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BOOK FORUM

# Lumping and Splitting, Hierarchies and Ceilings

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I have been eagerly awaiting the publication of *Heathen: Religion and Race in American History* ever since I first heard that Kathryn Gin Lum was working on a long history of "heathens" in US history. I had, at the time, just finished my first book, *Christian Imperialism: Converting the World in the Early American Republic* (Cornell, 2015), and I had been doing a lot of thinking about "heathens" in nineteenth-century American culture. Specifically, I had trying to understand how white Protestant missionaries understood the concepts of heathenism, civilization, and conversion, and how these ideas shaped their decision-making about where they should focus their evangelistic attention. In *Christian Imperialism*, I argued that missionaries understood "the heathen world" to be a big place, but they did not understand all heathens to be equally heathenish. Some were more civilized than others, and thus made better candidates for conversion – and, as I found, those who were more "civilized" tended to be in or on the margins of Anglo-American empire. I called the rubric that missionaries used to judge the relative heathenism of different populations the "hierarchy of heathenism." But I still had a lot of questions, and I hoped that Lum's work would answer them. I have not been disappointed.

*Christian Imperialism* ended its focus in the 1840s, and I did not yet have a clear idea of what happened to the hierarchy of heathenism in the following years. The language of "heathens," I found, seemed to drop out of polite usage – at least in part in direct response to Christians from the developing world who pointed out that such language was offensive. And as imperial maps changed, and as the number of missionary organizations working overseas ballooned, the decision-making process of where to go shifted a bit. One thing, though, remained consistent: how missionaries and their supporters drew maps of the world and of its supposed need for evangelical intervention. The terminology might change – from the "heathen world" to the "10–40 window" – but the impulse (and much of the geography) remained the same. But how and why – and what happened to the idea of "heathens" once the term became distasteful – was less clear. Kathryn Gin Lum's magisterial book, *Heathen*, helps us to understand all of this. Lum helps us to understand "heathen" as a religio-racial category that had real staying power: it helped organize understandings of human hierarchy from ancient times to the present. I have learned so much from this book and from Lum's methodological approach to the topic. Among the many contributions of the book, I most appreciate her discussion of the geographic imagination and missionary mapping. *Heathen* helps us to understand just what was going on when a missionary mapmaker put pen to paper and shaded in – darkly – the "heathen world."

One of the joys of working in scholarly community is learning from each other when we approach the same set of sources with different questions and different interpretive lenses. While I will confess to having moments of anxiety that Lum's work would make my own unnecessary, I chose to embrace the advice of a dear mentor that rather than thinking of colleagues working on similar topics to be *competition*, we should instead rejoice that we are now a *subfield*. And so it has been my delight over the years to sit on panels together, furiously taking notes as we looked at the same notes and discussed the ongoing work that would become *Heathen* and my second book, *Missionary Diplomacy* (Cornell, 2024).

Missionary maps and the geographic and ethnographic writings that accompanied them have been important sources in both Lum's work and my own. The most basic type would look something like this: a map of the world shaded from dark to light, with the majority covered in darkness, representing the "heathen world," and the gradually lighter regions representing the Christian world, with the lightest, whitest shade reserved for Protestant lands, the seat of "true Christianity" on the eastern coast of North America. These maps are incredibly rich sources, both for what they contain and for their wide distribution. They were designed to show two things: the progress of missionary exertions and the overwhelming need of the world for more of the same. Some would be reproduced in missionary magazines, Sunday school tracts, or textbooks. Others might be hung from the walls of a church during the monthly concert of prayer.

It's no accident, of course, that these religious maps of the world looked a good deal like the racial maps of the world from the same era. Religion and race, after all, were linked concepts. Lum's work in *Heathen* helps us to understand some of the implications of those linkages. The maps, in many examples, effectively equate huge swaths of Asia, Africa, Latin America, the Pacific Islands, and the Middle East as similarly "heathen." Christianity, civilization, and whiteness are all similarly linked in this cartographic move. Lum's discussion of heathens as a racial category emphasizes the way that this collective identity obscures very real differences between different communities within it. Effectively, marking this huge population as part of a shared category of heathen made it difficult for Americans to appreciate the multiplicity and diversity within the group.

Yet this is not the whole story of missionary mapping. These maps could also be used to help white Americans to understand the world. When read alongside the other types of missionary maps and ethnographic writings that accompanied them, the maps also communicated to Americans some of the differences between these groups of people. Alongside the dark-to-light maps, missionary supporters were encouraged to peruse detailed maps of the terrain where missionaries evangelized, and to read missionary descriptions of the people and their cultures. These were often deeply racist descriptions, and not infrequently included material that reflected missionary misunderstandings, biases, and prejudices. But they were intended to introduce the world to American audiences – to address the problem of insufficient support to missionary organizations. Some missionaries understood this problem to be, quite simply, a matter of ignorance. How could American Christians support missions to the heathen if they didn't *know* the heathen? Missionary ethnography was their attempt to make Americans less ignorant, and to help them not only to find China, Japan, Korea, Liberia, or Hawaii on the map, but to know something about the people who lived there, and what made their specific cultures in need of evangelizing. The hierarchy of heathenism emerged out of – and contributed to – this dynamic, which continued in

various forms throughout the nineteenth century, well into the twentieth, and perhaps even the twenty-first.

Over years of conversations and reading Lum's work, I've come to think of the distinctions between her approach and mine as something akin to an emphasis on "lumping" or "splitting" as we both try to understand race and nineteenth-century white American Protestant ideas about the world. Both impulses are present in American Protestant writings about the world's various religious and racial groups. Depending on the particular needs of the nineteenth-century author, they might emphasize a collective heathenism in one piece of writing and focus on specificity in another. As historians, paying attention to one or the other tendency can provide different lessons about nineteenth-century racial conceptions. A splitting approach can help us to understand how American Protestants thought about the world and their place within it. A lumping approach, on the contrary, can help us to understand the pernicious staying power of racialized conceptions of difference.

Attention to the tension between these two dynamics, further, raises new questions. Perhaps most importantly, it raises important questions about the nature of conversion, how it was supposed to work, and what its effects would be. Conversion is a type of transformation. Protestant missionaries understood it to be more than just a change of religious affiliation: it was an internal change of profound importance, and it was far from simple. As Lum so powerfully shows in *Heathen*, conversion is a tricky concept when religion is tied to race. How, or when, does one shed the "heathen" label? Is that even possible? The specificity of ethnographic writers did important work to help conceptualize the "native convert" – though this figure often inhabited an in-between space, both part of their "heathen" culture and part of "Christian" civilization. When was conversion genuine, and when were non-Anglo-American Christian cultures "true" Christian societies? The persistence of "heathenism" as a lumping concept helps us to understand the long-standing epistemological challenges at play here (and this can help us, in turn, to unpack the concept of "reverse missions" and the racism at the root of that framework in contemporary mission contexts). As Lum explains, even converts faced a "heathen ceiling" that limited their ability to be accepted as fully equally members of American Protestant communities.

The concept of the heathen ceiling is an essential partner to that of the hierarchy of heathenism. The latter emphasizes the possibilities of transformation and upward mobility, while the former reminds us that the white supremacy of those constructing the hierarchy ultimately meant that there were clear limits to how much movement would be allowed. *Heathen* is required reading for everyone who wants to better understand the ways that white American Protestantism has shaped ideas about race. It is only through understanding these dynamics that we can have any hope of creating change.

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