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A postcolonial critique of John Warneck and the Batak religious identity

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Abstract: This study examines Johannes Warneck's theological and anthropological interpretation of Batak indigenous religion as heathenism within the broader framework of colonial mission discourse. The research aims to evaluate whether Warneck's category of heathenism adequately represents Batak religious identity or instead distorts it through a theological-civilizational hierarchy. Methodologically, the study employs qualitative textual analysis of Warneck's *The Living Christ and Dying* Heathenism, read through a postcolonial hermeneutical lens and compared with historical and ethnographic scholarship on Batak religion, cosmology, and customary law. Theoretically, the study engages with postcolonial criticism and biblical models of contextualization, especially Acts 15 and Acts 17, to assess the relationship between Gospel proclamation and local culture. The findings show that Warneck construed Batak religion as estrangement from God, bondage to spirits, moral deficiency, and spiritual degeneration, while Batak society in fact possessed coherent religious concepts, ritual structures, and customary legal institutions. The study concludes that a contextual and redemptive missiology offers a more adequate framework, one that preserves Christian theological conviction while taking local identity and cultural forms seriously.

Keywords: Batak religion, contextual missiology, heathenism, John Warneck, postcolonial theology

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1. Introduction

The term *heathen*, particularly within the history of Christian missions, has become a subject of renewed scrutiny in light of the increasing accessibility of missionary archives and theological literature. These materials reveal not only how Western missionary institutions described the peoples they encountered, but also how language itself became part of the missionary project. Recent scholarship has shown that heathen was never merely a descriptive term. Jerry Hwang identifies a fundamental dichotomy in Protestant mission movements: Christians as "insiders" and non-Christians as "outsiders."[1] His extensive biblical analysis examines the use of the

[1] Jerry Hwang, *"For the Conversion of the Heathens": Reflections on Insider/Outsider Dynamics*, November 9, 2023, https://omf.org/for-the-conversion-of-the-heathens-reflections-on-insider-outsider-dynamics.

term *heathen* in the King James Version (KJV) and in the writings of prominent missionaries such as William Carey, Charles Spurgeon, and Samuel Wilberforce. Hwang further asserts that the KJV does not explicitly endorse the use of heathen to denote non-Christians. The term originates from the Greek *ethne*, typically translated as "nations," without inherently negative or uncivilized connotations. This insight offers a renewed theological framework for understanding mission—both in the 19th century and in contemporary practice. Mission, particularly in its contextualized form, should not be viewed as an exclusive necessity for "them" who receive the Gospel, but also as a fundamental need for "us" who proclaim it. Such awareness demands a posture of humility, acknowledging that Christians carry cultural legacies, theological assumptions, and historical limitations into their mission endeavors. Only through this humility can today's missionaries learn honestly from past mistakes and foster cross-cultural relationships that are equitable, respectful, and just. Without it, evangelism risks perpetuating a harmful mindset: "*When I do it, it's contextualization; when you do it, it's syncretism.*"[2]

John Oxenbridge (1608–1674) is among the missionaries who contributed to the theological framing of heathen in the context of contextualization discourse. As McGhee notes, Oxenbridge employed the term to articulate the English Protestant approach to theological, historical, and natural dimensions of reform, colonization, and evangelization in America amid shifting religious and political landscapes. His concept linked the physical transformation of land, the spiritual conversion of Indigenous peoples, and the introspective struggle of believers confronting sin and salvation. Thus, English Protestants were tasked with spreading Christianity and civilization to so-called heathen populations through cultivation and propagation, while simultaneously grappling with their own vulnerabilities and striving to embody scriptural ideals.[3] In that respect, the category did theological work and political work at the same time.

The term "heathen" carries a complex etymological and theological history, deeply intertwined with colonial discourse and missionary ideology. Derived from Old English *hæþen*, meaning "dweller of uncultivated land," it originally referred to rural populations who had not converted to Christianity.[4] While *pagan* connotes simplicity, heathen evokes imagery of "grassland dwellers." The word *heath* itself denotes "open, uncultivated land; barren terrain; wilderness".[5] English Bibles variously translate heathen as "gentiles" or "nations," with *heath* rooted in Germanic and Old English, while *gentile* and *pagan* derive from Latin. There is definitional

[2] Hwang, *"For the Conversion of the Heathens": Reflections on Insider/Outsider Dynamics*.

[3] Patrick Seamus McGhee, "Reformation, Colonisation, and the Conversion of the 'Heathen': Theology, History, and Nature in the Writings of John Oxenbridge (1608–1674)," *Atlantic Studies* 22, no. 1 (January 2025): 2–33, https://doi.org/10.1080/14788810.2024.2393037.

[4] Alexis Wells-Oghoghomeh, "Heathen Sight and the Problem of Anti-Africanness," *Church History* 93, no. 2 (June 2024): 344–47, https://doi.org/10.1017/S0009640724001483.

[5] Kocku von Stuckrad, ed., *The Brill dictionary of religion* (Leiden: Brill, 2006).

overlap between *heathen* and *barbarous*, both implying a lack of written culture or civilization.[6]

Over time, *heathen* evolved from a geographic descriptor to a theological label for all non-Christians, particularly those practicing indigenous religions characterized by animism, polytheism, or ancestor worship. The Cambridge Dictionary defines "heathen" as people whose beliefs and way of life are either non-religious or outside the Abrahamic traditions of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam.[7] In modern English translations of Spanish Catholic texts, the term "heathen" risks conflating English and Spanish conceptions of non-Christianity. For instance, the 20th-century Anglophone version of Hernando Ruiz de Alarcón's *Treatise on the Heathen Superstitions that Today Live Among the Indians Native to this New Spain* (1629) translates *gentilicas* as heathen, imposing Protestant English terminology onto Spanish Catholic contexts that neither the original author nor his intended audience would have endorsed.[8]

Although Batak society has historically comprised diverse sub-ethnic groups with distinct religio-social traditions, including Toba, Karo, Angkola, Simalungun, and others, missionary discourse, particularly in Warneck's writings, frequently collapsed this diversity into a single category of "Batak heathenism." This study, therefore, does not seek to represent Batak religious plurality exhaustively. Rather, it critically examines the epistemic reduction through which such plurality was rendered invisible within missionary classificatory frameworks.

In missionary literature (such as the works of Oxenbridge), the label heathen is not merely descriptive but ideologically charged. It serves to delegitimize local religious systems and morally justify the Christianization of non-European societies. The term often portrays Indigenous communities as spiritually lost, morally inferior, and in dire need of salvation through the Gospel.[9] This construction positions Christianity as a civilizing force and native belief systems as remnants of spiritual darkness.[10] Consequently, heathen functions not only as a religious term but also as a colonial tool for dividing and subjugating non-Western populations. Contemporary scholarship widely critiques the term for its Eurocentric bias and its failure to acknowledge the complexity and legitimacy of non-Christian religious traditions[11]. The persistent use of heathenism by Warneck to describe Batak religion illustrates how missionary language not only reflects but actively shapes perceptions of indigenous

[6] Seamus McGhee, "Reformation, Colonisation, and the Conversion of the 'Heathen.'"

[7] "heathen," *Cambridge Dictionary*, English Disctionary (Cambridge University Press & Assessment, 1999), https://dictionary.cambridge.org/us/dictionary/english/heathen.

[8] Seamus McGhee, "Reformation, Colonisation, and the Conversion of the 'Heathen.'"

