

Missiological Imagination as a Pedagogical Tool: African and Asian Christians in Conversation

Benjamin L. Hartley is Associate Professor of Christian Mission at Palmer Theological Seminary, the Seminary of Eastern University in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. He received his Th.D. in missiology from Boston University School of Theology in 2005. He is an ordained deacon in the United Methodist Church.

Abstract: This article provides an example of how mission history may be utilized in imaginative ways to promote student reflection about missiology. The article first presents biographical portraits of three Christian leaders from Africa and Asia in the late eighteenth century with respect to three missiological themes (migration, empire, and theology of evangelism). The second section of the essay is a fictitious and imaginative conversation amongst the three historical characters and myself as author, where questions are posed around these same themes. The article concludes with pedagogical reflections on the use of a similar exercise with students.

The inspiration for writing this article was first piqued by observing the powerful effect field trips to historic churches in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania had on the seminary students in one of my classes. As they touched artifacts, descended creaky stairs into church cellars, sat in pews, and mounted preaching platforms their historical imaginations came alive as they asked questions about Christian discipleship – both past and present. Scholarly developments in the

fields of history and practical theology in recent years have also prompted me to reflect upon new ways of writing and teaching history as a missiologist.

Practicing Protestants: Histories of Christian Life in America, 1630-1965, a collaborative effort of the History of American Christian Practice Project, is one example of rethinking the way history might be utilized in theological education.

The recovery of the Christian way of life depends in large part on an agreed upon, constitutive set of historical *practices*. Protestant theorists of practice *need* history, because it provides the sources for those foundational habits and patterns of action that will lead to renewed faith. But, of course, they need histories of a particular kind, histories that yield kernels of insight about practice, that reveal what has shored up Christian identity in the past and what has produced sanctified and meaningful lives through the centuries [*italics in the original*]. (Maffly-Kipp, Schmidt, and Valeri 2006: 5).

Such invitations to rethink the craft of history have been even more pronounced among persons outside the theological disciplines (Denning 2002; Slotkin 2005). The scholarly appreciation of historical imagination has been increasing in recent years and received significant attention at the 2009 gathering of the American Historical Association when Gabrielle Spiegel of Johns Hopkins University addressed the association at its opening plenary session on the theme “the pleasures of the imagination.” The panel included such well-known scholars as sinologist Jonathan Spence of Yale and Natalie Zemon Davis of the University of Toronto.

Other scholars have sought to blur the lines between history and fiction more dramatically by the creation of “alternate histories” (Williams 2008) and

“counterfactual histories.”¹ Such efforts to encourage historical imagination have not been welcomed by all historians, to be sure, and a philosophical debate on such issues is ongoing (Munslow 2007; Jenkins 2003; Ankersmit 2002). As scholars of world Christianity seek new ways of thinking about Christian movements around the world, it may be in precisely such invitations to greater historical imagination that we discover new ways to deepen our missiological understanding and help our students to do so as well (Bevans 2005; Whiteman 2008).²

Rather than discuss in a philosophical manner ways of teaching missiological imagination through history, my purpose is to demonstrate one way that I have done so in my own teaching. This essay has two parts. The first part of the essay provides succinct biographical portraits of three Christian leaders from late eighteenth century Africa and Asia, using the lens of three missiological themes (migration, empire, and theology of evangelism) which were struggles for all of them in some way. The second section of the essay is a fictitious and imaginative portrayal of a “celestial coffeehouse” conversation amongst the three historical characters and myself as author, where questions are imaginatively posed about these same themes to the historical representatives within both their

¹ These terms are not synonyms. Briefly stated, alternate history may be considered a form of writing that is closer to fiction than counterfactual historical studies and most closely resembles the nature of this essay.

² Whiteman’s (2008) study of nonformal missionary training efforts does not even indicate mission history as an item taught in missionary training programs.

own context and mine. I conclude with reflections on the use of such a fictitious “conversation” in my own teaching.

Biographical Portraits

The three persons whose lives will be considered are, in order of their birth and sequence of presentation, Olaudah Equiano (1745-1797), Lee Sung Heun (1756-1801), and Ntsikana (1780-1821). They represent three different places of origin – West Africa, Korea, and Southern Africa – and three different denominational perspectives which can be roughly characterized as Methodist, Roman Catholic, and indigenous African. All three biographical portraits contain nuances and ambiguities related to even these most basic characteristics of geography and denominational identity. In addition to their geographical and ecumenical diversity, the choice of these three figures was based on their influence as evangelists in their respective settings at the dawning of the Protestant missionary movement. The recovery of nonwestern initiatives in world evangelism from the earliest years of the missionary movement is thus an important aspect of this article.

Migration, empire, and theologies of evangelism are the three themes which provide the framework for the (necessarily brief) biographical portraits of each person, as well as the focus for the celestial coffeehouse conversation that follows. In different ways and in varying degrees of intensity each of these 18th

century missionary evangelists experienced geographical migration, were required to grapple with their relationship to empires, and implicitly – if not always self-consciously – embodied a practical theology of evangelism. First, I will introduce each of our coffeehouse companions in light of these themes, and then I will examine the three themes themselves by comparing our celestial companions with one another and by analyzing ways their stories may offer insight into ecclesial practices for evangelism in our own day.

Olaudah Equiano (1745-1797)

Olaudah Equiano is most well known for his 1789 autobiography, *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa, the African. Written by Himself*. This landmark anti-slavery text went through nine editions in Britain in its first five years and nineteen editions for American readers by the middle of the nineteenth century (Edwards 1989). By the time of Equiano's death in 1797 his literary success had made him the most famous and wealthiest person of African descent in the Atlantic world (Carretta 2005: xii).

