On Knowing Humanity Journal

Creating a Christian faith-based approach to anthropology, incorporating insights from theology into ethnography and analysis, and allowing religiously committed anthropologists to speak freely of the ways in which their commitments inform their theory and practice. Raising new questions and lines of research on subjects such as: the significance of humanity's unique calling in nature for personhood and the construction of culture; the underlying reasons for humanity's destructive behavior toward self, others, and the environment; and the role that divine redemption and hope play in human lived experience and practice. Reincorporating teleology, in the sense of purpose, into scientific understanding, inviting dialogue between Christian anthropologists and anthropologists of all persuasions around a deeper understanding of the human condition, and encouraging the doing of anthropological research and writing through the eyes of faith.

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Stranger: A Biblical Teaching as an Anthropological Resource

Kerry Dearborn

The biblical priority to care for the stranger is high in both Old and New Testaments. Furthermore, the stranger includes not only foreigners in Israel's midst, but all those who are other to us, even we ourselves, and God. We are to see, make space for, and provide solidarity and shalom for strangers in an *I-Thou* manner, not exploit them as an *It*, respecting the boundaries as well as the relations between people. In so doing, we are able to hold in tension both the particularities of human difference and the universality of God's love for all. Perhaps theologians and anthropologists, as relative strangers, can begin to welcome and care more effectively for one another in this biblical "I-Thou" manner.

> *"The stranger is the essential metaphor of biblical experience and . . . the key to its ethical stance."*[1]

This article[2] will explore the biblical concept of the stranger, from both its Old and New Testament uses. How is the stranger perceived, protected, known, and understood? What are some ways in which these insights might prove beneficial to the anthropological enterprise of knowing the other? As mutually informing disciplines, theology and anthropology have much to offer each other. Anthropology has deeply enriched theology in revealing the complexities, diversity, and commonalities found in human cultures and contexts. Christian theology can enrich anthropology with resources for knowing the other from its core affirmation that all humans are sacred, created in the image of the Triune God of love, and that to know the other, one must in a sense love that other. The Bible reveals that the way to know the other, the stranger, is not to keep an objective distance, but to learn to be true to the object/subject of one's knowing and honest about one's impact in the process (Barth 1963, 16–20).[3] Being true to the other means drawing close enough to know that other without overpowering, assimilating, or annihilating the other (Volf 2006, 24–25). Authentic knowing includes a kind of welcoming and even embracing of the other. As Rabbi Marc Gopin writes, "The centrality of the stranger in both law and metaphor in biblical religions is at least one key to how a believer is supposed to love the other who

[1] Gopin (2006, 12).

[2] This article was originally published as chapter 3 (pp. 54-79) of the edited volume, *On Knowing Humanity: Insights from Theology for Anthropology*. Edited by Eloise Meneses and David Bronkema, copyright 2017, by Routledge. Reproduced by permission of Taylor & Francis Group.

[3] Cf. James Torrance writes that in Trinitarian theology reason is understood, not statically or substantively, but dynamically and functionally, as the capacity of the whole person to respond to the other, of being true to the truth, of "being true to one another in love" (Torrance 1996, 38).

is different and how the believer may also be loved by others or by God" (Gopin 2006, 3).

Many of us have been raised to be wary of strangers. Growing up in the church, I was familiar with Jesus' story of the Good Samaritan, his explanation of what it means to love one's neighbor. What I didn't realize until further biblical and theological study is that Jesus' story is actually a revelation of what is at the heart of the Bible, indeed the heart of God—that care for the stranger is mysteriously linked to love of God and of neighbor, the fulfilling of the two great commandments.

It wasn't until I visited a remote village above the Arctic Circle, Point Hope, Alaska, that I experienced what it means to be welcomed as a stranger rather than disdained as an outsider. Yes, my husband and I were referred to as *naluagmiu* ("people of bleached seal skin"). Yet we were given front row seating at the annual whale feast with rare delicacies from that feast, and we were welcomed into people's lives, homes, and even a wedding while we were there. They welcomed us, yet also gave us lots of space to be ourselves. They realized that we were not habituated to eating *mikigaq*, a delicacy of whale blubber fermented in the whale's blood, so they gave us a sampling, but didn't waste a lot on us. They also left us to our normal routine of sleeping from 11 p.m. until 7 a.m.—rather than doing what they did which was to sleep when they were tired and work and play when they weren't, whether it was at 3 a.m. or 3 p.m. (We discovered this when we heard young men playing basketball outside our tent at 3 in the morning.) It was light all of the time, so why be confined to sleeping from 11 p.m. to 7 a.m.?

This experience illustrates for me the biblical priority of welcome and care for the stranger. The biblical faith affirms such a welcome as integral to human nature since humans are described as those who have been created in the image of a welcoming God. The main hypothesis of this article is that the biblical mandate to care for the stranger offers rich resources that correlate with and build on anthropological strategies for knowing the other. Secondarily, I propose that biblical resources pertinent to welcoming the stranger have applicability when thinking about the disciplines of theology and anthropology welcoming one another. Theologians have come to affirm that Trinitarian theology greatly benefits by attentiveness to its "locus in *particular* social, ecclesiastical, and political conditions," such that the "social sciences . . . may become the handmaids of theological awareness, not tools of theological reduction (as is often presumed)" (Coakley 2013, 12). Is it possible that anthropologists also might welcome this stranger to its own field of study, and allow it to perform its unique role and offer its special gifts?

Even as Inupiat villagers welcomed us, gave us space to be ourselves and were willing to engage with us, and we were able to help students from the village attend the college where we taught, I believe there are ways in which anthropologists and theologians might more fully offer their gifts to one another. Insights from the biblical perspectives on engagement with the stranger can lead to mutual enrichment, while ensuring the retention of the integrity of both disciplines.

This article will glean resources from biblical perspectives on the stranger through examining three related areas. These areas include first, the biblical priority of welcoming the stranger (why); second, the scope of who qualifies as a stranger (who); and third, methodological approaches by which the stranger may be welcomed and known (how).

Biblical Priority to Care for the Stranger

The prioritization of care for the stranger is not a marginal or minor issue in the Bible.[4] Rather it is a central and highly prioritized ethic within the biblical witness. "Of the 613 laws in the Torah, the one that appears most often is the directive to welcome strangers" (Newman 2007, A, 1:1). As theologian Orlando O. Espin writes:

> Welcoming the stranger . . . is the most often repeated commandment in the Hebrew Scripture, with the exception of the imperative to worship only the one God. And the love of neighbor (especially the most vulnerable neighbor) is doubtlessly the New Testament's constant demand.
>
> (Espin 2006, 46)

In that way it correlates with one of the central driving forces of anthropology as the study and knowing of diverse others. And since, as Gopin writes, "The concept of stranger in human experience is

[4] Cf. "Drawing on the Torah that emphasizes fraternity, humanity and hospitality, Derrida declares that hospitality is ethics itself and not simple one ethic amongst others" (Conway 2004, 8; with reference to Derrida 2000, 151).

relevant to almost all relationships," it carries epistemic relevance for anthropological knowledge (Gopin 2006, 3).

The priority of care for the stranger is deeply rooted in scripture in four ways (Gushee 2013, 38). First, it is connected with the esteem placed on all humans as those who are created in God's image.[5] No one is outside of that profoundly exalted view of humans. As Rikk E. Watts states:

> The biblical language indicates that all human beings—not just the Pharaohs of Egypt—in their physicality, their maleness and femaleness, and their interplay between individual and collective, are intended to be living pictographs of Yahweh the Creator, enlivened by his breath . . . and ultimately by his indwelling Spirit.
>
> (Watts 2002, 21)

Strangers share the high esteem bequeathed on all humans, having been created in God's image, and furthermore in the sacredness attributed to all human beings. David Gushee asserts that the idea that human life is sacred is "a conviction that is not only a core belief of the Christian church but also the greatest moral contribution of the Christian tradition to world civilization" (Gushee 2013, 1). Gushee continues, "If any human life is sacred, every human life is sacred." In this way the stranger deserves to be treated with the highest sense of his or her dignity from a biblical and theological perspective.

A second basis for prioritizing care for the stranger is rooted in God's compassionate love and care for all humans, particularly those most vulnerable. This is affirmed throughout scripture both in the Old and New Testaments, as is evident, for example, in Psalm 113:

> Who is like the Lord our God,
> who is seated on high,
> who looks far down
> on the heavens and the earth?
> He raises the poor from the dust,
> and lifts the needy from the ash heap,
> to make them sit with princes,
> with the princes of his people.
> He gives the barren woman a home,
> making her the joyous mother of children.
>
> (Ps. 113:5–9)

Third, God established laws of covenant faithfulness to embed his care for those most vulnerable into the very structure of community life. These laws were established to ensure the protection and well-being of the needy, including the stranger. Specifics about these laws will be noted later in the article.

Fourth, the inspired vision given to Israel for its eschatological future was of *shalom* for all of creation, including strangers. The process for moving toward that end included the invitation for Israel to be God's vehicle of blessing for all people. The vision was one of shared destiny and even more profoundly of being part of one human family with one Father, or of one vine with many branches (Matthew 23:9; Romans 11:16–20; John 15:1–11).

As a side note, it is important to clarify that the profound honoring of human life was not meant to promote desacralized views of creation. Though biblically only humans are affirmed as being created in God's image, the Bible also affirms that all of creation participates in God's good purposes and can be viewed sacramentally. Thus, after denoting the three spheres in which the world of relation arises (nature, humanity, and spiritual beings), Jewish philosopher Martin Buber continues:

> In every sphere in its own way, through each process of becoming that is present to us we look out toward the fringe of the eternal *Thou,* in each we are aware of a breath from the eternal *Thou;* in each *Thou* we address the eternal *Thou.*
>
> (Buber 1958, 6)[6]

[5] The image of God has been a contested subject throughout the history of Christianity. There has been agreement that what has been revealed in scripture as the character and nature of God pertains in specific ways to the created character and nature of humans. There has also been agreement that the covenant-making nature of God revealed as steadfast love, faithfulness, mercy, and justice indicates that humans are also most fully human when they also reflect these characteristics. For Eastern Christians traditionally and over the past 100 years in the West, the image of God has been understood in relational terms, since God is apprehended as a communion of Triune persons. Thus, humans are considered most reflective of God's image when they exist in mutually loving and self-giving relationships.

[6] For further exploration see (Gushee 2013, 388–410).

However, for the purposes of this article on theological anthropology, humans will remain the focus and particularly the way in which the biblical approach to the stranger may provide an epistemic lens for human knowing. The fact that it is such a significant biblical theme warrants its further exploration if anthropology is to draw resources from that stranger, the Judeo-Christian tradition. According to Rabbi Gopin:

> there is no person of greater concern in the Bible than the stranger who is with us but not with us, women we know but do not know, who is a source of great mystery and yet ancestral familiarity, whose treatment by us is ultimately a litmus test of whether we and our culture have succeeded or not in the eyes of God, and whose experience is essentially a yardstick of our moral stature. If we love the stranger, protect him and see to his needs, then our society passes a kind of Divine test, and we also have the emotional and spiritual fulfillment of identifying completely with an echo of ourselves.
>
> (Gopin 2006, 6)

Who is the Stranger?

The "stranger" biblically is both a very specific term applied to individuals, and also a more general and inclusive term that can refer to entire ethnic, religious, and national groups (Gopin 2006, 4). "There are several words in the original Hebrew of the Old Testament rendered into English as *alien, stranger, sojourner or foreigner*, depending on the translation. The most common word . . . is the Hebrew word transliterated into English as *ger*" (Espin 2006, 82). This term can also be used to refer to a "guest" (Gopin 2006, 6). The "stranger" or the "other" is an elastic biblical term used to refer to individual or collective selves, to correlate with the way "we see ourselves as part of more than one collective identity—the human race, the nation, the class, the family, the religion, and this complicates the question of self, other and boundaries" (Gopin 2006, 4).

"Stranger" has been typically used in the West as a way to designate a people or groups as other or alien. Yet, the Bible challenges rigid walls between the stranger and the self. Though a stranger is usually seen as foreign to us, and thus somewhat unknowable, biblically there is also the sense that this other shares many commonalities with us, such that given a certain set of circumstances we could be intimately bound together as close family or friends. Thus the stranger, Pharoah's vice-regent in Egypt, is revealed as Joseph, brother and son (Gen. 42–43). Rahab, the prostitute of Jericho, becomes a member of the tribe of Israel and a specific ancestor of Jesus (Matt. 1:5). Ruth, the Moabitess, becomes the great-grandmother of King David and also one of Jesus' ancestors (Matt. 1:5). The three strangers that visit Abraham are actually messengers of God, or perhaps even a revelation of God's self. And ultimately an outsider, the "Word made flesh" and birthed in an animal trough, is the Messiah who comes to express love to all people (John 1:14).

Because, biblically there is a sense in which all humans are bound together and share a common core identity, something is lost when we avoid or fail to make contact with the "other." As Gopin writes:

> There is some element of tragedy in the fleeting encounter with strangers: an opportunity lost perhaps for the greater unity of the human spirit on this earth that is achieved when strangers become committed to each other through some shared experience. In Jewish theology there is an element of the Divine in every human being, in every stranger . . . There is some element of divine tragedy in strangers who have failed to be reunited, though the reunion seemed so possible at that instant. But the public space—between families and groups, at the border of the lives of strangers, especially where there is tragedy—also presents an immense opportunity for spiritual discovery and ultimate moral fulfillment.
>
> (Gopin 2006, 7)

Historically, knowledge of those often distanced as strangers, foreigners, and the other has been one of the gifts that anthropology has conveyed to human understanding. This has occurred without necessarily a shared commitment to the idea of "the Divine in every human being." Could more be gained by anthropology if it should incorporate biblical perspectives of this nature? Could it heighten the sense of meaning and purpose for anthropological work as well as offer some helpful strategies for knowing the other?

As we proceed to look more carefully at who it is that constitutes the stranger, the elasticity of the concept will become more apparent. Even the call to love the stranger, and the question of whether the stranger is still a stranger if beloved is a part of this elasticity. As Gopin writes, "Yet the biblical text holds love and the stranger in paradoxical tension" (Gopin 2006, 7). One might know the heart of the stranger (as in Exod. 23:9), and still remain strangers, thus making it possible to be loved while retaining the title of stranger (Gopin 2006, 8).

Biblically We are all Strangers

The Bible challenges God's people first to remember that we all carry the identity of being strangers in one way or another. From the very beginning of the process of knowing, likeness and difference are included and held in tension. As mentioned previously, "The concept of stranger in human experience is relevant to almost all relationships. We human beings constantly create both very large and very small societies in which someone is a stranger to that society. Simultaneously we ourselves frequently experience varying degrees of estrangement in one setting or another" (Gopin 2006, 3). In other words, it is not merely the distant and different "other" who qualifies as stranger. We all in some sense share this identity.

Biblically, the Israelites were commanded to follow numerous practices to remind them that they were and had been strangers. Regular celebrations like Passover and Sabbath were established in part to help the people of Israel remember what it was like to have been strangers in Egypt, and that even now they were relative strangers, worshippers of Yahweh in the midst of a world worshiping other gods. These were ways of ensuring compassion, justice and humility towards others. It was crucial for those in Israel to remember their patriarch Abraham's time of being a stranger in the land promised to him. The prophets reminded them again and again of these historical and ongoing experiences to encourage equity, generosity, and the recognition that their lives and possessions were a gift from God, not a basis for pride or exclusion.

As Volf points out,

> The children of Abraham are not strangers pure and simple, however. Their "strangeness" results not from the negative act of cutting all ties, but from the positive act of giving allegiance to God and God's promised future. Stepping out of their culture, they do not float in some indeterminate space, looking at the world from everywhere and anywhere. Rather with one foot planted in their own culture and the other in God's future . . . they have a vantage point from which to perceive and judge the self and the other not simply on their own terms but in the light of God's new world—a world in which a great multitude "from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages" is gathered "before the throne and before the Lamb."
>
> (Revelation 7:9; 5:9) (Volf 1996, 53)

In acknowledging who they are and have been as strangers, the people of Israel could perceive the multifaceted reality of their own identity and grant that to the identities of the strangers in their midst. Even as they acknowledged their own simultaneous "distance and belonging," they could also recognize both the distinctive and universal elements in the identities of the other (Volf 1996, 49–50).

It was the very distance they experienced from their surroundings by being bound to God and to God's future for them that created space where they could receive the other. As Volf explains, "The distance from my own culture that results from being born by the Spirit creates a fissure in me through which others can come in. The Spirit unlatches the doors of my heart saying: 'You are not only you; others belong to you too'" (Volf 1996, 51).

As those grafted into Israel, practices of remembrance are enjoined to Christians as well. They are to remember having been rescued from being "strangers and aliens" while continuing to be simultaneously strangers in "this world," and residents in the kingdom of God (Ephes. 2:19, Phil. 3:20). Remembering one's status as "resident aliens" is crucial lest the rescue from servitude becomes an excuse for "entitlement, rejection, judgment, disconnection, and deliberate and pervasive forgetfulness," which fosters an excuse for ignoring the needs of others rather than engaging responsibly with them (Labberton 2007, 137).[7]

[7] As Carroll points out, "'resident aliens' is one of the translations given for the Hebrew and Greek words that refer to sojourners in the Bible" (Carroll 2013, 132). Cf. Hauerwas, *Resident Aliens* (1989).

There are parallels between Hebrew and Christian liberation from the oppression associated with being strangers. The Hebrews' yoke of bondage that resulted from being aliens was removed in their rescue from Egypt, and was replaced by a new yoke of citizenship in God's kingdom. This new yoke was the law that framed social structures for human flourishing, including the strangers in their midst. Christians also are invited to leave behind the yoke of spiritual bondage from being outsiders and aliens in the kingdom of God. In the New Testament Jesus invites "the weary and heavy laden" to come to him to receive his yoke of discipleship to him, "for my yoke is easy and my burden is light" (Matt. 11:28). This yoke is also designed to enable the human flourishing of all. In both cases deliverance requires receiving the generosity of God and extending that generosity to others, always remembering that it is a gift from God to be shared rather than a privilege that one has earned.

As Volf asserts, fundamental interdependence with all people is at the core of what it means to be human. To forget that common to our interdependence is the reality of a shared identity as strangers, at least in some capacity, is a way of cutting ourselves off from the bonds and responsibilities that tie us to one another. Volf writes, "The other then emerges either as an enemy that must be pushed away from the self and driven out of its space or as a nonentity—a superfluous being—that can be disregarded and abandoned" (Volf 1996, 67).

One disruptive movement within Israel and evident throughout the history of Christianity that contravened the sense of common identity as strangers, with all of its theological freight, has been a distorted approach to "chosenness." The idea that God had chosen a special people for God's redemptive purposes became a means by which a few tried to cut themselves free from the bond to the many to soar as superior beings over those who were not considered chosen. Thus the "chosenness" of Israel by God became one of those identity markers that was distortedly used for self-exaltation and the exclusion of others.

Furthermore, distorted views of being chosen have created ways of rationalizing abuse or neglect of the stranger rather than responding with biblically-commanded care. As Gopin writes, "The number of groups that, in the name of monotheism, have used the chosenness metaphor to destroy indigenous peoples physically or emotionally in the past millennium defies the imagination" (Gopin 2006, 14). Gopin explains how incongruous it is that the three Abrahamic religions have each appropriated this idea in an ethnocentric way. "How anyone in their right mind could have read the Prophets of Israel and come to the conclusion that chosenness meant superiority or privilege is beyond me" (Gopin 2006, 14).

For the children of Abraham, honoring their own history and their core ancestral identity as strangers has been one means of challenging a self-aggrandizing use of chosenness. Scripture makes clear that Abraham was a stranger, moving from Ur to Haran, to Canaan, to Egypt, and back. He is chosen of God, but it is clear that in the midst of the gift of his particular relationship with God, "he is also a man through whom all nations will be blessed (Gen 12:3) and who follows the ways of God which involved a universal commitment to justice and righteousness" (Gopin 2006, 13). He is chosen as a *vehicle* of God's blessing for all people.

In fact, Abraham thus becomes an "ideal model of engagement with the world, without consuming that world or allowing it to consume him" (Gopin 2006, 13). His awareness of his own interdependency with others and his need for the care and hospitality of others as he sojourns, makes him especially gracious to other strangers. Thus:

> Abraham also serves as a model of hospitality toward foreigners. When three strangers—unbeknownest to Abraham, messengers from God—passed by Abraham's home, he was so eager to offer them food and drink that he ran out to greet them (Gen. 18:1–6). As an immigrant himself, he understood the experience of being a stranger in a foreign land, and he was eager to make others feel welcome.
>
> (Soerens and Hwang 2009, 83)

To be a child of Abraham was to reflect his virtues and follow in his ways. More implications from this will be explored later.

Similarly, the deep identity of the children of Abraham as strangers is reinforced through other key leaders of Israel. Stories abound in scripture to remind the children of Abraham that most of their key leaders were strangers, or were treated as strangers at some time. Rather than narrating it in a negative and threatening light, the Bible invites the reader to consider what gifts the stranger might offer.

Moses is a stranger in Egypt, the other even to his own people, a vulnerable child who comes close to annihilation as a child, and as an adult has to flee his home to find shelter among non-Israelites. Still, he is

hosted by the Pharaoh, the most powerful figure in all of the land, first as a baby, and later as a returning murderer. He is also dependent on the welcome and provision of Jethro and his family when he is a criminal fugitive. Yet it is this stranger who is able to lead the people of Israel out of bondage and into the Promised Land.

Strangers are also revealed as capable of making important contributions to the nations or communities that receive them. Joseph is able to establish a system by which Egypt is able to survive a horrific famine and to become a means by which surrounding peoples may endure it as well (Gonzalez 1996, 96–97; cited in Soerens and Hwang 2009, 84).

Ruth, whom Old Testament scholar John Goldingay likens to an Arab being received in a Jewish settlement, becomes a redeemer of Naomi's hope and lineage (Goldingay 1996). She is described by her Jewish mother-in-law as "better than seven sons" (Ruth 4:15), and she becomes the ancestor to King David, one of the greatest kings of Israel. Such inclusion is not contrary to God's choice of Israel to be a vehicle of God's blessing, but organic to it (Soerens and Hwang 2009, 85).

The most renowned stranger is Jesus, who spent his earliest years as an outsider in Egypt, under threat of extinction from Herod (Matt. 2:14). "Furthermore, Scripture suggests that all of us, as followers of Christ, whatever our nationality, have become aliens in this world, as our allegiances are to lie not primarily with any nation state but with the kingdom of God" (Soerens and Hwang 2009, 86).

Biblically the Stranger is One who is Especially Vulnerable, and thus Qualifies for Special Care, Protection, and Valuation

"The stranger or sojourner is the classic Other in monotheism" (Gopin 2006, 6). Unique to Israel at the time were the laws and social structures to ensure fair legal treatment rather than exploitation of strangers because of powerlessness, prejudice, or cultural differences (Deut. 1:16–17; 24:17–18; 27:19). Such protections included Sabbath rest from their work alongside the residents (Exod. 20:10; Deut. 5:14) and timely wages for work that had been done (Exod. 23:12; Deut. 24:14–15). Along with widows and orphans, sojourners were free to glean, since access to the land was otherwise difficult. "Sojourners were also to receive a portion of the special tithe that was collected every three years for the poor (Deut. 14:28–29; 26:12–13)" (Carroll 2013, 89). When Israel ignored these provisions, the prophets railed against them, expressing the anguish and anger of Yahweh to have the vulnerable people about whom God cared so much, be neglected and abused.

At times questions have been raised about whether the purity codes of Numbers and Leviticus were used to exclude strangers.[8] In contrast, Mary Douglas argues that these books are remarkable for the fact that "they never use the principle of ritual purity to separate classes or races, foreigners or natives" (Douglas 1993, 25). She goes on to explain:

> In the biblical creed defilement is not caused by contact with other people; it comes out of the body, or it comes out of moral failure. Everybody is liable to be defiled or to defile. This should be totally unexpected to the anthropologist used to purity codes in other religions.
>
> (Douglas 1993, 25)[9]

Thus, biblically, defilement is not from contact with the stranger or the poor and thus not to be used as a basis for exclusion or oppression. Rather, Leviticus teaches God's people, "Love the stranger as thyself" (Lev. 19:34) (Douglas 1993, 26).

The fact that these protections and provisions were rooted in the nature and will of God made them inviolable in a way that laws based on social preference, political will, human reason, or longstanding tradition did not. They were not meant to be negotiable, for they were expressive of God's nature and woven into God's intentions for those he had created. Furthermore, as Gushee points out, even the king or ruler in the land was accountable to uphold such laws. No one was above the law established by Yahweh. "In many cultures, especially in the ancient world, the ruler defined the law and was above the law . . . But the kings of Israel found that they were indeed accountable to the same divinely given moral law that governed everyone else" (Gushee 2013, 62).

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[8] See for example Max Weber, *Ancient Judaism* (Weber 1952, 417).

[9] Jesus taught similarly about issues of defilement in Matthew 15:10–20, that it is what comes out of the heart that defiles a person.

Certainly there are structures in the Bible that reflect the privileging of a few over the many, but as Richard Bauckham argues, these structures were temporarily tolerated while being relativized and transformed ultimately to be aligned with God's will for the flourishing and mutuality of all people. This allowance for interim structures of hierarchy is only one form of two aspects of a strongly egalitarian *direction* of thought in the Bible. And such hierarchical structures as the monarchy, for which Israel adamantly lobbied to replace its theocracy, were under scrutiny to ensure "that they operate for the good of all, rather than for the particular benefit of the privileged" (Bauckham 1997, 118). Thus prophets as humbly-born as Amos could confront political and religious leaders for abusing their role and violating the justice for all that God had commanded. Nathan could confront King David for his violation of Bathsheba and murder of her husband. The Mosaic law envisioned significant differences between Israel's king and the kings of the nations (Deut. 17:14–20). "The king is not to exalt himself above his fellow Israelites but to rule *as one of* his people" (Bauckham 1997, 122).

The second form of the one egalitarian direction of thought in the Bible according to Bauckham is radical opposition to hierarchical relationships and structures. This form of "radical opposition" to hierarchical human structure operates "especially to critique relationships of privilege, which give to one person or class privileges or rights at the expense of others who lack them" (Bauckham 1997, 118). Whether through the Exodus, the basic equality of family households in premonarchical Israel, provisions for debt-forgiveness and the return of land, God's action and law inscribed the equality of all people. And for those who fell outside of the normal provisions of land and family households, widows, orphans and the strangers, laws were designed such that "the whole society had to take responsibility . . ." for them (Bauckham 1997, 120).

Laws that were created in opposition to divine law were considered to be lacking in authority and moral suasion. Such laws were suspect for being arbitrary and often exploitive of the most vulnerable. Ultimately those who have been disadvantaged by laws via the political-legal community's application of them, including "women, children, slaves, foreigners, indigenous peoples, homosexuals, religious dissidents," and, I would add, people with disabilities, are to be drawn into the political community both to be adequately represented and also to offer their own authoritative voice (Gushee 2013, 63).

God as the Ultimate Stranger

Biblically, "stranger" is an identity so expansive that it is linked with God's identity. The ethical pull of the stranger is most profoundly anchored in God's own identification with the stranger. "The creation story also reveals God as Creator from out of this world, as the first biblical stranger who reaches across impassable boundaries to give birth, to nurture life, even as He or She is not completely part of it but rather in some undefined relationship" (Gopin 2006, 4).

The Otherness of God, God's patient waiting to be welcomed by human "hosts," the vulnerability of God (though volitionally so), the alienation of God by our destructive and self-aggrandizing behavior, all connect with aspects of strangers' lives, though obviously in different ways. Israel's loyalty to God was in part evaluated on the basis of their care for the stranger. This circumstance was all the more powerful in that the sojourner was a "not so thinly veiled metaphor for God in this world . . . We cannot find God or see God or even know how to do so without meeting the human stranger through love" (Gopin 2006, 6).

Thus it is not surprising in the New Testament that Jesus would make this identification with the stranger even more obvious. He was willing to come as an outsider, in vulnerability and dependency. He assumed an incognito identity, and worked to retain that veiled identity as long as possible. "He came to his own but his own knew him not" (John 1:11). Jesus seemed a stranger and outsider to the religious leaders and unknown by most political leaders during the whole of his life. At times he was a stranger within his own family, such as when he opted to stay with the religious leaders as a boy rather than travel home with his family, describing the temple as his "father's house" (Luke 2:49). Even among his own followers, after the resurrection he was seen as a stranger, whether with Mary Magdalene in the garden, or the two disciples on the road to Emmaus.

Jesus cared deeply about how strangers were received. He encouraged his followers to invite outsiders rather than friends to dine with them. And he described the final judgment in which those who have welcomed strangers from among the least of these will have welcomed Jesus, himself. "I was a stranger and you welcomed me" (Matt. 25:35).

Thus love of God as the ultimate Stranger offers a paradigm for love of the fellow human stranger. God is honored in some mysterious way by the way we treat the most vulnerable in our midst (cf. Howell 2017).

The biblical narrative reveals that God is deeply aware of the plight of the stranger. God hears their cries, welcomes, protects, sustains, and even honors outsiders by expressing solidarity with them and including them in God's ultimate gathering around the throne and the Lamb in the end of time. And God commands God's people to follow in this way.

The Nature of the Bible's Mandate to Care for the Stranger

Having acknowledged the biblical priority of care for the stranger and the inclusive reality of who qualifies as a stranger, we turn now to identify specific elements involved in approaches to the stranger that hold possibilities for an enriched anthropological epistemology. As Martin Buber affirmed, to gain authentic knowledge of the other, it is vital that he or she be continually honored as a *Thou* rather than being reduced to an *It*. Buber's reflections on the human *Thou* were deeply grounded in knowledge of the eternal *Thou*. "Every particular *Thou*, is a glimpse through to the eternal *Thou*; by means of every particular *Thou* the primary word addresses the eternal *Thou*" (Buber 1958, 75). Given that each person is a glimpse through to God, someone created in God's image, Buber framed specific ways of approaching and coming to know and love that person, strategies that for our purposes can elucidate how biblical approaches to the stranger might be useful as an epistemic tool.

The process involves increasing understanding of the other, *Thou*, which the very nature of the *Thou* determines will always be an indeterminate and partial knowing (Buber [1958] and Polanyi [1974]). It also involves and even requires some form of transformative process for the *I*. Elements of mutuality and self-altering connection are necessary if I am to do justice to the other and avoid reducing the other to an *It*. And though it is not a linear process, there is a sense of progression in the deepening of knowledge that moves one from merely beginning accurately to see the other, ultimately to identification and solidarity with the other. The process is a demanding one in which changes to the *I* must happen repeatedly in order to adapt to a more authentic knowing of the *Thou*. That is most profoundly the case when the Stranger in question is God, but it also applies to human knowing if I am going to face and dive beneath the many layers of presuppositions and a priori ideas I have about the other.[10] I will describe this process as three-fold: seeing the stranger, making space for the stranger, and ultimately shalom with the stranger.

Seeing the Stranger

Because the stranger is by nature unknown she may also seem somewhat invisible. Whether through being unvalued, easily categorized, or unimportant to the tasks and preoccupation at hand, the stranger can remain something of a nondescript presence in the background of one's experience or context. Perhaps because of demands that might arise in noticing strangers, the temptation may be to ignore and actually structure one's experiences to avoid really seeing or being interrupted by such outliers. It is not difficult to think of examples of this especially now, with flotillas of boats filled with desperate people in the Mediterranean and the Adaman Sea hoping to be seen and rescued. To see the stranger requires openness to the promise of the gifts they bring, not merely the problems of who they are and what they may need. The gift of the work of ethnographers is to continually draw our attention to the strangers or the other in our world, and to keep them from being dismissed as unvalued or invisible. This accords well with biblical reminders that outliers exists in all cultural contexts and can bring their own rich gifts to cultural understanding. Furthermore perhaps biblical wisdom about what it means to move through the process from actual *seeing* to *shalom* with the stranger might prove helpful to ethnographic endeavors.

Wisdom about what *seeing* looks like and the rich fruit that it bears are evident throughout the many biblical narratives. "Face to face" is one evocative way in which the Bible depicts such seeing. To see God "face to face" is to glimpse something of the core truth of God's identity. Such face-to-face encounters are always a gift of self-revelation, culminating ultimately in the self-revelation of God in Jesus Christ, who is the

[10] T.F. Torrance describes the transformative and even agonizing process of Israel coming to know the strange God, Yahweh, in *The Mediation of Christ*. Much of the agony comes from having to move from a self-referent posture of knowing, to a revelation-centered process of knowing, in which their very epistemological categories are like clay pots that have to be shattered and continually remolded by the power of God if they are to contain some semblance of truth.

face of God, the "image of the invisible God" (Col. 1:15). *Seeing* the ultimate Stranger is somewhat paradigmatic for what is required to see the strangers in our midst. As T.F. Torrance points out it requires a kind of ongoing reciprocity, or extensive back and forth mutually adaptive process. He describe it as "A two-way movement . . . an adaptation of divine revelation to the human mind and an adaptation of articulate forms of human understanding and language to divine revelation" (Torrance 1983, 17).

Faithfulness to *see* the other requires that we seek understanding by operating within the constitutive relations and framework of thought appropriate to the other, and avoid projecting an "external or alien framework of thought" onto that which we seek to understand (Torrance 1983, 13). Thus, according to Torrance, whether in natural science or in theology, progress in understanding is "necessarily circular" and highly demanding. This is clearly evident in the arduous history of Israel coming to see and know Yahweh throughout the Old Testament. It is in part our own "confusion of face" which complicates the process so much (Dan. 9:8). Confusion about our own identity and fear of the other clouds our ability to *see* the other accurately. Thus, patience, persistence, openness, and grace are all essential in the process.

The circular nature of the process by which one can move from a kind of blindness to greater seeing is evident in a greeting shared by the Zulu people of South Africa. The greeting includes two parts. One part is *Sikhona*, which means "I am here to be seen"; and the other part is *Sawubona*, which means "I see you." To see the other is to move beyond the mischaracterizations of fear, indifference, or hate in which the other remains an *it*, to a kind of seeing in which the other is considered a *Thou*, worthy of love and care.[11] It also includes the willingness to be vulnerable enough to be seen or self-revealing and to gain new perspective on oneself.

The co-adaptive and mutually-revealing process involved in seeing the stranger is evident in a number of biblical narratives. As previously noted one of the mysterious sightings of "God" happens for Abraham while he is resting in the doorway of his tent in the heat of the day, and he sees three strangers standing nearby. "When he saw them, he ran from the tent entrance to meet them, and bowed down to the ground. He said, 'My lord, if I find favor with you, do not pass by your servant'" (Gen 18:2–3). Abraham's approach to seeing means giving high honor to these visitors and utterly altering his plans from resting in the heat to serving them as best he can. These strangers bring with them a great word of promise and blessing for Abraham and Sarah of new life that is beyond anything they could imagine. The strangers see Abraham in a most revealing way and allow themselves to be seen by him and to be included in his life, his eating and his drinking. For Abraham, humble willingness to give up his small agenda of rest, opens him up to a much larger agenda that affects not merely Abraham and Sarah's entire life, but also the future of their lineage, and ultimately of the world.

Boaz, a prosperous landowner, sees the stranger, Ruth, gleaning in his fields. He sharpens his focus to learn more about her from those who know her better, and then goes to meet her. In a short time of such seeing and coming to know, Boaz realizes that in this foreigner is a great treasure. So transformative is his having seen her that he describes her in ways that parallel Abraham himself: "You left your father and mother and your native land and came to a people that you did not know before" (Ruth 2:11). He immediately offers protection and provision to her, and invitation to continue to glean in his field.