[9] Seamus McGhee, "Reformation, Colonisation, and the Conversion of the 'Heathen.'"

[10] Udi Greenberg, "Protestants, Decolonization, and European Integration, 1885–1961," *The Journal of Modern History* 89, no. 2 (June 2017): 314–54, https://doi.org/10.1086/691531.

[11] Greenberg, "Protestants, Decolonization, and European Integration, 1885–1961."

belief systems. Rather than engaging with the internal coherence and cultural significance of Batak cosmology, Warneck's framing imposed a dual lens—one of theological judgment and civilizational hierarchy. This approach aligns with the fourfold axis of 19th-century Protestant missions: orthodoxy, zeal, civilization, and morality.[12] Thus, heathenism functioned as a conceptual bridge between theological condemnation and cultural conquest. In postcolonial and interfaith studies, *heathen* is increasingly viewed as theologically reductive and ethically problematic.

In both medieval and modern contexts, the term "heathen" has often been employed interchangeably with labels such as "infidel," "barbarian," and other descriptors for non-Abrahamic peoples, frequently without a nuanced understanding of its etymological and cultural significance.[13] Once incorporated into the Bible by English reformers during the vernacular translation movement, *heathen* became a conceptual nexus linking theology, history, and nature.[14] The term came to symbolize the fallen state of humanity and divine predestination, intertwined with a corrupted natural world resulting from original sin. Since Adam was designated as a tiller of the ground after the Fall, land cultivation was imbued with spiritual significance.

Etymologically associated with untamed, uncultivated landscapes, *heathen* in the Old Testament refers to idolaters dwelling in the wilderness—portrayed either as adversaries of God or as potential converts (e.g., Lev 26:32–33, 38; 2Ki 16:2–4; 17:1–17; 21:2–9; 2Chr 28:3–4). In the New Testament, *heathen* are framed as targets of missionary outreach or eschatological enemies (Gal 2:9; Rev 19:15). Elizabethan and Stuart historical narratives often depicted non-Christians as persecutors of the faithful or as early examples of conversion, as seen in the works of John Foxe and John Speed (Willet, 2005). Protestant polemicists also appropriated the term to critique the Roman Catholic Church, equating its rituals with *heathen* idolatry. Thus, "heathen" was not simply a theological judgment concerning false worship; it was also a classificatory device that linked religion, morality, and civilization within a single evaluative framework.

This issue becomes especially important in relation to Johannes Warneck, a German Lutheran missionary active in the Batak region of North Sumatra in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In his influential work *The Living Christ and Dying Heathenism*, Warneck interpreted Batak indigenous religion through the category of heathenism, a term that he did not use loosely. In his theological system, heathenism signified estrangement from God, bondage to spirits, moral distortion, and spiritual degeneration. Although Warneck recognized what he described as scattered

[12] Alec Ryrie and D. J. B. Trim, "Four Axes of Mission: Conversion and the Purposes of Mission in Protestant History," *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society* 32 (December 2022): 113–33, https://doi.org/10.1017/S0080440122000020.

[13] W. Stephens, "Bullinger and Zwingli on the Salvation of the Heathen," *Reformation & Renaissance Review* 7, nos. 2–3 (October 2005): 283–300, https://doi.org/10.1558/rarr.v7i2-3.283.

[14] Seamus McGhee, "Reformation, Colonisation, and the Conversion of the 'Heathen.'"

"elements of truth" within animistic religions, he nevertheless regarded Batak religion as a fallen and decaying religious order that required radical reconstruction through the Gospel.[15]

Warneck's approach deserves critical reconsideration for at least two reasons. First, his writings have exerted long-term influence on how Batak indigenous religion has been remembered, discussed, and judged in mission history and church life. Second, the category of heathenism itself must be interrogated. The central issue is not merely whether Batak religion does or does not fit Warneck's criteria; the more fundamental problem is that the category already presupposes a theological-civilizational hierarchy. It collapses religious difference into deficiency, thereby narrowing the interpretive space within which indigenous religion can be understood on its own terms.

This question is particularly pressing in the Batak case. Prior to the arrival of Christianity, Batak society possessed a sophisticated indigenous religion that permeated social, ritual, and cosmological life. Batak religiosity was not a scattered collection of irrational fears but part of a comprehensive worldview involving conceptions of divine order, ancestral mediation, ritual specialists, and moral obligations embedded in social life. Beyond theological dimensions, Batak society also possessed a developed customary legal system and communal mechanisms of deliberation, including *parhataon*, through which social norms, kinship obligations, inheritance, marriage, land ownership, and dispute resolution were governed.[16] Such realities complicate the missionary tendency to equate indigenous religion with chaos, depravity, or civilizational absence.

Accordingly, this article advances the thesis that Johannes Warneck's classification of Batak indigenous religion as "heathenism" was not a neutral theological assessment, but a colonial-missiological construction shaped by nineteenth-century Protestant assumptions about religion, morality, and civilization. Rather than merely describing Batak religiosity, the category of heathenism functioned to reduce religious difference into spiritual deficiency and to legitimize hierarchical missionary intervention.

Guided by this thesis, the article addresses two research questions: (1) How does Johannes Warneck construct Batak indigenous religion as heathenism within his missionary and theological writings?, and (2) What becomes visible when Batak indigenous religion is read beyond the missionary classificatory frame of heathenism? By engaging Warneck's writings through a postcolonial and contextual missiological

[15] J. Warneck, *The Living Christ and Dying Heathenism: The Experiences of a Missionary in Animistic Heathendom*, The Living Forces of the Gospel (London: Fleming H. Revell Company, 1909), 104–5, 133–34, 267–68, 291–92.

[16] J. C. Vergouwen, *The Social Organisation and Customary Law of the Toba-Batak of Northern Sumatra*, trans. Jeune Scott-Kemball (Dordrecht: Springer, 2013), 17.

lens, this study seeks to reconsider both the representation of Batak religion in mission history and its implications for contemporary Batak Christianity.

This study also contends that Christian missions need not choose between theological conviction and cultural attentiveness. Biblical models such as Acts 15 and Acts 17 suggest that the Gospel is neither reducible to any single culture nor indifferent to culture. Instead, the Gospel judges, redirects, and inhabits cultural forms through discernment. On that basis, the article concludes by proposing a contextual and redemptive missiology that resists colonial hierarchies while preserving the distinctiveness of Christian confession.

2. Research Methods

This study employs a qualitative textual analysis grounded in postcolonial textual criticism to examine Johannes Warneck's *The Living Christ and Dying Heathenism*, using it as the primary source. The analysis is designed to investigate how the term heathenism operates not only as a theological descriptor but also as a classificatory device shaped by colonial, civilizational, and missionary epistemologies.

Methodologically, the analysis proceeds in three interconnected stages. First, the study conducts a close reading of Warneck's text to identify recurring theological and moral themes that characterize the Batak indigenous religion. These thematic indicators include, but are not limited to, notions of estrangement from God, fear of spirits, moral deficiency, degeneration, and the contrast between Christian regeneration and animistic decline. Such themes are treated as discursive markers through which religious difference is transformed into perceived deficiency.

Second, these thematic constructions are analyzed within their broader historical and missiological context. Rather than treating Warneck solely as an individual thinker, the study reads his language as part of a wider nineteenth-century Protestant missionary discourse characterized by theological exclusivism, civilizational hierarchy, and moral universalism. In this sense, the analysis adopts a postcolonial hermeneutical lens that attends to how power, theology, and cultural judgment intersect in the production of missionary knowledge.

