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Recontextualizing Christian practice in the American South : Interracialism discourse in the work of Clarence Jordan (1912-1969)

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Introduction

Clarence Jordan (1912-1969) was a white Southern Baptist minister who advocated social equality in the United States from a Christian stance. A native of Georgia, Jordan saw firsthand the social injustices and inequalities of racial segregation that was prevalent in the American South of the Jim Crow era. Increasing modernization and industrialization allowed unprecedented material affluence for some ; yet, social dislocation and unequal opportunities left many poor and socially disconnected. Clarence Jordan believed that the mainstream society and church culture of his time failed to follow the principles of Christian life as taught in the Bible.

Jordan insisted that the Gospel of Jesus Christ needs to be proclaimed in ways that are relevant and meaningful to contemporary people, in both word and deed. Calling American society to faithfully put into practice the message of Jesus Christ, Clarence Jordan established Koinonia Farm in 1942 in Americus, southwestern Georgia. Koinonia (Greek word for *fellowship*) Farm became an intentional community promoting racial integration, simple living, pacifism, sustainable agriculture and Christian community life. Koinonia Farm was thus intended to

become a “demonstration plot for the Kingdom of God”.[1)]

In addition, Clarence Jordan actively promoted Koinonia ideals through sermons, talks and his own translations of the New Testament. Having a degree in agriculture (University of Georgia) and a PhD in New Testament (Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, Kentucky), Jordan translated from the Greek language most of the New Testament to produce his *Cotton Patch Gospel*, a colloquial version set in the rural South of the 20th century. Through his “Cotton Patch” sermons and translations, Clarence Jordan sought not merely to represent the American South, but to influence the mentality of the people of his time and thereby promote social change along the lines of the principles incarnated in Koinonia community.

This paper is part of a project to elucidate the discourse strategies which Clarence Jordan employs in some of his texts to challenge attitudes and institutions in US society. Related to this project, Koinonia Farm has been introduced as a case study within the course of Society and Culture of America at the School of Intercultural Studies of Seinan Gakuin University in Fukuoka, Japan.[2)] The focus of this article will be on the ways in which Jordan recontextualizes Christian practice in his texts to resist racial discrimination in the American South.

The theoretical framework of the article draws on insights from discourse

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1) For studies on Clarence Jordan and Koinonia Farm see, for instance, Chancey (1998), K’Meyer (1997), Lee (1971), Snider (1985).

2) Professor Karen J. Schaffner introduced the topic in this course (アメリカ社会文化論 *Amerika shakai bunka ron*) since 2012, motivated by the study of groups and individuals who fought to achieve the ideals of freedom and equality in the United States. This involved collecting and studying a large array of both primary and secondary sources on Koinonia Farm and identifying the main themes in the material.

Since 2015, I joined the project out of an interest in alternative Christian communities in modern North America and their associated discourses, focusing here on the discourse strategies employed in some of C. Jordan’s texts. I wish to acknowledge my deep appreciation to Professor Schaffner for her invitation to join the project, for the materials she kindly facilitated me, and for carefully reading and commenting on this paper.

studies, a perspective that sees discourse as both social representation and social practice. Taking the Cotton Patch Gospel version of the Parable of the Good Samaritan and Jordan's sermon "The Substance of Faith", we explore recontextualization as an overarching discourse strategy that involves the matching of locations, events, characters, social relations, institutions, cultural practices and power structures. The analysis shows that it goes beyond merely matching sociocultural items, for Jordan employs other strategies which connect the Bible stories with 20th century US society and by which the characters of the stories become agents of social change.

By studying the texts of Clarence Jordan, we can learn about racial relations in 20th century Southern society. Furthermore, Jordan's choice of Christian sources to reorient the prevailing attitudes and values of a culture largely informed by Christianity, provide an interesting case to understand the ways in which alternative discourses draw upon mainstream cultural themes to reshape the larger society.

