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SOMETHING BORROWED

THE ORIGINS OF CHRISTIAN WEDDING RITUALS

BROOKE LEANY

Brooke Leany recently graduated from Brigham Young University with a BA in Ancient Near Eastern Studies: Greek New Testament. She hopes to pursue graduate work in the history of religion in the ancient Mediterranean.

Abstract: Western Civilization is defined by Christianity, but Christianity is not just a collection of morals and a few books. It, like all religious traditions, is a culture, a people, and an entire world of customs and rituals. The culture of Christianity modeled many of its traditions off those created over the previous centuries by the Jewish and Roman peoples. The wedding traditions presented by Tertullian and Plutarch represent the lives of thousands of people. They describe deeply held religious beliefs and cherished memories. From these two authors, we can deduce that Christians either abstained from, adapted, or participated in the traditions of their peers. When each of these decisions was made the *ekklesia* revealed not only the wedding day itinerary but also the state of Christian theology at that precise moment.

Western Civilization is defined by Christianity, but Christianity is not just a collection of morals and a few books. It, like all religious traditions, is a culture, a people, and an entire world of customs and rituals. The culture of early Christianity was heavily influenced by the traditions of the Jewish and Roman peoples from previous centuries. In this paper, I will attempt to shed light on early Christian marriage rituals, how they differed from the traditional weddings of the Greco-Roman world during the first and second centuries CE, and what this tells us about the Christian community's developing theology.¹ David G. Hunter and others of today's foremost experts on ancient marital practices have focused

1. Many of the earliest converts to Christianity came from Judaism and with them came portions of their culture. This no doubt applies to wedding customs as well but due to the limitations of this paper I will not be able to discuss this aspect of the formation of Christian traditions in a way that would do it justice.

their studies primarily on the sociocultural and philosophical aspects of a long-term marriage, using nuptial logistics as support for their research.² While this work is extensive and thorough, it neglects to examine the interaction between early Christianity and Greco-Roman religion, rather it focuses on the developing attitudes toward marriage within each separate community.

Because the Hellenistic world had no real separation between church and state, it was challenging for members of this new religion to decipher how they were meant to live in a society that operated by laws and societal norms which were in direct defiance of their new beliefs.³ As time went on Christianity began to form its own traditions. From the beginning of the second century forward all Christian weddings had to be overseen by a bishop,⁴ and by the fourth century the Christ-believing community, or *ekklesia*, had distinct matrimonial traditions.⁵ To explore this interaction, I will turn first to the writings of Plutarch to learn the state of nuptial traditions in the Greco-Roman world. Next, I will review the works of Tertullian, examining the aspects of weddings he felt were confusing or controversial enough to need written clarification. Then I will compare the two to learn which traditional regional elements Christians deemed unholy, which elements were adapted to better fit the new theology, and which, if any, new elements were introduced. From these sources, it is apparent that many aspects of ancient weddings that would typically be associated with Christianity were, instead, taken directly from Greco-Roman traditions.

PLUTARCH

In the years 18 and 9 BCE, the Roman Emperor Augustus issued three laws that fined unmarried men and women: *lex Iulia de Maritandis ordinibus* (18 BCE), *lex Iulia de adulteriis* (18 BCE), and *lex Papia-Poppaea* (9 BCE).⁶ Because state law was filled with religious elements such as this, it is difficult to distinguish where weddings stopped being a legal formality and began acting as a religious ritual. While it is uncertain where this line was drawn extant sources can help piece things together. During this time the responsibility of a husband began to change. Not

2. Hunter, David G. *Marriage and Sexuality in Early Christianity*. Minneapolis, MN: 1517 Media and Fortress Press, 2018.

3. i.e., the use of the crown; see below.

4. Hunter, David G. "Wedding Rituals and Episcopal Power", (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 7.

5. This term which comes from the Greek word "ἐκκλησία" which refers in the New Testament to the Church or a body of Christians (LSJ q.v. ἐκκλησία). This particular usage comes from Engh, Line Cecilie and Mark Turner. *The Symbolism of Marriage in Early Christianity and the Latin Middle Ages: Images, Impact, Cognition*. (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2019), 94.

6. Hunter, "Wedding Rituals", 10.

only was he required to produce progeny, but he also needed to be an upstanding and respectful husband.⁷ With this change, weddings only grew in importance, however, this did not bring clarity to the associated rituals.

