



[Home](#) | [Current Issue](#) | [Editorial Board](#) | [Instructions for Authors](#) | [Contact](#)

Lethbridge Undergraduate Research Journal
ISSN 1718-8482

Wild and Ferocious: Language and Colonialism in Christianity Studies

Robert Volpicelli
Ithaca College
Ithaca, New York, USA

Citation:

Robert Volpicelli: Wild and Ferocious: Language and Colonialism in Christianity Studies . *Lethbridge Undergraduate Research Journal*. 2009. Volume 4 Number 1.

Abstract

Post-colonial studies have shown many deficiencies in our modern scholarship. Similarly, this paper will attempt to illustrate that colonization has not been fully evaluated in the arena of Christian studies. Deconstructing the language used in a contemporary text book will show that the relationship between the Early Medieval Christian missionary movements and the Germanic Tribes is, in its essence, a colonial relationship. However, there is little acknowledgement of the negative consequences of the early missionary movements. We can then evaluate other text books in light of the same criteria used, supporting the thesis of needing to reevaluate the work done in this field. Finally, the questions left are personal ones that ask us to consider whether the mental framing surrounding the unrecognized acts of Early Christian missionaries are an implicit critique of our own biases as academics, perhaps not yet reconciled with our colonial heritage.

Ralph Keen's *The Christian Tradition* is well contoured and well informed. In many ways, his book stands as a benchmark for introductions to Christianity studies for its clarity and approachable style—his writing, often reflects glimpses of a personality behind the text, bringing a level of humanity to our human inquiries. Yet, however thoughtful I find Keen's work in animating the cultural history of Christianity, I am nevertheless struck by something I will describe as a deep-seated and ingrained assumption, one that stretches far beyond Keen's own scholarly maintenance of objectivity. Throughout the course of reading his introduction to the Christian religion, I was, multiple times, halted by the language which Keen uses to depict a cultural encounter between the Early Christian missionaries and the peoples of Western Europe. Seemingly an event that belongs exclusively to the past, what Keen describes is to be considered an exemplary model for the colonial relationship; but, as such, it remains largely unrecognized. Deconstructing such a relationship means confronting our transformative capabilities and our imaginations on an individual level, but a sole indictment Keen would certainly be unfair and would achieve little. Although I am using his work as a space for evaluation and meditation, many of the same critiques can be applied elsewhere. Discovering some of the nuances of colonization leads me to emphasize that we are all readers and writers of a certain script, a script in which we have the power to choose to either enslave or liberate.

Over the last four decades, post-colonial theories have spanned many of our major disciplines, their faces in academia, ever-changing and multifaceted. And yet any effort to evaluate colonialism, in whatever form we may encounter it, remains singular in a goal which we can find articulated by Bill Ashcroft: to make increasingly "clear the nature and impact of inherited power relations, and their continuing effects on modern global culture" (Ashcroft 1). In aspiring to understand colonization in the way Ashcroft describes it, we must come to terms with the fact that the "enemy," to use the phrasing of the seminal Ashis Nandy, is an "intimate" one. The apparatus of colonization has not only been the manifestations of external forces just as it has not always been overtly political. The weapons of the colonizer, as Nandy implies, are much more discrete and also dearer to us than we've ever realized. Tzvetan Todorov, in his *The Conquest of America*, reminds us that it is *language* that has always been a steadfast companion to empire. Ashcroft similarly adds that "Post-colonial studies are particularly sensitive to language, since language has itself played such a leading role in colonization" (Ashcroft 2). My analysis, then, is a critical look at the use of language in Christianity studies and how it relates to the context of colonialism. The linguistic assumption present in these texts is one that many of us make; and, it is an issue at the heart of the colonial relationship: the identification of a "Self," with which we associate, and the estrangement of an "Other," of whom we are ignorant.

