

“We can’t go to them, but now they are here”: Ideologies of religion and culture in evangelical ESL classrooms

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Abstract. The history of colonialism, missionary work, and White supremacy is omnipresent in ESL. This study observed ESL instructors at two evangelical Christian ESL programs in South Carolina and investigated locally circulating ideologies of language, race, religion, and gender. The programs, Omega and Pinewood, aimed to share Christianity but used opposing strategies. Omega obfuscated evangelism by conflating Christianity with American culture and focused on assimilating students into English-centric, White evangelical culture. Pinewood accommodated students’ cultural norms, sharing both Christianity and students’ religion. Results of this study are important for understanding how institutional practices correlate with negative outcomes students may experience.

Keywords. religious ideologies; evangelical; ESL; colonialism

1. Introduction. Nonnative English speakers are often judged on accent, both in English classrooms and daily interactions with native speakers (Kang, Rubin, & Lindemann, 2015; Rubin, Coles, & Barnett, 2016). However, accent is perceived as well as produced (D’Onofrio 2018; Hay & Drager 2010; Hay, Nolan, & Drager 2006; Kang & Rubin 2009, 2014; McGurk & MacDonald 1976). Ideologies of race, gender, and even religion interact to affect the way teachers engage with and perceive their students (Hughes 2023). A long history of colonialism, missionary work, and White supremacy in English language education means that ideologies of race, religion, and gender are omnipresent in the English as a Second Language (ESL) classroom (Flores & Rosa 2019; Phillipson 2001). In fact, religious groups today continue to use ESL programs as a means to share their faith, utilizing various strategies and orientations towards students.

This study observes ESL instructors in South Carolina programs/schools affiliated with evangelical Christian ministries and investigates institutionally circulating ideologies of race, gender, and religion (Flores & Rosa 2019; Vandrick 1999). It engages in discourse analysis in order to answer the question: How are institutional practices of language instruction by ESL instructors at evangelical Christian language schools potentially shaped by, and how do they contribute to the shaping of, locally circulating ideologies of language and religion? I illustrate how the two evangelical ESL programs presented religious orientations in their linguistic and cultural pedagogical practices, but did so in different ways. These orientations reflected different ideologies about how religious identity was related to other social dimensions. The main differences between the two programs were (1) the overtness of their religious orientation; (2) their accommodation toward the students’ cultural perspective; and (3) the layer of discipleship culture they situated themselves within.

* Thank you to all of my participants, for letting me into your classrooms and passions, and to Dr. Nina Moreno and Dr. Elaine Chun, for your encouragement and insight.

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The ideologies I describe demonstrate how contemporary practices of evangelical ESL programs continue to reflect a lingering history of colonialism, Anglocentrism, and White supremacy in which the field of English teaching has long been implicated (Kubota 2001, 2021; Pennycook 2002; Vandrick 1999). These ideologies have rationalized colonizing tactics, including forcing English upon colonized groups, either through military force or economic necessity. It is important to note where the legacy of these movements is still present in ESL today so that biases and harmful practices can be confronted and ameliorated. At the same time, it is also important to recognize that evangelical organizations may range widely in their orientations to religion. In some cases, this may be because of the pressure not to display one’s evangelical goals openly, but in others, it may reflect a shift in theology and missiology away from assimilationist practices and prioritization of the spiritual needs above physical needs.

2. Methodology. Ethnographic observation was conducted at two sites that hosted ESL classes, Omega Language School and Pinewood Church. Twenty-eight hours of observation were conducted among five teachers at Omega. Twenty-five hours of observation were conducted among six teachers at Pinewood. In addition, all teachers were individually interviewed.

Omega Language School was an English school with campuses in two major cities in South Carolina. The school had a Christian mission and Christian staff, although the Christian mission was not publicized on their website or recruitment materials. Pinewood Church was a church that hosted a large ESL program with in-person classes one night a week and two Zoom classes other nights of the week. The in-person students were all Afghan refugees that members of the church and community were connected with through being their circle of welcome in the resettlement process. The Zoom students did not all live in South Carolina and had been connected to the program since before the pandemic.

Teachers were given the opportunity to select their own pseudonyms, although a few elected to have me choose for them. Their pseudonyms, demographics, and teaching sites are depicted in Table 1 below.

