

How Do We Deal with the Baggage of the Past?

# Living with Ill-Defined Words: A Response to Herbert Hofer and Rick Love

by *Ralph D. Winter*

**H**ofer treats four words beginning with a “C”: “Christian,” “Church,” “Christianity,” “Conversion,” plus a fifth, “Baptism.” He finds these five words “burdensome and confusing” in India and elsewhere. Rick Love, giving many fascinating examples, finds much the same on the international level in working in the world of Islam. Perhaps the word “missionary” is in the same category, or is that too obvious to mention?

First, let’s be done with the word “conversion.” In Standard English that word usually means merely an outward change, a change of culture, clothing, diet—it means to proselytize. Well, the NT very clearly opposes any proselytizing as essential to salvation. Logically, then, if I were asked at the border of Egypt “Are you here to convert Muslims?” the most accurate answer I could give would be, “The Bible instructs me not to proselytize anyone at any time.” Obviously, when Evangelicals speak of conversion we do not mean an outward conversion but an inward conversion. However, when we talk to outsiders we need to use the meanings for words as they understand them. Conversion is part of our Evangelical dialect, but we ought to lay it aside if we want to make sense to outsiders.

In Hofer’s case, in India, in that particular environment, all of his five words have special and perhaps objectionable meanings, understandably. With “Christian,” he is dealing with a specific social and in fact legally defined entity. It is a relatively small group of some 25 million people, out of 150 million Dalits, who are known as Christians. Furthermore, almost universally—in India and nowhere else—this entity which is called Christian is drawn from that fairly distinct class of people called Dalits. Granted that there is also a smaller body of “Christians” from Kerala who are from a background of what is loosely called Syrian Orthodox Christianity. They speak Malayalam.

Of the millions of Dalits, the (small) percentage who make up the Christian movement in India are just as good as any other people. They possess inherent intelligence and beauty. Thanks in part to missionary work, outstanding attorneys, medical doctors, professors and creative leaders are to be found in this sphere. By contrast, the Malayali Christians are strikingly different in that

---

*Ralph D. Winter is a senior mission thinker who has been actively involved from the beginning of the massive transition from simply thinking in terms of countries or individuals to thinking in terms of peoples. He is founder of the US Center for World Mission, and is currently chancellor of William Carey International University.*

their social and economic standing is far stronger.

In India, then, Hoefler's five words often have negative connotations, due mainly to the social status of Dalits in general. Outside India where Rick Love is at work, these five words are used with a flavor affected by the general, global reputation of Christians in many lands. It is a world in which American implies Christian just as Arab implies Muslim.

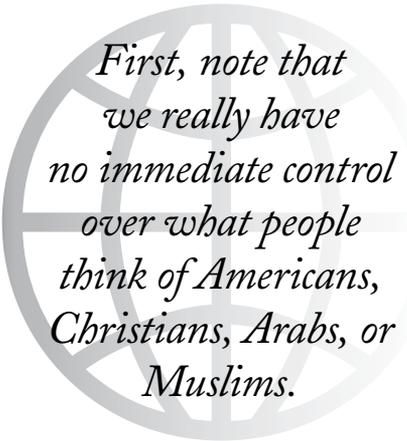
First, note that we really have no immediate control over what people think of Americans, Christians, Arabs or Muslims. Rather, common perspectives and actual usage is what determines the meaning of words in general, including these five. That stubborn fact will not easily change. For example, Mormons have been trying to live down earlier "revelations" about plural marriage. They are doing it. It is not easy. It is slow. To change the meaning of Mormon is to change the general understanding of the word precisely among non-Mormons.

For example, some words, like "gay," start out as normal, unloaded words and over time become culturally defined terms associated with something very specific, actually preventing the word to be used the way it once was. (A term is a specifically defined word.) Some words, like bathroom, men's room or restroom, may have originally been chosen for their pleasant connotations, but over time have gained an instant reference to something quite different, quite specific and not so pleasant. We can't change that. We can employ other words, but they too will become "degraded" in this sense.

Some words, in contrast, start out with derogatory implications, like gothic, Quaker, or Methodist, but over time have well earned a much more favorable meaning. The very word Christian is one of those. It began in the NT as a sneer word but became, under Constantine, a highly respectable term. The "Big Bang" theory was so named

out of derision by highly respected scientists, but now the phrase is well accepted and is no longer negative.

