



Common Ground Journal

Perspectives on the Church in the 21st Century

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South East Asian Church Responses to Challenges Faced in the Age of Globalization

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Common Ground Journal (CGJ) is a publication of the CanDoSpirit Network and is published twice annually as a resource for Christian congregations seeking to understand and faithfully live out their calling as the people of God in the world. The primary audience for CGJ is thoughtful Christians in congregations who are catalysts for growth within their own churches.

CGJ is devoted to the development of strong, faithful churches whose life and ministry grow out of the church's nature as the people of God. They are organized and led in a manner consistent with their nature and mission. They continually ask, "What does it mean to be a sign of the Kingdom of God in the world today?"

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- Articles that stimulate thinking and reflection on the nature of the Church
- Articles that link the nature of the Church to its life and work in the world
- Articles that explore the integration of theology and social sciences in relation to life and work of the Church

- Essays on truths gleaned from the interplay of theory and practice, theology and experience in the active life of faith
- Articles that present insights from congregations attempting to live out their identity as the people of God in world
- Articles based on responsible qualitative research designed to inform a local congregation's understanding of its life and ministry
- Articles that raise questions that the Christian community needs to explore in becoming the people of God in the world
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From the Editor

By Calvin Chong

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South East Asia represents a significant geographic region in Asia. Comprising Myanmar, Cambodia, Laos, Thailand, Vietnam, Malaysia, Brunei, Indonesia, East Timor, Philippines, and Singapore, the region has been subject to economic and cultural globalization, political and social upheaval, technological and communications revolutions, rapid urbanization, poverty and famine, flood and earthquake. While the degree of change may vary for different countries, the impact is felt deeply by all at ground level.

What are some of the changes experienced as a result of globalization and national development? How have the churches and Christian organizations responded? What counsel is available from Christian leaders and thinkers from or familiar with South East Asia as they reflect on the implications for Christian worship, nurture, and outreach? This issue explores the ground level realities faced by a sample of countries located in South East Asia.

Daniel Low and Rhonda McEwen examine how shifts in Singapore's religious and social landscape is challenging Christian identity and traditional educational practices of the church. They explore how Wenger's "Communities of Practice" can be usefully deployed as an educational strategy to help the church negotiate its identity, extend its participation in the community, and foster learning that is sensitive to contextual realities.

Lisman Kolamaldi addresses the disjunctions that work against a holistic view of faith and life within the Christian community in Singapore. He points to tensions and polarities that come about when over-emphases and priorities are given to "mind and reason" over "heart and humility" and vice versa. Addressing the false dichotomy, he calls for greater connections between the different facets of our humanity and shares how the initiatives of the Fellowship of Evangelical Students aim at holism and the integration of mind, heart and action.

Natee Thanchangpongs examines the recent 2011 floods that devastated central Thailand and provides a critique of the dark side of economic globalization and free market capitalism. After presenting a case for Christian social responsibility and holistic missions, he examines how the Thai churches measured up in the face of the floods before presenting useful suggestions that urge the Thai church toward a deeper commitment to integral missions.

Paul De Neui expounds on the concept of *missio Dei*, highlighting not just the *sending* aspect but also the *transforming* aspect of the concept. Adopting this theological principle as a guide, he calls for the church to resist the two extreme positions when relating to the world: *cultural osmosis* and *cultural alienation*. Instead, he advocates for a position of living faithfully in the tension between the two, remaining prophetically intelligible in society, and being bonded by the transforming experience of Christian *communitas* aligned with *missio Dei*.

As we read this small collection of articles, we cannot but notice shared concerns and common threads. The most prominent ones include a) the call for Christian faith to be holistic and integrated, b) the plea for the church to be more engaged in the affairs of the polis and c) the urge for greater attention to be given to Christian social responsibility.

It is these emphases together with the many other insights penned that this particular issue brings as a special contribution from South East Asia. It is hoped that the articles will spawn dialogues and responses as readers work out the implications for church life, pastoral and community responsibilities, Christian education, missions, work and family life, and personal lifestyle.

About the Editor



Calvin Chong is the Academic Dean of the School of Theology (English), Singapore Bible College. He received his Ph.D. in Educational Studies from Trinity Evangelical Divinity School in 2007. He worships at Covenant Community Methodist Church where he serves in both the Worship and Missions ministries. Calvin is married to Cheh and has two boys Asher (20) and Justin (17).

