

Article

Inclusive Heritage: Implications for the Church of England

Renie Chow Choy^{1,2}¹ St Paul's Cathedral, London EC4M 8AD, UK; r.choy@westcott.cam.ac.uk² Westcott House, Cambridge CB5 8BP, UK

Abstract: The Church of England's historic buildings represent the single largest group of heritage sites in the UK, playing a key public-facing role in the church's 'cultural witness'. However, they are complex historic environments implicated in the recent focus on 'contested heritage' and imperial legacies. The wider heritage sector's answer to the adversarial nature of this debate has been to turn contested histories into dialogical opportunities; participatory and collaborative approaches to interpretation and curation have become an important feature of much recent secular heritage work. Yet, the CofE has not yet articulated or embraced the value of similar initiatives for its own collections, with guidance at the institutional level aimed primarily at conservation and protection. This paper initiates a discussion about how engagement with sensitive memories enhances the importance of CofE's cultural heritage. It offers a preliminary report of a research project led by the author titled 'Inclusive Interpretations of Christian Heritage', carried out between 2021 and 2022 at iconic churches in central London. After discussing the theoretical context, project rationale, and method, the paper discusses the connections which Christians from ethnic minority or immigrant backgrounds have to ecclesiastical spaces usually associated with national history. The perspectives of previously unrepresented groups can supplement expert assessments concerning a site's significance, revealing important areas in which the CofE's cultural assets hold meaning beyond national or aesthetic importance. The paper argues that widening community engagement represents a crucial task for accentuating the social and civic importance of the CofE's cultural heritage.

Keywords: heritage; contested; colonialism; postcolonial; memorials; inclusion; engagement; Anglican; Church of England



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1. Introduction

One sign of the Church of England's (CofE) central role in the public realm is the undisputed cultural importance ascribed to its historic buildings. The Church of England is responsible for one of the nation's largest collections of cultural assets, in the form of a staggering 42 cathedrals and 12,220 listed parish churches, representing nearly 45% of all Grade 1 listed buildings in England (Taylor 2017, p. 11). However, Anglican churches are complex historic environments. Recently, questions have been raised about the relation of the CofE's estates and endowments to the transatlantic slave trade and other exploitations, and about ecclesiastical monuments commemorating figures whose actions or affiliations brought suffering to other individuals.¹ Beyond these, England's central role as progenitor of global Christianity also presents deep postcolonial dilemmas: European expansionism, missions and conversion, the spread of Western values and standards, and racial hierarchies all affect social cohesion, equality, and sense of belonging (Choy 2021).

The reception to the CofE's reckoning with its imperial legacies has largely mirrored the culture wars in the public sphere: while some individuals welcome it, many others perceive this move as unpatriotic and needlessly emotional. The wider heritage sector's answer to the adversarial nature of the debate has been to redress the exclusionary impact of monumental histories and sites: if statues, like the national and authorized stories they serve, promote a one-sided history, what is needed is to turn them into dialogical

opportunities. Giving marginalized communities a voice through participatory and collaborative approaches to historical research and interpretation is now widely accepted as “best practice” in the heritage sector, crucial for helping build community cohesion and achieve civic ideals. The term “sites of conscience,” for example, was popularized in the late 1990s to describe the duty of historic places, museums, memorials, and other settings to preserve difficult, painful, and uncomfortable aspects of the past in ways that turn “memory into action.”²

However, though community engagement and their resulting co-productions, co-curations, and co-creations have been a feature of much recent secular heritage work, the CofE has not yet articulated or embraced the value of similar initiatives for its own collections. This is somewhat surprising, because the CofE stands at a distinct advantage in this regard. For in contrast to other contested historic sites such as palaces, stately homes, museums, and galleries, Christians from diasporic communities are personally invested in England’s places of worship simply by virtue of their faith: belonging is assumed on the basis of religious affiliation. This pre-existing and elective link between a collection and an audience—the envy of any heritage institution—should mean that the CofE starts from a stronger position than most other sensitive sites of memory in its capacity to promote social connections amidst contestations. However, much of this potential lies buried and little understood, with guidance at the institutional level aimed primarily at conservation and protection, and passions at the public level heated over the perceived threat to historic collections. This paper initiates a discussion about how widening engagement with sensitive memories enhances the importance of the CofE’s cultural heritage. The paper refers to a research project led by the author, titled ‘Inclusive Interpretations of Christian Heritage’. It was carried out between September 2021 and August 2022 at Westminster Abbey, St Paul’s Cathedral, and Southwark Cathedral, and made possible by a Durham University Common Awards Seedcorn Grant. As the project needed to address the funding body’s mandate of strengthening Anglican theological education, this research was necessarily limited in scope, and concerns the specific question of Christian identity and belonging within historic Anglican spaces. The following paper first establishes the theoretical context, then briefly summarizes the project rationale, method, and key insights to argue that the CofE should be confident about the value of opening up its collections to marginalized groups for new historical insights and interpretations. In particular, the paper offers preliminary indications about the ways in which previously unrepresented perspectives enrich our stories about the CofE’s historic churches: their reflections allow us to tell a deeper and more profound story about our cultural assets and reveal areas in which the collections hold meaning beyond national or aesthetic significance. In this way, widening community engagement represents a crucial task for accentuating the social and civic importance of the CofE’s cultural heritage.