In both cases, *seeing* strangers is not only transformative of the one who sees, but mysteriously binds together both the one who sees and the one who is seen.

The challenging process of what it takes to develop more accurate sight is evident in the relationship between Peter and Jesus in the New Testament. As David Benner conveys, there is interdependency in Peter's process of knowing Jesus and knowing himself. His many presuppositions about Jesus are dealt with through a dialectical process of gradually being able to *see* who Jesus is as Peter is willing to gradually face more and more of who he (Peter) is in that light. As Benner writes, "It is . . . highly unlikely that he could have known the depths of his fears or the magnitude of his pride. These levels of knowing of self awaited deeper knowing of God" (Benner 2004, 27).

Biblically, it is clear that careful "seeing" requires being open to new demands and to new possibilities. Jesus describes two kinds of seeing in his story of a man

[11] Cf. "So long as love is 'blind,' that is, so long as it does not see a *whole* being, it is not truly under the sway of the primary word of relation. Hate is by nature blind. Only a part of a being can be hated" (Buber 1958, 16).

who is robbed, stripped, beaten, and left to die by the side of the road. Both the Levite and the priest see him but walk by on the other side of the road. The Samaritan, considered a stranger in that space, however sees the wounded man as a *thou*, is moved with compassion, and gives up his own agenda to serve and care for this stranger in distress. As mentioned previously, Jesus uses this story to illustrate the heart of biblical teaching about one of the two greatest commandments, the call to love your neighbor as yourself. Again, this is not a marginal ethical issue but central to the call of God's people.

Seeing biblically reflects a starting point for knowing that includes a striking shift of power, a willingness to open up to the unexpected, and a posture of humility and appropriate service. Thus Mary in seeing Jesus chooses to sit at his feet and learn in the way of a true disciple, while Martha clings to her own agenda and remains preoccupied with familiar roles, control, and given expectations (Luke 10:38–42). Martha does not seem at this time to see the wonder of who is in her midst, and the way in which that can change everything else.

Significant power differentials can block connection and distort knowledge. The role of the describer, category-maker, anthropological (or theological) assessor is an enormously powerful position. Depictions of the other carry enormous weight with immense implications and enduring impact. As theologian, Willie Jennings notes in *The Christian Imagination*, the ability by explorers and social scientists to name the other, to categorize them according to civilized or barbaric, developed or primitive, white or black, had a major impact with an oppressive burden the results of which many people of color continue to shoulder today (Jennings 2010). In scientific descriptions of the other in the nineteenth century people were assessed as having full or diminished humanity according to various physical and cultural features, and even head-measurements (Jackson and Weidman 2005). Many peoples were reduced to "its" rather than accurately known and honored as "thous."

Seeing the other within the framework of a biblical view of the stranger, with all humans as "living pictographs of Yahweh," requires a shift of power such that the other is treated with dignity and honor. It includes even a reverence for the other in the ways that he or she uniquely images the divine. And with that dignity, honor, and reverence comes the humble admission that, "For now we see through a glass darkly: but then face to face" (1 Cor. 13:12, KJV). This process of seeing thus requires ongoing openness, humility, and provisionality in describing what is known in particular (cf. Backues 2017). And it requires tenacious and continual re-centering on what is known of a universal nature—that the other who is seen is a sacred wonder.

As Gopin writes, there are few arguments related to Jewish ethical behavior that are more challenging to believers than the idea that God resides in the image of the other human being.

> It is as if a Divine voice says perpetually to the inner self who is conscious of the sacred laws of morality, "You want to find Me? You want to fast and suppress your body, or engage in any number of demonstrations of devotion in order to locate Me or conjure Me? Fine, go right ahead, but you have only to look and really see the stranger or estranged Other who walks past you every day. And the more you truly see him or her the more you will find Me."
>
> (Gopin 2006, 9)

Thus, a biblical vision of the stranger in which s/he is honored as *Thou*, resists categorical depictions. "Every *It* is bounded by others: *It* exists only through being bounded by others. But when *Thou* is spoken, there is no thing. *Thou* has no bounds" (Buber 1958, 4). Rather there is a sense of an openness of being that is acknowledged in the other and a permeability that resists categorization. For the one who seeks to know, it requires adoption of a posture of "'faithfulness' to what is given even as we hope to discover heretofore unknown aspects of reality, a reality that may yet reveal itself to future eyes in an 'indeterminate range'" (Polanyi 1974, viii).

To see and come to know another as a *Thou* demands a kind of immediacy and face-to-face quality that breaks open normal categorical ways of describing the other.

> But the mankind of a mere *It* that is imagined, postulated, and propagated by such a man has nothing in common with a living mankind where *Thou* may truly be spoken. The noblest fiction is a fetish, the loftiest fictitious sentiment is depraved.
>
> (Buber 1958, 14)

Making Space for the Stranger

Seeing strangers in a way that obviates against reducing them to a category or an *It* opens the way for a second aspect of knowing the stranger, and that is making space, or welcoming that person into one's life. This requires adequate preparation and an approach that incudes both openness and boundaries to avoid violating the other or one's own core commitments.

Preparation to meet and know the other includes careful study and training, as ethnographers well know. Additionally, authentic encounter and the kind of knowing of the stranger called for in scripture require internal and spiritual preparation. This has been described as "solitude of the heart" (Nouwen 1996, 44) or "creating space in myself for the other to come in" (Volf 1996, 141). Nouwen argues that without solitude of the heart in which I face my own contingency or limits along with God's great love, our relationships can become self-referential and exploitive. The other is easily reduced to an *It* who is there to serve my needs and fulfill my agenda. Spiritual preparation fosters discontent with a "self-enclosed identity" followed by a degree of self-emptying, since "the self that is 'full of itself' can neither receive the other nor make a genuine movement toward the other" (Volf 1996, 141).

Solitude of the heart awakens genuine desire for the *Thou*, rather than an approach to a person or community merely as a means to satisfy my curiosity, interest, or academic pursuits. The latter is not really a welcoming and free space for honest self-revelation of the other if that other is an object (*It*) to be studied, converted, or exploited, rather than a *Thou* to be treasured.

The space that is opened up in such preparation includes a readjustment of one's own identity before moving to explore the identities of the other. Real encounter and real knowing requires authentic openness to the other and thus a sense that the other is someone without whom I am incomplete. Biblically the stranger is someone to whom I am bound, as a member of my extended family and a co-heir of my future. Thus internal preparation to meet this other as a partner in my future rather than an object of curiosity or study shifts one's motivation. Such knowing is not about building up a knowledge base of abstractions by which to characterize the other. Rather the desire is for a living and transformative encounter, or meeting of the *I* and the *Thou* (Buber 1958, 11).

Historically, for some Christians, appropriate preparation and motivation have required a major pilgrimage. As Nouwen writes, "To fully appreciate what hospitality can mean, we possibly have to become first a stranger ourselves" (Nouwen 1996, 68). Celtic Christianity at times fostered such a high value of the stranger that Celtic Christians were willing to go to considerable effort to prepare themselves for the spiritually and physically demanding challenge of laying aside their defenses in order to love the stranger.

> The process in Celtic Christianity was that of a quest, becoming a *perigrini* or pilgrim. It included the willingness to become a stranger and to leave behind one's own comforts, possessions, certainties, and systems of control, while holding fast to a celebrative trust in God."
>
> (Dearborn 2012, 139)

It is no surprise that J.R.R. Tolkien, who took some inspiration from Celtic Christianity, narrated the transformative process in both Bilbo and Frodo Baggins as they were willing to venture forth from the Shire (Fimi 2006, 156–170). Bilbo was especially suspicious of strangers as were all in his community, until he went on a quest with Gandalf and the dwarves, and awakened to the rich wonders available to those who are open to the other. As he learned to make space in his life for the dwarves with all of their own particularities, he did not lose what was distinctive about his "hobbit" identity. But rather than that being a boundary meant to keep others out, his identity now became a bridge to a sense of greater interdependency and vitality. And while retaining his hobbit love of nature, feasting, and the quiet life, he developed deeper values of commitment to the common good of all, and appreciation for the diverse peoples who populated Middle Earth. Thus, his final years were spent not in the Shire but with the Elves, neither fearful of the other nor ashamed that he had himself become the welcomed stranger in their midst.

Through all of this preparation Bilbo learned, in Volf's words:

> to transcend the perspective of our own side and take into account the complementary view of the other. Even more . . . attending to shifts in the other's identity, to make space for the changing other in ourselves and to be willing to renegotiate our own identity in interaction with those of others.
>
> (Volf 2006, 28)

Such preparation and pilgrimage is necessary for the sense of presence needed in the encounter with the stranger that correlates with Buber's characterization of *I-Thou* relationships.

> The primary word *I-Thou* can be spoken only with the whole being. Concentration and fusion into the whole being can never take place without me. I become through my relation to the *Thou*; as I become *I*, I say *Thou*.
>
> (Buber 1958, 11)

Because as Polanyi claimed, knowing is irreducibly personal, it requires full immersion of the whole person into the relational context (Newman 2007, 110). That means being present with the entirety of one's body and being.

To be fully present requires the gifts of space and self-offering, but also a suspension of judgment and criticism. Volf writes, "*the will to give ourselves to others and 'welcome' them, to readjust our identities to make space for them, is prior to any judgment about others, except that of identifying them in their humanity*" (Volf 1996, 29, italics his).

To make space for the other means to offer space that is safe, free, and disarming. It is a safe space if offered, not as a way of changing people, but where if desired, change can take place (Nouwen 1996, 71). Iñupiat and Yupik students at the college where I taught in Alaska were often wary about opening up to receive anthropologists who would come to study them and their villages. They felt at times that their ancient ways were valued more than they were themselves. Though they were eager for their villages to have viable health clinics, working toilets, and fast moving vehicles, they sensed that the space they were invited to occupy was one that would reify them and their villages in quaint and static ways of life. They were grateful that their cultural identities as Iñupiat or Yupik peoples were being honored and valued. They sensed that what was particular to their lives and cultures was being treasured. But the sense of freedom to grow and change as part of the universal family of humankind felt somewhat absent. Thus, distrust and defensiveness prompted them and family members at times to make stories up for the people studying them, to create a kind of protective barrier behind which they could hide.

Freedom to grow and change in a way that is both consistent with the particularities of one's culture and the universal quality of one's humanity is the kind of space where authentic knowledge can take place. As Buber writes, "The *It* is the eternal chrysalis, the *Thou* the eternal butterfly" (Buber 1958, 18). The stranger who is honored as a *Thou* is approached with openness to their multifaceted past, complex present, and their hopes and desires for their future.

This is where a discussion of appropriate boundaries in *I* and *Thou* relationships is so crucial. For the stranger to be willing to relinquish defenses and to be known, certain protections are vital. Though there is a sense in which the *Thou* is unbounded and to be known in all the dynamism and multiplicity of many overlapping identities, a boundaried space is necessary for safe disarmament and genuine self-revelation to occur. Protections are vital to ensure that the relationship moves toward authentic knowing, *I-Thou*, rather than consumption, assimilation, subordination, or domination of the other, *I-it*.

A biblical approach to the stranger challenges and enriches modern notions of inclusivity, diversity, tolerance, or pluralism. These culturally chic concepts often have a market-based drive to them that can devolve into a force of "homogenizing consumption" or "boutique multiculturalism" (Fish 1997, 379; Newman 2007, 32). Rather than authentic relationship and knowing, such an approach to pluralism can flatten out the particularities of cultural diversity and be a force for deep conformity masquerading as pluralism. Thus Nicholas Boyle writes:

> 'Pluralism' is these days a popular word, and a comfortable idea, in many more and less theoretical contexts, but it is something of a mystification—an appearance of variety in the adiaphora in order to conceal the unity in what counts, a velvet glove round the hidden hand.
>
> (Boyle 1998, 152)

The biblical narrative conveys both destructive issues that arise from the absence of boundaries and contrasting depictions of human flourishing where boundaries are sustained. Gopin describes the lack of respect for boundaries that was evident in the Garden of Eden as a:

> story of over-consumption and the breaking boundaries—not in order to meet the other, to engage and appreciate the tree, but in order to consume and thus destroy it. Appreciation of the Other must respect boundaries of separate existence. Where there is no boundary there is no

> recognition of anything but the self. Where there is nothing but the self there is only demonic destruction and self-worship.
>
> (Gopin 2006, 11)

Rather than moving toward wisdom and true knowledge, Adam rejected his limits and "practiced ultimate alienation from the sacred aspect of the Other in the world" (Gopin 2006, 11).

What began as a healthy and protected set of relationships for Joseph and his people in Egypt devolved into oppression and slavery without those protections having been enshrined in covenanted commitments. Thus Israel was given covenants as the basis of life in the Promised Land, where they could live as a type of new creation. These covenants required them to live within their limits and to respect, rather than oppress the strangers among them, since they knew what it was like to have been so dehumanized themselves. Loving the stranger does not dissolve differences. Rather it becomes a means of owning their own particularities and receiving healing of their lingering wounds from having been abused strangers themselves. And in healing themselves they are also able to offer healing to care "for the Other who lives across a clear cultural, economic or political boundary" (Gopin 2006, 6).

The reason the stranger is "the essential metaphor of biblical experience" is that through welcoming the stranger Israel is able to hold in tension both particularities of human difference and the universality of God's love for all (Gopin 2006, 12).

> The stranger is loved but not consumed. The stranger continues to be different but is loved nevertheless. The boundary remains. And the love travels across the boundary day to day like light from the sun. But it does not consume and it is not consumed. Both remain vibrant and effluent, and the metaphor of Divine relationship to and love for the world is re-enacted in the relationship of self and other, in the ethical relationship of meeting across boundaries that are never destroyed.
>
> (Gopin 2006, 13)

Thus Abraham as a model for such engagement retained his particular rituals and ceremonies while remaining committed to his call as a vehicle of blessing for others. He was able to hold to his own deep priorities, while also defending those who lived as strangers to his ways in Sodom (Gen. 18:22–23). Lot, on the other hand, became so assimilated into that community that though he retained the value of welcoming and protecting strangers, he allowed his personal boundaries to collapse and offered his own daughters to be raped.

To offer a safe space that includes boundary protections is to be willing to live with the tension of honoring the wondrous humanity of the other, while at the same time recognizing marked differences that at times evoke conflict in that space.[12] Thus Nouwen argues that there is a place in welcoming the stranger for confrontation, rather than hiding ourselves behind some pretense of neutrality. "Real receptivity asks for confrontation because space can only be a welcoming space where there are clear boundaries, and boundaries are limits between which we define our own position. Flexible limits, but limits nonetheless" (Nouwen 1996, 98). To enter into an *I-Thou* relation requires an *I* who is aware of her own particularities and commitments, and willing to reveal them as such. For both parties it can become a space of increasing clarity about one's own particularities and a willingness to explore those particularities critically. Both receptivity and confrontation are needed. "Receptivity without confrontation leads to a bland neutrality that serves nobody. Confrontation without receptivity leads to an oppressive aggression which hurts everybody" (Nouwen 1996, 99).

This is a challenging process that is easily violated. Because of this, followers of Jesus acknowledge the need for a mediator—the Holy Spirit. In the Bible protective boundaries to guide God's people are created that are not only evident in the Word given to the people of God, but also ensured where the presence of God's Spirit is welcomed. The Spirit's "love presses not only outward to include others, but also inwards (and protectively) to sustain the difference between the persons, thus preserving a perfect and harmonious balance between union and distinction" (Coakley 2013, 24).

The movement of the Spirit to create unity in the midst of diversity is evident throughout the New Testament, particularly the book of Acts. Tensions arise as two very different communities, Jews and Gentiles, are brought together in the outpouring of the

[12] Duke University's wrestling in January 2015 with its approach to Muslims and Muslim worship on its campus highlights the complexity of this challenge.

Spirit at Pentecost and the creation of the Church. The Spirit of God guides believers in navigating the turbulent waters of ethnic differences in ways that preserve cultural identities while retaining the core value of God's universal love and concern for all people. Jews thus welcome Gentiles without forcing them to be circumcised or adapt to their purity laws. Yet they must themselves relinquish some ancient traditions that exclude the other. Peter is inspired by God to let go of his judgment that certain foods and certain people are unclean (Acts 10:3–4). Accordingly he is willing to go to the house of the Gentile, Cornelius, to stay with him and share in his food. But he is also clear that there are certain non-negotiables. He makes clear to Cornelius that as a mere mortal, he will not be worshiped. Instead he offers him the wisdom from God for which Cornelius had prayed. He proclaims God's universal love: "God shows no partiality but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him" (Acts 10:34–5). And he also proclaims the particular nature of God's self-revelation in Jesus Christ (Acts 10:36–43).

Welcoming these strangers into their community meant that the Jews shared with Gentiles their greatest treasures, including their relationship with God, the outpouring of the Holy Spirit, and community life, while also honoring those cultural differences among the Gentiles that contributed to their well-being and their participation in the purposes of God. They were able in this way to fulfill the ancient commandment from Exodus 12:49, "The alien living with you must be treated as one of your native born. Love him as yourself for you were aliens in Egypt."

The Spirit's work among God's people equips them to develop more of a sense of their own positive identity as those who are beloved and chosen, by means of which the Spirit then empowers them to extend God's love to others. This makes it possible for them to move beyond the tendencies of a negative identity in which one defines oneself by who one is not, and thus by refusal of the other. Space is created that preserves particularity, but is expansive enough that their very particularity can become a means of welcoming and coming to know others.

Solidarity and Shalom with the Stranger

The biblical wisdom for knowing the stranger does not result in mere theoretical understanding accompanied by mild indifference, stoic tolerance, or resignation to parallel existences. Rather, the ultimate goal behind the ethic of the stranger is "to arrive where we started and to know the place for the first time" (T.S. Eliot, *Four Quartets*,"Little Gidding"). That is, it is to return to the original story of Creation, of the Strange God who would create us and welcome us, as both strangers and those created in God's image, into God's own Triune communion. It is to remember that even as there is both unity and diversity in God's innermost being, we reflect God's glory by being one universal family composed of a rich array of cultures and languages. And it is to live with the vision that one day we will feast together as brothers and sisters from every tribe, tongue, and nation.

The biblical view of the stranger builds a rich case in which we realize our solidarity with all others, yet a solidarity that is not sameness. We are all strangers, and we belong to a God who was willing to enter into our world as a stranger in order to break down the dividing walls that we have erected to separate ourselves from God and from one another. To accept the gift of our solidarity with God and one another is not to capitulate to uniformity. Living in the tension of remaining strangers and thus somewhat unknown to one another (1 Cor. 13:12) while also being "no longer strangers" (Ephes. 2:19), preserves the gift of unity while sustaining particularity. Thus Gopin points to the "exquisite paradox of the sanctified life of the stranger, a blend of radical particularity in a morally challenging world, together with an acute commitment to the same world" (Gopin 2006, 13). When merely focusing on the universality of our solidarity it is easier to trample over particularist identities. On the other hand when the particularities of our identities are given hegemony, tribal and sectarian loyalties can override the value of the other.

From a Christian perspective, as members of one family we are called to live more and more into the likeness of the one in whose image we have been created. As we conform more and more to the character of God in Christ our family resemblance in self-giving love, freedom, joy, and gratitude will become more apparent. "At the same time, we are called into this unexpected family to become more distinct from one another in our created uniqueness allowing the particular glory of God in us to be seen and fulfilled. These two callings require one another and will test one another. Both come from God's imagination" (Labberton 2007, 154).

The goal is to live out our kinship as Father Greg Boyle describes. It is to move from separate rooms of existence, into the hall of service, and ultimately into

the ballroom of kinship where with all people we will one day feast and celebrate together (Boyle 2010). Strangers are not cast adrift, rarely to be known and welcomed, without a future or a hope. Rather they are welcomed with those gathered around the Lamb and the throne, "a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages" (Rev. 7:9).

I will conclude with a call for theologians and anthropologists as relative strangers to welcome and care more effectively for one another in this biblical "I-Thou" manner. This would include a refusal to create caricatures of the other. It would also include a commitment to see one another more accurately, to make space for the other, and to honor the other by guarding the particularities and boundaries of the other. It would mean acknowledging the gifts that are part of the disciplinary field of the other, while also being faithful to the particularities of one's own discipline and thus engaging in confrontation from time to time. It would also mean adapting as appropriate to the learned wisdom of the other. Anthropologists may at times feel they are being offered *mikigaq* from theologians that is hard to swallow. Yet hopefully this truth is fermented in the blood of the ultimate stranger, Jesus—a cup of fermentation that is a cup of fellowship, of deep intimacy with God and with others.

This theologian for one appreciates that theologians and anthropologists share a familial resemblance of seeking truths about those who are strangers. And my hope is that anthropology will deal not merely with "the chrysalis form of religion" but that which in fresh turning "is born again with new wings" (Buber 1958, 116). I know theologians need anthropologists. Thank you for welcoming this theologian in this vital anthropological work.

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Immigration and the Dehumanizing of the "Other" in the United States

Steven Ybarrola

Immigration has become the defining issue of our moment. People are on the move like never before, and countries are scrambling to deal with both the influx, and the loss, of people on the move. In the United States, our former and current president, Trump, has made expelling immigrants his top priority, and we are witnessing the revamping of the Department of Homeland Security, and the Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE), to capture and expel immigrants at an alarming rate, disrupting peaceful communities and denying those detained due process as required by the U.S. Constitution. What should be our response as followers of Jesus? How do we need to be, as Andrew Walls stated, "out of step" with our society when it comes to supporting the most vulnerable among us?

Anthropology, from its inception as a discipline in the latter part of the 19th century, dealt with the study of the non-Western, "exotic" Other. Armchair anthropologists such as Edward Tylor and Henry Morgan gathered data from missionaries and global travelers to construct a theory of cultural/societal development that fit within the construct of the biological evolutionary paradigm recently developed at the time. This placed some peoples at the evolutionary level of "Savages" (e.g., Australian Aborigines), others at the level of "Barbarians" (e.g. Tahitians and Aztecs), and still others at the level of "Civilized" (i.e., Westerners) (Langness 2005, 39). Since the latter part of the 19th and early part of the 20th centuries, and the critique of this "paradigm" or construct in anthropology brought by the German immigrant to the United States, Franz Boas, the discipline has moved more in the direction of a cultural relativistic approach that tries to understand and present non-Western, as well as the diversity within Western, cultures in their own context and understanding, rather than judging them by some arbitrary ethnocentric standard (see Stocking 1992).

However, the early evolutionary model presented a clear way of distinguishing "us" (Western, civilized) from "them" (non-Western barbarians, savages). As an undergraduate and graduate student studying anthropology in the 1980s, the way this was sometimes conveyed was through the image of cannibalism. There was hardly any trope that more clearly demarcated the gulf between us and them than the accusation that other non-Western groups of people ate humans. Now, there evidently are cases where a group would practice what we in the West might call ritual cannibalism (though they would not see it that way), such as when the Yanomami of the Amazon would drink the remains of a cremated ancestor in a ritual ceremony (Chagnon 1968), and Americans may be familiar with the tragedy of the Donner Party which, when trapped by snow in the Sierra Nevadas, resorted to eating members of their party who had died in order to survive. But in general it was found that "The charge of cannibalism has always been leveled against people whom other societies find foreign or inferior. It was a weapon of colonialism and class" (Pickering 2018, 9).[1] In other words, a key aspect of the accusation of

[1] In Pickering's concise overview of the anthropological study of cannibalism, he states, "Invariably, in-depth research into the evidence for cannibalism in specific societies has contributed to disproving allegations. The closer we look, the less reliable is the so-called ethnographic evidence" (2018, 4). See also Obeyesekere 2005.

cannibalism was an egregious way to dehumanize the "Other."[2]

This brings us to the presidential debate between then Vice President Harris and contender Trump on September 10, 2024. During a discussion of immigration, Trump accused Haitian immigrants in Springfield, Ohio of eating peoples' dogs, cats, and pets.[3] The Washington Post noted,

> The promotion of such rumors, which thrust the city [of Springfield] into the national spotlight, is rooted in a centuries-old racist trope of vilifying newcomers to the United States and highlights the country's present-day divides, historians note . . . His remarks were the latest in a swirl of canards that Trump has spread about Haitian immigrants, despite local officials debunking the claims.[4]

Vice President Harris was incredulous, stating that this was not happening. However, the accusation was enough. This is because, like cannibalism, to accuse another group of people in the United States of eating peoples' pets is akin to accusing them of cannibalism, as most people in the U.S. consider pets as part of their family, especially dogs and cats. The Christian anthropologist Robert Priest has a take on this that he gave in a chapel talk at Wheaton College in 2008[5] in the context of discussing Billy Graham's cultural faux pas of preaching in India among upper caste Hindus about the Prodigal Son's father killing the fatted calf upon the reception of his lost son—a moving story, at least for Americans. This was, of course, perceived as an abomination among those Hindus who understood the cow as something sacred. Priest presents the Hindus saying, "The cow is our mother. You do not kill and eat your mother!" This led Priest to give, as a comparative cultural faux pas, an imaginary evangelist from outside the United States, who preached a sermon in which, at the end of the story, without any good reason, the father of the story kills and cooks the family dog to celebrate the son's return. One can imagine how this would be received. The point is, for the majority of us in the U.S., pets are sacred--they are part of our family--and to accuse immigrants of eating them is sacrilegious—it's dehumanizing.

What we are experiencing today regarding immigration, unfortunately, has a long-standing history in Western societies, and particularly the United States. There has always been a xenophobic and racialist understanding of the "Other". See, for example, Thomas Jefferson's *Notes on the State of Virginia* in 1781 where he stated, "I advance it therefore as a suspicion only, that the blacks, whether originally a distinct race, or made distinct by time and circumstances, are inferior to the whites in the endowments both of body and mind" (1825, 198).

Following the trajectory of Jefferson's "suspicions", in the latter part of the 19th century arose "scientific racialism" (Lieberman and Scupin 2012). This was the idea that "race" was real and determinative, and people of other "races" were inferior in their intellectual and other capabilities to "Americans" (i.e., northern and western Europeans). My grandfather was one of these "inferior ones", coming from southern Europe (Spain) in 1896 when he would have been viewed as non-white and a threat to American society--much as immigrants, especially those from the Global South, are being portrayed today (see Scupin 2012, and Guglielmo and Salerno 2003). Scientific racialism, promoted by leading 19th century scientists such as Samuel Morten, was based on a social imaginary of their time—the immigrant "Other" as inferior. Social imaginaries, according to the Canadian philosopher Charles Taylor,

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[2] While what I will present in this essay could be applied to any number of societies, since one of the seeming human universals is distinguishing "Us" from "Them", or in-group from out-group (see Brown 2012), and could be used to analyze any number of social divisions, I will limit my discussion to the United States and the issue of immigration.

[3] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lHycpIhnFcU. Around the time of the debate, polls showed that for 82% of Trump supporters, immigration was a very important issue in the 2024 election, whereas only 39% of Harris supporters felt the same (https://www.pewresearch.org/race-and-ethnicity/2024/09/27/trump-and-harris-supporters-differ-on-mass-deportations-but-favor-border-security-high-skilled-immigration).

[4] https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2024/09/14/trump-immigrants-eating-pets-racist-stereotype/.

[5] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pfTbSNtfVEo.

are something broader and deeper than the intellectual schemes people may entertain when they think about social reality in a disengaged mode. I am thinking, rather, of ways people imagine their social existence, how they fit together with others, how things go on between them and their fellows, the expectations that are normally met, and the deeper normative notions and images that underlie these expectations (Taylor 2003, 23).

If we think today of the social imaginaries related to the immigrant "other", we have a whole litany of denigrations—the immigrant as invader, occupier, job-stealer, social welfare cheat, stranger, enemy–and on the other side, beneficial to the economy and society, and even friend,[6] among others. In my research among internal migrants from other parts of Spain to the Basque region (north central Spain), a region which historically has had a very strong Basque nationalist sentiment, I found that the attitudes of the local population created two contrasting social imaginaries—the immigrant as enemy or ally, stranger or friend. The first was largely a political designation—you're either with us or against us in our struggle in opposition to the Spanish state. The second was more of a cultural designation—you're either with us or against us in our struggle for cultural sovereignty, including things like the Basque language (which is not remotely related to Spanish or French), and other Basque cultural exhibitions (e.g., ways of socializing, festivals) (Ybarrola 2002; 2009).

One of the key imaginaries that is being used today is the immigrant as a "threat" to societies and "our" way of life. This has been the main social imaginary used to try and deport thousands of migrants from the United States, even those who have legal standing in the country. One of the most egregious of these recently is the case of Abrego Garcia. Here, a man from El Salvador, who had legal status to be in the U.S. and a court order barring his deportation, was nonetheless rounded up by Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) and deported to a now known notorious prison in El Salvador. The Supreme Court of the United States (SCOTUS) unanimously ordered the Trump administration to facilitate his return, even as the administration acknowledged that his arrest and deportation were an error. He was eventually returned to the United States after weeks of delay, and after the Trump administration indicated that they were not planning to bring him back despite the ruling by SCOTUS.[7] Upon his arrival, he was immediately arrested by the U.S. government for alleged "smuggling" undocumented immigrants into the country.[8]

We are not in an unprecedented time, since our country has experienced this anti-immigrant sentiment throughout its history; but we are in another dangerous and inhumane time regarding migrants. Unfortunately, open racialism has reared its ugly head again, which, one could argue, is both good and bad. The good aspect is that since Trump's statement after coming down the escalator in Trump Tower regarding Mexican immigrants when announcing his candidacy ("They're bringing drugs. They're bringing crime. They're rapists. And some, I assume, are good people"[9]), and his election and first presidency in 2016, it has been very clear that American racialism and racism were just residing below the surface of American society after the presidency of Obama. In other words, there has always been a racialist/racist part of who we are as a society. In the wake of Obama's election in 2008, some pundits were arguing that we were now in a post-racial society. This "imaginary" has been dispelled; racialism/racism went underground, but in the last decade it has come back in full-force. The Unite the Right white supremacist rally, and the killing of a counter-protester, in Charlottesville in 2017, was an early cautionary tale of Trump's first administration.

The bad aspect of open racialism is that now it seems no holds are barred when it comes to immigrants of color. ICE is conducting raids on stores, meatpacking plants, and agricultural fields throughout the country, as well as rounding up people on the streets while wearing masks and unidentifiable

[6] https://news.gallup.com/poll/692522/surge-concern-immigration-abated.aspx.

[7] https://thehill.com/homenews/administration/5274438-donald-trump-abc-news-interview-kilmar-abrego-garcia/.

[8] https://www.axios.com/2025/05/04/trump-deportations-abrego-garcia-supreme-court.

[9] https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/fact-checker/wp/2015/07/08/donald-trumps-false-comments-connecting-mexican-immigrants-and-crime/.

clothing. Some Hispanic[10] churches have stopped meeting for fear of being raided. Racial profiling increasingly has been used to detain Hispanic U.S. citizens and others who are here with documentation, as well as those who are undocumented.[11] In response, we are currently witnessing protests against ICE raids in various cities throughout the U.S., with the Los Angeles area receiving the national spotlight when some demonstrators became violent. This prompted the Trump administration to claim that LA was "under siege" and a "war zone" which led Trump to send in the National Guard and Marines to "control" the situation.[12] Governor Newsome and other elected officials from California, as well as local authorities, have accused the Trump administration of fanning the flames of unrest through their militarization of the situation.[13] As *The Guardian* pointed out, "The only people facing a war zone [in LA] are immigrants.[14]

So when president Trump made the claim, completely unsubstantiated, that immigrants in Springfield, Ohio were eating people's pets, he was tapping into this social imaginary of the immigrant as the Other to be feared; they are the pet eating Other. My wife and I have been watching the television series *Resident Alien*, in which an alien from another planet arrives, and, while at first planning to destroy all humans, becomes more human as a result of his connections with other people. It is interesting watching his transformation from an earth-killing alien into a more compassionate human being. With the current administration, we are seeing no such transformation. What we are watching in the TV series is the development of empathy, something we have yet to see regarding immigrants with anyone in this administration despite the fact that Trump is married to an immigrant (though white) and J.D. Vance is married to someone whose family immigrated from India. Ironies abound!

Samuel Huntington, a Harvard professor and key theorist during the Cold War, scrambled, as did many other political scientists after the rapid fall of the Berlin Wall, to come up with a new theory of what our world looked like in the wake of the collapse of the Soviet Union. He developed the theory that we were now in a "clash of civilizations"—the idea that the world could be divided into clearly bounded "civilizations" which would be in conflict with each other (Huntington 1996). The attack in the United States on 9/11 seemed to support his theory, as a handful of largely Saudi men (15 of 19) flew planes into the World Trade Center, the Pentagon, and attempted to do the same with the Capitol. Critics of Huntington's theory have pointed out that there is far more conflict and warring within his designated "civilizations" than between them.[15]

However, Huntington's theory gained a widespread hearing and acceptance in governmental circles. He then followed up his book *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of the World Order* (1996) with *Who Are We: The Challenges to America's National Identity* (2004). Here Huntington extends his "Clash" theory to immigration, arguing that if one "civilization", in this case the U.S., accepts too many immigrants from a different civilization (i.e., Latin American), it is in danger of losing its own identity. In the context of his argument, the word "challenges" could just as easily be replaced with "threats". This was not lost on one reviewer of his book, who prophetically noted

> Nowhere does Huntington address the question of what is to be done. He doesn't have to. Merely to "problematize" Mexican immigration in this

[10] Throughout this essay I will use the term Hispanic to refer to immigrants from Latin America. I recognize that this is somewhat of a controversial issue with some preferring the use of Latino/a and more recently Latinx. While I understand the arguments for using the latter, I've chosen to use Hispanic due to its wide usage in the United States, as well as the fact that the Latin American immigrants I worked with in Iowa self-identified as Hispanic.

[11] https://www.axios.com/2025/07/09/ice-us-citizens-detention-racial-profiling.

[12] https://abcnews.go.com/US/trump-la-siege-mayor-governor-paint-picture/story?id=122652268.

[13] https://www.latimes.com/california/story/2025-06-10/newsom-says-about-immigration-l-a-raids.

[14] https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2025/jun/22/los-angeles-trump-immigrants.

[15] https://newrepublic.com/article/176019/samuel-huntington-clash-civilizations-wrong.

> fashion is enough. The more Americans buy into his argument that Mexicans are a threat—an argument that will be increasingly attractive the more the economy turns downward—the more a host of "solutions" will present themselves more or less automatically: stepped-up border patrols, intensified efforts to bar those whose papers are not in order from public schools and hospital emergency rooms, etc. (Lazare 2004, 22).

What is often missed in this rush to deport the immigrant Other is what they contribute to American society. I grew up in the Central Valley of Northern California where I saw Hispanics, primarily those from Mexico, working in the fields to harvest the produce most of the rest of the United States depends on. One of the arguments being made today, which is not new, is that immigrants are taking jobs away from Americans, but these are jobs other Americans do not want. I recall in 2011, after Alabama passed one of the then most restrictive immigration laws in the country, a mass exodus of Hispanic workers from the state took place. There was a news story about one owner of a fruit orchard who, while the camera panned showing the abundance of fruit hanging from the trees, said that almost all of that fruit would fall to the ground and rot due to the lack of laborers willing to work in the orchard. He stated that once the Hispanic laborers left, no Americans were willing to take the job of picking the fruit. This has led Alabama orchard growers to push for more guest worker visas.[16] [17]

When I was in Middle School, a friend and I decided that for a summer job we would work in the fields in the Central Valley of northern California. We filled out the paperwork to allow us to do this, and then went to a field to pick bell peppers, working alongside Hispanic laborers. My friend was tall, so he picked the peppers on the top of the plants, and I laid in dry irrigation ditches on my back picking those on the lower side. After a day of working in the hot San Joaquin Valley summer, and receiving very little compensation, we decided that that was enough for us; we worked one day! This has always given me a great appreciation for what these immigrants do to provide the produce that we eat every day.