Two things, therefore, are clear. The meaning of words cannot normally be legislated. You may define them for yourself but you cannot mandate society to accept your personal definition. Then, cultural transitions of meaning are slow. Thus, while individuals have the power either to avoid or to choose the words they use, they cannot give them a personal meaning and expect to be understood. I came come up with an E0-E3 scale years ago and defined



*First, note that  
we really have  
no immediate control  
over what people  
think of Americans,  
Christians, Arabs, or  
Muslims.*

it in the way I wanted to. Early in that process I found that some other people decided to define the scale differently. I could not stop them. Thanks to the Perspectives course my original definitions are fairly widely used. Right now I am trying to define and name a "Fourth Era" in mission history. Although I was able to conceive and name the first three eras, and they are used in the Perspectives Study Program, I am aware of several others who have already given their own meaning to a fourth era—such as the challenge of cities, the emergence of non-Western missions, or the "Insider" approach, etc. I may be too late to make my idea stick! What I decide will in no case be used by everyone!

So much for theory. Take the word Californian. Being a Californian I grew up in a society predominantly hostile to Christianity. Example: In 1966 when we were home on furlough, my oldest daughter was in middle

school. At the beginning of the year an evening was planned to allow parents to visit each of their children's classrooms and their teachers, ten minutes per class. Entering the social studies classroom other parents and myself were told that the coming semester would focus on cultural features Americans have inherited from Europe (note Europe)—music, art, literature, ideas about government, legal structures, etc. The teacher then said, "Any questions?" I raised my hand and asked why religion was not one of the things we got from Europe. But before the teacher could open her mouth one parent instantly and angrily erupted, "All right, if you're going to teach Christianity you're going to have to teach Buddhism, too." Well, before I could even think, much less suggest, that, sure, do teach Buddhism if it came from Europe, the bell rang and the ten-minute period was over. Point: The word Christian is not a good word in much of California, and I can do little about it beyond behaving well.

Further: Years ago, living and going to school East of the Mississippi, I quite often chose not to volunteer the fact that I was brought up in California, at least not Southern California. Someone has observed: Ask a Midwesterner if he goes to church and he'll say, "Right over there, every Sunday." Ask people on the East Coast and they'll say "Yes, but let's see, ah, I am not sure of the name of it." Ask a Californian and the angry reply will be, "It's none of your business."

A parallel: Driving to Guatemala, down through the huge country of Mexico to our first missionary assignment, our station wagon packed to the gills with family and belongings, it began to sink in: "Guatemala is mainly a Catholic country. The border officials might be more friendly (and lenient) if I described myself as an anthropologist (my most advanced education) rather than as a missionary." But as we neared the Guatemalan border and reached for our passports I discovered with a shock that (in those days) passports

plainly stated what you were: mine said “missionary.”

Well, we got into Guatemala without incident. But a year and a half later I had to renew my passport. I traveled out of the mountains down the 150 miles to the capital city.

As I entered the U. S. Consulate it flitted through my mind that I could now change my status on my passport. I could call myself an anthropologist! But, wow, that thought lasted only a nanosecond! In my first 18 months in Guatemala, moving round among mountain villages of Native Americans, I had already been deeply impressed by what a very bad reputation sporadic graduate student anthropologists had gained among these people. Those students were taught the relativity of cultural norms, but apparently they were not taught that norms in any one rural society would usually be absolute. Their behavior even in short study visits was disreputable to these people, totally amoral. By contrast, these mountain people also were wise to what a missionary was. No category had higher respect. Even Evangelical “converts” were highly respected. There were already Evangelical fellowships in most mountain towns. And all those mountain towns—in those days almost solidly Catholic—deliberately chose “Evangelicos” for their town treasurers.

Thus, obviously what you call yourself is very crucial. But even more inevitable is what people will take you to be no matter what you try to call yourself. In many places around the world if you are known to be an American citizen you are assumed to be a Christian. And even if you try skillfully to masquerade as something else you cannot control their keen perceptions. “If it looks like a duck, walks like a duck, and quacks like a duck, it is a duck.” In Guatemala I could have called myself an anthropologist. But since I was inevitably known to be associated with missionaries the prior assumption of all these dear rural people was that I was, of course, a “misionero.” I could not

**B**y contrast, these mountain people also were wise to what a missionary was. No category had higher respect.

have resisted that assumption with any lasting success. In Guatemala I was, it turns out, under the circumstances (which I could not change), greatly blessed by being called a missionary—even though my entire upbringing in California would have urged that that was a strategic mistake.

One of our staff couples had lived for seven years in Turkey. They have been teaching English in a private school there owned by a super-observant group of Muslims. Before they were hired several faculty families were sent to visit them one evening in their home of eight very well-behaved children. All was well. Going out the door as they were leaving, one of the faculty wives was overheard saying “If these people are Americans, everything we have seen in the movies must be wrong.” That is how the meanings of words change.