Koinonia's proposal as discourse

Clarence Jordan's attempt at both representing the American South and influencing the mentality of his audience through his texts provide a case for exploring his Koinonia proposal as discourse. From the perspective of discourse studies, discourse is a form of language use and social interaction, which communicates ideological opinions, as well as a means to change social structures and relations. Particularly, critical discourse analysis (CDA) focuses on the relation between text, ideology, and racial inequality. Within CDA, van Dijk's (1993) approach conceives discourse in relation to society (social structures, groups, interactions, institutions, etc.) and social cognition (group values, attitudes, beliefs, ideologies). Text structures employed in a specific discourse are shaped by both social structures and social cognition. On the other hand, texts within a discourse can be structured in such a way as to shape social reality and social cognition.

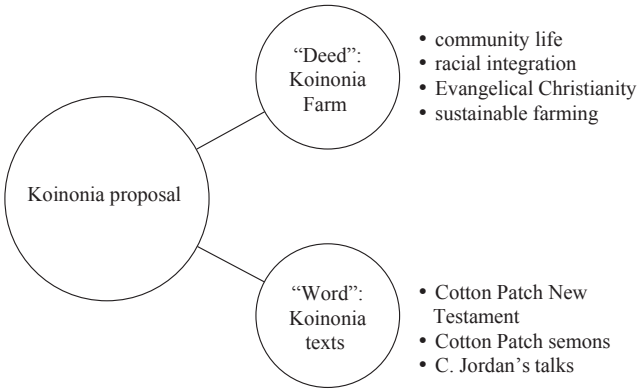

Fig. 1. Two ways of conveying the Koinonia proposal : in "deed" (Koinonia Farm) and in "word" (Koinonia texts).

Discourse analysis focuses thus on exploring the specific ways in which text structures function as social representation and social practice. CDA, in particular, pays attention to the text structures that reflect and influence ideologies of power and racial relations.

As mentioned above, Clarence Jordan maintained that the Gospel of Jesus must be proclaimed meaningfully in both word and deed, which in the Koinonia proposal correspond, respectively, to his "Cotton Patch" texts and the community life at Koinonia Farm (see Fig. 1).

It is possible to take the "word" dimension of Koinonia proposal as discourse, inasmuch as it both represents American society and attempts to influence social groups and their mentalities, especially in the South (see Fig. 2). Koinonia's proposal interacts with an array of forms existing in American social cognition, particularly ideologies, group values and attitudes fostering racial discrimination and individualism, which appear in opposition to racial equality and community life. Other competing ideologies in the US at that time were secularism and liberal theologies, to which Koinonia faced with Evangelical Christian tenets. The text

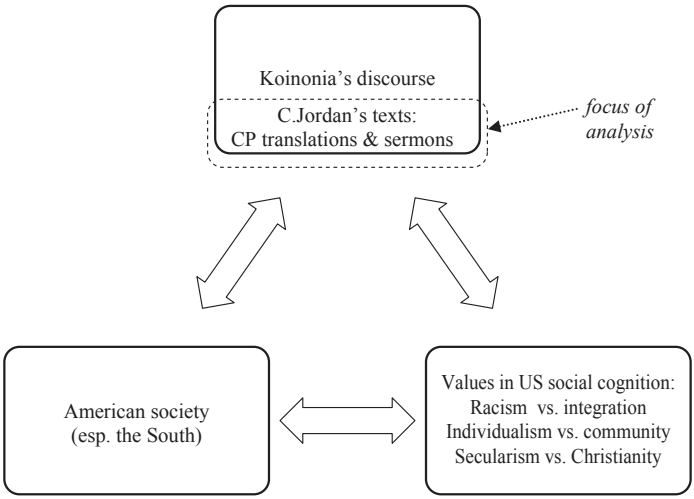

Fig. 2. Koinonia's proposal as a discourse interacting with American society, especially the South, and competing group values and ideologies in US social cognition. C. Jordan's texts constitute the interface between Koinonia's discourse and American social reality.

structures in Clarence Jordan's translations of the New Testament, his sermons and his Cotton Patch versions of the Parables of Jesus constitute the interface by which Koinonia discourse interacts with social groups and their worldviews.

