

Mission Round Table

The OMF Journal for Reflective Practitioners



What's in a Name?

Now the whole earth had one language and the same words. And as people migrated from the east, they found a plain in the land of Shinar and settled there. And they said to one another, "Come, let us make bricks, and burn them thoroughly." And they had brick for stone, and bitumen for mortar. (Genesis 11:1–3)

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Editorial

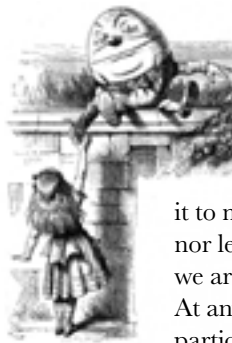
Walter McConnell

Proverbs 16:24 tells us that “Gracious words are like a honeycomb, sweetness to the soul and health to the body.”¹

And yet, we know full well that words are often used ungraciously. The psalmists thus recognize wicked people who, in their desire to cause harm, “whet their tongues like swords, who aim bitter words like arrows” (Ps 64:3), who “encircle me with words of hate, and attack me without cause” (Ps 109:3). Contrary to boast of the children’s rhyme that “Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words can never hurt me,” words can cause pain, whether through a needed rebuke or vicious lies. Words can cause severe pain when used to treat people of other ethnicities or cultures as less than fully human. This issue of *Mission Round Table* puts more papers from the OMF Mission Research Consultation into print and looks at words and their effects from a number of different angles.

As in our previous issue, our introductory article comes from a devotional David Eastwood gave at the Consultation. Here, David turns his attention to the story of the Tower of Babel. He rightly explains that the change in the condition of people—from having “one language and a common speech” (Gen 11:1 NIV) and the ability to plan and carry out great projects, to being “scattered ... over the face of the whole earth” by Yahweh, who also “confused the language of the whole world” (Gen 11:9)—was not a sign that his creation promises had failed, but the means by which his plans would be carried out.

But while God’s word will never fail, the same isn’t true of human speech. It’s not just that people can be purposely hurtful or deceptive. It’s also that languages—composed as they are of sounds that intermingle with other sounds to communicate ideas—can produce ambiguity and, at times, total miscommunication. Words like “chew,” “Jew,” and “due” can become indistinguishable because of someone’s pronunciation or another person’s listening ability. Confusion can also arise when a word has broader meanings than a listener is aware, its meaning has changed over time, or a speaker gives it a sense outside of common use. And



though Humpty Dumpty might scornfully claim that “When I use a word, it means just what I choose it to mean—neither more nor less,”² both Alice and we are right to protest. At any given time, a particular word has a limited number of meanings. And though we may need to survey the possible definitions to grasp the sense of a specific usage, the options remain limited. The papers written by Jerry Hwang and Paul Woods highlight some of our difficulties when encountering words in older texts that demonstrate differences in synchronic and diachronic meaning. As Hwang’s paper makes clear, diachronic change in meaning may prompt us to be careful to avoid some words used by our forebears, lest we cause confusion or even offence. And as Woods demonstrates, synchronic differences can result in people within a prescribed timeframe and culture using words in surprisingly divergent ways.

Words are not, however, the only thing that can be defined in ways that change over time. Focusing on the Myanmar context, Lightyear calls attention to a phenomenon that impacts people all over the world—their categorization by ethno-linguistic traits for political (or missiologistical) ends. If, as often happens, this results in some being marginalized as politically inferior, it doesn’t matter whether the classification reflects the group’s aspirations or is imposed by others—the result is negative. The paper wisely entreats missionaries to “handle difference differently” so that walls of division between people are broken down in Christ rather than built up through classification.

Eugene Yapp broadens this conversation by considering the place of religion—particularly as practiced by minority religious groups—in the modern secular state. His vantagepoint for understanding and responding to the question is built upon experience working with governmental and non-governmental bodies that address interreligious and diversity issues. He submits that we need

to actively promote multi-culturalism, build relationships with people from other groups with whom we don’t agree, and seek accommodation between groups that hold contesting social visions. Rejecting a quick fix, Yapp’s proposal acknowledges that a lot of groundwork needs to be done—including rethinking theological education so that it better engages society—before we can lay the foundations upon which to build for the future. Who will join him to complete this task?

In our final paper, Les Taylor addresses what he identifies as a form of “missiologistical consumerism” that often keeps us focused on identifying and promoting outreach toward specific, identifiable people groups. While the concepts led him and his wife to Asia, he asserts they weren’t enough to sustain his work, particularly when his study of the people in his world didn’t fit the cultural, linguistic, and religious boxes he expected to find. Though they were, in many ways, one people, the fact that they were, in other ways, quite distinct caused him to reevaluate popular people-group thinking. Whether or not his reasoning convinces you to perform a similar reevaluation, his article should challenge your thinking and practice.

As in the previous issue of *Mission Round Table*, a series of questions follow each article. Please reflect on these on your own, or, better yet, discuss them with a colleague or group. As iron sharpens iron, may these articles and your reflection on them sharpen you so that you can better serve the Lord whose word doesn’t fail even though our words and ideas might. And may we echo the psalmist’s prayer that our words will always be pleasing to God. “Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable in your sight, O LORD, my rock and my redeemer” (Psalm 19:14).

Walter McConnell

Editor, *Mission Round Table*

¹ All Scripture quotations are from the ESV.

² Lewis Carroll, *Through the Looking Glass and What Alice Found There* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1902), 117.

Genesis 11:1–9

The Tower of Babel—Scattered Humanity

David Eastwood



David Eastwood has served for thirty-one years in Taiwan with OMF International. During that time, his ministry has included Bible teaching, preaching, and church planting, and, for the last eight years, he has served as the Field Director. David initially trained at All Nations Christian College in the UK but has since completed further studies with Singapore Bible College and Spurgeon's College in the UK. He is studying for a Doctorate in Practical Theology with the Cambridge Theological Federation, investigating the experiences of the Taiwanese working class as they become part of a local church.

Now the whole world had one language and a common speech. ² As people moved eastward, they found a plain in Shinar and settled there.

³ They said to each other, "Come, let's make bricks and bake them thoroughly." They used brick instead of stone, and tar for mortar. ⁴ Then they said, "Come, let us build ourselves a city, with a tower that reaches to the heavens, so that we may make a name for ourselves; otherwise we will be scattered over the face of the whole earth."

⁵ But the LORD came down to see the city and the tower the people were building. ⁶ The LORD said, "If as one people speaking the same language they have begun to do this, then nothing they plan to do will be impossible for them. ⁷ Come, let us go down and confuse their language so they will not understand each other."

⁸ So the LORD scattered them from there over all the earth, and they stopped building the city. ⁹ That is why it was called Babel—because there the LORD confused the language of the whole world. From there the LORD scattered them over the face of the whole earth. (Genesis 11:1–9 NIV)

Whatever you believe about the historicity of the first eleven chapters of Genesis—if you are a Christian who accepts that the Bible is authoritative and that these accounts are primarily theological texts intended to teach us about God and his relationship to his people in contrast to the multiple religious stories and myths of the nations surrounding Israel—then the story of the tower of Babel has to draw our attention. It is the culmination of a set of stories leading from creation through to the start of God's call to and covenant with Abraham. Up to this point, the story of Genesis reads as the story of God and humanity. It is one that charts the spread of sin into all aspects of human life and culture. Sin ruins the relationship between man and his creator (chapter 3), man and woman (chapter 3), and man and his brother (chapter 4). Sin corrupts human society to the point that

God decides to wipe it out and start again (chapters 6–9). The covenant with Noah and his sons is a promise to all humanity that God will never again take such drastic action. But at the same time, the story of Noah serves as both a warning and a promise of judgement to come.

As we come to Genesis 10 and 11, we see parallel accounts—one positive and one negative—of the spread of people across the world following God's blessing of Noah and his sons and his command to them to "Be fruitful and increase in number and fill the earth" (9:1).

There are hints that chapter 10 and 9:1–9 should be looked at as one literary unit.¹ Genesis 5 onward follows a structure of three sets of genealogy, narrative, and genealogy, with chapters 10–11 being the last section. We definitely don't have space to dig through chapter 10 in this limited study. But as you read through the long, and not exactly thrilling, list of names which the NIV entitles "The Table of the Nations", the first thing that strikes me about chapter 10 is that it seems to be in the wrong place.² Why, before the story of Babel—a story that starts with the claim, "Now the whole world had one language and a common speech"—do we have an account of humanity spread across the world into different clans and nations, each with their own language—a phrase repeated as a summary three times in Genesis 10?³ I think the answer to that question is actually quite important in our understanding of how to interpret the story of Babel.

If the order of these chapters had been reversed, then this whole section would have a very different feeling. The Table of the Nations would have read as a consequence of God's punishment of humanity at the end of the Babel story.⁴ God's blessing of Noah and his sons would have been meaningless as the Babel story would have emphasised their disobedience. The choosing of Abraham would have seemed

like a plan B—God reacting to the disaster of humanity’s scattering into different peoples and languages rather than it being his plan all along.

Instead, Genesis 10 comes as an affirmation that God’s will regarding the scattering of humanity across the world—the geographic, cultural, and linguistic separation of peoples—is part of his plan to bless the descendants of all the sons of Noah. It is his intention that they will be fruitful and multiply just as he had promised for humanity before the fall.

God blessed them and said to them, “Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky and over every living creature that moves on the ground.” (Gen 1:28)

In addition, this list of the nations places Israel in the context of the rest of humanity. There is no mythological story here that gives the ancestors of Abraham some special created status. Even the curse on Canaan, the son of Ham by Noah (9:24–25), is seemingly nullified by the fruitfulness granted to the Hamites by God. Though from Genesis 12 through to the coming of Jesus there will be a focus on Israel as God’s covenant people, their context is the whole of humanity all equally created by God, and all equally tainted by the fall. Not only does this oppose blatant attempts to claim the inferiority of one people, race, or culture based on God’s supposed rejection,⁵ but it also opposes later subtle claims to superiority based on trying to claim one race or people as the equivalent of the people of God.⁶

Instead, we come to the story of Babel as one that lacks tension because we already know God’s will is going to be done. The whole emphasis is on God having been in control all along. By placing the story after chapter 10, we can follow the story of the people being scattered by God with a sure knowledge that this is all God’s plan.

The story of chapter 11 starts with a people disobeying God’s command to scatter and instead building a city. The chapter ends with Abraham (Abram) who will be the one chosen to initiate God’s plan to restore humanity. He has been told to leave his family and go to Canaan, but he also disobeys for a

while and settles in the city of Haran—but we know God’s will is unfolding.⁷

So, our story starts in Genesis 11:1–3 with mankind unified by one language and culture settling down to build a city on the plains of Shinar, in contrast to God’s clear command to spread over the world (9:7, a repeat of the command to Adam and Eve in 1:28).

In verses 3 and 4, the emphasis is on the words of the people. Their plan to build a city out of bricks, with bitumen for mortar and—as the centrepiece—a big tower reaching to the heavens.

Commentators point out how thoroughly human-centric these verses are.⁸ The materials used were man-made bricks, not wood or quarried stones. The idea of a city to keep people together requires plans for the logistics and technology needed not only to build a city but to supply it with water and food, and to remove the consequences of so many humans living together. From then until now, more and more of the world’s population live in cities surrounded by the technology that emphasises human achievements and distracts us from the far more magnificent creations of God.⁹

My first experience of full-time Christian ministry was a year spent working as a voluntary evangelist with the London City Mission. Our youth ministry in Hoxton, in the East End of London, arranged an outing to a place about an hour’s drive from the city. Some of the children that came were eight to ten-year-olds who, in their entire lives, had never been outside of London. As we reached the motorway and the buildings either side of the road gave

way to fields of grass and country scenes, one small boy began to behave strangely. He was terrified by this vista of wide horizons and green nature. All his life he had lived surrounded by concrete, tarmac, and brick. His was a man-made environment. And now he was seeing the beauty of God’s creation all around him and it was frightening. As more and more people in the world spend most of their life in mega-cities, surrounded by man-made environments and unable to see the stars that declare the glory of the Lord (Psalm 19:1), it is not surprising that they are unaware of the Creator. It is not surprising that retreats to the countryside, mountains, or sea can be effective tools in reaching urban unbelievers. It is much easier to believe in a creator God when you are faced with the vastness and beauty of his creation, less easy when surrounded by a man-made cityscape.

Back to our story and the irony of all this is this ability and creativity of humanity. Our ability to subdue and master our environment is itself a gift from God who created us in his image. But the city also perhaps was a search for man-made security. The builders sought security behind human-constructed walls, sheltered from the environment, perhaps even waterproofed by bitumen, in case God’s promises were not true and he sent another flood. In the ancient Near East, a city would have been an awesome thing. After forty years in the wilderness when the Israelites first saw the cities of Canaan, they described them as “fortified up to the heavens” (Deut 1:28) and this is exactly the impression the builders of Babel were trying to achieve, even more so because of their huge vanity project—a tower reaching to the heavens “so that we may make a name for ourselves” (Gen 11:4).



Taipei 101

Humanity hasn't changed much. To this day, nations are building big towers so that they will be bigger than those found in another city or country. Many in Taiwan were sad when the Taipei 101 ceased to be the tallest building in the world, a title it held for only six years (2004–2010). Now it is only the eleventh tallest building.¹⁰ We still have our desire for people to look at us and be impressed. What, I wonder, are the towers in your life, the unacknowledged sources of pride and calls for attention? Certainly, in the academic world, it is easy for people to measure their value by qualifications, positions, and publications, but in all spheres of human activity, we easily—individually and corporately—ascribe value to things that glorify ourselves and not our Creator.

The irony in this text is that no names are mentioned here whatsoever. Possibly, this was the work of Nimrod—the mighty warrior and hunter of Genesis 10:8–12. The Ziggurats of the ancient Near East sound like the tower of Babel and the most ancient ones were believed to have been built by gods. But if this kind of legacy was what Nimrod—or whoever built Babel—was looking for, the text just sets that aside completely.

In verses 5–7, we have the contrast to the human plan and speech. This huge work that the people were attempting—a city and a tower reaching to heaven—is so insignificant in comparison to God, that the writer describes him as having to come down to look at it, like a person stooping down to look at a bunch of busy ants. It is an almost humorous reminder that both the hugely important projects and seemingly unsolvable problems that consume our lives seem so different if looked at from God's perspective. However, God is not amused. In his dialogue with himself—another of those intriguing hints at his trinitarian nature—he sees the serious consequences of man's success in this project and takes steps to prevent it. It's worth noting that the issue here is not so much the vanity displayed by the tower project—God could easily have toppled that—but the co-operation of men in direct disobedience to his command to scatter and the building of the city and all it represents. So, God confuses their language. I wonder whether they woke up one morning and headed off to work on the tower and suddenly found that they were speaking different languages.

“Put the bricks over there”. “你在說什麼?” “What did you just say?” “No entiendo ¿Qué están diciendo estas personas?” “你明白他在說什麼嗎?” “Saya tidak mengerti.”

From organised co-operation, there was a change to confusion and disunity. Presumably, people found those they could communicate with and left. The result that God was looking for was achieved: “the LORD scattered them from there over all the earth, and they stopped building the city” (Gen 11:8). Verse 9 repeats the declaration that it was the LORD who scattered them.

What are we to make of this story? As I have already said, people have in the past used it to claim that it is God's will for people of different races and cultures to be separated. And that, of course, is used as an excuse to then maintain privilege or supposed superiority of one race or culture. I don't believe that is a valid use of the Bible here.

Firstly, as I have said, the order of Chapters 10 and 11 seem deliberately to oppose such an interpretation. Secondly, that really doesn't seem to be the way the people of Israel came to understand things. Consider, for example, when Paul tells his Greek audience, “From one man he made all the nations, that they should inhabit the whole earth; and he marked out their appointed times in history and the boundaries of their lands” (Acts 17:26). Paul seems to be drawing on the point made in the Table of Nations—that God was over the rise and fall and geographic limits of nations and that “we (collectively) are his offspring.” (Paul is here quoting from a third-century BC Greek writer and, in doing so, opening the door for thousands of PhD theses spanning the spectrum from contextualisation to syncretism.)

Thirdly, when we look at the theological setting of this story within the bigger story of the Bible, we see that God ultimately does have a plan for the unity of mankind. What he is preventing here is that man himself should try to bring it about in some way with the Creator God left out of the picture. This becomes apparent in the very next chapter when God chooses Abraham, who will be the ancestor of the people of God, Israel, who the Bible will focus on for the next 2000 or so years. God includes in his covenant relationship the statement, “All peoples on earth will be blessed through you” (Gen 12:3).

As that plan comes to fruition, it becomes apparent that the Saviour who emerges from this chosen people is concerned with all people. The command he gave to his followers was to make disciples of *all nations* and the coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost is a deliberate symbolic reversal of the story of Babel, showing that God's plan will be very different from the plans of men. However, there is a subtle difference in Acts 2. The new believers—Jews and Jewish converts gathered from all over the Roman Empire and beyond—did not all suddenly become fluent in whatever ancient language was spoken at Babel. They declared that they heard everyone else speaking in their native tongues. Later, when Christ returns to bring to fruition the plan to restore humanity's relationship with God through his own sacrifice, we are told that a multitude will be gathered from every nation, tribe, people, and language standing before the throne and worshipping the Lamb (Rev 7:9).

The picture we get is not that God somehow reluctantly punished humanity for their sinful presumptuousness by separating them into different groups on the basis of geography, language, and eventually race and culture. Rather, the Bible seems to be presenting it as God's plan that humanity should scatter across the world and develop into these languages and cultures so that at the end of all things, the celebration of the salvation that comes from the Lamb of God, should be all that more amazing because it incorporates the richness and variety of peoples and languages that God has ordained, controlled, watched over, set the boundaries for, and then sent his servants to with the amazing message of the gospel. That is the awesome mission of God to which each of us has the privilege of having been called.

To conclude, this simple story reminds us that when we lose sight of the Creator God—by trying to work on our own projects, consciously or unconsciously seek our own glory, trying to maintain the feeling of security based on our own efforts—we are quickly straying from God's will. How does that apply to your life right now? What cities or towers are you building that God needs a magnifying glass to see?

But the story also reminds us that the unity of humanity is based on the creation of man in God's image. It was

God's will that humanity be divided into separate peoples, and God will use this to bring himself more glory when he brings an end to division and prejudice and hatred. That truth should impact all Christians and give us an appropriate humility when it comes to facing differences such as race, culture, or even gender. But we also have a reminder that, ultimately, man-made attempts to force a unity or co-operation between people will fail because they are the works of fallen humans and they smack of the arrogance and pride of Babel. Prejudice, hatred, and racial bias will never really be dealt with if the starting point is humanity and human experience. Our starting point has to be the God who created humanity and commanded them to be fruitful and multiply. **MRT**

¹ David Atkinson, *The Message of Genesis 1–11: The Dawn of Creation*, BST (Leicester: IVP, 1990), 173.

² Further questions address such issues as historicity, authorship, and how the offspring of three sons become associated with identifiable people groups stretching from Africa up to the Mediterranean and Asia (people that were known to exist between 2,000 to 700 BC).

³ Genesis 10:5, 20, and 31.

⁴ Victor P. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 1–17*, NICOT, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), 347.

⁵ See for example, David M. Goldenberg, *The Curse of Ham: Race and Slavery in Early Judaism, Christianity, and Islam* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2003).

⁶ As an example, Stanley notes that an underlying assumption of the nineteenth century British missionary movement was that Britain constituted a model of Christian culture and society. “She was the archetype of the Christian nation, and God’s design was to create more Christian nations on the same pattern.” Brian Stanley, *The Bible and the Flag: Protestant Missions and British Imperialism in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries* (Leicester: Apollos,

1990), 161.

⁷ There is debate among scholars as to the exact details of Abrahams stay in Haran because of the claim in Acts 7:4 that he waited until his father Terah died. But the statement in Genesis 11:32 that Terah died aged 205 makes calculating the timing difficult. See Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 1–17*, 366. Whatever the timing, it is clear that Abraham’s sojourn in Haran was a failure to fully obey the commandment to leave his family and people and go to Canaan. He was not entirely free of the sins of the builders of Babylon and is not commended as righteous in the same way as Noah (Gen 6:9). God’s choosing of and faithfulness to him was entirely an act of grace.

⁸ Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 1–17*, 392.

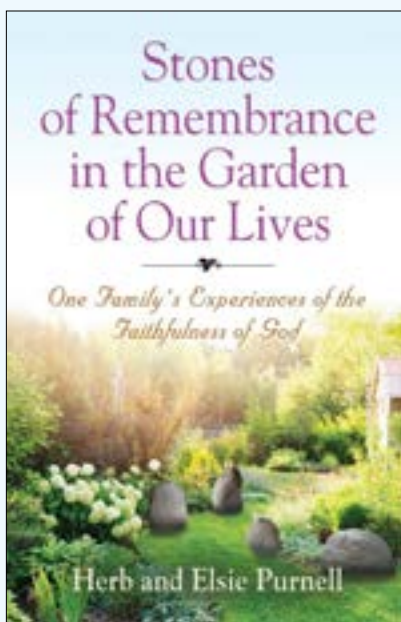
⁹ Atkinson, *The Message of Genesis 1–11*, 178.

¹⁰ Currently, the tallest building is the Burj Khalifa in Dubai, but fifteen of the top twenty are unsurprisingly in East Asia.

Stones of Remembrance in the Garden of Our Lives: One Family’s Experiences of the Faithfulness of God

By Herb and Elsie Purnell. Trenton, GA: BookLocker.com, 2022. ISBN 979-8885310963. 492 pp.

Reviewed by Neel Roberts



Stones of Remembrance in the Garden of our Lives is two autobiographies in one. Before Elsie Purnell died of cancer in 2005, she told her life story to one of her caregivers who carefully wrote it down. Beginning with this manuscript, Herb Purnell was able to weave her story together with his own in a well-joined manner, hers being set off in italics. For those who have studied Thai, Northern Thai, or the Iu Mien languages, *Stones of Remembrance* introduces us to Herb who helped develop language learning materials—which are still used today—while actively ministering to these three groups for over half a century. Those who are involved with Third Culture Kids (TCKs) or who are TCKs themselves may naturally want to get to know Elsie Purnell who contributed so much to the development of tools and ministries to enhance the lives of TCKs, adult TCKs, and the parents of TCKs.

Stones of Remembrance reveals just how multifaceted their lives were. Elsie was at one time gathering a bouquet of flowers and presenting them to a queen. At another time, she was washing baby bottles for Cambodian refugee mothers. She displayed the same spontaneity of action in both cases. Herb was as comfortable studying Mien vocabulary in a bamboo hut in a Northern Thailand forest as he was teaching in a university. One also discovers just how different Herb and Elsie were from each other. Gradually, the reader perceives that their great faith in God and their high degree of mutual respect enabled

them to come to agreement time after time on how they as a couple and a family were to move forward to fulfill God’s purposes for them. In fact, the book presents a case study of how one couple perceived that God guided them through Scripture, sermons, events, books, seemingly coincidental meetings with other people, and the advice and counsel that they often sought out from other Christians.

Their raising of four children adds numerous unexpected twists and turns to their stories. These are never seen as distractions from their work, but rather as signs from God that he had new plans for their lives. Their individual responses to a great family tragedy were quite different and they recognized that they needed to deal with it in different ways, while at the same time being mutually supportive.

Stones of Remembrance does not tell you how to be a happy couple, or successful missionaries, or how to raise your children, or how to deal with sickness, pain, and grief. It is much better than that. It tells us, in their own words, how one couple, by God’s grace, was enabled to do those things. The book is full of thankfulness to God and to all whom God used to bless them. At the same time, it refuses to hide the fact that life may be clouded with sorrows and that not all our questions or griefs will be laid to rest before we are. I unreservedly recommend *Stones of Remembrance*.

“For the Conversion of the Heathens”: Reflections on Insider/Outsider Dynamics

Jerry Hwang



Jerry Hwang taught at Singapore Bible College as an OMF missionary from 2010 to 2023. He continues to serve remotely as Affiliate Research Professor of Advanced Studies, while teaching at Trinity Christian College near Chicago. His work lies at the intersection of OT studies and missiology, such as his latest books, *Contextualization and the Old Testament* (ATA/Langham, 2022) and *Exploring the Old Testament in Asia* (co-edited with Angukali Rotokha; ATA/Langham, 2022).

Ronald Dahl and Dr. Seuss are among the children’s writers who have been flagged recently by “sensitivity readers” for elements in their books that are no longer suitable for the twenty-first century.¹ Belittling character descriptions, such as “enormously fat” (from Dahl’s *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* [1964]), and racist illustrations of Asian people as slant-eyed or African people as gorilla-like (from Seuss’s *If I Ran the Zoo* [1950]) have come under particular scrutiny. This has led publishers to issue revised versions of these classics (in the case of Dahl) or even withdraw certain titles (in the case of Seuss). In response, now-adult readers of these beloved works tend to defend them, whether in conceding how they are a product of their time or by opposing the “cancel culture” that questions their appropriateness.²

These tensions between literary stakeholders provide a window into how Christians from Western nations have traditionally negotiated their relationship to the non-Western “other.” During the nineteenth century, the “Golden Age of Missions” intersected with the “Golden Age of Colonialism” as explorers and missionaries from nominally Protestant empires first encountered non-Christian peoples on a large scale. The reading public in Europe and North America was regaled with tales of the “primitive,” “savage,” “pagan,” and “uncivilized,” to quote labels then common for non-Western peoples. Such depictions of “natives” appear in various genres, among them anthropological studies like Edward Tylor’s *Primitive Culture* (1871), missionary biographies like *The Last Journals of David Livingstone* (1874), and popular magazines like *National Geographic* (established in 1888).

Over a century after these publications, the decline of Christendom and the rise of the global church have blurred the traditional boundaries between Western/Christian “us” and non-

Western/non-Christian “them.” What is more, globalization and the internet have enabled Christians in the Majority World to read older missions literature *about* their cultures that was once written by and for Western insiders. Their sometimes-unflattering portrayals of “the heathen” were never intended for consumption by descendants of the non-Western outsiders under depiction.

The dated contrast between Christian insiders and non-Christian outsiders has been fundamental to the Protestant missions movement. This can be seen in the title of William Carey’s 1791 work, *An Enquiry into the Obligation of Christians to Use of Means for the Conversion of the Heathens*. Carey’s pamphlet has long served as a catalyst to arouse missionary passion for “lost” peoples in foreign lands. Among its inspired readers during the last two hundred years was James Hudson Taylor, founder of the China Inland Mission.

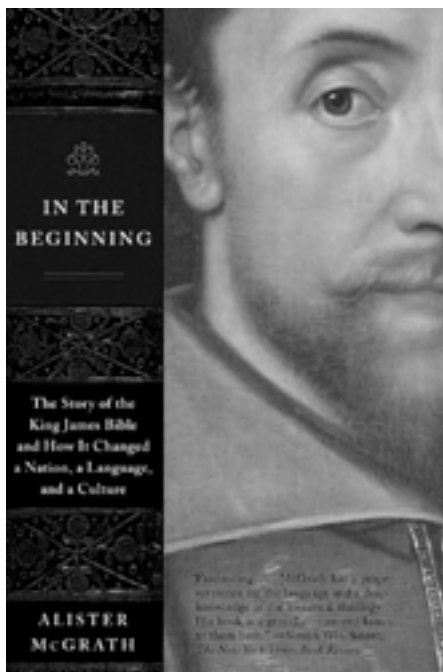
In the contemporary world, however, the obsolescence of Carey’s famous distinction between “Christians” and “the heathens” raises a question—how should mission-minded Christians understand insider/outsider dynamics with respect to religio-cultural boundaries? The distinctive synthesis of “Christianity, commerce, and civilization” that once characterized Western imperialism is no longer applicable.³ It is thus necessary to reexamine whether pity from Christian insiders toward the inferiority of non-Christian outsiders remains a legitimate motivation for sharing the gospel. Should the modern practice of mission continue the use of “othering” terms or concepts that emphasize the helplessness of those who are far from God (cf. Matt 9:36)?