In a small town in Iowa I did life history interviews among Hispanics who had moved there primarily to work in a meatpacking plant. Again, this was hard, and often dangerous, work that did not pay well, or have benefits expected by most American workers. One day I took a tour of the plant, and was struck by how many, mainly Hispanic workers (though there were other immigrants as well) were providing this labor. In doing these life history interviews, I always came away with two feelings: First, I was humbled that they would be willing to share their stories with me, since I was an outsider, though I spoke Spanish. And secondly, I was struck with how their stories were very much like my family's stories of immigration to the U.S. In other words, I was able to empathize with them, seeing myself and my family in their stories. This empathy is what is too often missing from Americans who have forgotten their or their family's own immigrant past.

So what happens when we lose this immigrant labor? Growers and producers in various parts of the country, be they fruit or sweet potato growers in Alabama, vegetable growers in Northern California, or meat plant owners in Nebraska and Iowa, will either see their crops rot and businesses suffer, or will have to pay higher wages to workers (not a bad thing), which will raise the price of everything we eat. At the time of this writing, there have been ICE raids on meat plants,[18] farm laborers,[19] and even stores like Home Depot, which is leading to growing protests in many parts of the country, and great fear among the immigrants.[20] [21]

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[16] https://aldailynews.com/in-labor-shortage-more-alabama-farms-turn-to-guest-worker-visas/.

[17] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LiQj_VYLvPw.

[18] https://www.cnn.com/2025/06/17/us/omaha-ice-raid-meatpacking-plant.

[19] https://www.latimes.com/california/story/2025-06-10/ice-expands-immigration-raids-into-californias-agricultural-heartland.

[20] For example, the No Kings protests throughout the country on June 14, 2025, which opposed president Trump's policies, may well have been the largest one-day protest in U.S. history, with an estimated 4 to 6 million people participating (https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2025/jun/19/no-kings-how-many-protesters-attended).

[21] President Trump stated that the government needs to pull back on ICE raids with farmers and hotel workers. However, within a few days this change in policy was reversed and ICE raids on these industries resumed (https://www.washingtonpost.com/immigration/2025/06/16/trump-farms-hotels-immigration-raids/).

Other contributions immigrants make to American society are safer communities (O'Brien, Collingwood, and El-Khatib 2017); the increase of religious people, especially Christians, who practice and take their faith seriously (Levitt 2007, 2001); and, especially among undocumented workers, payments to Social Security which most will not collect, helping to keep that program solvent.[22]

Biblical Reflections

On January 21, 2025, following the inauguration of president Trump, Bishop Mariann Budde, the Episcopal Bishop of Washington, DC, delivered her remarks at a prayer service at the National Cathedral directly to the newly installed president:

> In the name of our God, I ask you to have mercy upon the people in our country who are scared now . . . I ask you to have mercy, Mr. President, on those in our communities whose children fear that their parents will be taken away, and that you help those who are fleeing war zones and persecution in their own lands to find compassion and welcome here. Our God teaches us that we are to be merciful to the stranger, for we were all once strangers in this land. May God grant us the strength and courage to honor the dignity of every human being, to speak the truth to one another in love and walk humbly with each other and our God for the good of all people, the good of all people in this nation and the world.[23]

When shortly afterwards Bishop Budde was asked on CNN what led her to make those comments, she said,

> Well, these are the people that I know. These are not abstract people for me, they're actual people that I know, so I wanted to speak on their behalf. I wanted to present a vision of what unity could look like in this country that is transcending of differences and viewpoints and acknowledging our common humanity. I wanted to speak in such a way that reflected that dignity and respect, but I also wanted to bring into that space the real humanity of the people I was referencing.[24]

This is the key element that I've discussed above. When we talk about people in the abstract, we view them through our social imaginaries, and when it comes to immigrants, too often this is a denigrating or dehumanizing imaginary. But as we actually get to know people who have migrated, this imagery, i.e., our understanding, has the chance to be modified and transformed. However, this is not always the case. We can see the immigrants we may know as an "exception", and it doesn't necessarily change our overall view of the immigrant Other. I recall, when my family and I were living in the Basque region of Spain doing my dissertation research, being in a pub with a couple of my friends from church. They were talking negatively about the United States, which is quite common in many parts of Europe, and one of them looked at me and said, "What about Steve?" The other friend looked at me, and knowing my Basque ancestry, said, "Oh, he's not really American. He's Basque." This made me feel good, since I was not actually culturally Basque, but it also illustrates how I became an "exception" to their general view of Americans.

So, as Bishop Budde indicated, we need to develop empathy, since we are all, nationals and immigrants alike, created in the image of God (the imago Dei). This does not come easily, as the uncomfortableness of Trump and his family during Budde's presentation demonstrated. We as Christians—as Jesus followers--like everyone else, are naturally ethnocentric, and often too nationalistic to be willing or able to move beyond our own national perspective regarding the immigrant Other to understand and accept them in their own, and our own, weakness. As Bishop Budde noted, which is quite biblical, we need to be merciful to the stranger because we were all once strangers in this land.

M. Daniel Carroll R., an Old Testament scholar and Professor of Biblical Studies and Pedagogy at Wheaton College, has written as someone with

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[22] https://www.nytimes.com/2025/01/13/business/social-security-undocumented-immigrants.html.

[23] https://www.democracynow.org/2025/1/22/bishop_budde.

[24] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2BMZAkFbt9M&t=189s.

Guatemalan ancestry, on the biblical mandate to love the stranger (Carroll 2013). Carroll's Old Testament study of how Israel was to treat the "stranger" is quite illustrative of what we are experiencing today with immigration. There is currently a Facebook discussion on immigration from a "Christian" perspective that is making the rounds. In this iteration, the "Christian" perspective is presented as one in which immigration, and the mandate in Scripture to love the stranger or foreigner, is qualified, largely on nationalistic grounds.[25] While all countries must develop policies regarding immigration, and both Democrats and Republicans in the U.S. agree that our immigration policy needs to be reformed, my focus in this essay is not on border policy, but rather how Christians are called to treat immigrants who are already here. Carroll argues that "The Bible is a set of lenses that brings us into focus as God would want us to perceive [immigration]" (43). He states, "Immigrants are made in the image of God. Believers must examine their hearts for possible contrary allegiances that might lead them to want to deny entry to those from elsewhere—whether this be on cultural, racial, socioeconomic, educational, or political grounds" (2013, 48). As I understand Carroll, he is not calling for open borders, but rather that whatever our immigration policy, we do not deny entry of immigrants based on the factors he states above.

Carroll's emphasis on allegiances is quite germane to our discussion of immigration, since, as the anthropologist Clifford Geertz noted decades ago after the collapse of colonialism in many parts of the world, the key question in these countries was where did their allegiance lie—with the newly developing states, or with their ethnic group. This is a question that Christians need to ask themselves today—where does my allegiance lie; with the state (country) or with the Kingdom of God. Even Geertz, a secular anthropologist, back in the 1970s realized that you could not serve two masters (Geertz 1973. See also Meneses 2006).

As is well known, the Bible is about people on the move. From Abram's calling to leave his people and move to a new place, which would have been incredibly dangerous at the time, to the call of Jesus for his followers to go into all the world to spread the Gospel, we, as believers, have been called to move; stasis is the death throe of Christianity. After the Jerusalem Council in Acts 15, the Gospel became culturally translatable (Sanneh 1995). Since that time (and even before, since this was the reason for the Jerusalem Council) Christianity has made itself welcome in all of the world, with the potential to become contextual in every culture, though this is not always realized.

As Andrew Walls, the historian of World Christianity, wrote, there were two unchanging characteristics of the Gospel throughout church history—the Indigenizing Principle and the Pilgrim Principle. The Indigenizing Principle was the idea that every believer wanted the church to be "a place to feel at home"—to be with people who were like us. This is what I call the cultural aspect of the Gospel. The Pilgrim Principle, on the other hand, argued that to be a follower of Jesus one had to recognize that "no city is our home", and that to be a follower of Jesus meant that we had to be "out of step" with our own society and culture. This is what I call the countercultural aspect of the Gospel. As Walls states, "Not only does God in Christ take people as they are: He takes them in order to transform them into what He wants them to be" (Walls 1996, 8).

Christians in the United States, and globally, are living in a time when our allegiance is being tested when it comes to immigration. What does it mean to be "out of step" with our society with regard to loving the most marginalized, vulnerable, and dehumanized members? Will we side with our nationalistic selves and support the widespread rounding up of immigrants, including U.S. citizens or those who are here with proper documentation? Will we support our elected officials being harassed and arrested for challenging current immigration policies?[26] Will we support masked and unidentified ICE agents "disappearing" people on city streets?[27] Or will we stand up for those who are having their civil rights, according to the Constitution, such as the Fourteenth Amendment's due process clause, denied? Will we, as

[25] https://www.facebook.com/HowertonJosh/posts/pfbid02hs7R7UCJPm8DmtTnDQ4Hw775r6tV3VPPeCoZMWXHHqQ9bQhomjso46UqXQ5g57Mtl.

[26] https://www.nytimes.com/2025/06/12/us/politics/senator-alex-padilla-handcuffed.html.

[27] https://www.nytimes.com/2025/03/26/us/ice-tufts-student-detained-rumeysa-ozturk.html.

Bishop Budde stated, be merciful to, and stand with, those who are scared at what is currently happening—scared for themselves, their families, and communities? Will our allegiance to Christ lead us to be out of step with our society even when this might cost us personally, challenging the social imaginary of the immigrant as a threat? Being a follower of Jesus in troubling times may not be easy, but then Jesus did tell his followers that to be his disciple meant we would have to deny ourselves and pick up our cross daily (Luke 9:23).

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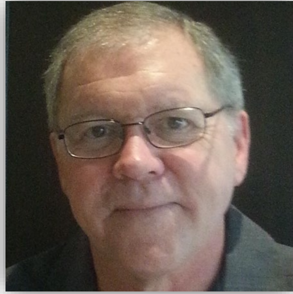

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"Born to Build a Nation": Nepali Christians and Cultural Reimagination

Emilie Jonsson

Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork in the Protestant Christian community of Lalitpur, Nepal, this article explores the perspectives and experiences of young adult Nepali Christians who are resisting social pressure to emigrate and instead actively choosing to invest in life in Nepal. Their faith-driven commitment to Nepal, combined with a cosmopolitan global awareness, has resulted in the practice of what I call cultural reimagination. Understanding Christian conversion/transformation as a part of cultural reimagination offers a new perspective on the crucial rupture-vs-continuity debate within the anthropology of Christianity. Building off of Benedict Anderson's idea of "imagined communities" and Walter Brueggemann's idea of "prophetic imagination," this article considers how these Nepali Christians rely on a sense of Christian calling to hopefully yet critically imagine the future of Nepal. Their example encourages Christians from around the globe to engage in prophetic, imaginative work within their own communities.

Introduction

"And now I would like to pray for our sister who is returning to Canada. She has been here for a short time, but now she must go back." The pastor nodded to a young Nepali woman, who quietly and dutifully went to stand alone in the wide empty middle of the stage. I recognized her, though I didn't remember her name. During my first visit to Naya Jiwan Church we had both stood up and introduced ourselves during the welcome section of the service. I had introduced myself as an American who spent some of her childhood in Nepal, but was back for anthropological research. She had introduced herself as a former member of the church who had lived in Canada for the past five years and had come back for a brief family visit. Although I never had the chance to speak directly to her, I remembered feeling a sense of affinity with her, observing how we both seemed a bit awkward, managing the feeling of disorientation that comes from passing through a place that is both familiar and changed.

As she stood isolated on the stage, head bowed, I wondered how she felt about this prayer. She did seem a bit embarrassed by the spotlight, even as the pastor's prayer committed her journey to God with warmth and pride. I could only imagine how her past few weeks had been: probably accepting countless invitations for tea or meals, distributing and then receiving suitcases of gifts, answering questions about how she managed to get to Canada and if she could help this or that person get there too.

Young Nepali Christians like her who have emigrated to Canada, the U.S., the U.K., etc. are considered the lucky ones who successfully navigated a wildly complex system of visa lotteries and immigration requirements. They are the individuals who "made it," the pride of their families, churches, and communities—even as they are painfully missed. While emigrants to places like Canada are seen as the pinnacle of success, the young woman from Naya Jiwan is actually a part of a much broader current of emigration out of Nepal. For every Nepali who permanently immigrates to places like Canada or Australia, many more Nepalis travel as temporary migrant laborers to places like Malaysia, the Gulf countries, and India.[1] Almost everyone I talked to in

[1] "Migration in Nepal: a country profile 2019". See Bibliography.

Nepal seemed to have a family member or friend who was studying or working overseas.

The flow of these emigrants is a clear expression of how much Nepal has changed in the last century. A sliver of a nation sandwiched between China and India, Nepal was relatively closed off to the broader world until the 1950s. The nation of Nepal was united under a Hindu monarchy in the 1700s and made deals with the British Raj to maintain its isolationist sovereignty through the colonial era. A time of political change began in the 1950s, opening Nepal's borders to a greater foreign interchange. The political shifts intensified into a Maoist-instigated civil war in the 1990s, and in 2008, the monarchy fell, replaced by a democratic republic. Since the 1950s, Nepal has undergone tremendous social, environmental, and economic changes.[2] Innumerable roads crisscross the steep hills, connecting formerly isolated villages to the rapidly growing capital city of Kathmandu. People with a diverse set of ethno-linguistic and religious identities have grappled with what it means to be democratic and secular in a country where Hindu elites defined the character of Nepal for centuries (Gellner et al. 2016). A massive trekking tourism industry has sprung up, but Nepal's economy has also been supported by the labor of millions of people who have migrated abroad, either for short-term work or as immigrants.[3] A quarter of Nepal's GDP in 2023 consisted of remittances: money sent back to the country from a global workforce.[4]

Nepali Christians have traditionally been on the margins of Nepali society, facing persecution that could give them even more reason to emigrate than their Hindu peers. Yet during my recent fieldwork in Nepal, I was fascinated to find that, even in a country and community where much of the pressure and incentive is to migrate out of Nepal, some Nepali Christians are choosing, very intentionally, to come back to or stay in Nepal. While participating in the Christian community in the city of Lalitpur, I witnessed a rising generation of Nepali Christians balancing a cosmopolitan global awareness with a deep commitment—a calling—to Nepal. At the intersection of these two things, they engage in what I call cultural reimagination. I draw on social theorist Benedict Anderson's idea of "imagined communities" and theologian Walter Brueggemann's idea of "prophetic imagination" to consider how these Nepali Christians choose to stay in Nepal and involve themselves in the nation's imagined future.

Like prophets, these Nepali Christians live as those called both "in" and "out" of their communities, prompting other Christians from around the globe to do the same. The Christian Church has historically operated in a world of binaries: *Are you in ministry or are you a supporting layperson? Are you from a Christian country or a non-Christian country?* But these distinctions are becoming harder and harder to maintain in our globalizing world. In light of the calling expressed by my interlocutors, this article ultimately argues that all Christians are called to imaginative, prophetic work by default, not by exception.

Methods

This article is based on ethnographic research centered on interviews and participant-observation among Protestant Christian communities in Nepal.[5] I spent about two and a half months in Nepal, primarily in Lalitpur, one of the three main cities in Kathmandu Valley. Lalitpur has a significant number of Protestant churches, of all sizes and styles. My fieldwork in Lalitpur focused on a few of the more established churches. To protect the anonymity of my interlocutors, these churches have here been merged into one composite church, which I have named Naya Jiwan (New Life) Church. The churches that compose Naya Jiwan are generally and vaguely Protestant, tending towards the "Bapticostal" approach common among Nepali churches. At both churches, I attended the weekly Saturday services, the regular youth fellowships, and other meetings like worship or choir practices. I also met with members of the Christian community of Lalitpur in non-church settings, like home visits or special celebratory events.

Most of my interviewees were in their 20s or 30s, although I met with a few in their late teens or 40s.

[2] For a more extensive history of the Nepali Protestant Church, see Rongong (2012).

[3] "Migration in Nepal: A Country Profile 2019". See Bibliography.

[4] "Personal Remittances, Received [% of GDP]—Nepal." See Bibliography.

[5] This article draws significantly upon my M.A. fieldwork and thesis. As the article is written under a pseudonym (see author bio), a standard citation of this thesis is not included in the footnotes nor bibliography.

Though not all were "youth" in the Nepali sense of being an unmarried young adult, almost all of my interviewees had some connection to the youth programming of the church. In age and social positionality, they comprise part of the "next generation" of the Church, so to speak. As the church founders and early members from the 1950s pass away, much of the hope for the future leadership of churches rests with these young people.

My interviews were open-ended conversations, often with people that I had some prior relationship with but did not know well. The interviews were primarily in English, with some Nepali thrown in here and there, per the interviewee's comfort level. My interviewees all knew English better than I knew Nepali, as many of them went to English-medium schools, and my Nepali speaking has never caught up to my listening comprehension. Considering that proselytizing is illegal under Nepali law and Nepali Christians still face a level of persecution, I only interviewed those who already publicly identified as Christian, and I avoided discussions of evangelism. To further protect the safety of my interlocutors, I have also used pseudonyms and changed/removed certain identifying details throughout this article.

Historical and Anthropological Context

As the last Hindu kingdom in the world (up until 2008), Hindu practices, beliefs, and symbols have made up much of Nepal's landscape for centuries. The streets of Kathmandu are filled with thousands of temples, and the sound of ringing bells at these temples is so pervasive and familiar that it blends into the hum of city noise. These temples house images and statues of gods and goddesses, but these figures can also be found pasted above doorways, painted on buses, and written into popular music. In much of Nepal, Hinduism is ubiquitous, visibly and audibly woven into the cultural fabric of social life.

In contrast, the 2021 census claims that a mere 1.76% of Nepal's population is Christian: about half a million.[6] However, many Christian leaders in Nepal have claimed this estimate is much lower than the reality, which they estimate is actually well over a million (Gibson 2017b, 95). Regardless of the actual numbers, Christians are beginning to have a significant public presence in Nepal. In Kathmandu Valley, little crosses are showing up on shop signs and Bible verses on the windshields of taxis. On one Saturday[7] morning, as I walked from one Lalitpur church service to another, a little girl on the sidewalk gave me a cheery *jayamasih*[8], the Christian greeting that serves as an alternative to the more Hindu *namaste*. I was surprised by her carefree public identification with Christianity. On another Saturday morning, I hopped on a public bus running along the Ring Road and watched as many people across the bus began to unexpectedly greet each other with hearty *jayamasih*s. I realized, as the little crowd got off the bus, that we were all headed to the same Saturday church service. Once an almost invisible (and widely disregarded) minority, Nepali Christians now hold a discernible place in the national discourse.

Anthropologists who study Nepali Christianity and its rapid rise inevitably run into one of the central debates within the anthropology of Christianity: whether conversion is a form of cultural rupture or continuity. A cultural continuity perspective has been traditionally held by anthropologists. It presumes that when someone becomes a Christian, their motives, beliefs, and/or selfhood may find new expression or interpretation in Christianity, but still essentially remain consistent. In this vein, anthropologist Blandine Ripert (2014), whose work focuses on the Tamang people of Nepal, wrote that "Although the Tamangs warmly welcomed the advances of missionaries, their success is arguably due to the fact that *their belief system seemed to complement ongoing transformations*" (54, italics added). In other words, Ripert holds that Christian conversion built upon beliefs and practices that already existed in the Tamang community, slotting into a long-standing ebb-and-flow of cultural change.

In recent years, Joel Robbins has become the anthropological figurehead for the opposing cultural rupture view, arguing that the self (and the community) undergo a sharply defined moment of transformation in the process of Christian conversion (Robbins 2007).

[6] "National Report on Caste/ethnicity, Language & Religion" 2021. See Bibliography.

[7] Most Nepali churches meet weekly on Saturdays instead of Sundays. Sunday is a regular work/school day.

[8] Literally translates, "victory/praise to the Messiah."

Many Nepali-born scholars and anthropologists seem, like Robbins, to emphasize the dramatic personal and cultural breaks that occur in conversion. For example, Nepali social scientist Rajendra Thokar (2018) compares Christianity to a "quake" shaking the foundations of Nepali culture and values (164).

In considering the Christianity of the young Nepalis I came to know, I follow in the path of those like Samuele Poletti (2022) who question the binary at the heart of this debate. I propose a third option: conversion (or the discernment of Christian calling or commitment[9]) as a part of cultural reimagination. Reimagination offers a way for a commitment to Christianity to be both rupture *and* continuity, an experience of radical newness and transformation combined with a deep grounding in the current cultural context. Considering that imagined categories like "Nepali" and "Christian" already have an extensive history, the idea of *re*imagination offers a model that both acknowledges the gravity of this history as well as the possibility of a transformed future.

Reimagination and Prophecy

This proposed cultural reimagination combines thinking from both anthropological and theological sources, namely the anthropological idea of "imagined communities" and the theological idea of "prophetic imagination."

The phrase "imagined communities" famously originated with political scientist Benedict Anderson. Andersonian "imagined communities" are communities which consist of people who will never all meet each other yet, in some way, think of themselves as one (Anderson 2006, 6). Anderson applied this idea to nationalism; I see its resonance in understanding both how my interlocutors related to the imagined communities of Nepal and Christianity. Being Nepali and being Christian is local and relational, negotiated in what Arjun Appadurai (1996) calls "neighborhoods," i.e. "situated communities characterized by their actuality" (179). Nepali Christians inevitably live in Nepali towns and go to Nepali churches. Yet Nepal and the Christian Church, as imagined communities, reach far beyond this local scope and create a broader imagination among their citizens/members. Appadurai (1996) observes that "the task of producing locality (as a structure of feeling, a property of social life, and an ideology of situated community) is increasingly a struggle" (189). This reality means it is harder and harder for a nation-state like Nepal to keep its many neighborhoods within one imagined community.

On the other hand, it remains a challenge for an imagined community like Christianity to maintain a sense of locality in Nepal's neighborhoods. As Webb Keane (2007) argues, "in some respects Christianity has no locality, either sociologically (institutions and people circulate), culturally (ideas and practices circulate), or ontologically (its truth claims are universal)" (45). This tricky task of nurturing both locality and imagination leads to significant uncertainty, open-endedness, and maybe even turmoil in defining and maintaining both national and religious imagined communities.

The uncertainty would seem to only increase when these national and religious identities intertwine. In the context of his work on Sumbanese Reformed Churches, Keane (2007) encountered the unexpected phrase "Sumbanese Christendom," which prompted him to consider the very definition of these words: "What is it to be 'Sumbanese'? What is 'Christianity' when it is inflected or qualified by a locality?" (89). I follow Keane and consider similar questions on what it means to be "Nepali" *and* "Christian." In the midst of such questioning, it becomes possible and perhaps even necessary to reimagine such communities. The imagined boundaries of Christianity and nationality expand and contract under the demands of the local and the global.

From one perspective, this flexing of these boundaries and the emergence of these questions represents a concerning threat to the integrity and stability of imagined communities, whether political or religious. Appadurai's use of the word "struggle" and Thokar's "quake" seem to allude to this kind of anxiety. These anxieties clearly have a grounding in an ever changing and globalizing world. However, I choose "reimagination" for its potential as a positive reframing of these definitional questions of identities and communities. What if challenging what it means to be Nepali or to be Christian, rather than posing an

[9] I add this qualification because many of my interlocutors were born-and-raised Christians and therefore technically did not convert. However, these interlocutors, like many born-and-raised Christians across the centuries, still described themselves as having a particular time where they personally "met" or "knew" Jesus and experienced a spiritual transformation.

existential threat, actually gives new vitality to these communities?

Walter Brueggemann's notion of "prophetic imagination" offers a theoretical framework for reimagination that provides a positive angle and illuminates the critical yet hopeful perspective my interlocutors provided on being Nepali and Christian. Brueggemann's seminal text *The Prophetic Imagination*, originally published in 1978, as well as his later 2015 work *The Creative Word: Canon as a Model for Biblical Education* speak to the archetype of the Biblical prophet. Brueggemann (2015) writes:

> The prophets are not political scientists with blueprints for a social order. They are not crusaders for a cause. They are not ethical teachers. They are speakers (not writers) who commit linguistic acts that assault the presumed world of the king, who expose the pretensions of the royal system, and who invite listening Israel to *entertain new dimensions of social possibility which they had never before considered.* In much of Protestantism, the prophets have been mistakenly understood as social activists or as social reformers. But they have the more fundamental task of *nurturing poetic imagination*. . . . They seek to form an alternative context for humanness by *creating a different presumptive world* which is buoyed by different promises, served by different resources, sobered by different threats, and which permits different decisions. (73-74, italics added.)

When understood in relation to this prophetic archetype, Nepali Christians embody and share a new imaginative reality that refines and redefines their imagined communities instead of threatening to dismantle or weaken said communities. Prophetic imagination makes real "the possibility of passion" (Brueggemann 2018, 35)—caring deeply about suffering and pain while boldly believing in and envisioning a different future. But where does this prophetic imaginative capacity emerge from? Or, to borrow again from Brueggemann, "How can we have enough freedom to imagine and articulate a real historical newness in our situation?" (2018, 39). Part of prophetic freedom comes from the mixed insider/outsider status of the prophet. The prophet is the voice of a peripheral community (2015, 71), specially positioned to disrupt the old consensus (ibid., 88) and evoke a new world (ibid., 80). Yet Brueggemann ultimately argues that the prophet's energetic and expansive capacity for imagination comes from a divinely-received calling. Although the use of the word "calling" can evoke a sense of special status (one might imagine the peculiar asceticism and reclusivity of the desert prophet clothed in sackcloth, for example), the calling to prophetic imagination can and should pertain to all Christians. Prophetic imagination is the actualization of the universal Christian condition of grief and hope, whether one works in the church, healthcare, community organizing or something else (2018, 121-125).

This theological understanding of prophets—as critical yet hopeful reimaginers of their communities—adds an important new angle to much of the anthropological discourse around prophets. Dorothy Emmet, in her 1956 lecture, observes the influence of Durkheim and Weber on how anthropology tends to view prophets as individuals distinct from a group and as social radicals or even revolutionaries (13). Durkheim focuses on prophets as socially deviant or even criminal characters (ibid., 13-14). Weber, in turn, defines a prophet as "a purely personal bearer of charisma who, by virtue of his mission, preaches a religious doctrine or a divine command" (Weber 1968, 253). Weber paints the prophet as an individual leader who "exerts his power" over his followers because of his gifts of persuasion or "magical charisma" (ibid., 254). These conceptions emphasize the sociopolitical nature of prophecy: prophets as leaders who can mobilize people and religious rhetoric towards a new social order. Prophecy becomes primarily about social and political action. Although he acknowledges this component of prophecy, Brueggemann primarily emphasizes the linguistic and epistemological dimension of the prophetic message (2018, 21). In other words, the what of prophetic action is bound up with the how and why. In order for the social and political action to actually create something new, someone must propose and conceive of said newness. As Brueggemann argues, "the *imagination* comes before the *implementation*" (2018, 40, italics in original).

While I spend the rest of this article exploring this theological/imaginative angle on prophecy, it is important to first note that the Nepali Christians I came to know might question being compared to prophets in the Old Testament sense. My interlocutors, for the most part, are not directly interfacing with authorities (except perhaps within their churches). They are not composing books of poetry

(as far as I know), and many of them, I would guess, would not consider themselves public speakers. The prophets of the Old Testament received uniquely profound and direct inspiration from God in a way that my interlocutors would likely never claim. However, I reference this archetype of the biblical prophet because I witnessed how my interlocutors' choice to actively stay in Nepal as Nepali Christians meant that they were "creating a different presumptive world" (Brueggemann 2015, 74). In a variety of ways—their words, their faithful actions, even just the very nature of their being and identity—they commit to Nepal and are reimagining what it means to be Nepali.

"Born to Build a Nation": Reimagining Nepal

Before I could recognize the significance of the choice to commit to and stay in Nepal, I first had to internalize the strength and nature of the current *out* of Nepal. My first youth fellowship meeting at Naya Jiwan Church felt much like a crash course in globalization and migration. After a Saturday service, cup of tea in hand, I was warmly greeted by one of the youth leaders, Nishan, and invited to their weekly youth fellowship. Optimistic but feeling a bit shy, I showed up to the large meeting room where the youth were clumped into chatting groups. Nishan gradually gathered the small crowd. The official meeting proceeded in a quick and orderly manner: Nishan prayed and shared some announcements, we sang some songs, and a young man shared a brief sermon, all in Nepali. Nishan introduced me to the group as the researcher who might be asking people questions about their experiences. Official programming duly over, Nishan invited everyone to hang out for a while. The group split roughly by gender; some of the young men from the group wandered off while the young women clustered to chat.

The young women shyly asked me, in flawless English, if I would like to play a game with them, and I happily agreed. *This is it*, I thought, *my chance to build ethnographic rapport, ask some initial questions, get know some potential interviewees*. They brought out a set of board games, but everyone quickly grew bored. We discarded the artifice of the game and began to simply chat, toying with the game pieces.

If I had thought I would be asking the questions and learning about them, I was wrong. One young woman broke the ice with a modest compliment: *your eyes are so beautiful*. Then the questions came thick and fast: *You're married? Tell us your love story. Show us a photo of your wedding. Did you kiss your husband at your wedding? We don't do that here.* Then one young woman proceeded to tell the story of a time she went to a *bideshi*[10] wedding and the couple kissed—the first time she'd ever seen people kiss in real life. I managed to slip in a question, asking, if/when they got married, whether they would wear a white dress or red *sari*[11]. They all laughed at this question, not even bothering to answer because it was so obvious that they would wear white. One of them pulled up her TikTok account and showed us all a modest yet elegant white dress that she would want to wear at her wedding. The girls all expressed their approval, but with the air of a pipe dream: they told me it would be years and years before they got married because they need to get a master's degree and a job first.

The TikTok account should have been a clue, but I still found myself surprised by their easy literacy in global media culture: *What shows do you watch? Gilmore Girls? Stranger Things? My sister really likes Stranger Things. Do you like horror movies? Do you like ramen? Do you like spicy food? I eat so much buldak ramen. Do you play sports? It's so weird how Americans call it football when it isn't played with your foot.* I found myself missing some of their references (*You don't know who Colleen Hoover is?*), and I felt old and awkward in my traditional *kurtha* tunic next to their trendy slouchy hoodies and denim. I felt a bit more cool again when they oohed and aahed upon learning about my recent trip to L.A., the land of movies and celebrities. One young woman responded, "How far is that from Texas? I know some people from there."

I asked if they want to stay in Nepal or leave, and the response was basically: *duh, leave*. When I asked why, one girl noted how she would have to leave to get a PhD in her chosen field of study, but the others

[10] "Foreigner's".

[11] Fabric pleated and draped into a "dress" over a blouse and petticoat. Highly decorated red *saris* are traditionally worn at weddings across South Asia.

seemed to think the desire to leave was self-explanatory.

Many of my interlocutors spoke of this desire among young people to leave Nepal, often with a shrug of acceptance or a note of begrudging resignation. Youth leader Nishan, usually ever optimistic in front of me, once bitterly made a passing comment that the youth group is shrinking as everyone goes to *bidesh*[12]. Jai, another youth leader, shared a similar sentiment:

> [The youth] have to go abroad. Some people go for their studies, some people go for work. We cannot stop them, because they have different kinds of challenges, family pressure. They have to earn for the family. Some say they don't see the future in our country, so they leave the country. Most of the people, when they go outside, they don't come back. It's a challenge.

I repeatedly heard the theme that good educational and career opportunities are poor-to-nonexistent in Nepal, and the path to social mobility and financial stability is through *bidesh*. Most of my interlocutors are relatively privileged urbanites who were born into or have achieved a certain level of educational opportunity, so they were likely to set their sights on countries like the U.S., South Korea, or Australia, either for education or work.

With conversations like those above, it would seem likely that many young Nepali Christians are more than ready to drop the Nepali label and go make it big in "the West."[13] Perhaps patterns of emigration and globalization are disconnecting young Nepalis from their heritage. One of my interlocutors, a successful young businesswoman named Rebekah, observed that "Nepal is really fascinated by Western culture and people really try to be like a foreigner. Nepali TikToks, they try to be fancy and act like, 'Oh I can't speak Nepali. I can only speak in English. *Nepali ali-ali aaunchha*.[14]' They think that if you can speak in Nepali, you are old-fashioned." She noted that she struggles to sell products that are made in Nepal or seem Nepali: her Kathmandu Valley based consumers want to buy into a more "Western" and "modern" aesthetic.

Although some young Nepali Christians undoubtedly are following the current and looking outside Nepal for their future, the more time I spent getting to know these young Christians, the more I recognized a countercurrent, one that could potentially root them more deeply in Nepal. A significant proportion of my interlocutors, in spite of all of the economic and cultural reasons to emigrate, expressed a deepening loyalty and commitment to Nepal. Within their commitment to their specific Nepali communities and the idea of the nation of Nepal, they began to powerfully reimagine their communities and nation.

The interlocutors who fell most clearly into this category were generally slightly older than the ones who most strongly expressed a desire to get out of Nepal. Yet despite being slightly older, these interlocutors were decidedly *not* "old-fashioned" homebodies. They had almost as much cultural literacy as the Naya Jiwan youth I described earlier. For example, when I met Bibek at Naya Jiwan Church, I was taken aback by just how cool and cosmopolitan he was. He spoke slang-infused English with a strong American accent and little bit of a swagger to match. When I introduced myself, he told me how he had just been to the state where I live, visiting family who, it turned out, live a half a day's drive from me. Bibek perfectly fit the image of the globe-trotting adventurer, showing me photos of his trips around the world. And he seemed to somehow know everyone within the Christian communities that I moved through. He talked about the pastors like old friends, but after youth fellowships, the youth would affectionately swarm him. Of all of my interlocutors, Bibek seemed to have the most abundant financial and social capital. Although he had every opportunity to leave Nepal, he made it very clear to me that he intends to always come back.

> Seeing the emptying of your country is heartbreaking. Many people think they are born in Nepal at the wrong time, there's no opportunity. If

[12] "Foreign country / countries".

[13] I was intrigued to learn that this label of "the West" could sometimes include countries like South Korea and Japan, but not India. Although I did not fully explore this definition in my interviews, "the West" seems to be an "Other" defined by cultural and geographical distance and perceived affluence.

[14] "I know only a little Nepali."

> they were born 300 years ago, Nepal was better financially, socially. Kathmandu used to be like today's Dubai or Singapore. We did a lot of trade with Indian empires and Chinese empires. But for me, I feel privileged to be born in *this* time, in Nepal. There is lots of work to do for this country. If I was born in New York right now, I would just be rebuilding or managing the city. But here, I have an opportunity to build it. All of [my family] left Nepal for the dream cities of the world, but I am born to build a nation, so I'm going to stay here and at least contribute a little part of what I can to the country.