CDA has often been applied to uncover the discursive sources of dominance and inequality, notably to analyze the discourses that reproduce and perpetuate the ideologies of racism. In this paper, however, we intend to analyze rather the ways in which discourse is actively used to challenge dominant ideologies and relations of racial inequality. We will pay attention to the text structures which, from Koinonia's Christian stance, both reflect and intend to challenge racist ideology and relations. Specifically, the analysis will focus on two texts by Clarence Jordan : the Parable of the Good Samaritan in the Cotton Patch Gospel of Luke, and the sermon "The Substance of Faith".[3)]

Recontextualization as overarching discourse strategy in the Cotton Patch texts

Much of Koinonia Farm's activism took place during the period of the Civil Rights Movement in the 1950s and 1960s. Clarence Jordan had met Martin Luther King, Jr. ; he had preached in King's church and even stayed for a week at King's home in 1958. However, although Jordan shared King's vision for some time, Jordan eventually disagreed with the Civil Rights Movement's confrontational approach to challenge race inequality. In Jordan's opinion, the Civil Rights Movement's activism could bring to an end racial segregation in public spaces, yet whites and blacks could still hate each other and continue to hold racial prejudice in their minds (see Chancey 1998, pp.178-179).

For Jordan, it was then necessary to change the minds of the prejudiced people, which required communicating in ways that could be meaningful to them. Giving the strong influence of Evangelical Protestantism in Southern culture, the Bible and the life of Jesus functioned as a common language. It only needed to be rendered in the very terms of the language and culture of 20th century Southern society, and such cultural and ideological translation Jordan sought to achieve in his "Cotton Patch" texts.

In the Cotton Patch Gospel, Israel/Palestine becomes the United States, or even more specifically, the American South. Jesus' life and preaching ministry take place in the state of Georgia : he was born in Gainesville [Bethlehem] and was laid in an apple box [manger] ; he lived in Valdosta [Nazareth], after returning from Mexico [Egypt] ; and he was baptized by John in the Chattahoochee River, in the border between Georgia and Alabama. John the Baptist was the son of Reverend Zack

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3) The Parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10 : 25-37) is from *Clarence Jordan's Cotton Patch Gospel. The Complete Collection*. Smyth & Helwys, 2012 (with an Introduction by Jimmy Carter ; Foreword by Will D. Campbell ; and Afterword by Tony Campolo).
The sermon is from *The Substance of Faith and other Cotton Patch sermons by Clarence Jordan*. New York : Association, 1972 (edited by Dallas Lee).

Harris [priest Zacariah] and his diet in the countryside of Georgia was typically Southern : he ate corn bread and collard greens—in place of honey and locusts which he had in the Judean desert. The Sea of Galilee in northern Palestine becomes Lake Lanier in the northern part of Georgia, whereas Jerusalem becomes the state capital city of Atlanta. Jewish religious places like the synagogues become Christian churches ; Israel's religious feasts become church conferences ; and Jewish religious leaders are translated as Protestant ministers.

From the New Testament, Clarence Jordan also translated Paul's Epistles and the General Epistles, those letters that the apostles sent to Christian communities in the early church that were scattered in what is present-day Greece, Rome, Turkey and the Near East. In the Cotton Patch version, these letters are addressed to churches in Washington [Romans], Atlanta [Corinthians], the Georgia Convention [Galatians], Birmingham [Ephesians], the Alabaster African Church of Smithville, Alabama [Philippians], Columbus [Colossians], and Selma [Thessalonians].

But Jordan's effort is not limited to merely matching places and items of Palestine with the US. For him, social equality is at the heart of Jesus' life and preaching, and this needs to be clearly conveyed to his Southern audience. In the Cotton Patch texts, Jesus is proclaimed as "a light to illuminate the problem of races" (Luke 2 : 23).