The present study applies the field of linguistics to missiological questions of this nature. Such an approach has the advantage of retracing the historical links between past and present terminology in how insiders refer to outsiders. In this

regard, “heathen” is useful to examine since its reference to those outside the religio-cultural fold is not limited to Carey’s pamphlet. It has also had a long history in Western civilization for its versatility in describing a broad range of “others.”⁴ As we will see, the KJV’s frequent use of “heathen” (and its cognates in other West European languages that underlie both the Protestant Reformation and nominally Protestant imperialism) has lent this term a uniquely biblical ring. The perception of biblical authority for “heathen” language has sometimes led Christians from both Western and non-Western backgrounds to defend the practice of characterizing non-Christians as primitive, ignorant, and pathetic.

References to “heathen” in the KJV Bible

The King James Version of 1611 was a monumental achievement that had an enormous impact in shaping the language, culture, and theology of Western civilizations.⁵ Its renderings from Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek permeate every sentence for English speakers, whether consciously or not. Even as the KJV (also known as the Authorized Version) has become a timeless classic, it resembles all other Bible translations by also being a product of a particular time and place. Alister McGrath has demonstrated in his magisterial survey that the KJV arrived in English history at a key moment when England’s cultural identity was solidified as a Protestant nation that transcended different camps (e.g., Puritan, Anglican).⁶



The seventeenth-century challenge of unifying England’s Protestantism, particularly in the face of Catholic and Jewish alternatives, is what lies in the background of the KJV’s 145 references to “heathen” (both noun and adjective).⁷ The majority of these are in lesser-known passages of the Old Testament (136x). But the same conceptual gaps between intimate “us/you” and more distant “them” can be seen in its sporadic but familiar New Testament appearances (7x). In the KJV rendering of the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus’ teaching on prayer turns on a contrast between his disciples and the “heathen”: “But when ye pray, use not vain repetitions, as the heathen do: for they think they shall be heard for their much speaking” (Matt 7:7). Elsewhere in the KJV New Testament, the “heathen” can be dangerous in addition to being misled, as when the apostle Paul explains that his ministry has been “in perils by the heathen” (2 Cor 11:36).

A significant cluster of three New Testament references to “heathen” appears in the KJV’s rendering of Galatians. First, the mission of Paul is described as his endeavor to “preach him [Jesus] among the heathen [Gk. *ethnē*]” (1:16; cf. 2:9). Second and third, Paul asserts that “the scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the heathen [*ethnē*] through faith, preached before the gospel unto Abraham, saying, In thee shall all nations [*ethnē*] be blessed” (3:8). This verse is illustrative of the KJV’s conceptual world since the same Greek plural noun *ethnē* underlies KJV Galatians 3:8’s distinction between “heathen” and “nations.” In their renderings of *ethnē* in Galatians, the KJV translators apparently promoted the “heathen” to the rank of “nations” only when they became descendants of Abraham. This decision by the translators also reflects a theological assumption that God’s true children are not classified as the “heathen” and only sometimes among the “nations.”

Intriguingly, “heathen” was already current in the time of the KJV as a hybrid religio-cultural term for all that separated the higher civilization of Protestant England and its divine right of kingship from lower civilizations that lay beyond the British Empire. Two years before the KJV’s publication, the clergyman William Biddulph had published his popular book, *Travels of Foure English*

Men and a Preacher. Kathryn Gin Lim summarizes that in this 1609 classic.

The primary lesson readers were to take from reading about these “Forraine and Heathen Countries” was gratitude for their own blessings and confidence in the superiority of Protestant Christianity. ... In a nutshell, then, “Forraine and Heathen Countries” served as a foil against which the English could reassure themselves of their political, economic, social, and religious superiority.⁸

Biddulph’s book was one of numerous “travel itineraries” about the Orient that were popular in the seventeenth century. Due to their lasting influence on the English public, it becomes immaterial whether the KJV’s references to the “heathen” were the source of insider/outsider distinctions, or rather, a reflection of existing norms. The direction of linguistic dependence for various uses of “heathen” pales in importance next to the reality of semantic convergence—Biddulph’s broad definition of “heathen” as cultural Other and the KJV’s own references to “heathen” as religious Other both entered the vernacular and began to blend with one another.

Subsequently, this stark contrast between elect and reprobate was read back into the Old Testament with an assist from circular reasoning since the KJV had rendered *goyim* as “heathen” whenever non-Israelites are in view.⁹ Similar to Greek *ethnos/ethnē*, the underlying Hebrew terms do not quite conceptualize Israel’s place as a *goy* among *goyim* along identical lines to the KJV’s insider/outsider boundaries. On this note, “nation” in English is an anachronistic rendering of Hebrew *goy* since modern readers will think naturally of a nation-state (which derives from eighteenth-century political ideas). The singular noun *goy* instead denotes a group with a common religio-cultural affiliation that also shares a land and a king.¹⁰ Such a combination of religio-cultural, territorial, and political traits is why the Pentateuch can describe Israel in Hebrew as an ‘am (i.e., “[familial] people”) that is not yet a *goy* but on the way to becoming “a great *goy*” (e.g., Gen 12:2; Exod 32:10; Deut 4:6). To summarize, when the Old Testament distinguishes between Israel and the *goyim*, the matter at hand is less the *spiritual* conflict between a holy “nation” (cf. Exod 19:5–6) and unholy “heathen,” but more the *physical* difference between small Israel

as an incipient *goy* and the larger *goyim* that already have a land and a king.

A closer look at the KJV's renderings of *goyim* reveals another translational issue. Perhaps since the precise sense of *goy* was not yet available in Old Testament scholarship, the KJV's translators tended to conflate distinct *denotations* and *connotations* of the Hebrew plural *goyim* under the rubric of "heathen." In its spatial connotations, *goyim* is an identifier in the Hebrew Bible for both the neighboring peoples who will invade Israel (e.g., Lev 25:44; Ps 79:1) and tempt Israel with "the abominations of the heathen" (e.g., 2 Kgs 16:3; 2 Chron 28:3), as well as the remote places where Israel will be sent into exile to "perish among the heathen" (e.g., Lev 26:38; cf. Ps 80:8; Zeph 2:11). In addition, the *goyim* are named as enemies of God/Israel (e.g., Ps 2:1) or mocked as ignorant for their idolatry (e.g., Ps 135:15–18), sins that require their subjugation under Yahweh (e.g., Obad 15–16) and/or his human regent (e.g., 2 Sam 22:44). Within its various literary contexts, then, the term *goyim* bears the neutral *denotations* of plural ethno-political groupings that may not be "nations" in the modern sense, with possible *connotations* of their hostility or disobedience in some passages.

These linguistic data indicate that the KJV's uniform rendering of non-Israelite *goyim* as "heathen" obscures two kinds of lexical information from Hebrew. The first involves changing the sense of Old Testament passages that portray the *goyim* positively as worshipers of Yahweh. In Psalm 102:15, for example, the KJV's statement that "the heathen shall fear the name of the LORD" suggests that the *goyim* are chastened opponents of Yahweh, even though the psalm contains no hint of their rebellion or sin (cf. Isa 26:2; Ps 87). Another example is found in Ezekiel 20:9, one of many passages in which Judah's sin has made the name of Yahweh "polluted before the heathen." In such reversals on the "recognition formula" of Exodus, the unclean group that fails to know Yahweh is actually Israelites rather than "the heathen," since the latter are watching intently to see how Yahweh vindicates his reputation and judges his sinful people. Here, the mislabeling of the "heathen" party reinforces the sort of "us/them" dichotomy that was popularized in European culture, such as Biddulph's travel itinerary.

On this note, there is a second issue with reserving "heathen" for non-Israelite *goyim*. Such a decision by the KJV translators mutes how the Old Testament Prophets often attack Israelites as more "heathen" than the (other) *goyim*. Jeremiah furnishes a prime example as "a prophet to the *goyim*" (1:10) who surprises his audience by speaking mostly against fellow Israelites. Thus, to the extent that *goyim* might possess "othering" connotations (which is debatable in each passage of Jeremiah), the KJV removes the theological irony at hand by identifying Judah blandly as a "nation" (e.g., Jer 2:11; 5:9, 29; 7:28) rather than as the worst *goy*/"heathen" (cf. Jer 9:16; 18:13). These misdrawn boundaries make it difficult for readers of KJV Jeremiah to perceive how foreign outsiders like Ebed-Melech the Cushite official (Jer 38–39) and Nebuzaradan the Babylonian guard (Jer 40) are the prophet's most responsive listeners, even protecting him from the Israelite insiders in Jerusalem who seek his life.¹¹ In the book of Jeremiah and elsewhere in the Old Testament, the usual insider/outsider distinctions are undermined since "we have met the heathen and it is *us*."¹²

In short, renderings such as the KJV's "heathen" often became self-referential dichotomies between Christendom on the one hand, and the *barbaroi* (in Greek), *pagani* (in Latin), *Heiden* (in Germanic languages, from which English "heathen" comes), or *sauwages* (in French) on the other.¹³ Interestingly, the impact of the KJV in reinforcing the pejorative sense of "heathen" eventually caused this term to disappear in subsequent English Bibles (such as the RSV) that counted the KJV as their inspiration, shared its essentially literal philosophy of translation, and were based on much the same manuscripts. But while "heathen" language has mostly dropped out of newer Bible translations into European languages,¹⁴ the cultural habits of "othering" that were (mis)endowed with biblical validation have sometimes persisted until the modern era, both in Western missions literature and popular culture.

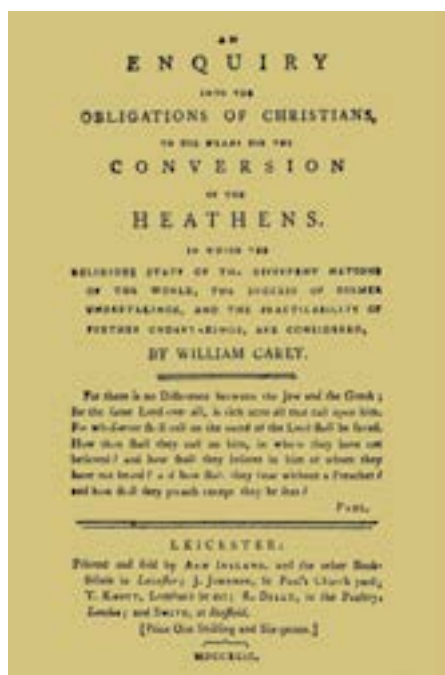
The term "heathen" in early Western missions literature

A useful window into the insider/outsider distinctions that became normative in the West can be seen in William Carey's aforementioned work, *An Enquiry into the Obligation of Christians to Use Means for the Conversion of the Heathens*.¹⁵ This 1791 pamphlet sought to instruct professing "Christians" on the spiritual needs of "the heathen(s)" and take up their God-given responsibility to share the gospel with them. The title of the *Enquiry* might seem to reflect the rigid contrast between "us" and "them" that characterized the KJV Bible nearly two centuries prior, making it a product of its context in late eighteenth-century England.

However, Carey was a more perceptive reader of both the Bible and European Christian history than many mission thinkers after him. The "Introduction" of the *Enquiry* (3–6) provides an understanding of the Fall's effects upon all humanity (and not just "them") that is foundational for his entire argument. Carey's theological discussion of the relationship between Christendom and the rest of the world exhibits three features of what would now be termed *cultural humility*.

First, Carey observes that "Israelites themselves too often joined with the rest of mankind against the God of Israel" (4). In this respect, his grasp of Scripture allows him to overcome the category confusion that was introduced by the KJV. Carey sees clearly that the distinction between "Christians" and "heathens" diverges from the gap between "us" and "them," such as when he warns that "a very considerable part of mankind are still involved in the darkness of heathenism" (5). On a similarly universal note, he concludes that "the far greater part of the world, as we shall see presently, are still covered with heathen darkness!" (10). In sum, the "we" in Carey's usage typically refers to English-speaking readers, who may not be right with God themselves, rather

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than to “us” as a Christian nation. Later in the pamphlet, Carey acknowledges in passing the British Empire’s evils in the West Indian spice trade (86). This comment reveals him to be a Christian first and foremost who would not hesitate to criticize national interests.

Second, Carey’s survey of European history indicates that “Christian” insiders are often no better than “heathen” outsiders: “But blind zeal, gross superstition, and infamous cruelties, so marked the appearances of religion all this time, that the professors of Christianity needed conversion, as much as the heathen world” (34). Particularly in colonial history, Carey concedes

a melancholy fact, that the vices of Europeans have been communicated wherever they themselves have been; so that the religious state of even heathens has been rendered worse by intercourse with them! ... the face of most Christian countries presents a dreadful scene of ignorance, hypocrisy, and profligacy (64, 66).

From such statements, it becomes clear that the initial contrast between “Christians” and “heathens” in Carey’s title serves only to grant a common assumption. He then asserts that the real divides between these groups are spiritual rather than ethnic or national in nature.

Third and most provocatively, Carey holds that non-Western/non-Christian peoples are not as primitive or wild as they might have seemed at first. Even as he notes that European explorers have

observed how indigenous peoples “are in general poor, barbarous, naked pagans, as destitute of civilization, as they are of true religion” (63), in the next breath he challenges imperialism’s narrative that European Christians always brought civilizing influences to their colonies:

I greatly question whether most of the barbarities practised by them, have not originated in some real or supposed affront, and are therefore, more properly, acts of self-defence, than proofs of inhuman and blood-thirsty dispositions (64).

By hinting that the resistance of indigenous peoples was often a response to oppression, Carey makes a radical break with the “Doctrine of Discovery” that provided theological justification for Christian empires to regard themselves like Israelites with a Joshua-like imperative to subdue “Canaanites” in pagan lands.¹⁶ Carey’s justification for Christian mission rests instead on the theological conviction that “we” (i.e., his readers) are really no different from “them,” for all are created in God’s image and can potentially join his work of redemption:

Can we as men, or as Christians [sic], hear that a great part of our fellow creatures, whose souls are as immortal as ours, and who are as capable as ourselves, of adorning the gospel and contributing by their preaching, writings, or practices to the glory of our Redeemer’s name, and the good of his church, are enveloped [sic] in ignorance and barbarism? (69–70)

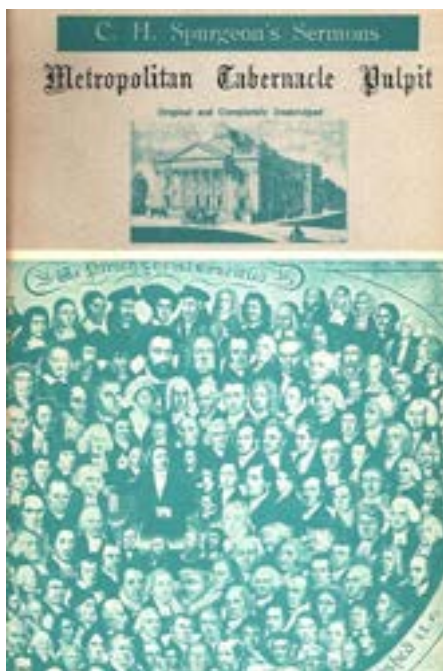
Even as Carey observes that non-Christian peoples are currently “in ignorance and barbarism,” this hardly presents an insurmountable problem since conversion to true Christianity would result in them becoming “as capable as ourselves.” In short, Carey’s use of “Christians” and “heathens” in his title is a rhetorical starting point (which he quickly undoes) rather than being a permanent chasm between “us” and “them.” Much like Jeremiah’s critiques of his own people, Carey recounts that Europe’s own pagan history was the reason that the early church engaged in mission: “It was no objection to the apostles and their successors, who went among the barbarous *Germans* and *Gauls*, and still more barbarous *Britons*!” (69, italics original).

Western missions literature and popular culture after William Carey’s *Enquiry*

Carey’s decoupling of insider/outsider distinctions from Western/non-Western boundaries was not retained consistently in the missions literature that would come in the wake of his influential pamphlet. The Western missionaries to Asia who followed Carey as “The Father of Modern Missions” tended to lack his biblical literacy and theological vision, seeing themselves instead in the role of the Old Testament Prophets who railed against the horrifying idols that lay before their eyes. The icons of ancient Mesopotamia thus became superimposed upon the icons of colonial Asia. This is evident, for instance, in how British missionaries regarded “India, with its temples still thriving and alive with ritual activity... [as] a manifestation of an idolatry as pervasive as any in the ancient world. ... India, although the jewel of the Empire, became the most glaring illustration of the nineteenth-century’s definition of ‘idolatry.’”¹⁷ Similarly, in Thailand (then called Siam), an American missionary account from the same period used biblical language to condemn the Buddhist use of icons: “They raise the gods of silver and gold, of brass, iron, wood and stone, which see not, nor hear, nor know: and the God in whose hand their breath is, and whose are all their ways, they have not glorified.”¹⁸

It is indisputable that these Western missionaries were motivated by a genuine sense of call in sharing the gospel with Indians, Thais, and other Asian peoples. At the same time, there was a strong undercurrent of cultural superiority in their misapplication of the Old Testament’s image-making parodies to the (heathen) Other rather than the (Israelite) self. The context of polemical passages such as Psalm 135, Isaiah 44, and Jeremiah 10 makes clear that the actual target and the worst problem are Israel’s own idolatry, much as perceived by Carey’s *Enquiry*.¹⁹

The tendency to vilify pagan cultures on the mission field found a parallel on the home front in the West. Two examples from the “Golden Age of Missions” in the nineteenth century will suffice to illustrate how missionary appeals to the non-Western world had a propensity to disparage the Other as primitive and uncivilized. The first is



a sermon by Charles Spurgeon that is dated to 25 April 1858. In his message on “The Cry of the Heathen,”²⁰ Spurgeon explains Paul’s vision of the Macedonian man who pleads, “Come over into Macedonia, and help us” (Acts 16:9). The sermon utilizes a blend of biblical exposition and social commentary, drawing a link between Protestantism and civilization that is reminiscent of Biddulph’s travel diary:

If you ask what makes this land free, every candid man must say it is the open gospel and the unfettered preaching of the Word Certain it is that wherever you find Protestantism, you find liberty, and wherever you leave Protestantism behind you, you begin to feel the yoke, and to hear the groans of the oppressed.

Spurgeon later explains that “liberty” of all kinds forms a dividing line between civilized “us” and primitive “them.” He asserts,

There are many places where all the joys of life and the social comforts and enjoyments of our being, are as yet totally unknown. Now, the gospel has blessings in both its hands. Wherever it goes it has the blessings heaven, rich and golden—it has the blessing of the earth, fair and silvery. . . . The great civilizer is the cross. Nothing else can make the barbarian into a civilized man, but the cross and the vision of Christ hanging on it.

Toward the end of the sermon, Spurgeon provides his understanding of

“barbarian” when he briefly assumes the persona of the man in Paul’s vision who is asking for spiritual help. But instead of portraying someone culturally adjacent to Paul who is located in another part of the Greco-Roman world, Spurgeon steps into the character of a faraway savage and places a mixture of earnest and pitiful words in his mouth. Spurgeon’s embellished characterization reveals his own view of the Other, and is worth contrasting to William Carey’s *Enquiry*:

Methinks, I will stand here as a heathen this morning, and I say to you as if I had not heard the gospel. “Ye Christians of Britain! ye highly favored ones, who know the name of Jesus and prove the power of the Spirit, preach the gospel to us, for we are men like yourselves. What though our skin be of a color less fair than your own? Yet he fashioneth our hearts alike. Oh tell us not, because we feed on the locust, and eat the serpent, that therefore we are not of your kith and kind! ‘Not that which goeth into a man defileth a man.’ It is true, our kings and princes are only fit to rank with your beggars; but oh! God hath made of one blood all nations that dwell upon the face of the earth; and from our huts and cabins we come forth to-day, and we say to you, ‘We are men—we are your brothers—younger brothers, it is true—we have not had a double portion of the inheritance, brothers, too, whose fathers spent their part in riotous living, but why should the children’s teeth be set on edge because the fathers have eaten sour grapes? Why must the son of man for ever bear the curse of Canaan? O preach the gospel to us! We are men, mother Eve is our mother, as well as yours; Adam, too, is the father from whose loins we sprang; and because we are men, the common sympathy of humanity bids you listen to us, when we say, ‘Come over and help us.’”

Here the mention of Adam’s sinful descendants echoes the Introduction of Carey’s *Enquiry*. However, Spurgeon also makes a subtle but unmistakable connection among darker skin (“less fair than your own”), the savage who consumes dirty animals (that is mitigated somewhat by his quotation of Matthew 15:11), and a clear allusion to nineteenth-century views on race that privileged white Europeans over black Africans (“the curse of Canaan”). This combination of Western tropes

about dark-skinned pagans stands at odds with Spurgeon’s appeal to “the common sympathy of humanity.”

Spurgeon concludes his first-person discourse by reimagining the Macedonian man’s terse appeal as an extended invitation for Christians to visit “us” with the civilizing light of the gospel:

Besides, we have another argument. We are told that ‘unto you is the Word of this salvation sent,’ not for yourselves, but for us, brothers, who have not heard the gospel and who know it not. And you have the treasure in your own land; and we believe you have the treasure given to you, that you may lavish handfuls of it out to us. We know that old Judea had the covenant and the oracles, and the gospel to keep for coming generations; and we believe that you men of Britain have the gospel, not for yourselves, but for us. We have heard what your Master said, ‘Ye are the lights of the world;’ not lights of Britain, not lights for yourselves, the lights of the world. Oh! bear your burning torches into the glades of our dark forests. Come [sic] and shed your light through the dark mists of our idolatrous temples; let the bats of our superstition, and the owls of our ignorance, fly away before the sunlight of your gospel. It is not for yourselves you have received it, but for us. Oh! give it to us. Preach the gospel to us, for it is designed for us. But we have another argument, brethren; look at our miseries!

In conclusion, Spurgeon’s sermon resembles Carey’s *Enquiry* for its strong



Portrait of Samuel Wilberforce by George Richmond (Public domain), via Wikimedia Commons.

appeal for Christians to take up the cause of mission to faraway lands, but the insider/outsider divisions that Spurgeon uses have more in common with Biddulph's account of the "heathen" from the sixteenth century as well as nineteenth-century exoticization of "the Orient." The fact that Spurgeon has conveyed such caricatures of the Other using a "we"-character should not hide the fact that he is still relying on a sharp religio-cultural distinction between "us" and "them" that is foreign to the Bible.

Elsewhere in Spurgeon's sermon, he implicitly criticizes American Christians whose argument for slavery as God's design is what he deems as "the effect of a delusion which hell itself did first invent." But in the process of challenging the theological views that eventually led to the American Civil War, Spurgeon falls into the same trap as southern American Christian advocates of slavery who used the so-called "curse of Canaan" (Gen 9:18–29) as biblical warrant for anti-blackness. Tragically, such views persist in some quarters of the American church and scholarly guild today.²¹

A second example of a missionary appeal that falls short of Carey's *Enquiry* can be found in a sermon by Samuel Wilberforce, an Anglican bishop of Oxford and son of the British abolitionist William Wilberforce. In a sermon from 1860 published as *The Word of the Lord to Ebed-Melech the Ethiopian*,²² Wilberforce preached to a team of new missionaries to Africa by expounding on the Lord's words to Ebed-Melech the Cushite official. His sermon has the laudable goal of magnifying God's grace toward "the lost", but it does so at the expense of Ebed-Melech by labeling him "this despised example of a despised race" (6). Like William Carey, Wilberforce certainly affirms God's love for all people when he says that "the remembrance and tender compassion of the Lord is full and entire for each one of the innumerable mass, as if he stood alone in a desert world" (7). Yet, the summons to share divine grace relies on maximizing the human depravity of a Cushite who is supposedly "despised," reflecting the same theological misunderstanding as Charles Spurgeon's that associated the "curse of Canaan" with blackness.²³ But as noted above, the literary context of Jeremiah 38–39 reveals that Ebed-Melech is a foreigner who rescues the prophet Jeremiah from his own countrymen and

thereby shows himself to be one of the most righteous individuals in the book.

Later in the sermon, Wilberforce's biases become more overt when he associates Ebed-Melech the ancient Cushite with modern members of "the despised enslaved tribes of suffering Ethiopia" who are trapped in "fetish rites and devil worship" (12). Whether this kind of occult behavior might soon be witnessed by Wilberforce's hearers in Ethiopia is not relevant, for the book of Jeremiah itself has already revealed Ebed-Melech to be a better Israelite (in his theology, not ethnicity) than the Judahites who are trying to kill their own prophet from Yahweh. Wilberforce's choice of text about Ebed-Melech (Jer 39:15–17), the only individual who receives a personalized salvation oracle, actually stands in opposition to his homiletical contrast between "the heathen darkness of Africa" and "our light" (13). Wilberforce has walked in the footsteps of the KJV by overlooking how insiders and outsiders have switched places in the book of Jeremiah.

The sermon concludes with an exhortation for hearers to trust God's power and provision as they proceed on their mission. Interestingly, Wilberforce draws upon a striking biblical image in describing their journey to Africa as "brethren going forth into the wilderness" and "the great and terrible wilderness before them, of its 'fiery serpents, and scorpions, and drought, where is no water'" (16–17). The published version of the sermon not only footnotes Deuteronomy 8:15 as the source of these words, but also quotes Deuteronomy 31:7–8 to assure the team leader that their mission to Africa will proceed successfully like Joshua's conquest in the promised land:

[B]efore he gave over to younger hands his rod and staff, God's great prophet said of old to his successor,—"Be strong and of a good courage: for thou must go with this people unto the land which the Lord hath sworn unto their fathers to give them; and *Thou shalt cause them to inherit it* (17–18, italics original).

The parallels that Wilberforce draws between a hostile wilderness and wild Africa have been instrumental in Western encounters with the non-Western world. Much like Biddulph's travel itinerary and the KJV began to bolster each other's insider/outsider

categories in the seventeenth century, the pagan African inland became the nineteenth-century prototype of both the culturally "heathen" land to be taken in European empires' "Race for Africa," and the religiously "heathen" land that would receive Western missionaries who brought the light of the gospel. Again, the gospel-driven compassion of Wilberforce and his audience is not in question, but such a missionary appeal to Africa conflates God's paternal love for sinful humanity with one's own paternalistic love in crossing the boundaries between "us" to "them." In Wilberforce's "othering" of the pitiful, the biblically motivated self-critique of Christendom's own faults that characterized Carey's *Enquiry* has gone missing, much as in Spurgeon's call to missionary service.

Conclusion

Why be critical of these works by nineteenth-century missionaries and preachers who inhabited a very different world than ours? The reason is that the present stakeholders for these works continue to offer them as worthy of emulation, without commenting on their elements that would be seen nowadays as a racist affront to the gospel. For example, Spurgeon's sermon "The Cry of the Heathen" is hosted online by The Spurgeon Center at Midwestern Seminary, which seeks "to advance the gospel of Jesus Christ by preserving the personal library of Charles Haddon Spurgeon and fostering a deeper appreciation of his life, legacy, theology, and preaching."²⁴ Similarly, numerous OMF homeside offices still publish the century-old works of the China Inland Mission that are inspiring for retracing the steps of courageous "China hands," but perplexing for their offhand use of terms like "heathen Chinese" or "heathen nation" (that featured in the "Yellow Peril" during the same period in America).²⁵ The acknowledgment that our spiritual forebears were sincere but imperfect in their encounters with non-Western cultures would be preferable to upholding the aura of "saints who sometimes were."²⁶ On this note, a more reflective posture toward both the past and the Other would also offer a way beyond the unnecessary choice between defending Christian luminaries without critique on the one hand, and the "cancel culture" that seeks to censor them without context on the other.