2. The CofE as Cultural Heritage Guardian

The CofE has been described as “an accidental heritage steward” (Berry et al. 2020, p. S1). Listed churches are exempt from secular listed building consent, but are subject to the CofE’s internal system for the care and conservation of its buildings, churchyards, furnishings, and contents. Applications for changes to the building’s fabric are weighed against considerations of potential harm or loss caused to the site or object’s “heritage value,” largely defined in terms of architectural, artistic, historic, and archaeological merit (ibid., S2). Experts are called upon to regulate, explain, and manage heritage assets, making judgments about the meaning and importance of a site based on its esthetic importance or rarity, authenticity, and contribution to a national story (Smith 2006).

There is an increasing recognition within the wider heritage sector that this privileging of experts over communities can reinforce long-standing prejudices and inequalities by either deliberately or unintentionally suppressing versions of the past that allow subordinated groups a sense of belonging within that heritage (Little and Shackel 2016, p. 42). Conflict arises when the “official” interpretation about a site’s significance ignores how it

might be experienced by a diverse range of people, thereby offering inclusion to a certain demographic while excluding others. Practices are now promoted to prevent this dissonance and redress the inherent power imbalance between professionals and local communities. The Faro Convention adopted by the Council of Europe prefers the term “heritage community” to “heritage site” to emphasize that the value of a place comes from the affinity which a wide range of people feel for it, beyond the judgments of conservation experts.³ Furthermore, the task of heritage interpretation is now widely considered crucial for promoting civic goals such as equality and tolerance, and respect for people, places, and the environment. Building on Freeman Tilden’s (1957) classic *Interpreting Our Heritage*, Tim Copeland has made a powerful argument for a “constructivist” approach to heritage management which mediates the present experience of visitors with the complexities and challenges of the historic environment through collaboration and reflection. Far from complicating heritage sites unnecessarily, the aim is rather to arrive collectively at new knowledge and understanding, and to promote a sense of belonging and ownership which are the essential ingredients for active citizenship (Copeland 2006, 2009). Likewise, Yujie Zhu (2021) has described a “ladder of heritage interpretation” for understanding five purposes of visitor engagement, beginning first with entertainment and consumption, then secondly knowledge and fact-sharing (e.g., about events and figures), and thirdly understanding and recognition (e.g., of historical impact and legacies). However, it is co-production which unleashes the true potential of heritage tourism—the fourth and fifth rungs: imagination and reflection (e.g., about feelings and future behaviors and actions), and healing and reconciliation (e.g., from conflict, trauma, loss, shame). Thus, recent theoretical approaches challenge the view that heritage institutions and practitioners should be conservative forces for preserving static categories such as nation or tradition; rather heritage spaces should be “interlocutors and co-inventors in the creation of new social possibilities, and alternative stories about what it means to belong” (Sontum 2021, p. 44). Heritage is envisioned as “something that is done” rather than something “to have” (Smith 2006, p. 65).

Applying these theories to the CofE context would entail viewing historic churches not as “heritage sites” with fixed meanings, but as a living “heritage community” of global Christians, and embracing the ways in which this heritage community changes the meaning of a historic space. But what precisely would this achieve? The leading professional heritage interpretation provider for CofE churches and cathedrals, the Centre for the Study of Christianity and Culture (CSCC) based at the University of York, adopts a highly collaborative and locally-led approach to ecclesiastical heritage interpretation. Their projects involve lengthy consultations with stakeholders at multiple levels to ascertain the significance of the site, and volunteers are often involved in the production of interpretive content. However, the CSCC is keen to point out that writing and installing some facts about the history of a church for a passive visitor experience is easy enough; the much more difficult task is deciding what emotional response and behavioral change a building and its collections ought to stimulate. This observation suggests that though there might be support in general for the idea of diversifying audience engagement with the CofE’s cultural assets, the larger obstacle is understanding how this would substantively improve the heated and adversarial nature of the debate over contested heritage. Indeed, encouraging greater diversity in public engagement seems to require some justification, as it departs from the currently dominant conservation- and expert-led approach to the CofE’s collections, and the individuals who control, influence, and take the most interest in the church’s heritage work are still overwhelmingly drawn from the white British demographic. Put bluntly, what would be gained by encouraging minority groups to offer their views and reflections on what is frequently referred to as “the nation’s heritage”? What is the value of a dialogical approach to the CofE’s cultural heritage spaces?

3. Inclusive Interpretations of Christian Heritage

Stemming from these theoretical issues, a research project was conducted with the aim of enriching interpretations about London’s most iconic churches by revealing the

connections that Christians from ethnic minority or immigrant backgrounds have to heritage spaces usually associated with national history. The primary question was, “In what ways do their responses to a historic church differ from, or supplement, expert assessments concerning the site’s significance?”

A participatory method was crucial, for which the “autoethnographic walking interview” was selected. In autoethnographic research, the participant uses self-reflection to explore how his/her autobiographical story connects to wider cultural, social, and political questions; the life of the participant becomes a conscious part of the place or object being studied (Ellis 2008). In this way, narratives about heritage assets prioritize the participant as author and interpreter, rather than as a passive receiver of knowledge, and stresses the participants’ journey rather than the objective qualities of the site itself. Investigating historic places through autoethnographic observations can draw out tensions between the values ascribed by its living community and those enshrined in official designations by heritage agencies. The “walking interview” is similar to a tour in representing the conventional way in which heritage sites are experienced, but differs from a tour in placing the participant in the position not of “tourist” but as someone with capacity to articulate attitudes, knowledge, and responses to the surrounding environment.