The Cotton Patch Parable of the Good Samaritan

In the original Bible passage, the story is located in Palestine/Israel, on the road between Jerusalem and Jericho. In the Cotton Patch version, the incident took place somewhere on the road between Atlanta, Georgia's state capital, and Albany, a city in the southwest of the state. Taking the injured man to a hospital in Albany suggests that this was the closest city, which places the scene nearby Americus and Koinonia Farm. The story is thus brought as close as possible to the audience

	King James Version / (MSG)	Cotton Patch Gospel
Characters	Jesus lawyer (religious scholar) a man thieves priest Levite Samaritan host (innkeeper)	Jesus teacher of adult Bible class/Sunday school a white man gangsters white preacher white Gospel song leader black man nurse
Locations	from Jerusalem to Jericho	from Atlanta to Albany
Other items	(road) raiment beast (donkey) passed by on the other side inn two pence (silver coins) I will repay	highway wallet and brand-new suit car stepped on the gas [to hurry] scoot [to go quickly] hospital the only two dollars I'll settle-up (…) when I make a pay-day

MSG : *The Message* Bible version is added to clarify some entries from the King James Version.

Table 1. Comparison of the Parable of the Good Samaritan in the Cotton Patch Gospel with other Bible versions (King James Version and occasionally, *The Message*).

Jordan is addressing. It did not happen in a far land in the Middle East, but right here in America, in Georgia, and probably in Americus.

Certain elements in the Cotton Patch version place the story in a contemporary period of time, such as the use of cars and the existence of facilities like the hospital—instead of a donkey and an inn in the original Bible passage, respectively (see Table 1). To enhance the immediacy of the events in the story both temporarily and geographically, Clarence Jordan employs several linguistic forms and idioms pertaining to American English (e.g., "step on the gas", meaning "to hurry") and to informal language (e.g., "scoot", meaning "to go quickly").

The presentation of the characters intervening in the story further situates the incident in American society. Among the characters in the original New Testament passage, there are three religious specialists : an expert in the Jewish religious law

("a lawyer"), a priest, and a member of the Levi tribe which was in charge of temple worship (Levite). These were religious offices within Judaism in the time of Jesus. Paralleling this, the religious persons portrayed in the Cotton Patch version are commonly found in American Protestant churches : respectively, a teacher of a Sunday school/Bible class, a preacher (of the Christian Bible), and a Gospel song leader.

The religious ministers in the Cotton Patch version are all white people, as well as the victim of the attack. By contrast, the person who assisted the victim is an Afro-American ("a black man"). This racial profile corresponds to the ethnic divide presented in the original Bible story, in which the religious specialists are Jews, whereas the assisting person is a Samaritan, a member of an ethnic group from the Samaria region, nearby Judea. These two ethnic groups lived side by side in ancient Palestine but did not have good relations between themselves. Although they lived in close proximity, they maintained social distance, avoided talking to each other and even regarded one another as enemies. Jesus denounces the hypocrisy of the religious people of his time, who knew that at the core of Jewish religion was the command to love the people around, and yet rejected and discriminated against their neighboring Samaritans.

The racial profile in the Cotton Patch version mirrors this situation of avoidance, exclusion, segregation and interracial conflict in the American South. Despite such a culture of racial discrimination, it is the racial other who comes to rescue the victim. Just as the Samaritan did not vacillate to help the Jewish person, so did the Afro-American not spare his time, efforts and resources to assist the white man. In both versions of the parable, the man who helped the victim promises to pay for any additional costs involved. However, the Cotton Patch version adds that the black man would pay such additional costs when he makes "a pay-day", implying that he will need to work to get that money. Jordan presents this man as going a step further than the original version, for the helper is willing to do for the

victim even that which is beyond his actual financial possibilities. To help the injured white man, the black person is giving all he has, and even more.

It is the segregated and the excluded that are presented in this parable as an example to reverse the culture of racial discrimination. It is such people who put truly into practice the core principle of love that is at the core of Jesus' message.