The turn of the 7th Century would prove to be a defining moment for Christianity and effectually led to changes for the entirety of the Western world. The emergence of the papacy began in 590, under the nascent leadership of Gregory I, "later also known as Gregory the Great" (Keen 83). With newfound and ever-increasing unification, the Holy Roman Empire was spreading, and its tour de force became the church's ability to extend its reach with a level of efficacy that is quite unprecedented. As Keen says, "The beginnings of this expansion are obscure" (Keen 83), however, it seems undeniable that the gathering and centralizing of power in the early Christian Church would be analogous to a rising penchant for missionary activity. Without sword or shield, the Church began to grow into a rather reluctant empire compared with war-mongering empires of other epochs; its beginnings could almost be described as humble. It wasn't until a "band of monks, led by one later known as St. Augustine of Canterbury, arrived in England in 597" (Keen 83) that the world would truly begin to be shaped by the hands of Christianity.

In Keen's work, we are textually introduced to the different tribes of England (the Angles, the Saxons, and other Germanic tribes) in a way that bears an essential similarity to the manner those who were traversing there for the first time must first experienced. Approaching the shores of a new land (by boat or by turning the page), we see, off in the distance, the archetypal "barbarians." (Appositely, the classification of "barbarian" has always been intrinsically linked to language in the sense that it meant if we chance upon people who are not speaking *our* language they must not be speaking at all). It is "the first, spontaneous reaction with regard to a stranger," Todorov has pointed out, "to imagine him as inferior, since he is different from us: this is not even a man, or if he is one, an inferior barbarian" (Todorov 76). Thus, we find one of the first and *only* things Keen says about tribal culture is that "The Roman monks expected to find wild and ferocious people—an expectation that was at least partly confirmed" (Keen 83). At this point, the only other characteristics Keen can attribute to the pagans which makes them "wild" and "ferocious" are his associations of "political disarray" and "intermittent conflict" (Keen 83). We can note that either of these associations also seems applicable to the Christian community of that time, having just gone through their own political upheavals and acknowledging that the bloody Crusades loom on the horizon. It would seem that the expectations of finding feral natives for both the traveler and the author have been determined well in advance.

But what remains more troubling than any lack of desire to know the other in attempts to salvage him from estrangement, is an association that Keen establishes with the Christian missionaries, sympathizing with them through his language. He describes the missionaries as "dedicated men"; and, apparently, the only consequences of mission activity he finds were benefits that resulted because of it: "establishing monasteries throughout present-day Germany and in the process creating centers for learning and piety" (Keen 86). But we can quickly turn to a damning example of Keen's Christian sympathies and pagan "othering" as he writes about the life of the missionary known as Boniface. He says:

"Alas," Boniface came to an unfortunate end. This extraordinary man, who had established Roman Christianity in Germany . . . died in the Frisian town of Dokkum at the hands of a pagan mob . . . He quickly became regarded as one of the great martyrs of northern Europe. (Keen 87)

Even if we can ignore Keen's exclusion of any reason as to why the German natives might have disliked Boniface, we can still see a general polarity being created. Keen calls Boniface "extraordinary," which shares in the common Christian interpretation of the man as a "great martyr" (The "Alas" still baffles me. Does it express regret?). Here, the pagans are, without question, a "mob," which, unless we excuse its negative connotations, *limits* them to an ethos of general unruly and perhaps even unmoral behavior. In another example, Keen says:

"To persuade the native Christians that obedience to the papacy was the only valid form of Christian practice, and to convince the pagans that this imported tradition, Christianity, was superior to their own religious traditions, would have been daunting for any missionary" (Keen 120).

Again, we experience something that is quite paradoxical. Although his description overwhelmingly evokes the tyrannical nature of the Christian mission, the fervor which forced inferiority upon other cultures and the will to exclude culture from even being "valid," Keen's language turns. At the end, he does not ask us to relate to the harshness of the Early Christians, but instead, asks us to understand how "daunting" this challenge would have been to a missionary.