Third, to assess the adequacy of Warneck's representation, the study engages in a comparative historical reading between his descriptions and selected ethnographic and historical scholarship on Batak religio-social structures. The primary reference is made to the work of J. C. Vergouwen and subsequent studies on Batak cosmology, ritual practices, and customary law. This comparison does not aim to construct an exhaustive ethnography nor to deny the legitimacy of Christian theological evaluation. Rather, it functions as a critical test of whether the category of heathenism accurately accounts for the internal coherence, moral order, and institutional complexity of Batak indigenous religion, or whether it distorts these realities by subordinating them to a pre-established theological-civilizational framework.

Overall, this methodological approach integrates postcolonial critique with contextual missiology to address the two research questions outlined in the introduction. By making explicit the analytical stages and comparative criteria, the study seeks to demonstrate that its conclusions emerge from a systematic interpretive process rather than from ungrounded interpretive opinion.

3. Results and Discussion

The Concept of Heathenism in Warneck's Thought

Before turning specifically to Warneck, it is necessary to clarify the conceptual weight carried by the word *heathen*. In Protestant mission history, heathen did not merely identify those who were not Christian. It frequently marked them as spiritually lost, morally deficient, and culturally inferior. Such a usage can be seen in missionary writings that connected evangelization with civilization, reform, and cultural transformation. The term's etymological association with uncultivated land became entangled with religious judgments about uncultivated peoples. The result was a semantic field in which the non-Christian other could be described simultaneously as religiously mistaken and civilizationally incomplete.[17]

Within the wider history of Protestant missions, this logic often coexisted with professions of love, spiritual concern, and cultural sensitivity. In other words, missionary discourse could be pastorally sincere and nevertheless structurally hierarchical. This ambivalence is crucial for reading Warneck. He was not a crude propagandist, and in several respects, he was more nuanced than many of his contemporaries. Nevertheless, nuance does not dissolve hierarchy.

Warneck's discourse on heathenism cannot be read in isolation from the broader corpus of missionary knowledge production in late nineteenth-century Protestant missiology. His interpretations of Batak religion were not marginal or idiosyncratic, but circulated and helped consolidate a transregional missionary epistemology in which animistic religions were systematically rendered intelligible as religious deficiency.[18] Warneck's writings were widely read, cited, and reproduced within German Lutheran mission circles and beyond, shaping both missionary practice and subsequent historiography of indigenous religions in North Sumatra.[19] As scholars of colonial mission history have argued, such missionary texts functioned not merely as theological reflections but as epistemic instruments that translated cultural

[17] Seamus McGhee, "Reformation, Colonisation, and the Conversion of the 'Heathen.'"

[18] Paul Pedersen, *Batak Blood and Protestant Soul: The Development of National Batak Churches in North Sumatra* (Grand Rapid, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1970); J. Warneck, *Die Religion Der Batak: Ein Paradigma Für Die Animistischen Religionen Des Indischen Archipels*, Quellen Der Religions-Geschichte (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1909).

[19] Sita van Bemmelen, *Christianity, Colonization, and Gender Relations in North Sumatra: A Patrilineal Society in Flux*, Verhandelingen van Het Koninklijk Instituut Voor Taal-, Land- En Volkenkunde, volume 309 (Leiden: Brill, 2018).

difference into hierarchical categories of religion, morality, and civilization.[20] Within this framework, indigenous religion could appear meaningful only insofar as it confirmed its placement at a lower rung of religious and civilizational development. Warneck's conceptualization of Batak religion as heathenism thus exemplifies what postcolonial scholars describe as epistemic violence: a mode of representation that does not simply misdescribe indigenous religiosity, but actively reconstitutes it as absence, degeneration, and legitimizing missionary intervention as both morally necessary and theologically inevitable.[21]

In his seminal work *The Living Christ and Dying Heathenism*, John Warneck articulates a sharp theological and anthropological conception of heathenism, which he uses to describe non-Christian religions, particularly Batak animism in North Sumatra. For Warneck, heathenism is not merely a denial of God's existence, but a profound estrangement from Him: "The essence of heathenism seems to be, not the denial of God but complete estrangement from Him."[22] In his view, the Batak religion did not evolve toward recognizing the true God. Instead, it underwent spiritual degeneration, marked by the dominance of ancestral spirits, fear of supernatural forces, and a distorted moral framework.

Warneck does not indiscriminately label all non-Christian religions as heathen. Rather, he identifies specific criteria that, in his judgment, qualify Batak religion as such. First, he observes that the Creator God (*Ompu Tuhan Mula Djadi* or *Mula Jadi Na Bolon*) is "curiously thrust into the background,"[23] replaced by secondary deities and ancestral spirits who are functionally closer to human life. Second, he emphasizes that Batak religiosity centers not on worship of a transcendent God, but on "fear of sinister powers, spirits, and souls,"[24] rendering religion a transactional magical system rather than an ethical relationship with the Divine. Third, Warneck argues that the Batak religion lacks a moral structure rooted in divine will. Morality is governed by *adat*

[20] Frederik Schulze, "German Missionaries, Race, and Othering Entanglements and Comparisons between German Southwest Africa, Indonesia, and Brazil," *Itinerario* 37, no. 1 (April 2013): 13–27, https://doi.org/10.1017/S0165115313000235; Hesron H. Sihombing, "Decolonizing the History of Mission: An Indonesian Lutheran Perspective," in *Decolonial Horizons: Reshaping Synodality, Mission, and Social Justice*, ed. Raimundo C. Barreto and Vladimir Latinovic (Cham: Springer Nature Switzerland, 2023), 167–83, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-44843-0_9.

[21] Edward W. Said, "Orientalism Reconsidered*," in *Postcolonial Criticism*, 1st Edition (New York, NY: Routledge, 1997); Jeffrey Guhin and Jonathan Wyrtzen, "The Violences of Knowledge: Edward Said, Sociology, and Post-Orientalist Reflexivity," in *Political Power and Social Theory*, ed. Julian Go (Emerald Group Publishing Limited, 2013), 231–62, https://doi.org/10.1108/S0198-8719(2013)0000024015; R. S. Sugirtharajah, *Postcolonial Criticism and Biblical Interpretation*, Oxford Scholarship Online (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2023), https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780198752691.001.0001.

[22] Warneck, *The Living Christ and Dying Heathenism: The Experiences of a Missionary in Animistic Heathendom*, 96–107.

[23] Warneck, *The Living Christ and Dying Heathenism: The Experiences of a Missionary in Animistic Heathendom*, 28.

[24] Warneck, *The Living Christ and Dying Heathenism: The Experiences of a Missionary in Animistic Heathendom*, 104–5, 109–10.

(custom), and sin is defined not as a violation of divine law but as a breach of ancestral tradition. Thus, heathenism, in Warneck's framework, is a religious system that "lies about God, about the value of life and the value of personality," and is therefore not only theologically erroneous but anthropologically destructive.[25]

Nevertheless, Warneck does not entirely dismiss the possibility of a "longing for God" within animistic religions. He acknowledges a "dim perception" of a Supreme Being in terms like *Debata* among the Batak but contends that this perception has been "reduced by nature worship, fear of spirits, and moral coarseness."[26] Accordingly, heathenism in Warneck's thought is not a primitive stage of religious development leading toward Christianity, but a deviation and spiritual decline that can only be redeemed through the revelation of the Gospel.