Cotton Patch Sermons as discursive practice : "The Substance of Faith"

The Scripture reading for this sermon is from chapter 3 of the Epistle to the Hebrews (="Hebrews"). Rather than a letter properly, Hebrews is a sermon addressed to early Christians whose faith was weakened after facing trials and opposition from enemies of Christianity. To encourage them to continue in the faith, Hebrews draws largely on the Old Testament. Chapter 3 is a warning against behaving like ancient Israelites did, who chose to ignore God despite having received clear instructions through their leader Moses, and whom God rejected for their disobedience. It calls disoriented Christians to carefully consider and follow the life and work of Jesus Christ, lest they too be rejected.

For his sermon, Clarence Jordan uses the Cotton Patch translation of the New Testament. As usual, it is rendered in contemporary language and informal style. Here, expressions like "partakers of the heavenly calling" are translated as "partners in the spiritual assignment" ; Moses is presented as "God's deputy" ; and Jesus, "the Apostle and High Priest of our profession", appears as "the founder and leader of our movement". The informal style conveys a sense of closeness and reality, with God getting "sick and tired" with Israel, "thoroughly fed up with that bunch", that "whole gang" who "died like flies" before reaching God's "destination", because of their disobedience and unbelief.

Further recontextualization occurs as Jordan make comments on the Scripture reading. First, Jordan provides the Old Testament context of Hebrews 3, which

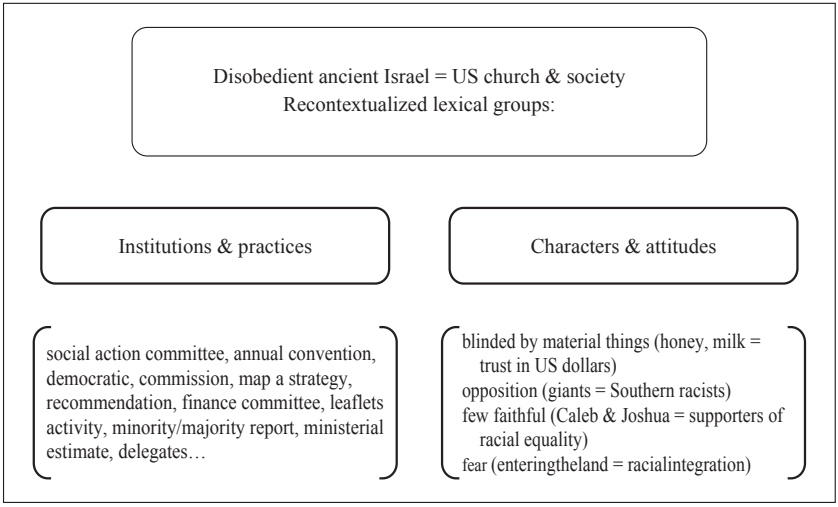

Fig. 3. Matching disobedient ancient Israel (Twelve Spies story) with US church and society through recontextualized lexical groups (institutions, practices, characters, attitudes).

refers to the Twelve Spies episode.[4] But Jordan soon connects the Old Testament story with the church and society of his own time (see Fig. 3). The twelve spies become "delegates" who are sent to the "annual convention", a typical general meeting in Protestant bodies—such as the Southern Baptist Convention. There they made a "ministerial estimate". The majority of the delegates were "very impressed"

4) According to this story recorded in the Book of Numbers (13 : 1-33), after they came out of Egypt, the people of ancient Israel reached the borders of Canaan, the Promised Land, which God had told them through Moses to take possession. So they decided to send twelve spies to explore the land and bring back a report. They recognized the material abundance of the country, but ten of them emphasized the existence of giants and the difficulties these posed to enter the land, thereby giving a report that discouraged most of the people. Yet, Caleb and Joshua, the other two spies, chose to trust in God and encouraged the people to join them. The people, however, decided to believe the report of the ten spies and did not obey God's command, for which reason God punished them to wander in the desert for 40 years until their generation died. Only Caleb and Joshua remained, leading later a new generation to Canaan.

with the prosperity they saw, but in their report they stressed the presence of "giants". Jordan argues that their distorted vision on material things blinded them to the spiritual things. He comments in an ironic tone that being "democratic" and "practical", the people decided to accept the "majority report" and "postpone this venture". Instead, they had "study courses" on giants, appointed a "social action committee" to "map out a strategy", made the "recommendation" to distribute "leaflets", and set a "finance committee" to "raise funds". Yet, all their "activities" were merely "excuses" ; they did not take God seriously. So God "got upset" with them. These are all terms and expressions loaded with negative connotations of bureaucracy and proceduralism, and which apply to modern institutions and church practices rather than the tribal ways of ancient Israel.