Equiano's extraordinary involvement in global migration movements of the late eighteenth century is perhaps his most unique attribute. His frequent travels around the Atlantic and Mediterranean oceans make it difficult to identify Equiano with any single country. Equiano justifiably and without exaggeration called himself a "citizen of the world" long before the age of airplanes made such

a moniker as easily attainable and relatively commonplace as it is today. Equiano spent extended periods of time in Central America, the Caribbean, North America, Britain, Spain, Turkey, and elsewhere. As the most dramatic example of a migrant Christian leader in the late eighteenth century, it comes as little surprise that Olaudah Equiano's country of origin is a topic of debate among historians (Carretta 2005: xv; Sweet 2009).

Equiano's ability to serve as a go-between among so many different cultures would have been impossible had he lived his life prior to the age of European seaborne empires, and the British Empire in particular. It was an empire that kept him enslaved, provided him business opportunities once freed that involved his own profiting from the slave trade, and enabled his travels and transcontinental influence through his book. His experience in the British Royal Navy gave him valuable experience in positions of considerable responsibility that even included his participation in an unsuccessful venture to discover a new route to India by traversing the North Pole. His lifelong familiarity with commerce served him exceedingly well in the final decade of his life as he effectively managed his book's marketing in as impressive of manner as he crafted his prose (Carretta 2005: 184, 229, 330-367).

Equiano's Christian experience suggests that pragmatic but rigorous Christianity appealed to him in ways that nuanced theological ideas did not. Equiano praised George Whitefield's preaching while he also criticized the more

sedate preaching of others which he saw as the cause for their “thin congregations”(Edwards 1989: 94; Carretta 2005: 165). Unlike many in Whitefield’s audience, Equiano did not have an ecstatic conversion experience upon hearing the preaching of the “divine dramatist” (Stout, 1991). Equiano’s conversion experience did not occur for another 9 years, in 1774, and took place in Spain where he read Christian books provided by a friend (Carretta 2005: 173). Equiano soon returned to London joyfully expressing his newfound faith in Christ and joined the Huntingdonian Methodist chapel where he had visited several times before and had been moved by an experience of a “love feast.” He was known as a Methodist for the rest of his life (Carretta 2005: 332).

Historians have rarely, if ever, characterized Olaudah Equiano as an evangelist, but he was involved in evangelism activities around the world and displayed a remarkably astute understanding of evangelism in many respects. Stylistically, Equiano’s personal approach to evangelism with others appears to have mimicked his own experience of conversation with friends and reading books prior to conversion. The examples he gives of his own evangelistic activities occur most often on board ship where there was often plenty of time for conversation. His one-on-one efforts at evangelism, however, were often disappointing endeavors. Shortly after his conversion experience in 1774, Equiano was offered the opportunity to attend a Spanish university by a Catholic priest whom he had befriended with the goal of converting to Protestantism. The

Catholic priest had similar aspirations for his Protestant friend. Equiano considered taking the priest up on his educational offer because he thought he might be able to lead other Catholic priests to become Protestants.³ He decided against this, however, as it seemed disingenuous to him.

Equiano also made two attempts at foreign mission service but neither worked out very well. Equiano went to Central America for a brief period on a business venture in which his primary hope was to convert Amerindians to Christianity. Equiano's attempt to go to West Africa as a missionary never materialized in spite of considerable effort on the part of himself and several friends to facilitate this (Carretta 2005: 179-184).

Without question, it was Equiano's gifts as an author which represent his most lasting contribution as an evangelist. The dramatic recounting of his conversion and calls for more radical discipleship through the abolition movement in his autobiography were intended not merely to entertain but to prompt conversion to the Christian faith and the abolitionist cause. Personal conversion and abolitionism were inseparable for Equiano as he pointed out the hypocrisy of the Christian faith in its association with the slave trade. In one section, he shames his Christian readers by drawing a connection between the frightening sacrificial rites of his family's traditional religion and his fear of being a sacrificial victim on board a slave ship. These two stories appear in his book in

³ Equiano appears to have been most energized by anti-Catholic books he read and urged would-be converts to read them with him.

such a way that the reader readily makes the connection that the Christians' slave trade is even worse than the pagan rituals of West African religion (Equiano 1987: 19).

What contemporary theologians often call a "holistic" understanding of evangelism was most vividly present in Equiano's autobiography in his descriptions of freedom and conversion. Equiano's recounting of his experience of being granted freedom in 1766 is the closest literary parallel to his story of religious conversion in 1774. These two watershed events in his book might be viewed as a two-part process toward Equiano's total freedom. The imagery which Equiano uses to describe his being granted freedom recalls the story of Peter's release from prison. Peter was so overwhelmed by the experience of being led out of prison by an angel that he thought he was seeing a vision (Acts 12:8). Equiano thought the same as he ran to the Register Office to officially register as a freed slave.

I could scarcely believe I was awake. Heavens! Who could do justice to my feelings at this moment! Not conquering heroes themselves, in the midst of a triumph – Not the tender mother who had just regained her long-lost infant, and presses it to her heart... All within my breast was tumult, wildness, and delirium! My feet scarcely touched the ground, for they were winged with joy, and, like Elijah, as he rose to Heaven, they 'were with lightning sped as I went on. (Acts 12:8) (Edwards 1989: 98)

Equiano alters a standard literary device of conversion narratives by placing the story of his freedom from slavery at the center of the book rather than his story of conversion. The conversion story, though not unimportant, does not occur until

nearly the end of his narrative. So, while following the genre of spiritual autobiography to a degree, Equiano's narrative seems to emphasize the centrality of personal freedom even more so than his conversion (Costanzo 1987: 50).