Site	Pseudonym	Demographics
Omega City 2	Bob	White man, 63
Omega City 1	Kay	White woman, 52
Omega City 1	Cheryl	White woman, 61
Omega City 1	Christi	White woman, 41
Omega Virtual	V	White woman, 42
Pinewood	Pam	White woman, 73
Pinewood	CJ	White woman, 62
Pinewood	TacoCat	Black man, 33
Pinewood	Em	White woman, 26
Pinewood Virtual	Sally	Asian woman, 46
Pinewood Virtual	William	White man, 80

Table 1. Teacher demographics and pseudonyms

At Pinewood, I observed three in-person classes and two zoom classes. The classes (as the program referred to them) and the demographics of the students are as follows: Beginner non-

literate class (Afghan women); Intermediate class (Afghan women); Advanced class, in-person (Afghan men); Advanced class, on Zoom (1 Russian woman, 3 Burmese women, 1 Korean man, 1 Brazilian woman, 1 South Asian woman); and Reading class, unspecified level, on Zoom (3 Burmese women). Due to the needs of the student population and various constraints of Covid-19 and other personal situations, student attendance was very variable in all classes, particularly in-person ones.

At Omega, I observed three classes in City 1 and one class in City 2. The classes in City 1 were: Level 4 Speaking/Listening (2 Turkish women, 2 Colombian women, 1 Brazilian woman, 1 Japanese woman); Level 2 Reading/Writing (4 Latina woman, one of whom was Black, 1 Asian woman, 1 Latino man); and Level 4 Grammar (2 Colombian women, 1 Brazilian woman). The class in City 2 was a combined Level 4 and 5 Grammar and Reading class, comprised of 1 East Asian woman, 1 Latino man, and 1 Latina woman. Additionally, I was given access to recorded classes that were conducted over Zoom during the 2020-2021 school year. One participant, V, was only observed through this modality, since at the time of my data collection, she worked in an administrative capacity in lieu of teaching. Demographics of the virtual classes are not included here because I was not given access to the students in order to survey them.

3. Ethnographic background. My own positionality is highly relevant to the way I engaged with this research. I grew up in evangelical culture in general and evangelical missionary culture in particular. Both of my parents and all four of my grandparents attended the same missions-focused Bible college, in addition to multiple aunts and uncles. My parents and both sets of grandparents met each other at that Bible college and decided to be career missionaries. My father's parents were missionaries in Central and Latin America while my mother's parents were missionaries in Zimbabwe. My parents were missionaries in South Korea for 2.5 years of my childhood before they returned to the U.S.

As a child, as early as I have memories, I knew that I was a missionary kid and that my job was to make friends with people so my parents could tell them about Jesus. This mindset persisted even after we moved to South Carolina. We returned to the U.S. when I was 6, and my father started teaching at the Bible college, where he continued to teach for the rest of my childhood. My family attended an evangelical church with a strong commitment to missions work. We held mission conferences every year where the church focused on different missionaries and different cultures. For several years, my mother was one of the main organizers of the missions conference. Year round, the hallway to the sanctuary was lined with photos of the missionaries the church supported in order to remind the church to pray for them. Some missionaries had the country they served in listed under their name, while others who served in more sensitive areas, meaning places where it was illegal or dangerous to be a missionary or a Christian or to try to convert people, only had a broad region listed.

My faith has changed since my childhood, but I write about evangelical Christian culture and missionary culture as an insider, as someone who was an active participant and knows the cultural norms, the in-group language, the coded language used to talk about missions without endangering the missionaries or the people they worked with. I was socialized into this culture and received both implicit and explicit training on how to navigate it and how to present it to the outside world. I bring this knowledge with me into my analysis.

There are several layers to the subgroup of evangelical Christian culture under study, here referred to as *discipleship culture*. To be clear, I am not referring to the voting block described as

evangelicals, as many people in that voting block are not active members of evangelical churches and thus not actively steeped in the culture that emanates from the church. Insiders to evangelical Christian culture are those that are active participants in the events and life of an evangelical church (as contrasted to Catholic and mainline Protestant churches).

Within the church, there are also different levels of involvement. Laypeople and ministers share many cultural experiences, but those involved in ministry in some capacity participate in the culture on a deeper level. An even deeper level is that of evangelical missionary culture, which includes missionaries themselves as well as those who work with missions organizations, those who are involved with supporting missionaries, and those who do missions work domestically, often with international students or immigrants and refugees. Within missionary culture, there is a deeper level still of people who view missions to unreached people as the most important and highest calling. This is depicted in Figure 1, where those who attend Sunday service regularly are the most peripheral members of discipleship culture and those who are evangelical missionaries to unreached people groups are the most steeped in it, particularly as regards the usage of coded language. While a person might identify themselves as a Christian or even an evangelical and not fit into the layers of the circle, those within the circle would not consider them to be the same sort of Christian and might not even consider them to be Christians at all. I make no judgments about anyone’s faith identity, but in this paper I do not generally consider those outside of the circle in Figure 1 as members of discipleship culture as I am studying it.