Bibek has both pride in what Nepal has been and a sense of investment in what he wants it to be. In Bibek's experience, seeing the West in all its reality (e.g. a culture of overwork and loneliness) instead of through the rosy lens of social media only deepened this commitment to "building Nepal." Bibek told me that he sees part of his life's calling as sharing these thoughts with youth in the church so they can "make a better choice" as they consider leaving Nepal. He honored their free will, but indicated that he hoped that they would be the people who stay and reimagine a future Nepal.

Interlocutors like Bibek who talked about their commitment to Nepal did not, notably, seem primarily motivated by a strong sense of patriotic nationalism. Their desire to invest in Nepal or, more specifically, the next generation of Nepali Christians, did not seem to stem from a belief that Nepal is special or superior. Interlocutors willingly critiqued or expressed doubts about life in Nepal. For example, though Bibek said he would never want to leave Nepal, he caveated that his Christian morals mean he is unwilling to engage in bribery, and the normalization of such corruption in certain Nepali business circles would be the one thing that could force him to leave. For Nepali Christians like him, any sense of national loyalty came second to and originated within their Christian faith.

Considering this clear awareness of their relative allegiances to Nepal and to Christianity, I would describe Bibek and others' dedication to reimagining Nepal in terms of "vocation" or "calling", particularly in accordance with Brueggemann's sense of prophetic calling. In fact, Emmet's 1956 lecture (referenced earlier in relation to prophecy) argues that what Weber and Durkheim miss in prophecy is the idea of vocation. She argues that "the vocational person learns to live as a servant of some work which is greater than his own purposes. Where this vocational devotion is combined with a first-hand power which brings people to see things in a new way, we speak of him as prophetic" (Emmet 1956, 22). I agree with Emmet's assessment of the importance of vocation to understanding prophecy, but I am inclined to include an element of agency relative to her presentation of vocation as ultimately deterministic, that is, as something that is bestowed upon the prophet. Theologian Andrew Davidson observes that vocation/calling is "about the overlap of freedom and purpose" in the Christian life (Davidson 2009, 3). Davidson characterizes humans as created for a reason by a purposeful God (ibid., 4). Yet Davidson does not see this limiting but rather creating the conditions for individual agency: "Providence does not close down opportunities and choices but opens them up. Vocation is about sifting amongst these choices and the actions that go with them" (ibid., 4). Davidson outlines the markers of all human vocation: 1) gratefulness, 2) humility, 3) working for the good of the whole, and 4) creativity (ibid., 5-6). These four characteristics are clear in Bibek's self-narration: 1) he was grateful to live in Nepal now, 2) he knew that he may only contribute "a little," 3) he gave significant resources to serving the youth of the Nepali Church, 4) he saw himself as "building" Nepal. This vocational commitment to Nepal, though less effusive than a conventional patriotism, seems no less devoted. It profoundly directed the course of Bibek's life and, he seemed to hope, the lives of people around him in Nepal.

Like Bibek, another interlocutor, Nishan expressed a similar vocational commitment to Nepal in his life and work at Naya Jiwan Church. At the beginning of my interview with him, he told me, "I never thought I would be working for the church." However, within a year or two of working at Naya Jiwan, Nishan went from feeling "this is just a job" to "this is what I was called for."

When Nishan used the word "called," my ears pricked. I had wondered if this theological idea would come up in my interviews, but Nishan was the first to use it. The interview moved on, but calling came up again as we talked about the youth leaving Nepal. Nishan, with the air of resignation described above, told me: "I can't blame the young generation for leaving Nepal. For me, if I also got the call to go, I would also go. But it's not about calling. They are going to solve their problems. But I don't have any bad words for them, they are just following their dreams. They're not doing anything wrong. Maybe some of them dream

about good houses or good family in the future or about having lots of money in the future. For me, I dream about serving. And God provides."

I explored further: "Is there a difference between a dream and a calling? Or are they the same?"

"No," Nishan responded immediately, "They are very different things. I could dream about writing hundreds of songs and making them famous, but a calling is different. If my dream is about writing songs, but it is not my calling, I will have nothing."

A calling, in Nishan's understanding, comes from regularly talking with God. Nishan connected his experience to the story of Jonah: he might want to go to the "easiest place in the world," but God could call him to "the poorest villages in Nepal" or "thousands of young generations." He concluded: "It's not me deciding my things, it's Him [God] deciding my stuff." Although this statement may sound fatalistic, it still exists at the intersection of freedom and purpose described by Davidson because Nishan had to choose to listen to God or not. The purpose is already there, and God has provided for it, but humans have the freedom to rebel or accept, like Jonah.

Nishan's division between dreams and callings proved a productive one in understanding the way my interlocutors talked about their future and reimagined Nepaliness. While dreams come from the self and serve the self, calling comes from God and serves God and His purposes, which aligns with the origin of prophecy. In my interviews, discussions of dreams seemed to point outside of Nepal, while thoughts around calling more often pointed inwardly—also a prophetic orientation. While dreams seemed to serve as a way to reimagine the self (e.g. going to the U.S. to study and become wealthy), calling had a wider scope, reimagining much more than just the individual (e.g. serving the youth of Nepal that they may transform their nation). While Nishan intentionally did not judge those who are following their dreams, his own sense of calling did seem to be a marker or expression of his genuine faith. Nishan, Bibek, and others, who have their own strong sense of calling, seemed to hope that by patiently encouraging and living alongside dream-directed youth that they would open the door for God to refine those dreams into callings.

While calling can be associated with traditional ministry jobs, I was surprised that many of the Christian business people I spoke with also seemed to have an aspect of calling in their work and life in Nepal. Ayush was another interlocutor who demonstrated his deep commitment to life in Lalitpur, running his local business in addition to his many hours helping at Naya Jiwan Church. He said he would want to get a bit more Biblical training in the U.S., but ultimately would want to stay in Nepal. "It's our country, it's my country. I have to look after my own people." Part of this "looking after" involves his work at the church, but he said that he now understands his business as part of his "ministry." Seeing his business as ministry meant subtle things like putting up paraphrased Bible verses in the office, but, even more importantly, being trustworthy and uncorrupt in accordance with good Christian "character" and "attitude." The Christian business people I spoke with, men and women, indicated that, though Christians *can* have a reputation as ethical business-people, Christian identity is not actually a guarantee of moral uprightness. Bibek even went so far as to say he would rather do business with a non-Christian than a Christian because he has been "betrayed" by more Christians than non-Christians. Thus business people like Ayush and Bibek have the opportunity to work towards a Nepal where Christians are recognized as morally responsible, ideally promoting a broader change of greater honest investment in Nepal.

Cosmopolitanism and Defining a Modern Nepal

People like Bibek, Ayush, and Nishan have chosen to stay in Nepal even when they could leave, and they can readily talk about their calling that led them to this commitment. Nishan's description of calling versus dreams would seem to draw a line between this group and the young women of Naya Jiwan who showed me their Tiktok and shared their dreams of moving out of Nepal. I hesitate, however, to draw a sharp distinction. Even some of the youth who presented as most "Western" and "modern" seemed to be possibly and gradually developing a calling to Nepal, perhaps through the mentorship and example of people like Bibek, Ayush, and Nishan. The young woman, Maya, who said she would need to do her PhD outside of Nepal, for example, later shared with me, one-on-one, that she wanted the PhD precisely so she could come back and fill a specific felt need in her Christian community in Nepal.

I argue that rather than understanding these outward-looking Nepali Christians as "corrupted" or "deserters", we should instead interpret their actions as challenging and expanding the imagined boundaries of being a Nepali person. In this sense of reimagination, they have the potential to prophetically reimagine their

communities and nation even as they look out at and engage with the world. The world becomes a source of new ways of thinking and being that can be recontextualized into Nepal. A drum kit (kick drum, cymbals, etc.) can take up the rhythmic *ghin-tang* language of the Nepali *madal*[15], as I heard during a worship practice at Naya Jiwan. A white wedding dress can become a symbol of Christian distinctiveness. The practice of Nepali Christmas caroling can become a fascinating mash-up of the European Christian tradition and Nepali Tihar festivities.

I propose that the language of cosmopolitanism gets to the heart of these reimaginations of being Nepali. Ulf Hannerz defines cosmopolitanism as "an intellectual and aesthetic stance of openness towards divergent cultural experiences, a search for contrasts rather than uniformity. To become acquainted with more cultures is to turn into an *aficionado*, to view them as art works" (Hannerz 2019, 487, italics in original). In this sense, cosmopolitanism represents a continuation of the issue of choice outlined in the previous section. Cosmopolitanism becomes the power to choose between cultures, to discuss and dissect cultural beliefs and artifacts in order to claim and reject different pieces of cultural identity and experience. The young women of Naya Jiwan Church seemed eager to demonstrate the breadth and depth of their cultural palate, not just blindly express allegiance to "Western" culture. Lydia, another young Christian woman, observed that "before this, we had the concept that we want to be foreign," but in more recent years, "we want to be Nepali, we are proud now." She has seen some young women wearing a traditional Nepali hair ribbon (called *chulthi dhago* or *lacha dori*) in their everyday lives, an act that previously would have been viewed just as "something old people would do." Selectively reclaiming parts of Nepali fashion is the act of a cultural connoisseur.

I nonetheless hesitate a little in calling my interlocutors "cosmopolitan." Although these young people do seem to represent a version of cosmopolitanism, it is not the cosmopolitanism of, say, wealthy American teens who jet-set between Tokyo, Paris, and Marrakesh. As Hannerz notes, cosmopolitanism is a seemingly paradoxical mix of "mastery" of and "surrender" to other cultures (Hannerz 2019, 488). Many young Nepalis, starting from a subaltern position, clearly bear the competing demands of mastery and surrender more heavily than those who come from a position of global power and affluence. I hypothesize that this unequal dynamic is part of why, among my interlocutors, "the West" evoked both bitter resignation and longing admiration, sometimes even in the same conversation.

This ambivalence towards "the West" and growing sense of cosmopolitanism is likely not unique in Nepal to the Christian young people that I came to know. However, their status as Christians in Nepal does give them a particular proximity to notions of Western-ness and cosmopolitanism. According to my interlocutors, many Nepalis perceive Christianity as a *bideshi* or Western religion. Although many of my interlocutors strongly rejected this idea when leveled as an accusation, some saw the benefits of Christians being perceived as "Western" (or, more fairly, cosmopolitan) and "modern."

When I asked her about whether Christianity is seen as a modern religion in Nepal, Maya said that Christianity is a "Pinterest religion," especially around Christmas time, where many people, Christian and non-Christians alike, take aesthetic Christmas photos. She noted wryly how 11 months of the year non-Christians bash Christians, but in December everyone copies "Justin Bieber and Ariana Grande" with a Christmas look in pursuit of "fame." In a similar vein, Lydia quipped that "the malls celebrate Christmas more than churches." She is not wrong: the malls and churches I visited did rival each other in terms of which had the taller and shinier Christmas tree. Although this tie to a "modern" global culture perhaps has more to do with the globalization of a consumerist Christmas than the specific actions of Nepali Christians, there are ways that Nepali Christians—especially the second and third generation—clearly choose to be "modern" or "Western."

Music is one such way that some churches in Lalitpur have intentionally presented themselves as "modern." One of the youth leaders I spoke with described how important he thought it was to translate Christian songs from "different genres" (i.e. English songs that are not from the traditional Nepali hymn book) to keep youth interested and happy. Some of the youth did talk about how Naya Jiwan Church's worship is well-known for its musical excellence. Naya

[15] Although it is a simple drum, the Nepali *madal* can produce various distinct sounds, described with onomatopoeia like *ghin-tang*.

Jiwan Church, with its drum kit, guitars, bass, and keys clearly follows the Hillsong-esque mold that has been reproduced in many countries around the globe (Wagner 2013, 76). By engaging in these instances of global Christian culture, young Nepali Christians use their cosmopolitanism to participate in the process of defining what a "modernizing" Nepal actually looks like. From their prophetic position on the periphery of Nepal, they synthesize a variety of influences from both inside and outside Nepal to reimagine Nepaliness.

In many ways, Nepal is still a nation-in-progress: a long heterogeneous collection of people only recently organized into a secular, democratic state. What it means to "be Nepali" is thus still being negotiated. In these stories, we can see two different ways that Nepali Christians conceptualize themselves as part of the Andersonian "imagined community" of Nepal and its future. One perspective highlights Christian connections outside Nepal and thereby plays into trends of globalization in Nepal: the outward migration of people and the importation of cultural forms and practices. The other perspective utilizes the Christian understanding of calling to affirm that Nepali Christians are deeply Nepali by virtue of their commitment to shaping and uplifting Nepal from the inside. This loyalty and feeling of connection to Nepal may seem to be at odds with an outwardly-looking cosmopolitanism, but many of my interlocutors held these two in tension.

In this way, many of the young Nepali Christians I got to know have particular potential to transform Nepal from a position of intentional rootedness even as they have the sweeping vantage point of the periphery, not unlike the archetype of the biblical prophet. They have the potential to be (and some already are) the odd-one-out people, but not in a bad way: honest business-people in the midst of a culture of corruption, youth discerning their calling in a modernizing city of dreams—distinctively Christian in the midst of a country known for its Hinduism. Their differences do not need to sideline them in the project of nation-making in Nepal or identity-making among members of the global Nepali community, but potentially can make them utterly integral, uniquely perceptive of both the current realities and future possibilities of being Nepali.

Conclusion

By exploring this idea of cultural reimagination, I do follow in the spirit of Anderson's "imagined community." Anderson's focus on imagination makes sense of how my interlocutors have engaged in creating the nation of Nepal, in both explicit and implicit ways. In another sense, however, I take a hard turn away from Anderson. Anderson stops short of saying religious communities are irrelevant in the world today, but he accepts a historical narrative that places "the dawn of the age of nationalism" after "the dusk of religious modes of thought" and "the ebbing of religious belief" (2006, 11). To the contrary, I claim that Christian calling/vocation is an essential, growing component of imaginative nation-building work. In a country like Nepal, where a strong social current pulls young people away from their nation and into globalized migratory flows, some countercurrent has to provide the imaginative impetus and inspiration to stay. In the case of my interlocutors, that countercurrent was their Christian calling to Nepal.

As my interlocutors discerned this calling, it did not lead to cultural rupture or to continuity, but a combination of the two. They held on to a historical or traditional Nepaliness, both in symbolic and practical ways, but they also envisioned a transformed future Nepal where they could be globally connected, visibly Christian, and yet no less Nepali. Because the core of their identities rested in their Christian convictions and community, they could freely reimagine the Nepali part of their identity without feeling shaken.

In the midst of significant change, humans can have a tendency to hunker down to protect "us" from "them." The ever-shifting trends of globalization and international migration have evoked such a reaction from certain Christians, especially those living in Old Christendom where Christianity has had a long history of political and social dominance. However, the example of my interlocutors offers a different way. I witnessed young Nepali Christians who are choosing to invest in and commit to Nepal while still looking to engage with a variety of global influences. They do not idolize some narrow ideal of Nepal, stirring up in themselves a nationalistic loyalty, nor do they accept anything and everything in their vision of a future Nepal. Rather, their positions on their society's periphery and their cosmopolitan taste gives them a discerning perspective, brimming with both optimism and critique. They engage with the changes in their

communities, nation, and world as fodder for the creative work of reimagination.

Reimagination is not the work of a select few with particular political power, special divine inspiration, or serendipitous historical positioning. Prophetic imagination, as Brueggemann observes, is not merely the work of certain preachers. Clearly it is the work of young men and women in the Nepali Church whether they work as businesspeople, students, or youth leaders. Some are chasing dreams, but the "born to build a nation" passion of people like Bibek offers them a compelling alternative.

This example of reimagination can and should compel Christians outside of Nepal as well. Philip Jenkins specifically applies this argument to churches of the global North: "In the present day, it may be that it is only in the newer churches that the Bible can be read with any authenticity and immediacy, and that the Old Christendom must give priority to Southern voices. If Northern churches cannot help with clergy or missionaries or money, then perhaps they can reinterpret [or, dare I say, reimagine?] their own religion in light of these experiences" (Jenkins 2019, 433). The ever-more internally-driven growth of Christianity in countries like Nepal has not absolved Christians from Old Christendom from engaging with Christians and churches in that part of the world. On the contrary, Christians of North America and Europe need to open themselves to being transformed by the Christianity practiced and preached by the rest of the world. Engaging with a global variety of theologies, expressions of faith, and biblical hermeneutics can be uncomfortable or even shocking, but the challenge can reinvigorate Christians and Christian communities, especially those that have lost their dynamism and sense of calling.

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"From Every Tribe and Nation": Multiculturalism in Christian Churches in Suburban Melbourne[1]

Natalie Swann

This article analyses everyday multiculturalism in Christian churches in suburban Melbourne, showing how migration transforms migrants and host communities. It reflects on how the story of Pentecost provides a framework for migrants and host churches to understand cross-cultural encounters and describes how liturgical habits create a sense of home in a new church setting.

The article is based on ethnographic fieldwork and in-depth interviews at three churches; a multicultural Catholic congregation that worshipped in English, a multicultural Seventh-day Adventist congregation that worshipped in English, and an Arabic Baptist church that worshipped in Arabic and was home to people from a range of countries but mostly Iraq and Egypt. In describing these multicultural churches and the intertwined lives and loves of people from different cultural backgrounds, I consider the *faith*-full way in which my participants think about ethnicity and migration. While not always explicitly theologised, this tendency reflects a deeply-embedded 'theological disposition' that results from Christian liturgical formation.

I draw attention to the way in which Derrida's theory of cosmopolitanism can be understood as another way of talking about the liturgical practice of Pentecost in everyday life. By doing so, I hope to show that both the mobile migrant and the host community that shows hospitality participate in cosmopolitan—or liturgically 'Pentecostal'—habits.

This research is an attempt at a local Australian ethnography, not one oriented to people of a particular ethnic background. This is a deliberate step away from a tendency in the social sciences to limit studies to a particular ethnic group as a convenient way of limiting scope, but which thereby reinforces the assumption that ethnicity is people's primary organising principle. While there are many ethnically identifying churches in Australia, there are many multicultural faith communities as well. This article is concerned with how habits are transformed through or held onto despite a cross-cultural encounter and argues that both are evidence of liturgical formation.

Introduction

My research explores the interaction between faith and migration for Christian migrants in suburban Melbourne. This article analyses everyday multiculturalism in Christian churches in suburban Melbourne. It focuses on how migrants recreate a sense of home in a new church setting. In particular, it explores how they prioritise the values they bring with them and how they open themselves up to new values through the migration process.

I participated in worship at three churches in Preston, a middle ring suburb in the north of Melbourne; a multicultural Catholic congregation that

[1] This article represents research conducted for my PhD thesis at The University of Melbourne: Swann, Natalie (2019) "On the Way Home: Christian Migrants and the Liturgical Self", available here: https://minerva-access.unimelb.edu.au/items/5478022d-69ed-5c5c-bab1-a7d30348bad8. Similar content was delivered as a presentation at the 2019 Australian Anthropological Conference.

worshipped in English, a multicultural Seventh-day Adventist congregation that worshipped in English, and an Arabic Baptist church that worshipped in Arabic and was home to people from a range of countries but mostly Iraq and Egypt. This project describes these multicultural churches and the intertwined lives and loves of people from different cultural backgrounds. Social science exhibits a tendency to limit studies to a particular ethnic group as a convenient way of limiting scope, which reinforces the assumption that ethnicity is people's primary organising principle. This is confounded by denominational commitment among migrants and the ensuing multicultural congregations this commitment can produce. In contrast, my project is a local Australian ethnography, not one oriented to people of a particular ethnic background.

Overall, my project has explored the ways in which faith and migration journeys are intertwined and seeks to show how the stories migrants tell echo the themes Christians rehearse when they remember, re-enact, and re-tell key biblical narratives. Following the theologian James K. A. Smith (2009, 2013, 2017), I frame this remembering, re-enacting, and re-telling as 'liturgical practice'. This liturgical practice is not limited to the formal wording of the church service but includes the habits of everyday church life and the faithful practices of Christians in their everyday lives. Smith's articulation of liturgical practice owes much to Pierre Bourdieu's (1990) conception of *habitus*, and I have sought to draw the two concepts into conversation as I reflect on the migration stories my participants told me. The liturgical frame expands two facets of *habitus*: first, it is explicitly tied to a sacred text, and second, it is used to decode what people love and value rather than decoding power relations. I hope that this reading of the lives of migrant Christians contributes to re-shaping the way we talk about and ascribe value to the lived experience and emotional expressions of migrants in Australia.

In this article, I want to dwell on one particular liturgical narrative—that of Pentecost—and explore the correspondences with cosmopolitan and multicultural habits in the churches I worked with. I am drawn to the politics of the ontological turn in anthropology (Bialecki 2017) and feel its political potential—its desire to help us really get radical alterity. And yet, I cannot help but feel that in positioning the other as ontologically apart from ourselves, we preclude that which we see actually happening in settler societies like Australia; everyday multicultural community. I would rather suggest, following Levinas (1994) and Milbank (2006), that we meet the other face-to-face and engage in creative, responsive dialogue. What confronts and challenges me in multicultural Preston is not that there is systematic failure to understand one another (although that may be happening), but rather the curiosity that communication and community are possible despite alterity.

While I am a fellow believer with my research participants, my project was conducted under the supervision of non-believing anthropologists (Prof. Andrew Dawson and A/Prof. Debra McDougal) in a secular university. Many highly educated social scientists in Australia are unfamiliar with Christian Scripture and the narratives it contains and I therefore present my research expecting to need to explain this context to my readers. The voice of my research is designed to mediate between these two systems of thought in the kind of creative, responsive dialogue that I understand to be the only ethical way to encounter difference.

Pentecost and Cosmopolitanism

According to the book of Acts, Jesus appeared to his followers over forty days after his resurrection, before ascending to heaven (Acts 1:1–10). Fifty days after the Jewish Passover, the time when Jesus was crucified, the Jewish people celebrate the Festival of Weeks—also known as Pentecost. About a week after Jesus had ascended, his disciples were gathered together in a house, while Jews from across the diaspora gathered in Jerusalem for the festival. While they were gathered there, the Spirit descended as tongues of fire on these first disciples and empowered them to speak other languages, in which they proclaimed the resurrection of Jesus to the multilingual Jewish population in Jerusalem. The crowd is amazed: "Are not all these who are speaking Galileans? And how is it that we hear, each of us, in our own native language? Parthians, Medes, Elamites, and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene, and visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, Cretans and Arabs—in our own languages we hear them speaking about God's deeds of power" (Acts 2:1–11, NRSV). In the account of Jesus' ascension (after his resurrection) in the book of Luke, Jesus had told his disciples that "repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his [the Messiah's] name to all nations, beginning in

Jerusalem". In this way, the coming of the Spirit with the gift to speak in other languages enables the disciples to take the first step in fulfilling Jesus' parting command to take the gospel to all nations. It creates a vision of and takes the first steps towards a multi-cultural Christian church.

The contemporary Australian church, however, is incredibly fragmented—along both ethnic and denominational lines. Indeed, ethnic and denominational difference are often intertwined. Gary Bouma describes the way Australia's religious landscape is a product of its migration history:

> All non-Aboriginal religious groups have found their way to Australia by migration either by being carried by migrating peoples or by 'migrating' as systems of belief and practice transmitted by means of teachers, publications or missionaries. The shape of Australia's religious profile is primarily a function of its migration history and only secondarily a function of conversion or changing religious identification. (Bouma 1997, 1)

Abe Wade Ata's three-volume study of Religion and Ethnicity in Australia (1988, 1989, 1990) demonstrates the way in which Australia's diverse religious (and especially Christian denominational) landscape reflects its diverse migration history. The ethnic church is discussed in terms of attendance, cultural activities, and (seemingly) inevitable decline. Departure from the ethnic church is often conflated with a loss of ethnic identity, so that migrants who chose to worship in multicultural or mainline Australian churches are viewed as having weaker ethnic identities.

Social science exhibits a tendency to limit studies to a particular ethnic group as a convenient way of limiting scope, which reinforces the assumption that ethnicity is people's primary organising principle. Glick-Schiller et al. suggest that despite the fact that "many worshippers emphasize a community in Christ without an ethnic suffix, scholars persist in categorizing the worshippers by their ethnicity" (Glick-Schiller et al. 2006, 814–15). The priority of ethnicity is confounded by denominational commitment among migrants and the ensuing multicultural congregations this commitment can produce. In my project, I tried to distance myself from this tendency; attempting to produce a local Australian ethnography, not one oriented to people of a particular ethnic background. In the face of the pervasive Australian narrative about ethnic difference equating to religious difference, remembering, re-telling, and re-enacting the story of Pentecost can support a counter-narrative that recognises unity and difference *within* the local, mainstream Christian church.

Pentecost—like the rest of the liturgical calendar—is not celebrated on a particular day with all the trappings of tradition in all churches. But for those that embrace the liturgical calendar, such as the Lutheran church where I grew up, or the Anglican church where I now worship, the day is one of celebration. Eight weeks after remembering the resurrection of Jesus on Easter Sunday, the church remembers the beginning of the public ministry of the Apostles. Because the first Pentecost is marked by the speaking of different languages, it is also often a day to celebrate the multicultural nature of the church.

Jacques Derrida (2001) has a vision of the cosmopolitan city, in which cities are transformed into places of welcome, and he identifies the Judeo-Christian contribution to this idea of cosmopolitanism. Speaking to *The International Parliament of Writers* in 1996 on the subject of cosmopolitan rights for asylum seekers, refugees, and immigrants, Derrida is overtly political in his agenda, arguing for welcome and justice: "For let us not hesitate to declare our ultimate ambition . . . our plea is for what we have decided to call the 'city of refuge'" (2001, 8). He traces a brief genealogy of the concept of cosmopolitanism. Derrida identifies a "considerable gap" between the principles of asylum and hospitality proposed by Enlightenment thinkers such as Kant (cf. Kant 1972) and the implementation of these principles in post-war Europe. For Kant, says Derrida, cosmopolitanism is defined as the right to hospitality. But for Derrida hospitality is not simply one ethic among others, but "hospitality is culture itself." In seeking out reference points for this assertion that ethics is co-extensive with hospitality, Derrida first points to the Hebraic tradition of cities of refuge, second he points to the medieval tradition of the sovereignty of the city, and third, he links the cosmopolitan tradition of Greek Stoicism to Pauline Christianity.

It is Derrida's acknowledgement of the Hebraic and Christian roots of cosmopolitanism which most interests me—the fact that openness to the outsider has long been a theological imperative, and that theology and politics are not easily disentangled. Derrida suggests that the first text in which the "urban right to immunity and hospitality was rigorously and juridically developed" (2001, 17) was the Book of Numbers

(citing Numbers 35:9–32, cf. Chronicles 6:42–52, and Joshua 20:1–9). He doesn't dwell on the detail of this biblical reference, but instead points his readers to the works of Emmanuel Levinas in *The Cities of Refuge* (1994) and Daniel Payot in *Refuge Cities* (1992). Commenting on the contribution of Pauline Christianity, Derrida states:

> Pauline Christianity revived, radicalised and literally 'politicised' the primary injunctions of all the Abrahamic religions, since, for example, the 'Opening of the Gates of Israel'—which had, however, specified the restrictive conditions of hospitality so as to ensure the 'safety' or 'security' of the 'strong city'. Saint Paul gives to these appeals or to these dictats their modern names. These are also theologico-political names, since they explicitly designate citizenship or world co-citizenship: 'no longer foreigners nor metic in a foreign land, but fellow-citizens with God's people, members of God's household' (Ephesians II. 19–20). In this sentence, 'foreigners' (*xenoi*) is also translated by guests (*hospites*); and 'metic'—but see also 'immigrants', for '*paroikoi*'—designates as much the neighbour, from a point of view which is important to us here, as the foreigner without political rights in another city or country. (Derrida 2001, 19)

While Derrida sees this radical opening up of the church to all people as having its root in the teaching of Paul, many theologians would suggest it is foreshadowed in the Old Testament and brought to fulfilment by Jesus in the Gospel accounts (e.g., Blomberg, 2007). Indeed, Paul himself argues as much:

> [T]he scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, declared the gospel beforehand to Abraham, saying, "All the Gentiles shall be blessed in you." For this reason, those who believe are blessed with Abraham who believed. (Galatians 3:8-9, NRSV)

That is, as early as Genesis 12, God promises Abraham that all the peoples of the world will be blessed through him (Genesis 12:3). Throughout the Gospel accounts, Jesus begins to realise the fulfilment of this promise, drawing to himself the Magi, Samaritans, Greeks, and Romans, among others, and hints that this blessing to the nations was to be fulfilled. The Gospel of Matthew climactically concludes with the resurrected Jesus commanding his followers:

> Then Jesus came to them and said "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age." (Matthew 28:18-20, NRSV)

Surely this passage is implicated in the worst of Christian missionizing. But it also lays the foundation for Paul's commitment to the universality of the Christian message and the unity and equality of all believers. Contemporary theological writer, Daniel Hayes, points to the fact that the ancient world, the one in which Christian scripture was written, was multi-ethnic (Hayes 2003). Israel is described (or at least translated) as an ethnic nation. Despite the experience of severe ethnic barriers, Christian Scripture encourages and predicts that worship of Jesus will lead to profound unity across these ethnic or national divisions, while still acknowledging that difference exists. Hayes writes:

> [T]he people of God in the Book of Revelation are portrayed as being from all the different peoples of the earth. They are multi-ethnic, multicultural and multilingual . . . God's intention for his people is to be multi-ethnic and multicultural, but yet united in their fellowship and their worship of him. (Hayes 2003, 199)

Despite the fact that cosmopolitanism can be argued for from Scripture and via Derrida's analysis, the reality of church on the ground in Australia is that it is denominationally and ethnically highly fragmented. Yet, the stories in this article show how movement can help people to cross denominational and ethnic boundaries. Sometimes, this is an incidental function of movement, sometimes it is the result of deliberate missional movement. Following Derrida, it seeks to ask how both the Australian-born and the overseas born "recreate, through work and creative activity, a living and durable network in new places and occasionally in a new language" (2001, 12). What I am suggesting here is that cosmopolitanism is simply another way to talk about the liturgical practice of

Pentecost in everyday life. I wish to draw the two concepts into parallel.

Cosmopolitan Habits

According to Datta, "cosmopolitanism in its most fundamental sense implies openness to difference," and says, "It is a regular feature of the literature that those people who move—migrants, tourists, pilgrims, global elites—are those who 'become cosmopolitan', allowing their identities and practices to transform, seeing themselves as less fixed, more fluid. Literally, they become 'citizens of the world'; *kosmopolites"* (2009, 353). This sense of cosmopolitanism was certainly apparent in the people I worked with in churches. Two people I met and spoke with in the Catholic church demonstrate this.

In Helena's story, migration to different countries forced her to find Christian community across ethnic and denominational boundaries.

Story 1: Helena

Helena was born in India. She grew up in a wealthy family with a Protestant mother and Catholic father and went to Catholic church every day. Every day at home they would have more 'Protestant' devotions—reading the Bible, singing songs, and praying as a family. So, even as a child, her experience had a kind of diversity. She was a very 'good girl' and had a reputation among her friends for being powerful in prayer. If someone asked her to pray, she would immediately kneel down, cover her hair with a scarf and pray. She and her family were often the only people at morning prayer with the Jesuit novices at the local Catholic college. Her mother trained the children to give thanks in the morning and to say prayers before bed. If she or her siblings would make a mistake, her mother would say, "Ask God to forgive what you did," and then they would have to kneel down and ask her for forgiveness as well. She would respond, "I forgive you, did you tell God?" Then she would say, "Don't repeat this mistake again."

When Helena finished high school, she left home for a residential nursing hostel to train to be a nurse. Helena journeyed from India through Malaysia and Brunei, and attended multiple denominations, finding new ways to express her faith through the habits of different faith communities. This was not always comfortable—she found herself challenged by new modes of worship in a Pentecostal community in Brunei.

While on an overseas placement in Malaysia, a relative of hers took her to a Church of Christ, but the distance was too great to attend there regularly, so she worshipped at other closer Catholic and Anglican churches. She joined a Christian fellowship and started "doing all the things," but she really loved her involvement with the kids in the church—teaching them songs and looking after them. There wasn't a priest in this community, "they take turns to pray and worship the Lord," and they cooked and ate together like a family.

Helena was counselled not to go to Brunei because it is a strict Muslim country, but the pay on offer was so generous that she could not turn down the job she was offered there. As soon as she landed in Brunei, she was shocked by the way women dressed, with everything covered, even their faces. There was no church, just a big mosque. Then, one day she met a woman who worked in the laboratory at work. She said she was a Christian and invited Helena over for dinner. Helena was a bit cautious and took a friend who was Muslim along with her. When they arrived, they saw a lot of poor people coming to the house, worshipping in a Pentecostal style. She did not really like Pentecostals because her experience was that they were very judgmental, condemning people to hell for their sin. For Helena, no-one but God has the right to judge because only God knows your heart. So, she told me, she was scared because she thought they "let God go to their mind," and because she was scared they would forcibly baptize her, that "one day they will just put me in the water like that." Still, although she didn't find everything they did persuasive, eventually she was baptized. Now she happily calls herself born again. Helena speaks in tongues and finds Pentecostal habits of prayer particularly powerful. She prays every morning and night and as she talks you get the sense that prayer is never far from her lips. During the course of our interview, she shared many of the kinds of things she would pray in an ex tempore style. She explained prayer like this:

First, the most basic thing is that you need to clean yourself of your sins. You need to remember all the things you have done and say "I'm sorry God, forgive me." After that, you go on to praise God. She says you "clean yourself, and [offer] thanksgiving, and praise, then you submit." Having done these

things "you forget everything" because "you are purified." This has been very important to Helena and she says it has helped her in many ways. As an example of this prayer and how she prays it, she offers "I am the worst sinner, God, that's why you chose me to be here and thanks for your love. I am a very bad sinner, but you cleansed me, to come to this level, and you made me."

Helena says that her father told her that wherever you go you should learn the good things. She laughs, "I took many good things from them—I stole things from that Pentecost church!".

While Helena was living in Brunei, she visited Australia four times. In Melbourne, she visited another local church, but found she was much more comfortable at Sacred Heart because she could pray and praise God the way she wanted to here.

Helena moved to Australia and was married. She says when she was first married, she worshipped her husband more than she worshipped God. But her husband treated her poorly. She thought he was a believer, but after they were married she struggled to get him to come to church with her. He lost tens of thousands of dollars gambling. She prayed for him all the time—even praying he might win, though she knew in her heart it was wrong. She says she has learned and changed a lot, and she praises God and thanks him in prayer "for what I am today." She discovered he had a girlfriend and asked him to leave. He took everything, including her car. There was nothing and no-one left, but she says, "who was with me? God was with me." Sometimes, she prays in the middle of the night.

There is a verse that is special to her, which she quotes from memory thinking it might be Isaiah 15:6, "'For a small moment, I have forsaken you, I hid my face from thee, but with my loving kindness and with all my mercies I am with you.' Even last night I shared one of the same verses with one of my girlfriends. But I told God, 'Lord, you just mentioned there in the Bible a very small moment you hid, it's not a small moment to me! It's a very big thing! Because for God, things are not, for us it is different, isn't it? That's what's in the Old Testament, years and things are nothing to God. Bible says for a 'small moment'—no more 'small moment'!"