Several themes emerged from 37 autoethnographic walking interviews conducted at Westminster Abbey, St Paul’s Cathedral, and Southwark Cathedral with participants ranging in age from 20s to 70s across Protestant denominational affiliations (Anglican, Methodist, Baptist, Pentecostal, congregationalist), from countries of origin in the Caribbean, North America, South Asia, East Asia, and Africa. The following is only a preliminary synthesis of some key insights which begin to reveal new ways of understanding historic ecclesiastical sites. A fuller and more detailed publication will follow in due course.

3.1. Understanding Why England’s Ecclesiastical Heritage Matters to Ethnic Minority Christians

It is difficult to overstate the fact that Christians from diasporic communities generally begin with an instinctive and positive affinity for historic churches, and are uniformly taken in by the impressive architectural beauty and incredible workmanship. Such positive feelings often come from personal autobiographical perspectives. Standing under the dome of St Paul’s, one participant said:

For my ancestors, they would never have ever imagined I’d be standing in a place like this, being in this space, surviving even . . . that this would even be allowed to happen.

Another said:

I’m just thinking about my grandmother in the Caribbean who was Anglican through her veins. She would be absolutely thrilled to know I’m walking through this place right now.

These reflections show that it is impossible to escape or underestimate the historic impact of England’s role and of Westernization. Many remarked, for example, on the transporting of the architectural form of the church to the colonies, not unlike (to use examples mentioned by participants) plug sockets or the English language itself. Upon hearing an organ, one participant from East Asia said:

Where I’m from, some people don’t think that you can have a proper church without a pipe organ It wasn’t so long ago that only the piano or pipe organ were allowed in churches. Our own instruments were considered secular.

The wooden quire stalls in Westminster Abbey reminded another participant of his childhood memories waiting for his mother while she had choir rehearsals in similar looking stalls in a former British colony. One participant saw the British coat of arms in Henry VII’s chapel at the Abbey and remarked that it is almost identical to the Hong Kong coat of arms.

The reminders of a mutually entangled history have a powerful impact. One individual said:

In my country, we have no Christian heritage sites before the English arrived. It’s not until I stand at the tomb of Elizabeth and Mary [here at Westminster Abbey] that I realize, ‘Oh so this is what it means to be an Anglican.’

Another remarked that her country's colonial administrators came and went, but seeing their monuments at Westminster Abbey made her realize "this history actually happened," that governance over colonies was not trivial or negligible for the British, but was celebrated. This made participants wish that the history told here included the stories of everyone involved:

If there is something here that celebrates an administrator in India, it's equally important to include the perspective of someone from India. These statues were at its time made for the consumption of a particular audience valorizing a particular set of people, and this history is rejected and embraced in different ways now.

One participant from the Caribbean said of St Paul's Cathedral:

For us this is the mother church, but I have to remember my family at their Anglican church back home – that was also our mother church. What's the definition of a mother church? I don't see this as being inherently higher than that, it's on the same level – ultimately the church belongs to God.

One participant, commenting that Westminster Abbey in the popular imagination symbolizes "the heart of Anglican Christianity," asked:

Why should Nigeria, which has the largest number of Anglicans in the world, not have some representation here? It would only be right for some aspect of the story of Nigerian Anglican Christianity to be told here.

Much as it is impossible to visit an Anglican church in Nigeria and not think of England, so for some, it is not right to visit an Anglican church in England and not think of Nigeria. For them, celebrating English Christianity comes hand-in-hand with acknowledging the story of Christianity in other nations.

While white British visitors can choose whether to acknowledge or disregard the history of the colonies, for ethnic minority Christians the need to think constantly about the complex and entangled histories can be mentally exhausting. Descendants of enslaved peoples in particular can never "just enjoy" the building. As one participant said:

I'm awed by this architecture. But then you start asking questions that draw you away from that initial feeling of heightened religiosity. Where did all this wealth come from, who built this, where did the gold and materials come from? How many lives were lost overseas or here to enable this greatness to be constructed?'

Another individual, reflecting about her relationship with St Paul's Cathedral, said:

I have a very strong sense of my family history which is more locally located, more socially located, outside of this grandeur, outside of this building. I don't relate to the memorials here in the same way I relate to the white-washed walls of my ancestors' church in the Caribbean, the oldest church there, knowing that my ancestors helped to build that and occupied the pews and worshipped there.

This reality, she said, means she cannot help but think outside of the official "heritage significance" ascribed to the collections at St Paul's:

These colonial monuments, it's skewed: Sure, here's an administrator of the French West Indies, here's another of the East India Company. But when I think about my home, what this represents is far more complex. It's the relationship with my ancestors, and this doesn't ever come out in the audio guide or the guidebook you get about why this monument is very important—the more complete, multi-layered history.

Contrary to assumption, the challenge posed by commemorative monuments, then, is not only the fact of historic injustices, but even more pressingly the current-day suppression of voices and of dignity they represent if left unmediated. Despite the complicated histories which bind colonizer with colonized, commemorations perpetuate the myth of a single narrative: far from simply chronicling a "dead past" as some would argue, their messages can have a painful effect beyond the immediate historical event in question, so pervasive are the legacies of empire. One participant of Indian origin paused at the memorial to

Stringer Lawrence, commander of the East India Company's troops, at Westminster Abbey, and saw the lines "For Discipline Established, Fortresses Protected, Settlements Extended, French and Indian Armies Defeated." While he had consistently spoken positively about the monuments until this point, this one prompted him to remark:

I see this and now I'm annoyed. In my town we saw these symbols of British power. You know, the clubs where only the British were allowed and so on, and my relatives who are wealthy sometimes take me to these clubs now, because when they were young, they weren't allowed in these places. My grandmother once asked, after my mother had moved to the UK in the '70s, 'Are you allowed to talk to British people?' And she couldn't get over the fact that you could.