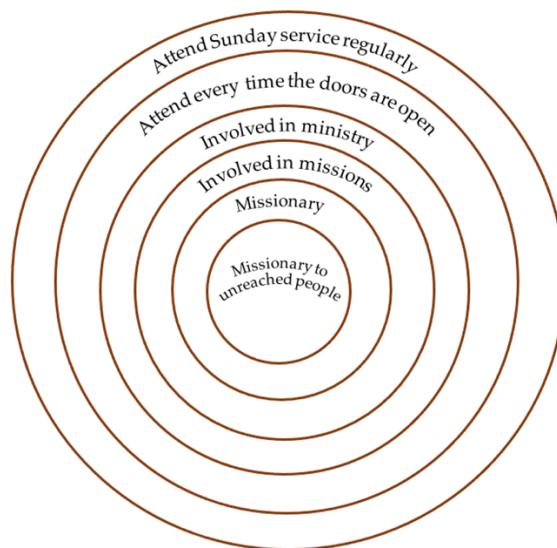


Figure 1. The layers of discipleship culture

4. The opacity of religion at Omega. At Omega, the primary mission was to prepare students with English skills that would allow them to enter American higher education or, secondarily, to find better jobs. However, Christianity was a constant undercurrent to the interactions between students and staff. It was not an overt presence: the building looked like any other small school, and the curriculum was not religiously based. However, as the school administrator, V, put it, the school tried to hire teachers and staff that were Christian and “like[d] to have teachers that are like-minded,” meaning Christians from a variety of evangelical denominations who had a heart

to reach international students. In describing this purpose to me, V reveals a missional mindset that underlies the stated goal. She uses coded language and pauses as she constructs this meaning.

(1) Interview with V

- | | | | |
|----|-----------|--|---|
| 1 | Ruthanne: | okay so I know Omega also is like (.)
<Christian connected, affiliated> | |
| 2 | | >like omega being like the word for
_____ or whatever< | Definition is redacted
to not reveal the
name of the school |
| 3 | | how exactly do you describe that? like are the
teachers at Omega all Christians? like is it
viewed as a ministry? orr. | |
| 4 | V: | yeah so:: (.) | |
| 5 | | um _____ is obviously Christian. and so we
try to get (.) teachers and administration that
are also Christian. | Redacted name is the
president of the
school |
| 6 | | and so we like to have (.) <um teachers that
ar::e> like-minded! | {Hesitatingly} |
| 7 | | and that like (.)um (.) we::, like we <i>want</i> to see
the best <i>for</i> our students? | |
| 8 | | and so that can be um academically, um
lifestyle um uh <i>spiritually</i> that kind of thing. | |
| 9 | Ruthanne: | yeah | |
| 10 | V: | and so yeah, and like, we pray for the students
like we want them to do <i>well</i> and and thrive
and that kind of thing. so. | |

In Example 1, both V and I are searching for the words to communicate (lines 1, 4, 5, 6, 7). I am navigating the tension between invoking insider knowledge (line 2) in order to elicit specific information while also asking questions that an insider wouldn't have to and/or wouldn't want to ask (line 3). This tension casts doubt on whether I am an insider to missionary culture and will be receptive to missions oriented goals. In response, V pauses repeatedly to search for words (lines 4, 5, 6, 7) that will truthfully convey the mission of the school while also not coming off as too strongly evangelically motivated. In line 6, she settles on a coded term (“like-minded”) that in-group members use to identify other in-group members.

Another participant, Kay, described her motivation for teaching at Omega: “I started volunteering here as a conversation partner, and fell in love with the students and just felt like I was called to do this. So I got an ESL certification.” She later elaborated, in the conversation below.