Warneck situates Batak religion within a broader framework of global animistic belief systems, which he identifies as the most ancient and pervasive form of heathenism. He asserts that "animism was the primitive form of heathenism, maintaining itself… amid all the refinements of civilization."[27] Thus, he not only critiques Batak religion as erroneous but also as a spiritually degenerate system lacking any inherent trajectory toward the knowledge of the true God. Rejecting evolutionary theories of religion that posit animism as a precursor to monotheism, Warneck insists that "any form of Animism known to me has no lines leading to perfection, but only incontestable marks of degeneration."

To evaluate Warneck's claim, it is necessary to clarify the theological position of Debata Mula Jadi Na Bolon within Batak cosmology. In pre-Christian Batak religious thought, *Debata Mula Jadi Na Bolon* is understood as the supreme creator and ultimate source of cosmic order, rather than as an immanent deity directly involved in everyday ritual interaction. Warneck writes, "He is far away, and is therefore all but ruled out of the religious life. His place is taken by demons, who are feared and worshipped."[28] Religious life is structured through a mediation system in which divine power is accessed through ancestral spirits, ritual specialists, and the moral order of *adat*. This mediated structure does not indicate the exclusion of the Creator God. However, it reflects a cosmological logic in which transcendence and proximity are held together through differentiated levels of spiritual agency.[29]

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[25] Warneck, *The Living Christ and Dying Heathenism: The Experiences of a Missionary in Animistic Heathendom*, 88–95.

[26] Warneck, *The Living Christ and Dying Heathenism: The Experiences of a Missionary in Animistic Heathendom*, 103–5, 133–34.

[27] Warneck, *The Living Christ and Dying Heathenism: The Experiences of a Missionary in Animistic Heathendom*, 7–8.

[28] Warneck, *The Living Christ and Dying Heathenism: The Experiences of a Missionary in Animistic Heathendom*, 7–8.

[29] Vergouwen, *The Social Organisation and Customary Law of the Toba-Batak of Northern Sumatra*.

It should be clarified that this analysis does not seek to idealize Batak indigenous religion as a coherent or harmonious system free from internal tensions. Like all religious traditions, Batak religiosity prior to Christianity was marked by contested authority, internal hierarchies, and practices that are open to ethical and theological critique. Emphasizing cosmological coherence or ritual vitality does not imply normative approval. Rather, the purpose of this discussion is to challenge the colonial-missiological reduction that rendered Batak religion intelligible only as a deficiency. A postcolonial reading becomes problematic precisely when it replaces one form of idealization with another. This study, therefore, seeks to avoid both colonial denigration and postcolonial romanticization by focusing on modes of representation rather than on idealized substance.

Warneck's interpretation rests on a Protestant theological assumption that authentic religion requires immediate relational access to God as a moral lawgiver and a personal object of worship. Within this framework, the perceived distance of Debata Mula Jadi Na Bolon is interpreted as theological absence rather than as transcendence. Consequently, ancestral mediation and ritual engagement with spirits are construed as substitutes for God, rather than as part of an integrated religious system. What Warneck identifies as "religious degeneracy" thus emerges not from Batak theological incoherence, but from the application of a Christian theological norm that renders Batak religious structures intelligible only as a deficiency.[30]

Warneck further contends that heathenism is a system that actively misleads humanity through spiritual falsehoods. He claims that Batak religion "lies about God, about the value of life and the value of personality," and that it "destroys man's nobler nature, and degrades him to a will-less, thoughtless member of a flock of cattle."[31] In this view, heathenism is not merely an intellectual error but a spiritual force that oppresses and enslaves, alienating individuals from moral freedom and an authentic relationship with God. He also rejects the notion that animistic religions such as Batak possess moral values that can be cultivated. Although proverbs and sayings may appear ethical, Warneck argues that "these proverbs do not truly reflect the moral condition of the people."[32] For him, Batak morality is not grounded in divine will but in custom and fear of ancestral spirits. Consequently, he concludes that heathenism is "a

[30] Pintor Marihot Sitanggang, "Examining Mula Jadi Na Bolon in the Traditional Belief of Toba Batak People," *BIA': Jurnal Teologi Dan Pendidikan Kristen Kontekstual* 6, no. 2 (December 2023): 92–105, https://doi.org/10.34307/b.v6i2.494; Carel Hot Asi Siburian, "Konstruksi Pemahaman Kontekstual Pada Suku Batak Toba Dalam Perjumpaan Kristus Dan Debata Mulajadi Na Bolon," *JURNAL TERUNA BHAKTI* 6, no. 1 (August 2023): 21, https://doi.org/10.47131/jtb.v6i1.188.

[31] Warneck, *The Living Christ and Dying Heathenism: The Experiences of a Missionary in Animistic Heathendom*, 90.

[32] Warneck, *The Living Christ and Dying Heathenism: The Experiences of a Missionary in Animistic Heathendom*, 91.

poisoned hereditary theory of life of burdened will-less creatures,"[33] which can only be overcome through the revelation of the Gospel and the liberating power of the living Christ.

In Warneck's theological framework, the Gospel appears not merely as supplementary illumination but as the power that must overcome the structures of heathenism. Christian transformation begins, in his view, only after "much deep plowing," when a "fresh human soil" has been turned up.[34] Moral renewal does not arise from external reform alone, but from a new relation to God through Christ.[35] In this sense, Warneck sees the Gospel as both liberating and reconstructive: it breaks the bondage of heathen religion and reorders life around communion with the living God.[36]

Taken together, these themes show that Warneck's concept of heathenism is more than a description of non-Christian religion. It is a theological diagnosis of estrangement from God, spiritual bondage, moral distortion, and religious degeneration.[37] At the same time, his willingness to acknowledge residual "elements of truth" reveals a limited but real space for missionary discernment.[38] For contemporary readers, this combination of recognition and negation is precisely what makes Warneck both significant and problematic: he is more nuanced than a merely dismissive polemicist, yet his framework still reduces Batak religion to a fallen system whose value can be recognized only insofar as it is subordinated to the reconstructive power of the Gospel.[39]

To conclude the analysis of John Warneck's concept of heathenism, it is essential to situate his views within broader historical and theological contexts. Writing at the turn of the 20th century, Warneck was shaped by German Protestant missiology, heavily influenced by pietistic and apologetic responses to non-Christian religions. Within this framework, heathenism appears not merely as error but as a field of spiritual conflict. Warneck describes it as opposition to God and bondage to dark powers, while setting over against it the "quickening Gospel powers" that alone can

[33] Warneck, *The Living Christ and Dying Heathenism: The Experiences of a Missionary in Animistic Heathendom*, 121.

[34] Warneck, *The Living Christ and Dying Heathenism: The Experiences of a Missionary in Animistic Heathendom*, 281.

[35] Warneck, *The Living Christ and Dying Heathenism: The Experiences of a Missionary in Animistic Heathendom*, 286–87.

[36] Warneck, *The Living Christ and Dying Heathenism: The Experiences of a Missionary in Animistic Heathendom*, 286–87, 291–92.

[37] Warneck, *The Living Christ and Dying Heathenism: The Experiences of a Missionary in Animistic Heathendom*, 103–5, 133–34, 267–68.

[38] Warneck, *The Living Christ and Dying Heathenism: The Experiences of a Missionary in Animistic Heathendom*, 133–34.