Lexical groups appear further recontextualized as Jordan frequently alternates the personal pronouns between *they* (the Israelites) and *we* (Jordan and his American audience). Since in the Bible narrative the pronoun *they* stands semantically in opposition to God when the Israelites choose to disobey His commands, the binary opposition extends equally to the *we* vs. *God* pair. There is also alternation of verbal tenses, between past tense when using the pronoun *they* and present tense in the case of the pronoun *we*, a syntax choice that collapses the temporal distance between the time of the Bible story and the 20th century.

To make this connection more explicit, Jordan provides direct reference to US society to suggest that just as the Israelites' vision became distorted with the abundance of "honey", "milk" and "grapes" in Canaan, similarly contemporary North American society puts more trust on US dollars and material possessions than on God.

Later on in the sermon, Jordan relates the case of a pastor in a Baptist church in North Carolina who seriously believed the Gospel's message of social equality and therefore chose to preach and promote racial integration. Like Caleb and Joshua—the "minority report" observers—who outstood from among a disobeying, unfaithful

majority, this pastor and his racially integrated church had to face their own "giants", namely, opposition from racists and the prejudices imbedded in Southern culture. The characters and social attitudes in these illustrations thus clearly convey Jordan's calling to racial equality and integration as a *radical* yet faithful way of Christian practice.

Concluding remarks

In his attempt at recontextualizing the Gospel of Jesus in the 20th century American South, Clarence Jordan replaced a large array of cultural items from the original Palestinian setting of the Bible to the US, covering places, events, social relations, religious institutions, beliefs, social practices, economic activities and power structures. Linguistic choices that render the text in Southern accent further situate the story in the new setting and brings it closer to the audience.

But beyond this contextual matching of items, Clarence Jordan sought to influence the racist social cognition and promote social change. In his texts, characters become agents of social action towards racial equality. Already in the original Parable of the Good Samaritan, the choice of characters suggests Jesus' intention of using them not simply as characters of a story, but as agents of social action (the Samaritan). With the arrangement of the other characters, Jesus criticized the Jewish religious leaders for failing to fulfill the sacred commandments which they so zealously preached. In the Cotton Patch version of the parable, such discursive function takes a more specific orientation toward interracial reconciliation in the American South. The other characters that remained passive in the story (white religious leaders) are implicitly denounced as hypocrites for failing to act according to the core principles of the religion they represent. Jordan's translation has Jesus clearly calling white religious people to put into practice the commandment of loving their neighbors by ending the racial divide and becoming

concerned with the needs and problems of black people.

In the sermon the "Substance of Faith", Jordan connects the Old Testament story of the Twelve Spies with the church and society of his own time, through recontextualized lexical groups loaded with negative connotations of bureaucracy and proceduralism. Syntax features such as alternation of personal pronouns and verbal tenses contribute to collapse the temporal distance between the time of the Bible story and the 20th century. The use of illustrations and references to modern US society more explicitly make the point that contemporary church and society behave similarly to the disobedient, unfaithful ancient Israelites of the story, giving more importance to material things than to spiritual ones, refusing to be *radical* in their commitment to God and failing to become "Christ's partners".

Through all these discourse choices, Jordan shows that in God's perspective, to radically live the Christian life involves practicing racial integration, even when this means being a minority among a majority that places personal material interests over the needs of fellow humans. Future studies should address additional discourse strategies by which Koinonia texts interact with the American social cognition, particularly in regards to the contents of Christian faith.

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