Renewing Christian Community Identity and Educational Strategies Through Communities of Practice: Considerations for Singapore Churches

By Daniel Low and Rhonda McEwen

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Abstract

Singapore has adopted a selective approach in response to the impact of globalization. This approach has brought about shifts within the island's social and religious landscapes. In turn, these shifts are creating challenges for the local Christian identity and educational strategies. This article pertains to the relevance of Wenger's Communities of Practice (CoP) in helping Singapore Christians renew their identity and educational strategies in the face of these challenges.

Introduction

The tentacles of globalization have penetrated virtually every political, economic and social structure around the globe,¹ with the accelerated diffusion of market capitalism, liberal humanism and information technology.² Singapore is not isolated from these effects. Since independence, it has been transformed by the Peoples' Action Party (PAP)-led government into one of the most globalized nations in the world.³ However, the effects of globalization have not emerged *carte blanche* in Singapore due to the PAP's policy of "selective globalization",⁴ where various facets of economic

¹ Ulrich Beck, *What is Globalization?*, trans. Patrick Camiller (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2000).

² Carver T. Yu, "Forging Evangelical Identity: Integration of Models of Theological Education in the Global Context" in *After Imperialism: Christian identity in China and the Global Evangelical Movement*, eds. Richard R. Cook and David W. Pao (Eugene: Pickwick Publications, 2011), 220.

³ Singapore took top spot between 2005 and 2007 on A.T. Kearney Globalization Index. In 2010, she ranked third on Ernst and Young's Globalization Index.

⁴ Terence Chong, "Singapore: Globalizing on its Own Terms," *Southeast Asian Affairs*, 2006, 266.

globalization (e.g., financial regulations, migration) are encouraged for economic sustainability; while other “unwholesome global commodities” (e.g., civil liberties, pornography) are curtailed to protect an Asian conservative society.⁵

This selective approach has resulted in shifts within Singapore’s religious and social landscapes, which in turn pose challenges for the Christian community’s identity⁶ and education paradigm. How should the community respond to these challenges? This article will delineate these shifts and challenges and then suggest that Wenger’s Communities of Practice⁷ (CoP) provides fresh perspectives for the Christian community to consider in response to the challenges.

Shifts in Singapore’s Religious and Social Landscapes

Although Singapore is committed to a pluralistic model of governance, the society has long been multi-ethnic, multicultural and multi-religious due to its strategic location at the intersection of various civilizations, cultures and religions.

Religious Landscape

With the diverse representation of almost every major religious tradition in Singapore and strong religious identification among the population, global and local developments have inevitably “put the spotlight on religion, and raised issues concerning religious identity, inter-religious relations and their impact on social cohesion.”⁸ Within the limited confines of this article, the shifts within Buddhism and Taoism will be examined.

⁵ Chong, “Singapore: Globalizing on its Own Terms”, 266. Chong labels “selective globalization” as an “oscillation between being globally open and locally particular.”

⁶ Robbie B.H. Goh, “Christian identities in Singapore: Religion, Race and Culture between State Controls and Transnational Flows,” *Journal of Cultural Geography* 26, no. 1 (February 2009): 1-23.

⁷ Etienne Wenger, *Communities of practice: Learning, Meaning, and Identity*, (New York: Cambridge, 1998).

⁸ Lai Ah Eng, “Introduction”, in *Religious Diversity in Singapore*, ed. Lai Ah Eng (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2008), xliii.

Presently, Buddhism and Taoism are experiencing revival and have the highest number of adherents within the Chinese population.⁹ This resurgence is brought about by two factors. First, there is a renewed confidence among the Chinese community (especially the Mandarin-speaking segment) due to the government's reassertion of "Chineseness" in light of China's meteoric rise as a global economy powerhouse. According to Tan, "Chineseness" points to the increasing prominence placed on Chinese language and culture within the local socio-cultural and political landscape by the ruling elites.¹⁰

Second, proponents of Buddhism and Taoism see the need to respond to what is often interpreted as aggressive proselytizing approaches by the Christian community¹¹ with inaccurate portrayals of these religions. Recent examples of the latter that made headlines include Pastor Rony Tan's insult of Buddhist and Taoist beliefs and NUS (National University of Singapore) Campus Crusade for Christ's gaffe over advertisements promoting mission trips to Thailand and Turkey.¹² Thus, these religions

⁹ Tong Chee Kiong, *Rationalizing Religion: Religious Conversion, Revivalism and Competition in Singapore Society*, (Boston: Brill, 2007), 1; Singapore Department of Statistics, *Census of Population 2010 Statistical Release 1: Demographic Characteristics, Education, Religion and Language*, (Singapore: Department of Statistics, Ministry of Trade and Industry, 2010).