Another participant said:

When we were in Hong Kong, my dad and I went over on the Star Ferry to Kowloon, and we looked back and he started telling me about how Chinese people weren't allowed to live on the Peak and that kind of thing stays with you. Because you realize your ancestors wouldn't have been allowed to live there.

Looking at a commemoration of the first bishop of Calcutta at St Paul's Cathedral, one participant said:

I am grateful, but this also inevitably makes me think about my family's conversion to Christianity by missionaries, and how much of it was based on a Eurocentric idea that the English were inherently better. Whether deliberately or subliminally, a whole generation of black people have grown up believing they were inferior.

Another participant coming from Hong Kong and finding herself in front of the monument at Westminster Abbey to Lord Palmerston (who as Prime Minister pursued war with China to force the legalization of trade in opium), said:

There has got to be a way of celebrating these figures and these things without muting other voices; but this is muting my place in the memory. England is a dream place I want to go to, a dream country, the place I wanted to come, there are so many things that are familiar—even the way the churches are. Where I'm from was a mini version of here. But I feel like I'm standing in front of these things and feeling again and again how it was when my mother was told that the only way I was allowed to go to school was if I had an English name, and my mother, not knowing any English names, told them to choose, and that's how I got my name. So what it feels to me is that I am holding an unrequited love: there's a love—there's a part of England that I love, but at the same time the way they speak, it is a shallow monologue which hollows out the depth and dimensions of the story that I'm written in that is in relation to them. I'm still looking for a place where I would feel acknowledged as part of the story of Palmerston and of this country.

The overall effect produced by the monuments should be acknowledged. One person remarked that these monuments cement the link between Christianity and political and military power in a stronger way than necessarily accurate or required:

For many people who were in churches in India, like some of my ancestors—their primary link was to the missionaries. They were Christians first, and their primary experience of Christianity was through the Bible and prayer and the missionaries, not through politics or the army. But suddenly we come here and see a much stronger link between empire and Christianity, it just becomes suddenly apparent. It's things like this which lend themselves to more postcolonial critique: so now I come to England, and I have to equate Christianity with empire.

Arriving at what was meant to be the highlight of the tour, the sacred site of pilgrimage, the shrine of Edward the Confessor at Westminster Abbey, one participant said:

The antiquity of this shrine doesn't compensate for what I've endured for the past 25–30 minutes walking past imperial-era monuments. The journey I've just taken hasn't prepared me to be here and be prayerful.

One participant was visibly distressed by the end of her walk around St Paul's: standing beneath a pair of monuments to Admiral Nelson and Marquis Cornwallis, both in swagger pose and accompanied by figures of Britannia with her plumed helmet and spear, she stated:

I couldn't sit here for a service anymore—I can't unsee what I've seen. I'd actually say to the steward 'I'm not gonna sit here' because this is about colonial violence.

These heartfelt remarks show us that the CofE's public—and specifically national—character often catches by surprise those whose interest in churches is spiritual. Some individuals express this in positive terms: one participant described his admiration, through reviewing the monuments to military leaders, politicians, and writers, that Christianity plays an important role in the life of the nation and is not just about transcendent faith and doctrine. Another remarked about Nelson's tomb:

In my country I had to learn about Nelson from a textbook. The teachers told me about his heroic victories at sea. How I relate to a national hero is that when I settled down in this country, he became my hero too.

However, for others, the function of churches as public spaces causes tension:

Somehow churches are so willing to assert the dominance of the earthly kingdom, while they're claiming that this is the place for everyone to come here to worship.

One participant argued that it is very important for places of worship to emphasize "the heavenly kingdom" out of respect for those who had wholeheartedly accepted the spiritual vision presented by missionaries. Confronted with the tomb of an English missionary at Westminster Abbey, his thoughts turned to Samuel Ajayi Crowther who, having spent his life converting Africans to Christianity, was removed from the Niger mission and placed under the supervision of European secretaries who were resistant to the idea of native self-determination:

He died a heartbroken, depressed man, because he realized that these people, though they preach Christianity, what they're practicing is English culture.

Sentiments such as these suggest that the CofE must make a deliberate effort to underscore that its cultural assets do not exist principally to preserve "Englishness" but to maintain the spiritual purposes to which many have converted at great cost.

For those whose interest in the CofE's churches is not ethnic or national but primarily religious, the definition of what "community" means in the context of the nation's iconic churches is necessarily spiritualized. One individual at Southwark Cathedral remarked that migration means the constant feeling of homesickness, sense of separation, and distance:

There is nothing here that reminds me of home—the colors, the scents, the fabric, the sounds . . . —which means to engage here I must detach the concept of the church as a building from the church as the people of God. I tell myself that if I'm here and I have other people here with me in worship, it is hallowed ground regardless of what it is . . . It is worshipping with people that makes a church a church.

Thus the medieval statues of saints in Henry VII's Chapel at Westminster Abbey prompt one individual to say that her sense of spiritual belonging comes from the living community of faith around her since she does not have the historical knowledge required to appreciate saints celebrated in medieval churches. Highlighting a similar barrier, another participant remarked with puzzlement on Poet's Corner:

I remember being ushered here to sit for Evensong. I saw the names and assumed they were fellow Christians before me. They are not someone important but just people who have prayed in this same space and then who were worshipping just like me, and I was overwhelmed by the sense of being connected with Christians in the past or all the forerunners before me so that I was surrounded by witnesses. But now I realize that maybe they're actually not even churchgoers, just the most significant literary writers and artists. They don't even need to be Christian even.