Yet, let's become more focused in deconstructing the tensions in Keen's work. In what I'd like to label as the "language of absence," Christianity studies have not only been dismissive of Christian imperialism, but, in a way, participate in its form. That is, in describing the tribes people, Keen is extremely conscious of what the other "lacks." He uses, almost exclusively, negative terms to describe them. "Literacy, knowledge of the international language Latin, familiarity through their monastic studies with the classical tradition, and a knowledge of law, both Roman and ecclesiastical," Keen says, "all of these were essential components of a stable society. All were absent among the migratory tribes" (Keen 125). Colonizers throughout history have been more than willing to emphasize, by way of justification, what the people they oppress are lacking: traditionally the "absence of writing, of money, of garments" (Todorov 156). But what they neglect, Todorov delineates, is what is *present*, and by doing so they are negating the role of certain aspects of culture that are different than their own: "The presence of oral traditions instead of written laws, of images instead of writing, indicates that of a different role has developed, on either side, upon presence and absence in general" (Todorov 156). In the shadow of every absence—the practices of orality, barter systems, and nudity—is a function that is unfamiliar to the colonizer, but the validity of these systems is diminished, as it is in Christian studies, as trivialized and uncomplicated absence.

On an extremely deep level, the language of absence is an attempt to rationalize the eradication of cultural difference. For example, Keen adds, "The populations in the wilderness craved connections to Roman civilization, a system of laws and culture that promised stability and refinement" (Keen 85); and, it "offered a stability sorely needed by the northern peoples; and there can be little question that the missionaries who brought the Christian religion to these regions were aware of this need" (Keen 85). "Craved," "sorely needed," these are heavy assumptions deduced from a situation already claimed as obscure and opaque. I wonder whether this does not have something to do with the assumptions we carry about the superiority of our own cultures. Is it really unreasonable to think that the culture of migratory tribes developed *with* laws, refinements, and classical traditions of their own?

What we are seeing enacted, in history and the subtext of written history, is what Todorov calls a "double movement." Within the terms of a double movement exists "only two possible, and complimentary, forms of behavior" (Todorov 42): it is to acknowledge culture, but to refuse to believe it is different from your own, or to acknowledge its difference but to refuse to even admit it is culture. What we find in the instance of a language of absence is the later of the two forms, the colonizer recognizes the difference (i.e.; it lacked *their* writing and *their* law), but refuses to acknowledge it as a viable culture. Ultimately, the double movement culminates in the colonizer seeing the others "not only as equals, but also identical, and this behavior leads to assimilationism, the projection of his own values on the others." In this equation, "What is denied is the existence of a human substance truly other, something capable of being not merely an imperfect state of oneself" (Todorov 42).

We can compare this to what Keen says about the Christian missionaries, seeing this double movement exists even in his description, but, of course, as unconscious. What he is describing is the assimilationism which gives the illusion of the allowance of difference, but in all reality, all real differences are being negated by the colonizer. He says, there was a "degree and form of adaptation to local customs that were permitted without giving up the distinctive elements of Catholic Christianity" (Keen 83). How is this not viewed as a highly problematic purport? The level of "permission" is confined to the "distinctive elements" of a Christian form. As long as the "local customs" do not fall outside of the Christian value set they are allowed, but any true difference is surly denied; hence, it is assimilation instead of Keen's "adaptation." As long as the colonizer identifies the colonized as *a person*, he also identifying him as an intrinsically *Christian person*; and thus, it is more likely that the Christian missionaries allowed the proliferation of customs that they saw as unconscious or typologically Christian ones, rather than seeing any merit in the actions of the other.