¹⁰ Eugene K.B. Tan, "Re-Engaging Chineseness: Political, Economic and Cultural Imperatives of Nation-Building in Singapore," *The China Quarterly*, no. 175 (September 2003), 751-774.

¹¹ Kuah-Pearce Khun Eng, *State, Society and Religious Engineering: Towards a Reformist Buddhism in Singapore*, 2nd ed. (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2009), 271. See also See Guat Kee, "Building Bridges Between Christians and Muslims: A Personal Journey" in *Religious Diversity in Singapore*, ed. Lai Ah Eng (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2008).

¹² Channel News Asia, "Pastor's comments on Buddhism/Taoism "inappropriate and unacceptable": MHA", accessed February 23 2012 <http://www.channelnewsasia.com/stories/singaporelocalnews/view/1036211/1/.html>, Jessica Lim, "NUS orders Christian group to stop all activities on campus", accessed February 23 2012, http://www.straitstimes.com/BreakingNews/Singapore/Story/STIStory_769329.html

have rejuvenated Chinese cultural and nationalistic elements¹³ and also embarked on a process of rationalizing or intellectualization by eliminating superstitious elements and re-focusing on “philosophical and intellectual aspects.”¹⁴ All these go to demonstrate that they will not “idly stand by while its members are drawn away”.¹⁵

Another shift in the religious landscape is the emergence of “transfiguration of forms” and “hybridization of meanings” within Chinese religions. The former is defined as “the changing of forms of practices without the shift in essential meanings,” and the latter as “the change in meaning with little change to the forms of religious practice”.¹⁶

As traditional religions collide with modernity (e.g., urbanization and nation-building) and other cultural systems within a multi-racial and multi-religious society, these processes demonstrate the religions’ innovative capacity to overcome the emerging anxieties in order to help their adherents grapple with the challenges of everyday life. Examples include the transformation of Chinese religious meanings and forms into a “fantastical spectacle” during the annual Chingay procession and the rise of reform Taoism and Buddhism.¹⁷

Social Landscape

To remain globally competitive, the Singapore government has consistently reiterated the need for foreign professionals and workers. Although the local populace has periodically expressed its unease to the government over the dramatic increase in the number of immigrants, it vigorously unleashed its dissatisfaction during the recent

¹³ Kuah-Pearce, *State, Society and Religious Engineering: Towards a Reformist Buddhism in Singapore*, 249.

¹⁴ Tham Seong Chee, “Religious Influences and Impulses Impacting Singapore” in *Religious Diversity in Singapore*, 23. See also Tong, *Rationalizing Religion* and Kuah-Pearce, *State, Society and Religious Engineering*.

¹⁵ Tong, *Rationalizing Religion*, 267.

¹⁶ Daniel P.S. Goh, “Chinese Religion and the Challenge of Modernity in Malaysia and Singapore: Syncretism, Hybridisation and Transfiguration,” *Asian Journal of Social Science*, no. 37 (2009), 113.

¹⁷ Goh, “Chinese Religion”, 125.

General Elections.¹⁸ While the government has promised to slow down immigration, the number of foreigners remains significant in our social landscape.¹⁹

Despite rapid economic globalization, governance remains largely conservative.²⁰ With the government's proven track record in bringing about sustained economic growth and stability in every aspect of social life,²¹ many Singaporeans are content to entrust the running of the nation into the reliable hands of the PAP and focus instead on the pursuit of affluence. This concern for material wellbeing has resulted in complacency towards social and political issues, both nationally and internationally.²²

Challenges Towards the Christian Community's Identity and Educational Strategies

The identity of the Christian community in Singapore occupies an "uncomfortable position".²³ This position is primarily attributed to Christianity's close alignment with colonial rule and culture, having arrived immediately after Sir Stamford Raffles established the island as a British port in 1819. At the same time, many non-Christians perceive the community's growth as having been largely achieved at the expense of winning converts from other Asian religions.²⁴

¹⁸ Donald Low, "Post GE: What went wrong?", accessed September 29 2011, https://wiki.smu.edu.sg/gto/Post_GE:_What_went_wrong%3F.

¹⁹ As at June 2011, Singapore consists of 1.39 million non-resident foreigners and 3.79 million Singapore residents, see "Latest Statistical News", accessed September 29 2011, <http://www.singstat.gov.sg/>.