I think the quote is more likely from Isaiah 54:7–8, "For a brief moment I abandoned you, but with great compassion I will gather you. In overflowing wrath for a moment I hid my face from you, but with everlasting love I will have compassion on you, says the Lord, your Redeemer" (Isaiah 54:7–8, NRSV).

Helena holds onto this promise, even though it does not feel like she has only been forsaken for a moment. She wants the moment to end. She waits in hope for everlasting love and compassion.

Over time, Helena's own Roman Catholic worship practice has been transformed through this exposure to difference as experienced through the greatest difficulties of her life. She adopted the Pentecostal practice of ex tempore prayer to bring her concerns to God. She still says the Rosary, but she treasures this new way of speaking to and with God. She is not so romantic as to suppose each of these communities is just like the other—she is alert to their particularities, their strengths and weaknesses. But she has also discovered the church is something bigger than she imagined. She says it is really only by chance that she is again worshipping at a Catholic church. Denomination has been relativised for her; what matters is the gathering of God's people.

In a similar way, Sione's story illustrates the way in which movement can break down strong commitments to denominational loyalty.

Story 2: Sione

While raised in a strongly Catholic family and community in Tonga, Sione's friendships with Tongans from the Uniting Church and other denominations here in Melbourne have shaped him into an advocate for ecumenical partnership. Sione can see a linearity between his upbringing in Tonga and his openness to Christians of other traditions. But it seems from the full context of his experience in Australia—the support he received from friends in the Uniting church, the opportunities he had to visit Uniting churches without familial constraint—that this openness was facilitated by his migration experience as much as it was by his pre-existing theological schema.

Sione was brought up in a strong Catholic household, even thinking as a young man about joining the brotherhood. He studied teaching at university in Tonga and taught high school geography and economics. In 1990, he won a

scholarship from the Australian Government to come and further his studies at Deakin University. He undertook a Bachelor of Business in Personnel Management and Human Resources, from which he graduated in 1994. The culture shock for Sione, particularly with regards to modes of teaching and learning, was powerful. As a teacher, back in Tonga, "the students rely on you as the teacher to prepare all the materials, all the readings and write down the notes on the board and everyone's copying the notes from there. That's how they do this."

But in Australia, as a student he was responsible for a far more active role in learning in classes. "It's so different," he tells me, slowly shaking his head. Together with the challenge of studying in his second language, English, this made him ask some hard questions and pushed him to some intense study practices, even putting a spanner under his mattress so he wouldn't sleep comfortably and would wake to study more readily.

For Sione the support of the Tongan community in Melbourne was crucial to making it through these challenges. There was one particular man, an uncle, who held him accountable for his studies. This man, Sione tells me, was very supportive of students. Sione's habit was to study from Sunday afternoons to Friday nights, but Saturday was a break for him from his studies. On Saturdays, he would drink kava[2] with his friends, Sione commented, though his uncle would check in on him asking 'Have you done your homework?' If Sione said he would only be halfway finished, his uncle would organise for somebody to take him back to University to finish his study. He laughs remembering his younger self. Looking back, he reflects, "even though I want to socialise in that time . . . I came here to fulfil [a] purpose, my studies, not to drink the kava every night." He can see that by helping him focus on his study, his uncle was actually supporting him.

In retrospect, Sione appreciates this external discipline as a blessing, a support. But it was not only Tongans of Catholic background from whom he found support, but of all backgrounds. He specifically mentions friends from the Uniting church, some of whom trained for ministry and now serve as pastors in local churches here in Melbourne. The friendship across denominational boundaries that Sione has experienced in Melbourne, has prompted his involvement in organising Ecumenical Tongan Services here.

Here is how he describes his ecumenical outlook: "My understanding is that there is one God and it doesn't matter how different . . . they worship and the way we are. We mean the one thing and it makes me comfortable to be with them [friends from the Uniting church]. We talk. Because most of the time at the kava party the men gather together, like sharing jokes and maybe political talk about political issues. But most of the talk is spiritual sharing which makes a balance of why you want to be there. And for me, when I was involved in the sharing, even those people [who] are already ordained as a minister and still studying the Bible—I don't feel uncomfortable when I share my belief with them. Because I believe that there's only one God we have, we share. . . . I said regardless of our differences we need to come together and share what we stand together, that there's only one God. So about nearly 10 years now I became the secretary for the Tongan Ecumenical Services here in Melbourne. Then I tried to foster that idea amongst the Christian community here and [in] the Tongan [community]; and some Anglican[s] too, the Uniting, the Methodist and the Catholic. And there's a small minority that are called the Tongan Church . . . I became involved there . . . when I came here the Catholic community was never involved there. Because I can feel we still have a chance of becoming—mixing with other denominations. I have managed to break that ice."

Early in his time in Australia, Sione would worship at both the Catholic church and with his student friends in Uniting church congregations. He says some people were suspicious of that, but in his mind: "My belief, the faith that I've brought up from the beginning back home will never get out from me ever. Wherever I go, wherever I mix I believe that God's people [can be known because they share and do good things] . . . I carry around . . . what Jesus

[2] Acording to Tecun, "the pounded Kava root today is infused with water before drinking and can be considered a soporific, although the effects depend on how much is infused with the water and the type of Kava used as well." While "chiefly Kava rituals are performances that mediate the hierarchical power relations," "Kava Tonga manifests itself in various forms dependent on the type of event, purpose for gathering, rank of attendees, and frequency of getting together, being consumed in each of these settings predominantly, but not exclusively by men" (2017, 54).

said. Wherever you go it doesn't matter . . . if you are Catholic, it doesn't matter whether you're Uniting: whatever congregation you are, you are people of God. You have been loved first by God, and that love should be to all of you, and then you share it with your brothers and sisters in your journey." This has been part of his faith from the very beginning of his life.

We continue to talk about other things, about the ways in which Tongan culture is lost in younger generations, about Sione's struggle to decide about whether to stay in Australia or return home to Tonga, and his training to become the first Tongan deacon in the Catholic church in Australia. We finish our conversation with a realisation that just a few months earlier we had worshipped together at the Anglican cathedral, where we were both visiting to support friends being ordained in the Anglican Diocese of Melbourne. I offhandedly remark that it is a small world. "It is", says Sione, "The good thing is both churches are coming together, a lot of dialogue, the Anglican and the Catholic churches, and then we follow the same program for the deaconate, it's really good."

The migration experience has not made either Helena or Sione a-cultural or transcultural bohemians—they both retain strong connections to their cultures of origin. But movement has facilitated—perhaps even necessitated—an openness to other ways of practicing the Christian faith. Both Helena and Sione have moved for work, and moved for relatively significant periods of time. Neither of them predicted or foresaw the way the process of movement would change their practice. Being mobile means that each of these migrants has experienced difference and discovered fraternity despite it. It has made them more flexible in their practice and in their openness to others and their practices. In each of these stories—and others detailed in my thesis—the participants reflect on the fact that the lessons they have learned through being mobile are all part of God's plan for them.

Reciprocal Hospitality

We have seen the way in which the mobile subject is transformed, but for Kant and Derrida, cosmopolitanism is less about the transformation of the self as it is about the openness required to offer hospitality. I am, therefore, a little uncomfortable with the way dwelling on mobile 'cosmopolitans' shifts the focus from the other to the self. It seems to undermine the heart of hospitality; the right for the visitor to be treated as herself or himself—"this right to present themselves to society" (Kant 1972, 137–138). And, in many cases, surely this makes the cosmopolitan the visitor, rather than the host. But Derrida considers the act of hospitality on the part of the host crucial to cosmopolitanism (Derrida 2001). And this affects how we understand these three churches and the people who worship in multicultural communities as cosmopolitans. Indeed, Derrida questions who the subject of hospitality is, employing in other works (e.g. Derrida 1999) the same term for she who gives hospitality as he who receives it (Anidjar 2002). A one-sided formulation of hospitality flowing from host-to-guest neglects those moments in which the foreigner/guest serves and edifies the host.

While those who have migrated have often had experiences that have opened up their identity or practice, this reciprocal sense of cosmopolitanism as hospitality allows us to see the ways in which those who are raised locally actively welcome the stranger in all their particularity. I saw this form of cosmopolitan welcome in the churches I worked with in the following four ways: symbolic representations of diversity, in the content of worship services, through the running of events to celebrate diversity, and through deliberate strategies of inclusion.

For example, in their worship services, Preston Seventh Day Adventist dwells for significant amounts of time on church mission and their desire to connect across cultures. The congregation supports long term mission financially and encourages its members to experience short-term mission themselves overseas. Every week at Preston Church as part of the Sabbath School, a video is shown of the week's mission focus. These videos are produced centrally by The Office of Adventist Mission at the Seventh-day Adventist Church's General Conference World Headquarters. According to the official Adventist website through which these videos are made available, the purpose of these videos is to "share stories that will show what mission offerings have accomplished, to thank

members for their support, and to report on what still needs to be done."[3]

The videos are extremely well-produced and, in keeping with their production by a US communications team, almost always narrated with a North American accent. While they seek to foster a sense of global partnership, there are constant echoes of the American origins (and ongoing American administration) of the denomination. Music is used to evoke a sense of place (e.g. the use of kettle drums when introducing African projects, or bamboo flutes for Chinese projects) and the videos provide basic education about different places (geographical location, landscape, etc.) as well as information about Adventist Mission in that location.

Following the screening of one of these videos, a collection is taken for global mission. The church's performance at these '13th Sabbath Offerings' [4] is reported weekly in the notice sheet. Members of the congregation went overseas on mission trips twice during my stay at Preston church. One group was the youth group, who went on a short-term mission to the Pacific, and the other was a pair of twins, who travelled to Cambodia on a medical mission trip to celebrate their 30th birthday.

Diversity is also celebrated at Preston Seventh-day Adventist church through the annual International Night. According to the chair of the social committee, this is the highlight of the church social calendar. Some of the social activities are off-site (e.g., picnics, beach trips), but the International Night is held in the upstairs hall on a Saturday/Sabbath evening. People come representing their country of origin (either where they were born, or where they identify as being from by ancestry) in national dress—even if they don't really have a 'national dress'. When I was first invited to the event by Juliette, who was born in Mauritius, she told me that in previous years she had variously dressed in a sarong, a borrowed sari, or a specially purchased dance costume. She doesn't feel there is a particular Mauritian outfit she can or should wear, but she tries with her costume to evoke something of her homeland.

The Adventist church actively, deliberately incorporates newcomers. Tabitha, a postgraduate student from Botswana is amazed by the freedom she has had to be involved in church leadership, she says:

> I find myself being allowed to do more at Preston Church compared to back home. Back home there's a lot of bureaucracy . . . it's so hard to do something if they don't really know you. So, that's what I've kind of been struggling with back home. I've wanted to be more active in church but it hasn't been that easy. In that, because I lived in Francistown and then I went to live in a capital city which is Gaborone so a lot of people, they didn't know me, didn't know where I was coming from so, it's very hard for them to actually allow you to take part in church activities. Whereas, at Preston if you're willing, they'll just give you a chance to do that. So that's what I absolutely love about them.

When I asked a locally born elder about this, she told me involving newcomers in church leadership is a deliberate strategy to help people feel connected and meaningful. It is an act of hospitality.

During my time with the Arabic Baptist church, I attended a rally hosted by the combined Arabic churches of Melbourne. There was a visiting musical performer and speaker from Egypt. The height of the preacher's message was that this audience needed to focus their attention on Melbourne. He told them that when they get to judgement, they are going to be held accountable for Melbourne. They will be answerable for Melbourne. They need to serve Melbourne. The church is universal—and this preacher suggested the outworking of this is not that these Arab Christians need to continue to seek the good of the church in the Arab world, but rather they are, in a way, free to serve God in the place He has put them. These Christians are responsible for the particular place they are in.

Joel Robbins (2006) sees that theology has something valuable that anthropology seems to have lost but may yet regain: the ability to make claims about what kind of life we ought to strive for. Hope and a vision of the good life are things that many anthropologists yearn to advocate for based on their encounters with difference. Robbins is not himself a Christian, and he thinks it may be possible for

[3] http://www.adventistmission.org/faq. A complete archive of videos is available online: http://www.adventistmission.org/amdvd-archive

[4] The '13th Sabbath' refers to an annual quarter (13 weeks)

anthropologists to achieve this if we "recommit ourselves to finding real otherness in the world" (2006, 292). As I have argued elsewhere (Swann 2018), while finding his conclusion that we can simply do better through encountering difference unpersuasive, I do think this provocation can help Christians see the beauty of encountering difference in two ways demonstrated in the stories above:

> First, it might help Christians to practice a radical openness to migrants who arrive in Australia already knowing the love of Jesus. It might surprise you to learn that 42% of migrants to Australia from the Middle East and North Africa, 49% of migrants from South East Asia, and 81% of migrants from Southern and Eastern Europe identified themselves as Christians on the 2016 Census (ABS 2016). There is no reason to believe that they are any more nominal than the 58% of Australian-born persons who ticked the same box. Yet, I suspect that sometimes the (mainstream Australian) church is inclined to think of them (even the Christian ones!) as a "mission-field" rather than as partners. They are considered in need of teaching and training in order that they become more like the Australian church, rather than as brothers and sisters whose witness and teaching may transform the Australian church into a more Christ-like body.
>
> Second, it might help Australian Christians to practice seeing themselves as 'the other', especially when they travel to other countries. I think that if we fall into the trap of thinking that there is a white Australian 'we' who host migrants, we fail to prepare the approximately 30,000 Australians who leave Australia each year to spend more than twelve months overseas (ABS 2018). People going into missionary service are (hopefully) trained in how to be guests in another country but vast numbers more Australians, especially young Australians will travel for substantial periods abroad. How could the church train them so that their Christian faith not only survives that journey, but is positively transformed? How could the church prepare them to be "good" migrants? (Swann 2018, np)

Conclusion

The stories and vignettes presented in this article reflect the ways in which churchgoers navigate the tension of being united in spite of cultural difference. The migration journey has, for some migrants, opened them up to new modes of worship practice, or produced an openness to other faith traditions typical of the mobile cosmopolitan. But openness is not only demonstrated on the part of the mobile subject, there are also attempts made by the host churches to provide hospitality. This hospitality is shown through displaying material objects, running events, and in everyday forms of speech and song in worship services.

The cosmopolitan migrant, like the Christian, is stuck in a space of ongoing liminality. Migration is typically characterized by a feeling of disconnection, of engagement in "multiple cultural worlds that are dynamically intertwined" (Coleman and Collins 2006, 5. Migration is not like ritual experiences of liminality—there is rarely a promise of a future reconciliation, no easy transition to a new and clearly defined role in the social structure. But, while there are periods of discomfort in the stories presented in this paper, these participants do not continually live in a state of anxiety. Instead, even when Helena and Sione feel lost—Helena in a Muslim country, or Sione studying in another language—they find community. They creatively respond to difference, being stretched and shaped through the encounter. They experience, perhaps, what Rapport and Dawson call "being at home in movement" (1998, 27). At the same time, cosmopolitan host communities open themselves up to difference and the possibility of transformation through the encounters that echo the experience of the early church in the story of Pentecost.

Theologians such as James KA Smith (2009, 2013, 2017) and Michael Banner (2014) have been advocating for how the liturgy *ought* to shape the formation of the person. Rather, this project provides thick ethnographic data exploring *how* liturgy plays out in the life of believers. The stories shared show why different liturgical traditions remain important in the lives of believers when they relocate from one country to another. I do not seek to argue for one perfect expression of a liturgy of Pentecost that will best shape the Christian. Rather, I seek to demonstrate how Scriptural narratives like that of Pentecost are turned into a range of habits which all point back to the same biblical stories. The ways Christians in different churches remind themselves of and re-enact these stories are different, but the stories remain the same. These narratives therefore create continuities between communities even as preferences for different habits create fragmentation. Our commitment to certain habits—particular temporalities and spatialities—affects

our feeling of 'at home'-ness in different churches. Migrants both learn new habits and experience their faith in new ways, and seek to recreate habits that help them to live out a faithful life oriented to God and the good.

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From Spirituality to Orthodoxy: Black American Assimilation and the Eschewal of African Spiritual Practices

Dennis Shipman

This article investigates complex historical processes illustrating how specific mainstream Christian denominations have played a significant role in shaping the religious and cultural identity of Black Americans, particularly through "shaming" resulting in upwardly mobile Blacks eschewing African spiritual practices they may have seen a grandmother, grandfather, uncle, aunt, or neighbor practice. Drawing on an anthropological approach that synthesizes ethnographic fieldwork among Black American Christian communities and a historical discourse analysis of denominational teachings, this study explores the zeal with which Black Americans embraced Christian orthodoxy and orthopraxy particularly during the First Great Migration, which served as a strategic mechanism for assimilation into the dominant American culture. The research reveals that the reinforcement of negative perceptions, labeling indigenous African spiritual practices as "hocus pocus" or "mumbo jumbo," was not merely a passive cultural shift but an active, denominationally driven process tied to notions of respectability, social mobility, and the rejection of perceived "primitive" or "superstitious" associations. This deliberate distancing facilitated integration into predominantly white social structures and contributed to the formation of a distinct Black American Christian identity.

By examining this dynamic, the article illuminates the profound impact of religious institutions on cultural adaptation. It also provides critical insights into the ongoing negotiations of spirituality, tradition, and modernity within the Black American experience, while simultaneously offering a nuanced evaluation of the Black Church's multifaceted role—its unparalleled contributions to community survival, provision, and a unique theological framework for liberation, alongside its internal pressures towards assimilation.

Introduction

The spiritual landscape of Black America has long been a vibrant, often contradictory, tapestry woven from threads of African cosmological continuities and the imposed realities of Christian evangelism. From the crucible of enslavement to the promises of emancipation, religious institutions have served as sources of resilience, while acting as complex mechanisms of social transformation. Yet, within this narrative of adaptation and survival lies a less explored, yet critical, phenomenon: the active eschewal of traditional African spiritual practices by Black Americans, particularly as a strategic adaptation towards assimilation into dominant American culture and mainstream Christian orthopraxis. This article argues that specific mainstream Christian denominations have played a significant and often overlooked role in reinforcing negative perceptions of African spiritual traditions among Black Americans, directly contributing to this assimilation process.

The nuanced tension between ancestral spiritual practices and emergent Christian orthodoxy reached critical junctures during pivotal periods of Black American history, exemplified by the First Great Migration (1910-1970).

As millions moved from the rural South to urban centers, seeking economic opportunity and social advancement, the embrace of mainstream Protestant denominations offered not just spiritual solace but also pathways to respectability and integration within a

racially stratified society. This dynamic is powerfully underscored by the trajectory of institutions like the National Colored Spiritualist Association of Churches (NCSAC). Once a prominent voice for a distinctly African-inflected spirituality, the NCSAC's eventual decline, particularly by the mid-20th century, stands as a stark illustration of this broader assimilationist trend—a poignant testament to the increasing disassociation from practices often derided as "hocus pocus" or "mumbo jumbo" by both external society and, crucially, by influential Black Christian leaders themselves.

Drawing on an anthropological approach that synthesizes rigorous ethnographic fieldwork among Black American Christian communities with a historical discourse analysis of denominational teachings, this study explores the zealous embrace of Christian orthodoxy and orthopraxy. We will demonstrate how influential Black churches, such as the National Baptist Convention, USA, Inc., the Church of God in Christ (COGIC), the African Methodist Episcopal (AME) Church, and the African Methodist Episcopal Zion (AME Zion) Church, while providing vital community and liberation theology, simultaneously propagated narratives that subtly—and sometimes overtly—stigmatized spiritual forms deemed "unorthodox" or "primitive". This reinforcement of negative perceptions was not a passive cultural drift but an active, denominationally driven process, intrinsically tied to aspirations of upward mobility, social acceptance, and the rejection of associations that can hinder integration into predominantly white social structures.

This article will proceed by first outlining the historical presence and evolution of African spiritual continuities within the Americas. It will then analyze the specific theological and social doctrines of mainstream Black Christian denominations, illustrating how these contributed to a discourse of "shaming" traditional African spiritual practices. Subsequently, ethnographic insights will illuminate the lived experiences of upwardly mobile Black Americans who, often with personal connections to these ancestral practices through family members like a grandmother, grandfather, uncle, aunt or neighbor, made conscious choices to eschew them in favor of Christian orthodoxy. By examining this dynamic, the article illuminates the profound impact of religious institutions on cultural adaptation and provides critical insights into the ongoing negotiations of spirituality, tradition, and modernity within the Black American experience, while offering a fuller evaluation of the benefits as well as the detriments of the Black Church in America.

Historical Presence and Evolution of African Spiritual Continuities

The transatlantic slave trade, a cataclysmic event in human history, profoundly reshaped the spiritual lives of Africans forcibly brought to the Americas. Yet, despite the brutal rupture from their homelands and systematic attempts to erase their cultural identities, West African spiritual traditions demonstrated remarkable resilience. These systems, often characterized by a holistic worldview, emphasized a permeable boundary between the sacred and the profane, incorporating ancestor veneration, the belief in various spirit entities, divination practices, and the significant role of communal ritual. Spiritual power was often understood as immanent in nature, manifest in specific sites, objects, and specialized practitioners who mediated between the human and spiritual realms.

This vibrant tapestry of beliefs and practices formed the foundational cosmological framework for millions of enslaved Africans, a framework that would subtly and overtly persist in the new world. Furthermore, recent scholarship by Afe Adogame (Adogame, Obadare, and Adebanwi 2025) expands upon foundational understandings of African spirituality, highlighting its dynamic, trans-local, and evolving nature, moving beyond essentialist definitions to encompass its contemporary manifestations and diasporic connections, which is critical for a full comprehension of its enduring presence.

Survival in the Americas necessitated adaptive strategies for maintaining these spiritual continuities. Often, this involved covert practices, disguised rituals, and the embedding of African cosmological elements within ostensibly Christian forms. The Ring Shout, for instance, a communal ecstatic dance that combined African circle dance traditions with Christian hymns, exemplifies the syncretic ingenuity of enslaved Africans. Similarly, the development of various forms of Hoodoo and Conjure in the American South, while adapting to the new environment and sometimes incorporating European elements, undeniably drew heavily from West and Central African magical and healing traditions, serving as crucial means of asserting agency and seeking spiritual protection in a hostile world. For example, ethnographic work by Zora Neale Hurston in the 1930s (1935) meticulously documented

practices of Hoodoo in Florida and Louisiana, detailing the creation of protective charms ("mojo bags") and divinatory techniques passed down through generations, often blending biblical figures with African spiritual principles. More recently, scholarship by Yvonne Chireau (2003) has highlighted how these practices, though often marginalized, represented a distinct religious landscape, offering spiritual power and agency to Black communities beyond the confines of formal church structures.

Beyond formal practices, African spiritual understandings informed narratives, folklore, linguistic patterns, and even funerary customs, revealing a persistent, albeit often hidden, spiritual current beneath the surface of imposed Christianization.

However, from the very outset, these African-derived spiritual expressions faced intense scrutiny and condemnation from the dominant white society. Enslavers and missionaries alike frequently demonized African spiritual practices, labeling them as "savage," "primitive," "superstitious," or outright "Satanic." This denigration was not merely a matter of theological difference but served a crucial socio-political function: to justify enslavement, assert white supremacy, and to systematically dismantle any cultural or spiritual practices that could foster collective identity, resistance, or a sense of independent Black power. It was within this environment of external oppression and the demonization of their ancestral heritage that independent Black churches began to emerge. While offering essential spaces for community, leadership, and a unique theological interpretation of liberation, these nascent Black Christian formations also inherited, and in some cases, internalized, the broader societal bias against African-derived spirituality. The path toward "respectability" in the eyes of the dominant culture, even within Black-led institutions, would increasingly involve a conscious distancing from these stigmatized traditions.

Theological and Social Doctrines of Mainstream Black Christian Denominations and the Discourse of "Shaming"

Having established the tenacious presence of African spiritual continuities in the Americas, this section will now analyze how the theological and social doctrines of specific mainstream Black Christian denominations actively contributed to a discourse of "shaming" these practices.

This process was intricately linked to the broader project of assimilation into dominant American culture and was particularly salient during periods of increased Black social and geographical mobility, such as the Great Migration.

While these denominations undeniably played a critical role in community building, political organizing, and providing spiritual refuge for Black Americans, their pursuit of legitimacy within a racially hostile society often necessitated a clear distinction from anything deemed "primitive" or "un-Christian." The National Baptist Convention, USA, Inc. (NBC), as the largest Black Baptist denomination, exemplified this dual role. Its emphasis on a formalized, didactic Christianity, rooted in biblical literalism and a structured worship service, implicitly contrasted with the fluid, experiential, and often ecstatic nature of African-derived spiritual practices. Sermons and Sunday school lessons within NBC churches frequently exhorted congregants towards "respectable" behavior, often framing adherence to mainstream Christian norms as a sign of moral rectitude and social advancement. This included subtle, and sometimes overt, critiques of practices associated with folk traditions or "superstition," which could be interpreted as references to Hoodoo, Conjure, or African spirit beliefs. The pursuit of social acceptance and upward mobility, especially for those migrating to urban centers, made adherence to these "respectable" tenets a pragmatic choice, reflecting what Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham terms the "politics of respectability" (1993, 14) within the Black Baptist tradition.

The Black Church: A Source of Protection, Provision, and Distinct Spirituality

Beyond the theological and social doctrines of shaming, it is vital to acknowledge and elaborate upon the profound and enduring positive contributions of the Black Church to the lives and spirituality of Black Americans, even as it navigated the complex path of assimilation. These denominations served not only as arbiters of respectability but as indispensable bastions of survival and empowerment.

The Black Church, across its various denominations, served as a fundamental source of protection. During eras of virulent racism and systemic violence, churches often functioned as physical sanctuaries and meeting places impervious to white surveillance and control. They provided safe spaces for community organizing, education, and mutual aid. For instance,

during Reconstruction and the Jim Crow era, many Black churches covertly housed freedom fighters, served as centers for voter registration drives, and offered legal defense networks against unjust laws and racial terror. They were places where Black dignity was affirmed, and strategies for collective survival were forged. This protective function was often a matter of life and death, providing a refuge when no other institutions would.

Furthermore, the Black Church was an unparalleled provider of provision. Beyond spiritual nourishment, these institutions were often the primary social welfare agencies for Black communities, particularly during periods when state and federal support was inaccessible or discriminatory. Churches established benevolent societies, offered informal credit unions, provided food and clothing to the needy, and created networks for job placement and housing assistance among congregants. They were educational centers, running schools and literacy programs when public education was segregated and substandard. Sunday school, for many, was the only pathway to formal learning. This extensive practical support fundamentally shaped the material and social well-being of Black Americans, serving as a vital counterforce against economic marginalization. For instance, in the early 20th century, many Black churches established mutual aid societies that provided insurance benefits, burial funds, and support for widows and orphans, filling critical gaps left by discriminatory government policies.

Moreover, the Black Church profoundly shaped the spirituality of Black Americans in unique and enduring ways. It offered a theological framework for liberation and justice, reinterpreting biblical narratives to speak directly to the experiences of oppression and the promise of ultimate freedom. The powerful oral tradition of preaching, the call-and-response patterns, and the deeply emotive, participatory worship styles—imbued with African aesthetic and performance elements—fostered communal solidarity and emotional release. Spirituals and gospel music, born from the crucible of bondage and the joy of resilience, became central to Black cultural expression and a unique conduit for spiritual experience, affirming identity and connection to the divine in ways that transcended formal doctrine. These forms of expression, while rooted in Christian faith, became distinctly African American spiritual manifestations, providing hope, solace, and a pathway to navigate a racially hostile world. The very act of worship often became a form of psychological and spiritual resistance, reaffirming worth and humanity in a dehumanizing society.

However, the African Methodist Episcopal (AME) Church and the African Methodist Episcopal Zion (AME Zion) Church, while rooted in protest against racial discrimination within white Methodism, nevertheless adopted much of the theological and structural orthodoxy of their white counterparts. Their strong emphasis on education, temperance, and structured church governance fostered an image of sophisticated religiosity. Within their pulpits, spiritual practices that did not conform to the established Methodist liturgy, particularly those involving trance, speaking in tongues (also known as glossolalia), ancestor veneration, or specific ritualistic uses of herbs and charms, were often dismissed as remnants of a "darker past" or uneducated superstition.

This theological distancing was a conscious effort to demonstrate that Black religious life was as "civilized" and "enlightened" as white Protestantism, thereby challenging the racist stereotypes that often-justified racial oppression. For many upwardly mobile Black Americans, joining these denominations was a clear signal of their commitment to a specific path of progress that involved shedding "undesirable" cultural baggage.

The Church of God in Christ (COGIC), while a Holiness-Pentecostal denomination that embraced ecstatic worship and spiritual gifts, paradoxically also participated in the discourse of shaming. Despite its own African-derived ecstatic elements and focus on spiritual experience, COGIC rigorously condemned what it termed "folk magic" or "conjuration," interpreting such practices through a purely demonic lens. This condemnation served to distinguish COGIC's "holy" spirit manifestations from what they perceived as dangerous or unsanctified spiritual power, often linking traditional African practices to malevolent forces or the unregenerate past. This theological purification, though from a different theological posture than the staider Baptist and Methodist denominations, still served to delineate acceptable spiritual expression from that which was to be eschewed, reinforcing the idea that legitimate spiritual power derived solely from the Holy Spirit as understood within their specific Christian framework.

This internal critique and shaming discourse were significant because they came from within the Black community itself, often from trusted religious leaders. For individuals seeking to integrate into mainstream

society, the warnings and subtle denigrations from respected pastors and church elders carried immense weight, often more so than external white condemnation.

The message was clear: embracing Christian orthodoxy and rejecting perceived "Africanisms" was not just a spiritual choice but a crucial step towards social and economic advancement, a pathway to respectability, and a means to escape the derogatory labels of "hocus pocus" and "mumbo jumbo" that haunted earlier generations.

Ethnographic Insights: Lived Experiences of Eschewal

This section transitions from historical and theological analysis to the lived realities of Black Americans, drawing directly from the rigorous ethnographic fieldwork conducted for this study among diverse Black Christian communities across the United States. Through a series of over two dozen in-depth interviews and sustained participant observations spanning nearly a decade, this research illuminates the deeply personal and familial dimensions of the eschewal of African spiritual practices, vividly demonstrating how the aforementioned historical and denominational "shaming" discourse has manifested in everyday life, shaping choices and identities across multiple generations. The qualitative data, meticulously collected and corroborated across numerous narratives, reveals that the decision to distance oneself from such traditions is often profoundly personal, shaped by intimate family narratives, pervasive community pressures, and an internalized understanding of what constitutes "respectable" and "legitimate" spirituality within the context of mainstream Black Christianity. This rich ethnographic tapestry aims to provide robust confidence in the data by affirming that the sentiments shared by the initial vignettes are indeed widely echoed across the informant pool, reflecting broader, deeply ingrained cultural patterns within these communities.

Many informants, a diverse chorus of voices spanning geographic regions and denominational affiliations (from the National Baptist Convention, USA, Inc., to AME and COGIC churches), consistently recounted childhood experiences or shared family stories that subtly, or sometimes overtly, conveyed the negative perceptions of African-derived spiritual practices. These narratives frequently highlighted a palpable generational shift, often driven by the pursuit of upward mobility and respectability. Mrs. Clara Jones, a 78-year-old active and devout member of a National Baptist affiliate church in Chicago, provided a poignant vignette. She shared how her grandmother, a first-generation migrant from rural Mississippi who had carried vestiges of folk traditions with her, would secretly consult a root doctor for ailments or perceived spiritual afflictions that the rigid church deacons, in their adherence to emergent orthodoxy, dismissed as "God's will" or a lack of sufficient faith. "My Mama used to tell us to stay away from old Sister Mae's house," Mrs. Jones recalled, her voice softening with the memory, but firm with the ingrained caution she had internalized, "said she was into 'that old stuff,' things that 'weren't of God.' It was just how you talked about it, not mean, but like it was backward, something you left behind when you came North and got 'saved,' and wanted to be seen as 'proper'," she concluded. This narrative highlights the familial transmission of the shaming discourse, where discretion and eventual rejection of such practices were learned behaviors intrinsically tied to aspirations for an urban, "modern," and undeniably Christian identity. Mrs. Jones's account was frequently and compellingly echoed by numerous other long-standing church members who remembered similar unspoken rules within their own families, particularly those with deep roots in the rural South, indicating this was a widespread phenomenon rather than isolated incidents.

Another compelling theme emerged from discussions with younger congregants, often professionals or those with higher educational attainment, who expressed a clear disassociation from practices they vaguely recognized as "African" or "folk." Mr. David Green, a 35-year-old professional and deacon in an AME affiliated church in Atlanta, acknowledged hearing whispers of his great-aunt's abilities to "read signs" or "fix things" with spiritual interventions that seemed to fall outside the accepted purview of formal church doctrine. "My parents always pushed us hard in church, no nonsense, just Bible," Mr. Green explained, his tone reflecting a sense of inherited imperative. "They saw anything outside of that, like what Auntie might have done, as 'hocus pocus,' something from a time people were trying to get away from. It wasn't 'Christian,' it was just . . . embarrassing if you really thought about it," he admitted. This sentiment consistently underscored how the quest for respectability, often intertwined with educational and professional attainment, fostered a

conscious distancing from practices labeled as pre-modern or antithetical to sophisticated Christian belief. Numerous other informants in similar social positions articulated comparable views, emphasizing the social capital gained by aligning exclusively with mainstream Christian norms. For instance, one interviewee, a Black female professor in her 40s from a COGIC background, recounted how her grand-mother, despite her deep church involvement, would secretly use "blueing" in her wash water to ward off evil, a practice she dismissed as "superstition" even as she recognized its protective intent within her grandmother's worldview. This illustrates the subtle, yet persistent, awareness of these practices even among those who had outwardly rejected them.

Within COGIC communities, while ecstatic worship was a hallmark, the boundary drawn between "holy" spiritual manifestations and "folk magic" was particularly rigid. Field observations revealed sermons vehemently condemning "witchcraft," "sorcery," and "root work," often implicitly targeting practices with African roots. One sermon, witnessed in a large COGIC church in Houston with approximately 500 congregants present, emphasized that "any power not coming from the Holy Spirit is from the devil, and you cast it out! Don't be messing with that mumbo jumbo, that's how spirits get hold of you!" This direct and forceful language, while perhaps not explicitly naming African spiritualities, implicitly categorized them as dangerous and antithetical to true Christian faith, thereby reinforcing the imperative to eschew them for the sake of spiritual purity and communal acceptance. During a week-long revival service in a rural Mississippi COGIC church, several testimonies centered on individuals who claimed to have been "delivered" from "hoodoo" or "conjure," framing their prior involvement in such practices as a period of spiritual bondage from which the church had freed them. These public narratives further solidified the internal shaming mechanism.

These ethnographic insights demonstrate that the eschewal of African spiritual continuities is not a passive process of forgetting, but an active, culturally informed decision. It is driven by a complex interplay of denominational teachings, familial socialization, and the broader desire for social and spiritual legitimacy within a society that has historically devalued Black cultural forms. The "shaming" discourse, whether subtle familial nudges or overt pulpit condemnations, has profoundly shaped the spiritual landscapes of Black Americans, guiding them towards orthodox Christian expressions as a primary means of navigating identity, community, and aspiration.

