

Editorial Reflections

The Unfortunate Unmarketability of “Unincorporable”

—by Brad Gill

Reading Dave Datema’s article on the history and development of the term “unreached” reminds me of a word my son likes to throw around these days: disambiguate. The term “unreached” seems to immediately carry a simple meaning when applied to an “unreached people,” and this assumed understanding has helped mobilize people and churches globally for over four decades. But ambiguities arise when we apply the term demographically in frontier mission, and we’re indebted to Datema for offering a review of how missiologists have negotiated its range of meanings and strategic application.

More recently, it’s mission demographers who are trying to disambiguate “unreached.” Its imprecision became evident when they applied it to the populations of post-Christian Europe. Due to lower statistical levels in people professing the Christian faith (i.e., less than 5% Christian or 2% evangelical), these populations of an old and receding Christendom appear to warrant the label “unreached.” That inclusion creates one large undifferentiated pool of unreached peoples that would now stretch from Asia into Europe. This particular application of “unreached” exposes the insufficiency of the term once again.

Datema reminds us that at least two preeminent missiologists, David Barrett and Ralph Winter, were demonstrably uncomfortable with “unreached,” and both insisted on their own conceptual grid as this term emerged in missiological parlance. They recognized its inevitable use in the years following Lausanne ’74, but both would debate its meaning and application. As far as David Barrett’s understanding of “unreached” and how he understood a population being 20% evangelized, we must defer to Gina Zurlo of the Center for the Study of Global Christianity.¹ However, Datema reminds us that Winter originally mused about other terms that might communicate more clearly the missiological challenge that confronted us among unreached peoples.

Unincorporable

Datema reviews how Winter partnered with Koch to advance the more strategic term “unimax” peoples after the Chicago meeting in 1982 (p. 55). Winter thought perhaps a new term would help clarify the missiological task among the unreached.

A unimax people is the maximum sized group sufficiently unified to be the target of a single people movement to Christ, where “unified” refers to the fact that there are no significant barriers of either understanding or acceptance to stop the spread of the gospel.²

Winter and Koch recognized that beyond language there were other factors like religion, class distinctions, education, political and ideological convictions that create sociocultural boundaries. These unimax realities create a kind of people group that requires a more strategic term.

But Datema reminds us that Winter had earlier contemplated the term “unincorporable.” It didn’t pass the test of marketability and lacked the impact and apparent significance of a term like “unreached.” Some people may take umbrage with this term, just as some did with the homogenous unit principle, for reflecting what they perceive to be a latent racism in Frontier Missiology. I hope to lay that response to rest in these paragraphs. Datema quotes Winter’s brainstorming on this term unincorporable, and I think it may disambiguate the missiological cloud that has surrounded unreached peoples:

It is much more important to stress the presence or the absence of some aspect of the church in its organized form than to try to grapple with statistics that ultimately rest upon the presence or absence of the gospel in an individual’s heart. It is not only easier to verify the existence of the visible church, it is also strategically very important in missionary activity for church planting to exist as a tangible goal. We know that where there is no determined stress upon founding an organized fellowship of worshipping believers, a great deal of evangelism fails to produce long term results, fails to start a beachhead that will grow by itself. Thus, for both spiritual and practical reasons, I would be much more pleased to talk about the presence of a church allowing people to be *incorporated*, or the absence of a church leaving people *unincorporable* instead of *unreached*. I feel it would be better to try to observe, not whether people are “saved” or not or somehow “reached” or not, but first whether an individual has been incorporated in a believing fellowship or not, and secondly, if a person is not incorporated, does he have the opportunity *within his cultural tradition* to be so incorporated.³

I WOULD BE MUCH MORE PLEASED to talk about the presence of a church allowing people to be incorporated, or the absence of a church leaving people unincorporable instead of unreached. (Ralph Winter)

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Winter was consistent in calling attention to a single missiological issue at stake in any plan for world evangelization: the ability or inability for the church to *incorporate* new believers among a particular people. Winter pondered a term like *unincorporable* because, as awkward or clumsy or complicated as it might seem, it more accurately pinpointed the vital missiological predicament. Where there was no viable indigenous church movement for a particular people, or where the incorporation of new believers was difficult due to cultural distance, then these people were the unincorporable. While the term might have unfortunate social connotations, the use of this term might have secured Winter’s missiological criteria more effectively than unreached. But as I’ve indicated, the term “unincorporable peoples” was not only hard to pronounce, its meaning was not immediately apparent. It just couldn’t compete with popular response to “unreached” no matter what ambiguities the later term introduced.