More subtle examples of Olaudah Equiano as an evangelist are also present in his autobiography. For example, his frontispiece portrait, which was printed in each of his books, appears to copy a style of portraits common among preachers in the period (Carretta 2005: 287-90). At the bottom of the portrait is also an open Bible turned to Acts 4:12. In this chapter, Peter and John engage in evangelistic preaching in the city of Jerusalem, are imprisoned, and defend themselves before the high priest Caiaphas. Verse 12 is a direct evangelistic appeal and also the verse Equiano meditated upon immediately prior to his conversion experience. "There is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among mortals by which we must be saved." In this single image, Equiano conveys both his evangelistic desires and reminds his readers that he has suffered an even worse imprisonment than Peter and John through slavery. Equiano's closing words in his autobiography contain a final message to two kinds of readers – perhaps the two kinds of audiences he hopes he is reaching? He praises those who seek "to do justly, to love mercy, and to walk humbly before God" while condemning those who refuse to follow the lessons from his autobiography. These persons, Equiano writes (in reference to the Matthew 7:6 "pearls to swine" text as well as his own book) may receive "the

treasures of wisdom” but nevertheless throw “the jewels of instruction away.”

(Equiano 1987: 178; Carretta 2005: 329)

Equiano’s story of relentless migration across the Atlantic world and in contact with a number of different nation states in an age of empire and revolution is extraordinary but should not overshadow the important contributions he also made as an evangelist author. He never lived to see the legal demise of the British slave trade in 1807, but he did witness the difference he made in the lives of so many of his readers through his bookselling tours and speaking engagements prior to his death in 1797. Equiano perhaps deserves to be counted as one of the first itinerant Methodist evangelists who could claim, with only minimal hyperbole, that “the whole world is my parish.”

Lee Sung Heun (1756-1801)

Twelve years younger than Equiano, Lee Sung Heun is the pioneer evangelist of Korea. He has the distinction in Roman Catholic circles of being the only founder of the Catholic Church in an Asian country who was indigenous to his country.⁴ Lee Sung Heun and his friends were instrumental in the conversion of thousands of persons before the first foreign Roman Catholic missionary (Chou Mun-mo) arrived in Korea in 1794, ten years after Sung Heun’s conversion.

⁴ Lee Sung Heun’s name is variously transliterated. His surname is sometimes Yi rather than Lee. His given name is sometimes Seung-hun or Sung-hoon. I have chosen to follow a convention used by other authors of using Lee Sung Heun’s given name, Sung Heun, when I refer to him rather than his surname, Lee.

Sung Heun lived during the reign of King Yongjo and his grandson, King Chongjo at a time of both relative prosperity and cultural instability (Grayson 1989: 159). The new faith's association with foreign elements in an era of cultural instability made life difficult for incipient movements to the Christian faith as rulers of the time found Christians an easy scapegoat (Kwang 1996: 116).

The story of Sung Heun's conversion to the Christian faith begins in 1777 with a group of Korean scholars who were studying Sohak (or "Western learning") that included Roman Catholicism as well as mathematics, astronomy, and other subjects (Won-Sun 1996). One of these scholars, Lee Pyok, heard in 1783 that his friend Sung Heun was going to accompany his father as an envoy to Peking, and he urged Sung Heun to learn as much as he could about the Christian faith during his time in China (Kim and Chung 1964: 25).

Korea had implemented increasingly isolationist policies after invasions from Japan and northern China in preceding centuries, so the opportunity for travel outside the country was extremely limited. Sung Heun may have lived at the same time as Equiano, but the opportunity for him to be a "citizen of the world" was quite limited by comparison. As the son of a dignitary in the Korean government, Sung Heun did receive the rare privilege of travel, and upon arrival in Peking he immediately went to a Catholic Church and began studying the Christian faith with Jesuit priests. Early in 1784 Sung Heun was baptized by the French Jesuit priest Louis de Grammont and given the name Peter with hopes

that, like the disciple, he would be the foundation on which the Korean Catholic Church would be built (Kim and Chung 1964: 24). After studying with the Jesuits for several months, Sung Heun returned to Korea and brought back gifts for his friends including books, crucifixes and other works of art. Lee Sung Heun baptized his friends, and they gave one another baptismal names that expressed their sense of apostolic identity. Lee Pyok, because he had “prepared the way” for Sung Heun’s voyage to China, was named John the Baptist.

Lee Sung Heun’s relationship to the Korean empire both made it possible for him to travel to China and convert to Christianity and also caused him to be persecuted along with thousands of other Korean Christians as Korean rulers sought to destroy what they saw as corrupting foreign influences. Confucianism enjoyed the status of a state religion in late eighteenth century Korea. The Korean kingdom’s fear of Western empires’ influence was strong. In December 1801, a Korean Christians’ letter written secretly on silk to the Roman Catholic bishop in Peking was intercepted (Hwang and Kim 2009). The letter requested military intervention from the Chinese ruler as well as Western powers in order to bring religious freedom to Korea. The Korean ruler’s fear of another empire invading his own prompted a terrible period of persecution for the early Korean church and led to the martyrdom of three hundred believers in the ensuing months (Kwang 1996: 109; England, et. al. 2004: 483; Clark 1971: 51).

Sung Heun and his friends' evangelistic efforts began in 1784 among the middle class and nobility and quickly spread to lower classes of society as well (Kwang 1996: 118). Christianity immediately faced stiff resistance from Confucian scholars, government officials, and converts' own family members. Korean Christianity experienced its first martyr as a result of torture less than a year after Sung Heun had returned from China. For Sung Heun and Lee Pyok it was the pressure from their families rather than torture which ultimately caused them to apostate. Lee Pyok died of typhus soon thereafter in 1786. In 1787, the first period of persecution passed. Sung Heun returned to the Christian faith and, along with several of his friends, continued administering the sacraments as laypersons to the small flock of Christians. They also established a hierarchy for their infant church without the knowledge or permission of Catholics outside of Korea (Kim and Chung 1964: 28).