Questions by Plutarch contains some of the most specific details about marriage in the ancient world. Most of these details are placed in a question-and-answer format in which Plutarch answers a series of questions, usually why a certain practice exists, and he responds with possible answers but rarely gives any definitive reason. While the answers he gives are helpful, the information most relevant to this study is found in the questions themselves. For instance, when Plutarch is asked, “Why do they light neither more nor less than 5 torches in the wedding ceremony,” we learn information that is often assumed to be common knowledge and thus excluded from the literature. Due to this aspect of ancient literacy, these wedding rituals are not well documented in the corpus of Greek and Latin literature. We are fortunate to have these details preserved in Plutarch’s greater collection of *Moralia*.

On the morning of her wedding, a bride in the Roman Empire would begin by picking flowers, already wearing her ring and long white robes. As she prepared, she was surrounded by her mother and sisters, and any other female members of the bridal party. She would place her hair in six curls (*sex crines*) with a dagger which had drawn blood in battle (*hasta caelibaris*), literally translated as *bachelor’s spear*, and tie her *tunica recta* with a Herculean knot. Next, she would place a yellow or red veil (*flammeum*) over her head and be crowned with a wreath of the flowers she had picked earlier.⁸ She would then be led to her groom and would say to him “*Ubi tu Gaius ego Gaia*,” (Where you are Gaius, I am Gaia) and officially enter into the marriage contract.⁹ A sacrifice was offered to the gods and the bridal party then shared a joyous breakfast.

When the evening came the bride would be taken from her parents and begin her procession to the groom’s home.¹⁰ As the bridal party set out, they would light five torches (*cerei*) as a symbol of indivisibility, fertility, and reverence for the five

7. Veyne, Paul “The Roman Empire” in *A History of Private Life*, vol. 1: *From Pagan Rome to Byzantium*, trans. Arthur Goldhammer (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1987), 36.

8. Plutarch. *The Roman Questions of Plutarch: A New Translation with Introductory Essays and Running Commentary*. Trans. H. J. Rose (Oxford, UK: Clarendon Press, 1924), 101.

9. Plutarch, *Quaest. Rom.*, 30.

10. There seems to have been a spectrum of ways to perform this portion of the ceremony. Some authors claim that the bridal party hosted a faux kidnapping with the bride ceremoniously weeping as she went over to the groom’s home. The main explanations for this act are that the bridal party did not want to offend the house gods she was leaving behind or that it was in recognition of the Sabine women. Other authors report processions where there was no fake abduction and the bride simply tried to look mournful as she walked.

gods who oversaw marriages (Jupiter, Juno, Venus, Suada, and Diana).¹¹ As they walked, the bride held a spindle and distaff as she watched the groom throw nuts to the children and the rest of the party sang the *Talassio*, a song meant to summon the god of marriage by the same name, sometimes the bride would also portray a reluctance to leave her ancestral home.¹² Once everyone arrived at the home of the bridegroom it was the bride's responsibility to anoint the doorposts with oil, fat, and wool garland before she was carried over the threshold.¹³ In some areas, such as Plutarch's homeland of Boeotia, the axle of the bridal carriage would be burned to symbolize that she could no longer return to her paternal home.

Upon entering her new home, the bride would touch the ceremonial fire and water.¹⁴ Some scholars believe that she also exchanged fire and water with the bridegroom, but this claim is less substantiated. The two families now joined would eat together.¹⁵ It is unclear if the consummation of the marriage would have occurred directly after the fire and water or following the dinner. The following morning the groom would present the bride to the household gods. She then offered her first sacrifice to the gods of her new home. It was at this point — having exchanged vows, anointed the home, been purified by the fire and water, consummated the marriage, and been accepted by the gods — that she was officially wed to the bridegroom.