(2) Interview with Kay

- | | | |
|---|------|---|
| 1 | Kay: | so I mean it was all providential. |
| 2 | | I um |
| 3 | | one of my friends was volunteering (.) here |

4 and (.) I was (.) um I can't remember oh! I think I was
between or I had had some health issues and had to stop
my other job because it was stressful? and um just
concentrate on my health for a while and then and *she*
said well why don't you volunteer at Omega?
5 and um
6 so yeah, fell in love with my first conversation partner
7 and then and she was from Spain, and then I had two
conversation partners from Saudi Arabia.
8 and (.) was just eye-opening for me to um (.) have *real*
relationships? with (.) *Muslims!*
9 Ruthanne: yeah
10 Kay: and um yeah and so then I just (.) kept feeling like this
nagging thing of (.) ya need to (.) you might enjoy doing
this
11 and um (.)
12 so I did I went and got the certification (.)
13 and I subbed? here first
14 and then (.)
15 the rest (.)
16 I feel like God's done that
17 Ruthanne: yeah
18 Kay: my whole life
19 Ruthanne: yeah
20 Kay: I didn't go seeking something necessarily but
21 Ruthanne: the door just kinda [opened
22 Kay: [the door just kinda opened. nodding,
smiling

V and Kay both show a hesitancy to directly label their motivations as a desire to evangelize, V through pauses as she searches for the right words and Kay through circumlocution (Example 2, lines 3-4, 6-8, 10, 16, 20). V emphasizes that she and other staff want what is best for the students holistically (Example 1, line 7)—they do not only care about spiritual matters (Example 1, line 8), but do believe it is a part of the students' overall well-being. In this local context, V's expression of a broad scope of concern for students distances her from the type of missions ideology that focuses on the soul at the expense of the body and uses physical needs as a way to entice people into hearing the missionaries' message. Instead, V aligns with a more progressive ideology that wants to meet students' felt needs for language skills, as well as their (possibly un-felt) spiritual needs. Kay, however, is more open about having a direct spiritual motivation for teaching. She was not a teacher previously and became one at Omega because she felt the call of God to have "real relationships" (Example 2, line 8) with the students. She does not directly state why having real relationships is so meaningful to her. Instead, through her pauses (Example 2, lines 8, 10, 11, 12, 14, 15), she displays a careful stance that manages the delicate boundary between being truthful while not directly revealing her missional mindset. I joined her in this delicate work when I provided the phrasing "the door...opened" (Example 2,

line 21), a discipleship phrase related to how God directs a person towards the mission God has for their life or to particular missions opportunities. Kay took up the phrase quickly and cheerfully (Example 2, line 22), acknowledging that I had understood what she was saying without saying.

The teachers' guarded descriptions of the school were mirrored in the school's presentation of itself as a whole. The school was not necessarily secretive about their Christian origins, but neither were they transparent. A useful example of this is the name of the school itself. *Omega* is a pseudonym, but their true name was a word easily understood as associated with Christianity to other Christians, having a deep meaning connected to God and the way God interacts with humanity. However, this meaning is opaque to those outside of Christianity and the evangelical sphere, and especially to the students they recruited. In interviews, I asked the teachers whether they thought their students recognized the meaning of the school's name. All answered that they did not discuss the meaning and expected students probably did not know. Kay mentioned that students who are Christians were probably aware, but also expressed surprise when I told her that the website had no information about the meaning of the name, nor any mention of Christianity at all.

The opacity of religion was also demonstrated in the school's recruitment materials. Omega's website offered a list of universities and a few high schools where there was an agreement between them and Omega to recognize the language school's English training as meeting the college's English entry requirement. Most of these schools were Christian-affiliated, but again, as this is not advertised to students, they would not know the religious ties unless they happened to already be familiar with the universities.

The opacity of religion at Omega is tied to its origins as a ministry started by a missionary. The founder, owner, and president of the school was an Indian man who had worked as a missionary to international students in the United States. Several participants referenced him when describing the religious nature of the school. Kay brings him up unprompted as her first and only answer to the question of whether to categorize the school as a ministry and seems reluctant to elaborate beyond this.

(3) Interview with Kay, discussing Omega's owner

- 1 Ruthanne: I don't know what word to use cuz I don't think ministry feels like the right word but like (.)
2 [obviously faith is a big part
3 Kay: well [I know that that
4 I think the *owner* (.) considers it a ministry

Cheryl also does not answer the question directly. Like Kay, she references the founder. However, she adds nuance to her answer by acknowledging that not all the teachers at the school take up the missions goal of the institution. This can be seen in Example 4.