It was not until 1789 or 1790 that they received instruction from Jesuits in China about Roman Catholic theology of Holy Orders and the sacraments. Sung Heun and his friends promptly sought to follow this new instruction and ceased to administer the sacraments although they continued to preach and baptize as Jesuits in China had encouraged them to do so (Suk-Woo 1996: 145). Further inquiries were made about "ancestor worship" in subsequent months. Many Christians in Korea were discouraged by the response of the Bishop in Peking who condemned the practice as heretical. The Korean Christians nevertheless

followed this instruction which resulted in a new wave of persecution that killed 400 believers (Clark 1971: 50). Sung Heun apostatized for the second time during this 1791 persecution but again repented of his apostasy and was restored to fellowship. In 1801, during the Sin-yu persecution caused by the infamous silk letter, Sung Heun was martyred for his faith (Kim and Chung 1996: 55).

It is difficult to piece together Lee Sung Heun's ideas about evangelism and the church apart from those of his friends, but some clues may be derived from what we know about the early years of the church in Korea. The most striking characteristic of early Korean Christianity as a Roman Catholic movement is the central role lay leadership played in evangelism in Korea. In spite of periods of intense persecution, repeated apostasy, martyrdom, and relative isolation the church in Korea grew to ten thousand by 1800, largely through the influence of lay evangelists even though a Roman Catholic priest had arrived by 1794. The fragility and resilience of the faith were remarkable in these early years.

The multiple waves of persecution of the Roman Catholic Church in 1791, 1801, 1810, 1815, 1819, and 1826 caused a closeness of fellowship of Christian believers and an embrace of egalitarian social relations among Christians in Korea (Kim 1984: 8; Clark 1971: 51). The first converts to the Christian faith came from a number of different social strata within Korean society. Sung Heun and Lee Pyok were from an aristocratic class, but other early followers of Christ were

from lower classes. One convert named Hwang Il-gwang even came from a despised class of butchers and reported that members of the aristocracy who were Christians nonetheless honored him. These dramatic gestures of egalitarianism in Korean society at this time also manifested themselves in the church's treatment of women. Concubinage and bigamy were prohibited in the church, and women from the aristocratic classes were permitted to remarry after the death of their husbands – a practice outlawed in the wider society. It is unsurprising that up to two-thirds of the early converts to Christianity in Korea were women. The stories of early Roman Catholic women evangelists in Korea are just beginning to be more widely known (Kwang 1996: 117-121; Ledyard 2006).

Poems and early hymns of Korean Catholics also express a remarkable depth of Christian fellowship which contributed to the Christians' evangelistic effectiveness. In Lee Sung Heun's collection of poems, *Mach'ŏn yugo*, one finds a piece of verse comparing his heartfelt love for a Christian friend with "that of a nightingale seeking its true love" (Won-Sun 1996: 70). Sung Heun's poems and other Christians' writings also praised God as *tienzhu*, an expression for God that conveyed God's personal qualities in contrast to the more impersonal notions of God in neo-Confucian thought (Won-Sun 1996: 97-98).

In spite of his repeated apostasy, Lee Sung Heun demonstrated a deep love for his people and the Gospel he sought to propagate. He was a privileged member of Korean society who was given the rare opportunity to travel to China

and there learn about the Christian faith. There were many negative consequences of Sung Heun's location within the Korean empire, but the early Christians' experience of persecution also helped to shape their church in ways that strengthened the church's evangelistic potential. Early Korean Christians' evangelistic effectiveness may be attributed to the closeness of their fellowship, their embrace of a radical egalitarianism among women as well as among different social strata, and their commitment to teaching the faith through a variety of doctrinal books in the language which the greatest number of people could understand. Korean Christians' attempts to demonstrate their loyalty to Korean society and their commitment to their Christian faith were met with persecution throughout the nineteenth century.

Ntsikana (1780-1821)

Ntsikana, our final guest gathered around the celestial coffee table, has been called the first modern African theologian and represents "a genuinely new birth of Christian insight within African society and culture" (Hastings 1994: 219). Still a young man and not yet famous by the time of Sung Heun's and Equiano's death, Ntsikana was born in 1780 the son of a councilor to the Xhosa chief, Ngqika, an esteemed position among the Xhosa which Ntsikana would one day inherit. Ntsikana was a poet theologian, dancer, and hymn-writer for the Xhosa, and his songs continue to be sung today in Xhosa congregations and by

professional South African musicians. In the mid twentieth century, Ntsikana was an inspiration in the struggle against apartheid South Africa (Transvaal African Students Association 1944). His hymns represent a rigorous effort to contextualize the Gospel message in the medium of dance and song through a Xhosa cultural and religious tradition which was undergoing dramatic change (Hodgson 1982: 11; Peires 1979).

Ntsikana's first encounter with the Christian faith in a form that he found appealing remains a mystery. Scholars surmise that he likely heard the preaching of the Dutch missionary Johannes Theodorus Van der Kemp (1747-1811) when Ntsikana was still a young man, at least a decade before his conversion in 1813. Van der Kemp may have been the first to encourage Ntsikana to infuse his poetry with Christian content. With his great appreciation of indigenous cultures, linguistic brilliance, and firm disgust of white settlers' racism, Van der Kemp was the finest example of a European missionary in South Africa. There is also a belief among the Xhosa Christians that Ntsikana received a revelation about Christianity prior to meeting missionaries, and only later did he receive instruction from them (Enklaar 1988: 106; Khabela 1996: 9; Hodgson 1980: 3; Hodgson 1985).

