

The 2020 Census Part II: The Politics of Belonging

On June 27, 2019 the United States Supreme Court determined in the case of the *Department of Commerce v. New York* that the Trump administration cannot reinstate a citizenship question asking households about their citizenship status on the 2020 census questionnaire.

The Census Act requires the Secretary of Commerce to conduct a census every 10 years in order to “apportion the members of the House of Representatives among the States.” The census is used for a number of purposes. For instance, it is used by Congress and the Federal government to draw up electoral districts and to help them allocate funds for social services.

The Trump administration presented evidence that the citizenship question has been included on the census questionnaire in the past, specifically from 1820 to 1950, and that including such a question in the 2020 census represents a return to the “traditional status quo.” However, according to historians, although a citizenship question has been included in the past, such a question was limited to only some households and it did not include the question on a universal as was proposed on the 2020 census.

The court ultimately ruled against the Trump administration’s citizenship question on administrative and procedural grounds. They firmly rejected Secretary of Commerce Wilbur Ross’ explanation that the citizenship question would help the Department of Justice better enforce the Voting Rights Act. Furthermore, the court stated that the Secretary’s rationale for the question was for some other unnamed goal. While the Court did not discuss this at length, many presume that the question preemptively seeks to fragment and destabilize immigrant communities who tend to vote Democratic.

Although the Court rejected the Secretary’s justification, it did not exclude the question altogether leaving an open door for other reasons to still include the question. Yesterday, Trump announced that he will drop his efforts to include the question in the 2020 census and will alternatively procure the citizenship data using existing records. But his administration has instructed “the Commerce Secretary to consider beginning the process of including the question on the 2030 census count.”

The Politics of Belonging

Data collected by the Census Bureau shows that minority and immigrant communities are less likely to respond to census questionnaires for fear the information will be used against them and their families. The citizenship question in particular solidifies this fear. If immigrant communities and communities of color refuse to fill out the census this will produce less accurate census data along with an undercount of the population. This could result in the defunding of key social services in those communities, and even the loss of seats in the House of Representatives.

Contrary to the justification given by Secretary Ross, such a question would

adversely undermine the communities the Voting Rights Act protects. While the Trump administration will not be able to include the question in 2020, Trump's politicizing of the census may still deter participation in the census.

The public discourse surrounding this case highlights a pertinent question shadowing the country since 2016 (and arguably since the colonization of the Americas): *who belongs?*

True Belonging

Citizenship is an exercise in community creation. It's the government's way of determining who belongs where, and with whom. In a world changing so rapidly, I couldn't help but ask what does it mean to belong? Where do I belong as a Christ follower? And where does the Church belong in today's society?

Brené Brown says this about belonging in her book *The Gifts of Imperfection: Belonging is the innate human desire to be part of something larger than us. Because this yearning is so primal, we often try to acquire it by fitting in and by seeking approval, which are not only hollow substitutes for belonging, but often barriers to it. Because true belonging only happens when we present our authentic, imperfect selves to the world, our sense of belonging can never be greater than our level of self-acceptance.*

History shows that the question of belonging has confounded humanity since Genesis. We have always attempted to create arbitrary barriers between one another in order to make sense of our imperfect nature. To do this we created rule-based cultures and societies, and have sought to classify others based on our differences. But the mission of Christ and the early Church was to redefine what it means to belong. In the New Testament, we see Christ standing firm against the political actors of that day by intentionally including those persons and groups considered undesirable and immoral by the religious and political leaders of the time.

This means that true belonging looks like a Church having the courage to create spaces of acceptance, love, and belonging for all people despite their background. It means everyone is welcome and no one, not even the Church, has to sacrifice its authenticity or who they are.

Identity Crisis

It's when the Church is preoccupied with protecting its identity that she alienates the very people Christ has called her to connect with, love, and protect. By taking a count (or a census if you will) of who and what does or does not belong churches produce a fragmented, divisive, and compassionless body of believers.

We cannot return to the "traditional status quo." In order to find and practice true belonging in Christ, the Church must address the uncomfortable questions people are wrestling with today. We must be willing to dialogue about what it means to open ourselves up to those in the LGBTQIA+ community. How can we say we believe in the belonging Christ demonstrated when we refuse to address the injustices of structural racism and bigotry within and outside the church? Furthermore, true belonging means trusting in the call and leading of the Holy Spirit over women ministers.

Can the Church reconcile standing true to her message if she remains

exclusive, protectionist, and divisive? How can we as believers truly “seek the lost” when we create arbitrary justifications for excluding anyone who challenges our preconceived ideas about who should and should not have access to experiencing God’s grace? Is not everyone deserving of hearing and experiencing the grace that Christ freely extends?

It’s time we stop trying to determine the spiritual citizenship of others, and start demonstrating the kind of self-sacrificing, all-inclusive belonging that Christ practiced when He was on Earth.

The 2020 Census Part I: Bleaching MENA’S and the Bible

“I’m shouting into this void saying that we’re not white and no one is listening.” ~ David Shams

Like Michael Myers of the *Halloween* movie franchise, the proposed 2020 Census question refuses to die. Having lost the 2020 battle, the Trump administration is still considering inserting the question into the 2030 census. This citizenship question stalks immigrant populations threatening to reallocate billions of federal dollars and to redistrict several congressional seats. However, that’s not the only controversial part of the Census. Today, this weighty instrument that once listed “Hindu” as a race needs careful reexamination.

Consider this interesting box on the Census form. Under the question of race, citizens are asked to state what kind of “White, Black, or American Indian” they identify as. Examples under “White” include German and Irish, which one would expect. However, other choices now include “Lebanese and Egyptian.” The Census website further defines “White” as “A person having origins in any of the *original peoples* [emphasis added] of Europe, the Middle East, or North Africa.”