Whether one agrees with this study's linguistic argument about the term and concept of "heathen," it should be clear that the missionary model of self-critique offered by William Carey, following the Bible's own lead, has remained the unfortunate exception in how the Protestant missionary movement has engaged the Other. For, as the eminent missiologist Paul Hiebert once noted, missionaries in particular seem to struggle with applying the methods of "critical contextualization" to themselves, preferring instead to contextualize for others without recognizing their own situatedness as part of (mis)assuming that "we have faith, they have culture."²⁷ But as those in Christian mission relearn that contextualization is as much for "us" as it is for "them," such a demonstration of cultural humility in our time will likely make future generations more forgiving of our mistakes where we once said, "it's contextualization when I do it, syncretism when you do it."²⁸ **MRT**

Reflection Questions

1. Where have you encountered older terms or descriptions for people which are now considered inappropriate (e.g., "heathen," "pagan," "savage")? What were the generational and/or cultural differences at work?
2. In your circles, where do you see the traditional distinctions between Western/Christian "us" and non-Western/non-Christian "them" becoming blurred or even inaccurate? How are the boundaries between "insiders" and "outsiders" in Christian faith shifting around you?
3. How do you feel about the linguistic reality that Bible versions tend to reproduce their translators' cultural assumptions or biases? In what ways does this impact your confidence in Scripture as God's Word or in the Bible translations we use?

4. What can we learn from William Carey's posture of "cultural humility" which was countercultural for his time? Where might we be falling short in our ministry approaches to the religious or cultural "Other"?

¹ Mark Gollom, "Why the Use of Sensitivity Readers is Causing Such a Stir in the Publishing World," *CBC News*, 5 March 2023, <https://www.cbc.ca/news/entertainment/sensitivity-readers-writers-roald-dahl-1.6768418> (accessed 5 May 2023).

² Grace Lin, "Dr. Seuss Museum Should Honor the Fact that He Outgrew His Racist Past," *New England Public Media*, 11 October 2017, <https://www.nepm.org/commentaries/2017-10-11/dr-seuss-museum-should-honor-the-fact-that-he-outgrew-his-racist-past> (accessed 5 May 2023).

³ The coinage of "Three C's" is first attributed to the missionary-explorer David Livingstone, though this slogan was later misunderstood to denote Livingstone's unabashed support for colonialism. For a nuanced treatment from an African perspective, see Fidelis Nkomazana, "Livingstone's Ideas of Christianity, Commerce and Civilization," *Pula: Botswana Journal of African Studies* 12, no. 1–2 (1998): 44–57.

⁴ Kathryn Gin Lum, *Heathens: Religion and Race in American History* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2022).

⁵ Melvyn Bragg, *The Book of Books: The Radical Impact of the King James Bible 1611–2011* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 2011).

⁶ Alister E. McGrath, *In the Beginning: The Story of the King James Bible and How It Changed a Nation, a Language, and a Culture* (New York: Doubleday, 2001), 99–171.

⁷ Nandini Das, João Vicente Melo, Haig Smith, and Lauren Working, "Heathens," in *Keywords of Identity, Race, and Human Mobility in Early Modern England*, Connected Histories in the Early Modern World 3 (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2021), 131–36.

⁸ Lum, *Heathens*, 26–27.

⁹ As Das, Melo, Smith, and Working (see footnote 6) observe, the KJV's references to "heathen" reinforced the impression that "Old Testament writers continually pitted heathen gentiles—those who did not worship Jehovah, the God of the Jews—against reformed Christians." "Heathens," 136.

¹⁰ Daniel I. Block, "Nations/Nationality," in *New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology and Exegesis*, ed. Willem A. VanGemeren, 5 vols. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1997), 4:966–72.

¹¹ Jerry Hwang, "The *Missio Dei* as an Integrative Motif in Jeremiah," *Bulletin for Biblical Research* 23 (2013): 502–3.

¹² On this use of surprise in Jeremiah through "shifts in symbolic arrangements," see Louis Stulman, "Insiders and Outsiders in the Book of Jeremiah: Shifts in Symbolic Arrangements," *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 20 (1995): 65–85.

¹³ On the historical development of these dichotomies in the West, see Paul G. Hiebert,

"Western Images of Others and Otherness," in *This Side of Heaven: Race, Ethnicity, and Christian Faith*, ed. Robert J. Priest and Alvaro L. Nieves (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 97–110.

¹⁴ For example, the terms *païen* and *Heide* no longer appear in the latest French and German versions of the Bible, respectively.

¹⁵ William Carey, *An Enquiry into the Obligation of Christians to Use Means for the Conversion of the Heathen (Facsimile of 1792 Edition)* (London: The Carey Kingsgate Press, 1961).

¹⁶ See the overview of Joshua's history of interpretation by L. Daniel Hawk, *Joshua in 3-D: A Commentary on Biblical Conquest and Manifest Destiny* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2010).

¹⁷ Joanne Punzo Waghorne, "The Divine Image in Contemporary South India: The Renaissance of a Once Maligned Tradition," in *Born in Heaven, Made on Earth: The Making of the Cult Image in the Ancient Near East*, ed. Michael B. Dick (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1999), 213, 215.

¹⁸ Cited in Siu Kam-wah (Joseph), "American Missionary Views on Siamese Culture and Their Evangelical and Social Works in Siam Between the Mid-19th Century and the Early 20th Century," Harvard-Yenching Institute Working Paper Series (2019), 32: https://www.harvard-yenching.org/wp-content/uploads/legacy_files/featurefiles/SIU%20Kam%20Wah_American%20Missionary%20Views%20on%20Siamese%20Culture.pdf (accessed 5 May 2023).

¹⁹ For details, see Jerry Hwang, *Contextualization and the Old Testament: Between Asian and Western Perspectives* (Carlisle, UK: Langham, 2022), 156–61.

²⁰ Charles H. Spurgeon, "The Cry of the Heathen," n.d., <https://www.spurgeon.org/resource-library/sermons/the-cry-of-the-heathen/#flipbook/> (accessed 5 May 2023).

²¹ J. Daniel Hays, "Racial Bias in the Academy . . . Still?," *Perspectives in Religious Studies* 34 (2007): 315–29.

²² Samuel Wilberforce, *The Word of the Lord to Ebed-Melech the Ethiopian* (London: Rivington, and J. H. Parker, 1860).

²³ For example, there is a lengthy and unfortunate history among Jeremiah commentators of misunderstanding the rhetorical question, "Can the Ethiopian change his skin?" (Jer 13:23) as an observation on blackness as unattractive and/or something in need of washing off. For more discussion, see Jerry Hwang, "Who Is the Real 'Model Minority'? An Asian American Reading of Ruth and Ebed-Melech in the Hebrew Bible," *Biblical Interpretation* (2022): 9–11.

²⁴ <https://www.spurgeon.org/spurgeon-center/>

²⁵ E.g., M. Geraldine Guinness, *The Story of the China Inland Mission* Vol. 1 (London: Morgan & Scott, 1893), 32.

²⁶ On this need for discernment in reading missionary accounts, see Alan Neely, "Saints Who Sometimes Were: Utilizing Missionary Hagiography," *Missiology: An International Review* 27 (October 1999): 441–57.

²⁷ R. Daniel Shaw, Danny DeLoach, Jonathan Grimes, Simon Herrmann, and Stephen Bailey, "Contextualization, Conceptualization, and Communication: The Development of Contextualization at Fuller's Graduate School of World Mission/Intercultural Studies," *Missiology: An International Review* 44 (2016): 100–103.

²⁸ This half-joke among missionaries is related by Gary Corwin, "A Second Look: Telling the Difference," *Evangelical Missions Quarterly* 40 (2004): 282.

Intersectional and Binary Representations of Non-Christians in China and Britain: An Empirical and Theological Study of Nineteenth-century Mission Publications

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1. Introduction

The characterisation of Christian mission as “from the West to the Rest” is now being replaced by the idea of “from everywhere to everywhere,” reflecting not only current realities but also the history of the enterprise. Such revisions or reworkings are primarily missiological and theological, but may require us to consider ethnicity and race as well. The “from the West to the Rest” understanding of mission associated with the explosion of Protestant, and especially evangelical, mission into the majority world from the middle of the nineteenth century contains representations of non-western people by Western authors for Western readers.

In his *A New History of Christianity in China*, Daniel Bays mentions the “extensive written communication” of Western missionaries, private correspondence and mission magazines and journals, which were written to inform the Christian public in the western sending countries.¹ Missionaries spoke the languages of their target peoples while local workers rarely spoke English or other Western languages; the most authoritative interpretations of China for the early nineteenth century Western public came from missionaries.² “So-called native workers” in various parts of the non-Western world were hardly ever mentioned in missionary correspondence.³ In her study of local women working with American Presbyterian missionaries in southern China, Christina Wong complains that, “class, gender, and Western hierarchy [made] female workers almost invisible.”⁴

Christina Wong's research on the portrayal of native workers in American Presbyterian correspondence formed a chapter in the volume *Shaping Christianity in Greater China*, of which I was the editor.⁵ In correspondence with her about her contribution, I detected a gradual change in focus from the representation of native colleagues to the depiction of Chinese people in general, and particularly non-Christians, in late nineteenth- and

early twentieth-century mission journals and magazines. Similar conversations with other Asian Christians created in me a curiosity about orientalist, paternalistic, or simply pejorative representations of Asian non-Christians.

Later, having dipped into accounts of evangelistic work in the UK in the same period, I began to wonder about the representation of non-Christian English people, especially the poor, in mission magazines. Finally, it occurred to me to compare the portrayals of non-Christians in different social, cultural, political, and religious contexts. Perhaps the representation of the “target people” in one or both contexts might reflect a general sense of neediness, physical and spiritual.

2. Some theoretical concepts

Hall argues that representation works on two levels.⁶ First, there is an internal relationship between the objects we see in the world and our mental representations of them. Second, we bring concepts together and organise them into groups by establishing relations we think exist between them. These complex relationships produce meaning and people are able to communicate when they share similar conceptual maps. Such sharing involves not only linguistic but also cultural knowledge. Furthermore, the significance of shared representations implies a constructionist approach, in which meaning is derived not directly from objects in the material world but is mediated by complex systems of culture and thought. Roland Barthes' refinement of this general position distinguishes between denotation and connotation.⁷ Denotation relates to the simplest level at which people would accept the correspondence between linguistic labels and objects, while connotation links words in a language to broader themes and domains. For Hall, denotation concerns our shared understanding of terms such as *dress* or *jeans*, while connotation enables us to make higher

level assessments of formality or the acceptability of wearing jeans in a specific context, according to shared knowledge and acceptance of complex factors, such as culture, history, and religion.⁸

Such an understanding of connotation within context led Michel Foucault to emphasise the specific nature of a particular discourse, summarised by Hall as “a way of representing the knowledge about — a particular topic at a particular historical moment.”⁹ We must think about how language is used in practice rather than in any abstract sense and consider very carefully the cultural influences and ideas impinging upon a discourse, which in this research include theological stance. For Foucault, knowledge is produced within and as a result of discourse, and the creators, recipients, and aims of such knowledge are inextricably linked to questions of power and control.

Finally, Foucault places the idea of the body at the centre of his work on discourse.¹⁰ Initially, the “body” referred to the physical body of, for example, prisoners, but later it developed into a more abstract concept, a canvas on which discourse constructs its ideas and meanings.

Foucault’s ideas of contextual specificity, power dynamics, and the body as essential elements in the consideration of discourse are of value for this research. Mission magazines relating primarily to the last quarter of the nineteenth century constitute a corpus of texts whose authors shared very similar social and theological positions and which reflected a shared cultural background. From Bays and Wong, it is clear that there was a power dynamic between non-Christian people in China and London and those who represented them in mission magazines.¹¹ Power dynamics are not necessarily evil or exploitative; one group of people writing about another who have no voice involves such a dynamic by its very nature. Finally, representation of the two non-Christian groups involved “bodies”, canvases on which individual and generic non-Christian Chinese people and Londoners were depicted.

3. Two corpora from three sources

As a member of OMF, I thought it important to research representations of Chinese people in the magazines of the China Inland Mission. Apart from

its obvious relevance to us, it is well known that from the inception of the CIM, *China’s Millions* was a remarkably up-to-date, comprehensive, and well-produced publicity tool. I was able to locate and download several issues of *China’s Millions* from the last quarter of the nineteenth century, which formed my CIM corpus. In order to maintain consistency of authors and target audience, it was decided not to include North American issues of *China’s Millions*.

In order to facilitate a comparative study, it was necessary to construct another corpus of similar size containing mission magazines and publicity relating to evangelical mission work in England in roughly the same period. In addition, I felt it important that the basic theological position of those undertaking mission work in England should correspond to that of their counterparts serving in China. A long period of online searching led me to construct an LCM-SA corpus, which contained mission publicity from both the London City Mission and the Salvation Army, in order that its size should be roughly equivalent to that of the CIM corpus. Although the Salvation Army materials do present some mission work outside of London, most of the content relates to Britain’s capital.

4. The background and theology of the two mission efforts

As the research explores the representation of non-Christian people in the publicity of the China Inland Mission (CIM), the London City Mission (LCM), and the Salvation Army (SA), it may be instructive to explore briefly the mutual positionality of the three groups. It is far beyond the scope of this study to do this in depth, and what follows is an attempt to site the organisations within some broad trends of nineteenth-century British evangelicalism.

Bebbington describes the growing importance of the holiness movement in the last decades of the nineteenth century.¹² Some important elements of the movement came to Britain from the United States and later took on a particularly British flavour, especially with the formation of the Keswick movement in the 1870s. The holiness movement had a direct and powerful influence on Hudson Taylor, and the theology and practice of what became



“A Visit on the Dust Heaps,” from *These Fifty Years, Being the Jubilee Volume of the London City Mission* (1884), after p140.

the China Inland Mission.¹³ The general theme of holiness also helped shape the theology of William Booth, who founded the Salvation Army.¹⁴ Another element in the holiness movement was the idea of the separation of the believer from the world, its system of ideologies and allegiance seen as evil and dangerous. Apart from this theological and devotional connection, the person of Mary Reed shows informal, personal ties between these great evangelical missions. The first Australian member of the CIM, Reed was the daughter of a certain Henry Reed, a businessman who gave substantial financial support to William Booth.¹⁵

It is well-known that Hudson Taylor had strong connections with the Brethren and remained in contact with influential members of the group, especially George Müller, whose work in orphanages in Bristol supported the CIM. Although doctrinally there was some distance between the Plymouth Brethren and the leaders of the Keswick movement, there were similarities in the practical teaching of the two groups on sanctification.¹⁶ In addition, the premillennialism usually associated with the Brethren was a significant influence across evangelicalism, particularly in the non-conformist churches,¹⁷ and led to an expectation of darkness in society and an attendant urgency about the task of evangelism.

The London City Mission was founded in 1835 as an interdenominational mission dedicated to evangelism by

lay workers drawn mostly from the working class, a profile not dissimilar to the China Inland Mission. At the same time, in its emphasis on the inner city it resembled the Salvation Army;¹⁸ the LCM was known for its commitment to social philanthropy as well as its conservative evangelical stance.

The combination of concern for the physical and spiritual was seen in the work and writing of Lord Shaftesbury and Dr. Barnado and is echoed in *The Christian* as follows: “Neither Jesus nor his apostles ever separated the physical from the spiritual well-being of men. He and they fed and healed the bodies of the people, and the sympathy thus manifested won their attention, and enabled them to impart food and healing to their souls,” as cited by Bebbington.¹⁹ Bebbington notes that even in such a pietistic publication, “the gospel and humanitarianism... were seen not as rivals but as complementary.”²⁰ Shaftesbury wrote the introduction to three of the LCM books in the corpus used in this research and maintained close relationships with the CIM. Broomhall reminds us that Shaftesbury chaired an interagency meeting on famine relief in China at which CIM missionaries were present, and Dowsett notes that his approach to the fight for social justice in England was an inspiration for Taylor’s opposition to the British opium trade with China.²¹

5. Research sources, methods, and findings

The details of the two corpora are found in Tables 1a and 1b. (Note that The Christian Mission and The East London Christian Mission later became the Salvation Army.)

Very real difficulties in finding suitable non-CIM sources meant that the rough size of the two corpora was determined by the amount of material from London City Mission and the Salvation Army. Table 1 shows that both contained under one-million words, the CIM corpus being the larger of the two. Further limitations caused by the time available for data analysis and paper writing forced me to undertake a relatively simple content and thematic analysis. As I was thinking of words or terms to look for in the two corpora, I was reminded of my discussions with Christina Wong and others about the portrayal of Chinese people as victims, somehow pitiable or oppressed. Later, in view of the growing

Table 1a: Details of the CIM corpus

CIM document and date	No. of pages	No. of words (K)
<i>China’s Spiritual Need and Claims</i> (1865)	102	35
<i>China’s Millions</i> (1876)	282	207
<i>China’s Millions</i> (1877)	192	168
<i>China’s Millions</i> (1878)	208	186
<i>China’s Millions</i> (1879)	184	173
<i>China’s Millions</i> (1883)	196	164
Total	1164	969

controversy about how Western people are thought of as labelling non-Western people, and the increasing critique of Western colonial and missionary practice in the past (and possibly the present), I began to think more about terms such as *pagan* or *heathen*, especially as these are at best considered dated and often viewed as unfortunate or even racist.

Having constructed two corpora containing a number of mission magazines in PDF form, I used the online analysis tool *Voyant-Tools* to produce lists of individual words and their frequency of occurrence for each publication.

I then arrived at total figures for the two corpora. This was followed by a coding exercise for the two lists of terms according to a general scheme of noun, adjective, verb, person, and location,

bearing in mind that some individual terms could belong to more than one category. For example, *lost* could be part of a verb phrase, or an adjective, or a noun. Consider *he lost his book*, *she found the lost book*, and *Christian mission concerns outreach to the lost*. Following this initial identification of terms, individual categories were then sorted, with the most commonly occurring terms placed at the top of the relevant section in the table. I also categorised terms as positive, negative, or neutral, according to their general sense where explicit.

5.1. Occurrences of the word “poor” in the two corpora

In both corpora, the most commonly occurring terms were *men*, *work*, *people*, and *home*. These and a few other neutral terms were ignored. Because the study

Table 1b: Details of the LCM-SA corpus Table 1b: Details of the LCM-SA corpus

LCM-SA document and date	No. of pages	No. of words (K)
(LCM) <i>Our Veterans</i> (1881)	279	66
(LCM) <i>These Fifty Years</i> (1884)	403	105
(LCM) <i>Round the Tower</i> (1874)	347	84
(LCM) <i>The London City Mission Magazine</i> 84(983) (1919)	370	208
(SA) <i>The Christian Mission Magazine</i> II(3) (Mar 1870)	11	17
(SA) <i>The Christian Mission Magazine</i> III(3) (Mar 1871)	11	18
(SA) <i>The Christian Mission Magazine</i> II(7) (Jul 1870)	11	18
(SA) <i>The East London Evangelist</i> (Oct 1868)	9	12
(SA) <i>The East London Evangelist</i> (Nov 1868)	9	13
(SA) <i>The East London Evangelist</i> (Mar 1869)	8	15
(SA) <i>The East London Evangelist</i> (Jun 1869)	8	17
(SA) <i>The East London Evangelist</i> (Nov 1869)	8	17
(SA) <i>The East London Christian Mission Report</i> (1867)	12	6.5
(SA) <i>In Darkest England</i> (1890)	227	127
Total	1713	723

emerged from an initial interest in negative portrayals of Chinese people that was then extended to include similar depictions of Londoners, I decided to identify the most commonly occurring negative adjective. In both corpora, this was the word *poor*. It occurred more than 530 times in the CIM corpus and 830 times in the LCM-SA corpus and therefore I examined both corpora to identify and code each occurrence of the word *poor*.

I carried out in an inductive thematic analysis of the two corpora, in which I tried to identify each occurrence of *poor* and build a taxonomy of usage of the word from the texts themselves.²² The process of coding involved several passes through both corpora in order to categorise meanings of the word in context and remove occurrences considered irrelevant. Occurrences of *poor* were only counted if they described some aspect of a non-Christian Chinese person, not including what I initially termed *temporarily pitiable*, usages such as the *poor man got soaked in the rain*, which were not judgments of inherent value or status. Likewise, if a missionary admitted to a *poor command of the Chinese language*, this was also ignored. Reported speech in the LCM-SA corpus in which Londoners described themselves as *poor* were discounted because they were not representations of “others”.

Table 2 shows occurrences of the word *poor* according to four broad categories

derived from the data; Figure 1 is a visual representation. *Poor* in what I labelled a *financial* sense described people suffering from a lack of money only, based on the context. The category *pitiable* applied to those enduring hardship, difficulty, or suffering. It was usually fairly straightforward to distinguish between *financial* and *pitiable*. The *spiritual* sense of the word was, ironically, in these magazines relating to evangelical Christian mission, occasionally a little harder to identify; a very small number of cases indicated people who perhaps were *poor* in a *pitiable* and *spiritual* sense. In both corpora, a very small number of usages of *poor* seemed to have no justification from the surrounding text and broader episode it described. It is possible that such unjustified usages of *poor* reflect a catch-all category of poverty in some broad, undefined sense.

The data suggest that, for the CIM sources, *poor* is as much about *financial* poverty as being *pitiable* due to one’s individual circumstances. Spiritual poverty, as a clearly identifiable separate form, occurs less often. There is a much greater emphasis on *financial* poverty in the LCM-SA mission magazines. Significantly fewer people were labelled as *poor* in the *pitiable* sense. Of the usages of *poor* in the publicity about English people, around one in twenty were explicitly related to *spiritual* poverty.

I conclude from these magazines depicting evangelistic work in China

and London that the concept *poor* is multidimensional. In both cases, the word represents a concept that is not simple, but complex, involving Wittgensteinian family resemblances. As used by Christian writers to describe non-Christian objects of evangelistic work in the late nineteenth century, *poor* manifests an inherent intersectionality in the sense of Crenshaw.²³

5.2. Occurrences of the word “heathen” in the two corpora

This word was chosen for three main reasons. First, it is the second most common negative adjective in the CIM corpus. Second, contemporary Western societies are sensitive to what might be considered politically incorrect labels, especially those more commonly used in the past. It is probably fair to say that while not always associated directly with racism, the word *heathen* is viewed as pejorative by some. Thirdly, given that *heathen* does have connotations of racism and cultural superiority, I was intrigued to find that it was not uncommon in the LCM-SA corpus.

Heathen was different from *poor* in terms of the thematic analysis because the corpora yielded a cluster of related terms, each of which represented a binary opposition: *heathen* (relating to people), *heathenism* (in the sense of religious beliefs and practices), and *heathendom* and *heathen lands* (referring to territories or domains). Following linguistic convention, I use the form *heathen** as a higher-level label to refer to the basic word and its derivatives as a set. All in all, *heathen** occurred 346 times in the CIM corpus and 71 times in the LCM-SA materials.

A similar inductive thematic analysis was carried out for *heathen** as for *poor*, and an analogous but ultimately more complex taxonomy was derived from the data. For both corpora, I identified an initial three-category model that represented three broad binary oppositions. *Affiliative* binary refers to individuals or groups of people in terms of whether they are identified as Christian or not. *Systemic* binary refers to an equally clear opposition between systems of belief and practice, such as heathenism and Christianity. Finally, *territorial* binary is used to classify a land, territory, or part of the world seen as non-Christian vis-à-vis the so-called Christian lands or Christendom.

Table 2: Summary of the results for *poor*

Categories	CIM Corpus		LCM-SA Corpus	
	Frequency	Percentage	Frequency	Percentage
Financial	144	35	377	58
Pitiable	171	41	228	35
Spiritual	93	23	41	6
No justification	5	1	6	<1
Total	413	100	652	100

Figure 1: Summary of *poor** in the two corpora

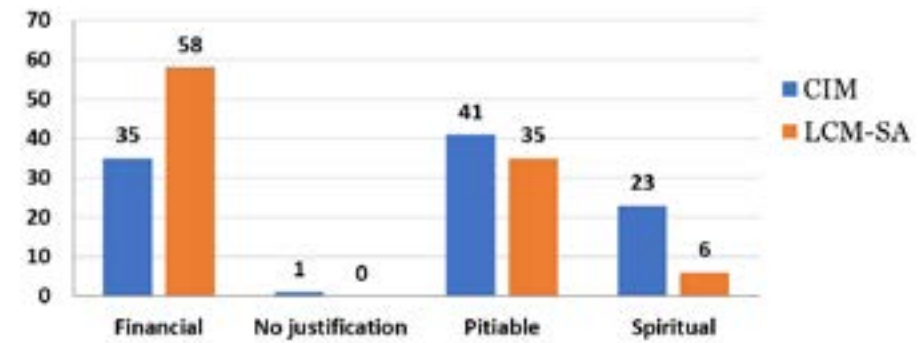


Table 3: Summary of the results for *heathen**

Category of binary	CIM Corpus		LCM-SA Corpus	
	Frequency	Percentage	Frequency	Percentage
Affiliative	233	67	45	63
Systemic	62	18	22	31
Territorial	51	15	5	7
Total	346	100	72	100

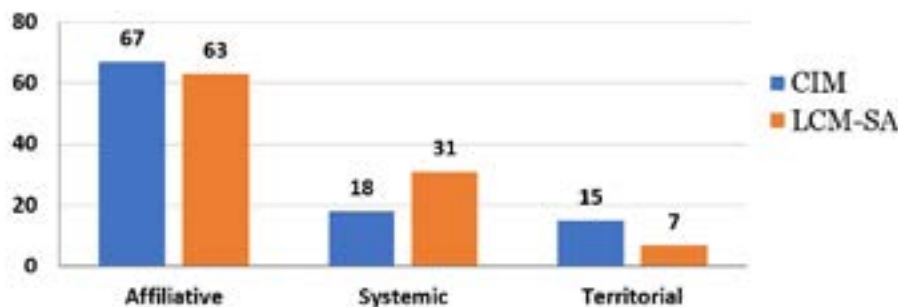
Figure 2: Summary of *heathen** in the two corpora

Table 3 and Figure 2 summarise the occurrences of *heathen** in the two corpora, using three basic categories that reflect different but related binary oppositions.

From the data in Table 3 and Figure 2, the most significant occurrence of the word *heathen** related to a simple dichotomy of religious affiliation of individuals or groups of people. In both corpora, around two thirds of the total uses of *heathen** depicted this simple dichotomy of belief; almost every use of the word *heathen* was merely an expression of whether or not a person believed in Christ. There were very few examples of the word *heathen* having a pejorative or racial implication. In addition, despite the very different social, political, and religious environments studied, the similarity of occurrence of the term *heathen* in the two corpora is striking. The term was used to refer to those without Christian faith in England as commonly as to those in China.

The category of *systemic* binary was used for occurrences of *heathenism* that reflected a distinction between Christianity and other religions or practices. Thus, followers of *heathenism* or “the darkness of *heathenism*” would be examples of the term *heathen** expressing a binary opposition between two religious systems rather than a person’s individual religious affiliation. What was unexpected is that as a percentage, the *systemic* binary occurred more in the British context than the Chinese by a factor of almost 100 percent. Finally, *heathen** was used to refer

to physical territories twice as much in the CIM corpus as in the LCM-SA one.