²⁰ Donald Low, "A Reform Agenda for a Reformist Government", accessed September 30 2011, https://wiki.smu.edu.sg/gto/A_Reform_Agenda_for_a_Reformist_Government.

²¹ Tong, *Rationalizing Religion*, 2.

²² Randolph Kluver and Ian Webber, "Patriotism and the Limits of Globalization: Renegotiating Citizenship in Singapore," *Journal of Communication Inquiry*, no. 27 vol. 4 (October, 2003), 381, accessed October 4, 2011, doi: 10.1177/0196859903255779.

²³ Goh, "Christian identities in Singapore", 8.

²⁴ Goh, "Christian identities in Singapore", 8.

Present Identity and Educational Strategies

Christian practices in Singapore continue to be heavily influenced by Western expressions of the faith.²⁵ The community is frequently identified as “highly educated”, “English-speaking”, “cosmopolitan” and “middle/upper class”²⁶ and its educational paradigm often embraces the latest and most popular Western teachings.²⁷ Mandarin-speaking churches, in adopting these teachings, weave the translated versions into their programs with few attempts to contextualize.

Thus, Wan challenges Chinese Christian leaders to re-evaluate a range of issues (e.g., evangelism methods, worship styles and theology) and formulate approaches that are biblically valid and culturally relevant. For example, evangelism within the Chinese context needs to incorporate cultural values such as honor, relationship, and harmony instead of emphasizing arguments that are rationalistic and lineal-logical.²⁸

Present Challenges

What are the present challenges confronting the Christian community’s prevailing identity and educational strategies?

²⁵ Choong Chee Pang, “Globalisation and the Church” in *The Challenge and Impact of Globalisation- Towards a Biblical Response*, eds. Tong Suit Chee and Allan Wong (Singapore: Graduates’ Christian Fellowship, 2002), 47.

²⁶ Kuah-Pearce, *State, Society and Religious Engineering*, 273; Goh, “Christian identities in Singapore”, 11.

²⁷ Daniel K.S. Koh, “Resident Aliens and Alienated Residents” in *Pilgrims and Citizens: Christian Social Engagement in East Asia Today, Christianity in Series: I*, ed. Michael N.C. Poon (Adelaide: ATF Press, 2006), 136. Examples include Rick Warren’s *The Purpose Driven Life*, Nicky Gumbel’s *Alpha Course* and Cesar Castellanos’ *G12 Vision*.

²⁸ Enoch Wan, “Christianity in the Eye of Traditional Chinese” and “Practical Contextualization: A Case Study of Evangelizing Contemporary Chinese”, accessed Dec 5 2011, http://www.missiology.org/new/wp-content/uploads/2011/01/Christianity_inthe_eye_of_traditional_chinese_July_19991.pdf and http://www.missiology.org/new/wp-content/uploads/2011/01/Practical_Contextualization_evangelizing_Contemp_chinese_march_20001.pdf

First, the Christian community's intimate association with European or American culture and tradition perpetuates the myth that Christianity is Western.²⁹ Thus, it alienates itself from the Chinese population, especially the Buddhists and Taoists. The learning paradigm is also alienated due to the lack of incorporating local or implicit theologies, which are to be found in how Christians live out their beliefs in a multiracial and multiethnic society.³⁰

Second, social stability and individual prosperity, together with the prevalence of Western forms of Christianity, have caused the Christian community to focus largely on individual concerns and problems (e.g., investing large amount of time and resources into activities or programs, buildings and staff) and remain largely detached towards public engagement and betterment of society and nation (e.g., in the effective assimilation of immigrants into Singapore, inter-religious dialogues).³¹ This inwardness is reflected in its educational focus which has largely fallen behind the evolving religious and social dynamics within the Chinese population. In order to address this gap, DeBernardi argues that churches need both "education and dialogue, including the continuation of inclusive inter-religious dialogues".³²

Communities of Practice (CoP)

According to Wenger, CoP is a social learning theory that assumes the fundamental process of learning and identity formation as situated in the active and

²⁹ S. Dhanabalan, "The Church in Singapore – Time to distance from the West?", *Graduates' Christian Fellowship (GCF) Bulletin November 2003*, accessed October 4 2011 from <http://www.gcf.org.sg>

³⁰ Simon Chan, "Folk Christianity and Primal Spirituality: Prospects for Theological Development" in *Christian Movements in Southeast Asia: A Theological Exploration*, ed. Michael N.C. Poon (Singapore: Armor Publishing), 17.