This day was both extraordinarily eventful and symbolic for the couple. From the very beginning, the date was chosen to avoid times of ritualistic purification. The *flammeum* was colored red or yellow to represent a flame and was believed to protect the bride from any negative comments from spectators. The bride parts her hair into six parts to have exactly three curls on either side of her head because three was believed to be a magical number. Even the dagger with which she parted her hair represented a union that could only be parted by iron, that is to say, death.¹⁶ As the day progressed and the bridegroom arrived at the home of his bride, they exchanged a set of vows, "Where you are Gaius, I am Gaia" promised the bride. Plutarch postulated "Is it a kind of agreement to begin at once to share everything and manage all in common? The words then mean 'where you are lord and master, I am lady and mistress.'" ¹⁷ This connection between Mother Earth and the bride/future mother brings a sense of divine purpose to the nuptials as well.

11. Plutarch, *Quaest. Rom.*, 2.

12. Plutarch, *Quaest. Rom.*, 31.

13. Plutarch, *Quaest. Rom.*, 29.

14. Plutarch, *Quaest. Rom.*, 1.

15. Rose, *The Roman Questions of Plutarch*, 102.

16. Plutarch, *Quaest. Rom.*, 87.

17. Plutarch, *Quaest. Rom.*, 30.

As the ceremony left the bridal home and progressed through the streets exactly five torches were lit.¹⁸ Five as an odd number is as indivisible as the couple should be. Another aspect of this number was that, according to Plutarch, it was considered the ultimate marital number because as a combination of 3, the first odd, and 2, the first even, it symbolized the union of man and woman. The number of the torches was also used to appeal to Jupiter, Juno, Venus, Suada, and Diana in hopes that they would bless the union and watch over any children that came from it.

Along with the torches, the people celebrated by singing the *talassio*.¹⁹ This song comes from the Latin word *talasus* which means wool basket. This is likely connected to the bride's carrying of the spindle and distaff as well as the placement of the wool garland on the doorposts. All of these remind one of the Roman literary tradition in which the wives of great heroes spun wool to represent their devotion and excellence as a wife. As the bridal party traveled, they would offer various small sacrifices to the gods in addition to the main sacrifice which would occur at the groom's home.²⁰

Before this main sacrifice could begin the bride had to anoint and enter the home, however, she was forbidden to walk over the threshold as she entered.²¹ This was avoided by either carrying her or placing her in a cart and wheeling her over. This was done in remembrance of the rape of the Sabine women who first entered their homes under constraint. Additionally, it allowed the bride to give the impression that it was not of her own accord that she would be entering the home where she would lose her virginity. I have already discussed several elements similar to this act of carrying a woman over the threshold, such as the bride portraying herself as unhappy during her procession, giving the impression that the bride did not wish to be married, these aspects can be connected to this idea that a woman of good repute would not desire to have sex. This is an extension of the societal convention that purity and virginity were the marks of a worthwhile woman, without these qualities the bride would have become an outcast for her defilement.

The most important of all these ceremonies was the ritualistic touching of fire and water. Concerning this aspect of the wedding, Plutarch seems less sure of the meaning than in the other instances which have been discussed. William Goodman gives four explanations as to what the purpose of the ritual may have been:

1. The fire and water acted as a purifying agent for the bride.

18. Plutarch, *Quaest. Rom.*, 2.

19. Plutarch, *Quaest. Rom.*, 31.

20. Rose, *The Roman Questions of Plutarch*, 102.

21. Plutarch, *Quaest. Rom.*, 29.

2. Fire and water represented masculine and feminine, respectively.²²
3. “Fire without moisture is without nourishment and dry, while water without heat is barren and inactive; and so male and female apart from each other ineffectual, but their coming together in marriage produces the perfect communal life.”²³
4. Man and wife must share all things, even the bare necessities of life.

Preference for each explanation may have correlated to certain regions or age groups at the time but because all four rationales have some degree of prominence it is likely that during this ceremony thoughts would have turned to more than one of these options.

The entire wedding day was spent performing one ritual after another to appease the marital couple’s household gods. It was only in marriages of economic significance (i.e., when a dowry was being exchanged) that formal documentation of the union was required. In the most extreme circumstances, the wedding would have been officiated by the Pontifex Maximus, the highest religious official of the empire.

TERTULLIAN

Nearly a century after Plutarch, Tertullian, nicknamed the Father of Western Theology, became one of the most avid writers of the second and third centuries. He spent his lifetime (155 to 220 CE) writing 33 books concerning Christian apologetics and polemics. From his writings, much knowledge has been gained concerning the practices and concerns of the early Christian *ekklesia*. These concerns included the paying of taxes, sabbath day observance, and the proper way to get married. Because the canonical books of the New Testament say remarkably little about weddings, Tertullian’s writings contain some of the best information on the wedding practices in early third-century Carthage (North Africa).