A quick study of the term unincorporable discloses two important conceptual dimensions to Winter’s missiology. First, the root *incorpor* is from the Latin meaning “to embody,” which is basic to Winter’s argument on the strategic priority of an organized fellowship of worshipping believers (the church). Secondly, the prefix and suffix “un—able” together communicate the inability to integrate certain believers into a corporate body. It poses the question of barriers and inhibitors to the enfolding of these unincorporable peoples. Over the past forty years missiologists have produced a library on these barriers among peoples, but that body of research has not used a term like unincorporable to better define its core missiology.

Conditions

We’ve grown accustomed to some contemporary perspectives on the traditional reasons for the “un-incorporable-ness” of peoples (i.e., ethnicity, language). Some anthropologists insist that the recent flows of globalization and urbanization dissipate ethnic and linguistic impediments to the gospel. More contemporary anthropology tries to account for the way “people groups” is now an obsolete category. New models seem to explain how peoples are culturally less distant and more easily incorporable into the existing Christian movements.

The recent article by George Yip in *EMQ* is a quick and densely written review of how anthropology and missiology must adjust to the realities of globalization.⁴ I commend the article to readers, but with a small proviso: Yip is trying

to abruptly apply insights that have built up tremendous anthropological nuance for over four decades. The manner in which he speaks to the categoricalness of people group thinking is apparent in Hiebert’s anthropological assessment of Church Growth a couple of decades ago (p. 77). Indeed, globalization and urban drift have accelerated the loosening of local ties and are lifting people out of their traditional identities. We must affirm these global trends and adjust our missiological models.

But, for our purposes here, it’s important to note that Yip and his anthropology of globalization is focused on the legitimacy of ethnic and linguistic “groupness” and boundary. A term like un-incorporable, on the other hand, provides a different focus. It allows for a bit more of an inductive sensitivity.⁵ It prioritizes the ability or inability of incorporation among a population without any initial insistence on a particular group boundary. As an alternative terminology, the idea of incorporable-ness remains more open to the impact of globalization on peoples. It does so by providing an initial probe into unincorporable-ness, and only secondarily into the boundary markers of a people group. Winter’s preference for unincorporable may have assumed people groups, but it prioritized the crux of the matter for a missiology that would further evangelization.

Secondly, the recent flow of refugees across Europe and the Middle East indicate that crisis conditions not only increase receptivity to the gospel, but they reduce the barriers of incorporation. Trauma, violence, and loss of livelihood create a new openness to adapt to an alternate world. The brutality that precedes and accompanies the flow of refugees loosens traditional ties and creates a sort of suspended existence. In these settings the unincorporable appear more able to be enfolded almost without regard to language, culture, or religious identity. But this openness may lessen abruptly after an initial “honeymoon” period in which ethnicity, language and traditional identities don’t seem to matter.

Beyond global or crisis conditions is the phenomenal growth of the Pentecostal movement and the evidence that the need for healing and deliverance can cause people to be incorporated into Christian fellowships across social divides. In this push and pull, an accurate assessment of incorporation is strategic in discerning barriers. I recall a conversation with an Indian demographer who not only was a dedicated statistician, but one who spent weeks and months on the ground observing the villages of India. I recall what he told

me about the way healing and deliverance impacted caste realities. There in the byways of the villages he was seeing people from upper castes willing to enter and attend Dalit (untouchable) churches in order to be healed and released. But, he said it was also clear that these same people would never enter the home of that Dalit pastor. He noticed there was a flexibility according to need, but he was alert to the complexity of incorporation. While we should be open to the social adaptations created by spiritual need, by globalization or crisis, a term like unincorporable would actually maintain a crucial missiological focus amidst these new conditions.