As I have grown older, and have taught the history of missions for 40 years now, I have gained huge additional insight into the historic record of the successes and failures in the global missionary movement. What was that movement like? I know now more than ever that most of what donors think they know, and what especially secular people think they know, is an extensively distorted caricature.

When Rick Love, in a plane, sitting beside a Muslim, was glad the brochure (about the mission conference to which he was going) did not fall out into plain sight on his lap, I would like to know what the essence of the problem was. Was the brochure a great distortion of the true integrity of mission work? He felt he had given a favorable impression of himself. If the man discovered he was actually a “missionary,” what harm would that have done? Would that not have enabled the man to revise his undoubtedly negative concept of the word “missionary”?

It is like suggesting that we stop referring to the Bible as the Bible. That has been done for the benefit of teenagers. However, we also need to change people’s understandings of the Bible. We need to stop pulling fanciful things out of it, like the idea that the Earth is only 6,000 years old. We need to stop sending young people out as missionaries before they understand the lay of the land. What are 400 mission agencies doing in Afghanistan? Most may be trying to get the people to change the name of their religion. Instead of trying to change our name we need to stop trying to make them change their name. They are Muslims. We are Christians. Both of us need to be more fully surrendered to God and guided by Him. Coming to know Jesus is the best way that can happen!

In some countries it would really help if we were not known as Americans. So, we need to count on Canadians, Swedes, etc. But, wherever we are we need honestly to confess the failures of America, the shattering of families by our devouring school and work situations, the high divorce rate, prison rate, etc. We need to apologize and warn people in other countries not to follow our example in many spheres. Do we leave it to secular scholars like Rodney Stark and the foreign-born like Dinesh D’Souza and Vishal Mangalwadi to reform opinions? (Here I refer to *For the Glory of God, What’s So Great About America*, and *The Legacy of William Carey* respectively).

What is suggested here is neither easy nor quick. It will take a huge new campaign—which is already coming to pass. Not only are many Christian leaders thinking that it is time Evangelicals go easier in their legendary criticism of attempts to make “This World” better, but far more of our leaders seem eager to try to live up to the Lord’s Prayer—for the Kingdom to

come and His will to be done on earth. Missionaries, with slim Evangelical theological support, have done many truly magnificent things for the nations of the non-West. Their earnest, local good things deserve the backing of their enormously greater influence and resources today. It is no small thing that the entire history of philanthropy has soared above many of the lesser projects of the past. In all these new global initiatives more Christians need to show up. When that happens—and it is happening—we will redeem some of these words. Whether we do or don't it seems to me that we will have to live with American citizenship, Christian roots and missionary roles.

As a closing note, William Carey International University, which is so generously helping *IJFM*, in talks with accreditation officials had the hardest time convincing them that we, as acknowledged Christians, really had good thoughts for people around the world besides changing their ideas about religion. Why was that? They had not read Stephen Neill's magisterial *Colonialism and Christianity*. They did not know the marvelous record of the missionary movement. And, they had not even read D'Souza's ground breaking article "Two Cheers for Colonialism." (*The Chronicle of Higher Education*, 10 May 2002; available online). The sturdy truth is not a biased whitewash but is in our favor.

Check the *Reflections* section in this issue for a sweeping answer to the question of where we are (already) heading in missions. **IJFM**

## What about Colonialism?

**M**uch of the turmoil of thought in this issue of *IJFM* about the stained meanings of words is the result of the overall colonial phenomenon. Thus, there is an amazing amount of ill-will associated with the word *colonialism*. Simultaneously, there is an equally amazing confusion about what the word means. It has become a "scapegoat" word gathering up all those evils Western countries inflicted on the rest of the world in time past.

First, what people don't usually mean by colonialism is the kind of colonial occupation of the land of another people that is permanent, such as what took place in the USA, New Zealand, Australia, even England—the latter gets its very name from the colonies of Anglo-Saxons which took it over, permanently, in the vacuum left by the withdrawal of the Roman imperial legions. Later, Scandinavians (Vikings) *came to stay*, either directly or via French Normandy. This is the literal meaning of *colonialism*. Well, even California is very clearly a permanently colonized place.