The most important part of any wedding is the bride and groom. It was the responsibility of any young lady who wished to marry to find a spouse of the same religious background. This meant that any potential suitors must be Christian.²⁴ This was an especially important decision since in early Christian belief a person, man or woman, could only marry once.²⁵ If your spouse died or if the couple

22. Plutarch, *Plutarch’s Morals*. Translated by William W. Goodman. (Cambridge, England: Press of John Wilson and Son, 1874), 39.

23. Plutarch, *Quaest. Rom.*, 1.

24. Tertullian, *On Monogamy*, 7.

25. Hunter, David G. *Ecclesiastical Legislation*, (1517 Media; Fortress Press), 237.

wished to be separated then the couple either had to live the rest of their lives alone or be considered adulterers.²⁶

Tertullian is careful to point out that all traditional apparel was optional and decided upon by the bride.²⁷ If it was the wish of the bride to be fully ornamented, her face would be fully shrouded in a veil. She was meant to be covered as she went to meet the groom and was only revealed once she was standing before her betrothed. Only virgins were permitted to wear the veil as it was intended to shield her from gazing upon men and men from gazing upon her; if the bride and groom had truly maintained their chastity, they should blush upon seeing one another.²⁸

If she did not veil her face the couple ran the risk of becoming desensitized from each other and there would be no proof of their purity.²⁹ During this period, chastity was considered one of the most important qualities a Christian could possess.³⁰ From the moment of her betrothal, the bride was no longer considered a virgin in the eyes of Tertullian as she was now intending to engage in sexual activity despite having never actually participated in any such activities.³¹ Because of this, a betrothed girl or woman who belonged to the churches in Greece or Africa would wear this veil from the time of her betrothal until after the ceremony was completed.

In contrast with this extreme modesty, by the third century, Tertullian claims that “women [had] every member of their body heavy laden with gold.”³² He then reflects on the (unspecified) times when the only jewelry a woman wore was the gold ring which both the bride and groom would wear on the fourth finger of their left hand as a sign of their oath. However, other acts of modesty did persevere. For example, a bride would not have arranged her hair elaborately as an extravagant hairdo was believed to distract from the reason they had all ultimately gathered: to worship Christ.

26. Hunter, *Ecclesiastical Legislation*, 238.

27. Tertullian, *De Corona*, 4.

28. Tertullian, *On Prayer*, 22.

29. Tertullian, *On Prayer*, 22.

30. Tertullian refers to chastity as equally important as righteousness and truth (*De Fuga in Persecutione*, 3.)

31. To him Eve, as the “Mother of the Living,” was never a virgin. (On the Veiling of Virgins: 5) Any references made to the virginal bride will be referencing the modern understanding (i.e., a bride which has not yet had sex). In this paper *virgin bride* is meant to refer to a woman who would be considered a virgin in a modern sense. Unless specified otherwise, any mention of a bride will be referring to this *virgin bride*. (Tertullian, On the Veiling of Virgins, 5.)

32. Tertullian, *The Apology*, 6. Tertullian is likely exaggerating as most people would not have been able to afford such accessories. This was most likely done to emphasize his belief that members of the *ekklesia* were abandoning the “good ways of [their] fathers.”

While it is unspecified if brides would have worn white, as they do today, the groom was clothed in white to represent “the bright beauty of the unwedded flesh.”³³ A white toga was worn to all private ceremonies — namely espousals, marriages, and name-givings — as a form of celebration.³⁴ Though it would make sense for the bride to be similarly clothed it is unclear if women also wore white. Tertullian references this issue regarding women in two instances. The first is an explanation that it is sinful for men to wear women’s clothes and for women to wear men’s. The second accuses prostitutes and Ceres-worshipping women of blasphemy for defiling the color of purity by wearing pure white shoes and all-white dresses.³⁵ With this in mind, it is reasonable to continue with the assumption that the bride also wore white.

