadequate renderings that result in misreadings of the translation. This is not to suggest that a faulty interpretation always means that the original translation choices are wrong, but it is possible for the primary meaning of the text to be obscured through a poor rendering. With an *exegetical* orientation, the translator seeks integrity with the original text and clarity in communication without deliberately influencing theological development, letting the clearly understood message create an impact upon the reader. At the same time, if translation choices result in inadequate theology, the translator should consider the possibility that the message has been obscured through a failure in the intended communication.

The ultimate test for translation is not the *intended* meaning according to the translator, but the *perceived* meaning as interpreted by the audience, Nida & Taber’s (1974:1) “reader response.” As believers are exposed to the *front* of the translated text⁵⁶⁰ and express its meaning through verbal and practical expressions of faith, such as through the interview process, the perceived meaning of the text is exposed. In particular, distortions in the translated text can come to light through the use of the text by the intended readers. Because of the myriad ways translation can err,⁵⁶¹ attending to such expressions of the meaning can help the translator adjust the text so that the intended meaning is more accessible to the reader. However, if an adequate and equivalent meaning is being gleaned from the text but other factors are leading to what the translator concludes is mistaken theology, that theology probably should be dealt with in *front* of the text by

⁵⁶⁰ See 8.2.3 for a description of this concept.

⁵⁶¹ See 8.2.2 for a list of possible errors by Steiner (1998).

grappling with the implications of the meaning as lived out in the context, not by an adjustment *behind* the translated text. The influences upon an emerging theology are much greater than the translation itself and the presence of misguided theology cannot stand as the sole reason to alter the translation.⁵⁶²

An example is the view of the participants towards the older son. He was unanimously considered to be a good (*naik*) person. This contrasts sharply with the interpretation in which the older son is seen as representing the Pharisees⁵⁶³ and which is reflected in our choice of title for the parable: *Two Lost Sons*.⁵⁶⁴ Keller (2008:35) comments that the

elder brother is not losing the father's love in spite of his goodness, but because of it. It is not his sins that create the barrier between him and his father, it's the pride he has in his moral record; it's not his wrongdoing but his righteousness that is keeping him from sharing in the feast of the father.

However, the Sindhi view is that the son is righteous and acceptable to the father *because of* his obedience. His lack of compassion was noted and attributed to pride (ASR Interview 9B), but was considered to be minor in comparison to his conformity to the father's will. R (Interview 6B) commented that the older son

did not do anything wrong, he always obeyed the father. He was on the right path. He did not do what was wrong, but went on the right path. He was happy with his father. He had everything. His father said, "All this wealth is yours. After me, all the inheritance is yours. You are the heir. This will not belong to the younger."

While acknowledging that the son's attitude towards the father was not appropriate, they were in general agreement that the son presented a good argument to the father. Even though this appears to downplay the intended impact of the story, it is not a distortion of the meaning of the text but

⁵⁶² For example, in a Muslim context the passages that refer to an exclusive blessing to the nation of Israel can be problematic. Luke 2:10,14 are often translated and understood to refer to humankind in general, whereas the focus is on the fulfilling of God's promises for Israel. The Bible consists of a development and unfolding of insights through a process of progressive revelation. Thus, the initial focus of Jesus on the 12 tribes and its unfolding into a gospel for all nations through the cross and resurrection cannot be appreciated by someone who expects the sacred text to be a finished and totally coherent set of dogmatic statements. It can be tempting for the translator to avoid the exclusive question by following a more inclusive translation model. However, this does not maintain the integrity of the text. The inclusive question needs to be wrestled with inside the bounds of the author's communicative intention.

⁵⁶³ Because the full context of the story was not provided for the readers to show that the parable is a response to the Pharisees' grumbling (Lk 15:2), the interpretation of the older son as a rebuke to the Pharisees was not understood by the participants.