One individual commented that though surrounded by symbols of status and power all around the church, she knows most of the work is carried by the community, and the church is transformed by the people of that community, and that therefore:

What's in the flags, stained glass windows, statues . . . it's just 'brick and mortar'.

Such comments show the strong desire to find a sense of spiritual community in an environment comprised of historic objects or commemorations which may be alienating.

Participants were therefore inclined toward features which they felt most clearly expressed the fundamental meaning of Christianity. The Abbey's Great West Doors with the statues of modern martyrs prompted several reflections:

This is the Christian faith; it is Hebrews and Peter and Paul talking about suffering as the mark of Christianity. In this great building of power, it's important, this recognition of suffering for Christ as the benchmark.

The statues moved another participant on a personal level because of the reminder of the reality of persecution in his own country:

For me at first Westminster Abbey was just a tourist attraction. With this I found a personal link. Because otherwise for me it's all foreign. Now if I'm not Christian, this is a place where I take some photos and then leave. But because I am Christian, I'm always pushing to find out more about, spiritually, what are the meanings here that I can find. This is definitely one of them. He is here because he sacrificed not for other things but for Christ. And being a Christian myself, and connecting to this brother—I've never met him, didn't even know who he was—but looking at him links so much to what it means to be a Christian in my country.

An image of Christ in glory, a mosaic of the Last Supper, a 12th century consecration cross, medieval wall paintings of the crucified and resurrected Christ—these were pointed out as particularly meaningful objects in the churches not only because of their artistic beauty or antiquity, but because they offer “respite” (to use one person's word) from the overtly militaristic and nationalistic imagery all around, and anticipate the eternal and heavenly kingdom which binds us to each other.

3.2. Acknowledging the Dignity of Ethnic Minority Christians in Sensitive Historic Environments

The above reflections expose one very important dimension of the visitor experience at historic churches which must be acknowledged: namely, the interior cognitive processes that diasporic individuals exercise to comprehend their own presence in monumental spaces. Frequently, the lavish furnishings and opulent contents of iconic churches led participants to voice moving reflections about humility. Looking at the coronation chair at the Abbey, one participant said:

I need to be comfortable with who I am, I'm not royalty, I'm not in any family tree, I don't have a lineage that links me to anybody in a history book. Maybe I wish I was in the lineage, but it just seems so arbitrary, and social advantage likewise seems so arbitrary.

The portrait of Richard II prompted another to remark on the orb and scepter, symbols of power:

So he's Richard II, he's got a portrait in Westminster Abbey, and I'm only me. But when we're face to face with Jesus, we're both standing on the same line, so I think that's why I'm not intimidated because I give all reverence to Jesus. I'm not nothing without the Abbey or the Queen. It has a lot to do with how ethnic minorities read the Bible: we're always focused on 'this is what sets me free' . . . We're always reading Scripture for what sets me free from every kind of injustice, everyone who thinks that they can have a dominion over me, and when I read the Scripture, I realize Jesus sacrificed for me. King Richard didn't do anything for me. My faith in Jesus is so secure, so I'm not intimidated by these things.

Again, the coronation chair and portrait of Richard II led another individual to explain:

I come from a ruling family in my little village. And my daughters who grew up in Britain cannot relate because for them ruling is all about 'you've got to be the Queen of England'. They don't have any concept about what coming from a ruling family in Nigeria is, because that was all lost. What I mean by 'lost' is that the power was taken away from our ruling families and placed in the governors which the British put there on behalf of England. So my ruling family became what you call just a ceremonial figure; the ruling person no longer has any real power and command, just a figurehead But I do not walk around wanting people to recognize my royal lineage. Because I believe there is a God and I believe God is awesome, all-powerful, all-mighty, and we need to stop going around having this superiority mindset because that is the same thing that has led to many years of putting down people—women and other groups For me it's very much a case of my calling to ensure that we don't repeat the same mistakes going forward.

These remarks echo that of another who, when passing by a Bible on a lectern, spoke about how she has lived her life claiming promises from God's Holy Word. Another individual, pausing at the huge west doors at St Paul's, said:

It's a door that's bigger than my flat, I can't even take it in Do I care that this door is only opened for special people and not for me? No, probably because my parents taught me to be humble and know my station in life and be content with what I have. Not that I'm berating myself, but society does have a structure and I try not to be jealous, try to be hardworking, and as my mum says, just 'serve my generation'. So I try not to spend too much time being jealous of bishops and queens. These are values I deliberately want to maintain and cultivate because they've served me well.

Another, training to be a priest, said:

What does it mean to be a Christian? It's not about the seat of power. So the primary question for me in being a Christian is how can I, in my parish, in a small way, show a true reflection of what being a Christian means? Because for me to be a Christian isn't about belonging, or even being, in spaces like this.

Many individuals were prompted by objects suggestive of wealth and status to reflect on their own life history. One said:

Of course I'm not acknowledged individually in this place. But I've never done things for the acknowledgement. I've grown up with not having a lot, and making do with what I had. So I'm quite proud of myself for where I've got to, because it has all been my own hard graft. Nothing was given to me. My dad was a laborer and my mom worked in a brewery and then she was a carer. And I didn't think I'd ever get to university And I can say everything I have, I have worked for—I've not been gifted it, I haven't inherited it, so I'm really proud of myself for getting to where I am, which goes toward my self-assurance, because I depend on nobody to give things to me or hand things to me. And God knows I'm here. God sees me.