Discussion

This study has explored the complex historical and lived processes through which mainstream Black Christian denominations have significantly shaped the religious and cultural identity of Black Americans, particularly by actively contributing to the eschewal of African spiritual practices. Our analysis began by establishing the enduring presence of African spiritual continuities in the Americas, despite the brutal rupture of slavery, revealing their persistent manifestation in various syncretic forms and folk traditions. We then demonstrated how prominent Black Christian denominations—including the National Baptist Convention, USA, Inc., the African Methodist Episcopal Church, the African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church, and the Church of God in Christ—developed theological and social doctrines that, while providing vital community and liberation, simul-taneously fostered a discourse of "shaming" these African-derived spiritual practices. Finally, our ethnographic data vividly illustrated how this historical discourse translated into lived experiences, with upwardly mobile Black Americans actively distancing themselves from practices their elders or neighbors observed, driven by aspirations of respectability, social acceptance, and a desire to align with what was considered "civilized" and "modern" Christianity.

The effectiveness of this internal "shaming" mechanism lies in its source: not merely external white condemnation, but the powerful influence of respected Black religious leaders and community institutions. The church, a central pillar of Black life and a crucial agent for social uplift, became a significant arbiter of acceptable spiritual and social behavior. For Black Americans navigating a racially hierarchical society, the embrace of mainstream Protestant orthodoxy and orthopraxy served as a pragmatic strategy for assimilation, signaling a commitment to a specific path of progress.

The decline of institutions like the National Colored Spiritualist Association of Churches, once a vibrant alternative, stands as a testament to the powerful gravitational pull of these larger denom-inations and the social capital associated with their form of Christianity. This process highlights the profound impact of religious institutions not only on spiritual formation but also on the politics of identity

and cultural adaptation within marginalized communities.

However, it is crucial to acknowledge the inherent complexities and nuances of this historical trajectory. The Black church was never a monolithic entity, nor was its role solely about assimilation. It has always been a paradox: simultaneously a site of profound cultural preservation, particularly through its music and preaching styles, and a force for cultural transformation, sometimes at the expense of overt Africanisms. The decision to eschew traditional practices was often a strategic act of agency, a means of survival and advancement in a hostile environment, rather than a mere passive surrender. Individuals and families made choices they believed were best for their progress and the future of their children, even if it meant consciously moving away from ancestral spiritual paths. The ethnographic accounts underscore that this was a process of negotiation, not simple erasure, often leaving a lingering awareness, if not practice, of the older traditions.

This study contributes significantly to the anthropology of religion by demonstrating how religious institutions, even those formed in resistance to oppression, can become powerful agents of cultural transformation, subtly or overtly shaping internal norms to align with broader societal expectations. It enriches African American studies by providing a deeper understanding of the internal dynamics of religious identity formation beyond simple conversion narratives, focusing on the active processes of acceptance and rejection within the Black community.

Furthermore, it offers critical insights into broader discussions of cultural assimilation, highlighting the role of intra-community pressures and the complex interplay between tradition and modernity.

Future research will explore the contemporary resurgence of interest in African spiritualities among younger generations of Black Americans, examining whether this represents a re-negotiation of the "shaming" discourse or a new paradigm for Black spiritual identity, detached from the historical pressures of assimilation that defined earlier eras. We see some anecdotal evidence of this emerging phenomenon in film Director Ryan Coogler's international hit movie, *Sinners*, which is replete with overt references to Christianity masking Hoodoo ("rootwork") or African American spirituality, Voodoo (Vodun), Native American folklore, Celtic wicca and Vampirism. This cinematic representation suggests a cultural shift, where previously marginalized spiritual expressions are being re-examined and re-integrated into contemporary Black narratives, signaling a potential move beyond the historical need for strict orthodoxy.

Conclusion

This research compels a critical re-evaluation of the forces shaping Black American religious identity, revealing a paradox at its core: the very institutions that fostered liberation and community also orchestrated a profound distancing from ancestral African spiritual practices, which is a common balancing act that upwardly mobile Black Americans were forced to negotiate. Akin to "code switching," this strategic adaptation allowed for navigation of oppressive societal structures.

Far from a passive cultural drift, though, this study demonstrates that the eschewal of these traditions was a deliberate, denominationally driven process, strategically harnessed by mainstream Black Christian churches for the explicit purpose of assimilation and the pursuit of respectability within a racially hostile America.

Our analysis has traced the tenacious persistence of African spiritual continuities from the brutal crucible of the transatlantic slave trade to their manifestation in American folk traditions. Crucially, we then unveiled how leading Black Protestant denominations—including the National Baptist Convention, the AME and AME Zion Churches, and the Church of God in Christ—articulated theological and social doctrines that actively stigmatized these traditions, often labeling them as "primitive," "superstitious," or antithetical to "civilized" Christian faith. The ethnographic narratives confirmed this internalized shaming, showing how generations of upwardly mobile Black Americans made conscious choices to reject the spiritual paths of their forebears, prioritizing social acceptance and material advancement over inherited spiritual practices.

This study powerfully illustrates that the Black church, while an undeniable bastion of resilience and self-determination, also functioned as a cultural gatekeeper, an internal arbiter of acceptable identity. The "politics of respectability" it championed, born of necessity in a discriminatory society, inadvertently forged a spiritual orthodoxy that marginalized deeply rooted ancestral connections. This finding compels scholars to move beyond simplistic narratives of religious conversion, embracing the complex tensions

between liberation and cultural conformity, resilience and strategic abandonment that have defined Black American spiritual evolution.

In conclusion, the legacy of this denominational shaming continues to ripple through contemporary Black American spiritual landscapes, fueling an ongoing dialogue between inherited faith and a burgeoning interest in re-connecting with ancestral spiritualities. Understanding this deliberate historical eschewal is not merely an academic exercise; it is fundamental to comprehending the profound negotiations of identity, belonging, and spiritual authenticity that continue to shape the Black American experience. It challenges us to ask: What has been gained, and what has been lost, in the journey from the spirit's flash to the orthodoxy's embrace?

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The Olé in Dance and Religion: The Cultural and Theological Implications of Dance in the Hispanic Culture

Jessica L. Altz

In my research I have been looking specifically at the Hispanic community and how it is impacted by religion and dance, which at times intersect and at other times conflict with each other. Survey of the church geography within the Hispanic district of Oklahoma City has shown that very few churches engage with Hispanic language and culture, and it is my proposal that more work should be done in this respect. Dance, I argue, is one way that churches could engage more with the Hispanic community. With Hispanic dance, particularly flamenco, as my guide, I look at how the lives of people are affected by Hispanic culture and religion both positively and negatively and how digital media has allowed for connection and spreading of culture and religion. Tying this ethnographic research together, I consider how churches in the United States can open their doors to other cultures, and make people of different cultures feel more welcomed. I look at the emotional connection that dance can create both to those around us and to the Lord. In conclusion, the aim of this article is to consider the implications of both dance and religion on Hispanic culture and how they work both apart and together to guide the daily lives of those living in the Hispanic district in Oklahoma City.

Introduction

As I drive to my first Flamenco class I am racked with nerves, for a few different reasons. The first is that while the dance studio is on a safe street, the same cannot be said about the next street over where I need to park my car. That street is primarily homes and rental houses with broken windows that are known for car and home break-ins and attacks by gang members who target shoppers and restaurant goers on the next street. After locking my car and quickly getting to the street with the studio I am greeted by bright sounds, colors, and smells of the Plaza District in Oklahoma City. These are then mirrored in the studio where I am greeted with a hug from the instructor, whose Flamenco name[1] is Carmen.[2] The Studio breathes Hispanic culture with brightly colored walls, traditional music playing, and most people speaking Spanish. Before the class even starts, everyone can feel the *Olé* in the room.

The *Olé* in Hispanic culture is about passion, joy, and love, it is the feeling of strong emotion. One cannot say *Olé* without a smile on one's face. That is what dance and religion should be, about the emotion, the passion, love, and joy that one gets in praising the Lord and being able to move. Two of my informants spoke about the emotion that they feel during worship and when they dance: the joy they get and the ability to express emotions that they cannot always express with words. Mia stated, "I never went to school. . . I'm not the best, but I had the passion that's so much of what it is and what so few dancers unfortunately have these days." This passion that she speaks of, that so few people have nowadays, is the *Olé*.

[1] A flamenco name expresses an alternative side or personality. During the day while she is at work and with her children she is her given name. At night when she is dancing she is the sassy and spectacular Carmen.

[2] All individuals and churches have been anonymized with pseudonyms.

I want to note that while typically Hispanic and Latino/Latina are not the same (Hispanic refers to coming from a Spanish-speaking country, and Latino/Latina refers to Latin America), in this area I have learned that Hispanic and Latino/Latina all pertain to the same aspects of culture. I would also like to note that while people of Hispanic descent follow many different religions, I have chosen to primarily focus my research on Catholicism because Catholicism is the primary religion in Mexico. According to one of my informants, whom I will call Mia, "In Colombia, you [are] pretty much Catholic . . . that's what you do." This is also true of Hispanic culture in Oklahoma City. In less than a three-mile radius, four Catholic churches offer primarily, or only, Spanish services. There are only two other Spanish-speaking churches in the area (Assemblies of God and Baptist).

In my research I have been looking specifically at the Hispanic community and how it is impacted by religion and dance, which at times intersect and at other times conflict with each other. With flamenco dance as my lens, I look at how digital media affects Hispanic culture and religion. I then broaden my perspective to consider the role of language in the Hispanic culture in Oklahoma City. Taking a theological perspective, I consider how churches of the United States can open their doors to other cultures, and make people of different cultures feel more welcomed, allowing for a greater spread of Christianity.

The Petal Catholic Church

Before I started this project I had never been to a Catholic Church. I grew up Christian and would still consider myself to be Christian as I hold to central teachings of the faith, such as that Jesus died on the cross for our sins. But I do not affiliate myself with a specific denomination. Going to church while growing up, and still to this day, the churches I visit are usually old warehouse buildings that have been converted into sanctuaries. Still, I grew up in an area where most of my friends were Catholic, and now as a teacher, the majority of my students are Catholic. As a result I have been surrounded by those who follow the Catholic faith my whole life and have always been curious about the cathedrals and mass, as they seem significantly different from the churches I have attended. This project gave me the opportunity to explore Catholicism with its beautiful buildings and people always dressed their best. It opened up a world of church experience different from my own of meeting in warehouses or coffee shops, often dressed in whatever feels most comfortable that day.

My first opportunity to visit a Catholic Church in Oklahoma City was The Petal Catholic Church. There are actually two churches by this name in Oklahoma City. One is right in the middle of downtown, next to the Oklahoma City Bombing Memorial, and is surrounded by a bunch of corporate buildings. It is about a three to five minute drive outside of the Hispanic District. The Petal Catholic Church that I went to is right in the middle of the Hispanic District, and I had to take back roads of the city to get to it. The church is surrounded by homes that have seen better days, most have windows that are either boarded up or have bars over them. It is located in an area of the city where it is best to not be caught walking alone at night and where your car doors should be locked at all times. Once, as I was leaving, I noticed that the church had a fence around the perimeter with barbed wire at the top. However, the fence was not the first thing that I noticed (this may be because I have worked in Oklahoma City on and off for the last five years and barbed wire had become a common sight to me). Rather, the first thing I noticed was the amazing red brick work that created this building. The second thing I noticed was the moms sitting outside in the late August heat selling homemade lunch, and giving away food to those they knew were in need of a meal.

I attended both an English mass and a Spanish one. For the sake of brevity, I focus here only on the Spanish mass. It is of note that the English mass was more solemn than the Spanish mass, with less music and less engagement from the congregation. The biggest difference between the two masses, however, was that the Spanish mass had a happier mood. People greeted me with a smile, even when they realized my understanding of Spanish was minimal. Everyone acted like they were there because they wanted to be, not because it was a chore they had to do. Almost all of the seats were packed by the time worship was over. The crowd was about 98% Hispanic and 2% other ethnicities. I also noticed a lack of people in the age of fifteen to twenty-five. The worship music was much more upbeat and had a band of at least ten people crowded at the front with everyone grooving to the worship music. This crowd did not have hymn books (other than a few select people who owned them) or words on a screen to follow, but they knew all the words and could follow whichever song was sung. While this service was slightly less ritualistic than the

English one, it was still very ritual based: everyone knew what to do on the invisible cues that as a stranger I did not know and was unable to pick up on. The English and Spanish masses were led by different priests, with the Spanish mass having a larger group of altar boys and nuns to help with the service. While both groups wore their "Sunday best," in the Spanish mass people seemed to dress up more, with women in colorful dresses and men in suits rather than nice tops with clean pants. There was also far more participation from the crowd in the Spanish mass. In general, music and movement were much more entwined in the Hispanic service. One person would start singing their prayers, then others would join in. As they would sing they would start swaying to the movement, their bodies automatically reacting to the music.

The worship that was practiced, especially in the Spanish mass during the time of prayer, was ritual, but was also from the heart. In his ethnography of Black Pentecostal churches, *Fire in my Bones: Transcendence and the Holy Spirit in African American Gospel,* Glenn Hinson discusses how "experience suggests, song is but one of many possible vehicles of invitation. Preaching, praying, testifying, witnessing, and praising can all invoke the same invitational frame" (Hinson 2000, 3). The outburst of song during prayer may have been a way people from Hispanic heritage feel most connected to the Lord. A person can sing and pray at the same time, and for a culture where music and movement play an important role in people's daily lives, this could help them move from ritual practice to speaking from their souls.

Time, Memory, and History

Time, memory, and history are the foundation of Hispanic culture. This can be seen in their religion, dance performances, and the efforts that people put into the spreading of knowledge through digital media. People in the Hispanic culture in Oklahoma City do their best to share and spread knowledge of their culture and history, while preserving the memory of their loved ones and where they have come from.

Flamenco Performance to Celebrate Memory and History

"The doors are locked right?" my mom asks me as she clicks the lock button again while we drive past a homeless camp less than three minutes away from the ReVoZo performance at Spark Creative Lab. As I drive my mom to our first Flamenco performance on Mother's Day weekend I am reminded by her that even though this performance is technically in the Asian District, which is widely seen as safer than the Hispanic District and allows for a larger variety of people to come watch the performance, the area still is not considered to be safe and has a large population of homeless people that have been known to jump cars when stopped at intersections. Carmen chose the Asian District for the performance despite concerns about safety, the sharing of cultures, and some gangs in the area that have stirred up violence in the past. However, there is another reason for Carmen's choice of this location to host the performance. The area has a history of hosting Hispanic community performances, mostly because the streets tend to be cleaner, but also because before it was a part of the Asian District this street was a part of the Hispanic District before they were priced out. As a result the street still has a place in the Hispanic community's memory of what it used to be and of the performances that were right outside their door. Memories such as this one are what drives their culture, memories of their loved ones and of where they came from.

The ReVoZo performance took place in a very small performance space called Spark Creative Lab. ReVoZo is the dance company's name, meaning to "overflow", overflow with culture, pride, and love for their heritage. The performance itself was sold out with all sixty seats filled. In the front was a very small stage, approximately four feet by six feet, just barely large enough to fit all five performers (one student, two dancers, one singer and one guitar player). There was a table where they were selling drinks in an attempt to raise money for future performances. The entrance was a garage door that was thankfully left open the entire time as there was no AC in the building. The performance space itself had a cool industrial vibe that had the whole audience talking, even though it did not have any features that most people have come to associate with the Hispanic culture; instead of having colorful walls covered in artwork telling their history, there were concrete walls and exposed beams and ductwork. As we entered the space there was a check-in table to be sure that everyone who came had one of the reserved seats that had been sold out several weeks in advance. In the back right corner there was a door to the green room where I stood for the majority of the performance. Though this location made it slightly difficult to see, it did provide the best view of both the stage and the audience.

The audience was primarily Hispanic, along with some White attendees and a few African Americans.[3] Also, based on conversations I was able to overhear, about half of the audience spoke Spanish, while the remainder spoke English, although many seemed to speak both languages. The singer sang in Spanish, but spoke of the meaning of the specific songs and dances in English after he was requested to speak English by the host. This performance was primarily run by people in the local dance community; many of us met each other while attending the University of Central Oklahoma. The audience also had a significant number of people in the local dance community. It is a demonstration of how tightly knit and supportive this community is that, even though most knew nothing about Flamenco, they were still willing to come and watch the performance and show their support.

The performance itself was beautiful, and the singer had an amazing ability to tell the stories and history of the Mexican-American community through folk songs in the most heartbreaking and soul-filled way. As the singer sang the stories of their history, the guitarist added a reminiscent sound that took the audience to the hills and streets of Mexico. The dancers, though, were the real stars of the show. Flamenco is almost all improvisation (meaning that choreography is not created in advance); dancers hear the music and know the stories in advance, but they create the dance movements live. Before one song, the singer commented that these dances range from traditional Gypsy dances, coming from the hills of Mexico and South America to modern times, and were created to celebrate their ancestry and where they came from. This particularly caught my interest as previously I did not know that Gypsies had made their way to Mexico. I discovered that they have come as street performers and travelers from Spain who were chased out due to their supposed tendency to thieving. This gave them the opportunity to spread their culture and combine other cultures with their own. According to Barbara Thiel-Cramer, the author of *Flamenco: The Art of Flamenco, Its History and Development Until Our Days* (1991)*,* Gypsies were able to take and combine music from India to Europe. This new form went with them then to other countries such as Mexico where they continued to influence and be influenced by new cultures, including tribal cultures as well. The singer went on to say that while Mexico is their mother, Flamenco is their grandmother, demonstrating the importance of Flamenco to their culture and the impact it has made on their lives.

Gypsies have had a significant impact on cultures far and wide thanks to their traveler lifestyle and due to the laws (such as the laws in Spain) that have forced them to live a nomadic lifestyle. Likewise Flamenco has had an impact, and been impacted by, travel across cultures and around the globe. For example, the majority of Flamenco dancers from Oklahoma City can trace their roots to Mexico and from there they can trace their roots to Spain. Along the way they have picked up new techniques in both dance and music. This global experience is what adds to the beauty of Flamenco, which has been described as, "a glorious experience. Later it is difficult to try to express in words what it is you have seen and heard. That there are so many types of dances and songs from the heavy, serious, introverted to the light, happy, humorous and burlesque types, remains to be discovered" (Thiel-Cramér 1991, 71). Metaphorically, the Gypsy tradition is a tree with many branches of music and dance, with its roots in Spain, the trunk extending through different families/bands in different directions, and its leaves in the cultures where they have settled.

This metaphor works as well for religion and how they think about and view the world around them. Flamenco dancers have added their movement and music to Catholicism, Catholicism has impacted the soul of Flamenco dancers, and both have impacted the stories of Hispanic culture. If religion and movement seem to us like disparate things, it is because, according to Palmié, we are subject to "the epistemological ethnocentrism that our discipline inherited from a larger discursive field within which 'religion' began to emerge as a seemingly discrete sphere of human agency and experience in the aftermath of the Reformation and the rise of secular forms of political legitimization during the Enlightenment" (Palmié 2010, 88). Our studies of theology often seem restricted to specific aspects of religion. Rarely do we see research on how culture has impacted the music and movements that are done within the church. However, there is much that can be learned from studying this field. The worship service of a church should be (and often is) impacted by the culture of the people that attend that church. An example of this is the Spanish service in The Petal Catholic Church that I have described above and that had music that was

[3] This estimation is based on observation rather than survey, and certainly not exact.

lively and upbeat, with people dancing in their seats, celebrating Catholicism and their culture.

Podcasts Discussing Time, Memory, and History

As I sit in my office at the front of my house looking out the front window into my neighborhood, I reflect on how amazing it would have been to be at the taping for the ReVoZo: Flamenco Fantastico interview podcast hosted by *The Cross Curricular Dance Teacher Conversations for K-12 Public Educators* by Maria Krey Gibson. I had been invited to the interview, however I had a family emergency pop up and had not been able to attend. That did not take away from the joy of being able to hear what they had to say about Flamenco and their culture. From what I could tell, the interview was a very relaxed environment with three of the six members (many of whom are in other Flamenco groups as well, demonstrating how close knit this community is) speaking about their experiences and flamenco.

From the interview I learned that while the majority of the group are originally from Mexico, they immigrated at a very young age and all currently live within the Albuquerque, New Mexico area. This area is thought by many to be the twin to Oklahoma City, especially since many people have family in both areas or will move from one area to another for a variety of reasons including work, school, or family. I also discovered that the majority of the people in the group are teachers in their local public schools, working with students that are of similar cultural makeup to Oklahoma City Schools.

An aspect of the conversation that I really found interesting was the idea of Manicos. According to Vicente Griego (the singer in ReVoZo) this is a line of people who identify as being part of different Latin American countries. Griego said that the point of ReVoZo and flamenco is to give a voice to those with none. It gives them a home in a land where they are trying to create one. He also mentioned the importance of *Chicano,* "the voice of the downcast people" and how this is what makes art a contradiction. Art is for the rich to consume, but is for the poor to speak. It is diversity, accepting all different cultures. It is how cultures heal from transgressions—"how Mexico healed its relationship with Spain," as Griego says on the podcast. It creates a place where *manicos*—"the line of people who identify as different Latin American countries"—can feel power, voice, and strength. He went on to say that art and flamenco is something more; it is where a person is not just their race, it is a spiritual experience in itself, acknowledging both past and present. It finds its life in the drumbeat, its heart beat, leading the dancers into a circle that brings them together.

While flamenco has always been willing to be adopted by any culture, not every culture has accepted it for a variety of reasons. The primary reason is that wherever Gypsies went, crime and theft seemed to follow, and "Gypsy" in turn was considered synonymous with "flamenco". This unfortunately meant that countries such as Spain began to ban both flamenco and Gypsies for a variety of reasons. "The stereotypical constructions of flamenco lead to an imaginary with very powerful associations, among which are aspects such as a defined geographical origin (Andalusia) and a prototype of performers (the Gypsies) . . . Consequently, music associated with a specific country —and a racial idea—if produced outside of it, is most likely to be received with certain prejudices, valued with lesser attributes in terms of its quality and even perceived as less 'authentic' in comparison to that produced within its space of identification" (Macia Osorno 2024, 2). Thus flamenco, though welcoming of all cultures, has not been welcomed. In fact it has often been looked down upon due to the type of performers it used to have. This was especially true within countries where the government wanted everyone to celebrate one type of religion in a specific way.

Hispanic culture includes worshiping in a variety of ways, some of which stem from flamenco such as the music and movement, and specific key traits of spirituality. According to Martínez "the following key traits of Hispanic spirituality are essential for a truly inculturated Hispanic worship: the sacred, the symbolic, the personal, the communal, and as well as the oral traditions (Martínez 1993, 87). Flamenco and movement plays a large part in this, just as was said in the podcast. They have sacred locations and scriptures they hold close to their hearts. The Hispanic culture in Oklahoma City uses a variety of symbols (one of the primary ones being a circle) that can be seen in worship and spiritual practices, along with their daily lives such as on storefront signs. They are very communal, known for sharing everything and having a very different definition of personal space from the white American population. Many Hispanic homes are multigenerational in Oklahoma City, as they try to keep their family close and protected. They also have a variety of oral traditions, whether it be singing songs

from Mexico or as worship music, or telling stories that are religiously based or based in heritage.

From a theological perspective the Hispanic community in Oklahoma City is a rich community that has brought their heritage and Catholic traditions, with unique worship music and movements from Mexico to Oklahoma. From an anthropological perspective the Hispanic Community is full of diverse history. They get their worship style and dance from Mexican and Gypsy cultures and then bring it to America, where they can share their rich mix of traditions. It is by watching, asking questions, and listening to them and their stories that we learn just how much they have impacted our lives and how our identities interconnect with each other in Oklahoma.

Body, Movement, and Ritual

Learning About Body, Movement, and Ritual Through Flamenco Classes

As I walk up to Carmen's dance studio I am extremely nervous. On the outside the studio looks somewhat like a gas station, only lacking the actual gas pumps. However, as I walk into the studio I am greeted with a completely different scene. The studio itself has bright yellow walls with costumes hanging on racks all over the lobby, and smells like a dance studio (dance studios tend to smell like feet). The people inside are speaking a mix of Spanish and English and the music playing reflects this as it is a variety of instrumental music from Mexico and the United States. In the studio I am greeted with a hug from the instructor, Carmen. This is also Carmen's home studio, which her aunt started about thirty years ago and which Carmen grew up attending. This studio has been a big part of the city for the last thirty years, bringing cultural dances to the scene, celebrating all types of cultures from Scotland to Mexico. Carmen's goal is to use dance to teach students about their own culture and others.

This was a bubble of excitement in the class, which had a variety of dance levels from first time flamenco dancers (such as myself) to advanced students who have been doing this for multiple years.[4] Most of the students were adults ranging in age from eighteen to about sixty-five. About half of the class was Hispanic and the other half was white. Most of the students were in contemporary American dance attire, wearing leggings and sweatshirts or leotards and flamenco skirts; a few also had flowy dresses on so they could utilize the skirt. While there were nerves, there was also much excitement in the air, with everyone ready to start class.

The diversity of the class did not stop at appearance; half of the class was taught in Spanish and the other half in English. The class was otherwise done in a traditional Euro-American class style. We started with stretching. From there we reviewed the seven basic positions (in western styles there are five basic positions, in Mexican flamenco two are added specifically for the arms). After we warmed up, we learned two combinations, one beginner level and one advanced. Carmen used this time to teach us new terminology such as "*munecas*" which is a specific movement of the wrist, along with a way of showing emotions, and "*goupé*" which is a brushed stomp of the foot.

Along with teaching us the basics of flamenco, Carmen also taught us some of the history of the dance and where it came from, creating a space that included classical dance elements and historical elements. She taught us that flamenco was started in Spain by Gypsies and then spread into other parts of the world when they were chased out of Spain. She explained how a large part of the reason they were evicted from Spain was because they had a change in laws due to religion. The impact of the Crusades on the Gypsies resulted in the spread of both Flamenco and Catholicism. Flamenco spread to cities, districts, and families. Hearing this combination of history and technique created one of the most exciting dance classes I have been to in a long time, and as a result I also went to the next community class a month later.

The second community class was also taught by Carmen, though this class was in the school where she teaches rather than her home studio. She teaches at a school in Northside Oklahoma City; the area is significantly wealthier than Southside, is more suburban, and has a much smaller population. The studio in the school is much less colorful than her home studio, but she has decorated it with posters and pictures on the wall in a tasteful way to add personality to the walls. She had a very similar class set up to the

[4] Dance leveling is done in a variety of ways, however in this case we are looking at the number of years spent studying this specific style. A student could have spent twenty or more years studying ballet, making them an advanced ballet dancer, but spent less than a year studying flamenco, making them a beginner flamenco dancer.

last one, and with the same people, although in the second class she spent more time on working vocabulary. She taught us the vocab in both English and Spanish, because even though they are Spanish words, they are Spanish dance words which many do not use in their everyday lives. For example she taught us that when addressing a class the instructor refers to "*liestros*" (for men, or men and women), or "*liestras"* (only women). She also taught the elements of the flamenco dance, intermixing the information with technical dance information, such as the "*marcaje*" or marking/travel steps, "*taconeo"* or percussive footwork (a personal favorite of mine), "*brazeo"* or "*braceo*" for upper body/arm work, "floreo" for hand movements, "*vueltas*" or turns, "*palmas*" or hand clapping (one of the most used skills in flamenco), and "*compas*" for staying in rhythm. We also learned and participated in a "*tongo*", which refers to historical flamenco street performances when people circle around the musicians and dancers who perform in hopes of getting money. Carmen used the *tongo* as an opportunity to teach us about the different types of music. The *tongo* is done to a four count beat, with the accent on the second beat, and without clapping on the first. Other music in flamenco can vary in count of either four, five, six, eight, or twelve. Carmen identified the elements of flamenco as the "*cante*" or singing, the "*guitarra*" or guitar, the "*baile*" or the dance, and sometimes (and this is my personal favorite) the "*cajon",* which is a wooden percussion instrument. Getting all of these together can create an almost hypnotic experience for the performer and the audience.

Through these dances young people have learned rituals that have helped to mold their identity outside of sitting in a classroom or church, allowing culture to be passed on to the next generation through rhythms and movements, many of which have been modified over the years to incorporate modern day culture with traditional culture. We live in a world with digital technology that allows us to learn information faster than ever before, including traditional ritual movements and rhythms. Young people are no longer "entrapped by structural factors as they strategically mold their identities, which are ever changing, never static, but they are not oblivious to such factors either. Rather they use . . . social group[s] . . . for molding identity as a resource to express a deeply felt embodied, socio-economic, historic positioning" (Mendoza-Denton 2008, 285). Dance classes have the potential to create such a social group and assist young people in forming their cultural identity. In addition to classes, performances, and dance companies[5] such as those Carmen is facilitating, the use of digital media can also help students merge their traditions, language, and culture with modern elements, combining Oklahoma City and Mexico, encouraging them to celebrate their heritage in creative ways.

Views on body, movement, and ritual are varied within the Hispanic community in Oklahoma City. As with members of any culture, these deep-seated beliefs and values did not always seem obvious to the Hispanic individuals with whom I spoke. For example, when speaking with my students about movement and ritual in the church, their response was, "we don't dance in the church." However, when I went to the Catholic churches, not only was there dancing during worship, with small almost flamenco-like movements, I observed a lot of ritual action, as congregants stand up, sit down, and go to their knees throughout the service. "This framing places belief in a dynamic relationship with experience and knowledge . . . Belief does not *decree* the interpretation of experience; nor does it *define* the meaning of granted knowledge" (Hinson 2000, 10). This is a type of worship as it demonstrates ritual behavior that is praising the Lord, allowing them to connect to the Lord in bodily as well as spiritual ways, and the Spanish services allow them to worship in a language they understand.

The style of worship in Catholic Hispanic Oklahoma City is important because it tells us a lot about the culture. We are able to trace back current day rituals to rituals during earlier times, which can answer many questions about historic Hispanic culture, like the type of rituals they found most important. Their worship tells us even more about their views on religion. "*Personalismo,* as appreciation of God's gift of life, a sense of pride and dignity and the expression of affection and solidarity, is strong in traditional Hispanic culture" (Martinez 1993, 88). The *personalismo*, the fact that they have their own words for celebrating the Lord, speaks volumes about the importance of religion in their culture. It tells everyone that Mexican culture holds religion to be of the utmost

[5] A dance company is a collection of dancers who regularly have classes and do performances together. Companies can range from students who perform for class credit, dancers who volunteer their time, and professional dancers who are paid to perform with specific groups.

importance. This has followed people of Mexican heritage to Oklahoma City, where people are not shy to say they are Catholic. It is common to see statues of Mary in people's yards, and to see rosaries around students' necks. They make it very clear they have *personalismo.*

Cross-Cultural Practices Impact on Body, Movement, and Ritual

The worship services and dance classes are great examples of the cross-cultural experience that is Oklahoma City. It is a place where a variety of cultures come together and intermingle. For example, although almost everyone present at the Spanish masses I attended was Hispanic, I could hear a variety of languages being spoken along with Spanish, especially by the children. In dance classes, people took the time afterwards to share about our daily lives. These social settings offer the opportunity to connect with people from different communities and learn about different work, education, and cultural backgrounds. These cross-cultural activities help us to understand different cultures' views of body, movement, and ritual. For example, in Hispanic culture the body is seen as an outward expression of the soul. Movement, then, can be a form of nonverbal communication of what the soul is feeling. The rituals in church allow people a place to worship, while rituals in dance teach a safe way to learn movements while stretching and conditioning the body.

The Hispanic notion of viewing the body as the expression of the soul allows for movements made both in and out of the church to take on a deeper meaning, especially when it comes into contact with the world around. This is very much a Catholic idea, and is discussed in John Paul II's *Theology of the Body*, which states that, "the critical relationship between embodiment and dual comprehensions of one's selfhood and one's relationship to the world is central. Embodiment is a state of being for material creatures that both limits and enables them to act within a wider experience of the world. The body is a particular form of materiality that distinguishes one person from another; limited to what a human person can achieve as a body and enabling it to live and die like others" (John Paul II, in Zimmermann 2015, 70). The body allows us to communicate with those around us, both verbally and non-verbally. The body is a means for us to distinguish between ourselves and others, while being able to communicate both culturally and religiously with one another. One way people in the Hispanic community in Oklahoma City do this is by adorning themselves with a rosary or other religious decorations, allowing the world to see by their body what they believe.

In the Hispanic community in Oklahoma City it is very important to be seen going to church. The ritual of going to weekly service is viewed not only as time spent with community and family, but also as a social acknowledgement and a sign of honoring one's family. "Honor is the positive value of a person in his or her own eyes plus the positive appreciation of that person in the eyes of his or her social group. In this perspective honor is a claim to positive worth along with the social acknowledgement of that worth by others . . . At stake is how others see us, and so, how we see ourselves" (Malina and Neyrey 1991, 25-26). Sometimes people attending service seemed to be going as a matter of course, not necessarily because they were excited about it, but because they were expected to go. However, regular attendance allows for elders to teach the younger generations by explaining the importance of these rituals in hopes of their continuing to practice the traditions.

So, there are a variety of ways in which body, movement, and ritual are used to teach people about culture and dance, and religiously to create connections to historical practices cross-culturally. These allow for people to connect with each other and their ancestors while living in a community that is surrounded by other cultures and traditions. It is through body, movement, and ritual presented to people both in religion and in traditional practices, such as dances, that people are able to feel connected to their home culture even though they are hundreds of miles away, allowing them to follow the beliefs and traditions of their ancestors.

Implications for Christian Practice

The information I have gathered has implications for Christian practice and demonstrates the relevance of this research. It tells us that other cultures are frequently excluded or ignored in American churches and that we need to create more of a culture of inclusion. There are various types of worship that are not currently being used in mainstream American churches, but could be employed as a means of connecting with more people. One example of this is utilizing movement more in the church, not just the small movements that people do in their seats, but

actual dancing as they would in streets. Perhaps if we utilize movement in worship to make an impact on young people we would see more growth in these churches. Also, by focusing on increased cultural inclusion, incorporating new forms of physical worship, and adopting a more diverse body of symbolism, we could see a greater understanding of cultures in a greater variety of Christian denominational churches.

Cultural Inclusion

The fastest way to get a person to leave Christianity, no matter the denomination, is to make them feel outcast. The fastest way to make someone feel welcomed and get them to join Christianity is to make them feel like they matter, and this includes their cultural background. People are far more likely to go to a church that speaks their language and that other people of the same culture attend. By focusing cultural inclusion on engagement with a greater diversity of language and music, as well as dance and food, churches could connect to more people and create more inclusion. This tends to be a large issue in Oklahoma City, where there are so many different cultures. In the Hispanic district there are four Catholic churches, one Baptist, and one Assemblies of God that demonstrate an effort to engage with the local Hispanic culture. There are few other denominational churches that are willing to offer a Spanish service. A lack of a church in one's own language may even lead to people leaving Christianity altogether.

When someone goes to church, language is a key part of their understanding of the message being taught. Language is also a huge part of culture. This does not mean that churches need to offer a service in every language to reach every possible audience. But it would be helpful to include people of different cultural backgrounds by, for example, having closed captions on the bottom of a screen, or having a room set aside so a small group of people that speak a different language can gather and worship in their language with closed captions on the screen or with a translator in the room (such as a church volunteer).