(4) Interview with Cheryl

- 1 Ruthanne: =because I don't think Omega— do you consider it to be a *ministry*? or a school with like (.) how would you describe?=
2 Cheryl: =yeah

3	I would say um it's more of a school: with—I think what our our	
4	maybe it doesn't even say that anymore it used to say Judeo-Christian principles or something=	quieter, like an aside. Looking at the mission statement framed and hanging on the wall
5	Ruthanne: [ah yeah	
6	Cheryl: = [but I think it doesn't I think it doesn't say that anymore	
7	UM	
8	so it <i>was started</i> by an Indian man?	
9	Ruthanne: yeah	
10	Cheryl: you know [blah blah blah?] ok yeah yeah yeah	Ruthanne nodding
11	Ruthanne: [I know ____ actually]	founder's name is redacted
12	Cheryl: um. so. so.	
13	you know it <i>was</i> started with <i>that</i> to show warmth and hospitality and, openness, and, you know to— <i>but</i>	
14	Ruthanne: yeah	
15	Cheryl: um	
16	think we have a a a wide range of (.) people? here. we have a couple teachers who I think would would <i>identify</i> (.) um as Christian but who don't regularly attend church:	"church" fades off at the end but on a higher tone, doesn't sound judgmental
17	we have my—then my husband's a <i>pastor</i> so, we're { <i>always</i> in church}	{laughing}
18	Ruthanne: XX [XXX]	
19	Cheryl: [Um > {yeh} <.] um and we have, you know a range from (.) sort of, we have had—{{I guess we don't actually have anybody right now!}}	{laughing} {{ surprised}}
20	Ruthanne: yeah yeah.	
21	Cheryl: OKAY sort of a Bob Jones? type? (.) teachers, and then we've had (.) you know (.) much more, sort of Episcopal uh—ih—a a RANGE =	

Cheryl starts and stops several thoughts in her answer to the same question (lines 3, 4, 6), ultimately landing on the history that it was started by the founder, whom she describes as “an Indian man” (line 8). When I indicate that I know the history, she stops explaining and pivots to a coded way of saying that the school was started to be a ministry that would hopefully lead to opportunities for evangelism (line 10-13), but that not all the teachers are necessarily on the same

page as the founder. “Warmth and hospitality and openness” (line 13) again connect the mission of the school with a missions ideology that serves both physical and spiritual needs while “you know” (line 13) and the unfinished phrase represents the unspoken other motive of evangelism. Cheryl then emphasizes the word “but” (line 13) and pivots to discussing the religious backgrounds of the school's teachers, indicating that although this was the original intention behind the school, not all current teachers share those goals. While this may not seem to directly answer the question of whether the school is a ministry, through referencing the layers of evangelical cultural identity (see Figure 1), Cheryl does answer that not all teachers are involved in the school as ministers or missionaries. In line 16, she mentions teachers who identify as Christian but don't attend church, putting them outside of the most peripheral sphere of discipleship culture. They are not even inside the circle and so are excluded from the possibility of being involved in the ministry aspect of the school. This is in contrast to herself who, as a pastor's wife (line 17), is involved in ministry and to the founder who is on the second-to-innermost level of missionary.

Missionary culture necessitates coded language, because often times missionaries' conversion efforts are looked down upon, if not outright illegal. While proselytization is not illegal in the United States, there is still a sense that one must hide one's evangelism efforts so as not to scare off the people they are evangelizing to. One way to hide this is through having a platform: a legitimate business that allows a missionary entry into communities they hope to evangelize. This paradigm is visible in the way Omega is presented: Omega is simultaneously “just” an English school—a legitimate and accredited educational institution—and a missions field where seeds can be sown to the nations. Different teachers may buy into Omega as a missions field with varying degrees of enthusiasm and commitment, and over time the line between missions, ministry, and workplace has become blurry. Whether intentional or not, as religious ties are elided in how the school is presented to students and in who is hired to work at the school, the opacity of religion serves to further evangelism goals.

One of the ways in which this opacity serves the mission of evangelism is through the conflation of discipleship culture and American culture, such that evangelical values and beliefs are presented and taught as if they are representatively American ones. School practices promote assimilation to evangelical Christian culture (and it should be said, *White* evangelical Christian culture), such as with book clubs that study religious stories. Kay's students in particular, who were high level grammar students, talked about a book club focused on *The Chronicles of Narnia* by C.S. Lewis, who, despite being an Anglican, is beloved in evangelical circles for the way his novels were written to “pre-baptize the imagination,” meaning they introduce people to concepts of Christianity through stories so that the seeds of faith are already planted and may be more likely to grow the next time the reader hears about Christianity more explicitly. The book club was marketed merely as an after-class enrichment activity and was not identified as being related to Christianity either in how I heard it talked about or in flyers. It was instead grouped with other cultural and social enrichment opportunities. It is an interesting example of American culture, however, as C.S. Lewis was British. Part of why it may so easily fit into American cultural activities is because of how strongly associated he is with discipleship culture. In this case, American culture acts as a proxy for what students are really being exposed to, which is discipleship culture.