These all point to the psychological work which many individuals do in the face of monumental buildings and histories. As one participant remarked upon entering St Paul's Cathedral, many people of color can recall a time when they've been told "You're so black, or you're so brown," or, on the contrary, "you're so white [i.e., you're not black or brown enough]"—and both are acts of racialization to which one is particularly sensitive when entering cultural spaces such as abbeys and cathedrals. One individual said whilst looking at the monument of Trahearne, a porter to James I, in Southwark Cathedral:

You know, I understand what is going on when I come into a room that's a 'white space', a space like this cathedral. It's not just observation, it's surveillance: I'm watched. And I understand sometimes the energy of the room changes when I come in because it's like 'he's a big black guy' and this then adds a type of resolve: I'm just going to resolve to make this space work for me. This means doing something as silly as looking at this monument and wondering about hygiene: how did people bathe back then. Just to humanize it all.

Another, prompted by the lofty and stunning nave of Westminster Abbey, said:

I am supremely impressed by this place of Christian worship—it is uplifting. But having said that, I am also conflicted. I'm just going back to the idea that whatever worship looked like in Nigeria, when missionaries arrived that was interrupted and denigrated and there was a loss of history, a loss of culture, and it destroyed the record of my people's search for God and their relationship to God, their theology.

We must therefore not ignore the disorientation some feel when surveying ecclesiastical objects. Remarking on commemorations and statues, one participant said:

We were warned so strenuously against idol worship. So English missionaries taught my people to be wary of figural representations and I'm now here surrounded by statues applying this skill and it's very uncomfortable. Why was it wrong in Africa to put up statues of people in churches but right here?

Another participant from the West Indies said:

Of course I get that this space is not supposed to be 'alienating'. But why is it alienating? Because you're asking people to see art and culture that can only remind them of what that culture represented to their grandparents and to their ancestors. You know for my ancestors all this art here would have represented oppression or abuse. You know there was a point in history when black people were considered to not even have the intellectual capacity equal to white people to appreciate the sort of art here. We were literally considered to be cattle at one point in history. So with me looking around at all of this stuff, I can appreciate it for its present beauty, but then I think about it historically and what it would have meant for the people of that time . . .

But another, looking at a monument related the East India Company, admitted:

By skin color and my surname I have more in common with the Indians who were on the receiving end of the East India Company's actions. But by my education and the way I view the world, well I've been raised here and even my grandparents were schooled in British India, in British education, and in British manners and the British worldview. So the way I view and experience the world, I have more in common with the people who were there with the Company than I do with the Indians who I might look more like. So I can recognize the greed, the evil aspect of the corporation . . . but I struggle with feeling 'us vs. them'—'Indian vs. Brits'. I can relate to both, although I don't find much to admire in the behavior of the East India Company. But, simply to the extent that they were Britons as I now am and they saw the world in a British way, well I had their eyes even if I had the skin and hair and surname of the people they were colonizing.

The range of tension and contradictions which surface highlight how historic churches are complex rather than straightforward environments for ethnic minorities and diasporic groups. Thus, it becomes even more imperative to understand the role of personal faith in such spaces. One person said:

It's my faith that draws me into this building, not its fame.

Another said:

My faith in Christ means I'm always trying to resolve the contradictions, not magnify them. To see how all the different sources of influence in my life came together and made sense together . . . I think the Christian worldview should go against having very nationalistic groupings of things or trying to pigeonhole as a way of separating . . . you know, are you being intentionally this race or that race, intentionally adhering to this culture or that culture.

However, as another said, this comes at a cost:

My faith means that I will experience a place like this very differently from a typical tourist. That means even my own parents who follow traditional beliefs and who don't speak English . . . And they don't get the reasons I'm interested in this history, and my parents may regret that they have sent me away—to create a figure that they're not familiar with. It is awkward.

Thus, historic churches prompt something deeper than a simple enjoyment or admiration. This is perhaps clearest in the powerful reflections about service and vocation prompted by historic churches. One participant stopped at the statue of the first bishop of Calcutta, Thomas Middleton, to reflect on following God's calling as a missionary. Another was visibly moved by the presence of Nelson's tomb beneath the dome of St Paul's. Thinking about Horatio Nelson dying for his country, and looking up at the scenes from the life of St Paul painted on the interior of the dome, he remarked:

I have spent 60 years as an Anglican minister and none of it has been easy. An archdeacon quoted a traditional saying to me once, 'It appears that you always only get the bare bones, no meat. I will pray that you won't choke on the bones . . . '—meaning that my life was very hard, and he prayed I would survive. I worked in very difficult churches overseas, churches with no property and no money. I had to beg for even a candlestand and beg for an electric piano. And in the end, I can't entirely say that my ministry was successful. So this has been a healing pilgrimage for me to talk to you about my life in ministry, in this place where I encountered the tomb of someone who died for his country, and a church dedicated to a saint who worked very hard and dedicated his whole life for Christ.

These remarks should not be easily glossed over, for what they reveal is the ability of individuals to tolerate or even overlook challenging aspects of the environment in order to sustain sentiments centered on faith, hope, and vocation. As one person said:

I'm a person who believes you can change anything—because what I'm focused on is the imprint I can make now. So I try not to feel oppressed by these invisible voices saying 'you know there's more of us and more of our history and we have more property and you will always be at the margins'. No, because I know my purposes are good purposes and we're going to have to utilize all of that good intention and what has to happen must happen because the world needs to change.