Ntsikana's story of conversion is infused with meaning from cultural practices and beliefs which the Xhosa most prized. In approximately 1813 Ntsikana experienced a divine call from God when he saw a light shining on his

favorite ox as he gazed admiringly upon his herd of cattle. Later the same day, while dancing with his family at a neighbor's gathering, he experienced the Holy Spirit entering his body. On the way home from this experience, Ntsikana jumped into the Ghorha river and washed off the red ochre worn by the Xhosa as a mark of their traditional religion and as a distinguishing characteristic from Africans who had become more westernized in their association with white settlers. Ntsikana, however, would be no lackey for the white settler agenda. After receiving instruction from white missionaries, Ntsikana steadfastly refused to be baptized by them a second time, asserting that his washing off the red ochre was indeed a valid baptism. Ntsikana thus immediately established himself as a Christian prophet in an indigenously African framework. Ntsikana began his teaching ministry by telling his followers that the Holy Spirit had "entered" his body to instruct the Xhosa people to pray and worship God and to only have one wife (Hodgson 1980: 3-5; Hastings 1994: 218-219).

The Xhosa were a people well-accustomed to seasonal migration patterns around the Eastern Cape (where most Xhosa remain today). The affirmation of a migratory life experience is observable in Ntsikana's hymns through the hunting images he utilized. As an ethnic group, the Xhosa frequently moved to new areas as game became scarce. Ntsikana even portrayed God as the hunter who is not limited to any particular holy place (Hodgson 1980: 52). The Xhosa were familiar with more dramatic migrations as well. The Xhosas' homeland of the

Eastern Cape was a relatively new location for the Xhosa who had migrated to this region from central Africa in the sixteenth century (Hodgson 1998). The need for migration continued during Ntsikana's lifetime but changed from voluntary migration in their hunt for game to forced migrations due to conflicts over land with British, Afrikaner, and Zulu groups as well as infighting among the Xhosa themselves. Beginning in 1779, a year before Ntsikana's birth, there was a succession of wars which lasted for a hundred years. These forced migrations were a destabilizing force in Xhosa culture during Ntsikana's lifetime, and Ntsikana helped his people to navigate these cultural changes.

Ntsikana's relationship to empire must be seen in light of both Dutch and British colonial expansion in the early nineteenth century as well as the dynastic feuds within Xhosa society itself. The Dutch had arrived in South Africa in 1652 and had settled to the west of the Xhosa around modern day Cape Town. The Khoi Khoi in that region had become quite westernized prior to Ntsikana even hearing the Christian message from Van der Kemp in 1800, and there was a strong desire among the Xhosa not to follow in the footsteps of the Khoi and see their culture destroyed. The British arrived in South Africa in 1795 which prompted further conflict.

At the time of Ntsikana's conversion there was conflict between two rival Xhosa chiefs. Ntsikana was aligned with chief Ngquika while another prophet, Nxele, was aligned with chief Ndlambe. Ntsikana advocated for a careful

accommodation and qualified acceptance of the presence of Europeans while Nxele called for militant resistance and absolute rejection of the whites' culture. (Hodgson 1980: 2). Ntsikana was thus a go-between not only between one culture and another or one religion and another but also between factions within his own society. He taught that Christian Scripture and the encroachment of white civilization both require the Xhosa to change their ways. Ntsikana sought to facilitate this change with integrity (Khabela 1996:125).

Ntsikana's ideas about evangelism are best expressed in his hymns. These hymns expressed the Christian faith in a ritualistic way rather than in formal doctrinal positions. Such ritualistic expression of faith was familiar to the Xhosa and allowed their Christian faith to be expressed in an emotional manner that resonated deeply with other cultural practices. For example, many of Ntsikana's hymns are focused around the praise of God and utilize considerable repetition. This was similar to traditional practices where the praise-names of a chief are repeated "in the conviction that the utterance of a person's praise-names is enough in itself to win their favourable consideration (Willoughby in Hodgson 1980: 11)." The following excerpt from Ntsikana's "Great Hymn" illustrates this well:

He who is our mantle of comfort,
The giver of life, ancient on high
He is the Creator of the heavens,
And the ever-burning stars;
God is mighty in the heavens,
And whirls the stars around in the sky.
We call on him in his dwelling-place.

That he may be our mighty leader,
For he maketh the blind to see;
We adore him as the only good,
For he alone is a sure defence (Hastings 1994: 220).

Much like the songs of Zion in the Old Testament, the singing and dancing of Ntsikana's hymns nurtured a sense of fellowship as the gathered Christian community. Ntsikana's "Great Hymn" addresses God as a gathered community with the use of the first person plural to describe the Christian community. This stress on the importance of Christian fellowship can be found even in Ntsikana's last address where he also encourages his followers in the face of war and persecution from whites as well as other Africans. "Always stick together... Should a rope be thrown round your neck, or a spear pierce your body, or be beaten with sticks, or struck with stones, whatever persecution comes upon you, on account of the word of God don't give way, keep it and stick to it and to each other." This final phrase, "stick to it and to each other" utilizes a proverb that denotes a "ball of scrapings" from the hide of an animal that is very sticky and hardens when dried (Hodgson 1980: 56-57).

Commentators on Ntsikana's Great Hymn have further described the expansive unity and reconciliation that Ntsikana desires for his people. "[I]n the 'Great hymn' there is a transition from particularism to universalism. Transcendence has ethical connotations and, linked with a spatial concept, God is now understood as being the uniter of all people everywhere through Christ so

that reconciliation becomes universal (Hodgson 1980: 59).” In the early twentieth century the St. Ntsikana Memorial Association was established with precisely such a goal of unity among Africans under the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Ntsikana’s practice of always wearing a cloak was also a symbol of Jesus’ unifying and protective power that was available to all people, and Jesus himself was referred to as the cloak which his followers “put on.” It was a familiar item of dress for Xhosa men and for early Xhosa Christians was frequently associated with conversion -- perhaps in allusion to Colossians 3:10 where Christians are instructed to “put on the new self” in Christ (Hodgson 1980: 59).