According to Martinez, "inculturation demands a critical integration of peoples' symbolic thinking, profound values, common language and traditions into the liturgical life of the Church" (Martinez 1993, 83-83). With the integration of other languages into a church, we will begin to see integration of other parts of people's cultures, such as values and traditions. This type of inculturation into other denominations of churches could result in growth in church attendance and could help reach others outside of the Hispanic community. It may even attract people who speak only English who wish to start learning Spanish, or to become closer with the Hispanic culture. It would also provide a larger variety of denominations to Spanish speaking people. By creating a way for Spanish speakers to attend different churches we would create a more welcoming culture that connects to more people and brings more people to Christ.

Worship

People worship in different ways. However, in many churches in the United States, or at least those I have experienced, there are only two ways to worship: by singing and dancing with small movements and by listening to the message. This does not connect to all people, and many people go home feeling more as if they were in school than as if they were in church worshiping the Lord. This is not how worship should be. Worship should be an expression of joy and love for the Lord. Worship allows people to connect and build a relationship to the Lord in their own way. Once this relationship is established it is far less likely that a person will leave Christianity. However, if we do not allow people to worship in church in a way that connects to them and their culture then they are far more likely to leave Christianity than if we give them ways to worship.

Encouraging people to worship the Lord in movements as large as they feel comfortable making would help make churches more welcoming. One way to do this is to have liturgical dance performances. Liturgical dance can be used not only as worship but as ways to tell stories of the Bible. In children's services, the children could learn dances that go with songs or Bible stories, helping to keep their minds from wandering and create a deeper understanding. I have seen this practiced at Christian sleep away camps where it has been very successful. Such dance could be a part of a regular children's ministry. Priests or pastors and worship teams could also encourage more movement, not having them hold back to the small personal movements in their seats, but allowing the movements that are already being done to expand.

Movement

Dance can tell us things about religion and people

that words simply cannot express. For dance and movement are ways to express emotions and some emotions, such as love for the Lord and pain, are best illustrated through movement, not words. Thus dance can give us deeper insight into what people are feeling and how they process religion. Some elements of certain dances may originate in the worship of other gods. For example, the circle dances that I discussed previously were originally fertility rituals to pre-Christian gods. Still, these can be and have been redirected to Christian meanings and uses. We live such sedentary lifestyles as a society that praying and worshiping through our movement would seem to please Him as part of treating our bodies as temples. David in the Bible danced for the Lord. Why do we not dance for Him now? We can utilize movement as a way to connect with the Lord and as a way to reinvigorate religious rituals that are common in a variety of denominations.

Conclusion

In conclusion, studying dance and religion is very relevant to understanding the Hispanic community in Oklahoma City as both are an integral part of the culture. By studying dance and religion together, we are able to view two different but interrelated parts of the culture, and to see how they can be used to grow Christianity. This is significant especially when we consider how religiously and ethnically diverse Oklahoma City is. It is remarkable and inspiring to see a community that has kept its cultures and traditions as alive and thriving as the majority of the Hispanic community has. Of course, I give this praise while also acknowledging that my informants have expressed concern that young people of their community are being influenced by digital media to leave religion and to divorce themselves from Hispanic culture. My hope is that my research can help develop ways to keep young people in the church, such as by combining their culture with religion through language and dance, and by allowing for a feeling of acceptance in different denominations through offering more freedom to express themselves. I believe that by becoming multilingual and incorporating dance, more churches can bring the Olé back into their worship services.

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Jessica Linn Altz received her BA in Dance Education from the University of Central Oklahoma in 2020 and MA in Theological and Cultural Anthropology in 2024. She has been dancing for the past 25 years and has trained in a variety of dance styles and teaching techniques. She has lived in the Oklahoma City area for 13 years and still lives there with her three cats and a dog, where she is constantly being inspired by the art, music, and cultural scene. She is supported by her family, boyfriend, friends, and mentors (one of which was interviewed for this article). She has a passion for religion, dance, culture, learning, helping others, animals, reading and dancing. She hopes that this article can help people to understand the importance of different styles of worship to help reach different cultures and varieties of people. She also hopes that people learn to praise the Lord by dancing like David in 2 Samuel.

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NEWS & OPINIONS

As D.E.I. Challenges Rage in the U.S., Can The 'Ontological Turn' Help Us Better Understand Differences in Intersex and Transgender Lives?

Inhabiting the 'Ontological Penumbra' as a Christian Medical Anthropologist[1]

Vincent E. Gil

"Certainty is the great enemy of unity. Certainty is the deadly enemy of tolerance."

> *From film "Conclave"* (2024).
> *Address by the Dean of the College of Cardinals upon sequestration of the Conclave.*[2]

Introduction

In the United States, the recent and peaceful transition of democratic power has also ushered in an unprecedented number of Executive Orders (EOs) by the new administration,[3] edicts which usher in a time of significant change. Two EOs especially affect both the status of persons in American society as well as ontologies of being, since these seek to eliminate historic diversity, equity, and inclusion efforts and redefine what the government now recognizes as "legal," or "real," regarding sex and gender.[4] Such edictal moves and redefinitions carry broad political, sociocultural, medical, and personal implications. The EOs also effectively remove established and historic guardrails for protected classes of persons.[5]

[1] Merz and Merz (2017).

[2] Masthead quote from film *Conclave* (2024), manuscript written by Peter Straughan, who adapted its script from the novel of the same name by Robert Harris (*Conclave—A Novel.* Vintage 2017).

[3] EOs are presidential directives—edictal in nature—and orders the government to take specific actions. Such usually mean ensuring implementation of a certain rule or declaring a new policy priority. They cannot override federal laws or statutes, which are the responsibility of Congress to enact or dismiss. At the present time they are, however, being implemented despite many overriding congressional/constitutional rules, and thus are being challenged in courts country-wide.

[4] Both EOs were directives signed the day after the U.S. presidential inauguration (January 20, 2025). These were titled, *"Ending Radical and Wasteful Government DEI Programs and Preferencing,"* and *"Defending Women From Gender Ideology Extremism and Restoring Biological Truth to the Federal Government."*

[5] In the U.S., federal law has so far protected individuals from discrimination or harassment based on nine "protected classes": sex (including sexual orientation and gender identity), race/color, age, disability, national origin, religion/creed, and genetic information. Many state laws take their cue against harassment and discrimination based on these classes, and up till now, so have

I use the current sociopolitical climate as a foil in situating and critiquing implicit and explicit government assumptions made, especially about sex and gender. I then use ethnographic histories from two subjects that do not fit the given sex/gender binary to give a sense to the reader of the empirical phenomena being questioned by the administration. As a medical anthropologist who specializes in sexuality and gender, I argue here for a better anthropological—and indeed Christian anthropological—understanding of how *intersex* (persons born with DSD) and persons diagnosed with *gender dysphoria* challenge implicit assumptions these EOs make about natural ontologies of sex and gender. My ethnographic and clinical experiences with intersex and transgender lives provide factual contexts by which central arguments in this piece are elucidated.

At the same time, I recognize and differentiate cultural change processes which have recently, and more generally challenged natural ontologies of being. In earlier work (Gil 2021; 2022; 2023(a)(b); 2025) I have attempted to distinguish what is clearly a *political ideology of expressive individualism*, a *social movement of self-identification,* from ontologies of body and self among DSD and persons with gender dysphoria. These distinctions I keep in view as I discuss the changes being made to the understanding of persons, sexes, and gender by new government edicts.[6]

I propose subject individuals mentioned do not view themselves or their world via natural ontologies of being and thus, in fact, ultimately embody *intuitive ontologies* (cf. Boyer and Barrett 2015). Such are implicit understandings not shared by a majority, and differ in how body-concepts, self-identity, and navigating the world are perceived, organized, and experienced. I understand these intuitive ontologies are first used by subjects to structure an embodied self-knowledge vs the knowledges of "others" unlike them;[7] and following, structure decision-making on how to self-present and navigate the normed world.

This opinion piece thus suggests it is centrally important to *understand embodiment* as a means of comprehending ontological premises which develop in these populations (cf. Barnes, 2019). Intuitive ontologies were often dismissed prior to the "gender moment" (Gil 2021); now, this administration's EO's *legally* dismisses them. Such individuals are left fitting only into normed, legal binary categories, or (again) not be recognized.

In his autoethnography, anthropologist Jamie Barnes (2019) suggests we "take seriously" different ontologies of selfhood, the "different worlds" persons often inhabit and describe; recognize our normed limitations on adequately understanding them in order to avoid premature ontological closure (cf. Jordan 1997). This is a difficult task in itself, since we must be able to also generate détente.

For certain, there are differences between intersex persons and persons with historic gender dysphoria, and I do not "same" them here. Yet both groups exhibit similarities in ways and means of arriving at intuitive ontologies, understanding their embodiment, and understanding "others." Their means become demonstrations of very particular forms of "embodied worldings." (Barnes 2016, 38). Thus, my aim in presenting and deconstructing their stories in brief, below, is to bring forth processes used to arrive at intuitive ontologies. Ultimately, the goal is to demonstrate how different embodiments can contradict the generalizations government EOs have brought forward.

Applying conceptual and theoretical notions from the 'ontological turn' can help anthropologists embrace the ambiguity of different "worldings." Such a 'place to inhabit' is the "ontological penumbra" (Merz & Merz 2017), a space in which, while not all is solvable or understood, provides deferral of critique (Bessire and Bond 2014), opens up alterity, and gives

many employer policies. The EOs disband decades of work promoting diversity, promoting equity at sundry levels, and inclusion of all persons without prejudice.

[6] The "why" and "what" of these edicts is implicit in their explanations. But such also reveal significant flaws in both scientific facts related to becoming human and being human, as well as to their objectivity and fairness.

[7] Here, I underscore Jamie Barnes' argument that "a focus on embodiment is essential in understanding the formation of ontological assumptions, and . . . that researchers have ethical responsibilities to practice an 'ontological reflexivity' that goes beyond the conceptual of recent ontological work. Indeed, this thorny and engaging issue of dealing with alterity stretches back to the foundations of the discipline" (Barnes 2019, 24-25).

opportunity for one to comprehend others' lives by way of their lived realities.[8] It also places anthropologists and social scientists in a better position to recognize and unpack human diversity despite political challenges against such. Rather than a certainty which cements position-taking, we can learn to live with and respect ambiguity, uncertainty, and others' lived experiences. For Christian anthropologists in particular, a penumbral landing place also helps us embrace largesse in the meaning of *imago Dei.*

Anthropology's Ties to DEI

Anthropology as a complex discipline has historically contributed to understanding human behavior, values, beliefs, and social institutions created in the process of living and surviving together. In fact, one of the greatest assets of anthropological methodology/holistic approaches is to comprehend the *insider's perspective,* which can then expose the lived realities and experiences of others in their own words and terms.

Moreover, anthropologists have themselves confronted inherent biases in their field, inclusive of questioning theories and methodologies (Clifford and Marcus 2010; Zenker 2014), shifts which opened up consideration of differing ontological "realities," different ways of persons "being" and understanding the world—in effect ushering in a controversial, but important "ontological turn" that now sits along with traditional theories of culture, relativism, self, and society (Vivieros de Castro 2015). Anthropological insights have been used to understand differing socializations, bring to light preconceived notions of the "other"—ethnocentrism, biases, and privileges—all of which have become necessary and first-step understandings when engaging diversity, equity, and inclusion efforts (Hermeking 2022)[9].[10] Our training and field experiences allow us to point out forms of inequities, discrimination, micro-aggression, unconscious biases, all which directly impact diversity outreach.

My subdiscipline, medical anthropology, significantly contributes to understanding health and disease differences among groups. Cultural data are integral to addressing how health disparities affect different groups and how such knowledge helps combat diseases.

Since the 1960's, medical and biological anthropologists have also studied human sexuality in depth and on par with biologists, neuroscientists, psychologists, and medical sexologists. (Herdt 1981; 1996; Williams 1986; Nanda 1990; Guttman 1996; Fausto-Sterling 2000). More recently, Christian anthropologists like myself have engaged "the gender moment" (Gil 2021; 2023; 2025; Paris 2011, DeFranza 2015), moving into research domains that explore gender, diversity, and sexual change (Kessler 1998; Preves 2003; Karkazis 2008; Villain 2010; Davis 2015). We are engaged in debates on definitions of gender, of identity; in understanding the roots of novel sex/gender performances and their ideologies. We seek to unpack

[8] From Merz & Merz (2017, 2): "The ontological penumbra is a space where the self and the other, ignorance and certainty . . . meet, overlap, and intertwine. It is a reflexive space of dialogue, encounter and engagement, which is also marked by ambiguity and plurality, as well as creativity and productivity where "the other" . . . needs to be recognized as our counterparts. We suggest that by occupying the ontological penumbra with our whole being, we are then well positioned to contribute towards the formation of a post-secular anthropology."

[9] I am quick to acknowledge here the current ruckus regarding DEI that preceded EO14151, which I examine below. After George Floyd's murder in 2020, DEI's rise was meteoric, America dramatically declaring its commitment to social justice through protests and attempts at racial reconciliation. Initiatives—corporate and governmental—surged to correct inequities, in the process making DEI a corporate and social mantra. The shorthand made something very complex a prerogative for quick fixes. However, DEI as mantra did not allow time nor incentivization to grapple with the deep, systemic changes that true equity requires. By 2024 politicos and religious conservatives against critical race theory were mounting a backlash against DEI, dropping "equity" from "frameworks," opting for the more neutral "inclusion" label. Ultimately, DEI became a "woke" endeavor, and religionists urged the faithful to follow biblical precepts rather than man-made ones. DEI ultimately became weaponized politically, religiously nefarious, causing chilling effects on organizations and companies that might otherwise have embraced equity practices. The stage was set for the new administration's EO to ban DEI.

[10] For example, see Blue Monarch Group, which is a company formed by anthropologists to specifically work with organizations and corporations. https://bluemonarchgroup.com. Adapting DEI strategies to the local context is best illustrated by Armand (2021).

their distinctions from, and connections to biological sex, all while keeping open scientific understandings of human biology, gender essentialism, psychological dynamics, cultural ideology, and culture change.

Thus our government's doing away with the tenets of DEI will compromise anthropological contributions to overall equity and inclusion; but also health equity, health as a human right, and the legal status of sex-variant persons in our social system. Ultimately, it strips the possibility that academics and researchers would continue exploration of lived realities without having to worry about legal restrictions, or limitations brought on by social constructions of persons in the present moment.

I turn to examining two recent EOs that significantly impact personal-social-legal premises, and our work.

Two Executive Orders (EOs) in Particular

Executive Order (EO) 14151: "Ending Radical and Wasteful Government DEI Programs and Preferencing."

(Quotes are from the EO and *italicized.)*[11]

It's necessary to discuss EO 14151 since it foregrounds issues which this edition of the *OKH Journal* has as its focus, migration and immigration; and which also apply to the subsequent EO explored here that legally redefines sex and gender. I will discuss 14151 briefly, then focus on EO 14168 thereafter.

EO 14151 guts nearly all U.S. affirmative action history. The ensuing absence of programs and means to promote affirmative action generated by this EO will move the culture clock back to before the Civil Rights Act of 1964, through which—among other items—it *outlawed* discrimination in employment based on race, religion, sex, color, or natural origin.[12] These actions are now seen as "*dangerous, demeaning, and immoral race and sex-based preferences...*"

This EO returns us to the days when people of color, women, and other marginalized groups such as immigrants lacked the means and tools by which to ensure these were treated fairly and evaluated on their merits. Such moves also significantly impact educational outcomes by withholding Federal program funding for justice-impacted children and adults. Many of these are immigrants' children—now 'collateral damage'—regardless of whether the children were born in the U.S. or elsewhere.

Separately, but as part of dismantling DEI initiatives thought to be *"engineering race and gender into every aspect of public life,"* directives issued were also aimed at removing transgender military, cutting off medical supportive services to transgender and intersex persons via government programs, and removing from government data documents with any traces of nomenclature or content that do not align with the EO's understanding of persons. Research and data produced by government grants that differed in nomenclature of persons from the now edictal are already disappearing from government websites.[13]

For academic research anthropologists, the future under this EO is certainly less tenable: funding from a variety of federal agencies is no longer available for work that 'misaligns' in any way with the government's ideology or its new definitions of persons (many being

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[11] In the words of the EO, "*Critical and influential institutions of American society . . . have adopted and actively use dangerous, demeaning, and immoral race and sex-based preferences under the guise of so-called 'diversity, equity, and inclusion.'" "The public release of these plans demonstrated immense public waste and shameful discrimination. That ends today. This administration resists any efforts to socially engineer race and gender into every aspect of public and private life."*

[12] President Biden continued Johnson's legacy with an executive order of his own titled "Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Accessibility in the Federal Workforce," which worked to promote "equal opportunity" and also defined each of the terms for federal use. Pew Research Center polls (May 12, 2023) found that the majority of U.S. adults (56%) favored increasing DEI at work, and that DEI is "a good thing." See https://pewresearch.org/diversity-equity-inclusion-in-the-workplace.

[13] As I write this at the beginning of February, 2025, newspaper headlines are reading such as "CDC Scrubs Data on Sexual Orientation, Gender Identity" (Corrine Purtill and Karen Kaplan, *Los Angeles Times* February 1, 2025). On my subsequently searching the CDC website, I indeed found that HIV research databases, and pages upon pages of vital, historical medical information have disappeared. There is now a graveyard of dead links, many of which had been active days or hours before. This appears as only the beginning of the 'purge.'

*un*protected minorities); or with demographic groups historically highlighted in DEI work.[14]

But the larger challenge comes with the following EO:

Executive Order (EO) 14168: "Defending Women from Gender Ideology Extremism and Restoring Biological Truth to the Federal Government."
(Quotes are from the EO and *italicized*.)

My comments here begin with a critique of the definitional—then proceeds to the EO's implications. As stated earlier, this EO overlaps significantly with EO 14151 given the targeted groups, which until recently have been protected classes. Most severely, this EO redefines what *legally* constitutes *sex* and *gender* in the U.S., without, however, a shred of bio-socio-cultural data given to validate government definitions. The argument behind the change is premised on the protection of women's rights and *"freedom of conscience."*

The Baseline

This EO's definitions erase the lives of those born with DSD (disorders of sexual development), commonly known as *intersex persons,* since there is no room for them in a binary model. Currently, that's about 5,799,476 persons (or 1.7% of the 2025 population) in the U.S. alone,[15] and a sexual category which has been historically recognized in biomedicine as well as many ethnomedical systems cross-culturally.[16] These individuals not only exist, but have wrestled for their acknowledgement and inclusion of their voices in determinants of what constitutes the "sex" of a person.[17] As anthropologists, we are witness to those myriad forms of natal genetic intersex expressions—historically and cross-culturally documented—which do not readily fit into a binary schema. (Perhaps we should introduce 'Guevedoces' to the presiding U.S. administration.)[18]

The Definitions Themselves

One can ponder why these lack established medical and lexical terms to define *men, women;* but instead, use terms and vocabulary best suited for fourth graders: [19] *"Female[s]"* are defined as *"those that produce the large reproductive cell";* and *"Male[s]"* as *"those that produce the small reproductive cell."*

The material as stated is ripe for late-night television ridicule. It is, however, important to underscore that there *are* established biological terms for reproductive cells that define and separate these: such are, of course, *"ova"* produced by women, and

[14] As an example, I've received several grants from the University of California Systems to study HIV among Latinas in the U.S., regardless of their legal status. These grants were enabled via funding from the NIH to study HIV in minority populations (including immigrant groups) and funneled through the UCs as initiatives for research. Studying such populations via federal grant funds is now severely in question since immigrants are considered *personae non gratae;* and as well, *because HIV is intimately tied to LGBTQ+ populations*, now scorned by the current administration.

[15] U.S. Census Bureau (2025), "Estimates of Intersex (DSD) Born Persons in the United States." U.S. Bureau of the Census, December 30, 2024. https://www.census.gov/2024/stories.

[16] See Gil (2021).

[17] See Dreger (1998); Fausto-Sterling (2000); Viloria (2017). There are organizations like OII (Organization Intersex International) that advocate and promote intersex persons' rights, promote their inclusion in discussions on sex and gender.

[18] *Guvevedoces* are persons with an intersex variation that causes them to appear first as females in form at birth, but at puberty develop male genitalia. The condition is caused by a deficiency in the enzyme 5-α-reductase as a fetus, which prevents the body from producing, initially, dihydrotestosterone (DHT), a male sex hormone. This hormone *does* get activated and is produced at puberty, morphing the once "female" organs into male ones. See Imperato-McGinley, Julianne; Guerrero, et al. (1974).

[19] See the language differential as compared to other former presidents: https://www.newsweek.com/trump-fire-and-fury-smart-genius-obama-774169.

"sperm" produced by men.[20] No chromosomal references at all are given in the EO.[21]

"Sex" is defined as *"the individual's immutable biological classification as either a male or a female."* Again, this "*immutable"* binary definition omits inclusion of XYY, XXX, XXY, and XO persons—all deemed in medicine as *mutated* intersex expressions.[22] For fact-checkers: Section 3 of this EO reads that *"women are biologically distinct from men";* and developmentally this is *eventually* true, yet the statement has a significant omission: Without exemption, both men and women *start out as bipotential*, meaning we are *not* biologically so distinct from the beginning regardless of our chromosomal make-up.[23] We share an identical 'genital bud' as well as bipotential parts—*two sets*—which then in utero develop differently*, potentiate or vestigiate* to make a man *or* a woman. (The process is "*differentiation*.") There are significant and identical traits in both males and females, as well as every fetus getting the necessary and baseline "X" chromosome.

"Defending Women"

The EO's suggestion is that American women need to be *"defended"* from gender ideology of the *"extreme"* type (never defined outright but suggested as that which challenges normed female formats). The EO supposes all women are *"at risk"*—particularly of trans-women allegedly taking their places—toilets, identities—ready to dislodge natal women from all female spaces.[24] The wording suggests that males with gender dysphoria who transition (i.e., become trans-women), "*fundamentally attack women by depriving them of their dignity, safety, and well-being."*

I'm not at all sure how a Laverne Cox or Caitlyn Jenner "fundamentally attack" the average American woman. I'm also not sure the average American woman cares to pay much attention *to* Laverne *or* Caitlyn . . . although, natal women have gone on record favoring trans' protection from discrimination.[25] And it is a fact that *those that are most afraid* when needing use of women's spaces such as bathrooms are *trans women*, given the social vitriol often expressed to them if recognized as trans.[26]

We do know *gender dysphoria* is a psychiatrically diagnosable identity disturbance, and thus classified as such in the DSM 5-TR.[27] While there is continued controversy about treatments and whether sex/gender transitions ease the dysphoria (Gil 2021), the one

[20] Now accuracy counts here. Most of us in the sciences use genetic markers "X" or "Y" to define gametes (their chromosomal pairing or trisomy), and use "O" for a gamete absence. Such nomenclature in biomedicine/genetics generally 'defines' what is chromosomally male, chromosomally female, or what may present as gonadal dysgenesis.

[21] The *"large-or-small reproductive cell[s]"* alluded to in the EO come later in the human life-course, when our bodies are capable of *maturing* (in the case of females), or *producing* (in males) reproductive cells—processes normally engaged during puberty.

[22] Some mutated intersex variations in humans are: Androgen Insensitivity Syndrome (AIS), Congenital Adrenal Hyperplasia (CAH), Klinefelter Syndrome, Turner Syndrome, Ovotesticular Syndrome, Clitoromegaly, Gonadal Dysgenesis, Hypospadias, Aromatase Deficiency, and Mixed Gonadal Dysgenesis; all of which involve sex chromosomes, gonads, or internal/external genitalia alterations that don't fit typical male or female classifications. There are over 30 observed intersex variations among humans with DSD.

[23] Let's be clear here that the fetus first develops as bipotential, 'We are "both" before we become "either." It is hormone action guided by the genetics that creates *differentiation.* Thus, we are more biologically similar than distinct. For a good review of the *biological-essentialist* position that men and women are different 'kinds', see Saguy and Joel (2021). Also see Fine (2011).

[24] Curiously, this argument sounds a lot like those put forth by lesbian groups regarding the 'take-over' of what is a *woman*, what is *female*, negating the social recognition of trans-women as women. See Burt (2022). See also Worthen (2022).

[25] Pew Research Center (2022). "America's Complex Views on Gender Identity and Transgender Issues." June 28. https://www.pewresearch.org/social-trends/2022/06/28/americans-complex-views-on-gender-identity-and-transgender-issues/.

[26] For an emotional autoethnography of a trans woman's experience with women's bathrooms, see Bellot (2016).

[27] American Psychiatric Association (2013). *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (5th ed.). Arlington, VA: American Psychiatric Publishing.

certainty here is such medical options and real-life data have resulted in extensive social controversies and set the stage for global, political, religious, and ideological polarizations on the topic.[28]

Ideological Responses and Legal Definitions

Of most interest then is this EO's effort to correct *"gender ideology extremism"* via government's issuance of a dictum that there are only *"two genders"* and (as stated earlier) *"two sexes."*[29] I certainly understand the not-so-civil war ushered in by gender ideology in this epoch of the "gender revolution," but government imposing a dictum on "legal" gender and sex definitions without corroborating scientific facts for stances it takes only aggravates already contested situations.[30]

Cultural ideologies, narratives, ontologies and epistemologies about males and females; about masculinities and femininities, sexuality, gender identity, are ongoing conversations and cognates in every culture system.[31] What is being pushed in this EO is not just prescriptive; it is a dictum by government for *how a person can be legally classified* via determined definitions. (For understanding its implications, and limits on how government can parse identity, see this footnote.[32])

This EO is a political response to liberal gender ideologies which emerged during the "gender moment" (Gil 2000-2017+). I note my repeated efforts in print to *distinguish* how the "gender moment" split into two ideological factions, and what this splitting now entails.[33] What follows is a quick but necessary recap of this split before I discuss the lived experience of DSD and gender dysphoric persons; what their intuitive ontologies may be telling us.

[28] Gil (2021), chapters 3, 4, 7, 8.

[29] In the interest of culture histories gathered by anthropologists, historians, and other social scientists, let's underscore the reality that many cultures world-wide include "third gender" persons (broadly stated here for expediency). As well, many culture groups, inclusive of historical Rabbinical Judaism have acknowledged and included varied sex/gender identities beyond the binary, such as the Judaic *aylonit, saris, tumtum, and androgynos* (Gil 2021, 78).

[30] The EO decries any gender identity ideology that does not align with the new government's views. It not only challenges without hesitation, but by edict will not tolerate a differing viewpoint in any of its government departments or employees. The federal government now interviews position-seekers and asks openly who they voted for, and whether their views align with the current administration's. See editorial, "Want a Job in the Trump Administration? Be Prepared for the Loyalty Test," *New York Times,* December 4, 2024.

[31] See Best and Puzio (2019).

[32] My central concern here is this EO's effect on the status of persons and the government's intentionality to legally redefine persons regardless of personal autonomy as constitutionally enshrined. See Ruocco (2016). Ruocco is quoted here, as are others, to clarify constitutional guarantees: "The antitotalitarian principle [in the Constitution] respects 'the balance which our Nation, built upon postulates of respect for the liberty of the individual, has struck between that liberty and the demands of organized society'" (citing Poe v. Ullman, 367 U.S. 497, 542 [1961] Harlan, J., dissenting) (195). Thus, "there is not an unlimited, unburdened right to define oneself. Rather, the antitotalitarian principle prevents the state from *taking over,* or *taking advantage* of, those processes by which individuals are defined" (citing Dean Spade, *Documenting Gender*, 59 Hastings, L.J., 731-753, 2008, 195). "[Regardless] the government affirmatively produces identity and conformity by documenting and enforcing 'legal' sex categories, as when a baby is born and assigned a sex of birth via chromosomal and genital appearance and recorded on a birth certificate" (196). This identity affects how the individual navigates sex-segregated facilities, legal documentation, gendered expectations, and interactions with state and nonstate entities. For most people, this assigned legal sex will raise little to no concern because most people identify with their assigned legal sex and ensuing gender identity. Nevertheless, "the proper focus of constitutional inquiry is the group for whom the law is *a restriction*, not the group for whom the law is *irrelevant*" (196).

[33] Readers who are not familiar with my work, please know I have researched and written extensively on gender, sex, and identity, and *do separate* what may be *social contagion, culture-bound syndromes of gender identity and nonconformity* from factual gender dysphoria and DSD; distinctions that the EO does not in the least make. See Gil (2021) and other publications, book reviews, in earlier editions of this very journal (2023; 2024; 2025).

The Split

One side gives voice to those seeing binary sex categories as hegemonic—as socioculturally, psychologically, and personally stifling and discriminatory (cf. Butler 1991–2006 and generally, genderqueer theory). These voices became the 'gender *identity* movement' and molted quickly into one advocating individuated sex/gender self-identification—*with, or without dysphoria.*[34] Identity is seen as a self-right needing no prescriptives, discarding in the process anatomy, biology, cultural learning, as mediators of self-knowledge and gender identity. What matters is what the person believes about themselves.

The other side of this debate refutes to 'normalize' any variance in gender *or* sex, affirming only binary ontologies of embodiment and thus disavowing a sex/gender "spectrum." There is a secular and religious component here which upholds Christian and other religions' creation narratives of two sexes; and which thus affirms only a binary format. Unfortunately, the refusal of factual genetic and psychological disorder distinctives misrecognizes persons born with DSD and those with actual gender dysphoria, and does not allow spaces for these conditions. Neither does this stance segregate DSD or GD as distinct from the social movement to self-identify. In effect, two camps that became polar opposites.[35]

Contexts: DSD and Dysphoric Persons

'Lost in the tussle' is the reality that individuals with DSD and factual, persistent, sometimes life-long gender incongruity not only *exist,* but likely inhabit *intuitive ontologies of which we understand little.*[36] Social acceptance does not imply progress in understanding these ontologies or working out implications without significant controversies. Moreover, we have continuing issues in the Christian church if such non-conforming individuals also claim to be "believers" (cf. DeFranza 2011; Gil 2021). EOs now threaten their legal identification as well.

Ontological Misalignments

Throughout my work with these individuals I've noticed how often their experiences do not align nor fit with natural ontological expectations, thus their relating to the "normal" world as outsiders. These see

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[34] Or, at times, regardless of a dysphoria diagnosis—trivialized—turning attention to the self as the only arbiter of identity 'no matter what.'

[35] The gender identity movement quickly infused social media with novel paradigms on sex and gender, with self-identification as its centerpiece. It moved to rapidly assert the medical mutability of hormonal profiles and sexual anatomy to fit one's desired self-perception. And, it especially targeted younger-age persons, many of whom struggled with body and self-image, identity, peer pressures, and family dynamic issues. Here was a "way out" for all troubled young selves. (Gil 2022; 2023; 2024). It became 'cool' to be non-bi ("enbi," "nb") or trans; it diffused throughout social media, social institutions and cultural frames exploiting DEI narratives. Proponents verbally chastised dissenters, then moved to help prohibit the psychological/psychiatric community from exploring the roots of gender dissonance, wrongly calling such efforts "conversion therapies" (per APA prohibitions).

The other, as a visceral reaction to the effects of the former, became the politicized negation of any ideology or facts that moved the sex/gender needle beyond the binary. Sadly, in doing so it erased DSD bodies as concrete, medically validated variations of the binary, as well as the factuality of gender dysphoria. It negated (rightly in my view) a "gender spectrum" and underscored the immutability of biological sex and gender once formed—a rallying cry for conservative Christians to also protest and take political action. Many such conservatives also wrongly labeled believers who did not adhere to heteronormative self-presentations, despite cultural/generational changes broadly in view; despite some who were DSD; despite some with verified dysphoria—and accused many of these of placing self-identity over one's identity in Christ (Gil 2021).

Within the religious right, this outrage cemented a need for civil and political mediation of what was taken to be an outrageous accost on natural human ontologies, the family, and on the fundamentals of human creation.

[36] Boyer and Barrett (2015) refer to intuitive ontologies as the way humans naturally categorize and come to understand the world—*their world*—based on cognitive deductions and predispositions garnered through their self-reflections and experiences. These include notions of self, identity, embodiment. Relating to sex and gender, humans expect distinct categories of beings. But when experience and self reflections do not match, these tend to reject the normative since the binary may be cognitively salient but disorienting in light of what they understand about themselves. Intuitive, deep-seated cognitive affects are turned to, rather than normative ideological and ontological positions.

cracks in sex/gender categories that most individuals do not see. They experience different forms of embodiment, self-perceptions, and thus engineer different means for social navigation. Many intersex and gender dysphoric individuals thus develop a heightened metacognition around sex and gender—where others without these conditions intuitively accept the norm. They, however, must actively construct an understanding of self, of physical embodiment, and ultimately do so based on what seems most credible *because of how they experience their selves and lives*.

Such individuals tend to also develop specialized competencies organized around recurrent, adaptive challenges—challenges that are in many ways functionally distinct, but that result in a specialized architecture for how to understand self and navigate among unlike others.[37] Here, agency is distributed throughout the environments within which such persons make their lives; actors being also acted upon; their performances shifting along with environmental assumptions and their demands for accommodation. More on these points later.

Understanding Unique Ontologies

I've learned from those with DSD or gender dysphoria that their unique, intuitive ontologies can be understood via *listening to their stories*, *observing their performances* as these manifest *in embodied forms*; and also *as historical verbalizations* when explaining to interested others who they are and what they are all about (see Blaser 2009; Gil 2021; Boylan 2013; Salazar 2011).

Natural ontologies and embodiments do exist *to them*; but these *are not them.* Such a statement is hard for us, the "outsiders," to imagine—given it is far easier for us to "same" experiences (cf. Blaser 2013) than it is to embrace an "ontological turn" that may make these *intuitive other ontologies* weigh in as equally 'real' to normative ones we know.

Here, I am extending the "ontological turn" beyond its usual application in cross-cultural and religious contexts, to the deeply personal and embodied experiences of individuals with DSD or gender incongruity. By my advocating we in the social sciences inhabit an "ontological penumbra" (Merz & Merz 2017), I am pushing for "epistemic humility" (Barnes 2019)—a recognition that we may not be able to fully access or critique the world these individuals inhabit but must nonetheless engage with it, *and them,* as they are.

This demands "methodological deferral" (Barnes 2019)—where we prioritize understanding other's explanations, their presence and experiences over theoretical impositions, even when these disrupt normative ontologies—since our own cognitive defaults may prevent us from grasping the full reality of *their reality.*

What *Do* Their Voices Tell Us?

I've abbreviated two subjects' ethnohistories as examples, collected over the course of years of knowing these individuals and engaging them as subjects in my work. Summarizing here should not opaque their facts but rather make it easier to cull and acknowledge their intuitive ontologies. I explain what I've gleaned.

First Subject: A Girl—then Adolescent—with DSD.

Born and classified as female from birth, it wasn't until she was seven that her parents noticed developmental "hints" that there may be some disorder: neck beginning to widen unnaturally, her fingers becoming stubby, her body itself not naturally aligning proportionately. Then medically tested, she was found to be "XO" (Turner Syndrome), the genetic absence of that other X chromosome, bringing on significant sexual-developmental distinctions, hormonal as well as major organ differences and difficulties.[38] She would be infertile (no uterus, a

[37] Boyer and Barret (2015) would probably say that these competencies are not atomic, indivisible, unitary entities; rather, they involve the orchestration of diverse neural structures according to particular inferential principles and functional goals. The organization of these competencies reflect, then, certain implicit assumptions about the domains that they handle—implicit assumptions about how the world, their world, needs to be organized, that are in turn used to structure their understanding of self, others, and how to navigate it all.

[38] She was born with intact external female genitalia, but internal structural deficits, including missing an ovary. Thus, she was raised as a female and a congruent female gender identity in the normative sense formed.

missing ovary, an under-functioning other), have some stunted growth and physical traits, and would be subject to close medical care for her lifetime.