³¹ Mathew Mathews, "Negotiating Christianity with Other Religions: The Views of Christian Clergymen in Singapore", in *Religious Diversity*, ed. Lai Ah Eng. See also Edmund Chan, "Globalisation and the Church- A Response" in *The Challenge and Impact of Globalisation*, eds. Tong and Wong, 54; Choong, "Globalisation and the Church", 50.

³² Jean DeBernardi, "Global Christian Culture and the Antioch of Asia", in *Religious Diversity*, ed. Lai Ah Eng, 138.

mutual interaction between humans through their participation in the shared enterprises and practices within their particular communities (e.g., in the offices, classrooms, factories, etc.).³³ As they participate and negotiate the meaning of their actions, reification – i.e., the creating of and passing on a common repertoire of resources and things (e.g., expertise, objects, stories, etc.) meaningful to a particular community – takes place.³⁴

The shared interest and mutual and regular engagement in joint endeavors and transference of expertise lead Wenger to conclude that CoP is an age-old phenomenon. It is everywhere and we “belong to communities of practice ... several ... at any given time”,³⁵ either as core or peripheral members. For example, an individual who is a scientist, mother and artist belongs to different communities of practice. At work, she works with other scientists on a common problem, at home she and her husband negotiate ways to raise the children and during her free time she cooperates with other artists to put up an exhibition. Thus, learning and identity formation are not distinct activities that take place within institutionalized learning structures, but are embedded within an individual’s social participation.

Utilizing CoP

It is not surprising that Wenger’s CoP resembles the learning and identity formation processes of the early Christians. A brief survey of Scripture reveals that these processes took place within their daily experiences and ongoing participation in social practices: dining (Mt 9:10, Lk 10:38, Acts 2: 46), traveling (Mt 9:35, 12:1), worshipping in the temple (Acts 2: 46) and connecting with people (Acts 2: 47). Thus, Jesus did not

³³ Wenger, *Communities of Practice*, 4, 45.

³⁴ Mark Seaman, “Birds of a Feather? Communities of Practice and Knowledge Communities,” *Curriculum and Teaching Dialogue*, no. 1 & 2, vol. 10 (2008), 270. See also David I. Smith and James K.A. Smith, “Introduction: Practices, Faith, and Pedagogy” in eds. David I. Smith and James K.A. Smith, *Teaching and Christian Practices: Reshaping Faith & Learning* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2011), 13.

³⁵ Wenger, *Communities of Practice*, 6.

create “another organized religious system parallel or counter to the synagogue”³⁶ that dislocated his followers from their existing communities.

What new perspectives can Wenger’s approach offer to the Christian community in Singapore in light of the present challenges discussed above?

First, it encourages Christians to live as brokering agents³⁷ within their existing CoP (e.g., at work, in their neighborhoods, schools, etc.) instead of heightening the prevailing unease about the community’s disjunctive position. According to Wenger, brokering involves the processes of creating connections, translation, coordination and alignment between perspectives and across CoP. Wenger argues that if brokers or brokering agents possess adequate legitimacy within their existing CoP, they “open new possibilities of meaning” in the development of practice.³⁸

While God is actively redeeming and reconciling his creation so that the various elements of creation (e.g., humans, economics, education) fulfill the purposes for which they were created,³⁹ Christians are also entrusted with the ministry of reconciliation (2 Cor 5: 18-19). Thus, through living and interacting in a redemptive manner in our existing CoP, we are able to sensitively move these communities towards God’s kingdom.

This approach could give rise to an educational approach that effectively integrates local narratives, issues, and questions into the study and proclamation of God’s Word. Learning also becomes emergent and meaningful for both Christians and their CoP as it evolves according to the uniqueness of each locality.

Second, it encourages a reconsideration of *ekklesia*’s simplicity as demonstrated by Jesus and his followers instead of committing huge financial resources to fund

³⁶ David S. Lim, “Catalyzing “Insider Movements” in Buddhist Context” in *Family and Faith in Asia: The Missional Impact of Social Networks*, ed. Paul De Neui (Pasadena: William Carey Library, 2010), 39.

³⁷ Wenger, *Communities of Practice*, 109.

³⁸ Wenger, *Communities of Practice*, 109.