Every individual interviewed found something in the ecclesiastical environment which led them to reaffirm their commitment to bettering the church and society through their involvement in varied areas of service in local communities, parishes, businesses, charities, the education and health sectors, and so forth.

4. Conclusions: The Value of the Dialogue

In spaces where the usual activity of visitors is to listen to the audio guide, read a guidebook, or follow a tour guide, this research has flipped the teacher/student relationship on its head and encouraged visitors to lead, direct, and speak—activities which enabled a deeply reflective way of experiencing historic churches. Perhaps many in charge of guarding the CofE's historic collections are anxious about what may emerge when those who, not being experts, break out of their position as passive heritage "consumers" and begin to voice responses and views. This research has shown the type of insights that such engagement would produce. Perhaps the most moving insights were those revealing how even monumental spaces, where strident symbols of historic domination dwarf (literally, in most cases) their audience, can prompt an individual to reflect on his or her own personal resolve in the face of past or present injustice. For one person, the sight of imposing floor-standing candle stick holders and the wrought iron sanctuary screen at St Paul's caused him to think about his strong sense of compassion toward others in the face of public displays of power and wealth:

I have an innate understanding that all people have a right to be treated with respect and dignity. I've always fought for that . . . I've always been against the treatment of people in ways that diminishes their humanity . . . There was one time when I was about five or six years old, and I was playing with a friend of mine and I got a bit rough and I hurt him and he started crying. And I remember looking at him and I remember saying to myself on that day, 'Never ever again will I use my force or my strength to hurt somebody'. Because I absolutely hated that moment . . .

Each individual brings his or her own conscience, ethical views, and sense of personal calling to an environment: this sort of sensitivity explains why the above participant had a particular response to candlesticks, or why another participant looked at the quire stalls organized by clerical rank and said:

I'm very comfortable with not laying claim to symbols of position or status, because I think you lose something the minute you do.

Once again, such remarks reveal how the CofE's cultural assets function as "sites of conscience" where an individual's moral compass is exercised.

The discussion about the contemporary social meaning of our cultural heritage has often been reduced to a debate about whether we ought to be "proud" or "ashamed" of Britain's history, turning heritage sites into tests of patriotism. But this is to underestimate the civic potential of historic churches. In contrast with the heyday of empire when churches promoted narratives for national and imperial formation, their purpose today transcends nationalism, just as Christianity today transcends national boundaries. One participant's observations about the statue of Wang Zhiming, a pastor killed during China's Cultural Revolution, demonstrates the power of memorialization when it is permitted to cross national boundaries:

There's no public or state recognition of persecution, of what he did in China. There's no memorial to him there. But unbelievably you can find one here, in this institution which is a proxy for British culture. So when I saw this I became very emotionally attached to this place. It's so much emotion and history behind that statue which we can't find in China, which was actually the motherland of this person. So you learn something here which you would never learn in China because it's just not part of our education.

In the wider geopolitical context, as former colonies confront their postcolonial identities and reassess their relationship with the English monarchy or the Commonwealth, the need to talk about shared pasts in ways which surpass nationalism on both sides becomes ever more crucial. One participant, reflecting on the memory of Englishness in India and its association with Christianity which many people are now strongly rejecting, contemplated:

I used to be very very vocal about nationalism and decolonialization. But nowadays seeing how this rhetoric can be coopted by Hindu [supremacist] nationalists and actually used against minority Christians, that changes the way I look at things Sometimes people take refuge in the myth of the single narrative: Christianity, empire, oppression, all one story But nationalist narratives today deny this complexity We need to be more watchful.

Recalling the historic ties of former colonies to England and Western Christianity therefore, and perhaps counterintuitively, takes on increased importance, because it is the rejection of this history by supremacists which leads to the wholesale rejection of Christianity, and to the persecution of Christians. When Christians around the world are suffering for their faith, there is a moral imperative for this country to show that its Christian heritage goes beyond national interests.

Thus England's historic churches must not today convey the meaning that so many monuments do by their inscriptions—a message of victory, domination, supremacy, all enabled by God's providence on behalf of England. Unmediated, the toxicity of imperial monuments and opulent furnishings lies in their talking *at* participants who already come with the baggage of historic subservience. One participant paused at the marble monument to Charles Holme at Westminster Abbey, an admiral who had been active in her native country of Jamaica in the 18th century, which features a large cannon:

It's practically directly firing at the shrine of St Edward. It's about power, even down to the rope underneath the cannon, and it's completely out of proportion. I'm not offended because I'm putting history into perspective. But the only thing it's got to do with Jamaica is that the fleet was stationed in Jamaica, and it was a fight. There's nothing here that is particularly about the island or the people. So yes, Jamaica's mentioned, but there's nothing in this that promotes a connection to Jamaicans.

The cannon is a useful imagery for capturing the nature of the dilemma here. For it is not just that representations of military arsenal are arresting inside a church: if the discomfort were simply owing to general ignorance today about the importance of historic battles for securing peace and freedoms, that could be easily addressed by an information panel. However, a metaphorical cannon is also fired every time a marginalized community's experience is dismissed in favor of an authoritative pronouncement about the historic, artistic, or national importance of a cultural asset. That the CofE still prefers top-down definitions about the meaning of its cultural heritage rather than community-generated ones is apparent in the recent judgment rejecting the application to remove a memorial to Tobias Rustat, a seventeenth-century benefactor who had invested in the Royal African Company, from the chapel at Jesus College, Cambridge. In Section 9 of the judgment, Deputy Chancellor Hodge argues that:

whilst any church building must be a 'safe space,' in the sense of a place where one should be free from any risk of harm of whatever kind, that does not mean that it should be a place where one should always feel comfortable, or unchallenged by difficult, or painful, images, ideas or emotions, otherwise one would have to do away with the painful image of Christ on the cross, or images of the martyrdom of saints.