Whereas *poor* represents a polysemous category, *heathen** is arguably a simpler binary, especially when we consider the word *heathen* as a marker of a person’s religious affiliation. However, during the coding process, it became clear that within the *heathen affiliative* binary, there were subgroups whose presence made further analysis and coding necessary. Likewise, initial passes through the data revealed a *systemic* binary of religious beliefs and practices, and it was necessary to categorise further these non-Christian systems.

Finally, the *territorial* binary was similarly refined. During this process, insights were gained from particular examples of the use of *heathen** in context and these will be referred to in the analysis.

Table 4 presents a more detailed analysis of the three broad categories and identifies subgroups within them for the CIM corpus.

Turning first to the *affiliative* binary, half of the *heathen* people mentioned in the CIM texts were Chinese. This is not surprising, as the magazines describe evangelistic work among these people. The second subcategory, generic, contains references to non-Christian people with no specification of who they were. Thirdly, *heathens* were mentioned in the context of biblical teaching recorded in the CIM publicity. Finally, a small number of occurrences of *heathen* affiliation refer to British and Karen non-Christians. Some commentary on *heathen* as a marker of personal religious affiliation might be helpful. The following examples concern so-called Chinese *heathens*. In *China’s Millions*, the elderly mother of a Chinese man is described as “still a heathen.”²⁴ Missionaries were grateful for her “hearty welcome,” which included pancakes, tea, and “a good supper.” This behaviour can be contrasted with the attitudes of certain “nominally Christian” westerners, “whose lives are less moral than those of the heathen around them.”²⁵ After an incident on a boat, we read that “the

Table 4: Breakdown of binaries associated with *heathen** in the CIM corpus

Category of binary	Subject of binary	Frequency	Percentage
Affiliative binary	Chinese heathens	183	53
	Generic	24	7
	In biblical teaching	17	5
	British heathens	7	2
	Karen heathens	2	<1
Systemic binary	Chinese religions	56	16
	Hinduism	2	<1
	In biblical teaching	1	<1
	Non-Christian religions	2	<1
	Unknown	1	<1
Territorial binary	Generic	34	10
	China	16	5
	Shan State	1	<1
Total		346	100

heathen boatmen more than once said, ‘your God certainly is the true God.’”²⁶ Later, a missionary writer concedes that “we have many things to teach the heathen, but they teach us some things.”²⁷ We also read that the Chinese heathen included literati²⁸ and that “enlightened heathen” viewed opium as a calamity.²⁹

While there is no directly pejorative or critical characterisation of *heathen* individuals, two uses only of the term are associated with ethnicity. In one comparison between Chinese and Western people, the word *heathen* to some degree conflates ethnicity and religious belief.³⁰ Something similar appears in *China’s Millions*,³¹ where it is claimed that while evangelism in the slums of London is difficult, “it is a great deal harder... to make any impression on the minds of heathen people.” Kathryn Gin Lum is strident in her critique of the conflation of religious and racial identities in some parts of the American church, informing us that, even as late as 1971, a US mission executive spoke about “a white world and a colored world,” and inferring that such a racial binary reflects a development in Europe towards the end of the Middle Ages in which “othering based on belief gave way to othering based on bodies.”³²

Against the background of such strong views, I must point out that the same corpus describes missionaries preparing for work in China “by doing such [evangelistic] work among the London heathen.”³³ There is also a comment in *China’s Millions* that “work among the heathen looks somewhat different at home to what it does out in the field.”³⁴ The quantitative data and the direct quotes from the corpus suggest that the *affiliative* binary associated with the word *heathen* essentially concerns a person’s religious affiliation as Christian or non-Christian and nothing else. To all intents and purposes, we could replace the word *heathen* with the phrase *non-Christian*.

My sense that *heathen** functioned as a binary emerged from the textual data itself. The binaries identified are the result of a process of emphasising difference, which will be discussed later. For the moment, however, note the reference to “heathen sisters” in *China’s Millions*, which suggests a concern at the human level that goes beyond faith affiliation and reduces the othering between Christian and non-Christian.³⁵ Finally, in the quotations relating to non-Christian faith of Chinese individuals, there are

eleven mentions of conversion, either accomplished or expected. From this, we can conclude that although faith affiliation is portrayed as a binary opposition in the CIM corpus, a person could move from one pole to another, a process which for the missionaries would entail, but not require, behavioural change. The missionaries of the China Inland Mission were clear that salvation came by grace and through belief alone.

The *systemic* binary refers to the dichotomy between religious systems rather than their followers. From Table 4, it can be seen that references to *heathenism* add up to only around 20 percent of the total occurrences of the form *heathen**. Naturally, the vast majority of those references (16 percent of all occurrences of *heathen**) concern Chinese religions. Interestingly, while there was no value judgement attached to an individual being a *heathen*, that is to say a non-Christian, attitudes to Chinese religions in the CIM corpus are clearly negative. *Heathenism* in the shape of Chinese religions is characterised as “darkness” (many times), “useless,” “deceived and deceiving,”³⁶ providing “sensuous pleasures,”³⁷ inferior to Christianity (many times), and even “a surging tide.”³⁸ Even here though, those caught up in the *heathen* religious system are described as earnest and sincere³⁹ and it is acknowledged that some of the teachings of *heathen* religion “may keep men [sic] from outward sin.”⁴⁰

The third category to look at is the *territorial* binary. Around 16 percent of all of the occurrences of *heathen** refer to the characterisation of territories or parts of the world as heathen as opposed to an implicit or explicit Christian West. There are 51 characterisations of lands or regions as *heathen*; of these, 34 refer to unspecified regions or parts of the world, 16 refer to China specifically, and one concerns the Shan State. *Heathen* lands were generally characterised as neutral, neither good nor bad, although there are a few mentions of sin, darkness, and lack of hospitals. By contrast, an article in *China’s Millions* describes the Chinese people as strong, intellectual, dramatic, and enterprising.⁴¹ They were skilled at arts and sciences and able to influence and even colonise the territories around them. Yet in the same breath, the writer claims that “mere civilization is no criterion of the moral condition of the people,” and “there is therefore no hope for China in itself.”

An interim conclusion is that the use of *heathen** (the word *heathen* and its morphological derivatives) creates a binary on three levels. In addition, while the *affiliative* and *territorial* binaries are essentially neutral, with small amounts of positive and negative characterisations of people, the *systemic* binary between religious systems is fundamentally more negative. It may be that the writers of *China’s Millions* wished to transmit a connotation⁴² of non-Christian religious systems as negative and harmful, while portraying the “heatheness” of individual people almost exclusively as their lack of affiliation with Christianity. One wonders if the CIM writers were trying to portray a powerful, dark religious system operating in certain parts of the world, whose residents were its unwitting victims.

I now look at the detailed breakdown of uses of *heathen** in the LCM-SA corpus. The figures are presented in Table 5.

Beginning with the *affiliative* binary, we see that just under two thirds of all occurrences of the form *heathen** relate to the faith affiliation of individuals or groups of people. Within this category, there are more than twice as many references to non-Western *heathens* as to Western ones, the majority of whom were British. Among the non-Western *heathens* were “Asiatics”, South Asians, and East Africans, some of whom were present in London. The overwhelming sense of *heathen* within this *affiliative* binary is simply *non-Christian*; as with the CIM corpus, there is no pejorative element. There is one mention of the apparent openness of the *heathen* to the gospel, yet that same paragraph also contains the words, “we mean the heathen proper, from the dark places of the earth.”⁴³ This suggests some conflation of non-Christian status with ethnic origin. Concerning *heathen* as a marker of non-Christian affiliation, it is noteworthy that in two places, so-called “Mahommedans” are portrayed as distinct from the *heathen*. It is difficult to know whether this represents a special status for the Abrahamic faiths or the idea that people belonging to a faith with a fixed Scripture and strict religious and behavioural norms were perceived as “more civilised” and therefore less *heathen* than others.

As with the CIM corpus, there is a juxtaposition between “the foreign [and] the home heathen.”⁴⁴ However, the LCM-SA publicity describes British

heathens in negative terms not found in the CIM portrayals of Chinese *heathens*. Consider this description: “the heathen of London, who are as ignorant, as besotted as miserable, as wicked, nay more so, and in danger of a greater damnation than the heathen abroad.”⁴⁵ Another negative portrayal of the poor in the East End of London describes them as “savages in the midst of civilization, and the heathen in the midst of Christianity.”⁴⁶ The parallelism here may suggest an identification between Christianity and civilisation on the one hand and savages and heathen on the other. This would question a straightforward use of *heathen* to signify non-Christian only. That said, such usages in the LCM-SA corpus were very rare. Regarding the construction of the *heathen* in the British context, perhaps we should leave the last word to William Booth: “we have in our midst a nation of heathens to whom the ideals, the practices, and the commandments of religion are things unknown.”⁴⁷

The *systemic* binaries identified in the LCM-SA corpus are also more complicated than those found in the CIM publicity. In a way, this should not be surprising. In the case of the CIM, Christian mission was being undertaken in virgin territory, where the two competing belief systems were Chinese religions and Christianity and the missionaries sought to replace one with the other. In late nineteenth-century England, however, Christian mission had to confront not only what were perceived as non-Christian worldviews, in the sense that people lacked familiarity with and understanding of the Christian message, but also the effects of de-Christianisation, an apparent move from understanding and following the gospel to ignorance

of it. In examining the *systemic* binaries, it is therefore impossible to separate moving away from the Christian value system and a deterioration in standards of morality and behaviour. As in the case of the CIM materials, it was felt that religious systems or the lack of them could affect people’s ethics and values.

Table 5 shows three kinds of systemic binary in the LCM-SA corpus. Fully one fifth of all mentions of *heathen** related to a fundamental opposition between Christianity and what I coded as “western godlessness”; only 8 percent referred to non-Christian religions. Again, within the context of Christian mission to English people in England, it is not surprising that the mention of non-Christian religions is relatively rare. There are only one or two explicit characterisations of non-Christian heathen religions as negative; the word *darkness* appears two or three times.

The relatively high percentage of incidences of “western godlessness” is striking, as are the ways in which ignorance or rejection of Christianity is described. The *heathenism* among the godless English people of the East End is described as “revolting” and “like a pestilence.”⁴⁸ Elsewhere, there are mentions of “the moral wilderness of heathenism”⁴⁹ and the *heathenism* of “the native poor.”⁵⁰ While such quotations suggest an interpretation of *systemic heathenism* beyond religious faith and seem to expand the notion of *heathen** to include immoral lifestyles, other occurrences of *heathenism* seem to refer to the removal of the individual from the Christian religious system.

The *London City Mission Magazine* laments the advance of *heathenism*, complaining

that among 400 people in a slum area, there was “not one professing Christian.”⁵¹ There are several mentions of a move from Christianity into *heathenism*; the word *lapse* appears four times. There is also a reference to a group of Germans living in London who “were sinking into a heathenish state.”⁵² The sense of movement here—deconversion—is the mirror image of the conversion possibility mentioned in the *affiliative* binary in the CIM corpus. Belonging to a particular system of religious faith and practice was considered neither fixed nor a matter of ethnicity and culture.

Finally, the LCM-SA mission magazines contain a small number of examples of the *territorial* binary. There were three mentions of *heathen* lands as opposed to an implied Christian West, but the texts also contain references to “heathen London” and “heathen districts of the metropolis,” establishing clear distinctions between Christian and non-Christian territory within a supposedly Christian West. Again, such binary oppositions undermine any simple identification of territory as intrinsically Christian or non-Christian.

The quantitative data from the LCM-SA corpus and the direct quotations from it roughly parallel the pattern discerned from the CIM data. That is to say, the *affiliative* binary is fundamentally one of opposition between Christian and non-Christian. That said, while the CIM data suggests an almost black-and-white division, the picture from Britain is more nuanced. There are one or two hints of an association between ethnicity and *heathenism*, but at the same time, the negative portrayal of *heathens*, particularly British ones, is stronger than anything that appears in the data from China.

The *territorial* binary contains a very small number of examples, but this is also intrinsically more negative than the analogous binary from the CIM corpus. The references to “heathen London” may suggest a degree of dissatisfaction with a situation seen as unacceptable within Christendom. As for the CIM corpus, the most significant binary in terms of negative characterisation is the *systemic* one. The LCM-SA descriptions of “western godlessness” are more negative and more strongly worded than the CIM portrayals of Chinese religions. Again, heathen individuals are critiqued for uncivilised behaviour, but they are also victims of a broader

Table 5: Breakdown of binaries associated with *heathen** in the LCM-SA corpus

Category of binary	Subject of binary	Frequency	Percentage
Affiliative binary	Non-Western heathens	29	41
	Western heathens	13	18
	Gypsy people	2	3
	In biblical teaching	1	1
Systemic binary	Western godlessness	14	20
	Non-Christian religion	6	8
	Immoral behaviour	2	3
Territorial binary	Non-Western lands	3	4
	London	2	3
Total		72	100

systemic heathenism resulting from movement away from Christian faith and morality and in moral deterioration.

6. Theological and missiological reflections

I now turn to theological and missiological reflection on the findings concerning representation of non-Christians through the words *poor* and *heathen**.

6.1. Poor

From the analysis of the two corpora above, *poor* is a polysemous concept containing four ostensibly separate characteristics. It was found that the term refers to financial poverty, spiritual need, and a person being pitiable in one way or another, but also includes usages with no clear justification from the context.

The profiles of the term *poor* in the two corpora are a little different, yet from the ways in which the writers use the word, I conclude that *poor* represents an intersectionality.⁵³ That people are *poor* means that they have financial and spiritual needs, and are somehow pitiable. In the LCM-SA data, this intersectionality contains a significant incidence of *poor* that cannot be explained or justified. Generally, those being reached through cross-cultural mission abroad or in their own country are presented as needy. *Poor* has connotations;⁵⁴ *poor* people are lacking in various ways and the reader is somehow supposed to feel sorry for them. People are presented as *poor* in a *spiritual* sense far less than as *pitiable* or financially bereft, which we might consider surprising in publications of evangelical mission societies. This is the case in both corpora, but is especially pronounced in the British materials.

We are reminded that the (visible) body lies at centre of discourse⁵⁵ and is a canvas for depictions of people that may have theological roots. Theologically, these visible characteristics of people could be the outward manifestations of lives marred by sin and its consequences. After all, every non-Christian, regardless of their forms and degree of poverty, is spiritually needy. The representation in both corpora evokes Foucault's point that discourse relates to a given historical moment,⁵⁶

which, in this case, has a theological component. *Spiritual* need is accepted across the board, theologically, yet here, particular attention is drawn to practical, personal, and social needs. The two sets of mission publicity were written before the fundamentalist-liberal divide in the United States,⁵⁷ which subsequently had such a marked effect on evangelical mission theory and practice.⁵⁸ Mission in China and in London is described in the two corpora as essentially holistic; the gospel is proclaimed verbally but also demonstrated practically through alleviation of hunger, provision of education, assistance to women, and medical interventions. Such integral mission was shaped by and tailored to the realities of particular settings and care for the body meshes with concern for the soul. At the same time, the description of people as *poor* in a composite sense would have inspired middle-class Christians—many of whom were the principal readers of the material and primary donors to the mission work—to pray for and give to the evangelistic enterprises described in the two corpora; this is a “point of doctrine and a persuasive rhetorical device.”⁵⁹ The representation of and resulting concern for the lost are produced by and within a discourse;⁶⁰ there is both theological and practical meaning. Few readers of the mission magazines would visit London's East End or China and their conceptualisations of

non-Christian people would have been mediated by the representations within.

6.2. Heathen

Positive comments about Chinese and Indian civilisations are juxtaposed with a small number of negative characterisations. It seems that being civilised is a good thing but is not enough, which points to the significance of faith in evangelicalism.

If the most important and possibly sole factor in the discussion relates to faith, then what about associations of the word *heathen** and descriptions of poverty? It seems probable that the view that a person can be “civilised” but still live in darkness reflects the view that all humanity and all cultures are fallen. The writers in the two corpora apparently do not embrace the idea that Christ is king of the world as well as king of the church. Their position would appear to align more with a “Christ against the world” sort of view.⁶¹

Where the behaviours of individual *heathens* are criticised, the inference is twofold. One is that moral weaknesses and unfortunate social and financial situations are directly or indirectly a consequence of not being Christian. The implication is that becoming Christian would enable change in one's behaviour, social status, relationships, and financial situation. Indeed, the corpora contain stories of people becoming believers and treating their wives better and giving up opium or alcohol. Following Christ brought opportunities to learn new trades and offers of employment and a generally more organised and disciplined life. These testimonies might resolve an apparent paradox between the intersectionality of *poor* and the binary of religious affiliation of people. Problems in people's personal and social lives were manifestations of an incorrect relationship with God and could be solved if that relationship were restored. This position stands apart from something similar articulated by Lum. She concedes that ancient Europeans who worshipped Norse gods were also considered idolaters, but suggests that at some point they received the Bible and were “lifted... into ‘Christian civilization.’”⁶² This term needs to be problematised; did such a thing ever exist anywhere and can it be considered monolithically?



“Down the court,” *Round the Tower; or, The Story of London City Mission* (1894): 108.

The second relates to the theology of the CIM, LCM, and Salvation Army. The testimonies of converts to Christ recorded in both sets of mission magazines tell of lives changed and new beginnings, primarily at the personal and relational level, without any sense of cultural civilisational change on the part of people in either group. Had the Bible been credited with elevating people in China into (Western) “Christian civilisation”, this would presumably have been such an obvious change that it would have featured in the mission’s publicity. In addition, “civilisation” is a system locked into culture, and the data in this study show a *theologically*-based suspicion of any such human system. While Lum sees *heathen* as a term conflating faith and culture and Fischer describes a change in the metaphor of light and dark from one of spiritual status to degree of civilisation (in western eyes), the conservative theology of late nineteenth-century Christian missions employs the word *heathen* as an indicator of religious affiliation only. A person might be “civilised” as a result of coming to Christ and undergoing a process of transformation and sanctification, but, *pace* Lum, this is more a matter of being lifted by “Christian values” than into “Christian civilization.”⁶³ In this regard, consider 1 Corinthians 12:2, 1 Peter 4:3, and Colossians 3:7, which all remind Christian people of Gentile backgrounds of their immoral behaviour before they came to faith—when they were “pagans.” The exhortation to transformation in Romans 12:2 follows Paul’s remarkable doxology; in the light of God’s glory, Christians must remove the influence of the old *system* and take on the wisdom of the new. My distinction between values and civilisation is fine and open to critique, but this is what the analysis of the two corpora reveals.

Movement, or change of affiliation, is evident in both corpora. The publicity of the CIM and the LCM and SA reflect their theological position and *raison d’être*: conversion was extremely important. Regardless of one’s race or culture, religious affiliation could be changed. The corollary of this appears in the LCM corpus, where the missional effort is partly responding to a move away from the liberating power of the gospel. Individual human beings are categorised as *heathen*, an ethnically neutral term describing their religious affiliation, while the *heathenism* of religious systems is more clearly negative. In addition, the

binary religious affiliation of a person is not related to culture and is not fixed; there is evidence of movement between Christian and non-Christian affiliation in both corpora. The inference is that human beings are affected by the religious systems in which they find themselves. Chinese religions are painted as dark and unpleasant, and the *heathens* that follow them are in some sense their victims.

In the case of London, non-Christian religions are similarly depicted, but this corpus also contains stronger negative characterisations of a form of Western *heathenism* that has departed or lapsed from Christianity, resulting in the kind of individual and social problems associated with the word *poor*. There are parallels here with the powerful critiques of an Israel that has departed from the true faith, in, for example, Amos 2 and Hosea 4. In the West too, people who do not belong to the Christian religious system are at risk of being influenced by various kinds of evil. There are theological connotations associated with the different non-Christian beliefs and practices. It seems that Fischer’s “doctrine of depravity,”⁶⁴ which he detects in mission writings about non-Western, “native” peoples, also applies to English people who did not know Christ.

Hall remarks that many cultures are increasingly closed to outsiders and mentions Kristeva’s view that this is a form of purification.⁶⁵ The strong binary established between Christianity and other religions suggests the maintenance of boundaries between systems of belief and the reinforcement of a conservative Christian faith and ethical position. I am reminded of the negative connotation of “world” in John.⁶⁶ Yet, this fundamental theological antipathy to belief systems other than evangelical Christianity (a small number of references to *heathenism* also mention Roman Catholicism) is juxtaposed with concern for the souls of individuals in China and London. While the presence of the *other* helps us define our own identity,⁶⁷ evangelism seeks to move that *other* from outside to inside without change to the group identity.

As before, representations are made by people with the power to write and disseminate them, and perspectives on the different belief systems emerge from within a “particular historical [and theological] moment.”⁶⁸ There is a slightly clearer connection between the forces of evil and Chinese religions than

between spiritual darkness and Western *heathenism*. Perhaps in the minds of the authors of the day, the fact that Chinese religions were so totally different from Christianity and incomprehensible to the Western mind meant that it was easier to associate them with spiritual forces. The meanings surrounding religious systems are created within a discourse,⁶⁹ but one structured by a select group of people who share a theological persuasion with their readers and represent non-Christian beliefs in accordance with that shared orientation and resulting connotations. From the systemic binaries in both corpora, we can infer that non-Christian religions, especially from East and South Asia, are seen as powerful forces that affect individuals. The effects of those forces in the lives of unfortunate people in China and Britain appear in the mission publicity.

7. Conclusion

This paper has looked at the use of two words, *poor* and *heathen**, in late nineteenth-century mission magazines and found that within the evangelical constituency of the day, they were used very similarly within culture and cross-culturally. *Poor* and *heathen** appear to have no clear pejorative or ethnic element at the personal level. Detailed analysis of occurrences of *heathen** reveals a difference in the way in which the term is used of people (in an *affiliative* binary) and of religions (in a *systemic* binary). Whether used in mission magazines describing work in Britain or in China, *heathen* is a neutral term that would today be expressed as “non-Christian”, while *heathenism* definitely brings negative connotations about certain systems of religious belief. The non-believing individual is a victim of non-Christian religion.

While *poor* represents an intersectionality and *heathen** constitutes a binary opposition, the two meanings come together in a connotation of need. Various forms of poverty result from and represent lives without Christ; being *poor* is the consequence of being *heathen*. Lum’s critique of nationalistic uses of the term *heathen* in the United States and Fischer’s exploration of British conflations of culture, Christianity, and civilisation in early nineteenth-century mission writings surface and address genuine concerns and real hurts. However, from this study of mission magazines, I conclude that a theological position that saw the world as inherently negative and even doomed to destruction viewed no culture

in positive terms and emphasised salvation in Christ as the only answer to the human predicament. **MRT**

Reflection Questions

1. The use of the term “heathen” remains controversial and for many has racist and neo-colonial associations. What terms might we use today, even only within the mission community, which could cause similar misunderstanding or offence?
2. In the research shared in this article, “heathen” primarily refers to a person’s faith standing. In that sense, it reflects a legitimate dichotomy for those whose vocation is to help move people from a no-faith or other-faith position to one of faith in Christ. What dichotomies exist in our thinking which are unhelpful or create negative characterisations of the “other”? What can we do about them? How Christian is it to divide people into “us and them” groups that do not reflect faith affiliation?
3. The word “poor” was found to represent a complex category much broader than financial poverty. In nineteenth-century sources from mission groups in the UK and China, “poor” seemed to have connotations of being pitiable and needing assistance. How appropriate is it to think of those who need the gospel as pitiable in general terms? Does thinking of people in such a way mean that we put ourselves above them?
4. In our globalised twenty-first century mission endeavour, missionaries sometimes serve in countries as developed as or even more developed than their own. How do we reconcile a traditional sense of “helping the needy”, albeit with spiritual needs at the centre, with the reality of a world where the West is no longer the only “developed” part?

5. If we are not offended by the use of the word “heathen” explored in and revealed by this research, how should we respond to colleagues who are? How important is it to try and see issues from someone else’s point of view?

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 - ⁶⁰ Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge* (London: Tavistock, 1972).
 - ⁶¹ Cf. H. Richard Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture* (New York: Harper, 1951).
 - ⁶² Lum, *Heathens: Religion and Race*, 190.
 - ⁶³ Lum, *Heathens: Religion and Race*, 190.
 - ⁶⁴ Fischer, “Civilized Depravity,” 413.
 - ⁶⁵ Hall, “The Work of Representation,” 226; Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982).
 - ⁶⁶ D. A. Carson, *The Gospel According to John* (Leicester: IVP, 1991), 123.
 - ⁶⁷ Hall, “The Work of Representation.”
 - ⁶⁸ Hall, “The West and the Rest,” 291.
 - ⁶⁹ Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*.

Being Human: The Politics of Identity

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Abstract

The current political crisis in Myanmar has once again thrust identity politics under the spotlight, highlighting the toxic legacy of “divide and rule” policies that sought to create distinct categories of person based on ethno-linguistic characteristics. Christian mission is deeply implicated in many of the systems of ethnic identity construction, and larger Christianized groups exercise a mutual leverage of Christianity and ethnicity to validate political claims. However, a younger generation of revolutionaries, recognizing how these modes of handling difference have contributed to oppression and division, are instead appealing for different “ways of being” that include, but are not defined by, externally given models of ethnicity. This is deeply resonant with both post-exilic prophecy and Paul’s statement in Galatians 3:28, whereby ethnic, gender, and social differences are both recognized and embraced, and yet not considered the basis for generating different categories of human being.

This paper seeks to highlight the importance of awareness of how identities are politically constructed and the dangers of naïve reinforcement of modes of practice that seek to use those differences to make particular categories of human being, often resulting in inequalities and marginalization. The biblical premise of all being created in the image of God means that all are human, in a single category; and that all other differences are, with respect to our relationship with God, simply descriptive. Instead of a “disabled person” where the “difference” of disability is used to generate a particular category of person, the term “person with disabilities” renders the difference

descriptive, retaining the primacy of equal personhood in terms of category.

Missiologically, this does not mean a rejection of ethnicity or, indeed, other differences, but rather, considers how we can handle difference differently so that we are not complicit in supporting modes of identity that reinforce exclusion or inequalities, or that suppose which particular expressions of a person’s identity are more “valid” and “authentic”. This can lead us to speak less of “Kachin people” or “Bamar people” or “Buddhist people” and instead to speak of “people”, whose identity may well be made up of multiple differences based on class, gender, beliefs, and background; ethnicity is celebrated, but not used as the defining trait of a person.

Dangerous people: The politicization of identity

In my office, a young research assistant works steadily on her latest research paper. She is a woman aged thirty, from an ethnic minority background that is itself a smaller sub-group of a larger ethnic minority; she is a Christian;

she is a wheelchair user. Her journey of the past decade has been one of a crucial realization: that her identity is not determined by her disability, or her gender, or her ethnicity, or even by her vocation. It is determined by her relationship with God, in Christ. However, her daily struggle remains, as those around her continue to impose a particular identity—whether government-issued ID cards categorizing people based on ethnicity and religion; whether being discriminated against in job applications due to her disability (or at times, the opposite—used as a token means to display diversity in the workplace); or the long, hard struggle in a highly patriarchal branch of “Baptist-ness” where women, especially ones with an education, are not permitted to speak. Her daily struggle requires determined navigation of the intersecting, imposed identity categories that others have framed for her, and use to shape their perceptions of her, and how they relate to her.