Note that the English don't feel guilty for taking over a Celtic island. Few Portuguese feel guilty for settling permanently in what they call Brazil (which saw more than 3 million Native Americans in their area disappear). Not very many in the USA feel guilty about grabbing land from the Indians and killing off most of them (at least that's true for California). By contrast, everyone seems to feel guilty about those places in the non-Western world where Western powers went, built roads, schools, telecommunications, introduced agriculture, government, etc.—and then *left*! I am neither saying they did no harm nor that their attitudes toward nationals were constantly or even often positive and affirming. The Dutch, when forced out of Indonesia, furiously burned down everything they could. But they left behind 160,000 schools, an inter-island railway system,

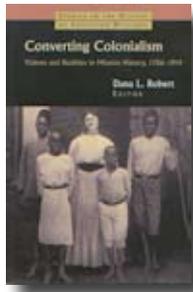
roads, and a government. It is obvious that Westerners have done less harm to indigenous peoples when they left after a time and did not stay.

Ironically, then, a less onerous meaning for *colonialism* is that which refers to imperial *temporary* occupation and rule, whether any colonies were established or not—like India, Indonesia, and most of the nation-states of Africa. In this case, where no permanent colonies were established, a more accurate term in place of *colonialism* would be *imperialism*, temporary imperialism.

But confusion still exists: Most people don't realize that the most serious exploitation of foreign peoples was going on in many places long before any Western political power had established a "colonial" government. And when those "colonial" extensions of European power (usually reluctant and expensive) were finally put in place, a purpose (resulting from missionary criticism) was to mitigate the cruelty of pre-colonial commercialism. The "imperialism" of a Western country throwing its governmental control over a foreign land was thus generally an improvement over earlier commercialism before (and often after) their withdrawal. And, the single most common source of complaints about unregulated commercial mistreatments of native peoples was the ever present missionary.

Two books in this sphere are outstanding. One is *Colonialism and Christian Missions* by Stephen Neill, possibly the most erudite missionary of all time. It was published in 1966 in the aftermath of WWII, when during the 25 years from 1945–1969 all the world's (non-colonial) Western empires were collapsing or in the process of collapsing. (My own little book, *The Twenty-Five Unbelievable Years* covers that astounding period when everyone assumed that the withdrawal of the colonial power

spelled the inevitable demise of the church—it was usually the opposite.)



Now a very different book, published on January 30, 2008, *Converting Colonialism: Visions and Realities in Mission History, 1706-1914*. It

looks back 50 years later than Neill, but at events even earlier. It is a careful collection by professor Dana Robert of chapters written by truly outstanding scholars, many of them non-Western. Her own lengthy introduction is a masterpiece. The curious title does not imply that colonialism was a converting force, though the introduction of Western civilization was extensively that. Neither is this a book setting out to “convert” people’s views of colonialism, though it does that to some extent. No, rather the title intends to describe the many different ways in which the non-Western

**T**he single most common source of complaints about unregulated commercial mistreatments of native peoples was the ever-present missionary.

victims, recipients, beneficiaries of colonial powers—those very people temporarily exposed to colonial rule—were able to convert and exploit colonialism for their own benefit! She includes the missionary movement itself as a mitigation and modification of colonialism. But, don’t expect to read about post-colonial influences. As the subtitle announces, the penetrating rays of light represented by these chapters focus primarily on the 1706-1914 period, long before those Western empires began to war at home and give up abroad.

A brief, fascinating and inevitably controversial article is “Two Cheers for Colonialism” (*The Chronicle of Higher Education*, 10 May 2002; available online). In this article Stanford professor, Dinesh D’Souza arrestingly and eloquently describes the difference between the very negative outlook

toward colonialism of his grandfather, who lived under the British colonial government, and his own, derived from growing up in an India vastly different due precisely to that earlier period. He says he can’t give three cheers but can muster two. When this article first appeared there were howls of outrage by wonderfully sensitive Americans who, however, are not talking about giving America back to the Native Americans. **IJFM**

**DIVERSIFIED**  
THEOLOGICAL EDUCATION  
Equipping All God's People

ROSS KINSLER, EDITOR  
Foreword by ARCHBISHOP DESMOND TUTU

New from  **wciu**  
Press

**Diversified Theological Education:  
Equipping All God's People**

Ross Kinsler, ed.  
ISBN: 978-0-86585-004-0  
Retail: \$19.95 | WCL Price: \$17.96 | 3 or more: \$15.96

The central concern of Diversified Theological Education, which includes Theological Education by Extension, is access. TEE and DTE models have made enormous progress in the urgent task of equipping all God's people for ministry. Ross Kinsler has compiled in this anthology important case studies of the diverse means of contemporary theological education.

Available through  
**www.missionbooks.org • 1-800-MISSION**