He goes on to say,

Whenever a Christian enters a church to pray, they will invariably utter the words our Lord taught us, which include asking forgiveness for our trespasses (or sins), 'as we forgive them that trespass against us.' Such forgiveness encompasses the whole of humankind, past and present, for we are all sinners; and it extends even to slave traders.⁴

Setting aside Deputy Chancellor Hodge's ecclesiological or theological views as well as his decision, what ought to be noted is his authoritative pronouncement about the correct function of a memorial in a chapel—something to the effect of, "church buildings necessarily contain uncomfortable things, things which may require us to exercise forgiveness." The assertion assumes that it is the non-experts who need to learn something about the function, purpose, and intended effect of monuments in churches—a stance also assumed in the Burlington Magazine's editorial on the Rustat judgment. Here, the author writes that "art and architectural historians must realise how much work needs to be done to correct misapprehensions about church monuments, even in a place as well informed as a Cambridge college might be assumed to be," by which is meant that people need to learn that monuments "are not ornaments in a building that can readily be removed but are integral elements of its historical and cultural significance."⁵ The rich collections in English churches are certainly a source of endless fascination which cannot be easily dispensed with. However, we underestimate the power of the CofE's cultural assets when a small group of custodians are able to tell a living heritage community what it needs to learn, and how its perspectives need to be corrected. This is to replicate what imperial monuments themselves do.⁶

The crucial step now is to permit a heritage community to change the very meaning of historic collections—even as they remain in situ, as most of them will. As one individual said, reflecting on the materials of churches—marble, wood, stone, glass—which speak to her of the many invisible people who both directly and indirectly contributed to the construction of the English CofE's achievements, victories, and heroes:

The whole thing about marginalization is that your stories aren't heard or told and therefore I am interested in those stories. And wasn't that quintessentially what colonialism did? It didn't acknowledge the contribution of the individuals within the country, within that colonial state to the British Empire. We failed to acknowledge the people that suffered and that labored—don't we owe it to them to do that even if it's uncomfortable, controversial what happened? One of the things I have thought about is 'How do I, in my being present here, acknowledge the thousands of people that contributed to this?' This informs my sense of vocation and also my sense of belonging: In this place of wonderful grandeur, how can I honor by my presence here every tear, every drop of blood, every drop

of sweat? My presence acknowledges it, and that's part of our interdependence as human beings. This is why I love this building, I think, because it's not just superficial beauty.

Not just superficial beauty, because churches are not themselves “monuments” which are endangered by non-expert views and identity politics. Ecclesiastical collections are invaluable and worth preserving, not so they can induce nostalgic pride for a powerful empire: let that be the job of heritage collections in palaces and stately homes. But *ecclesiastical* heritage has a uniquely constructive potential, because its essential character resists monologue. Attracting a global community of invested and interested persons by virtue of a shared faith, historic churches are *shared* heritage spaces, and as such their significance can only be deepened, enriched, and extended by dialogue. “Widening engagement”—a social mandate now embraced in many heritage institutions but still yet to be largely adopted by the CoFE—is, of course, the *raison d'être* of the Christian church as a whole. Furthermore, the Christian church from its earliest days has always nurtured the relationship between the living and the dead in order to anticipate a blessed, just, and peaceful future. The heritage value of churches must include the experiences of those around the world who, despite persecution, historic injustices, and persistent inequalities, have nevertheless taken up the faith.

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Notes

- ¹ See Church Commissioners for England, ‘Church Commissioners’ Research into Historic Links to Transatlantic Chattel Slavery’, 2023. Available online: <https://www.churchofengland.org/sites/default/files/2023-01/Church%20Commissioners%20for%20England%20-%20Research%20into%20historic%20links%20to%20transatlantic%20chattel%20slavery%20-%20report.pdf> (accessed on 6 March 2023).
- ² International Coalition of Sites of Conscience website: <https://www.sitesofconscience.org/> (accessed on 6 March 2023).
- ³ Council of Europe Framework Convention on the Value of Cultural Heritage for Society, Faro, 27 October 2005. Available online: <https://www.coe.int/en/web/conventions/full-list?module=treaty-detail&treaty-num=199> (accessed on 8 March 2023).
- ⁴ ‘Application Ref: 2020-056751 in the Consistory Court of the Diocese of Ely before the worshipful David Hodge QC, Deputy Chancellor, in the matter of the Rustat Memorial, Jesus College, Cambridge’, 23 March 2022. Available online: https://www.jesus.cam.ac.uk/sites/default/files/full_judgment_of_deputy_chancellor_hodge_qc.pdf (accessed on 6 March 2023).
- ⁵ Editorial: The Rustat Memorial, *Burlington Magazine*, Vol 164, No. 1430, May 2022.
- ⁶ For guidance on considering the impact of monuments on a congregation or community, see ‘Contested Heritage in Cathedrals and Churches’, guidance issued by the Church Buildings Council and the Cathedrals Fabric Commission for England, 2021. Available online: https://www.churchofengland.org/sites/default/files/2021-06/Contested_Heritage_in_Cathedrals_and_Churches.pdf (accessed on 6 March 2023).

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