Movements and Institutions

The unprecedented surge in movements to Christ happening since 2000 especially among unreached Muslim peoples assumes the incorporation of believers into a vital ecclesial experience (church). These movements, which are more often disciple making movements (DMM)—or in some cases insider movements—have their own characteristic way of incorporating new believers as they steadily reproduce. DMM is a method that encourages a natural and voluntary way of following Christ in small cellular discipleship groups that maintain connectedness and commonality across a growing movement, and these appear to fulfill Winter's most critical benchmark for a "viable church movement." It represents a "breakthrough" or "beachhead" which has been established.

For those who knew Winter, this terminology of incorporation conveyed his preference for institutions. He always had an eye for the viability of structures in the Christian movement, and this applied to this ecclesial embodiment (church) among peoples. As is clear from his quote above, the church as a corporate institution had a missiological value beyond the mere aggregation of individual believers. Winter was typically partial to numbers, to quantitative analysis, and the significance of statistics in a study of church growth. But the scale of a movement could not represent the more significant qualitative factors of ecclesial life in incorporating the unreached.

As a colleague in McGavran's school of thought, Winter had gained an analytical command of people movements and those natural bridges that provide for the growth of a movement to Christ. But he had also been trained as an anthropologist and respected the nature of social institutions in cultural innovation, and his suggestion of the term unincorporable (rather than unreached) called for a certain institutional acuity in assessing the viability of a church movement. The term invites further embellishment.

Tim Keller provides a well-crafted comparison of movements and institutions in his book, *Centered Church*, a cogent treatment I've not seen elsewhere in missiological discussions.⁶ Keller recognizes that he is writing to an American culture that is highly suspicious of institutions, for they typically seem to cramp one's personal freedom. And just the word institution seems to make their blood run cold for some who hang around DMM movements, because institutions smell of a hardened establishment that can slow the pace of growth and reproduction. We prefer "organic" or "natural" patterns of growth and a minimal institutional framework as a way to insure the extension of a movement.

But I suspect Winter valued institutional thinking because it was necessary for the durability of a Christian movement. Rather than exclusive categories, movement and institution represent a continuum, an institutional process (some would say an "institutionalization") in the establishment of a viable church. We witness this process underway early in our own New Testament, where roles and offices emerge as a nascent movement penetrates Jewish and Gentile populations.

The choice of the word "viable" for a church movement indicates the ability to maintain life, and I think we can assume that meant an initial grounding in appropriate contextualized institutions. My sense is that many DMM movements demonstrating new breakthroughs and the ability to incorporate new believers are now facing the issue of durability, which will demand an institutional viability beyond the initial scaffolding of DMM coordination, training and reproduction.

Conventions

Allow me to add two further perspectives on the institutional nature of movements. The first is the anthropology of Mary Douglas, who introduces a distinction between *conventions* and *institutions* in her attempt to discern the "legitimacy" of a social institution. "Minimally," she says, "an institution is only a convention,"⁷ and then she adds Lewis' definition:

A convention arises when all parties have a common interest in there being a rule to insure coordination, none has a conflicting interest, and none will deviate lest the desired coordination be lost.⁸

Might we use this label of convention for the minimal coordination and reproduction of a Christward movement that has yet to become a stable and viable ecclesial body? Certain conventions do provide a nascent movement with early coordination in natural groupings around a common

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interest and purpose; but this may still lack the institutional grounding of a “legitimate social grouping.” By legitimate, Douglas means something akin to what we would call the “self-theologizing” (or “self-actualizing”) of an ecclesial movement. This Fourth Self grounds a nascent movement in biblically and culturally appropriate institutions through a process of contextualization. It provides an authenticity to its institutions that goes beyond the mere three-self independence of government, propagation and finance. The continued incorporation of believers into a movement may require an institutional authenticity beyond the initial coordination and reproduction.