One of the most potent constituents of colonization tends to be the "finalist strategy," where, in effect, "the ultimate meaning is given from the start (this is Christian doctrine); what is sought is the path linking the initial meaning (the apparent signification of the words of the biblical text) with its ultimate meaning" (Todorov 17). This means that the "decisive argument" of hermeneutical behavior to the colonizing Christians was "an argument of authority and not experience" (Todorov 17). Keen's description of the time period supports the presence of a finalist strategy. First, it is enabled by a sense of power. Keen denotes that this is an era when the "Bishop of Rome began to exert a central administrative authority—as opposed to a spiritual authority" (Keen 82-83). As the papacy accrued political power, it was able to forcibly assert its doctrines on other cultures, or, as Keen puts it, "The stronger the 'hub,' the farther the 'spokes' could extend into untamed regions" (Keen 85). And, in what Keen calls "early cultural conflict," we can see the characteristics of the finalist strategy that limit other interpretations of scripture. In one example, he says, "one is struck by the persuasiveness of Coleman's argument for preserving the tradition of the ancestors [speaking of the Celts]. But Wilfrid argued that St. Peter, who supposedly held the keys to the kingdom of Heaven, was always correct" (122).

As "always correct," those propagating Christian doctrine have been continuously justified to "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations" (Matthew 28:19), finding support in tenets considered to be universal. But any system which "seeks to be universal," Todorov prompts, "is thereby intolerant" (Todorov 105), asking us to consider how universalisms warrant eradicating difference. He further considers the Christian egalitarianism to be a facilitator of colonization: to "clearly indicate in what sense this egalitarianism of the early Christians is to be understood: Christianity does not combat inequalities; but it declares them irrelevant with regard to the unity of all in Christ" (Todorov 106-107). When we place this claim in perspective, Todorov is exhorting that we bear witness to a system that contains no tolerance for outliers. It is a system in which *there can be no other*. In this respect, "the prejudice of equality," Todorov says, "is a still greater one, for it consists in identifying the other purely and simply with one's own 'ego ideal'" (Todorov 165).

Perhaps what we should be considering is how the pagan lack of universalisms might have contributed to their downfall, a "fatal broad-mindedness during religious conflicts" (Todorov 105). The pagans, rather than having one all-powerful and omniscient God, had a world comprised of many gods; and, it is likely that many, considering how many pagan tribes willingly accepted Christianity, attempted to "integrate the Christian god into their own pantheon, as one divinity among other" (Todorov 106). In interacting with a universal monotheism, this could have served as the deafening blow in this cultural conflict because, simply, "intransigence has always defeated tolerance" (Todorov 106).

In the forum of Christianity studies, the language used by Keen is in no way exclusive. In many texts, the recounting of the cultural encounter between the Christians and Germanic tribes is idealized, perhaps even romanticized, and spoken about with tinges of ethnocentricity. In the second, 1998 edition of *Christianity: A Social and Cultural History*, the authors have a tendency to see Christianity solely as a force of good: In the "new society" that was created (talking about the conversion of tribal cultures), "The most influential" element was "Christianity, which molded divergent cultural elements and offered a common world view and a model for behavior" (Kee 137). Saying, "a model for behavior," shows implicit value judgments; but, I find more disconcerting the lack of concern for the "molding" of divergent cultural elements. We almost always find a placid tone, even when the Christian Church "absorbs" a culture, "making it its own" (Kee 147), suggesting airs of cultural relativism. Most often, it becomes a question of subtitles and some of the most problematic phrases can be easily overlooked. In explaining the "Central Expression of Medieval Life," the authors say many cultures "gradually embraced" (Kee 147) Roman Christianity. Is there something fundamentally problematic about the proposing of gradual embracement? The word embrace implies enthusiasm and willfulness, the word gradual implies hesitation or even trepidation. Might this make us wary?

Though, if some signs are faint and require us to be astute observers, others can be glaring. In Bradley and David Nystrom's 2004 edition of *The History of Christianity: An Introduction*, there is a particularly disturbing depiction of a figure whom we are already familiar with, Boniface. Similar to Keen, the Nystroms revere Boniface's "courage," saying he "preached fearlessly among pagan Frisians, Bavarians, Thuringians, and Saxons" (Nystrom 114); but the ensuing details suggest more indifference than courage, more ignorance than any qualities to be revered. They say, "When this 'Apostle of Germany' found that thousands worshiped a sacred Oak of Thor at Geismar in Hesse, he took an axe and began to cut it down" (Nystrom 114). Such a bold declaration of power and disregard for cultural "divergence" is disturbing, yet the only commentary we find is supporting a Christian-centric view, that Boniface is simply a "doer of good" (Nystrom 114).