Christian cultural artifacts were offered to students as examples of American media in other situations as well. In one class I observed, Kay was arranging to take students to watch *Christmas with The Chosen* in theaters after class in order to practice English listening skills. *The Chosen* is a TV series about the life of Jesus from a Christian perspective. A Christmas special came out in theaters about the birth of Christ, which is what the students went to see. The students expressed concern to Kay about how hard it is to understand English movies without titles. Kay told them that there might be glasses available with subtitles, but also said, "well, since you *know* the story, that'll make it easier to understand. It's a good first one to watch without subtitles." Students agreed with both her assessment that they knew the story, and that knowing the story would make understanding the English easier.

It is likely that Kay knew the students were aware of the story because she had told them the story or had witnessed others telling them. Around Christmas, a nativity and advent calendar were present in Kay's classroom and Kay referenced forgetting to add to the nativity calendar on a day I observed, indicating that the advent calendar is usually used as a part of classroom activities. Although in the broader American culture, advent calendars are used to count down the days to Christmas with small gifts or treats, there are evangelical advent calendars that instead add a new piece of the story of the Bible each day, ultimately culminating in the story of the birth of Christ. This type of calendar is called a Jesse tree, referring to one of Jesus's ancestors. These advent calendars are valued because the narrative of the Bible as a whole is viewed as a necessary part of understanding why humanity needed God to come to earth in the form of a baby to redeem humanity from their sins. The advent calendar hanging in the classroom was a Jesse tree calendar. An example of this type of calendar is shown in Figure 2 below.



Figure 2. My mother's Jesse tree advent calendar

Although religion was not included in marketing materials for prospective students, once students arrived at the school, American culture seemed to be a method some teachers used to evangelize to students. The religious ties of the institution were not transparent, and although the curriculum the school used did not involve Christian beliefs, individual teachers did bring evangelicalism into their teaching and interactions with their students, with the backing of the

school's administration. Religion was not overtly present at Omega, but seeds were constantly being sown.

5. Ideology of accommodation at Pinewood. In contrast to Omega, Pinewood as an institution viewed itself as a ministry rather than as missions work. Instances of coded language did still arise. For example, the titular sentence, “we can't go to them, but now they are here,” was spoken by a volunteer during a conversation partner hour at Pinewood. This refers to the Great Commission in Matthew 28:19, wherein Jesus sent out his disciples to go and make disciples of all the nations. This verse is often considered to be a charge to missionaries, but there is also an interpretation wherein Jesus calls all Christians to minister to those around them. This volunteer did not situate herself as a goer, as a missionary, but tapped into the second meaning with reference to the ministry the church was able to conduct.

Despite this veiled reference in the volunteer's description of the ministry, coded language was used far less at Pinewood than Omega. In interviews with teachers at Pinewood, I was accepted as an insider more implicitly. We did not have to negotiate through coded language to quietly establish a missions goal. Evangelical terms were certainly used, but teachers were not hiding their true missions goals with intentionally veiled language, designed to be understood by an insider but to provide a safe and believable alternative narrative to an outsider. Instead, teachers were open about their desire to befriend their students and to have long-term relationships with them. They were equally open about their hope that such relationships would at some point yield opportunities to share Christianity with the students, in the hopes of ultimately converting the students. However, friendship was emphasized over and over again as a goal of the ministry in and of itself.

While religious ties at Omega were quite opaque, at Pinewood, religion was more physically present and overtly discussed, particularly in the in-person classes held in the church building. The setting of classes held in a church is relevant: to get into the parking lot, everyone drove past a church sign with a Christian message or Bible verse displayed in big black letters. Once inside, there was a large crucifix in the main room, and on the wall of each classroom were posters and art with Christian imagery, verses, and phrases. Further, following each in-person class, the church hosted a conversation hour where students stayed and talked with church and community members. There was often food during these hours, and the teachers and community members prayed over it.