Arguably, the issue of identity has grown to be the dominant discourse of the past fifty years, fuelled by three phenomena: the sprawling and complex legacy of



empires and post-empire independence movements; the growth of consumer culture driving the need for ever-diversified markets; and technological advances transforming health choices and outcomes, communication, and carbon-silicon interfaces. Antweiler points out that “Whereas the term ‘identity’ was already popular in the early 20th century, ‘ethnicity’ and ‘ethnic identity’ have only become buzzwords since the 1960s,” with the increasing trend towards framing claims to economic or political participation around “culture or tradition rather than by invoking [social determinants such as] poverty or basic needs.”¹ Whilst the approaches and strategies to classification and categorization have, to some degree, moved away from more “explicit allusion to corporeal features, the dominant perspectives on human collectives remain categorical and essentialistic.”² Identity is to some extent experienced “via collective identity,” and such identities are often the “principal means by which to fight for rights, resources and/or recognition.”³

Identity is typically defined individually in relation to particular characteristics, socially in relation to categories such as class, and collectively in relation to membership of groups.⁴ However, whilst much recent scholarship focuses on relatively mobile identities in industrial and post-industrial societies, this analysis to some extent obscures the extent to which these identities are in many cases not voluntary, and frequently collapsed. Thus, whilst van Stekelenburg rightly points out that not all collective identities are politicized in the sense of being used to frame claims to rights or grievances, this again obscures the ways in which some collective identities politicize the identities of others in order to make their own claims (for example, the forms of othering that politicize the category of “migrants”). In this sense, whilst identity, and particularly collective identity, is a crucial element of protest, for the most part, people’s lived experience of identity is given. I would argue that, to a large extent, self-determination with respect to identity is an issue largely correlated to wealth—whilst identity is significant for people regardless of their economic status, and in fact, often has a profound influence on that economic status, identity as an issue, involving (or holding out the possibility of) some form of contestation or choice, is the privilege of the few.



Thus, whilst Klandermans asserts that “collective identity becomes politically relevant when people who share a specific identity take part in political action on behalf of that collective,”⁵ the reality for most is that of an imposed othering: their political identity, both individually and collectively, is often pre-determined by others—an imposed reality, serving to delineate a particular set of expected behaviours and limitations, rather than as an issue that one would have much say in. State or other elites, acting as “political and identity entrepreneurs use their power, resources, and creativity to pull a collectivity together and to turn grievances into claims.”⁶ This may resemble larger, ethno-nationalist movements: “ethicized versions of collective identity are appropriated in postcolonial contexts, especially by leaders of ethno-nationalist governments and representatives of indigenous minorities.”⁷

What is perhaps neglected in the literature is the ways in which collective identity building by one group also seeks, explicitly or implicitly, to define the identity of “others” who are different from that group. The building of a particular collective identity requires the sharpening of distinctives—this is us, and we are not like them. Where this can be spoken of as politicized is when differences are highlighted as a means to establish and maintain particular patterns of relationship, privilege, and power within a society. Thus, to refer to “politicization” does not refer exclusively to higher, state-level actions. The use of difference to establish and maintain patterns of relationship, power, and privilege occurs on multiple scales: family, village, church, office, city, and nation.

With respect to identity, we can say that identity is politicized when certain differences are highlighted and used as

instruments to determine and regulate social relationships—particularly around access to resources, opportunities and rights, and expected behaviours. At a simple level, even in some churches, differences are politicized: being young, female, or homosexual, or in some cases, ethnically different, may limit the extent of one’s participation in church life. At a national level, gender, ethnicity, religion, and nationality are common discriminatory differences used to justify particular allocations of resources, rights, and privileges, and to frame expectations of behaviour. Pointing this out does not infer that the politicization of difference is inherently good or bad—simply that it happens, and happens much more than we think.

This is important, because sometimes our unquestioning acceptance of certain identities may simply reinforce their power to categorize and constrain, which in turn contributes to the ongoing oppression of those who have little power in society. If I accept common tropes around, say, gender, sexuality, or disability, by using words that reinforce existing social hierarchies, I contribute to the maintenance of those hierarchies and their violence towards the dignity and agency of those who have been placed in those categories. This overlaps with identity, wherein particular differences are codified to more discrete categories—thus, a person may be missing a leg, but that does not immediately make them a “disabled person”. However, social regulatory systems (particularly government assistance schemes intended to help, but also some social or religious systems intended to discriminate) require that the deformity be used to generate a particular category of difference—so, they are now a disabled person, which tends to be the dominant

frame through which others perceive and relate to them. The issue is not the existence of difference, but the way in which difference is handled as matter of public discourse and practice. Which differences “matter”, and how are certain differences used to assign status, power, and privilege in society? And what happens, as in the case of Myanmar, when certain differences are used to justify violent exclusion, oppression, and even genocide?

Toxic legacies in Myanmar

Myanmar is currently in political turmoil, as the *coup d'état* of February 2021 has ripped apart the last fragile threads of national cohesion. At the heart of the crisis is a wholesale public rejection not only of militarism, but of the notion that disparate groups can be held together only by force. However, the ongoing, violent repudiation of the military's claims to be the singular force of national unity has led to deeper questioning of the foundations of the disparate nature of Myanmar—specifically, the basis of the historical claims of different ethnic groups in Myanmar to political, economic, and cultural autonomy from the Burmese State. Given that, for decades, citizenship has been based on complex and heavily tilted framings of identity appealing to status as a true “son of the soil,”⁸ ethnicity and ethnic difference have long represented a core, but deeply contested, element of identity for people living in, or in relation to, Myanmar.⁹

However, in the current crisis, new voices, particularly from younger generations, are urgently questioning old assumptions about the primacy of ethnicity in identity, appealing instead to forms of belonging that acknowledge, but are not contingent upon, such differences.

Within the Christian community, ethnicity and identity remain problematic. Contra to the establishment of national church structures in Indonesia, and indeed to the ecclesiastical practices of Anglicans or Catholics in Myanmar, the largest denomination in Myanmar, the Baptists, have established their communion on ethno-linguistic lines, with the Myanmar Baptist Convention (MBC) being formed from eighteen language and regional conventions, including Kachin, Karen, Sgaw Karen, Chin, Asho Chin, Tiddmin Chin, Myanmar (Burmese speaking),

Mon, Rakhine, Northern Shan, Southern Shan, Eastern Shan, Shweli Shan, Lisu, Lahu, Akha, Wa, and Naga. Whilst the MBC has long been held as a model for promoting an inclusive unity in the face of diversity, the current crisis has also affected this, with an increased emphasis on ethno-nationalist identity preservation and autonomy from the main body. Particularly for ethnic groups engaged in long-standing armed resistance to the Burmese military—mainly Kachin and Karen, but also Chin, Rakhine, Shan and Mon—claims to territorial autonomy and political rights are largely derived from appeals to the relative population size of distinct ethnic groups in relation to particular geographies. Thus, claims by the Kachin Independence Organization (KIO), backed by its armed wing, the Kachin Independence Army (KIA), are based on being able to claim the support of a sufficient number of people who are identified as Kachin, and who live in, or in relation to, territories claimed by the KIA (mainly Kachin State). The point here is that it is in the interests of ethno-nationalist leaders to maintain distinct, legible categories of subjects. The question is: how can that legibility¹⁰ be maintained?

Even prior to the advent of colonialism, Myanmar's history had been profoundly influenced by its ethnic heterogeneity.¹¹ Colonial era concepts of pluralism reflected the Empire's paternalistic concerns for the “welfare of the natives” alongside more pragmatic tools to govern.¹² Myanmar has a long legacy of racial tensions, most dating back centuries. However, they were amplified in the colonial era by three factors: the need to develop categories of people to determine modes of citizenship; the need to establish multiple categories to maintain division (and therefore ease of rule); and the influence of Darwinist anthropology on social arrangements, where there existed a need to measure degrees of civilization.

To some extent, successive military authorities have assisted in the process of maintaining legibility of identity groups through the persistent, if inconsistent,¹³ mandatory recording of ethnicity on the national identity card. This process does, however, mean that the terms of identity are largely controlled by the State—thus, the ID card system also records religion, typically designated by the same immigration officer based either on the recorded religion of parents, or in most cases, the presumed religion of that ethnic group. As a result, most who are identified

as Burmese, Shan, Rakhine, Mon, or Pa-O will automatically be recorded as Buddhist; Kachin, Chin, and some Karen would be assigned Christian status. This can lead to some unusual identity constructions, such as an ethnic Burmese Roman Catholic Priest who, despite having his vocation clearly stated on his ID card, was nonetheless assigned to be a Buddhist. The classification system is, however, less able to cope with Hindu or Muslim adherents—many Hindus are simply recorded as “Hindu” in both the ethnicity and religion columns, as are many Muslims with specific, differentiated ethnic heritage, such as Karen or Kaman, who are nonetheless simply recorded as “Muslim”.

The process of recording in this way serves to tightly interweave religion and ethnicity, largely reflecting the philosophy of J. S. Furnivall, whose principles of a “plural society” envisioned distinct communities who lived separately, but met in the marketplace. This essentially defined “sum of parts” plurality, described as

in the strictest sense a medley, for they [ethnic groups] mix but do not combine. Each group holds by its own religion, its own culture and language, its own ideas and ways. As individuals they meet, but only in the market-place [...] different sections of the community living side by side, but separately, within the same political unit. Even in the economic sphere there is division of labour along racial lines, Natives, Chinese, Indians and Europeans all have different functions, and within each major group subsections have particular occupations.¹⁴

Each group followed its own distinct customs in its own social space, but interacted for commercial purposes. Furnivall's philosophy, reflecting the primarily economic concerns of colonial-era authorities, required three things: a legible, credible system of classification; stable, self-contained ethnic communities largely accepting of wider constraints on self-expression; and a powerful, disinterested ruling elite to sit above the “mosaic”.

These requirements themselves provide the seeds of self-destruction. The collapsing of ethnic and religious categories, together with the use of categories for administrative control, has resulted in inequalities and

discrimination—perhaps most notably for Muslims. Furthermore, the fixing of categories erased or negated “minorities within minorities,” or differentiated expressions of identity within a particular category (for example, those of a religion different from the majority of those within their ethnic group). Secondly, where such inequalities were seen in the light of constraints on social mobility and legitimate self-expression (for example, prohibitions on Christian and Muslim communities building religious buildings, in comparison to Buddhist communities), the dominance of the ruling elite was questioned—often in violent ways. Finally, the powerful elite became less disinterested and more overtly aligned with particular ethno-religious expressions—mainly Burmese Buddhism—perhaps exemplified by U Nu’s attempts to make Buddhism the national religion, and more recently, the support of Buddhist nationalist movements by President U Thein Sein in 2012–2016, and more overtly by Senior General Min Aung Hlaing from 2021 onwards.

In this context, ethnic and religious identity have been weaponized as tools for maintaining division, and hence result in internal weakness and control by the ruling elite. Many of the reasons given for the current *coup d’état* pivot around a pushback at the perceived secularism of the NLD party, to the extent that the new leader of the military proxy party (USDP), U Khin Yi, announced on Facebook that “We had to do the coup to save our race and religion. If not for us, none of you would even have Buddha shelves in your house any more.”¹⁵

What has ensued is a struggle that, at one level, pits a central military junta against a disparate collection of newly emergent resistance fighters and more established militia formed around ethnic identities. However, within this, the claims of both the military, to be the guardians of Buddhism, and by Ethnic Armed/ Revolutionary Organizations, to territorial and political rights based on ethnic identity, represent crucial organizing principles for opponents. What this means is that such identity categories are critical weapons to establish and maintain group solidarity on both sides, further reinforcing identity categories as the key shape of social fabric. Once again, this returns to issues of power—not only do we need to be alert to who, exactly, prospers from the maintenance of certain identity categorization systems, but how

powerful groups continue to manipulate those systems for their own ends.

This crosses over with Christian mission at several points: firstly, that it runs counter to the dominant theological course of the Old and New Testament, which critically relativizes politically constructed identities in the face of God’s redemptive work; secondly, where Christianity is itself used (and abused) in the service of maintaining particular ethnic identities for political ends; thirdly, where rigid enforcement of assumed religious identities on the basis of ethnicity constrains evangelism, both in terms of preventing converts from being officially recorded as different, and also by legitimizing coercive pressure to maintain a particular performance of ethnicity that entails religious elements (i.e., if you are Pa-O, you are Buddhist; so your entire behaviour needs to be consistent with that identity, or you are not Pa-O. And we need you to be Pa-O, because we need to show that we are a unified, populous community.)

When Christian mission also bases its own strategic approach on distinct ethnolinguistic identities—such as mono-ethnic churches or, like the MBC, ethno-linguistic sub-groupings that supersede geographical locations—to what extent do we reinforce boundaries and systems that are being used by others for political purposes?

Christian mission and ethno-nationalism

Whilst identity politics has played a particularly animated role in twenty-first century social discourse, the issue of identity trouble is not new. At heart are systems of identity construction and labelling that create particular categories of human beings, which are in turn embedded in social systems that confer differing degrees of importance, power, and “human-ness”. Such systems of identity construction include gender, race, sexuality, and class, and have in common the practice of using biological, behavioural, or generational markers to assign categories. Scholars working in Asia and Africa have shown how mission is implicated in the production of ethnolinguistic identities.¹⁶ This is often associated with deeply committed, long-term projects to document language and culture, in some cases generating written forms, alongside the work of proselytization, which itself is

frequently accompanied by sensitive, insightful, and reflective processes of cultural adaptation of religious practices in the light of the Christian gospel.

There is little evidence that many mission workers themselves worked with a significant degree of political consciousness¹⁷ in regard to the impact of the production of such identities, but in many cases, particularly in contexts where mission endeavour entered alongside colonial expansion, mission work contributed to wider efforts to identify, categorize, and manage sub-populations. Buadaeng notes how, in relation to the Karen, whilst people considered “different” existed side by side for centuries, “the word ‘Karen’ was never used by the groups that constitute the category Karen today until the Christian missionaries and British colonial officers gave the term respectability.”¹⁸ As the consciousness of the sense of a wider identity grew, this in turn led to calls for a wider expression as “more than a national minority ... a nation, with all the essential qualities of a nation.”¹⁹ This has been appropriated into the nationalist, at times secessionist, Karen movement.

This perhaps reaches the heart of the paradox—the power of the gospel, in relativizing, displacing, and replacing more localized beliefs and customs, has served to break down divisions and enmities between peoples, often leading to new affinity bonds that, in time, generate larger and more politically relevant categories. This does, in a way which can be traced with positive and negative trajectories, intertwine Christianity with the new collective identity, as Sakhong describes eloquently in relation to the Chin people of Western Myanmar:

Within the process of transition in beliefs from micro-level to macrolevel ... people’s identification with each other was shifting as well from clan and tribal identities to a wider level or macro-level of Chin national identity or Chin-ness, ... In this way, Christianity provided the means of overcoming clan and tribal identities, and at the same time helped to create a new society where people identified each other as brothers and sisters in one faith, or members of the community of faith ... this community of faith was identical with “Chin-ness” or a Chin national identity. Thus, Christianity



and Chin-ness were inseparably intertwined in a new Chin society.²⁰

This inseparability is critical in the framing of “otherness” by co-existent groups, and Sakhong’s excellent analysis highlights this:

The reason [for the intertwining] is, in my opinion, that Chinram was surrounded by peoples of other faiths – Burman Buddhists in the east, Bengali Muslims in the south, and Indian Hindus in the west – different races and different religions. As a result, the Chin had no immediate link or direct connection with peoples of their own new faith, other than of their own nationality, with whom they could identify as brothers and sisters.²¹

The political framing of identity plays a significant role in how different collective identities are stacked, or played off, against each other. The identity of the “others” who represent the greatest threat tends to influence which particular differences are mobilized in the service of a counter-identity. Thus, wider national policies play a part, and the existence of a wider Chin consciousness, enabled through the unifying power of the Christian religion, was critical in shaping Chin collective identity within the newly formed State of Burma:

When U Nu became the leader of Burma and the country moved to establish Buddhism as the state religion, Chin self-awareness and a common identity became the phenomena which then intertwined inseparably with Christianity. This Chin “political identification with Christianity” was ... important for the Chin ... when they joined the Union of Burma in which they faced a new environment of multi-

racial and multi-religious pluralism.²²

However, Christian mission endeavours were not always directed towards the creation of singular collective identities. Connolly describes the approach of the Christian Missionary Alliance amongst the Dayak in Indonesia, where there was a deliberate decision not to limit their mission field “to a single linguistically defined Dayak sub-ethnic group” but instead to “propagate a national, multi-ethnic Indonesian church.”²³ This enabled the development of a “pan-Dayak” identity that affirmed and included different, distinct sub-groups. As a result, “even as their Christian identity has made it easier for Dayaks to see their commonalities and unite on the basis of a pan-Dayak ethnic identity, this same Christian identity has also helped to create ties with other Christian groups.”²⁴

As with Karen and Chin in Burma (Myanmar), a significant influence on the creation and maintenance of collective identities linked to Christianity was the need to differentiate themselves from others—in this case Muslims—but unlike the Chin described by Sakhong, the pan-Dayak identity enabled adherents to become part of “a larger Christian community.” In the case of several of Myanmar’s larger ethnic groups, Christianity continues to play a key role in maintaining a collective identity, which is itself leveraged to legitimize territorial and political claims.²⁵ The maintenance of a coherent, validated performance of identity amongst a significantly large population remains crucial to these claims. However, this leads to another critical issue regarding collective identities: Who determines what constitutes a valid expression of that identity? How are particular identities—especially ethnic ones—constructed, and

on what terms? What criteria are used to differentiate people, and to validate a particular identity? Crucially, who is it that determines, defines, and maintains those criteria? To put it succinctly, who are the “guardians” of authenticity?

Guardians of authenticity: Learning from Butler

Orthodoxy is not a given, but is a particular, discursively constructed power relationship.²⁶

Whilst not without controversy, the work of Judith Butler has informed recent debates on identity by drawing attention to its performative construction.²⁷ One of the problems emerging from the generation of categories of person based on particular markers is that of validation. Again, gender is a more obvious choice—we say that this child is a boy or a girl, and, based on that, there are a set of cultural norms and expectations of how that child will dress, behave, speak, and think. Butler speaks of performativity in the sense that gender becomes inscribed on the body by means of the repetition of “validated scripts”—particular behaviours that are considered by wider society to be consistent with whatever identity is being represented. This means there are ways to be a woman (or not), and these are known, and so when one performs/acts consistently with those scripts, the performance is validated, which in turn reinforces the link between the behaviour and the body. In this sense, a person acts out in a way that draws approval from those around, and approval reinforces the validity of that performance.

This is found also in relation to ethnicity (itself a deeply complex and contested notion)—there are particular scripts associated with particular ethnic designations. If you are born into this particular group, society, or clan, there are myriad “scripts” that provide the template for behaviours and identities that are validated. Whilst this is often referred to as culture, and often either reified or at best treated as neutral, the contribution of theories of performativity has been to interrogate those scripts, and in particular, to ask who is responsible for their generation and maintenance, and to what purpose? From the gender perspective, this fairly quickly pointed to issues of patriarchy. But rather than simply expose the extent to which men maintain control over the scripts of social norms, performativity explores how this takes

place, and points to possible means of evasion, manipulation, or transformation of validated scripts. Such scripts refer not simply to documented rules and norms, but to the entire range of conscious and subconscious information that is used to justify or reject certain acts, symbols, and practices as legitimate or not with respect to a particular identity. This often exists as what sociologist Pierre Bourdieu called *doxa*, which refers to

a set of unquestioned beliefs by which aspects of the world and its constituents (people, things, one's own social situation and practices) are grasped as "natural", taken for granted.²⁸

Thus, what it means to be Singaporean, or English, or Muslim, is itself derived from a set of ideas and beliefs that tend to exist in relatively unchallenged, subconscious collective spheres—there is rarely a published, agreed definition, but somehow, we all know it when we see it.

However, what is less acknowledged is the extent to which the scripts of *doxa* are deliberately and carefully curated—as Østebø notes above, orthodoxy is discursively constructed. Thus, in different countries and contexts, what it means to be a citizen of that country, or to be a man or woman in that country, is constructed within a discourse. Think of people speaking of "British values" or "American values", almost always in relation to "others" (usually immigrants) whose performance is considered threateningly different. But what is important is to trace the source of the discourse: Who, exactly, is speaking of what "British values" are, and from where do they derive the authority to speak? Who are the cheerleaders? What are the symbols and scripts used (such as reference to historical events, or, in many cases, religion)? Butler's point on performativity is that the game is already tilted—there are performances that are recognized and validated, and ones that are not. Crucially, however, these are not fixed—they continue to evolve and change as public discourse changes. But public opinion is not an emergent phenomenon—things happen, things are said, in particular ways, by particular people, which change the *doxa*, the scripts.

Again, we ask: What is the relevance to Christian mission? There are at least three points. Firstly, the need for alertness to the ways in which we ourselves subtly adopt and promote particular *doxa* that



are themselves counter to gospel identity. For example, reference to "Asian values" or "Western values" needs to acknowledge how these *doxa* are themselves rooted in particular discourses of power, largely to gain strategic advantages by framing the "other" as inferior.

Secondly, we acknowledge that Christian mission has itself played a significant, often explicit, role in shaping the discourse around ethnic identity. Thinking of the examples cited earlier of Chin and Karen identity, the creation of these collective identities involved a complex and ongoing process of validation, particularly where Christian symbols and modes of practice replaced those associated with the previous religion. The often-delicate process of transforming or substituting a range of practices and symbols sought to preserve, and also redefine, the essence of being Chin, Karen, or Dayak. In some cases, Christian identity became a key element of the performative script of being Chin or Karen, in turn introducing a mutually dependent relationship between ethnic and religious performative elements. Thus, if to be Chin is to be Christian, the extent of "Chin-ness" is in some way related to an adequate performance of Christianity—with the caveat that those who are not Christian are thus less "Chin" than those who are. Where Christianity is intertwined with collective ethnic identity, Christian "performance" becomes an integral part of ethnic performance, and likewise, ethnic performance becomes an integral part of Christian performance.

Thirdly, whilst Christian mission may not be so explicitly involved in the creation of ethnic identities today, the question

remains how our ongoing practices contribute to the reinforcement of particular "validated scripts" of authentic ethnic expression, and whether those scripts are in fact promoting ethno-nationalist identities instead of Christian solidarity. A useful question to ask is: Who benefits from a stronger, collective ethno-linguistic identity? Returning to the Myanmar context for a moment, the creation and maintenance of particular ethnic categories in their current forms—for example, the "pan-Kachin" identity that has subsumed numerous smaller groups, such as Rawang, into a larger collective²⁹—is a critical component of claims for territorial and political rights in the area called Kachin State in Myanmar's northeast. Maintaining a unified larger collective sustains the legitimacy of those claims and, in this particular case, Christian religion is a key component. The key beneficiaries, however, continue to be business elites, for whom territorial claims translate into access to Kachin State's natural resources.

The first chapters of the Pentateuch describe the act of creation, where male and female humans are created in the image of God—one image, but two forms, both equally human, with no category differentiation. Here, gender difference is both descriptive (how they are, not what they are), and designed to reflect trinitarian models of unity, where three Persons are one God—all are in the category of "God", but express different "ways of being". The post-exilic prophets, in particular, foresee the dismantling of particular categories of being shaped around ethnicity. Zechariah's visions foresee the time when "many nations shall come to God" and will be called his people. This foreshadows the more specific work of the New Testament of the subtle relativizing of human categories of being, culminating in Paul's programmatic statement of Galatians 3:28. Here, the point is not that maleness, femaleness, or ethnic difference do not exist, but that these differences do not translate into different categories of humans—in Christ, all are "one," i.e., all are simply children of God.

Paul: Not so radical after all?

Paul's statement in Galatians 3:28 is, at one point, explosively novel, and at the same time, entirely anticipated by a careful reading of Hebrew Scriptures—particularly the post-exilic

prophets. In saying that “in Christ, there is neither Jew nor Greek, male nor female, slave nor free,” Paul is not dissolving all human distinctives, or flattening differences in the service of monochromatic uniformity. Rather, he is affirming the work of Christ in destroying the barriers between people, which shatters the politically and economically constructed identities used to codify and control populations.

This is anticipated by numerous post-exilic prophets. From the bold proclamations of Isaiah of full, unfettered and, indeed, fated inclusion of outsiders in the innermost zones of the temple in Isaiah 56, to the slow unveiling of the future promised “new people of God” in Zechariah, where “many nations will be joined to the Lord and will become my people” (Zech 2:11). A cyclical view of the history of God’s people highlights the ongoing tension around identity—the persistence of God in affirming the nature of his people as made in his image, as chosen, and as belonging to him, over and against the claims of clans, cults, and states that tenaciously seek to impose particularized and polarized identities as a means of control.

The God-centric model, given in broad outlines in the opening chapters of Genesis, insists that human identity is derived from our origins in the mind of God—actualized in creation. The process of creation set humans aside as distinct from animals, but, from the outset, classified differences in form (male, female) as descriptive characteristics within a single category (humans), rather than as determinants of specific categories.³⁰ As scholars note, both male and female forms of humans were required to properly express the image of God as one of complementary diversity, rather than competitive hierarchy.³¹

... we should be alert to the subtle ways in which different societies and thought regimes continue to construct multiple categories of people based on a range of so-called gender, ethnicity, and class markers, and how these are in turn used to create or maintain systems of control and discrimination, and based on our theological understanding, affirm that this is definitely not what the Maker intended.

Abram is called from the land of his ancestors to be a wanderer—he is called away from an urban life to one in which the identities of humans are again shaped by the call of God. But Egypt ensues, and food insecurity leads to land grabs by the Pharaohs; the anxieties of scarcity fuel fears of the “other”; and the descendants of Abraham are categorized by race and enslaved as a sub-class. Their identity is no longer determined by their calling; it is designated by despots, and daily reinforced by forced labour and population control—what today would be classified as structural violence. Freedom, then, by the Exodus, is not simply escape from forced labour, but from having your identity imposed from above, and used against you and those like you by a group of “others” who enjoy the privileges of being classified differently. Thus, as the Hebrews trekked across the dry wasteland, one of the skins to be shed was the deeply ingrained groove of being oppressed, which history showed to be a reliable predictor of becoming an oppressor.³² The formula “you shall be my people, I shall be your God” smashed all interstitial categories. There were no degrees of being God’s people—God was present to all. Even the details of sacrificial procedures, allowing for more modest animals to be presented with equal intent and approval by poorer people, affirmed the trajectory of God’s people as resisting political categories of being.

The largely tragic history of the monarchy was built on differentiated being and belonging. One explanation of God’s extreme reaction to the census taken by David is the abhorrence of God towards the reduction of humans to units of taxation or conscription. As the splendour of the kings grew, so too did the tax burden; by Solomon’s time, a key cabinet position was taken by Adoniram, who was in charge of forced labour. Here, categories of people were also determined as the basis for freedoms—

ethnic minorities were the conscripted labourers, whilst pure-blooded Israelites were the conscripted soldiers.

Post-exile, the tension persists. Much is made of Ezra’s ethnic purity drive, segregating those of mixed heritage from Israelites who had maintained purer bloodlines. But this strikes an odd note against the backdrop of the grander proclamations of Isaiah and Zechariah, where Gentiles are, by virtue of their obedience and faith, offered full membership of the people of God, with no further comments on their non-Jewish heritage.

I would argue that this is also the underlying concern of the latter sections of Revelation, and the call to come out of Babylon, and to resist the mark of the beast. From the start to the finish, we can trace a strand of God’s purpose through the Bible—of God’s insistence on the identity of his people as being defined by him, and him alone; and his resistance to other totalizing claims that impose new categories of being on people, as a means to discriminate and control.