⁵⁶⁴ See 8.4.1.3.1 for an explanation of this choice.

actually parallels the role of the Pharisees in that society. The impact of the story in shaping the believers' theology therefore needs to be considered in *front* of the text, not by altering the translation. What was lacking was clarity concerning the broader context of the parable found in Luke 15:1-2 which would have helped the participants understand the issue Jesus was addressing. Although the lack of the broader context exposes a weakness in the research, it paradoxically affirms the methodology by suggesting that revisiting the passage with the inclusion of the first few verses of the chapter would result in deeper and more appropriate reflections to address this misreading. Approaching the parable in this way underscores how important it is for believers to become discerning, interpretive communities – “together with all the saints” (Eph 3:18) – who read scripture as a collection of historically situated narratives and discourses written to address concrete situations and not as a book of dogmatic statements. Translators who avail themselves of such interactions benefit through the affirmation of translation choices as well as become alerted to potential problems.

11.3.1 Unexpected Readings

Specific examples from the interview process that illustrate the benefit of the exegetical orientation demonstrate the value of the methodology for Bible translation. Theoretically, the process of refining a translated text is never ending since the product only approximates the original text.⁵⁶⁵ Even as theology is an ongoing dialogue between text and faith,⁵⁶⁶ so Bible translation is an ongoing dialogue between original text (meaning) and cultural referent (form) to ensure understanding.⁵⁶⁷ The research methodology gives opportunity for one movement in that dialogue. When the culture texts expressed by the readers indicate an unexpected understanding, this may reveal a miscommunication that calls for a revision of the translation. There are at least five different kinds of unexpected readings evident from the research that guide the translator in adjusting the text.

Misunderstanding: The translator intended to communicate one message, but another was understood. In Luke 15:19 the word used is that of a paid servant (*nokar*)⁵⁶⁸ who has status and security within a household. This misrepresented the intent of the passage which refers to a common laborer without any status in the household and only hired on with daily wages. A

⁵⁶⁵ See 8.2.2 for a discussion of Bible translation philosophy.

⁵⁶⁶ See 5.4 for a description of this dynamic.

⁵⁶⁷ See 8.2.2.2 for the theory behind this assertion.

⁵⁶⁸ See an explanation of “servant” (*nokar*) in 9.2, Theme 4.

translation change to the Sindhi word *mazdoor* has been made to better communicate this point and avoid the misunderstanding.

Distraction: A turn of phrase or a particular word distracts the reader from the main message. The imagery of *Father* as a metaphor for God was distracting for some in the traditional group who refused to consider the comparison recognizing that the metaphor significantly reshapes the image of the unknowable God. However, this is an “in *front* of the text” issue since the believers and most of the traditional group were able to grasp the intent of the passage without being distracted by a negative reaction to the metaphor.

Lack of communication: A critical message is not comprehended or is ignored by the reader. The Sindhi love of poetry and metaphorical language meant that key idioms in the story – “this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found” (verse 24) – were not only easily understood but also resonated as powerful images. However, other aspects were not as clear. The participants understood the welcoming action of the father to mean that the younger son would gain another share of the inheritance. This was perceived as injustice and was discussed at length in the interviews. However, even though the message was not fully comprehended, this is not a translation problem, but rather indicates that they were attracted to an attitude exhibited by the Pharisees. This tendency may be influenced by the deeply Islamized Sindhi culture that reads sacred texts to distil legal provisions and guidance rather than theology. Alternatively, they may have imposed Sindhi cultural expectations of welcoming a son back into a household. Whatever the cause, they were taking the side of the older brother based upon an issue of fairness and downplayed Jesus’ point that it is relationship with the father and not the inheritance that matters. As a result they are actually grappling with an aspect of the message that Jesus was addressing which indicates a need to work out the implication in *front* of the text.