During the Afghan new year, the program held a celebration during this hour, during which a short service was held where a pastor read Christian scripture and offered a prayer. After he spoke, one of the higher-level students, Salazar, translated the English into Dari. When the pastor read scripture, Salazar read the same verses out of a Dari translation of the Bible. Notably, Jesus was not mentioned at any point, and common ground was drawn based on the common scriptures shared between Islam and Christianity and shared conceptions of the Creator God, to whom the prayer was directed. Relatedly, students did not shy away from discussing religion in the classroom. Religious ideas were frequently presented in class as a topic for discussion, with multiple viewpoints brought in and encouraged. Teachers brought Christianity into the discussion when asked by students but did not seem to have a mission to insert it when possible.

Culture also operated differently at Pinewood than it did at Omega. While Omega often conflated evangelical Christian culture with American culture as a means to sharing Christian ideologies, teachers at Pinewood explicitly contrasted Christian culture with American culture

more broadly. It was common to hear volunteers and teachers talking about the different ways that the mosque interacted with the Afghan refugees and the way that the church welcomed the students “without strings attached.” In her interview, CJ discussed a situation where she pointed out to students how the teachers and volunteers at the church had welcomed and helped the refugees and contrasted it with the general American public, as a way to point out the difference that being a Christian (a *true* Christian, not a cultural Christian) makes.

Another contrast between Omega and Pinewood was that at Pinewood, teachers and volunteers oriented toward accommodating students, rather than assimilating them into American norms. This showed up particularly in accommodations made surrounding gender and the holy month of Ramadan, during which devout Muslims fast. Of the three classes observed at Pinewood, those with mixed-gender students had two co-teachers, both of whom were present each week. One class, however, was comprised solely of men and had a single male teacher. The coordinator at first did not connect me with this teacher to observe because she worried about how the students would receive me as a woman in the classroom. However, after becoming more accustomed to my presence and after I had met a few of the men during the conversation hour, the coordinator asked the class for permission, and I was allowed to observe. This gender consciousness arose from a desire to respect the religious and cultural preferences of the Afghan students, many of whom were new arrivals to the United States and were uncomfortable in mixed-gender spaces.

The week that I first observed the all-men class happened to coincide with the first week of Ramadan. I was able to witness another aspect of religious and cultural respect: the teacher was discussing shrinkflation and had a slide with an image of a candy bar in order to demonstrate the concept. However, immediately after flashing the slide up, he realized he was showing a food item to fasting students and moved off of that slide. He apologized to the students in a friendly way and somewhat jokingly/self-deprecatingly stated they would not talk about food. The students suggested other non-food examples that he could use to explain the concept, which he took up.

Overall, these instances highlight an awareness of religious and cultural difference at Pinewood and an ideology of accommodation to the students, rather than of assimilation to American norms. The program oriented towards accommodating students' cultural norms, sharing Christianity with students while also sharing in students' culture and religion.

6. Conclusion. Omega recruited a diverse body of students online using a website and social media platforms that promoted multiculturalism through their mission statement and photo captions and made no mention of religion. For in-group members, however, the religious commitment of the organization was immediately visible through the name of the school, an evangelical Christian term with strong religious connotations to those within evangelical spheres, but not to those outside. Despite touting the value of multiculturalism, school practices promoted assimilation to discipleship culture, such as with book clubs that studied religious materials and field trips to watch religious movies. Omega inserted Christianity into the school environment as if it simply represented American culture. Around Christmas, a nativity and advent calendar were present in the classroom and displayed as cultural artifacts. Although religion was not included in marketing materials for prospective students at all, once students arrived at the school, American culture seemed to be a method for teachers to promote Christianity. The institutional value for

multiculturalism shaped their approach to evangelism; since students came from many backgrounds, their L1s and cultural experiences were not necessarily prohibited in the classroom, but were also not integrated or celebrated. Rather, White Southern evangelical culture and Southern American English were positioned as a unifying middle ground where various cultures could meet. Religion was certainly present, but it was strategically not overt. In contrast, religion was physically more overt and more present in official program activities at Pinewood. During discussion in higher level classes, religious ideas were explicitly presented as topics for discussion, with multiple viewpoints brought in and encouraged.