In our world, such totalizing claims are both prolific and nuanced. We would do well to take a few moments to consider how different categories of humans are constructed, for what purpose, and to what ends. The more obvious categories are those called “biological”, such as sex, or ethnicity. The development of gendered categories based on sex (or now, not so much) is perhaps the most consistently historical example of a political category of being. The particular chromosomal, and subsequent anatomical and future functional differences, are used to guide cultural framings of gendered identity: what you should wear, what you should do, your role in society, and whether you have the right to speak, vote, or become a religious leader. Presumed ethnicity is another. Whether accompanied by biological distinctives or not, being born in relation to a particular group within a certain context is used to frame particular characteristics, rights, and relationships—again, what you can and cannot do, how you are expected to think, speak, and behave, and the range of your freedoms. Whilst there is a certain reluctance in some circles to discuss issues of class (for fear perhaps of being labelled as a Marxist), class represents one of the more nuanced ways in which a person inherits membership of a particular category



of being. Most dramatically, this refers to slave or free, which many twenty-first century scholars and activists consider a very contemporary issue, with distinctions that are merely extreme poles on a spectrum of enslavement or dominance.

But what does any of this have to do with the work of cross-cultural mission? Firstly, we should be alert to the subtle ways in which different societies and thought regimes continue to construct multiple categories of people based on a range of so-called gender, ethnicity, and class markers, and how these are in turn used to create or maintain systems of control and discrimination, and based on our theological understanding, affirm that this is definitely not what the Maker intended.

Secondly, the need in our speech and practice to consider how we handle difference “differently”, even in terms of the words we use to speak of people. There is a vast gulf between speaking of a “person with disabilities” or a “disabled person”. There are huge relational and communicational differences if we view, speak of, and relate to a person-who-is-a-Muslim, as opposed to a Muslim, or indeed, if we even refer to the religious affiliation of a person for whom it is, in fact, not significant. In the first instance, the object is the person; the descriptive comes next. The semantic pause is critical. It means we first encounter that person as a person, and as a person who has many different things about them that are significant for them in terms of their identity. As soon as we speak of and relate to them as a “disabled person”, or a “Muslim”, we have chosen a particular set of conditions or markers by which to frame their identity in relation to us. Yet, for that person, it may well not be the most important or defining thing. Moreover, by our choosing of the way we categorize them, we express a forceful “othering”—framing them in ways typically based on markers distinct

from ourselves. This can often result in a relational approach which is set on our terms, and which treats the person not as a person, but as the category of person that we have determined them to be. This, in many ways, lies at the heart of much subconscious prejudice: the two-stage process of, firstly, making assumptions of a person’s identity based on a particular set of biological or behavioural markers; and secondly, making assumptions of a person’s likely behaviour, values, and character based on that presumed identity.

Doing difference differently

Reconciliation ... is achieved by eliminating enmity, not by eliminating difference. People of distinct identities are brought into unity through a reconciliation in which identities and differences are retained and celebrated, but also deprived of their ultimacy as they are sanctified and incorporated into the broader identity of God’s community.³³

The debates on culture are complex, multi-faceted, and, to some extent, self-repeating and self-fulfilling. The core argument of this paper is not the negation or marginalization of culture or cultural identity. Far from it. The grand vision of Revelation 7 of people from all tribes and nations, and speaking all different languages, is evidence enough that there was something distinct about the people whom John could see and

hear that led him to conclude that it was a truly comprehensive and inclusive congregation. Given that all were engaged in the same action (praising the Lamb) and ostensibly dressed the same (white robes), the suggestion is that the evidence of diversity was in something other than their external appearance or performance. Culture, language, and difference are clearly celebrated and treasured—what they do not do, however, is translate into separate, specific categories of people. Whilst John could clearly see that “all were present,” it seems unlikely that this was associated with any particular groupings and gatherings. As with Galatians 3:28, since they were in Christ and before the Lamb, the only thing that matters is belonging.

The argument of this paper is not anti-culture, or opposed to the promotion of ethnic, linguistic, or cultural aspects of identity. What I argue against is the tendency for these characteristics, or markers of difference, to lead to, or maintain, identity constructions that easily lend themselves to making categories of people, and the “othering” that ensues. But the relativization of difference does not mean the elimination of difference. John Barton (quoted above) rightly highlights the dangers of harnessing Christianity to a post-ethnic society (such as was being promulgated in post-genocide Rwanda), where prior identities are simply erased or dismissed as abuses or errors. Reconciliation hinges on the elimination of enmity, not of difference—where “identities are retained, but deprived of their ultimacy.” However, I think Barton understates the need for a rigorous interrogation of how particular identities have been constructed and manipulated by States or elite actors. This need not result in the wholesale rejection of all that was contained in those identities—rather, it focuses on issues of power, particularly where differences were codified in ways that led to categorization of people based

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The point of Galatians 3:28 “is not that the differences around gender, ethnicity, or class disappear in themselves; it is that they cease to have the power to define that person’s identity, either with respect to God or to others.”

on those differences, and differential treatment based on those categories. This, in some sense, leads to the redemption of difference, freeing it from being a tool for control, coercion, or discrimination.

In a way, this brings us back to Galatians 3:28—the point is not that the differences around gender, ethnicity, or class disappear in themselves; it is that they cease to have the power to define that person’s identity, either with respect to God or to others. I believe this is precisely why Paul in Ephesians can give specific instructions to slaves and masters—because, having assumed that class differences no longer define social relations between those “in Christ”, the principle of mutual submission can apply; once that is in place, the over-riding directive shaping slave-master relations is mutuality. They are, in effect, treated as equally relevant, and equally responsible. The slave is not a slave, but a person (in Christ) who works for a particular master. The master is not one who owns the bodies of others, but a person (in Christ) who has a particular responsibility to those who work for him.

Of course, in that situation, as in many contemporary situations, the status in Christ does not immediately overturn the physical realities of the identities imposed and maintained by the State. Even if the believing master chooses to free his slave, to some extent, that slave remains defined by his/her class. A Jewish or Gentile believer may well experience a relativization of ethnic identity difference within the Christian community, but identity categories are reimposed outside the church doors. Or are they?

This points to an inherent tension in Galatians 3:28. To what extent does the prefix “in Christ” limit the relativization of identities either to vertical relations between individuals and God, or to horizontal relations between Christian believers? The thrust of the passage, taken together with programmatic statements in Ephesians 2, points to the principle representing at least a radical re-organization of social relationships

between believers. However, if taken as a missiological principle (which I believe it should be), the inference is towards an extension of this relational radicalism beyond the church walls. Surely, and especially if connected with creation principles outlined in the early chapters of Genesis, the movement represents an expanding circle of influence, where the relationship with God impacts the relationships between believers and between believers and others. And as believers performatively express a different way of being and seeing difference, so that in turn impacts prevailing social norms. If we learn to cherish difference, but deny its power to categorize and control, a new way of “doing difference differently” is expressed.

If we learn to cherish difference, but deny its power to categorize and control, a new way of “doing difference differently” is expressed.

Aside from the imperative of Galatians 3:28 to reject attempts to categorize people based on difference, I would argue for four further considerations in relation to cross-cultural mission, particularly in relation to the issue of performativity, authenticity, and validation.

Firstly, there has been a tendency to unquestioningly accept, and at times naively reinforce, identity framings around ethnicity without considering the issues of power and control. In other words, who exactly is it that determines what being a “true” Kachin is? And why is it important to maintain that particular identity in that particular way? Who benefits from the maintenance of that particular validated script? To what extent does the production, preservation, or maintenance of a particular identity serve the interests of controlling agents, such as the State or local elites?

Secondly, and related to this, is the extent to which Christianity is implicated in and becomes a co-dependent actor in new identities, whereby ethno-linguistic “scripts” are embedded in scripts relating

to Christian belief, practice, and norms, and likewise, the expression of Christian “being” is embedded in particular ethno-linguistic scripts, such that being part of a particular ethnic group is synonymous with being Christian, and, vice-versa, that Christianity is a crucial tool in maintaining elements of language and culture. The same is true of other religious and ethnic expressions. And whilst the role of Christian missions in codifying and preserving languages is rightly lauded, interdependent relationships between Christian belief and practice, and ethnic identity have repeatedly implicated Christianity in ethno-nationalist movements and faith-based xenophobia.

Thirdly, where Christian mission/church emphasises the importance of a particular ethno-linguistic performative identity as validated script, there is a potential undermining of a key plank of the gospel itself, which is the radical relativization of such identities. This is perhaps most important in diaspora work—a major concern of diaspora communities remains the preservation

of ethno-linguistic identity, evidenced by often exaggerated emphasis on particular clothing, customs, and festivals. Anxious parents and grandparents fret over their children not speaking their “mother tongue” and Christian religion frequently plays a key role in maintaining that identity. But to what extent should a second or third generation Korean American, or Chin Australian, consider Korean, or Fallam, their “mother tongue” and “heart language”? To what extent does diaspora ministry emphasize particular validated scripts of Christian identity over the more fundamental scripts found in the New Testament?

Fourthly, and again related to “validated scripts”—just as with particular ethnic expressions, we need to have a deeper awareness of the powerful discourses which shape this in relation to more obvious “ethnic” culture. There is also a need to be more aware of the extent to which globalization has led to particular expressions of Christian faith and identity that are derived from dominant cultures. What constitutes a “spiritually alive” performance is

often closely correlated with particular styles of worship rather than biblically-informed spiritual practice. **MRT**

Reflection questions

1. What are your experiences of being “othered” (i.e., been involved in a situation in which somebody related to you based on a particular difference, like your ethnicity or nationality)? How did that feel?
2. Can you think of times when you have related to other people differently based on assumptions you made about their “type” of person? For example, we often relate to people we perceive to be “Asian” or “Western” in a certain way based on our assumptions about what “Asian” or “Western” people are like. How does this impact our relationships??
3. How could you “do difference differently” in your context? What subtle changes to the words you use, the way you communicate, or the way you organize meetings, could help prevent treating people based on the assumptions we make about their categories? For example, when I relate to a person with disabilities, instead of making assumptions about what they need or what they cannot do, I need to take time to find out how they can contribute, and how I can partner with them better.

Blackwell, 2013).

⁵ P. G. Klandermans, “Identity Politics and Politicized Identities: Identity Processes and the Dynamics of Protest,” *Political Psychology* 35, no. 1 (February 2014): 2.

⁶ Van Stekelenburg, van Leeuwen, and van Troost, “Politicized Identity,” 2.

⁷ Antweiler, “Ethnicity from an Anthropological Perspective,” 26.

⁸ Nick Cheesman, “How in Myanmar ‘National Races’ Came to Surpass Citizenship and Exclude Rohingya,” *Journal of Contemporary Asia* 47, no. 3 (2017): 461–83.

⁹ The historical background to this is long and complex. Readers are directed to Sarah L. Clarke, Seng Aung Sein Myint, and Zabra Yu Siwa, *Re-examining Ethnic Identity in Myanmar* (Yangon, Myanmar: Centre for Peace and Conflict Studies, 2019), <https://www.centrepeaceconflictstudies.org/wp-content/uploads/Re-Examining-Ethnic-Identity-in-Myanmar.pdf> (accessed 15 May 2023); Robert H. Taylor, “Perceptions of Ethnicity in the Politics of Burma,” *Southeast Asian Journal of Social Science* 10, no. 1 (1982): 7–22; Robert H. Taylor, “British Policy towards Myanmar and the Creation of the ‘Burma Problem,’” in *Myanmar: State, Society and Ethnicity*, ed. N. Ganesan and Kyaw Yin Hlaing (Singapore: ISEAS–Yusof Ishak Institute, 2007), 70–95; Ardet M. Thawngmum, “The Politics of Indigeneity in Myanmar: Competing Narratives in Rakhine State,” *Asian Ethnicity* 17, no. 4 (2016): 527–47, https://www.researchgate.net/publication/302917335_The_politics_of_indigeneity_in_Myanmar_competing_narratives_in_Rakhine_state (accessed 15 May 2023); Matthew J. Walton, “Ethnicity, Conflict, and History in Burma: The Myths of Panglong,” *Asian Survey* 48, no. 6 (2008): 889–910; Matthew J. Walton, “The ‘Wages of Burman-ness’: Ethnicity and Burman Privilege in Contemporary Myanmar,” *Journal of Contemporary Asia* 43, no. 1 (2013): 1–27.

¹⁰ Legibility refers to a process of making people visible to state and other authorities in legal terms—for example, through national ID cards or household registers.

¹¹ Michael W. Charney, *A History of Modern Burma* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009).

¹² Hock Guan Lee, “Furnivall’s Plural Society and Leach’s Political Systems of Highland Burma,” *Sojourn: Journal of Social Issues in Southeast Asia* 24, no. 1 (April 2009): 32–46, <https://muse.jhu.edu/article/367737> (accessed 16 May 2023).

¹³ The actual designation comes down to the recording immigration officer, based on his assessment of parental origins. The practice is at times laughably random—people assigned one ethnicity at birth may progress through several completely different iterations in their lifetime, sometimes simply on the basis of an immigration officer thinking their grandmother’s name “sounds a bit Indian”.

¹⁴ J. S. Furnivall, *Colonial Policy and Practice: A Comparative Study of Burma and Netherlands India* (New York: New York University Press, 1956), 304–305.

¹⁵ The Irrawaddy, “Leader of Myanmar Military’s Proxy Party Visits Nationalist Monk for Advice,” The Irrawaddy, 28 December 2022, <https://www.irrawaddy.com/news/burma/leader-of-myanmar-militarys-proxy-party-visits-nationalist-monk-for-advice.html> (accessed 15 May 2023).

¹⁶ Jennifer Connolly, “Christian Conversion and Ethnic Identity in East Kalimantan,” in *Casting Faiths: Imperialism and the Transformation of Religion in East and Southeast Asia*, ed. Thomas David DuBois (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 175.

¹⁷ There are numerous examples of mission workers who more explicitly identified with particular ethno-linguistic movements, or at least sought to align their mission efforts to secure rights, freedoms, and privileges for groups whom they

felt to be marginalized or oppressed. However, this tends to remain fairly marginal in mainstream mission discourse at least.

¹⁸ Kwanchewan Buadaeng, “Ethnic Identities of the Karen Peoples in Burma and Thailand,” in *Identity Matters: Ethnic and Sectarian Conflict*, ed. James L. Peacock, Patricia M. Thornton, and Patrick B. Inman (New York: Berghahn, 2007), 76.

¹⁹ Buadaeng, “Ethnic Identities of the Karen Peoples in Burma and Thailand,” 76.

²⁰ Lian H. Sakhong, *In Search of Chin Identity: A Study in Religion, Politics and Ethnic Identity in Burma* (Copenhagen: Nordic Institute of Asian Studies, 2003), 244.

²¹ Sakhong, *In Search of Chin Identity*, 244.

²² Sakhong, *In Search of Chin Identity*, 225.

²³ Connolly, “Christian Conversion and Ethnic Identity in East Kalimantan,” 176.

²⁴ Connolly, “Christian Conversion and Ethnic Identity in East Kalimantan,” 176.

²⁵ Note that the same can be said for Rakhine, Pa-O, Mon, Shan, and, to some extent, Mon—in this case, it is Buddhism that is an inseparably intertwined performative element of ethnic identity, which has led to the promulgation of specific laws on the protection of race and religion (for Burmese Buddhists), and a focus on Buddhist primacy by Mon nationalist cultural associations, for example.

²⁶ Patrick Desplat and Terje Østebø, eds., *Muslim Ethiopia: The Christian Legacy, Identity Politics, and Islamic Reformism* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 13.

²⁷ Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, 2nd ed. (New York and London: Routledge, 2011); Judith Butler, *Notes Toward a Performative Theory of Assembly* (Harvard: Harvard University Press, 2015).

²⁸ Konstantinos Vakalopoulos, “Shedding Some (More) Light in Bourdieu’s Habitus and Doxa: A Socio-Phenomenological Approach,” *Journal for the Theory of Social Behaviour* 52, no. 1 (2022): 8, <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/full/10.1111/jtsb.12364> (accessed 15 May 2023).

²⁹ For the role of Christian mission in creating, or at least encouraging this wider collective identity, see Herman Tegenfeldt, *A Century of Growth: The Kachin Baptist Church of Burma* (Pasadena: William Carey, 1974); Mandy Sadan, *Being and Becoming Kachin: Histories beyond the State in the Borderworlds of Burma*, British Academy Postdoctoral Fellowship Monograph (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013); Pum Za Mang, “Christianity and Ethnic Identity in Burma,” *Journal of Church and State* 61, no. 1 (2019): 78–105.

³⁰ Slovenian philosopher Slavoj Žizek interprets Galatians 3:28 as Paul’s claim that “ethnic roots, national identity and so on are not categories of truth.” Slavoj Žizek, *Living in the End Times* (London: Verso, 2018), 406.

³¹ Walter McConnell, “In His Image: A Christian’s Place in Creation,” *Asia Journal of Theology* 20, no. 1 (2006): 114.

³² Some scholars suggest that the term “Hebrew” may have roots in a term used by Egyptians and Canaanites (Hapiru or Apiru) at the time to describe people of diverse origins and backgrounds, but who were generally considered outsiders and foreigners. Whilst unlikely to refer specifically to those later known as Hebrews, the term generally had negative connotations, indicating an ‘Othering’ of those who are different by lumping them into a particular category of person.

³³ John Barton, “Confusion and Communion: Christian Mission and Ethnic Identities in Postgenocide Rwanda,” *Missiology* 40, no. 3 (2012): 233.

¹ Christoph Antweiler, “Ethnicity from an Anthropological Perspective,” in *Ethnicity as a Political Resource: Conceptualizations across Disciplines, Regions, and Periods*, ed. University of Cologne Forum »Ethnicity as a Political Resource« (Bielefeld, Germany: Transcript, 2015), 25, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctv1xxstw.5> (accessed 13 May 2023).

² Antweiler, “Ethnicity from an Anthropological Perspective,” 25.

³ Antweiler, “Ethnicity from an Anthropological Perspective,” 26.

⁴ Bernd Simon and Bert Klandermans, “Politicized Collective Identity: A Social Psychological Analysis,” *American Psychologist* 56, no. 4 (2001): 319; Jacqueliën van Stekelenburg, Anouk van Leeuwen, and Dunya van Troost, “Politicized Identity,” in *The Wiley-Blackwell Encyclopedia of Social and Political Movements*, ed. Donatella della Porta, Bert Klandermans, Doug McAdam, and David A. Snow (Boston: Wiley-

The Church in an Age of Ethnic Polarisation and Religious Exclusivism in Southeast Asia: Some Practical Considerations

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Introduction

Modernity has brought great impact and even unexpected and unwarranted changes to the modern world. We are witnessing within the current global religious landscape the rise of ethnic chauvinism, religious exclusivism, and increased persecution of religious groups. These social realities, as evident in much of Southeast Asia, are largely, if not solely, due to political power plays that greatly impact religious groups in general and the Christian community in particular. Competing ideological positions often give rise to dialectical social tensions that, in turn, give rise to frequent dissonance from claims of the normative good in the so-called modern nation state. Symptomatic of these social tensions are the favoring of one social group over another, often leading to heightened restrictions on some and the inevitable rise of social hostility.

Christians living in Southeast Asia cannot afford to ignore such realities. There are reports highlighting the persecution of minorities—Christians as well as non-Christians. This state of affair presents a formidable challenge to God's mission and the witness of the church. It is undeniable that the church's ability to maintain a vibrant witness in the light of these growing and disturbing realities very much depends on how our leaders of tomorrow confront such crises to maintain holistic or integral mission. The pertinent question is: how and in what ways can we ensure that the church is equipped and empowered to continue with the mandate of our Lord in this regard?

Priority in maintaining a multicultural agenda

To enhance Christian witness and holistic mission without undue encumbrances and/or obstacles, whether from government or other external forces, there needs to exist free "social space" that allows for the flourishing of such

activities.¹ The Lausanne Covenant affirmed that God is both Creator and Judge of all men and that the church, as the people of God, should share in his concern for justice and reconciliation throughout human society and for the liberation of all men from every form of oppression and injustice.² The Lausanne commitment, therefore, negates the dichotomy that sees evangelism and social concern as mutually exclusive activities, and replaces it with an understanding that Christian mission embraces both evangelism and social responsibility as integral aspects of our Christian faith.

Integral mission aims to bring the whole of life under the lordship of Jesus Christ, with evangelistic activities and the social responsibility of justice, compassion, and mercy united under the authority to Jesus Christ.³ Such an enterprise includes the bringing of Christ's peace—biblical *shalom*—into the world for the poor, the oppressed, and the unjustly treated. It brings to focus that Christian mission must be both the proclamation and demonstration of the power of the gospel in words and in deeds, intersecting with each other rather than being mutually exclusive.

Christopher Wright envisions integral mission as consisting of five marks following the mission statement from the Lambeth Conference of 1988.⁴ One mark is justice, that is, the seeking to transform unjust structures of society. While Wright's discussion of the unjust structures of society is heavily centred on the poor, the needy, and those who suffer, transforming unjust structures of society must include identifying systemic racism that fosters the idea or ideology of ethnic superiority and exceptionalism and moving towards more equitable outcomes in race relations and religious diversity. It is only within this kind of free social space that integral mission and witness can be carried out, thus sustaining and enlarging such free social space.

For example, in Malaysia where Islam is dominant, there is a debate on whether the country is an Islamic or secular state. The debate is compounded by the now-famous speech former Prime Minister Dr. Mahathir gave in 2001 declaring Malaysia to already be an Islamic State. In the years since Dr Mahathir's declaratory speech, ethnic and religious tensions have grown, thus prompting then current Prime Minister, Ismail Sabri, to propound his idea for a harmonious Malaysia through the more localised and colloquial expression "Keluarga Malaysia."⁵ More recently, the new government under Prime Minister Dato' Seri Anwar Ibrahim has introduced the concept of Malaysia Madani as a vision of a civilised, skilled, and inclusive society based on six core values, namely, sustainability, prosperity, innovation, respect, trust, and compassion. In essence, Malaysia Madani is a civil society concept intended to mobilise Malaysians to band together for a prosperous society.⁶

What is telling, however, is that these attempts have not yielded any fruitful outcomes thus far, but only more confusion. Malaysia has not come any closer to the sort of political order that our nation needs to successfully manage cultural and religious diversity both now and in the future.⁷ Many Malaysians feel as though we are drifting further and further away from forging a consensus as to the relationship between state, religion, and society. The contestation will likely not abate, but will only continue with no sight of agreement between those who subscribe to different ideals as to the best framing for an inclusive society in Malaysia. I suspect more of what is happening in Malaysia is symptomatic of what other nation-states in Southeast Asia are experiencing.

The need for an alternative

The search for an alternative must recognise the history, formation, and trajectories of a particular nation-state. This includes having a thorough understanding of the culture, core values, and tradition of the country in question. In many Southeast Asian countries, society comprises many ethnicities, religious persuasions, and classes with the thrust towards an inclusive society being on the integrity of community life, and the promotion and preservation of harmonious living. In this scheme of things, the focus has been on praxis—the

practical aspects that could bear on every human life and interest for the people and the community, not just on structures and institutional reforms.

As a basis for building this kind of platform, I find the work of Bhikhu Parekh on multiculturalism to be extremely helpful.⁸ Parekh understood multiculturalism to be neither a political doctrine with a programmatic content nor a philosophical school with a distinct theory of man's place in the world. Rather, it is a perspective or a way of viewing human life and how best to manage human relations for a good and better life.

Accordingly, Parekh views multiculturalism as consisting of three central tenets: (1) the cultural embeddedness of human beings, (2) the inescapability and desirability of cultural plurality, and (3) the plural and multicultural constitution of each culture. Each of these tenets consists of a creative interplay and functions in a complementary manner that coheres together to make multiculturalism a social reality. The advantage is seeing the world, the environment in which we live, as one that embodies the full range of the richness, complexity, and grandeur of human existence.

While Parekh was speaking distinctively as a non-Christian, I find we can agree with his insights from a biblical-theological point of view. All human beings are created in the image of God and seek a cultural belonging, for culture is humanity and all cultures are a diverse expression of what it means to be human.⁹

To sustain multiculturalism and to ensure its true flourishing, unity in a diversity of cultures is central. Hence, the perspective of multiculturalism—or a multicultural life that accounts for a society that cherishes diversity and encourages creative dialogues and respectable social engagements between individuals, groups, and their respective moral visions—is promising. A multicultural society is one that not only respects its members' rights to their own cultural bearings, but also cultivates the powers for self-determination in her imagination. It exhibits the intellectual and moral empathy that is so essential for broader development and the well-being of everyone else.

Unity in diversity should be based on understanding the "other" (i.e., our neighbours) rather than merely tolerating or accepting them. Understanding, in Gurpreet Mahajan's terms, involves

open appreciation of one another's differences ... Mutual understanding requires adjustments from both majority and minority communities in that absolutist values held by them may need to be *moderated* in the interests of social harmony.¹⁰

The key word is "moderated," wherein we can unpack three key thoughts for our purpose here.

First, moderation requires that we search and espouse a "middle-ground" narrative of societal concerns and views. This extends to political agenda, religious and ethnic relations, economic distribution, and social welfare. It requires an "open-system" of thinking that embraces the ethos of diversity and differences as the norm rather than imposing or changing the differences in and disagreements with the other.

Second, we need to enhance relationships with and inspire confidence in those whom we often say we do not and cannot agree with. Without this trust and confidence, which aims to rid us of suspicions and caution and move us towards openness, there can be no understanding the way Mahajan described understanding, and hence efforts towards unity in diversity. Building trust takes seriously the tried and noble stance of civilisational existence that relationship of the "other" and with the "other" matters and offers potentials for new terrains in social imagination for a good and better life.

Third, in seeking to moderate the discourse on more contentious and sensitive issues that have come to plague many Southeast Asian societies, there is a need to seek reasonable accommodation with differing groups who hold contesting ideas and social visions. One way is to work through pragmatic concepts like the German constitutional doctrine of "practical concordance".¹¹ The term "concordance" implies harmonious, consistent relations to each other. It's about recognising the claims on both sides of the divide and finding ways to maintain a dialectical balance in this regard so that the teleological goal or aim of a common good—the wellbeing for

a good and better life—may be reached or at least lie within practical grasp. The imminent juris, John Finnis, in his treatise has also treated us to valuable insights as to how society may aim for concordance in his doctrine of “practical reasonableness” and how this doctrine may hold when contenting interests are at play.¹²

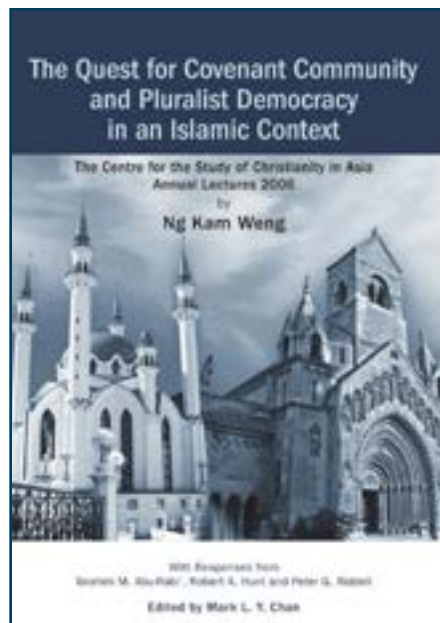
Towards engaging moral citizenry

If the church is to be a catalyst and play a prophetic role, its focal point must necessarily be towards empowering leaders and making disciples as vibrant moral communities to lead the charge in pressing for a harmonious society within a multicultural framework. To meet this challenge, the Christian community and its leaders must emphasize moral formation to express themselves in the public square as upright moral leaders of the community and righteous citizens of the nation. Ng Kam Weng, quoting Pauline Chazan, suggests that moral identity must precede moral choices, however inseparable they may be.¹³ This means that ethical actions can only result from the choice of the person that one chooses to be.