Most of the specific aspects of the marriage ritual come from Tertullian’s interpretation of the parable of the ten virgins. In this story, ten virgins sit outside a house awaiting the bridegroom.³⁶ When the groom is approaching, the virgins go to light their lamps but five of the virgins do not have enough oil. They are forced to leave to purchase oil and by the time they return the doors have been shut. Tertullian confirms multiple times that torches played a role in weddings and that it was their interpretation that the light represented their testimony of Jesus as their savior.³⁷

The nuptial ceremony became increasingly standardized as time passed. Weddings were officiated by bishops, presbyters, and deacons; moreover, “they [bishops, presbyters, and deacons], plainly, will give husbands and wives as they would morsels of bread.”³⁸ Tertullian attests that there was some form of a nuptial vow, which was most likely the precursor to the regulated set of oaths that were administered during the fourth century. In the early Christian *ekklesia*, it was believed that to be unified by an ecclesiastical leader was to be metaphorically married in the Lord.³⁹

SYNTHESIS

The traditions presented by these two men represent the lives of thousands of people. They describe deeply held religious beliefs and cherished memories.

33. Tertullian, *On the Pallium*, 27. It is unclear whether Tertullian is describing an element which was customary in the community or if he was instead advising that grooms should be clothed in white.

34. Tertullian, *On Idolatry*, 17.

35. Tertullian, *On the Pallium*, 4.

36. Matt 25:1–13.

37. Tertullian, *Scorpiace*, 6.

38. Tertullian, *On Monogamy*, 11.

39. Tertullian, *On Monogamy*, 11.

From these two authors, one can deduce that Christians either abstained from, adapted, or participated in the traditions of their peers, particularly the Pagan Romans. While the origins of these decisions are unknown, the motivations are generally quite clear. To begin our examination, I will first examine the traditions which, according to Tertullian, Christians omitted from their ceremonies. These are the traditions that Tertullian considered to have theological ties to the Greco-Roman cults.

The deliberate abstention from certain Roman traditions can reveal which of these were considered idolatrous by the Christians. The most self-explanatory of all these was the refrainment from blood sacrifice during the morning, procession, evening, and second morning. The flower crown, another, less obvious, ritual seems to have been a matter of contention among Christians. Tertullian was so adamantly against this ritual that he wrote an entire book, *De Corona*, on the topic. In this book, the reader confronts the great conflict of Tertullian's works. In chapter 2 he says, "that what has not been freely allowed is forbidden" while claiming in chapter 4, "If I nowhere find a law, it follows that tradition has given the fashion in question to custom, to find subsequently (its authorization in) the apostle's sanction, from the true interpretation of reason. These instances, therefore, will make it sufficiently plain that you can vindicate the keeping of even unwritten tradition established by custom." This inconsistency significantly weakens his argument against crowns, but this was not his only objection. He also believed that wearing a crown was offensive to their ancestors. By his logic, a bride wearing a crown at her wedding implied that she believed she already had a royal status despite not yet being perfected by Christ. Only those who had already died and were deemed righteous were worthy of crowns. All others were guilty of idolizing themselves.⁴⁰ The only possible motive aside from this was the desire to seduce those around them. He described a woman with flowers in her hair as "beauty made seductive."

This logic too applied to the fixing of the bride's hair. By elaborately curling and pinning her hair the bride was adorning herself with a crown, even if it would not be visible under her veil. If her hair was fanciful, she was acting immodestly. The desire to be beautiful was deemed a desire of the flesh. Therefore, the wearing of the *sex crines* was a sinful practice and should not have been worn by a Christian bride. This rebuttal of the crown and *sex crines* is particularly interesting as there is no evidence to suggest that the Romans saw any religious meaning behind the crown and the meaning attached to the hair in the magic number 3 is not mentioned by Tertullian. This begs the question: Did Tertullian understand this and choose to ignore it or was immodesty a bigger concern?