Ntsikana’s rigorous and highly nuanced contextualization of the Christian message helped the Xhosa people navigate a treacherous time in their history as they were buffeted by the upheavals of forced migration and warfare among African and European empires. Ntsikana’s efforts to accommodate his people to these social influences were not rear-guard in character but rather possessed a hope for the Kingdom of God that he described as “the beginning of peace for which there has been no preconceived council, or arrangement, of [humans].” This was not expressed as a hope divorced from concern for reconciliation in the here and now. In this sense too, Ntsikana possessed the best of the Pietist tradition, undoubtedly partly gained from Van der Kemp, along with an unwavering faithfulness to his Xhosa cultural context and the needs of his people (Hodgson 1980: 56).

“Celestial Coffeehouse” Conversation

This essay began by introducing the idea of a celestial coffee house conversation, but thus far we have mostly heard a monologue of brief biographical descriptions of three historical figures presented in a sequential manner. I will now consider the themes of migration, empire, and theologies of evangelism in turn and seek to engage in a literal, albeit imaginative, conversation among our ancestors in the faith. For each theme, I will first reflect briefly upon the issue in light of contemporary realities and then consider what our celestial conversation partners may have to say to this situation. I now invite the reader to the work of missiological imagination and into the celestial coffeehouse, where you are welcome to eavesdrop on my conversation with Equiano, Sung Heun, and Ntsikana.

Moderator: Experts predict that by the year 2050 the population of the United States will grow by at least an additional 100 million persons, almost entirely the result of immigration streams from Latin America, Asia, and Africa. The vast majority of these immigrants will have some kind of affiliation with the Christian faith.⁵ Migration movements are re-shaping the way we think about the Christian church in many different places – not just the United States. Professor Andrew Walls has referred to these migration movements as comprising a new

⁵ Population projection estimates may be obtained from the Population Resource Center, [Hhttp://www.prcdc.org/H](http://www.prcdc.org/H), or any number of other reputable sources.

“Ephesian moment” for the church (Walls 2002). In the previous section we have already heard how each of you – Olaudah, Sung Heun, and Ntsikana – were affected by migration movements. What insights might we draw about world evangelism from your experience for our own day in the face of these migration movements?

Equiano: Ntsikana and Sung Heun are both encouraging me to speak first since, in my book, I confessed to having a “roving disposition,” but I am not sure this makes me the best spokesperson of the phenomenon (Equiano 1987: 127). My repeated migrations do make it easy to understand the challenges of evangelism when cultures are so rapidly changing because of migration. In my own case, it is hard to situate myself in any particular culture except perhaps one I could best describe as a “trans-Atlantic Methodist” one. There are many people in the early twenty-first century who would similarly characterize themselves as cultural transients. In my observations of twentieth century missiologists and missionaries I have noticed that many of them thought of “culture” in more static ways and did not take into account the dramatic migration movements in the world. Instead, they too often thought of culture as bounded sets of pristine “otherness,” and this caused many missionary evangelists to be wrongheaded in their approach. I am glad to see that this way of thinking about culture is beginning to change (Taber 1991; Rynchiewich 2002).

There is another dimension to this issue of migration that I should mention. My marriage to Sarah, who was white and from England, was something I drew attention to a fair amount as I traveled the Atlantic world selling my book. I hoped that our cross-cultural marriage might be seen as a model for a rich level of cultural and commercial exchange between Africa and Europe (Carretta 2005: 329). Walls's dream of a new Ephesian moment where the "dividing wall of hostility" was brought down is something I hoped, perhaps too confidently, would occur through commercial exchange. Of course, I was not alone in this opinion (Equiano 1987: 175). There is some sympathy I feel toward many people in contemporary society who speak perhaps too optimistically about globalization's benefits in this regard. The increased speed and degree of involvement in the world economic system has brought undeniable benefits to people in many societies, but the true costs of globalization have also been frequently underestimated.

Moderator: I have noticed that the other two of you, Sung Heun and Ntsikana, have been whispering to one another as Olaudah has been speaking. What have you been talking about?

Ntsikana: We have noted a couple of things. First, we are struck by how different Olaudah's experience has been from our own. We simply did not travel very much at all in comparison. Second, we think it is important to understand the many different reasons why migration occurs. It is not only something done

for the sake of economic opportunity which works out well for all concerned – as it mostly did for Olaudah. My experience of migration was closer to what millions of refugees and internally displaced persons still experience in Africa than to what Olaudah experienced in terms of the benefits migration afforded him – the tragic experience of forced migration through his enslavement notwithstanding.

Migration was mostly something my people did in response to the wars around us. We moved with our herds and wild game to some extent and had made a massive migration from central Africa two centuries before my birth, but migration because of war was an entirely different matter. Evangelism in the midst of such suffering caused by migration is difficult for so many reasons. The cries of the ancient Hebrews singing the songs of Zion in a strange land resonated with my own songs.

Sung Heun: My experience of migration was a once-in-a-lifetime experience, perhaps most similar to the experience of many international students today in American and European universities. It was not an experience in the midst of war as it was for Ntsikana nor a constant state of being as it was for Equiano. I traveled to China, and there was exposed to a much different culture and learned about the Christian faith as well. When I returned to Korea, it was difficult to re-adjust to what was my home culture and to face restrictions in my evangelism and further education about Christianity that I did not have to worry about during those wonderful months of study with Chinese Jesuits. This

exposure, sadly, also made me suspect in the eyes of many of my countrymen as they thought I was trying to destroy our culture. Many migrants who return to their homelands after living abroad as a student or in some other capacity often experience an ironic feeling of displacement when they go back home. This may especially be the case if, during their time abroad, they convert to a “foreign” religion as I did. My experience illustrates, however, that in some places – especially those more closed to external influence – evangelism is sometimes only accomplished through indigenous efforts.