After all of this, if the question of the other in Christian studies seems minor, if the tensions I have picked up on seem to be merely "aesthetic," then we have underestimated the power of such aesthetic denotations in excusing and validating atrocity. What began in the 7th Century, a division between the Christian "Self" and the pagan "Other," had, in the 15th

Century, turned blatantly ugly. A papal bull from 1455 illustrates said ugliness in underscoring a “discovery principle” (d’Errico) that, when looking back on the dynamics of the earlier pagan relationship, is just an escalated version of what Keen was describing:

[W]e bestow suitable favors and special graces on those Catholic kings and princes, ... athletes and intrepid champions of the Christian faith... to invade, search out, capture, vanquish, and subdue all Saracens and pagans whatsoever, and other enemies of Christ wheresoever placed, and... to reduce their persons to perpetual slavery, and to apply and appropriate... possessions, and goods, and to convert them to ... their use and profit...(d’Errico)

Horrifying, yes, but such a declaration of human enslavement and cultural genocide emphasizes the need to further understand the dynamics between the Early Christians and pagan cultures, which is, perhaps, the very beginning of a colonial and imperial relationship; and, as such, might unlock valuable ways of understanding some of humanity’s bleakest moments

Because Christianity is a very important part of our present-day world it seems undeniably important that we fully understand its past. And yet, because of the very fact that the world we live in is so often a *Christian* one, our biases can make it hard to see what is behind the many veils of history. It remains that the responsibility of yearning toward a post-colonial world, one in which we can disassemble the power relationships that have plagued America and Western Europe, rests on our scholarship’s ability to more fully and honestly experience the past. Post-Colonial theory has presented us with an outlet for reclaiming such a past rather than repressing its existence and has given us the capability to re-imagine what is to come. Christianity studies play as much of a leading role in such a struggle as any discipline and must begin pursuing a new tenet, one proposed by Todorov, in which exploring, rather than disregarding, the other becomes an invaluable way of learn about the self: “History can be exemplary for us because it permits us to reflect upon ourselves, to discover resemblances as well as differences: once again self-knowledge develops through knowledge of the Other” (Todorov 254).

About the Author

Robert Volpicelli is senior earning a B.A. in English from Ithaca College, in Ithaca, New York. He also has a minor in Religious Studies and Honors. His interests and areas of studies include: Modernist Literature, Modernism, Post-Modernism, Post-Colonial theory, Intellectual History and Mythology. He would like to thank faculty member Rachel Wagner for assistance on this research paper.

References

- Ashcroft, Bill. *Key Concepts in Post-Colonial Studies*. London, GBR: Routledge, 1998
- D’Errico, Peter. “John Marshall: Indian Lover?”. *Journal of the West* 39.3 (Summer 2000). 26 Apr. 2008
[\[www.umass.edu/legal/derrico/mars ... \]](http://www.umass.edu/legal/derrico/mars...) .
- Gonzales, Justo L. *The Story of Christianity: The Early Church to the Dawn of the Reformation*. San Francisco: Harper and Row Publisher, 1984.
- Kee, Howard Clark, et al. *Christianity: A Social and Cultural History*. Upper Saddle River: Prentice Hall, 1998.
- Keen, Ralph. *The Christian Tradition*. Upper Saddle River: Prentice Hall, Inc., 2004.
- Nandy, Ashis. *The Intimate Enemy*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005.
- Nystrom, Bradley P. *The History of Christianity: An introduction*. New York: McGraw-Hill, 2004.
- Todorov, Tzvetan. *The Conquest of America: The Question of the Other*. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1982.