In addition, the symbolic meanings of the signet ring, the robe, the calf, the pigs and the running of the father to welcome the son, if they are as significant as indicated by the scholarship,⁵⁶⁹ were not grasped by the readers. While footnotes, glossaries or commentaries can aid the reader, additions in the text would not be appropriate because these are *secondary* levels of meaning, and the *primary* level of meaning is plain. That is, what was denoted is clear and consistent with the primary message of the parable, but the hearers were unaware of possible implied or connotative meanings. For example, the order to give the ring is clear. In fact, an aspect of the secondary meaning of showing favor and acceptance is also obvious to the average

⁵⁶⁹ See 8.4.1.3.6 for a summary of the scholarship.

Sindhi hearer. However, the possible connotative meaning of granting authority indicated by bestowing a signet ring is not communicated.

Reading a message with unintended cultural implications: Although an action is appropriately communicated, the cultural implications for that action may be at odds with the original meaning. The symbolic meaning of the father's order to bring shoes for the son may simply be an expression of acceptance and concern. However, as mentioned in the exegetical overview, within the Sindhi context the bottom of the foot is a symbolic place of shame. Thus covering the feet could be read as meaning that the father is removing the son's shame. The impact for Sindhis is significant and resonates well with the overall message of parable, but it may be more than what was understood by the original audience or intended by the author. There are benefits to this because Sindhi readers are relating the message to meaningful symbols that can bring the message to life as it resonates with their culture. What the reader brings to the text is a culturally shaped perspective of reality necessary to access the meaning and through which a "surplus of meaning" (Ricoeur 1976)⁵⁷⁰ is created that represents a true engagement of the text. Without a connection to the reader's "reality," there would be no communication of meaning and no means by which to overcome the gap between author and reader created by the "absence of a common situation generated by the spatial and temporal distance between writer and reader" (:35). At the same time, a "message is intentional; it is meant by someone" (Ricoeur 1976:3) and "a text remains a discourse told by somebody, said by someone to someone else about something" (:30). This implies that the perceived meaning within a cultural setting does not overcome but remains in dialogical relationship with the author's intended communication.

Preferring a synonym to the translation choice of a word: The reader reflects the meaning of the text but uses another word or phrase. This may be an indication that the translation choices are not as natural to the reader as other terminology. One word not in the Sindhi translation of the parable but used by some participants to describe the father's response to the son is *rAzi*, which means "reconciled" (For example, AA Interview 12B). The translation speaks of "pity" (*kahal*) and hugging and kissing, but not *rAzi*. The implication of the choice of terminology goes beyond this one passage in that the usual Sindhi term used for "reconciliation" is *mail melAp*. Hearing other synonyms used in conversation by the Sindhi reader may indicate that the translation choice within the Sindhi Bible needs to be reconsidered.

⁵⁷⁰ Ricoeur (1976:45-46) uses metaphor and symbol that create a "surplus of meaning" for the reader to explain his theory of interpretation.

11.4 Issues for Further Research

Pursuing one avenue of inquiry often opens the door to other possibilities. This thesis is no different and profitable work could be done to further examine the identified theological trajectory, discover other trajectories among Sindhi believers and explore the value of the methodology in mapping theological trajectories in other contexts.

11.4.1 Further Explorations of the Identified Trajectory

The development of a *father-child* metaphor as the primary orientation of Sindhi believers to God occurs not as a rejection of, but in conjunction with the *master-servant* metaphor. The orientation of the traditional group to God as Master continues to be affirmed by the believers. Biblical examples of this metaphor include parables based on *master-servant* relationships (e.g., Mt 21:33-40; 25:14-3) and Paul's self-identification as a "servant of God" (Tit 1:1). This raises a number of questions that can be explored:

- How will the creative tension between the two metaphors play out? Will there be an increasing preference for the *father-child* metaphor though an emphasis on God as Father? Or will their familiarity with the *master-servant* paradigm supported by biblical images retain significant influence within their relationships and praxis?
- How will the orientation of submission to God's Word and God's will become nuanced through the familial metaphor? Will it weaken or strengthen their obedience and trust? How will motivation to follow the way of Christ according to the principle of love (Jn 14:15) impact the commitment to submissive obedience?
- How will life transitions and rites of passage (birth, circumcision, marriage, death) be shaped by the *father-child* metaphor?
- How will a crisis (illness, death, ostracism, financial disaster) impact the believers' faith? Will it cause cognitive dissonance between that experience and the image of a caring and forgiving Father? Will experiences of death and calamity lead to an integrative and satisfying theology of God as loving Father or will it be found deficient and result in a different trajectory? Will believers be attracted to a theology that they "are being disciplined" (1 Cor 11:32) by their Father and accept suffering as a test for personal growth (Jas 1:2,3) because "the Lord disciplines those he loves, and chastens everyone he accepts as his child" (Hebrews 12:6)? Or will they be influenced by Sufism to conclude that relationship with the Father is on a mystical, spiritual level separate from the crises of

life? Or will they revert to the *master–servant* metaphor of God whose inscrutable decrees are always assumed to be just? The latter Islamic orientation, ever–present in Muslim Sindhi society, consistently views God as relationally distant and so remains an attractive resolution to the dilemma of processing grief.

Another profitable line of inquiry would be to repeat the research with other participants using the same Luke 15 passage but prefacing the interviews with an explanation of the context of the Pharisees and Jesus’ dispute evident in the first few verses of the chapter. Identifying the older son with the Pharisees, an understanding lacking in the research of this thesis, may alter the assumption of righteousness (Sindhi *naik*) assigned to the older son by the participants and result in different conclusions and culture texts. Interpreting the son’s reluctance to join the party as indicative of the Pharisee’s religious judgments may generate new considerations and insight into other theological trajectories.

11.4.2 Other Trajectories and Research in Other Contexts

The identified *father–child* trajectory has an obvious connection to the chosen parable. What if other metaphors of God are prominent in the presented passage such as shepherd (Ps 23:1) or Rock (Deu 32:4)? Or if passages such as Romans 5⁵⁷¹ are read which present concepts less conducive to familial constructs? Or if one of the *master–servant* parables mentioned above is used? Will the *father–child* metaphor be expressed in the generated culture texts or will other trajectories dominate?

There would be benefit in exploring other theological issues using the methodology introduced here.

- Belief in God’s Spirit in Sindhi Muslim thought parallels the Hebrew concept of the power of God active in the world (e.g., Isa 63:11,12; Ps 33:6). How will the more personal aspect of the *parakletos* in John 14 be understood and expressed by believers as they engage the passage?
- Sindhis are reluctant to consider God as “faithful” in relationship to the biblical covenants⁵⁷² because it insinuates that God is somehow “bound” and this is incongruous

⁵⁷¹ A similar point was made in 11.1.4.

⁵⁷² The problem of “faithfulness” was introduced in 7.5.

with the Almighty. How will the believers' theology be impacted as they consider passages such as 1 Cor 10:13 and 1 Jn 1:9?

- How will family life be impacted as believers interact with Paul's instructions in the epistles (e.g., Eph 6:1-4)?

As in this study, each series of interviews could help the Bible translator assess how translation choices in the Sindhi Bible are impacting the theological praxis of the believers.

This research project was from the perspective of an outsider examining the impact of contextualization in terms of etic expressions of inculturation. What results would be generated from a study using the same methodology but with insiders as the researchers? Would a similar theological trajectory be identified or would the conclusions be different? What if a gender specific study was done by women and with women, how would the focus of the study alter? Would it be possible to repeat the study for Tribal Hindu communities in the Sindh among whom a church has recently been established? Would the same theological trajectory be evident when the believers' emerging faith is contrasted to a polytheistic environment?

Applying this methodology in other cultural contexts with other people groups could also prove informative and productive. Sindhi believers have limited access to other Bible translations and no church history. They are emerging from a cultural setting dominated by Islam in which monotheistic assumptions are the norm and religious discussions are common. How could this methodology be adapted for more pluralistic or secular societies, such as in Canada where religion is usually considered a private affair? What effect would church history, established church doctrine and a plethora of Bible translations have on the way the Bible is viewed and related to? How can theological trajectories be mapped if there is no single dominant religious group out of which a church is emerging? Some aspects of this methodology are promising for future studies, while others may require adapting in order to be relevant.