[39] Warneck, *The Living Christ and Dying Heathenism: The Experiences of a Missionary in Animistic Heathendom*, 133–34, 281, 286–87.

overcome it.[40] Warneck unequivocally states that "the darker powers of heathenism" must be confronted by "the quickening forces of the Gospel."

Nevertheless, Warneck's approach to Batak religion was not entirely destructive. He recognized a "dim perception" of God, a "moral feeling," and even a "desire for better things" within the indigenous belief system.[41] However, Warneck does not allow these elements to alter his central judgment. They remain subordinate fragments rather than saving truth, since, for him, the essence of heathenism is still determined by godlessness and can be overcome only by the victorious power of the Gospel.[42]

From the perspective of contemporary missiological studies, Warneck's approach reveals a tension between two poles: on one hand, a sensitivity to the cultural and psychological dynamics of Batak society; on the other, a theological framework that categorizes indigenous religion as fundamentally flawed and misleading. In postcolonial discourse, this approach has been widely critiqued for its tendency to overlook the intrinsic value of local traditions and for its premature judgment of inferiority based on Western theological standards.

Warneck's Construction of Batak Religion as Heathenism

Batak society was deeply integrated with these spiritual dynamics. A visual representation of these spiritual activities is shown in Figure 1, which illustrates the traditional ritual context of the community.[43] Ritual practices such as mediumship through the *Sibaso* (individuals possessed by ancestral spirits) demonstrate the complexity and vitality of Batak spirituality. This system cannot be reduced to "primitive belief," as it is often portrayed in missionary literature. Rather, the Batak people possessed a well-established theological and social structure prior to the introduction of Christianity. Their spiritual traditions reflect a nuanced and dynamic religious identity that challenges simplistic colonial representations of indigenous faiths.

[40] Warneck, *The Living Christ and Dying Heathenism: The Experiences of a Missionary in Animistic Heathendom*, 17–18, 117–19, 133–34.

[41] Warneck, *The Living Christ and Dying Heathenism: The Experiences of a Missionary in Animistic Heathendom*, 103–4, 133–34.

[42] Warneck, *The Living Christ and Dying Heathenism: The Experiences of a Missionary in Animistic Heathendom*, 133–34.

[43] Bisuk Siahaan, *Batak: Satu Abad Perjalanan Anak Bangsa* (Jakarta: Kempala Foundation, 2011), 91.

Figure 1. A religious leader (called a *datu*) is leading the offering ritual

Beyond theological dimensions, 19th-century Batak society possessed a well-established social structure and a collective customary legal system. Among the Toba-Batak, a deliberative institution known as *parhataon* functioned as a forum for communal decision-making. A typical instance of this process is depicted in Figure 2[44], which shows a deliberation meeting held to make decisions or discuss conflicts. In this setting, elders and community leaders (appointed based on genealogical and social standing) convened to resolve disputes and establish social norms.[45] This process reflects a consensus-based legal tradition that governs various aspects of life, including inheritance, marriage, land ownership, and conflict resolution.

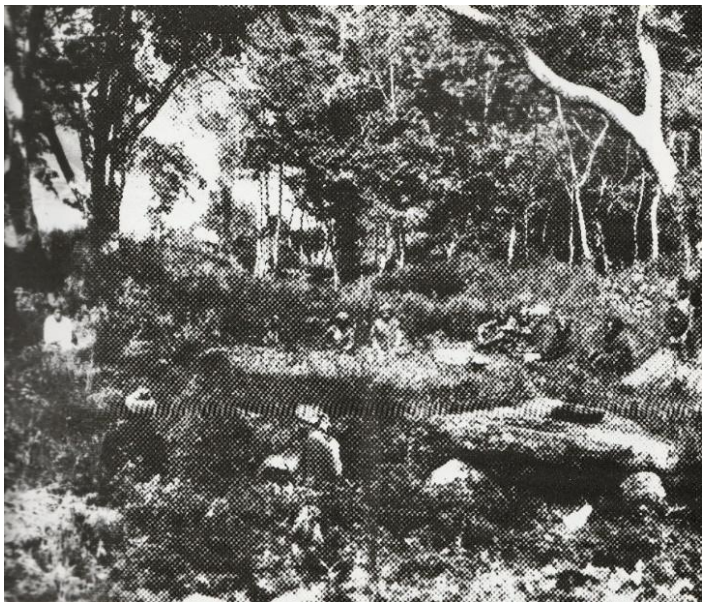

Figure 2. A deliberation meeting held to make decisions or discuss conflicts

[44] Siahaan, *Batak*, 91.

[45] Vergouwen, *The Social Organisation and Customary Law of the Toba-Batak of Northern Sumatra*, 105.

Their spiritual and legal institutions reveal a nuanced worldview that challenges colonial and missionary portrayals of indigenous peoples as primitive or uncivilized.[46] The Batak case underscores the importance of reevaluating historical terminology and frameworks (such as *heathen*) that have been used to marginalize non-Western societies. Recognizing the sophistication of Batak social and religious life invites a more respectful and accurate engagement with indigenous cultures in both historical and contemporary mission discourse.

Contextual Approaches to Gospel Proclamation

The proclamation of the Gospel has never occurred in a cultural vacuum. From the earliest days of the church, the apostles grappled with how to communicate the Gospel across diverse cultural and religious contexts. Two pivotal events in the Book of Acts—the Jerusalem Council (Acts 15:6–21) and Paul's sermon at the Areopagus (Acts 17:16–34)—provide a strong biblical foundation for contextual approaches in Christian mission. These passages emphasize that the Gospel must be communicated in forms that are intelligible and acceptable within local cultures, without compromising theological truth.

The Jerusalem Council in Acts 15 marks a significant moment in the history of Christian mission. The central issue was whether Gentile converts needed to be circumcised and adhere to Mosaic law, including dietary regulations. The apostles and elders concluded that Gentiles were not required to be circumcised but should abstain from food offered to idols, blood, meat from strangled animals, and sexual immorality (Acts 15:20). This decision reflects a profound principle of contextualization: the Gospel does not need to be encased in Jewish culture to be valid. Instead, the early church affirmed that salvation is by grace, not by law (Acts 15:11). This is an early expression of what Paul Hiebert later termed "critical contextualization."[47] Moreover, the council respected the cultural identity of Jewish Christians, allowing them to maintain their practices without imposing them on Gentile believers. This inclusive model honors cultural diversity within the body of Christ.

Another key passage is Acts 17:16–34, which records Paul's sermon at the Areopagus in Athens. Here, Paul engages an audience steeped in Greek philosophy and polytheism. Rather than condemning their idolatry outright, Paul begins with cultural observation: "Men of Athens, I perceive that in every way you are very religious" (Acts 17:22). He then uses the altar to "an unknown god" as a starting point to introduce the

[46] Felix Meier Zu Selhausen, "Missions, Education and Conversion in Colonial Africa," in *Globalization and the Rise of Mass Education*, ed. David Mitch and Gabriele Cappelli, Palgrave Studies in Economic History (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2019), 33, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-25417-9_2.

[47] Paul G. Hiebert, "Critical Contextualization," *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 11, no. 3 (July 1987): 104–12, https://doi.org/10.1177/239693938701100302.

true God (v. 23), even quoting Greek poets Aratus and Cleanthes: "For we are indeed his offspring" (v. 28). This approach exemplifies the core principle of contextualization—presenting the Gospel in language, symbols, and conceptual frameworks familiar to the local audience.