In emphasizing moral formation, the church through theological education must provide strong impetus and the moral resources to build individuals in terms of their moral citizenry. This is because theological education with its critical reflections over the centuries possesses vast moral resources and values that are able to shape a person's heart and soul into becoming that kind of person he or she ought to be. How can this be done? Let me offer two suggestions.

First, theological education may impart a distinctive disposition and moral capacity for Christians to act in the promotion of peace and harmony in a fragmented or divisive society. Through the process of inculcation of values and the internalizing of the Christian faith as a way of life through critical reflection and prayer, Christians will accept the specific role entrusted to them as members of a larger and wider community within the nation. It is in and through this process of internalization that our moral identity and, consequently, our role in society is shaped.

In this respect, one way by which our moral identity is shaped is through the



stories embedded within the community to which we belong. These stories function as symbolic discourse and handles that serve as models of inspiration for our moral identity. In the context of division and disharmony perpetrated by insidious forces in disrupting ethnic relations and manipulating religious exclusivism, Christians must hold these stories within their collective consciousness so as to relativize all such claims as normative. Stanley Hauerwas provides an example of how this can be worked out.

By making the story of such a Lord central to their lives, Christians are enabled to see the world accurately and without illusion. Because they have the confidence that Jesus' cross and resurrection are the final words concerning God's rule, they have the courage to see the world for what it is: The world is ruled by powers and forces that we hardly know how to name, much less defend against. These powers derive their strength from our fear of destruction, cloaking their falsehood with the appearance of corruption, offering us security in exchange for truth. By being trained through Jesus' story we have the means to name and prevent these powers from claiming our lives as their own.¹⁴

Second, the task of theological education is to stimulate the Christian's vision in the way he or she chooses to live. This is often accomplished by symbols and rituals lodged within the community. One such symbol that serves as a platform for moral reasoning and, consequently, the way Christians choose to impact society is the vision of the cross. The old rugged cross calls on Christians as followers of Christ

to a life of “self-emptying”. It is a life that is neither a withdrawal from the world nor a hiding within the safe cocoon of our inner sanctuary in comfort and security. Nor is it engagement with the world on its terms. Rather, as messengers of Christ, it is that way of freely choosing and being prepared to be self-sacrificial and giving, even to the point of death, so that the message of the cross may penetrate and challenge every culture and the present world order, knowing that Christ is exalted and glorified. Peskett and Ramachandra summarize this idea by saying, “to the extent that the church participates in the suffering of Jesus, it becomes the bearer of the risen life of Jesus for the sake of the world.”¹⁵

Contextual realities for moral action

Alongside the resources and vision to act consistently with our moral self, it is equally important for Christians to discern and understand the signs of the times in which we minister. This requires the exercise of moral discernment as well as the capacity for mutual deliberation. To equip people toward this end, the church must have a firm grasp on the historical backdrop and the traditions connected to the current human rights debate, the economic forces contributing to extreme nationalism, and issues of multi-culturalism framed within national particularities and culture. In practical terms, it will require that Christians be familiar with the history of the formation of the nation state, the social-political factors that gave rise to national identity, alongside the historical, legal, religious-economic policies and initiatives that have consistently and over time shaped the fundamental outlook of the whole of society.¹⁶

To this end, a missional engagement demands both academic excellence and praxis. By praxis, I have in mind the ability to interface understanding and reflection of biblical truth with right actions. This is “not just to actions but to the reflection that lies behind and within them This distinguished it both from abstract reflection on or a pragmatic response to, concrete situation.”¹⁷ By engaging in praxis, Christians can discover God's mission for the world, which will inform them to reflect further, which in turn “interprets, evaluates, critiques and projects new understanding in transformed actions.”¹⁸

Such an exercise will constantly demand that Christians critically evaluate their own thoughts and thought-actions in relation to their context and circumstances. Theological themes such as the doctrine of God, creation, redemption, and eschatology should be projected into and re-enacted by our worldview that consequently determines the significance of our lives and the nature of our being in society. In this regard, Gordon Dunstan highlights the role of traditions and conventions in guiding the course of moral discernment and deliberations when he says, “convention are carriers of moral insights, they form the network of moral communication in the community; they provide moral consistency within a generation and moral continuity within the next.”¹⁹

A praxis in societal engagement

What does such an enterprise entail and how can the Christian begin to take hold of social-religious-political-historical realities to exercise moral discernment and deliberation for right actions? Let me offer a suggestion.

The church through her enterprise of theological education must assist Christians to situate current ethnic-religious-economic considerations within a diachronic framework of the politics of national identity, while taking into account the synchronic ideological orientation of the evolution of such discourse and its impact on structures of society and state institutions in a given nation-state.²⁰ In doing so, it must critically analyze the social imperatives as part of an evaluation process before charting an appropriate course of action. In most of Southeast Asia, the pluralistic society comprises many different religions and cultures and it would be unreasonable to insist on accepting the views or the course of action of one dominant community, or accept that the one dominant community monopolizes state institutions to impose its views and dictate terms on others. A particular course of action may be deemed appropriate when,

Rather than excluding religion from the public area of political debate, the secular state encourages religious people and organisations to enter the debate with fervour and commitment in order to promote their particular view – with one proviso, and that is



that they play by the same democratic rules as anyone else. In a heterogeneous society, this is the only viable basis for promoting public morality (*action*). There may be some absolute ‘right’ or ‘wrongs’ for society, as many religious people and groups would argue there are. In public morality (*actions*) these are to be defined, defended and promoted on the basis of *reason* and political process rather than by *revelation*.²¹

Vicencio’s observations provide the theological motive that supports the perspective of multiculturalism discussed above. They illustrate how the enterprise of societal engagement in the realm of the socio-religio demands that Christians mobilize as well as band together to exhibit and act out their faith for the common good or for public justice for the whole of society.

In this, the church is both prophetic and cutting edge. It strives to equip the Christian masses to “build a world in which the strong are just and power is tempered by mercy; in which the weak are nurtured and the marginal and those at the entrance gates and those at the exit gates of life are protected both by law and love.”²² It then moves the masses into participation and mobilizes them into civil society movements as “mediating structures” to mediate the relationship between the all-powerful state with its potentially paternalistic tendencies and the wider diverse interest of ordinary citizens of community and the neighborhood for peaceful co-existence in a multicultural reality.²³

The church’s engagement with society: Some practical questions

The quest for societal engagement in

an age of increasing ethnic polarity and religious extremism demands a re-envisioning of our current philosophy of discipleship and approach to theological education. Robert Banks observes that education and training provide a vital dimension to the churches’ ministerial and missionary endeavour and that this aspect of the teaching ministry of the church must be met by involving *specialised initiatives and services*.²⁴ Without such a dimension, the mission and witness of the church would be ineffective and would lack the essential component to really move the missional task ahead in this era of global dissonance and upheaval.

To re-envision theological education in this direction, I set forth the following questions to facilitate effective solutions:

- Is there a need to introduce civic education as part of the curriculum design, giving focus on social-political-religious issues plaguing society and a moral citizenry informed by a Christian worldview?
- What about understanding and reflection on contextual realities, such as national history, traditions, law, heritage, culture, conventions and social trends of society, and prejudices and biases of each community? Do they have a place in our curriculum? If so, how much time and emphasis is adequate?
- What is the role and contribution of the entire Christian community in this

undertaking and how can we re-structure our practicum or practical ministries to incorporate this specific aspect of the training?

- How can theological educators become role models through their involvement in civil societal movements and help contribute to developing a theology of public engagement for social peace, and, at the same time, to being a light and offering a light unto the nation?
- Given that Christianity often attracts oppression and persecution, is there a place for the seminary to develop research projects or give grants to encourage the development of an indigenous theology of discrimination, oppression, or persecution?
- Is there a place for theological schools and seminaries to create and incorporate an institute, center, or other such arms in research, teaching, dissemination, and exploring practical and effective models of societal engagement for the churches' understanding and education?
- What role should theological education give to actual practitioners on the field and what would be their specific contributions in the overall task in theological education?
- Would mission agencies like OMF identify and begin to mobilize individuals who possess specialized skills and expertise in social studies or experience in wider social engagement to serve as missionaries who can enhance public societal engagement in a given country? If so, how could we overcome issues like procuring an entry visa or coming up against non-interference policies enacted by states and governments that are designed to keep foreigners outside of the conversation?

May the Lord bless the church in preparing and equipping Christians to face the challenges in this age and the age to come! **MRT**

¹ By free “social space”, I mean a “social arena dependent on, but also partially independent of political and familial authority or specific economic structures ... an institutionalised ‘space’ for human solidarity and bonding that allows in principle a credo to develop and be critiqued, revised and lived out (more or less) in the midst of history.” Over time, this includes a wide range of “voluntary associations, interest groups, dissent committees, experimental associations, opposition parties and private assemblies.” Max Stackhouse, *Creeeds, Societies and Human Rights* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984), 4.

² John Stott, *Making Christ Known: Historic Mission Documents from the Lausanne Movement, 1974–1989* (Carlisle: Paternoster, 1996), 24.

³ Lausanne Movement, “Integral Mission,” <https://lausanne.org/networks/issues/integral-mission> (accessed 9 June 2023).

⁴ Chris Wright, *The Five Marks of Mission: Making God’s Mission Ours* (Gomshall, UK: Micah Global, 2015).

⁵ See <https://keluargamalaysia.gov.my/> (accessed 17 May 2023).

⁶ “Malaysia Madani to Restore Dignity of the Nation – PM Anwar,” Prime Minister’s Office of Malaysia, 19 January 2023, <https://www.pmo.gov.my/2023/01/malaysia-madani-to-restore-dignity-of-the-nation-pm-anwar/> (accessed 9 June 2023).

⁷ For the benefit of readers who may not be familiar with the Malaysian struggles, the Islamic State debate has, over time, spiralled into an ideology proclaiming that the “concepts of a universal human rights posed a ‘clear and present danger’ to the sovereignty of Islam in Malaysia.” The attempts of this group are politically motivated, but represent a march towards the “desecularisation” of the implicitly multi-ethnic-religio character of Malaysian society in favour of a more “Islam-centric” way of life with a more fundamentalist outlook on religious pluralism, where the claims and rights of the majority are made to subvert the interest of the minority. See Gordon P. Means, *Political Islam in Southeast Asia* (Selangor: SIRD, 2009), 348; Clive S. Kessler, “Islam, the State and Desecularization in Malaysia: The Islamist Trajectory During the Badawi Years,” in *Sharing the Nation: Faith, Difference, Power and the State 50 Years After Merdeka*, ed. Norani Othman, Marvis C. Puthucherry, and Clive S. Kessler (Selangor: SIRD, 2008), 62–63.

⁸ Bhikhu Parekh, *Rethinking Multiculturalism: Cultural Diversity and Political Theory*, 2nd ed. (London: Macmillan, 2006). See also, Bhikhu Parekh, “What is Multiculturalism?” at <https://www.india-seminar.com/1999/484/484%20parekh.htm> (accessed 9 June 2023). I am indebted to and build on the work of Parekh.

⁹ It is not my purpose to expound or render a theological exposition on culture or cultural studies from a mission point of view. This is to simply to highlight that culture or output of cultural studies on a missional basis can agree with the general findings of the social sciences. My argument here is that theological education can incorporate and integrate such findings for further reflections and multiple praxis-making.

¹⁰ Ahmad Fauzi Abdul Hamid and Zawawi Ibrahim, “The Governance of Religious Diversity in Malaysia: Islam in a Secular State or Secularism in an Islamic State?” in *The Problem of Religious Diversity: European Challenges, Asian Approaches*, ed. Anna Triandafyllidou and Tariq Modood (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2017), 192. My italics.

¹¹ See, for example, the application by former United Nation Special Rapporteur for Freedom of Religion and Belief, Dr. Ahmed Shaheed, in the *Report of the Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion and Belief* on the occasion of the thirty-seventh

session of the Human Rights Council, 2018, on the agenda of promotion and protection of all human rights, civil political, economic, social, and cultural rights, including the right to development, <http://www.ohchr.org/en/documents/thematic-reports/a77514-interim-report-special-rapporteur-freedom-religion-or-belief> (accessed 17 May 2023).

¹² John Finnis, *Natural Law and Natural Rights*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011). See also the commentary by Diksha Sarma, “The Idea of Practical Reasonableness,” *International Journal of Advanced Research* 5, no. 1 (2017): 357–62, http://www.journalijar.com/uploads/96_IJAR-14560.pdf (accessed 17 May 2023).

¹³ Pauline Chazan, *The Moral Self* (New York: Routledge, 1998), 108–109 quoted by Ng Kam Weng, “Religion and Moral Citizenry: Whose Morality? What Law? Which Moral Community?” in *The Quest for Covenant Community and Pluralist Democracy in an Islamic Context*, ed. Mark L. Y. Chan (Singapore: TTC, 2008), 89–90.

¹⁴ Stanley Hauerwas, *A Community of Character: Toward a Constructive Christian Social Ethic* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame, 1981), 50.

¹⁵ Howard Peskett and Vinoth Ramamchandra, *The Message of Mission* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2003), 196.

¹⁶ While adding training in socio-political identity may seem to be a lot to add to the discipleship process, discipleship is always a lifelong process that includes incorporating new ideas, knowledge, and understanding to one’s life. This includes the sort of multidimensional and integrated concepts envisioned here. It is thus pertinent to ask whether theological educators and other church leaders think that it is important enough to prioritize these ideas so that Christian congregations rightly learn how to respond to them.

¹⁷ Robert Banks, *Reenvisioning Theological Education: Exploring a Missional Alternative to Current Models* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 160. There are various meanings ascribed to this term but Bank’s explanation seems to be the most helpful for our discussion here.

¹⁸ Charles Van Engen, “Specialization/Integration in Mission Education,” in *Missiological Education for the Twenty-First Century: The Book, the Circle and the Sandals. Essays in Honor of Paul E. Pierson*, ed. J. Dudley Woodberry, Charles Van Engen, and Edgar J. Elliston (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1997; reprinted, Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2005), 223.

¹⁹ Gordon R. Dunstan, *The Artifice of Ethics* (London: SCM, 1974), 9.

²⁰ For an example of such an approach in the context of Malaysia, see Helen Ting, “The Politics of National Identity in West Malaysia: Continued Mutation or Critical Transition?,” *Southeast Asian Studies* 47, no.1 (June 2009): 31–51.

²¹ Charles Villa-Vicencio, *A Theology of Reconstruction: Nation-building and Human Rights* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 270. (italics mine.)

²² Richard J. Neuhaus, “The Christian and the Church,” in *Transforming the World*, ed. James M. Boice (Portland, OR: Multnomah, 1988), 120.

²³ See the exposition by Peter Berger and Richard John Neuhaus, *To Empower People: The Role of Mediating Structures in Public Policy* (Washington, DC: American Enterprise Institute, 1977).

²⁴ Banks, *Reenvisioning Theological Education*, 131.

Personal and Practical Reflections on People Group Thinking

Les Taylor

Les Taylor (pseudonym) lived and worked in Southeast Asia for 20 years. In March 2020, he relocated to his country of birth, but continues to work (remotely) for one of the largest government universities in his country of service. In addition to conducting a number of research projects, he continues to publish his findings, and supervise his cohort of post-graduate students sharing his passion for making sense of their world.

Introduction

I never turn down the opportunity to contribute to an OMF mission research consultation in person and *Mission Round Table* in print, as both can impact fellow reflective practitioners in our Fellowship and beyond. I have no interest in presenting *pedestrian* and *predictable* positions on ethnicity. Working as I do as a religious anthropologist/historian in Southeast Asian universities, I am aware of many introductions to this topic. Google it! Some of these unpack the role of “religion” (ethnoreligious dynamics), language (ethnolinguistic dynamics), and power (including ethnonationalism) in creating difference. Whilst I briefly deal with these as they represent a useful framework, I will not attempt to float the enormous (figurative) iceberg of ethnic studies, after which I pontificate on this before it melts, making it impossible for even Singaporean air conditioning to prevent. There would not be enough time, I’d lose the attention of most, and it would flood the floor of the meeting room. Worst still, I would never be invited back to share again. On a more serious note, reproducing what others have written could come across as me weaponizing my privileged access to knowledge as a not-so-subtle power-play.

Rather than *predictable* and *pedestrian*, I want to be *personal*. My mission practice has been radically transformed by grappling with complexity. This is followed by the equally important task of boiling complex concepts, such as ethnicity, into easier to understand bumper stickers. I want to be clear and fair—not clever and fancy. All of us have specific callings and gifts. Some work in relatively culturally, religiously, and linguistically homogeneous corners of Southeast, East, and Central Asia.

As such, some of you have not had to grapple with the issues that some others have. Some might be familiar with “complexity on the *far side* of complexity.” There is a (perhaps apocryphal) story of the famous Swiss theologian Karl Barth being asked at a Q & A session at the end of his tour of North American theological seminaries about the most important theological insight he could make. His answer was “Jesus loves me, this I know, for the Bible tells me so.” I hope that by keeping things *personal*, others will understand why I have landed where I have.

Why did Matthew’s account of the twelve called by Jesus conclude with his comment that Matthew was a tax-collector and Simon a zealot? Did Jesus send these two out together?! Those who know me are aware that I am a zealot. Yet, I do not want to alienate any “Matthews” who are more conservative than myself. Ours is a diverse, international, and inter-denominational fellowship seeking a fulfilment of God’s kingdom coming to Asia’s ethnically diverse billions.

Another thing you need to know about me is that I can’t help myself updating any and all operating systems I employ as tools.¹ These include my mobile phone, computer, and software. But I want to remind us of the importance of our theological and missiological operating systems. Those who know me well are aware that whenever I stumble across books and articles containing insights offering potential improvements, I not only take these on board, but share them with others. We all work in contexts where language use, religious affiliations, cultures, and political ideologies are constantly changing. I am *not* writing to change your mind. I have many

weaknesses, but this does not include having some sort of misguided academic savior/messiah complex. I will leave it up to God’s Spirit to guide you about whether some ideas (how you think) and operational decisions (what you do) related to ethnicity now no longer serve you where you serve and/or strategize as well as they once did. In addition to being personal, I will do the best I can to make my reflections on ethnicity as *practical* as possible. I do this by answering some specific questions that I have either been asked—or wished that I had been!

Personal concerns about missiological consumerism

How we think, and what we do, has been formed in both (a) the seminaries we studied in before relocating to Asia, and (b) the training programs we have attended while working here. Most of us received a (one- to three-year) formation in a range of theological stables. I view this diversity as one of the many strengths of our Fellowship. I am running the risk of stating the obvious, but the default word most employ when referring to ethnic collectives is “people groups” (based on the Greek noun *ethnos*). Reproducing David Datema’s summary of the most important Hebrew and Greek terms referring to a range of collectives in the Holy Scriptures (in Table 1) is one of the ways of keeping this paper short. Datema’s work is important for a number of reasons. He is responding to some recent critiques of the concept of “people groups.”² He also raises the important point that some “human groupings” relate to language and nations that I have referred to above. Finally, he includes other important—but often overlooked—smaller collectives, such as families (*oikos*).³

There is no need to document the history of the concept of “people groups”, who championed them, and both when and how it became as influential, as it has been over the past half-century. I wish, however, to point out that some of those involved in proposing the concept of “people groups” and the related “Homogeneous Unit Principle” were people of their time. Some were from the Jim Crow (American) South, whose season of service was in the Indian subcontinent at a time when the caste system cast a longer shadow than it does now. OMF members will be aware of how Fuller Theological Seminar’s School of Global Mission and Ralph Winter’s U.S. Center for World Mission have influenced how we think and what we do.

Less than one week after beginning to write these words, I attended the centenary celebration of the Bible college that my wife and I attended in the late 1990s. As one does, I talked to one of the faculty who I studied with. He related that while he was teaching as a guest lecturer at a large evangelical seminary in the Indian subcontinent, his course coincided with a large Christian event in the nearby city. Hundreds of Christian pastors from this provincial capital and surrounding districts descended on a large church where they received a bundle of Christian books that had been funded by an American initiative. My friend—who is a staunch Calvinist—was invited along. He had a look at what was being distributed. He noted that this included Wayne Grudem’s reformed *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine*. He was less enthusiastic about some of the other items. This included a large hardback, high-quality, color handbook to dispensational theology! He then opined that the best ideas don’t necessarily become the most popular. This is because theologians, biblical scholars, pastors, preachers, and missionaries all need to work harder than ever against the headwinds created by publishers of Christian fiction and non-fiction. Some of these have inspired producers of Christian films and TV series. These include those riffing on the theological tropes of the *Left Behind* book and movies. Many Christians are consumers. You are what you eat. The same is true for what you watch and read.

I am grateful that my three-year season in an evangelical theological seminary included interacting with *Perspectives on the World Christian Movement*—the reader edited by Ralph Winter

Table 1: Terms designating human groupings in Scripture⁴

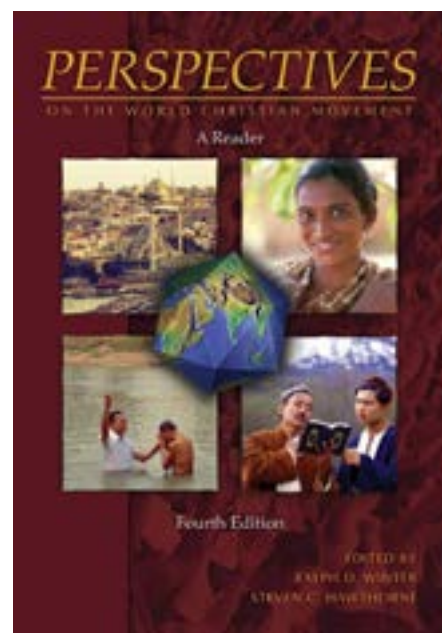
Group types	Hebrew terms used	Greek terms used	Affinities/ boundaries	Modern terms ^a
All humanity	Adam, eretz	Kosmos Oikoumene	Human	Homo sapiens
Nations/peoples	Goy, am	Ethnos, laos	Ancestry, language, land, government	Race, ethnicity, language, ethnolinguistic, nation state, cultural blocs, mega-peoples, macro-peoples
Non-Israelites/ Gentiles	Nokri, zar, arel, ger, tosab	Ethnikos, akrobystia, Hellen, sebomai, proselytos, xenos		
Tongues/ languages	Lishan	Glossa		
Tribes	Shebet, ummah	Phyle	Kinship, lineage	Tribe, socio-peoples, mini-peoples
Families/clans	Mishpachah	Patria, syngenes	Smaller kinship segment	Unimax peoples, micro-peoples, extended family
Households	Bayit	Oikos	Smallest kinship segment	Family

and Steve Hawthorne.⁵ This has had an incalculable impact on the recruitment—I can’t bring myself to refer to the military metaphor of “mobilization”—of thousands of people to relocate and serve overseas. Ideas such as “unreached people groups” and “contextualization” led my wife and me to decide to relocate to Southeast Asia in 2000. We joined a team engaged in a highly contextualized ministry of “show and tell” embedded in an ethnoreligious/ ethnolinguistic minority that were meat in the proverbial sandwich of competing ethnonationalist ideologies. Fear not, dear reader! I explain what I mean by these terms below!

However grateful for these ideas getting us to Southeast Asia, my personal experience was that these did not sustain me well. I suggest that anyone using

Perspectives—and there are thousands that do in all sorts of ways—should emphasize that this is primarily a *recruitment* tool. Its effectiveness is related to Ralph Winter—who rightly deserves the reputation of a religious entrepreneur *par excellence*—appreciating that Christians and would-be missionaries are consumers and subscribers of religious products. Perhaps he concluded, “if you can’t beat ’em, join ’em!” On numerous occasions when I pointed out ideas included in Winter’s reader that have either not aged well or don’t work well where we minister, I have encountered significant resistance. These usually began with, “But it says in *Perspectives*...!” I want to be fair about my concerns about this missiological product. It is therefore important for me to acknowledge that the 2009 edition of *Perspectives* is its fourth, and that I have not analyzed changes between these editions. That said, all books age. This is why reading journals—like *Mission Round Table*—is so important. Since *Perspectives* was first published, many things have happened. I am thinking of the following: the fall of the Berlin Wall and the remaking of Eastern Europe; Genocide/ ethnocide in Bosnia and Rwanda; 9/11 and the “War on Terror”; progress in Mindanao; ups and downs in Myanmar; developments in digital authoritarianism in China and other parts of communist Indochina; and the flowering of liberal democracy in Indonesia and its demise, following coups in Thailand.

Too many of us are overly loyal consumers of well-produced and promoted content. We are all busy, and the headwinds are sometimes intimidating, but many appear to have



lost the vision of creating our own ideas. The problem is that the best ideas don't always win, and most find security in simplicity. In recent decades, this has been exasperated by the algorithms powering our use of web browsers and social media. Both feed us what we already read, and our exposure to alternatives are often polemics of alternatives. All this encourages theological and missiological tribalism. In the late 1990s, I heard that the church that had been supporting an outstanding missionary couple chose to stop their support. The reason given was that they were not working within the "10/40 Window." A mate who led the missions committee at his church mentioned that one Sunday when he had the microphone, he said that the missionaries they supported were in the "8/50 Window." This was intended as a way to respectfully poke fun at this missionary gimmick. Someone who had recently completed a *Perspectives* course cornered him immediately after the service asking whether he could point him to a website where he could read more about this new concept.

Becoming students of both Word and world

I have shared my journey elsewhere, but let me share something more of my personal journey.⁶ This answers some questions about why I completed a PhD in anthropology at a government university under Muslim supervision almost exactly ten years after completing my degree in biblical studies and (mission) theology. I am extremely concerned that many who relocate to corners of East, Southeast, and Central Asia arrive biblically and theologically underbaked. I know that others share my concerns. After four years of presence and service, I came to the following conclusion. Having given three years of full-time study of God's word, I needed to give as many years to "study" my new "world." While I was working on my PhD, I continued reading theology and biblical studies during the weekends. My theological library that grew over these years is now at the Mekong Centre in Chiang Mai. Help yourself! One of the unexpected outcomes was learning to read the Scriptures as an anthropologist.

What came out of this? Firstly, I saw with new eyes how multi-cultural, multi-ethnic, and multi-religious Galilee was. Jesus would have been comfortable where

we were living. There were Samaritans to the south. Syrophoenicians lived to the north-west. There were ten Greek cities on the northern shore of the Lake of Galilee. God was at work in the hearts and heads of all sorts of non-Jews. Some miracles performed in Jewish parts of Galilee were repeated on the other side of the lake. Power and politics were also of enormous importance in first-century Galilee. The same was true where I was living at the time of my PhD studies. The Romans had conquered this part of the world. There was such a thing as the *Pax Romana*, but only after locals had been subjugated and malleable Jewish elites co-opted. Sounds familiar.

What about the Acts of the Apostles?

This presents Jews and Gentiles as being far from homogeneous. There were the elites in Judea, Samaritan apostates, Zealots, the "Herodians", Greek-speaking "Hellenized" Jews from the large diaspora, and Gentile "proselytes." Some, like Paul, were Roman citizens. Some Diaspora Jews, like Timothy, were not even circumcised! The Jews present at Pentecost spoke a wide range of languages, but nonetheless were privileged to hear the "wonders of God" declared in their own tongues. Some Jewish disciples, like Peter and James, appear to have only supported the work of God amongst Diaspora Jew after sometimes traumatic events they experienced at the house of a Roman God-fearer or in Antioch. Like Jews, the Gentiles were also a diverse bunch. I have already alluded to Cornelius. Many other God-fearers attended diaspora synagogues. Some remained God-fearers. Others became Jewish proselytes through a process that was completed through

circumcision. Anyone who has memorized the who, what, where, and when of Acts will know that Paul and his mate Barnabas were mistaken for Hermes and Zeus in Lystra (Acts 14:8–18). Serious students of Acts must not miss both facts that their gospel identifying King Jesus as "Lord" meant the head honcho in Rome was *not* lord, and that the most important sites were cosmopolitan cities between Jerusalem and Rome. I will return to the relevance of the centrality of cities below.