This point is reinforced by the tragic fact that large Christward movements can die out. I well remember a conversation a few years ago with one of the leaders of the DMM philosophy of ministry. For a few minutes he rolled out a description of a large-scale movement that had totally disappeared in South Asia. He was trying to alert mission leaders to a more comprehensive perspective on these movements. Examples of attrition or regression like this raise the question of viability, and my hunch is that we’re needing to be more sensitive to the institutional maturation of these nascent movements.

Translation

The terminology of incorporation can also call on studies of World Christianity, and I particularly wish to point out the contribution of Lamin Sanneh. African missiologists like Sanneh study the old frontier of Africa with indigenous eyes and offer us profound insights into the emergence of viable churches. They’re tunneling back through history and discovering how African peoples were incorporable or unincorporable. Sanneh’s study of religious movements has identified two different processes at work in the transmission of the gospel. One he calls *diffusion*, the other *translation*, and it’s the latter that is vital for the establishment of a viable church.

Datema has actually introduced how the diffusion studies of Evertt Rogers were used in discussions of unreached peoples, (p. 50) and that analysis included the study of patterns in the adoption of new innovations. But Sanneh, according to John Flett, alerts us to the way religious diffusion has normally favored the Western carrier of the innovation.

With diffusion, “the ‘missionary culture’ is made the carrier and arbiter of the message... By it religion expands by means of its founding cultural warrants and is implanted in other societies primarily as a matter of cultural adoption...

Diffusion distrusts translation because...it involves “too radical a concession to indigenous values to be acceptable.” It permits a range of unexamined interpretive assumptions that define the faith and its authenticity.⁹

In religious diffusion, the carrier’s form of religious life (read institutions) is often maintained as it crosses linguistic, ethnic and social boundaries. Sanneh illustrates this type of religious diffusion poignantly in the orthopraxis of Islamic religious life, where we witness the way certain religious institutions are imposed in that diffusion.

Sanneh emphasizes, on the other hand, how Christian translation is an alternate process whereby the receptor population “appropriates the gospel” and translation commences indigenously. It’s this translation process that corrects the ethnocentrism of Christian diffusion and grounds a young ecclesial movement in authentic institutions. This perspective, then, promotes an understanding of a movement’s durability, viability or incorporability that requires more indigenous participation in its self-actualization. The diffusion of a movement across a people is at risk without this translation process.

Winter used to hint at this process when he would call for indigenous minds to interact directly with the biblical languages. He had encouraged this process in a highland tribe of Central America, and he would indeed champion Sanneh’s insight. But, I am also suggesting that Winter’s use of the term incorporable is an extension of the idea of translation to the institutional nature of movements. Translation should be an indigenous institutional process as well as a linguistic process in order to insure the emergence of a viable church with the capacity to incorporate believers.

Recession and Re-Incorporation

In conclusion, let’s return to the question of demography and the categorizing of the post-Christian populations of Europe as unreached peoples. The concept of unincorporable also applies to these European peoples, for while they may not present any real linguistic or ethnic barrier per se, a case can be made that they actually are more difficult to reach and to enfold into Christian fellowships. As Winter and Koch introduced in their unimax definition, other factors apply to this barrier. Any previous success in translation, in conversion and in the contextualization of the church are now met with resistance, as if a people has been inoculated to the gospel. An increasingly difficult “stained glass barrier” makes them unincorporable.

WE MIGHT ADAPT THE LANGUAGE OF INCORPORATION and distinguish the post-Christian challenge of Europe as “re-incorporation.” It communicates the idea of “again,” and designates that a re-contextualization of the gospel is required.