By the time her parents "had the conversation," she had already begun the process of forming intuitive categories of self and body, because by comparison with other female children at her school and with playmates, she understood she was "different." Now she had a reason to understand she wasn't "sick," but instead, needing medical care because of her "conditions." Told that she wouldn't be having babies was construed in her eventual dialogue as another outcome that *wasn't so unnatural*, given that many women didn't have children and were seen as OK.

By pre-adolescence she had used her good mind and verbal acuity, acquired from her well-developed social radar, so she could 'navigate' the world of peers, use what she read, what she saw, what she experienced; all now blended into acuity, verbosity, as a coping mechanism. She was smarter than most; she could talk topics and segue with ease, keeping the attention on what she wanted and *not herself*.[39] The verbosity and constant chatter by early adolescence caused yet other labels to form around her: she was a "special needs person," and parents continuously tried to "correct" her overt 'superiority' and her own self-assemblages—back-firing and making her only believe all the more she was truly different—now beyond "special."

The identity that formed now existed in a realm of her own making. By later adolescence she was defiantly different: she had rewritten some social contracts, especially with immediate family, given their futility in reining in the independent, verbose, and brainy person she was becoming. Mother and father had become subservient to her persona and her needs. She intuited her body as "unique," and thus ended the friction between her embodiment, that reality, and society's cognitive assumptions about her physical non-normativity.

In a word, she had intuited her own ontological frameworks to understand her interiority, her body, and the external world. She had mentally and socially—to the degree she could—recast this embodiment that differed from those in her external world as "unique." She navigated her own, and other's expectations by reframing her self-concept, catalyzing her uniqueness, all the while utilizing her immense capacity to radar environments and respond accordingly to prevent her assemblages from being threatened. Navigating any misalignments meant constantly working against the automatic recognition processes of others *about her,* and using her difference to her benefit.

She thus lives with this dual awareness, of understanding natural ontologies but experiencing herself as another embodiment. Reframing herself as "unique," meant undergoing a cognitive epistemological re-ordering process that aligned with her own intuitive ontological framework of difference and speciality. She forms her world around these self-understandings.

Even with her lexical giftedness, she often finds it hard to voice that uniqueness when queried—and for us in turn to fully grasp the reality of her world assemblage. We have not experienced embodiment like hers; history like hers; necessity for social negotiations like hers; or the negotiation of the world that surrounds *her*.

Second Subject: Gender Dysphoria and the Mismatch of Ontological Expectations.

At age six and walking home from a Lutheran service attended with his family, he saw a nun in full habit across the street. *"Someday, I wanna be like her"* he said to his mother. *"Don't be silly!"* the mom replied. *"We are Lutherans, not Catholic,"* totally misunderstanding "being like *her*." And so it was that this young boy grew up, surrounded by sisters and not feeling like he "fit in" at all. Secretly, by age nine he would enter his sisters' room and play with their clothes. He recalls having great satisfaction in "playing dress," and even "borrowing" their underwear. By teenhood he had the courage to tell his mother and father he didn't feel right; he didn't feel as if he were becoming a man . . . but stopped short of telling the unspeakable: that he would have preferred being a girl; that he felt more like a girl than a boy . . .

Sensing the discord, seeing his growing effeminacy, and hearing he was being bullied in school because he carried his books "like a girl," the parents immediately enrolled him in the Naval Cadets in high school. He was told to "suck it up" because he was a growing *man*.

[39] Psychology tells us that acts by children which tend to divert the gaze of others from the self provide the child with enough leeway to eventually solidify their self-concept in ways that self-justify their coping behaviors.

And *suck it up* he did. He buried those feelings of being in the wrong body and decided that if there was any hope, it would be in formally joining the military after graduating; after all, "they make men, men." He joined the Navy and within a few months took the great step to show everyone and himself that he was "normal" by dating a woman and eventually getting married that year. The marriage turned disastrous.

For one, he "couldn't satisfy" his wife's needs in bed, a painful realization that his discomfort with his own body wasn't going away. Nevertheless, he tried to persevere, and eventually that next year they had a son. This complicated the marriage even more. His response was to *try harder*, delving into his Navy career and eventually becoming a submarine warfare specialist and Navy Seal. After a decade together, the discords drove them to a divorce.

But he tried harder again, liking immensely another woman and thinking their commonalities would make it all work out. And again, he couldn't "give" what she needed. The thought finally came, *"God, I'm ruining this beautiful woman's life. My secret is the cause!"* He broke down and told her of his feelings, his self-identification as *transsexual*. To his surprise, she talked about what needed to happen—and it wasn't divorce. With her encouragement he went through counseling, confirming him as a gender dysphoric male. It took a few years of therapy and a dishonorable discharge from the Navy (then) for him to pursue and eventually have hormonal and surgical reassignment. At that point, the couple settled for an amicable divorce.

A few years later, this now trans-woman felt a deep calling to ministry when attending an Episcopal church service (she had paused but never lost her faith); and determined to become an Episcopalian nun. That, she did accomplish—the first transgender Episcopal nun—her life mission becoming a support service for the then-ravaged (1990's) HIV populations.

Within this history are the double-binds, misalignments, and the need to constantly work against the automatic, natural ontological expectations and processes vs the intuitive ones.

Unlike those with DSD, whose physical traits may be atypical, gender dysphoric individuals have bodies that are normal and often *align* with one of the sex binaries. However, their inner experience of self and body contradicts intuitive expectations others' bodies generate. Their embodiment misaligns with their mind's understanding of their body and self.[40]

In this individual, there were typical early denials, denials which many gender dysphoric individuals also share about their incongruity. This is followed by attempting *strategic concealment* (passing, avoiding issues of gender or emphasizing the embodied gender despite its incongruity). Some may move to open defiance; but in many (adult) trans histories, natural ontologies are first embraced, as are attempts at believing them. Believing "this could be fixed" (i.e., their dysphoria) generates the secrecy and the cognitive denials of what has been their issue.

In this, and in many such cases, it takes repeated "failures" in attempts at body-self reconciliation, of denials to *not* hold, and actual life events—all speaking to an impending crisis—to come to terms with their dysphoria. Some then accepting the intuitive ontological framework which aligns with their historic, yet secretive self-perceptions. Such acceptance allows for a reframing of embodiment: actually 'seeing' the possibility of themselves 'emerge' as the very internal creature they believe they have always been. I'd like to call this process their eventual *inhabiting an intuitive embodiment.*

Such movement from natural ontologies that do not "fit," to an intuitive, alternative ontology of being requires agency. In this particular case, agency was provided by life-event crises, their second spousal's acceptance of the dysphoric condition and encouragement to transition; and the eventual understanding of what *being transsexual* implied, to enable a change of habitus. The "reconstruction" that followed was facilitated through another series of agents, that of clinical counseling, which provided the individual a space to understand fully their disorder, and ensuing decisions for sexual surgeries.

Navigating their new embodiment and self also required reframing their understanding of who this "emerging" person now was. Reconfiguring the self requires any trans person assimilate an alter-gender identity and role (or create their own individuated one) which the emergent persona is to inhabit. Natural ontological expectations of their former body-sex identity and gender role no longer apply. If these individuals retain a binary framework as an ontological other truth—such as was the case here—new feminine gender role behaviors then need to be learned and

[40] For a much more in depth explanation see Gil (2021 and 2024), and refer to the APA's Diagnostic Manual, DSM-5TR.

appositionally embodied.[41] She changes as she learns what in fact it means to be 'woman'.

Individuals may thus develop a unique cognitive flexibility in how they perceive their shifting identity, performance, beyond normed masculinity and/or femininity.[42] (However, if married at the time of transition, this flexibility may not occur in their spouses, even if desired.[43] This is another conflictual arena to wrestle with.)

In this case, it is also worthwhile to note that the person's *sexual orientation* did not alter: i.e., becoming a trans woman did not change whom they found erotic (women).[44] They thus never imagined a self-reference as "now a lesbian," or as "bisexual." For this individual, their persistent attraction to women (an historic 'heteronormativity' in *orientation*) never needed alteration: it was a natural ontological *fact* of their male development that remained historically and cognitively true for them. Thus, after their 'confirmation' surgeries they found little erotic pleasure with male partners—which they did have. What was reconfigured then was the importance of their libido: their sexual orientation and erotics becoming of secondary importance (and they spoke openly about this process).[45] Framing it as a non-sequitur, libido could then be sidelined by their eventual "calling" into ministry.

Such a significant move, enabling a self which could *negate* their eroto-sexuality, aided the person in their taking on vows of chastity and poverty when admitted to an Episcopalian nunnery.

In both examples, these individuals' implicit and explicit assumptions, learning to question what might be the conditions of their existence, selves, relationships, and performances, eventually gives form and reality to dynamic assemblages that stand aside natural ontologies of being. Internal ontological conflicts and external events help close down options other than those intuitively developed. Ultimately, many move to become who they've felt they've been all along.

My Trajectory into the Ontological 'Penumbra'

Early in my medical anthropology and sexology career, and as a Christian, I admit having significant 'issues' embracing these individuals' phenomen-ological stances as even remotely valid. Like Jamie Barnes' (2019) experience (in a totally different instance of "ontological conflict"), my world and the world of DSD and gender dysphoric individuals had different lenses and thus explanations. What I eventually learned was that these individuals articulate their realities in terms I hardly understood; and view life through lenses I did not possess. That I, in turn, needed to embrace and try to comprehend other assemblages by not disavowing their factuality *as these*

[41] Blaser (2009), in discussing ontologies of being, asserts "ontologies manifest as verbalized, embodied, and enacted *performances* through which people seek to make sense of their being . . . a performative layer." Following this notion, Barnes (2019, 20) writes, "these performances need to be taken into account if we are to understand humans and their worlds." Those of us attempting understanding of trans persons must acknowledge that gender roles now embraced do not come to the person through their natal history; but rather as acts of performance, perhaps historically viewed, but now enacted within social spaces that either confirm, or deny it. Embodiment and performance post-reassignment (now called "confirmation" surgery) requires significant self-reflection and assessments of social reactions to their performance.

[42] This case is historically representative. Since the late 1990s and into the 21st century, however, the significant social accommodation of gender variances now makes it more facile for trans persons to individuate performance; i.e., performativity is no longer assumed to be congruent with rigid binary sex-role behaviors.

[43] See Morris (2015).

[44] Such, despite their "body" not "obeying" their erotosexual framework. It was the case here that each time intimacy was attempted with a spouse, there were repeated failures of erection when embodied as a man. This generated significant frustrations in both spouses, to the point of the earlier marriage ending in divorce. The person stated in interview, "We had a child! We stayed married so that this child could be cared for, not because we were satisfied with each other."

[45] It would be impossible to determine whether the hormonal profile change from testosterone to estrogen would itself cause a significant decline in erotosexual interest sufficient to sideline the affect. What was shared openly was their lack of enjoyment in sexual encounters with male partners.

were lived out by them—even if I saw only 'through a glass, darkly'.

Much like Barnes (2019, 28), who discovers a sort of methodological atheism in the social sciences that dissuades anthropologists from other's truths without considered reflection *of alternate facts*—and one's own biases—I had to "let go" of what I could label "misrecognitions" on their part. "Misrecognitions"—a label that then would allow me to close down explanations which were *valid to these individuals, but not to me.*

As do many still, I could then unpack the world gender dysphoric individuals inhabit and conclude it leads them to wrong deductions about their self and gender.[46] That if these transitioned, they would be solely inhabiting a "socially informed and constructed body" (Barnes 2019, 29, citing Csordas 1990, 23); and that such eventual body/self would not necessarily lead to their happiness. I garnered it would also insult the core nature of their being as created by God.

I have come to understand that in lifelong gender dysphoric individuals especially, the 'somatovisceral dialogue' going on between body and brain doesn't eventually molt into an "embodied natural ontology" which can then accommodate the person's experiences within the natural world (Gil 2022; 2024). In fact, the dissonance between what the mind and body "say" to each other, coupled with these individuals' negative historical experiences in the world, override their acceptance of natural ontologies and "oughts" about identity. The result is their eventual development of an intuitive ontology of being that assuages such dissonances.

Is it correct then for these individuals to sex/gender transition? The polemic of who can or should respond to that question remains open and significantly controversial, in social, medical and faith contexts.

Assuredly, we cannot generalize. We *can* recognize that such lived experiences negate our common ontological expectations. We can also recognize that we may not be able to fully assess the world these individuals inhabit but must nonetheless try to understand them, engage their experiences on their own terms.

This engagement can be especially difficult for Christians, anthropologist or otherwise, given our theological predisposition to embrace the truth of natural ontologies and dismiss other intuited ones. I have met many trans persons who, after transitioning, truly flourish as individuals *and* remain faithful Christians who reflect *imago Dei* (cf. Salazar 2011; DeFranza 2015). As bystanders, do we reify our positions, call out their non-normativity as an evil lie of social construction; or do we pause to acknowledge their humanity, dismiss seeing them as threats, and engage what Miroslav Volf (1996) has called the "embrace"? Merz & Mertz (2017, 1), speaking about that "other", state: "These should not only be treated as subjects of study, but also recognized as valid counterparts with whom we can engage."

In this sense, biblical admonitions to not judge, bear false witness, exercise the gifts of love and embrace, may be the better route for any positional accommodation. And it is here, in this nonjudgmental arena, that we find ourselves occupying that 'ontological penumbra.' The late Pope Francis' famous interview response applies: "Who am I to judge?"[47]

This positioning recognizes different ways of experiencing existence without initial judgments to cloud our understanding personal histories. It also challenges anthropology's traditional stance of analysis through external critique (Barnes 2017). Instead, it demands that methodological deferral, where we prioritize understanding the others' embodiment and experiences over our analytic deductions; presence and performance over theoretical propositions. Getting to this stance is especially important, given that our cognitive defaults—theological, academic, or both—may prevent us from grasping the depth of an individual's unique self-understandings.

I am pushing for that epistemic humility by advocating we locate ourselves within this penumbral space: a recognition that we may not be able to "relate" to others' perceptions, experiences—deeply personal and embodied—held as truths we can imagine but

[46] Again, I remind readers that I am illustrating and unpacking gender dysphoria that is accurately diagnosed and has had an historical trajectory. This, of sufficient duration and depth, trauma and self-negation to distinguish it from the now popular *social movement of sex/gender self-identification and representation sans dysphoria.* The distinction is significantly important. See Gil (2021; 2022; 2023; 2024).

[47] Pope Francis said this during a candid conversation with journalists aboard a flight from Brazil on July 28, 2013. Cited in news and by news agencies internationally.

never live through. And yet, we live in a social world with a Rousseauian agreement, and this reality needs to also be factored in when making room for personal ontologies. No person, ultimately, is an island; and we are all embedded socially. Such raises yet other significant questions for social analysis!

Yes, it is impossible for me as a Christian to dismiss the primacy of natural ontologies regarding our sexuality, inclusive of natural variations of the binary XX-XY. However, this position should not foreclose the fact that 'others' not in the binary statistic are themselves involved in ongoing processes of navigating their way in the world; intentionally projecting actions, seeing responses, developing intuitions and assemblages that try to answer epistemological and ontological questions about self, being, and place.

To exercise mercy and compassion rather than analytic or theological judgment seems to me to be the better Christian response here. And to be clear again here, I am speaking to détente rather than embracing any part of the war on gender. There is much that needs understanding and correction which has yet to be undertaken in socially constructive ways. We must not 'same,' assume, or judge as we stand in this space. Unfortunately, government edicts are not workable solutions to ontological sex/gender controversies, or what it means to be human. Of course, we must separate social movements of self-identification from the factuality of developmental and psychologically real sex-gender issues. We must work to affirm what we know through science, and faith, yet stand also in the in-between spaces of ambiguity, uncertainty, where we recognize the "other" as our counterpart—I dare say our *brother/sister*—not wholly understood but wholly acknowledged and embraced.

In deconstructing arguments as I have, I haven't just picked apart what has been taken for granted. The goal has been to create space for deeper insights that honor both the complexities of human experience and the enduring truths that anchor us. Again, it does us well to not give in to "saming" as an epistemological truth, given looming government challenges to diversity and to the definition of persons—because "certainty *is* indeed the deadly enemy of tolerance."

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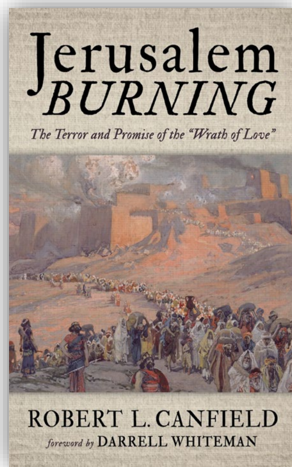
BOOK REVIEW

Jerusalem Burning

By Robert Canfield

Reviewed by Tyler Halstead



Eugene, OR: Cascade Books
2024

How is it that the ancient Israelites during the time of the Babylonian exile came to the conclusion that what they had experienced came to them through the hand of Yahweh? Not only that, but how did they infer that the immense suffering they went through—the total destruction of their temple, razing of their capital city, and loss of their nation, along with being hauled away to a strange, faraway land from which most of them would never return—was not merely punishment from Him, but an act of desperate love meant to draw them back to their Creator? I, as a committed Christian with training in theology and cultural anthropology, found the premise of Robert Canfield's *Jerusalem Burning* fascinating. Furthermore, these are great questions to delve into. After all, it's not as though Yahweh held the sole devotion of the Israelites in the centuries leading up to the exile. Far from it, in fact. Canfield points out that archaeological discoveries from the pre-exilic period include more objects related to the worship of the "Queen of Heaven" deity than to Yahweh (166). This shouldn't be surprising to readers of the Old Testament either, as the period dating back from the exile almost all the way to the conquest of Canaan is littered with descriptions of going after the gods of the surrounding nations and of the nations whom the Lord had driven out before them (Judges 2:17, as one example among many). It's quite natural to wonder how they would have determined that their suffering was an act of judgment from Yahweh, and not any of the nearly innumerable other possible deities they had gotten mixed up with.

This is where Canfield's background as a cultural anthropologist, having done extensive work in Afghanistan, is worth noting. He's not a theologian. On one hand, this at times seems to betray a lack of depth in his handling of the theological issues at play, both for the Israelites at the time and for those of us today, Jew or Christian, who believe in the God of the Old Testament. On the other hand, I found his treatment of the familiar narrative to be fresh and empathic, humanizing the story and struggle of the Babylonian exile in a way I've seen no one else do, particularly in academic writing. As a good anthropologist does, he patiently and carefully takes the reader through the story, focusing on the human element and explaining how the views and choices of the various players would have made sense at the time. His chapters on Jeremiah (5-7) were particularly engaging. Jeremiah was one of many prophetic figures who had delivered warning after warning to the people of Israel that if they did not change their ways and return to Yahweh as the sole object of their worship judgment would come to their land. In Canfield's telling, it was the combination both of these warnings coming to pass in the form of the Babylonian conquest and the human need to find meaning in the midst of suffering (173) that led them to the conclusions that they drew.

Throughout this book, the author's wrestling with the significance of this story is evident. In the introduction, he notes, "this story is my own best attempt to make sense of the texts and the critical

writings that have been produced about them" (5). Making sense of it all is not easy for any of us, as at the same time we are dealing with Holy Scripture for the roughly 2.5 billion Jews and Christians in the world which makes serious claims of divine revelation and ultimate truth, and also researching historical events for which much is known, both from the texts and from archaeology. It's clear that Canfield made a sincere effort to treat the Scriptural narrative with respect and take it seriously for the source of historical information that it is. Whereas so many others, writing from a nonbelieving perspective, commit the genetic fallacy of discrediting anything in the Bible as unreliable simply because they don't like the source, Canfield avoids this mistake. In fact, through much of the book I was pleasantly surprised with the way he seemed to take the fullness of the Scriptural narrative of this period seriously, including the more overt acts of God involving Himself in the nation's history (albeit in the latter portions of the book this pattern waned). Having said this, it should be noted that in many cases, he seemed to lean on the consensus of liberal biblical scholarship and didn't give adequate attention to contrary perspectives. One notable example is in chapter 14, where he discusses the book of Isaiah. While acknowledging that many throughout history assumed that it was authored by one person, he hastily dismisses this notion without providing much evidence on either side of the authorship debate. Readers unfamiliar with the background would remain oblivious to the fact that every manuscript we have of the book of Isaiah shows no break between chapters 39 and 40, including the complete manuscript of Isaiah in the Dead Sea Scrolls, along with the fact that Jesus Himself and every other New Testament author who quotes Isaiah consistently attributes the entire work to one author.

Ultimately, when it comes to writing about Scripture, and particularly, historical events described and interpreted in Scripture, there will always be the same fork in the road that we come to. Either there is a God who is active in history and interacts with His people, or there is not and all of our religious ideas are little more than coping with our existence. In the case of this story, we must determine whether it is believable that Yahweh actually did speak to the Israelites through the prophets, and that the biblical narrative is to be taken for what it is, or not. Whether we come to this as believers or unbelievers, following the evidence wherever it leads should be our mutual commitment.

Unfortunately, the concluding chapters of the book left me with very mixed feelings. Canfield did a masterful job answering the question of who God is to His people based on the Scriptural record. At the same time, his summarized conclusions seemed to me to be tainted with the same type of patronizing language with which social scientists often write about religion. While acknowledging that much of the reason the people of Israel came to recommit themselves to Yahweh was that His prophets' warnings had come to pass, he still attributes their discerning of Yahweh's hand animating their experiences as a product of the "creative and supple human imagination" (172). While interpretation of the evidence available may differ from person to person, it strikes me as rather unsatisfying to claim one of the two most formative and dynamic events in the Hebrew Bible (along with the Exodus) is little more than impressive imaginations striving to impose meaning on an otherwise miserable time.

In the end, I can recommend this book as an enjoyable and often insightful read for those interested in historical anthropology, while acknowledging that it has some shortcomings in its treatment of the Hebrew Bible.

Tyler Halstead is a graduate of Eastern University's MA in Theological and Cultural Anthropology program working in the field of education. He currently lives in North Africa with his wife Phuong and twin sons Abraham and Aaron. His research interests center around religion, ethnicity, language, and culture.

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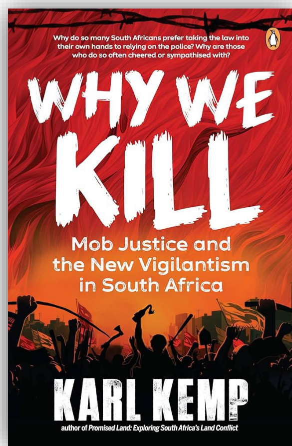
BOOK REVIEW

Why We Kill: Mob Justice and the New Vigilantism in South Africa

By Karl Kemp

Reviewed by Robert Guy McKee



New York: Penguin, Random House
2024

Karl Kemp's *Why We Kill: Mob Justice and the New Vigilantism in South Africa* (2024) is an "inquiry" (1, 297) by a white South African lawyer, journalist, and writer into why he and his compatriots have, in recent years, come to excel so in mob justice and vigilantism. It bears review in *OKHJ* for use of anthropological methods and its comparability to McKee (2021), reviewed in *OKHJ* 6(2).

The book opens with 300 pages of text, organized as prologue, forty chapters in five parts, and epilogue. The five parts, by their successive one-word titles, are 'Overture', 'Metro', 'Bush', 'Cops', and 'Justice'. After the epilogue come an author's note, acknowledgments and sources, acronyms, a glossary, and an index.

In the author's note, Kemp explains that he recounts his book's research-based stories not as an academic or a media-house journalist, but as a writer. He says he hopes thereby to provide the reader "some deeper insight" into his subject than does the conventional wisdom (roughly, "It's all the police's fault!")—more importantly, to move, affect, entertain or otherwise inform the reader on a level beyond (301) what these other vocations can do. He credits whatever his book's success is to its grounding in fieldwork, including myriad recorded interviews and follow-up research, mostly qualitative. He identifies Alexandra township, just north of Johannesburg, as his field-work's primary site, and rural Limpopo, South Africa's northernmost province, as his second.

In the prologue, Kemp starts with a 2006 story from what he judges to have been an earlier South Africa, where mob justice was already "widespread, entrenched and arguably unremarkable" (11), the cops useless, but conditions not yet those of the book's new vigilantism.

In 'Overture', Kemp introduces his new vigilantism, as marked by:

- the South African Police Service (SAPS) having started, from 2017, "to consistently record 'mob justice' and 'vigilantism' as formal causative factors for murders and assaults" (11);
- near disappearance of informal trial by elders (6, 11, 297);
- increasing, staggeringly-high numbers of victims —from 849 in April 2017–March 2018 to 1,849 in 2022 (15);
- the country's nearing, where vital services are concerned, "the threshold of a failed state" (46);
- "a tsunami of crime" (62), including a greatly increased murder rate (12, 61), with "nauseatingly egregious" cases "a dime a dozen" (60);
- increased competition among metro-dwellers for scarce resources, with illegal immigration

> and rural-to-urban migration exacerbating the problem (passim).

Kemp notes 2022 as the year of most of what he relates. He recounts the first segment of an Alexandra housing-conflict drama—a rich case study—that he weaves throughout the book, with core members of one vigilante party concerned providing their perspectives on the conflict via faithfully-transcribed interviews.

The titles of the book's four remaining parts identify their respective foci as Kemp sees them in differing, nuanced, inadequate (even taken together) explanatory relations to his subject. In part: 'Metro' furthers what 'Overture' began, concerning urban contributors to sociology's "anomie and social strain" explanation of mob justice; but it recognizes as unexplained here the country's rural mob justice, and it develops the book's Alexandra housing-conflict drama in view of additional contributors to vigilantism to be named later.

'Bush' reckons with what Kemp sees as especially rural contributors to mob murders: chiefs' traditional authority, Big Men, "witchcraft and muti killings" (111), and child kidnappings. It tells of the savage mob murder of suspected cable thief Trust Hlongwane, a young Zimbabwean immigrant, who was "stoned, brained, bashed for many hours" (160), then burned to death.

'Cops' only largely validates stereotypes of SAPS and its average cop—as corrupt, fat, poorly trained, failed in provision of basic services, useless to call given the choice of do-it-yourself policing and *real* (aka mob) justice. It tells of the murder by three SAPS officers of criminal suspect Mlungisi Khulekani Mpanze, with the magistrate later involved saying the officers had no right to act in Mpanze's shooting death "as the proverbial judge, jury, and executioner" (215). It challenges the idea that there is "any police force in the world that could cope with the [recent] madness of South Africa's streets" (224).

'Justice' treats the formal system's failure to deliver more than legal justice to the various parties either responsible for or aggrieved by alleged crimes of established dockets. It notes, for aggrieved parties of the finally concluded Alexandra housing-conflict drama, the multiplicity of the conceptions of justice due them, with most conceptions frustratingly beyond the system's power to deliver. It wonders about crimes "unreported [to SAPS] because the community believed themselves far better served by taking matters into their own hands" (273).

In the epilogue, Kemp concludes that South Africa's "vigilantism persists partly because it works in ways the formal system cannot" (297), while he also asks "what the rise of mob justice in the last five years portends" (298).

I preface several comments and criticisms, now, by judging some related to Kemp consciously writing as a writer, primarily to fellow South Africans. While I do not fault him for this, it likely prevented his awareness of McKee (2021) having provided much data for comparison and contrast, including mob justice statistics for Kenya (many) and Tanzania (fewer, but of interest).

I do not see Kemp anywhere define either key term, 'mob justice' or 'vigilantism'. He uses them sometimes synonymously, sometimes with one as a cover for both—e.g., "vigilantism, and mob justice in particular" (104); he assumes readers know what they mean, especially in their book contexts. I nowhere see any form of 'lynch'.

The glossary is a single page with twenty-eight items. Likely adequate for Kemp's primary target readership, it could helpfully be longer for those unfamiliar with South African English, with the non-English interjections of interviews, or with such as the Zulu *vimba* 'block, bar [e.g., a thief from escaping]' (11).

The book has no maps, photos, figures, or tables, where even a few would help readers better follow, understand, and/or imagine various parts of the book. The book's ethnography of mob killings certainly merits the publisher's back-cover content warning.

Kemp nowhere spells out the personal philosophical anthropology by which he concludes his book so: "[G]iven this country and the state of it[,] why not kill for vengeance [by mob justice]? Why not kill those who take and break and rape and do not care for the law-abiding citizens?" (300). My sense is, Kemp condemns himself for flip-flopping much in answering this question honestly himself; it is also that South Africa, recently surveyed as 85 percent 'Christian', bears study for why its many 'Christianities' and 'Christians' appear to me so absent from *Why We Kill,* especially from the country's response to its mob justice.

On the whole, I think *Why We Kill* an admirable success at what Kemp intends it to be—a writer's compelling inquiry that does not presume to more than aim at tentative explanations (297); that involves readers throughout by such as, "The little whispering

voice that asks whether it is so bad to murder criminals in a country with a crime rate like that of South Africa" (6); "Do you still wish to murder those who take from you, having seen and smelled the corpse of Trust Hlongwane?" (297). I think Kemp's book an invaluable contribution to the literature on mob justice/lynchings in sub-Saharan Africa.

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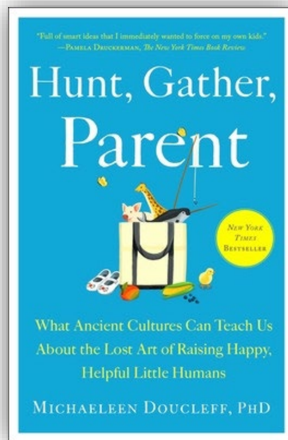
BOOK REVIEW

Hunt, Gather, Parent: What Ancient Cultures Can Teach Us About the Lost Art of Raising Happy, Helpful Little Humans

By Michaeleen Doucleff

Reviewed by Genevieve A. Perkins



New York: Avid Reader Press
2021

In the ever-present search for a perfect disciplinary method, Michaeleen Doucleff's parenting approach is not easily classified with any one trendy parenting camp, and yet her book *Hunt, Gather, Parent: What Ancient Cultures Can Teach Us About the Lost Art of Raising Happy, Helpful Little Humans* is a best-seller on different parenting styles book suggestion lists. With her PhD in chemistry and a successful career as a journalist and NPR radio host, Doucleff charismatically articulates her adventure and ready opinions. I admire her dedication to traveling the world with her toddler to solve our contemporary parenting puzzles, though I admit I have more questions than answers.

Doucleff's honest struggles connect with readers as the book is heavy in her personal experiences from depression to self-blame. I'm glad by the end she seemed in a much better place!

The book begins by calling out Western parents as "WEIRD", with many side-comments throughout her casually delivered content. Her writing style reveals her feelings for any matter at hand. For example, she lauds extended family systems for raising children, and proceeds to outline how the Catholic Church destroyed that. Though she states that one can't *actually* blame the Catholic Church, it is evident by her exclusion of other possible causations or correlations that we might as well blame church authority (27-30).

In this way, she often points out interesting thoughts. It would be difficult to miss how she really feels about having four kids in six years, stay-at-home motherhood, or that she thinks highly of ancient cultures despite her disclaimer that we should not romanticize them or criticize them (11). One cannot easily trust an author who is thus relativistic, and I often found myself enjoying and learning, then critiquing and questioning, all in the matter of one page. If a reader prefers to skip the opinions and distracting side-comments, Doucleff's chapter summaries are extremely succinct and helpful.

Though Doucleff notes that science can't solve everything (43), her epistemological viewpoint remains empirical throughout her analysis. Her parenting formula includes the Maya Method for togetherness (section 2), Inuit Emotional Intelligence to encourage (section 3), Hadzabe Health seeking autonomy (section 3), and Western parenting 2.0 that seeks minimal interference (section 5). This book's insights mostly focus on Doucleff's own child, Rosy, who is a toddler, though includes some how-to hints for older ages.

The most insightful parts were the stories she relates of interactions and conversations with these societies. A few things she learns are: to incorporate

purpose into daily life through chores, the power of storytelling, waiting a bit rather than being bossy, building a network of support to combat the isolation caused by our individualistic society, and to seek multi-age playgroups.

Interestingly, I notice, homeschool co-ops in America have multi-age playgroups while full-time school students miss this normally. Also, story-telling is something our popular culture too often uses to infuse their own contemporary ideals rather than listen to the older tales and learn from them. I wonder, do we Western parents have the right tools already and choose to ignore them? Is it really only the West that's WEIRD or can we check the rest of the world's parents in "modern" areas?

Because of her style of delivery, I have more questions than answers—mostly about her opinions and which Americans she bases her comparative assumptions on. (She is based in Silicon Valley.) Her situation is not every American's situation or story, and it is unjust to overgeneralize such a large section of the world.

Our empirically minded culture seeks the exactness of brushing teeth precisely two minutes and changing car oil at certain milage. We enjoy the certainty of if A then B. (I admit that I have been there while sleep training a child, wondering why the poor babe won't calm down if I did all the 'right' things.) But, human persons are not cars. Children, most certainly, are not lab rats for parents to experiment on with empirical behavioral tests, and I am not suggesting that this author means for us to do this! It is a way almost any parenting book can, unfortunately, be read—as a manual and with the assumption that if the child doesn't respond, clearly the child must be broken. The child is *not* malfunctioning, though perhaps in need of more understanding or family bonding.

Sometimes going far outside our normal to another land helps us see more clearly in the mirror. It took Doucleff a trip to Tanzania to connect the darkness with helping calm bedtimes (305). If that's what it takes, so be it! But, just like Doucleff learns that Rosy was always kind, she just hadn't seen it before, we might not be seeing what's right in front of us here among the wise parents around us. In reality, we might not need so many parenting books!

This book is not quite what one would expect from an *anthropologically* trained ethnographer, at least not what I would expect a theological and cultural anthropologist would have presented in her place. I admit, the title misled me into thinking it was more objective than it is! Her interlocuters are less in the spotlight than she and Rosy are.

While worth a critical reader's time, I neither fully recommend nor discourage this book. Doucleff focuses on keeping the peace and making parenting more enjoyable for parents (and child), digging at some root causes of why WEIRD Western parents struggle. But, I wonder, what is the real telos of parenting?

What matters to me is the subtle difference between treating children like humans in training and treating children like persons with souls needing good habits and guidance. Despite what this reader thinks verged on prejudice against her own society, Doucleff's attempt to find answers for Western parents is not without credit. The author's tone and assumptions towards all of us WEIRD Western parents is not wholly out of place, but wouldn't an anthropologist have dug into the similar WEIRD happening in other parts of the world?

I think anthropologists trained—and I recognize my bias here openly—in more holistic research and analytical methods would catch some understandings that Doucleff missed.

Personally knowing many parents of various family sizes and stages of life, I do not think it evident that all Western parenting is WEIRD. Many are thriving. I think a generational ethnographic research project is needed, especially because I see many of the author's suggestions lived by my grandparents' generation who have likely *never* read a parenting book (e.g. saying, "Who is being disrespectful?" rather than accusing a child outright, 200; or designating chores/help at any age, 65-73).

The West has a history of ruptured families and disrupted enculturation because of the vast changes in technology that ironically bring us together *and* separate us. As a parent, I find this book's parenting reminders, which echo what wise Western parenting mentors have modeled for me, refreshing. As an anthropologist, I am left wondering why all Western parents don't fit the WEIRD profile and if other cultures might suffer a loss of parental enculturation throughout a few generations. Can our global community contribute to a mutually edifying parent culture of support?

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