Where Omega oriented towards assimilation to American norms, Pinewood Church espoused an ideology of accommodation to the students. This can be seen through practices such as coordinators' respect of students' comfort with gender-conscious spaces. There was a women's class, a men's class, and two mixed-gender classes, both of which had a man and woman co-teacher who were present each week. Another example of respect for students' comfort was teachers allowing and even encouraging students' L1s in the classroom. For the lower-level classes, a translator was available on site to provide translation when necessary, and students were encouraged to use their L1s to explain concepts to other students during class. Respect for students did not mean an avoidance of religion or of Christianity, however. On an institutional level, there was a shared understanding that the students and the teachers came from different religions and cultures but could share those religions and cultures with one another. In fact, Pinewood celebrated the Afghan new year with a reading of shared Christian/Islam scripture in both English and Dari and mention of a shared Creator God. The ideology of Islam and Christianity both being Abrahamic religions shaped and was shaped by the institutional commitment to accommodation of student culture.

These two religiously-based ESL programs navigated religion and evangelism in the classroom using different strategies, but both programs operated with a goal to share Christianity. Their differing strategies are related to the ways in which they operated out of different levels of discipleship culture: Omega institutionally aligned with aspects of missionary culture while Pinewood situated itself as a ministry. Teachers at Omega steeped in missionary culture used coded language when they referred to their personal missions goals or to the missionary status of the founder. However, teachers at Pinewood did not feel the same need to hide their ministry goals. Pinewood conflated ministry with friendship, and teachers shared Christianity with students while also sharing in students' culture and religion. The layers of discipleship culture are relevant to the ways these schools and individual teachers related to their students. Missionary culture comes with an expectation of secrecy and hidden meanings, and this showed up in teachers' efforts to assimilate students as a roundabout route to evangelism. Troublingly though, the focus on assimilation and the conflation of evangelical and American cultures draws on long legacies of the relationship between colonialism and the church that have caused great harm to indigenous cultures, religions, and languages.

Religion has always been intimately tied to colonialism (see de los Ríos et al. 2019; Lachenicht, Henneon & Lignereux 2016; Rosa & Flores 2017; Vandrick 1999), as the motivations of European explorers and conquerors can be described by the motto "Gold, God, and Glory." As the arm of colonialism reached out, so did the church, with missionaries quickly establishing posts and schools. In order to transmit the gospel, the missionaries and indigenous people needed to have a common language. While many missionaries elected to learn the

language(s) of the indigenous people and translate the Bible into those languages, many others instead focused on teaching the indigenous people English so as to teach them Christianity. Alongside these programs of English education was a mission to “civilize the natives” that was predicated on religious, cultural, and linguistic erasure. These projects in themselves are violent, as they strip away the identity of individuals and communities, but they were also frequently accompanied by physical violence. The legacy of this violence can be clearly seen in the modern day as the United States and Canada reckon with the atrocities of residential schools and the ways in which language, culture, and identity were policed and erased. In less overt ways, this legacy is also present in the export of English around the globe through economic pressures.

It is a poorly kept secret that the field of Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL) has strong connections to missionary work. Many ESL and English as a Foreign Language teachers are missional Christians, and many missions-focused Christian universities offer TESOL degrees and certificates with the express intention of the teaching of English being used as a platform for missionary work. Even those in the field wholly unconnected to the church are still impacted by the colonial legacy. If TESOL teachers do not reckon with the long legacy of violence, oppression, and coercion embedded in the history of the church’s participation in ESL, we are likely to repeat these patterns of harm. To speak the language of evangelicalism, the sins of the fathers are visited on the children¹, but the truth will set us free². These patterns must be brought into the light³ so that we may repent of that harm the field has caused and work to meet students’ felt needs for English without acting for cultural or linguistic conformity.

While all of the teachers in my study cared about their students and were quick to describe their desire to help them, the aim of evangelism may at times be at odds with the aim of the holistic wellbeing of students, which participants such as V explicitly identified as their goal in teaching. Understanding the ideologies of religion, language, race, and gender circulating in these communities and the ways in which these evangelical programs relate to students is crucial for determining where the harmful legacies of colonialism and White supremacy still affect the field of TESOL and the students it purports to serve. This allows teachers to examine the strategies they orient towards and choose to move towards practices that do not perpetuate colonial frameworks. In the meantime, this research also paves the way for further investigation of how these ideologies and institutional practices circulate and how they may correlate with negative outcomes students experience.

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¹ Reference to Deuteronomy 5:9-10, Jeremiah 32:18, Isaiah 65:7, and others.

² Reference to John 8:32.

³ Reference to Ephesians 5:13.

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