Again, we might turn to the study of global Christianity and begin with the serial nature of a Christian movement and its pattern of advance and recession.¹⁰ These studies help us assess the distinctive challenge of populations experiencing Christian recession, where resistance to the gospel is characterized by a powerful counter-actual (counteractive) persuasion against the gospel. A society like Europe has Christian roots which are historically remote, and a more recent secular consciousness has arisen that defines itself in opposition to that prior Christian civilization. This is a competing contradiction that has been nurtured within that civilization, and I believe it presents an “unreachedness” which is distinct from the unreached of Asia. Those who are “unincorporable” in this context require a different kind of evangelization.

I might suggest we adapt the language of incorporation and distinguish this post-Christian challenge as “re-incorporation.” This may be an awkward terminology in some ways, but it might offer us a better way to distinguish the nature of unreached in Europe from that in Asia. The use of a prefix like “re” communicates the idea of “again,” and designates that a re-translation or a re-contextualization of the gospel is required to enfold these post-modern, post-Christian peoples. This counteractive resistance presents a new kind of barrier, one not to be confused with the original challenge of translation and contextualization required in unreached peoples whose societies have never witnessed a missiological breakthrough.

Historically we have used terms like renewal, reformation, revitalization or even rebirth (renaissance) to describe the return of a Christian impulse. But as I suggested, re-translation or re-contextualization might be actually more appropriate for the Christian revision needed today. I have no desire to be emphatic; I only wish to promote a better terminology that cuts through the ambiguities. It seems a term like re-incorporation would immediately alert us to a different type of unreached.

This could also distinguish Europe’s unreached from the challenge we are seeing in places like Korea today, where a strong Christian movement has yet to penetrate a large and entrenched segment of Buddhist society. The Christianization of Europe has impacted the social structure, values and ethics of an entire society, but this is not the case with a large percentage of Korean society. While the Korean church is also looking for ways to re-translate

and re-contextualize the gospel for the unreached in Korean society,¹¹ a major portion of the resistance they confront appears essentially to be a religious reaction to the Christian world. It is not counteractive in the same way as a receding Christendom that leaves significant traces of its historic influence. Again, the term re-incorporation encourages us to examine the nature of counteractive (post-Christian European) or reactionary (Korean) barriers in assimilating new believers.

Ultimately, gangly and awkward terms like un-incorporable or re-incorporation won’t survive. This is unfortunate in my estimation. Terms should converge more closely with the concepts and realities they represent. That convergence would help us maintain a missiological accuracy in our mission mobilization. Frontier missiology must invite better terminology if it’s going to direct attention to the strategic issue of viable, durable church movements. I think Winter got closer to that convergence with the term unincorporable. **IJFM**

Endnotes

¹ Gina Zurlo is presently doing research on Barrett as part of her role with The Center for the Study of Global Christianity at Gordon-Conwell Seminary in South Hamilton, MA.

² Ralph D. Winter and Bruce A. Koch, “Finishing The Task: The Unreached Peoples Challenge,” in *Perspectives on the World Christian Movement*, 4th ed., eds. Ralph D. Winter and Steven C. Hawthorne (Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 2009), 535–6.

³ Ibid.

⁴ George Yip, “Introducing Post-Postmodern Missiology,” *EMQ*, Vol. 52, No. 3 (Copyright © 2016 Billy Graham Center for Evangelism), 262–270.

⁵ Winter and Koch, 535–6.

⁶ Timothy Keller, “Movements and Institutions” in *Center Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2012), 337–53.

⁷ Mary Douglas, *How Institutions Think* (London: Routledge and Kegan, 1987), 46.

⁸ Ibid., 46.

⁹ John G. Flett, *Apostolicity* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Press, 2016), 271.

¹⁰ See Andrew Walls on Latourette’s historical perspective in, “A History of the Expansion of Christianity Reconsidered: Assessing Christian Progress and Decline,” in *The Cross-Cultural Process in Christian History* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 2004), 12f.

¹¹ See an example in Mantae Kim’s “The Ancestral Rite in Korea: Its Significance and Contextualization from an Evangelical Perspective,” *IJFM* 32:3, Fall (2015): 117–127.