11.5 Summary and Conclusion

The purpose of this study is to map changes in the faith (defined in terms of worldview, beliefs and values) of Sindhi believers towards God as they interact with the Sindhi translation of a NT passage. Such changes are described in terms of theological trajectories and, in particular, one overarching trajectory – a shift from a *master-servant* to a *father-child* paradigm – is identified that includes other theological themes. The answer to the main research question is developed from (1) The generation of culture texts expressed by Sindhi believers as they responded to the

Parable of the Two Lost Sons from a Sindhi translation of Luke 15, (2) A categorization of themes drawn from the culture texts that indicate theological concerns common to both believers and the traditional group and (3) The identification of theological differences within each theme drawn from the contrasts between the believer and traditional groups' culture texts.

The theme, *the relationship of human beings with God*, encompassed the other five themes identified in the analysis and represents the primary trajectory of *father-child* away from the believers' former *master-servant* perspective of God. The impact of this theological shift upon the praxis of the believers is considered using the seven dimensions of Kritzinger's (2010) praxis matrix. In this concluding chapter a series of reflections on the contribution made to missiology from the research process is presented including (1) The missiological significance of theological trajectories, (2) The contribution of the methodology to missiological practice and (3) Implications for Sindhi Bible translation. Issues for further research are also considered.

The analysis supports the claim that a shift to a biblically shaped view of God is not disconnected from previous beliefs, but is based on and shaped by *a priori* assumptions held by others in their context. Although the believers may look back to a single event in which they entered into a new allegiance, there is continuity in their perspective of God even as it is being shaped and developed in a fluid and dynamic manner by outside influences. This research project focuses on one significant element in a shift of faith, the dynamic Sanneh (1996:1) refers to as "crucial interstices, in which old forms and symbols are retrieved, and then reinforced, either from being recast or reconfirmed, from interaction with new religious materials and influences." The "new religious materials and influences" that acted as the catalyst for change was the Bible as God's word speaking authoritatively to the believer. The analysis explored how the believers' faith is "being recast and reconfirmed" through their interaction with the Sindhi translation of scripture. The theological trajectory is revealed through the current perspectives, symbols and metaphors of God used by Sindhi believers, primarily the *father-child* paradigm. It is my hope and prayer that not only the results of this research, but also the methodology of identifying and stimulating theological trajectories will be of use in establishing believers from many people groups in their faith in Jesus Christ.

Appendices

The following are available upon request from the author:

- The Sindhi of the translated Shah Abdul Latif poem in 1.2.2.2.1.
- The Sindhi of the translated songs written by RM and the Sindhi musicians in 2.1.1.1.
- The Sindhi translation of Luke 15 in Sindhi from the PBS *New Testament in Sindhi* (1991).
- The Sindhi questions used in the interviews.
- Transcripts of the interviews. The transcripts are kept secure with restricted access and will be destroyed after 7 years.
- Correspondence to arrange interviews.

Ethical Clearance letter:


Higher Degrees Committee
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2013-11-07

**ETHICAL CLEARANCE FOR DTH RESEARCH PROJECT OF MA NAYLOR:
*BIBLE TRANSLATION AS CATALYST FOR TRANSFORMATION AMONG THE
SINDHI PEOPLE OF PAKISTAN: MAPPING AN EMERGING THEOLOGY***

The Higher Degrees Committee of the Department of Christian Spirituality, Church History and Missiology hereby declares that it assessed the DTh research proposal of Mr MA Naylor (Student number 3404-510-4) in November 2008 and approved it without reservation. This assessment process included careful scrutiny of the research design and methodology and all the ethical dimensions of his research project. We were satisfied that he had built adequate measures into his research methodology to respect all the participants and to protect them from harm. We confirm that his research design upheld ethical standards and respect for each research participant.

Yours sincerely



Dr ZJ Banda
Chair, Departmental Higher Degrees Committee



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