As Stephen Bevans explains, "The gospel is never communicated in a vacuum; it is always expressed in cultural forms."[48] Paul did not compromise the truth of the Gospel but communicated it in culturally relevant ways. Ben Witherington III notes that Paul not only adapted language and symbols but also challenged Greek philosophical structures by introducing a personal, transcendent Creator God.[49] This is critical contextualization: using culture as a point of entry while confronting it with Gospel truth.

In contrast, Warneck's approach to Batak culture, particularly his characterization of animism as heathenism, reflects a colonial missionary paradigm shaped by exclusivist theology and Western cultural superiority. As Lamin Sanneh critiques, colonial missions often "translated the gospel into European culture before translating it into local languages," making Christianity appear as a religion of white Europeans.[50] In Indonesia, German missions in the Batak region brought not only the Gospel but also European cultural values, Western education systems, and Lutheran church music. Warneck's rejection of *gondang* (traditional Batak music) due to its association with spirit invocation and animism exemplifies this cultural imposition.[51] However, as Paul Hiebert argues, "not all cultural forms are evil; many can be redeemed and used for God's glory."[52] Reformed *gondang* could serve as a meaningful and contextual expression of worship for Batak Christians. Total rejection of local culture fosters alienation and renders Christianity foreign and irrelevant.

Moreover, Warneck's approach was highly individualistic, emphasizing personal conversion and moral reform while neglecting the social and cultural dimensions of the Gospel. Andrew Walls reminds us that "the gospel is both translatable and transformative—it enters every culture and transforms it from within."[53] The Gospel not only saves souls but also redeems cultural structures,

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[48] Stephen B. Bevans, *Models of Contextual Theology*, Rev. and expanded ed, Faith and Cultures Series (Maryknoll, N.Y: Orbis Books, 2002), 4.

[49] Wilson, "Forming God: Divine Anthropomorphism in Luke-Acts," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 140, no. 4 (2021): 775, https://doi.org/10.15699/jbl.1404.2021.7.

[50] Lamin O. Sanneh, *Translating the Message: The Missionary Impact on Culture*, American Society of Missiology Series, no. 13 (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1989), 29.

[51] Warneck does not explicitly mention *gondang* in *The Living Christ and Dying Heathenism.* He does, however, portray Batak ritual life involving drums, spirit-medium practices, and ancestral consultation as integral to animistic religion, suggesting a negative theological assessment of ritual-musical forms associated with spirit invocation. Warneck, *The Living Christ and Dying Heathenism: The Experiences of a Missionary in Animistic Heathendom*, 69–72.

[52] Hiebert, "Critical Contextualization," 109.

[53] A. F. Walls, *The Missionary Movement in Christian History: Studies in the Transmission of Faith* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1996), 7–9.

symbols, and collective expressions. Contemporary missiologists such as Charles Kraft and Harvie Conn argue that mission must be incarnational: entering into local cultures as Christ entered Jewish culture.[54] Mission is not cultural transplantation but cultural transformation.[55]

One of the central critiques of Warneck's approach is his failure to recognize that the Gospel redeems not only individuals but also cultures. In contemporary missiology, there is growing awareness that culture is neither wholly evil nor neutral, but a domain that can be redeemed and used to glorify God. As David Bosch affirms, "Mission is not only about saving souls, but about transforming cultures in light of the Kingdom of God."[56]

Acts 15 and 17 illustrate how the early church and Paul did not seek to destroy local cultures but to redeem them. In Acts 15, Jewish customs were respected for Jewish Christians, while Gentile believers were not compelled to adopt them. In Acts 17, Paul did not dismantle Greek symbols but used them as bridges to communicate the Gospel. This reflects a redemptive engagement—embracing what is good in culture, sanctifying it, and employing it for the glory of God. Such an approach aligns with the principle of *incarnational mission*, as developed by missiologists like Darrell Whiteman and Michael Frost. Whiteman writes, "Just as Jesus became flesh and dwelt among us, so must the gospel take on the 'flesh' of every culture it enters." This means the Gospel must be embodied in culturally intelligible and acceptable forms.[57]

In the Batak context, cultural elements and kinship systems need not be eradicated; rather, they can be redeemed and integrated into Christian worship. As Indonesian theologian Eka Darmaputera asserts, "Christianity in Indonesia must belong to the people—not only in language, but also in symbols, rites, and cultural expressions."[58] Failure to redeem culture results in a Christianity that is alien, exclusive, and disconnected from its social roots. Asian theologians such as C. S. Song

[54] Harvie M. Conn and Manuel Ortiz, *Urban Ministry: The Kingdom, the City, & the People of God* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2001), 186–187; C. H. Kraft, *Anthropology for Christian Witness* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1996), 402–4.

[55] Adam B. Cohen, Michael Shengtao Wu, and Jacob Miller, "Religion and Culture: Individualism and Collectivism in the East and West," *Journal of Cross-Cultural Psychology* 47, no. 9 (October 2016): 1236–49, https://doi.org/10.1177/0022022116667895.

[56] David J. Bosch, *Transformasi Misi Kristen: Serajah teologi misi yang mengubah dan berubah*, Cetakan 6, trans. Stephen Suleeman (Jakarta: BPK Gunung Mulia, 2006), 754–756.

[57] Michael Frost, *Incarnate: The Body of Christ in an Age of Disengagement*, Forge Partnership Bks (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2014), 10; Robert Canfield, "Crossing Cultures with the Gospel: Anthropological Wisdom for Effective Christian Witness. By Darrell L. Whiteman," *OKH Journal: Anthropological Ethnography and Analysis Through the Eyes of Christian Faith* 8, no. 2 (July 2024): 72, https://doi.org/10.62141/okh.v8i2.218.

[58] Eka Darmaputera and Martin L. Sinaga, *Pergulatan Kehadiran Kristen Di Indonesia: Teks-Teks Terpilih Eka Darmaputera*, Cet. 1 (Jakarta: BPK Gunung Mulia, 2001), 125–127.

and Kosuke Koyama have emphasized the importance of *indigenization* and *contextual theology* as authentic expressions of the Gospel in Asia.[59]

John Warneck's approach cannot be separated from the colonial context of late 19th-century Europe. German Protestant missions in Indonesia, particularly in the Batak region, operated within the framework of Dutch colonial power, which facilitated Christian expansion as part of the Western "civilizing mission."[60] Within this paradigm, Christianity was often presented not only as spiritual truth but also as cultural, moral, and intellectual superiority of the white race.

As Edward Said critiques in *Orientalism Reconsidered*, colonialism not only conquered territories but also shaped perceptions of "the other" as inferior and in need of guidance.[61] In missionary contexts, this meant that local cultures were viewed as obstacles to the Gospel rather than as fields for redemption. Warneck, despite sincere intentions, was caught in this paradigm. He did not see Batak culture as a potential vessel for the Gospel but as something to be replaced by German cultural forms deemed more "Christian." This model of mission has been widely critiqued by postcolonial theologians such as R. S. Sugirtharajah and Musa Dube, who argue that Christian mission must liberate rather than dominate.[62] True mission respects the dignity of local cultures, listens to their voices, and collaborates in a mutually enriching process of transformation.