I could write more about the ministry of Paul (or Saul, as he was called while he was in Judea). Since the late 1990s, my mission thinking has been shaped by some of the evangelical scholars involved in some of "new perspectives" approaches to Paul. Please note the small "n" and "p", and the plural "perspectives." For me, this approach to Paul's words—that many working with reformist theological operating systems are unconvinced about—highlighted the relevance of these first-century texts to the twenty-first century. Paul travelled along Roman roads and commercial sea lanes. We also need tracks that our kingdom locomotive can run along, or (for those of us without the funding) the means to buy a third-class ticket. Paul wrote many memorable words, such as there being neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, or male nor female. This was so, as all were now one in Christ Jesus. This most definitely did not mean that *social class* in the diaspora synagogues incubating new ways of being Diaspora Jews and Gentile God-fearers miraculously disappeared decades after the Passover and Pentecost festivals recorded at the end of the Gospels and beginning of the book of Acts. Diaspora Jews and God-fearing Gentiles did not



become androgenous. In addition to class and gender, Paul proclaimed the coronation of King Jesus at his resurrection to both Jews and Gentiles. They were one. Remember that unity and uniformity are not the same.

What about the equally important project of making sense of our new world? I was living at the time in the provincial capital of a Muslim-majority province. Most of the Muslims I interacted with spoke the mother tongue of the “people group.” This was a dialect of language spoken by millions. Some barely understood what was being said when they travelled in countries across the region. Some *spoke* the local dialect but were illiterate. These could read in the national language that most in town also spoke with a thick accent, influenced by their mother tongue. Some Muslims in town *only* spoke the national language, having attended national schools. Some were pious. Others were not. One of my biggest regrets about my priorities and preferences is that I mostly hung out with the most observant and did not see the importance of hanging out with those less observant. Language use and religious observance were both very different in rural Muslim communities. Few spoke the national language if they were presented with an option. Muslims living further to the north spoke one of the many dialects of the national language that I found almost incomprehensible. Their practice of Islam was also different than the “Islam” that I had become familiar with. There were more changes as one approached the national capital.

In recent decades, there have been some encouraging developments in mission anthropology that are related to the growth in the anthropology of Christianity in the academy.⁷ As someone who works as a professional religious anthropologist and (in recent years) historian, whenever I re-read what Paul Hiebert and Charles Kraft wrote decades ago, I am left with the impression that mission anthropology resembles the Galapagos Islands of the social sciences. By this, I mean that concepts that had currency before WWII and as former colonies were decolonized appear to have migrated and evolved in unusual isolation.⁸ I am not being unkind—we are all people of our time. In a few decades, some who read what we have written will come up with similar criticisms. That said, I am

I am extremely concerned that many who relocate to corners of East, Southeast, and Central Asia arrive biblically and theologically underbaked. ... After four years of presence and service, I came to the following conclusion. Having given three years of full-time study of God’s word, I needed to give as many years to “study” my new “world.”

grateful that my grappling with issues of ethnicity has been with relatively up-to-date operating systems provided by mainstream religious anthropologists and historians, and Area Studies specialists.

Personal (and hopefully practical) answers to frequently asked questions (FAQs) about ethnicity—“People Group” thinking

Below, I want to be both personal and practical by answering some of the frequently asked questions (FAQs) about ethnicity—“People Group” thinking—that I have either been asked, or wish I had.

FAQ 1: Tell me about how some “people group” thinking has operationally not served you well?

Some years ago, I was approached by someone from the Joshua Project.⁹ They wanted some advice on whether their database should specifically refer to two Muslim “people groups” in the country we worked in. At the time, I scored low on the graciousness index. I wondered what was behind this. Was this request associated with a church-planting initiative amongst Muslims in another part of the country who spoke the national language near the national capital, or the (aforementioned difficult) dialect? Before this work could get off the ground, had someone said that some sort of official recognition was needed about the “people groups”? I remember local discussions about whether we should avoid going too deep with Muslims who were *not* members of one particular Muslim “people group”. What prompted this angst? Many of us were engaging with descendants of Muslim migrants from the Indian subcontinent and Muslims who were citizens but only spoke the national language. Would doing so mean that we would not see a “people movement” of Jesus followers in our “people group”?

My interactions with members of the Fellowship involved in urban ministry confirm my suspicions that we are not the only ones to be grappling with these issues. You know who you are! This has led some committed to their “people group” products from not engaging in local universities. We are familiar with the “WWJD” products. Perhaps OMF should brand “WWPD” (What Would Paul Do) bracelets? Paul based himself in markets and synagogues where he interacted with a wide variety of Jews and Gentiles as I have described above.

In short, those of us ministering in cosmopolitanism, urban contexts are least well served by conventional “People Group” thinking. The diverse individuals impacted by Paul came from households. This was where they continued to follow some cultural practices—but changed others. They related to political power in different ways. Finally, they taught and worshipped in the language(s) employed in their *oikos*.

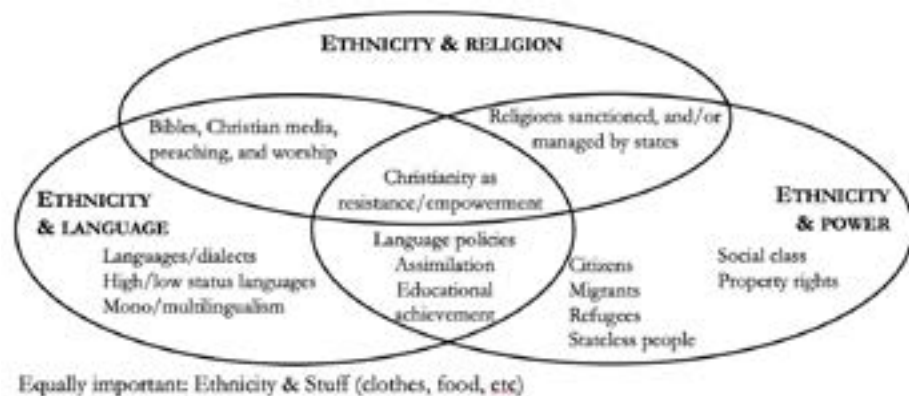
FAQ 2: Where does conventional “People Group” thinking work best?

The simple answer is that it is in contexts that are less linguistically and culturally cosmopolitan—most of which are rural. This is where Bible translations, tracts, audio Bibles, vernacular versions of Christian films, gospel radio programs, and hymns in the languages of their “people group” could be used effectively. The reason was simple, as everyone could read and understand these. Fantastic!

FAQ 3: Why use complicated terms such as ethnolinguistic and ethnoreligious dynamics, and ethnonationalism?

Ethnicity relates to culture. Culture contains stuff we can see (material culture) and, equally important, unseen stuff (such as cultural values). Ethnicity is concerned with creating commonality and difference. It’s important to

Figure 1: Ethnicity, religion, language, and power



remember that people are more *emotional* than rational. This is true both collectively and individually. Wherever we work, religious affiliation (or non-affiliation), language use/loyalty, and power influence how ethnic identities are created, maintained, and changed. It is important to add that these dynamics change in different ways and at different rates in different nation-states. I have summarized some of the most important relationships between these in Figure 1.

FAQ 4: Should we think/talk more about “language groups”?

Yes! From Figure 1, it is hopefully now clear that the relationship between language, power, and religion is extremely close and intertwined. In most of the corners of Asia where we work, the language(s) people speak are amongst the most important ways that people create commonality and difference. There are countless maps that graphically portray Asia’s linguistic landscape. What these *cannot* visualize are the multiple languages

that most speak. Furthermore, modern nation-states have national languages and policies. Discrimination against low-status minority languages is common. For some governments, making decisions about what language road signs are written in, can be controversial. Some church-planting initiatives sweat long and hard about how their literature, media, preaching, witnessing, and discipleship communicates. All of us have to decide what languages to learn, and which to emphasize. Languages also change. Those of you working with ethnolinguistic minorities will be aware about how common it is that second-generation believers who attend state schools are no longer proficient in their “mother tongue.” This is a huge issue in the Asian diaspora where children resent having to attend church services conducted in their parents’ languages. We should also talk more about language, as the inability to communicate in or loyalty to mother tongues contributes more to “ethnic” conflict than religious affiliation.

FAQ 5: How can Christian “People Group” thinking feed into ethnonationalism?

There are others in the Fellowship better qualified than I to analyze some of the unintended consequences of “People Group” thinking. Ethnonationalism is widespread across our region. It takes many forms. Some ideologies are led by governments in positions of power. Other ethnonationalist ideologies have been forwarded by ethnolinguistic and ethnoreligious minorities—some of which converted to Christianity years ago. Governments do not have the monopoly on violence, although they possess most of the weapons. A wide range of armed ethnic groups are active in our region. Some of these are led by Christian ethnic minorities. As people who preach a gospel of peace, what should our response be to Christians being both the perpetrators and victims of violence? I appreciate that most will feel constrained by the apolitical position that our Fellowship has taken in its handbook.

Continuing the conversation

In lieu of a conclusion, I would like to continue the conversation. I hope that I have not lost anyone while presenting this personal and (hopefully) practical critique of the “People Group” thinking that has become increasingly influential in our organization over the last few decades. Someone once said that gourmet burgers require the slaughtering of holy cows, but I trust that I have not come across as being unconstructively



critical and inappropriately iconoclastic. I would like to think that those popularizing new ideas would not be disapproving. After all, they had set to improve what had been passed on to them. Perhaps I am the first to have raised concerns about uncritically consuming missiological products that were originally conceived as a recruitment tool. I would be surprised if mine was the first suggestion that, in some contexts, “People Group” thinking might not always be the best conceptual tool for you to work with. Some might have concluded that they need to be more grateful for this paradigm, as it is still fit-for-purpose in their ethnically homogeneous context. Please bear in mind that the dynamics involved in ethnicity are always changing—although the pace of change in some contexts is slower than in others. I have done my best to boil down the complex concept of ethnicity into some bumper stickers. Nevertheless, I want to reiterate that my personal story about how I personally grappled with complexity (by engaging with both the Word and the world) is as important as my critiques and conclusions. May God guide us all. **MRT**

Ethnicity is concerned with creating commonality and difference. It's important to remember that people are more emotional than rational. This is true both collectively and individually. Wherever we work, religious affiliation (or non-affiliation), language use/loyalty, and power influence how ethnic identities are created, maintained, and changed.

Reflection questions

1. What were the most important ideas and who were the most influential thinkers that led to your involvement in what God is doing in Southeast Asia? How and why did these affect you?
2. While “people groups” have received a lot of publicity during the last few decades, what other missiological ideas should be engaged at a deeper level and which might need to be replaced?
3. How would you compare your curiosity toward and

understanding of God's word and the world in which you work? Which is in need of improvement and what could you do to improve it?

4. Upon what do you base your understanding of your specific context (e.g., spiritually, culturally, politically, etc.)? What kind of materials do you read about the people? When it comes to really understanding the people, how does what you read from missionary thinkers and activists compare with what you read from academic scholars, government documents, and other sources?

¹ Les Taylor, “From Toys to Tools: Reflections on Redeeming Our Screens,” *Mission Round Table* 16, no. 3 (September–December 2021): 11–15, <https://omf.org/mrt-from-toys-to-tools-reflections-on-redeeming-our-screens> (accessed 16 May 2023).

² His article specifically responds to Peter T. Lee and James Sung-Hwan Park, “Beyond People

⁴ David Earl Datema, “The Universal Particularism of *Panta Ta Ethne*: A Biblical Case for the Continued Viability of the People Group Concept in Mission,” *Missiology* 50, no. 2 (2022): 142.

⁵ Ralph D. Winter and Steven C. Hawthorne, *Perspectives on the World Christian Movement: A Reader*, 4th ed. (Pasadena: William Carey, 2009), <https://www.perspectives.org/>.

⁶ Les Taylor, “Bivocationalism in Southeast Asia: Stories from the Past and Thoughts about the Future,” *Mission Round Table* 13 (2018): 12–18, <https://omf.org/bivocationalism-in-southeast-asia> (accessed 16 May 2023).

⁷ Arguably, the two most important Christian anthropologists working in theological seminaries who are also contributing to the anthropology of Christianity are (1) Brian Howell: “Practical Belief and the Localization of Christianity: Pentecostal and Denominational Christianity in Global/Local Perspective,” *Religion* 33, no. 3 (2003): 233–248; “The Anthropology of Christianity: Beyond Missions and Conversion—A Review Essay,” *Christian Scholar's Review* 34, no. 3 (2005): 354–62; “The Repugnant Cultural Other Speaks Back: Christian Identity as Ethnographic ‘Standpoint’,” *Anthropological Theory* 7, no. 4 (2007): 371–91; “Contextualizing Context: Exploring Christian Identity in the Global Church Through Six Contemporary Cases,” in *Power and Identity in the Global Church: Six Contemporary Cases*, ed. Brian M. Howell and Edwin Zehner (Pasadena: William Carey, 2009), 2–25; “Local Language and Global Faith: Choosing Church Language in the Philippines,” in *Power and Identity in the Global Church*, 81–106; *Christianity in the Local Context: Southern Baptists in the Philippines* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011); “Anthropology and the Making of Billy Graham: Evangelicalism and Anthropology in the 20th-Century United States,” *American Anthropologist* 117, no. 1 (2014): 59–70; Brian M. Howell and Jenell Williams Paris, *Introducing Cultural Anthropology: A Christian Perspective* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2011); and (2) Robert J. Priest: “Anthropologists and Missionaries: Moral Roots of Conflict,” in *Current Concerns of Anthropologists and Missionaries*, ed. K. J. Franklin (Dallas, TX: The International Museum of Cultures, 1987); “Missionary Elencitics: Conscience and Culture,” *Missiology* 22, no. 3 (1994): 291–315; “Christian Theology, Sin, and Cultural Anthropology,” in *Anthropology and Theology: God, Icons, and God-Talk*, ed. Walter R. Adams and Frank A. Salamonein (New York: University Press of America, 2000), 59–75; “Missionary Positions: Christian, Modernist, Postmodernist,” *Current Anthropology* 42, no. 1 (2001): 29–68; “‘Experience-Near Theologizing’ in Diverse Human Contexts,” in *Globalizing Theology: Belief and Practice in an Era of World Christianity*, ed. Craig Ott and Harold A. Netland (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2006): 180–95; “Anthropology and Missiology: Reflections on the Relationship,” in *Paradigm Shifts in Christian Witness: Insights from Anthropology, Communication, and Spiritual Power—Essays in Honor of Charles H. Kraft*, ed. Charles Edward van Engen, Darrell L. Whiteman, and John Dudley Woodberry (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2008), 23–32; “Paul G. Hiebert: A Life Remembered,” *Trinity Journal* 30, no. 2 (2009): 171–75; Robert J. Priest, Thomas Campbell, and Bradford A. Mullen, “Missiological Syncretism: The New Animistic Paradigm,” in *Spiritual Power and Missions: Raising the Issues*, ed. Edward Rommen, Evangelical Missiological Society Series vol. 3 (Pasadena: William Carey, 1995), 9–87; Priest and Nieves, *This Side of Heaven*.

⁸ Lest the reader needs to be reminded, there is a difference between accepting the theory of evolution and being a believer in evolutionism.

⁹ <https://joshuaproject.net/>.

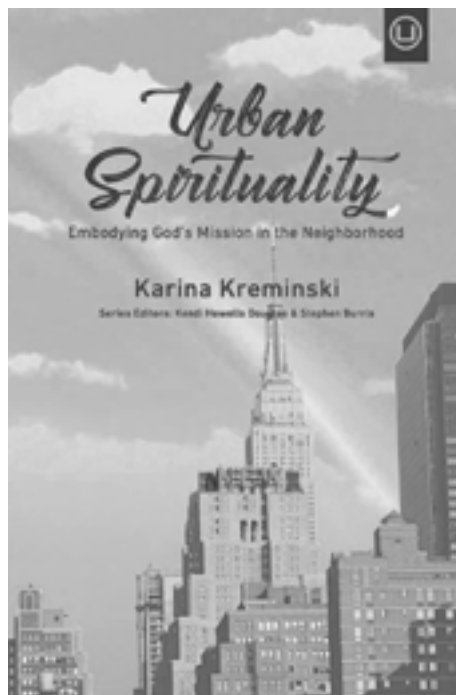
Group Thinking: A Critical Reevaluation of Unreached People Groups,” *Missiology* 46, no. 3 (2018): 212–25. See also David W. Pao, “Family and Table-Fellowship in the Writings of Luke,” in *This Side of Heaven: Race, Ethnicity, and Christian Faith*, ed. Robert J. Priest and Alvaro L. Nieves (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 181–93; Jenell Williams Paris, “Race: Critical Thinking and Transformative Possibilities,” in *This Side of Heaven*, 19–32; Leonard N. Bartlotti, “Reimagining and Re-envisioning People Groups,” *International Journal of Frontier Missiology* 37, no. 3–4 (2020): 133–40, https://www.ijfm.org/PDFs_IJFM/37_3_4_PDFs/IJFM_37_3_4-Bartlotti.pdf (accessed 16 May 2023); Tite Tiénou, “The Samaritans: A Biblical-Theological Mirror for Understanding Racial, Ethnic, and Religious Identity?” in *This Side of Heaven*, 211–221.

³ On *oikos*, see Paul R. Trebilco, *Outsider Designations and Boundary Construction in the New Testament: Early Christian Communities and the Formation of Group Identity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017) and “*οἶκος*: Households in Focus,” *International Journal of Frontier Missiology* 34, no. 1–4 (January to December 2017), https://www.ijfm.org/PDFs_IJFM/34_1-4_PDFs/IJFM_34_1-4-EntireIssue.pdf (accessed 16 May 2023).

Urban Spirituality: Embodying God's Mission in the Neighborhood

By Karina Kreminski. Skyforest, CA: Urban
Loft, 2018. ISBN: 9780998917726.
465 pp.

Reviewed by Brian Farber



As a recent graduate with a master's degree in biblical studies and pursuing God's leading into vocational ministry, I faced a future of ten-plus years to pay off the debt that I had accrued because of my studies. This debt brought home the reality that my lifestyle was going to have to change. This was going to be no easy task, as I lived near Chicago and was able to enjoy many of the perks of the city. As a graduate, however, I would no longer be able to take advantage of the significant student discounts that I previously enjoyed.

One of the perks of the city I enjoyed the most was the access I had to stage productions, whether that be theater, musicals, operas, or concerts in various types of venues. One day, a friend of mine informed me that the Briar Street Theater, which is the performance home of the Blue Man Group and situated in the heart of Chicago, utilized volunteers to usher performances. After responsibilities are complete, typically five minutes into the show, volunteer ushers are free to find a seat and enjoy the show for free. I was once again able to enjoy one of the unique aspects of urban life that I had grown accustomed to.

In *Urban Spirituality*, Karina Kreminski argues that urban areas have a uniqueness not found in suburban or country areas that demands we think differently about our ministry practices. Kreminski's work is a worthwhile read for anybody thinking about or involved in ministry in a city, especially those who are considering work among those in the city who live more communally.

The book is divided into two main sections. The first is more of a theoretical look at what an urban spirituality looks like, drawing on theology, anthropology, and sociology. The second emphasizes praxis and best practices.

In section one, Kreminski speaks of the unique challenges of the city compared to other contexts, arguing that we need to give greater emphasis to reaching cities and why a different approach is needed. After laying this foundation, she offers four distinctives that will give shape to missional communities and church planting: community, placemaking, discernment, and the other. Each of these is addressed in a separate chapter to demonstrate the need for a different approach to ministry in urban areas.

The case made in chapter one about how ministry in the city is unique and essential is presented well. Drawing on the work of Eric Jacobsen, Kreminski shares six distinct markers of a city. These are public spaces, mixed-use zoning, local economy, beauty and quality in the built environment, critical mass, and the presence of strangers.

Having lived in Bangkok for several years now, I can see signs of the six markers all around me. There are massive world-class malls, built for the spending pleasure of the city's wealthy, right next door to the slums filled with people who were not meant to step through the mall's doors. There are public markets, whose vendors often live inside the market or in the immediate neighborhood. There are well maintained parks, and the architecture of many buildings is unique or inspiring.

The author could have strengthened the case for ministry in the city by developing each of these markers to show how they give credence to the need for different types of ministry expressions. However, that would have been beyond the scope of this work, as it would become less about praxis and more theoretical.

Chapter three, on *place-making*, is intriguing and arguably gives significance to the rest of the book. As Kreminski says, "Most people can identify with knowing the difference between simply travelling in and out of a place and settling in that place to live, making it a home. We could call the process of making the 'space' that live in a 'place', place-making" (74).

For anyone who has moved house, there may be a time when the potential of turning a house (space) into a home (place) brings excitement. However, to bring this to fulfillment takes intentionality. Kreminski is spot on in emphasizing that in urban ministry we need to seek to develop places and not simply spaces for people to gather. It is in places, and even the process of place-making, that discipleship and community is formed.

The last section focuses on praxis—*practice*. Here, the author offers nine different practices that should be used for cultivating urban spirituality. Some recommendations include praying with open eyes in neighborhoods, neighborliness, lectio mission, peace-making, and celebration. This section is organized nicely and can easily be used as a reference guide for the different practices, how to practice them, and the reasons why.

There is much to commend about the book, but I do have a couple of complaints. First, the opening chapter about the city lends itself to “preaching to the choir.” The argument presented for the importance of giving priority to ministry in urban contexts is not enough for those who are committed to ministry in rural communities. Since I am involved in ministry in an urban context, having moved from a mix of suburb and country, I largely agree with what she has stated. This section would be strengthened by showing more of how ministry in the city impacts other areas and ultimately leads to bearing fruit in other contexts.

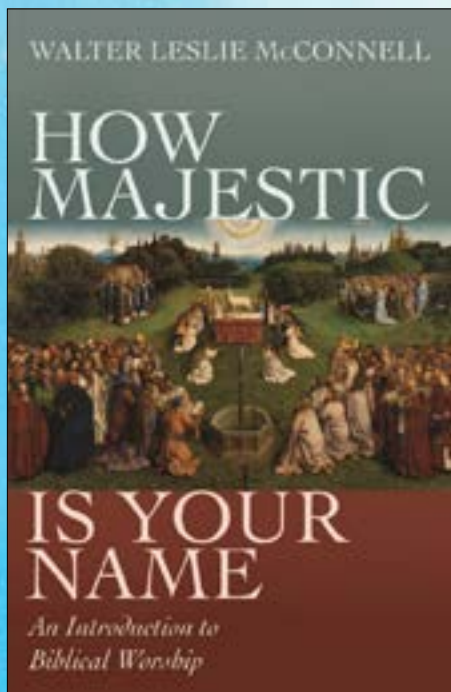
A second complaint addresses her critique of “typical” Christian spirituality. What Christian spirituality is being spoken about?

There are many who critique some of the traditional evangelical practices and present these critiques in a non-monolithic manner. The critique in this book seemed to group all the practices together into one monolithic group without recognizing the differences. Much of what she said is true of some groups, but there are many that would be in “typical” churches that it is a bit unfair to say that their approach is ineffective.

All in all, this is a good book. The weakness, in my view, was the overemphasis on praxis and not developing arguments to convince those who do not have a burden for cities. It is clear that she has thought deeply about living and ministering in cities. Throughout the book, she gives helpful examples of being present among people and how

different Christian practices can be utilized in urban areas. However, it would have been helpful if she had developed the arguments for why ministry in cities should be given greater attention. It is not that what she said was wrong, just that it was incomplete.

For those who aim to reach out towards those working in the marketplace of a city or who are looking for a more developed case for why the church should give a greater emphasis on urban centers, I would recommend Tim Keller’s *Center Church* over this one. However, it is still a good read and I find that many of the principles can be applied to discipling and church planting in various contexts.



How Majestic is Your Name: An Introduction to Biblical Worship

By Walter McConnell, Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2021.
Paperback ISBN 978-1-60899-901-1

“*How Majestic Is Your Name* is a rich, expansive, and profoundly biblical book on true worship as service, reverential fear, and bowing down to our God. It reminds us that worship is not a forty-five-minute event each week but a twenty-four-hour-a-day awareness of the presence of God in everything we do. The church has been waiting for this book for a very long time.”

—MICHAEL CARD, singer-songwriter and author

“How do we worship God? It seems common sense that we listen as God tells us what pleases him. *How Majestic Is Your Name* presents a topical survey of biblical teaching on worship. This book is well structured, comprehensive in its contents, and contemporary in its applications. Anyone teaching on worship or leading services will gain from this book. Likewise for believers who are serious about treating God as God.”

—DAVID BURKE, Christ College, Sydney

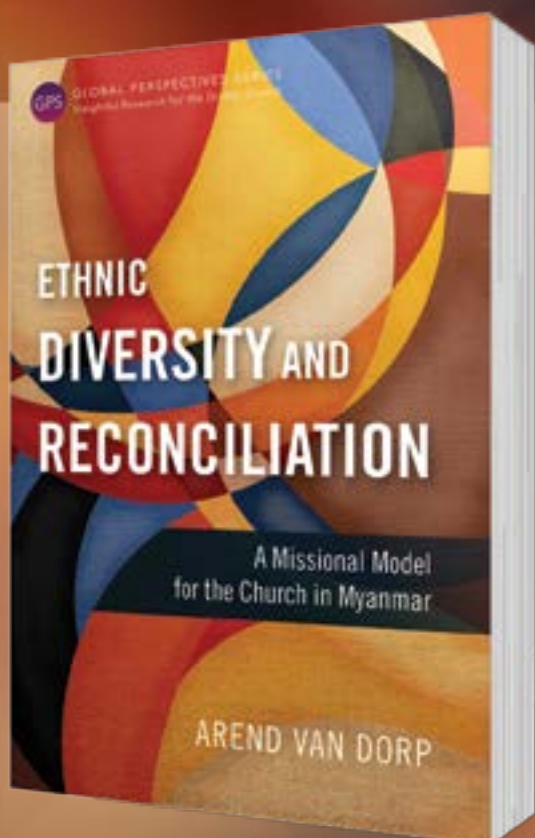
From the book:

Should our worship style be liturgical or charismatic? High or free church? Regulated or Spirit-led? Should we strike a happy medium that blends a little bit of this and a little bit of that? Does adopting any particular style, or even attempting to achieve a more “balanced approach,” throw more light on our personal preferences than on God’s design for worship?

Where should we go to learn the right way to worship? Many recent books on the subject turn to the development of liturgical formulas in the early centuries or the transformation of worship during the time of the Reformation. Others present us with the thoughts and practices of modern worship leaders. While many of these books are helpful, they reveal only part of the picture. If we want to understand what worship is and how we should do it, we need more than historical reflection and technical direction; we need the

theological grounding that only comes from the Bible. The Bible is our guide to worship because it is our guide to God. It should impact our understanding and practice far more than any other work, ancient or modern. The Bible’s narrative passages introduce us to God’s worshippers in action, its laws show us how the holy God desires to be approached by a holy people, the psalms provide words for individuals and groups who draw near to God believing he will hear and receive their prayers, and the New Testament documents realign the earlier revelation by showing how it points to Jesus Christ. In this book, we will explore the Bible’s teaching on worship so that it won’t be one of those things we do without understanding. Here, we will learn what God wants us to know so that we can worship him the way he wants us to worship.

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