Moderator: In my teaching I have noticed a tendency among students in American universities and seminaries to uncritically view the missionary experience – past and present – as irretrievably tarnished by missionaries’ compromises with imperialistic aspirations of the governments with whom they are associated. A friend recently encountered a similar attitude in his work as a missionary in the Middle East. A Muslim neighbor with whom he had been casual friends with for several years and with whom he had only spoken Arabic one day yelled at him in frustration over a simmering dispute about a common area in their apartment complex. “You are a murderer!” he cried, using English for the first time with my friend. Of course, my friend had done nothing of the sort as an individual, but in the eyes of this Arab Muslim the actions in Iraq of my friend’s home country, the United States, had been equated with his own actions. Of course, neither American university students’ knee-jerk criticism of the

modern missionary movement's compromises with imperialism nor my friend's Arab neighbor are being very fair to missionaries. Historians estimate that missionaries were as often opposed to colonial regimes as they were in cahoots with them (Sanneh 2008; Robert 2008). Can any of you relate to the attitudes of either the American university students' disdain for missionaries or my friend's experience?

Sung Heun: I can certainly relate to the antagonism your friend experienced from his neighbor. Although not a cross-cultural missionary in the same way, I too was angrily accused of being too closely associated with empires beyond Korea. People feared that the Christian faith I introduced in Korea was a bad influence from foreign and powerful empires from China and the West, much like suspicions that are present in the Middle East today. I became a martyr after a letter that a friend had written was discovered that requested military intervention by foreign empires. I was trying to do everything I could to contextualize the Gospel in Korean society with the utmost care. In retrospect I have even wondered if my own apostasy was an unfortunate but perhaps necessary step in this contextualization effort. Evangelists too are vulnerable people. It is my hope that contemporary Korean missionaries, many of whom go to predominantly Muslim countries, will remember our own experience of persecution, the careful attention we paid to contextualization efforts, and the cruciform vulnerability of mission (Bosch 1994; Moon 2005).

Ntsikana: I relate to both the attitude of American university students and your friend's neighbor. My rival in Xhosa society, Nxele, very much equated the missionary movement to all the terrible things the white settlers in South Africa were doing. He felt he had no choice but to violently fight the incursion of the whites because he saw a direct correspondence between the missionaries and the encroachment from their empires. The Arab neighbor you spoke of, while nonviolent in his response, expressed a similar kind of outrage as Nxele. The reaction of your American students strikes me as less justifiable and based on a lack of familiarity with the many fine missionaries who have served in Africa and elsewhere.

I realized from my contact with Van der Kemp as a young man that Christianity offered something different and must not be equated with what so many missionaries as pawns of empires were doing. I must confess, however, that Christianity's association with empire ultimately made my ministry in South Africa relatively unsuccessful during my own life. I had few followers compared to my rival Nxele. I tried to introduce my people to an alternative world of prayer and praise through my Christian songs. However, the violence of empire and the close association of so many missionaries with those empires detracted from my witness.⁶ It is unsurprising that southern Africa, decades after my death, became

⁶ In subsequent decades after Ntsikana's death the number of missionaries increased in South Africa to such an extent that the region became the area with one of the highest concentrations of foreign missionaries in the world. (Hastings 1994: 419).

associated, more than any place on the continent, with so many African Independent Churches. Without excusing the tragic compromises made by many missionaries over a century ago, we might see the birth of African Independent Churches as an unintended consequence of the missionaries' actions.

Equiano: It saddens me to hear these stories of the destructive nature of empire on the spread of the Gospel in Korea and South Africa. I saw something similar happening with regard to the slave trade and tried to show my readers that the slave trade greatly damaged the missionary cause. It is also easy for me to sympathize with those missionaries who did, for various reasons, compromise with colonial rule in ways we all might wish they had not. Even after my own conversion to Christianity I engaged in the purchase of slaves in Jamaica for my plantation in Honduras. I did this even while wanting my time in Central America to be an evangelistic effort (Equiano 1987: 152-53). I do not wish to excuse myself for my involvement in the slave trade, but I do wish that many of your American university students would be a bit less quick to rush to condemn the tragic compromises missionaries have sometime made with empire. It is not so easy to disentangle oneself from such influences.

Moderator: A number of theologians of evangelism in recent years have sought to think about evangelism as something the church as a whole does rather than as an individualistic expression of exceptional fervor for the Christian message. Calls for a "missional ecclesiology" and definitions of evangelism as

“ecclesial practice” have become increasingly commonplace (Abraham 2008; Stone 2007). Such examples can be found in Protestant as well as Roman Catholic circles (Pope-Levison 1994). The Roman Catholic document *Evangelii Nuntiandi* expresses this most poignantly:

“Evangelization is for no one an individual and isolated act; it is one that is deeply ecclesial. When the most obscure preacher, catechist or pastor in the most distant land preaches the Gospel, gathers his little community together or administers a sacrament, even alone, he is carrying out an ecclesial act, and his action is certainly attached to the evangelizing activity of the whole Church by institutional relationships, but also by profound invisible links in the order of grace. This presupposes that he acts not in virtue of a mission which he attributes to himself or by a personal inspiration, but in union with the mission of the Church and in her name (Paul VI 1975: 60).”

In your own lives of Christian witness, to what extent do you resonate with such ecclesial definitions of evangelism?