In the Indonesian context, contextual approaches are increasingly vital. As Jan Sihar Aritonang's study on the history of the church in Indonesia shows, the success of local churches depends significantly on their ability to root themselves in local culture.[63] Churches that merely extend Western cultural paradigms risk losing relevance and moral authority in the eyes of the people.

Toward a Contextual and Redemptive Missiology in a Postcolonial Perspective

In concluding this critical reading of John Warneck's representation of Batak indigenous religion as heathenism, it is essential to move beyond historical critique toward a constructive theological vision—one that liberates rather than subjugates.

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[59] Kosuke Koyama, "The Asian Approach to Christ," *Missiology: An International Review* 12, no. 4 (October 1984): 437–438, https://doi.org/10.1177/009182968401200404; Kosuke Koyama, "A Theological Reflection on Religious Pluralism," *The Ecumenical Review* 51, no. 2 (April 1999): 162–163, https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1758-6623.1999.tb00025.x; C. S. Song, *Third-Eye Theology: Theology in Formation in Asian Settings* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock Publishers, 2002), 11–13.

[60] Richard Price, "Alison Twells. The Civilising Mission and the English Middle Class, 1792–1850. The 'Heathen' at Home and Overseas. Palgrave Macmillan, Basingstoke [Etc.] 2009. Xiv, 353 Pp. Ill. £55.00," *International Review of Social History* 54, no. 3 (December 2009): 519, https://doi.org/10.1017/S0020859009990502.

[61] Said, "Orientalism Reconsidered," 165–166.

[62] Musa Wenkosi Dube, *Postcolonial Feminist Interpretation of the Bible* (St. Louis, MO: Chalice Press, 2012), 57; Sugirtharajah, *Postcolonial Criticism and Biblical Interpretation*, 12–14.

[63] Jan S. Aritonang and Karel A. Steenbrink, eds., *A History of Christianity in Indonesia*, Studies in Christian Mission, v. 35 (Leiden: Brill, 2008), 535–538.

The legacy of colonial missions, as reflected in Warneck's work, left not only institutional imprints in the form of local churches but also epistemological legacies that continue to shape perceptions of culture, religion, and identity. This final section proposes a new direction for missiology: a contextual and redemptive missiology rooted in postcolonial awareness.

A contextual and redemptive missiology presupposes an understanding of mission as a fundamentally dialectical process between the Gospel and culture (*adat*), rather than as a unidirectional transmission of Christian doctrine. Within this framework, the Gospel neither affirms nor entirely rejects cultural forms. Instead, it enters critical dialogue with them by affirming what is life-giving, challenging what is destructive, and transforming cultural meanings from within. Stephen B. Bevans describes this process as contextual theology, in which the Gospel is always articulated through cultural forms while remaining normatively oriented toward God's self-revelation in Christ.[64] Paul G. Hiebert similarly frames mission as a practice of "critical contextualization," emphasizing that culture must neither be uncritically accepted nor categorically rejected, but be theologically discerned and reshaped in light of the Gospel.[65]

From a broader theological perspective, this dialectical understanding resonates with H. Richard Niebuhr's insight that the relationship between Christ and culture cannot be reduced to either opposition or identification. Rather, it must be negotiated in dynamic tension across historical contexts.[66] In postcolonial settings, such a dialectic acquires additional significance because cultural forms have often been classified and suppressed by colonial structures. Edgar Schein's analysis of culture as a system of shared meanings further clarifies that genuine cultural transformation involves the reinterpretation of symbols, practices, and values, rather than their superficial replacement.[67] Accordingly, contextual and redemptive missiology understands mission as an ongoing process of mutual engagement. In this process, the Gospel becomes incarnate by taking shape within local cultural worlds, and culture is redeemed through participation in the *missio Dei* rather than erased.

Contextual theology is not a novel concept. Since the mid-20th century, theologians from Asia, Africa, and Latin America have emphasized the importance of making the Gospel an integral part of local life and culture. However, in Indonesia—particularly in regions like the Batak highlands that experienced intense colonial mission activity—contextualization has yet to become the dominant paradigm. Many

[64] Bevans, *Models of Contextual Theology*.
[65] Hiebert, "Critical Contextualization."
[66] H. Richard Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture* (New York: HarperCollins, 1956).
[67] Edgar H. Schein, *Organizational Culture and Leadership* (Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 2016).

churches and Christian institutions still unconsciously reproduce Western forms of Christianity in liturgy, music, organizational structures, and theological frameworks.

For instance, within the Batak Toba Church (HKBP), *Debata Mula Jadi Na Bolon* (the Creator God in Batak cosmology) has historically been associated with heathenism, as reflected in official church documents.[68] Nevertheless, efforts toward contextualizing the Christian understanding of God within Batak culture have emerged. Siburian proposes viewing Christ as *Debata Mula Jadi Na Bolon*, [69] while explicitly acknowledging the theological challenges such a formulation entails. This proposal requires careful dogmatic discernment to avoid conflating Christ with pre-Christian religious concepts in a syncretistic manner. Within a redemptive and critical framework of contextualization, such a confession must be understood not as a simple equation of identities, but as a christological reinterpretation that affirms continuity at the level of cultural reference while maintaining discontinuity at the level of theological content. Further theological reflection is therefore necessary to clarify how this identification can remain faithful to core Christian doctrines of incarnation, revelation, and Trinity without collapsing distinct religious frameworks into an uncritical synthesis. Then, *Debata Mula Jadi Na Bolon* and *Debata na Tolu* are not representations of heathenism but local expressions of the Triune God, with due recognition of theological distinctions. Thus, the affirmation "Christ is *Debata Mula Jadi Na Bolon*" becomes a contextual confession of faith.[70]

In this context, redemptive missiology becomes vital. Redemption here refers not only to spiritual salvation but also to cultural and historical restoration. The Gospel does not come to replace local cultures but to redeem and renew them from within. Just as Jesus became incarnate within first-century Jewish culture, so too must the Gospel take on the "flesh" of every culture it encounters. This incarnational principle lies at the heart of redemptive missiology. Postcolonial missiology calls for a re-reading of mission history with critical awareness of the power dynamics it entailed.[71] Warneck's approach to Batak religion reflects an asymmetrical power relationship; he arrived not only as a bearer of the Gospel but also as a representative of Western civilization, which presumed cultural and moral superiority. In this framework, the Batak religion was not allowed to speak for itself; it was silenced by missionary narratives that claimed theological and moral authority.

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[68] Unit Percetakan HKBP (Ed.), *Ruhut Parmahanion Dohot Paminsangon HKBP* (Sipoholon: Auditorium HKBP, 1987), 18–20.

[69] Siburian, "Konstruksi Pemahaman Kontekstual Pada Suku Batak Toba Dalam Perjumpaan Kristus Dan Debata Mulajadi Na Bolon," 21–24.

[70] Siburian, "Konstruksi Pemahaman Kontekstual Pada Suku Batak Toba Dalam Perjumpaan Kristus Dan Debata Mulajadi Na Bolon."

[71] Susan Abraham, "Postcolonial Theology," in *The Cambridge Companion to Christian Political Theology*, 1st ed., ed. Craig Hovey and Elizabeth Phillips (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 133–54, https://doi.org/10.1017/CCO9781107280823.008.

As a response, postcolonial missiology emphasizes the importance of listening to local voices. This means creating space for alternative narratives born from the lived faith of local communities. In the Batak context, this involves listening to how people understand *Debata Mula Jadi Nabolon*, how they interpret *gondang*, *ulos*, and kinship systems in light of the Gospel. This is not theological relativism, but a recognition that the Holy Spirit works within and through culture even before the arrival of missionaries.