Voices from Within the MENA Veil – Stripped, Erased...Bleached

Many American’s whose ancestry and origins are from the Middle East and Northern Africa find this new racial classification of “White” insulting and culturally dismissive. Laura Doan in an article for *The Daily Texan* cites that “many MENA (Middle Eastern and North African) people don’t have a white identity, but they are defined as white by the U.S. Census Bureau and almost every college application.” Here are how some MENA Americans are responding to this classification.

It was such a weird thing to grow up and be told, “You should be proud to be Jordanian. You should be proud of where you come from.” None of these forms are allowing me to feel proud of it, because I’m just white according to them.”

Sarah Shabbar

Léa Sleiman ’22, a Lebanese student from Beirut...has always embraced her Lebanese heritage...However, when Sleiman arrived in the U.S., she began to experience an identity crisis. “Because my ethnicity and culture were not

recognized in America, I was stripped [of] my identity."

Leen Rhazi

I'm shouting into this void saying that we're not white and no one is listening.

David Shams

I am a brown person. How do I know?...When it's dark outside and I'm walking by myself, white people sometimes cross the street to avoid passing me...My origins are from Egypt. Every day, I live my life in America as a brown person. Defining me as white and likening me to a European, as the census does, is absurd...to compel everyone from the Middle East and North Africa to select "white" on the census is to force us to participate in our own official erasure.

Moustafa Bayoumi

As someone who is half European and half Syrian, I can assure you that white and Middle Eastern are two very distinct races, holding different levels of esteem within American society, and should thus be listed as two separate options on all demographic surveys.

Chloe A. Shawah

It's another erasure of both Middle Eastern and North African people.

Persis Karim

Bleaching the Bible

There is something dangerous about the systematic whitening of the Middle East and North Africa through the 2020 census. Not only does it rob MENA Americans of their culture and heritage, but it also perpetuates this misrepresentation of biblical figures as "white" and/or European.

If you open Genesis 2:14 with one hand and scan the globe with the other, it's easy to see that the Euphrates River flows through Turkey, Syria, and Iraq. It's also easy to surmise that the river Gihon "which goes around the whole land of Cush" (Gen. 2:13) is now known as the Nile River, which flows through Sudan and Egypt. This proves that Adam and Eve's home was most likely close to the intersection of North Africa and Southwest Asia.

As we keep reading, we see that Moses and Paul resembled Egyptians, not Scandinavians (Ex. 2:15-19; Acts 21:37-38). They, like Moustafa Bayoumi, were people of color. Since they are the premier literary and theological contributors of the Old and New Testaments (respectively), the accuracy of their cultural and racial identity is imperative.

In a world where pseudo-scientists and philosophers have determined that whiteness is a superior racial classification, it was only a matter of time before artists and historians began bleaching these biblical figures. This is why in most art depicting the first couple their complexion is pale as though they lived near the Thames or Volga Rivers. It is why the premier contributors of Scripture, Moses and Paul, are portrayed as European philosophers. The agenda of colonialism required these authority figures to be portrayed as White.

But what about Jesus? As Dr. William Barber II would say, he was "a brown-skinned Palestinian Jew." Jesus' family actually lived as refugees in Egypt without arousing unwanted attention. This fact alone makes it clear that historically Jesus was a person of color.

The Case of the Great White Washing

Which means that the greatest act of cultural appropriation in history is the white washing of the Biblical world. Before black-faced comedy and red-skinned mascots, racist theologians vandalized the Bible invalidating every person of color within it by attributing them with a white face. For 500 years, European artists have whitewashed the biblical cast with paintbrushes. And today, politicians continue trying to bleach them with questionnaires like the one that appear in the 2020 census.

To preach the superiority of the European race *and* the Bible, colonizers gentrified North Africa and Southwest Asia. With the goal of subduing black and brown minds, white supremacists can't promote a Bible full of melanin rich characters as it contradicts their scientific and philosophical beliefs. These kind of intentional acts of bleaching have led many to dismiss Christianity and agree with Malcolm X:

The whole church structure in this country is white nationalism, you go inside a white church – that's what they're preaching, white nationalism. They got Jesus white, Mary white, God white, everybody white – that's white nationalism...Don't join any church where white nationalism is preached. Why, you can go to a Negro church and be exposed to white nationalism. 'Cause...when you walk in a Negro church and see a white Jesus and a white Mary and some white angels, that Negro church is preaching white nationalism.

Abandon or Awaken?

Does this mean we should abandon the Bible? Who gives up a treasure so valuable that thieves smuggle and disguise it for centuries? Let's not remove the Bible from our lives; let's remaster its scenes. We might not be able to repaint the Sistine Chapel, but we can reread the Bible with corrective lenses. Just as filmmakers remaster Black and White movies to add vibrant colors in places where there was only grey, our imaginations can restore the bleached passages of Scripture. When we do this, we'll see a Jesus who, as Nathan Brown puts it in his book *For the Least of These*:

was a refugee, escaping across a border under cover of darkness, then seeking to build a new life in a foreign country...Jesus knew what it was like to live on the margins of society, under the constant threat of violence...[he] lived with the vulnerabilities of poverty...As a teacher who did not fit in with the dominant religious culture, he knew what it was to be persecuted. As a victim of the violent and powerful, Jesus experienced the worst of human injustice, torture, and brutality; he was left a horrifically disfigured body barely recognizable to his human family.

Jesus subjected himself to these injustices in order to break down the "middle wall" separating people from God and each other. This makes it possible for us all to be fellow citizens in the household of God (Eph. 2:11-19).