Lee Sung Heun: I lived in a place and at a time when such an understanding of evangelism was quite natural. As anthropologists have frequently noted, Korea is a far more collectivistic culture than those found in Europe or North America, so an ecclesial understanding of evangelism is not as much of an insight for us as it might be for Christians in the West.⁷ The early Christian church in Korea was also a church that experienced considerable persecution, and the intimacy of Christian fellowship was something very important to us. My most important piece of theological writing was a poetic

⁷ See http://www.geert-hofstede.com/hofstede_dimensions.php. Accessed online 25 April 2008.

expression about Christian friendship. So, yes, I believe that people will want to join the Christian movement if they see Christians treating one another with love. The growth of the Korean church in its early years in spite of persecution suggests that we did a good a job of living out a radical call to Christian fellowship.

Ntsikana: Sung Heun and I shared a common love for poetry even if the styles of our poetry were different from one another. I also came from a similarly collectivist culture. My dancing and singing was never something that I did alone. My hymns were experiences of corporate theological thinking and acting. They are not best understood as a performance even though I was the primary composer of the songs.

Equiano: Although not as accomplished as Sung Heun or Ntsikana, I also tried my hand at composing poetry after my conversion. My experience of profound Christian fellowship in a Methodist “love feast” was very instrumental in my own story of conversion. I was simply amazed at this display of fellowship and wrote that “[t]his kind of Christian fellowship I had never seen, nor ever thought of seeing on earth (Equiano 1987: 138).”

Moderator: Contemporary scholars of world evangelism often study how groups and individuals navigated the change from being adherents of one religion to being Christians. The process of conversion is far from simple and is causing some missionaries to look carefully at Christian expressions in several contexts that do not involve participation in Christian churches (Chandler 2007; Tennent

2005). How did you experience this transition from a different religion to Christianity? How did you encourage your own followers to understand the continuities and discontinuities between the Christian faith and the faith your people held to before their conversion?

Equiano: My conversion to the Christian faith may be easiest for you to understand because I was so explicit in writing about it in my book. Because I was removed from African traditional religious practices at a young age, my conversion to the Christian faith did not involve a dramatic shift from one set of religious practices to another. I sampled many different religions in the course of my travels, similarly to what some people raised in a largely secular context today might do (Equiano 1987: 133). In my book I also tried to get my readers to see that African traditional religions have prepared Africans to receive the Gospel just as Judaism prepared Jews to receive the Gospel (Carretta 2005: 317). That was a pretty strong affirmation of African traditional religion in my day, but I remained uncompromising in my affirmation that “salvation is found in no one else” (Acts 4:12) and pleaded with the reader to find this salvation: “May God give the reader a right understanding in these facts (1987: 145)!”⁸

Ntsikana: I would say that my conversion to Christianity was a rather gradual one, even though in some ways my initial conversion experience was dramatic. I jumped into a river and washed the red ochre off my body, after all!

⁸ Acts 4:12 is the verse depicted at the bottom of Equiano’s portrait in the frontispiece of his autobiography.

That was a pretty clean break from one religion to another. However, in my teaching about the Christian faith through my hymns, my conversion was more gradual as I carefully considered traditional religion and the teachings of missionaries and the ways they were different and similar from one another (Hodgson 1980). The Xhosa worship that I led was much different from what was happening in the churches led by missionaries. I suspect missionaries wondered if what I was doing could be considered proper church behavior. The “interreligious dialogue” we practiced *as a church* (even if we did not call it that) between Xhosa tradition and the Gospel of Jesus Christ was profound and has some similarities to contemporary developments for the sake of “liberative ecumenism” in southern Africa as well (Daneel 2004).

Sung Heun: Baptism was a similarly dramatic “turning point” for me, but the realization that the ways we had honored ancestors had to change was a shock to many of us when we received word from the Chinese Jesuits. If only we could have been more intimately familiar with all of the debates of the Chinese Rites Controversy and the divergent ways that Rome responded to similar questions in China over time (Noll 1992).

Moderator: Thank you very much for an engaging conversation about migration, empire, and theologies of evangelism. Your insights about your own context and time period and the ways it might relate to the contemporary situation provide a great deal of fodder for further conversation.

Conclusion

The comparative analysis of three persons and their historical and cultural contexts illustrates the complexities of their experiences of migration, empire, and theologies of evangelism. Through an imaginative “celestial coffeehouse conversation” I have sought to reflect upon how these experiences so long ago might be used in contemporary situations to add historical depth to our analyses of missiological themes.

What are the advantages of such an exercise for students of missiology? In my own context of a North American theological seminary where I have required students to write a similarly imaginative two-part paper to this one, I have found that students do grapple with world Christian history in new ways. Nearly all students have noted that they bring different questions to the study of a particular figure knowing that they will need to think imaginatively about what s/he may say. Students also report that they find it much more difficult than they expected to pose questions to the person with whom they have chosen to “be in conversation.” The obviously anachronistic nature of their questions at times also gives them new appreciation for the task of an historian as far different from simply “reporting the facts.” A number of students also reported that with the assignment the study of history thus became less detached and more emotionally engaging as they tried to live vicariously through the person whom they sought to

study. This experience of living vicariously through another person is a large part of the appeal of biographical studies (Hutch 1997: vii-x). Cross-cultural and cross-generational empathy is pushed one step further in students' creation of an imaginary dialogue.

In this proposal for historical and missiological imagination, I am not arguing for a "fast and loose" use of history or a jettisoning of rigorous historical methodologies. However, as scholars in the History of American Christian Practice Project have noted, historians should always explore ways their craft can better provide historical insight for contemporary practitioners. The story of the cross-cultural transmission of the Gospel is without question one of improvisation and imagination (Vanhoozer 2006; Bevans 2005). This article's attempt at missiological imagination in a celestial coffeehouse is one example of how improvisation and imagination can be utilized to inspire future missiologists to see the tremendous creative work that remains to be done in the history of world Christianity. What is true for Equiano, Sung Heun, and Ntsikana is true for all of the saints who have gone before us. "For God had something better in mind for us, so that they would not reach perfection without us (Hebrews 11:39; Walls 2006).

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