It is important to emphasize that this postcolonial critique of Warneck's missiology is not intended as a rejection of the Gospel itself. Rather, it seeks to disentangle the Gospel from the methods, strategies, and epistemological frameworks through which it was historically mediated within colonial systems of power. The concern of postcolonial theological reflection is not the truth of the Christian confession, but how that confession became intertwined with cultural hegemony, civilizational hierarchy, and asymmetrical relations of authority. In this sense, the critique is directed not against evangelization, but against forms of mission that equated the Gospel with Western cultural norms and thereby obscured its liberating and reconciling character.

Postcolonial missiology, therefore, calls the church to listen again to local cultural wisdom, not as an alternative revelation, but as part of what Christian theology has long recognized as common grace. Such wisdom represents historically situated human responses to God's presence in the world. It may contain moral insights, social practices, and symbolic resources that can be discerned, purified, and reoriented in light of the Gospel. By recovering these local voices, the mission does not relativize Christian truth. However, it seeks to embody it more faithfully, freeing the proclamation of the Gospel from colonial forms of domination and allowing it to be received as good news rather than cultural imposition.

Furthermore, contextual and redemptive missiology challenges us to revise our understanding of conversion. Conversion is not a shift from a "false religion" to a "true religion," but a transformation of relationships: with God, others, and the world. In this framework, conversion does not require cultural abandonment but cultural renewal. One can follow Christ without forsaking cultural identity, worshipping Christ in one's own language, music, and symbols.

In practice, this demands that the church open itself to contextual forms of worship. *Gondang*, for example, need not be rejected because of its animistic associations, but can be reformed and used as a medium of praise. Although Warneck does not explicitly discuss *gondang* in *The Living Christ and Dying Heathenism*, the exclusion of *gondang* from Christian worship must be understood within the broader missionary and ecclesial policies shaped by the same theological assumptions he articulated. Historical studies of the *Rheinische Missionsgesellschaft (RMG)* and the early Batak Protestant Church indicate that ceremonial music and dance associated

with *adat*, particularly *gondang sabangunan* (music ensemble associated with ancestral and *adat* practices), were systematically prohibited among Christian converts from the late nineteenth century onward. These prohibitions were rooted in the missionary conviction that such music functioned as a medium of spirit invocation and ancestral mediation and therefore belonged to the sphere of *heathen* religious practice.[72]

Archival records and church disciplinary documents show that converts were discouraged, and at times formally sanctioned, for participating in *gondang* performances in ritual contexts. Purba's historical analysis of the *HKBP* Order of Discipline demonstrates that *gondang* became one of the most contested cultural practices within Batak Christianity, leading to a prolonged conflict between missionary-imposed norms and indigenous religious aesthetics. The eventual, partial rehabilitation of *gondang* in church contexts during the late twentieth century further confirms that its earlier exclusion was not incidental but reflected a wider colonial-missiological logic that equated indigenous ritual forms with animism and spiritual danger.

Similarly, *ulos* should not be dismissed as a magical object but reinterpreted as a symbol of love and blessing within the Christian community. This process requires honest dialogue between theology and culture, between faith and tradition. Redemptive missiology also calls the church to engage in social liberation. In a postcolonial context, this means acknowledging and addressing the structural impacts of colonialism, including in education, economics, and politics. The church must not merely inherit colonial structures but become an agent of transformation, advocating for justice and human dignity. This is part of the broader *missio Dei*, God's mission to redeem all creation.

Ultimately, contextual and redemptive missiology invites us to reimagine the church's identity. The church is not an institution that imports foreign culture, but a living community that dwells within and alongside local cultures. It is the body of Christ incarnated in every context, proclaiming the Good News in languages that resonate with the human heart. In this framework, the church in the Batak region is not a transplanted German church, but a Batak church, one that sings praises in the rhythm of *gondang*, prays in the Batak language, and proclaims the Gospel through local narratives.

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[72] Julia Byl, "'Sing, Choirs of New Jerusalem': Hymnody and Sincerity in the Christian Tobalands," in *Missionaries, Anthropologists, and Music in the Indonesian Archipelago* (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2025), https://doi.org/10.1525/luminos.223.g; Mauly Purba, "From Conflict to Reconciliation: The Case of the *Gondang Sabangunan* in the Order of Discipline of the Toba Batak Protestant Church," *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 36, no. 2 (June 2005): 207–33, https://doi.org/10.1017/S0022463405000147.

Thus, moving toward a contextual and redemptive missiology in a postcolonial perspective is not merely an academic endeavor; it is a spiritual and pastoral calling. It is a call to repent from the lingering shadows of colonial legacy and to walk alongside the people of God in the spirit of incarnation, liberation, and reconciliation. It is a call to see the Gospel not as the possession of one culture, but as Good News for all nations, embodied in every language, symbol, and cultural expression.

4. Conclusion

This study set out to examine how Johannes Warneck constructed Batak indigenous religion as heathenism and to explore what becomes visible when Batak religion is read beyond the missionary classificatory framework. The analysis has demonstrated that Warneck's use of heathenism was not a neutral theological description, but a colonial-missiological construction shaped by nineteenth-century Protestant assumptions regarding religion, morality, and civilization. Through this framework, Batak religiosity was rendered intelligible primarily as deficiency: estrangement from God, spiritual bondage, moral degeneration, and cultural backwardness.

By reading Warneck's work through a postcolonial and contextual missiological lens, this article has shown that such classifications functioned as epistemic instruments that reduced complex indigenous religious systems into singular categories of lack. When the Batak religion is approached beyond this classificatory frame, its internal cosmological coherence, ritual logic, and social-legal institutions become visible not as signs of godlessness but as historically situated religious responses that were rendered invisible by colonial modes of knowledge production. This shift does not entail romanticizing Batak religion, but rather a critique of the epistemological reduction through which indigenous religious worlds were hierarchically interpreted.

The article contributes to postcolonial missiology by demonstrating that critiques of missionary discourse need not result in the rejection of Christian mission or the Gospel itself. Instead, it argues for a contextual and redemptive missiology that distinguishes between the Gospel and the colonial methods, strategies, and epistemologies through which it was historically mediated. In this perspective, cultural forms such as *gondang*, *ulos*, and theological concepts such as *Debata Mula Jadi Na Bolon* function not as vestiges of heathenism to be eradicated, but as sites requiring critical discernment, reinterpretation, and theological engagement.

At the same time, this study acknowledges its limitations. The analysis focuses primarily on Warneck's theological writings and selected historical sources and does not attempt an exhaustive ethnographic account of Batak religious practice, nor a comprehensive survey of missionary voices in Sumatra. Further research could expand this inquiry by examining contemporary Batak liturgical practices, ecclesial

documents, and lived expressions of faith to assess how far contextual and redemptive missiology has been realized within Batak Christianity today.

In conclusion, this article argues that postcolonial missiology is most fruitful when it resists both colonial denigration and postcolonial romanticization. By attending critically to historical representations while remaining theologically accountable, contextual, and redemptive, missiology offers a framework in which Christian mission may be reimagined as a dialogical, discerning, and transformative practice grounded in the *missio Dei*.

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This study relies entirely on textual and historical analysis; therefore, formal ethical approval and informed consent from human participants were not required.

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