40. Tertullian, *De Corona*, 10.

However, not every aspect of a Roman wedding was considered heretical by Tertullian, a strict observer of the faith. These are the elements I will call tradition. These traditions would have had religious connotations to them, but they were not considered to be rooted in idolatry. A great example is the veils worn by Christian brides. Despite having a strong correlation to the yellow or red *flammeum* worn by the Pagan brides, veils were still heavily encouraged by Tertullian. While members of the imperial cult may have connected these veils to the imagery of a flame, Christians chose to believe that the veil protected the bride from corruption, not judgment as the Romans believed.⁴¹

An even better example is the adaptation of torches. The torches as they are used in the parable of the ten virgins most likely came from a combination of Jewish and Pagan influences but in chapter 29 of *Against Marcion*, when evaluating this metaphor, Tertullian states, “and thus ‘to wait for our Lord,’ that is, Christ. Whence ‘returning?’ If ‘from the wedding’... for the wedding is his.” In the context of the modern wedding, his statements are illogical. The Matthew passage in the New Testament details the story of a bridegroom *approaching* the wedding. This reference to Christ *returning* from the wedding before he goes into the wedding speaks directly to the traditional three-part wedding. If Tertullian is reliable in this instance, then it is clear that the *ekklesia* participated in the procession with the minor adaptation of the torches. The quantity of torches, as far as we can tell, was inconsequential; this would have sufficiently removed any association with the existing Roman symbolism of five torches.

In addition to participating in the general structure of the day, Romans and Christians shared many clothing traditions. This included the white attire, veil, and golden rings, all of which continue to be staple elements in western wedding culture. According to Tertullian, rings were a Roman tradition with no associated religious meaning. According to Christians, rings symbolized an oath between the bride and groom. He does not specify if the rings were exchanged at the betrothal or the wedding ceremony, but he does imply that both bride and groom began wearing them at the same time. These details are not corroborated in any of Plutarch’s works, but it is referenced in the works of other authors of the period.⁴²

Keeping in mind Tertullian’s policy of discarding only rituals, one can reconstruct what a typical wedding day might have looked like for a wealthy Christian couple. To begin, a groom dressed in white would arrive at the bride’s home. After the initial vows, the families would sit and eat together. As they traveled the bride would remain veiled and the groom would be throwing nuts to any onlookers.

41. Hersch, Karen “Gods of the Roman Weddings.” In *The Roman Wedding: Ritual and Meaning in Antiquity*, (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 2010.) 228.

42. Hersch, “The Roman Wedding”, 229.

Members of the bridal party may have carried torches to light the way until they met the virgins holding torches. Everyone present would file into the home and the bishop or deacon would begin the final ceremony. The bride would be unveiled, and the couple would proceed to the bridal chamber. They may have sung the *tallassio* as they walked, the bride may have anointed her new home before entering, and the groom may have carried her over the threshold but without additional evidence, there is no definitive conclusion. The party most likely prayed and gave thanks during the day, but this too is unconfirmed in these sources.

CONCLUSION

From its very beginning, the early Christian *ekklesia* distinguished themselves from their Pagan counterparts through thoughtfully evaluated changes in their cultural fabric. This may have been upsetting to the stricter members of the imperial cult but to these pioneers alteration of the traditions of their ancestors was critical as they followed in the footsteps of their Messiah. Many of these early Christians were converts who had spent their youth watching family and friends participate in Pagan rituals. As they began the process of reordering their lives to fit their new theology they risked being shunned by their loved ones and even faced possible execution. The condemnation of the crown, especially, would have separated them from the general populace. This may have been interpreted as disrespectful to the emperor or even as a rebellious act. This risk indicates that these changes did not occur because of laziness or a frivolous whim. Each element that was discarded was heavily debated and ultimately deemed sinful.

Without additional sources to affirm current findings, all conclusions are conjectural. The influence of Jewish customs can also not be underestimated. Many of the new church members undoubtedly came from Pagan upbringings but the earliest of all the converts came from Jewish communities. We know from the letters of Paul that this community had a difficult time leaving behind circumcision and the dietary portion of the law of Moses. Some of these people felt passionate that the Pagan converts should participate in circumcision and other initiatory customs to be accepted into the flock. Persistent traditions such as these inevitably affected the culture of Christianity.

As we have seen Christian wedding ceremonies borrow some—if not most—of their elements from Pagan culture. A more in-depth look at the changes made by early Christians to the wedding ceremony deepens our understanding of other co-opted celebrations such as Saturnalia or the Festival of Eostre by demonstrating these stages of cultural evolution. Understanding these steps in the cultural shift of the West allows us to recognize the patterns which likely helped form other traditions. Because all societies tend to follow similar patterns, this information

can help us understand the spread of Hellenism, the antagonism toward Christians in the third and fourth centuries, colonialism, and Christianity as a whole.