³⁹ Bruce Bradshaw, *Change across Cultures: A Narrative Approach to Social Transformation*, (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2002), 84, 91.

elaborate buildings and programs and employ multiple staff members.⁴⁰ This approach, in tandem with an educational strategy that incorporates local issues, will bring about an identity that is indigenized. As Christians move away from institutional forms that are shaped by the West, they are able to build deep and authentic relationships, establish shared narratives and histories and develop mutual trust within their existing CoP.

Third, it encourages Christians to actively engage the practices and issues in their existing CoP instead of investing enormous amounts of time and energy into church programs that are often divorced from the surrounding sociocultural context. This approach will bring about an authentic identity as Christians bring their spiritual gifts and talents to bear upon the challenges and needs arising in their CoP, thereby introducing God's transformative *shalom* into every layer of Singapore society.

Fourth, it encourages the development of local strategies to realign content (what is learned) and process (how content is learned and transmitted) with context (realities in existing CoP) instead of continuously importing resources from the West. This approach will bring about an educational approach that is contextualized, one that responds appropriately to the evolving local theologies and socio-religious realities within Singapore.

Conclusion

Singapore's selective responses to globalization have brought about challenges for the island's Christian identity and educational strategies. The prevalence of CoP in human society and their resemblance to the simplicity of the early church holds value for the Christians as we consider an appropriate response to the challenge of globalization. May our actions and words reflect Christ's humility (Phil 2:8) in a globalized and affluent nation.

⁴⁰ Choong points out that a medium-sized congregation of around 400 hundred members is able to finance a church building or extension project that costs several million Singapore dollars. He notes that these "financial resources and commitments are rare even in the first world". ⁴⁰ Choong, "Globalisation and the Church", 49.

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Building Deep Christians: Mind and Heart in Action

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www.commongroundjournal.org.

Abstract

This article addresses the tensions and polarities (e.g., mind and reason/heart and humility) that work against a holistic view of faith and life within the Christian community in Singapore. The author calls for connections between the different facets of our humanity and shares how the initiatives of the Fellowship of Evangelical Students aim at holism and the integration of mind, heart and action.

Introduction

The intellectually inclined, reason-driven person is often perceived as arrogant and self-righteous. On the other hand, the warm, humble hearted individual is often presumed to be unintelligent and slow-witted. The persuasive and compelling Christian apologist is detached from the daily struggles of life. The relational and pastoral hearted Christian minister fails to offer reasonable responses to intellectual challenges. These contrasting portraits represent both perceptions and realities that are commonly encountered within the Christian community.

Those on the quest for developing the Christian mind use the tools of logic, eschew the subjective, and despise whatever reason cannot digest. They examine doctrine and dogma as a matter of intellectual, philosophical and scientific inquiry and pay special attention to the intricacies of intellectual precision. These are the “people of the mind.”

On the other hand, those who pursue character-shaping Christ-likeness are often grounded in the realities of everyday living and interact with people and as a matter of habit and priority. For these, practical living and the imitation of Christ are more crucial than concerns of content. They possess godly character and radiate an inner exquisiteness coming from within. Their preoccupations focus on living out Christian virtues along life’s spiritual journey. These are the “people of the heart.”

It is often said that the “people of the mind” derive their heritage from western philosophical cultural influences while the “people of the heart” find their roots in the eastern belief systems. This stereotype has polarized the two groups, and here in the

global, city-nation Singapore, where “east meets west”, the tension could not be more real.

This stereotyping is divisive and suggests that we must either pursue a “discipleship of the mind” or a “discipleship of the heart” and that we can’t have both at the same time. In this, the wisdom articulated by Pascal that “the heart has its reasons that the mind cannot comprehend”¹ is lost to the sharp polarity between mind and heart.

The stereotyping is also extensive and impinges on the life and ministry of the church. One local church in Singapore claims that grasping right Christian doctrine is the recipe to the godly life. When mind and reason are set right, the other aspects of life will follow accordingly. This priority of the mind is shown in the ministry emphasis of the church where intensive courses on theology and doctrine are regularly offered. Not surprisingly, attention to personal inner life experience is given less emphasis and reflection on spiritual journeys with God are given low priority, sometimes even deemed as subjective and baseless exercises.

On the other hand, another church tradition emphasizes experiential spirituality and widely promotes spontaneous expression, discovering the inner self, and faith as feeling. Rationality and the exercise of the mind are deemed secondary and even demeaned in favour of the formation of spiritual intuitions and being in touch with one’s inner emotions.

Must this be an either-or problem where members of the Christian community must either settle for the Christian-less mind or be the mindless Christian?² Do Christians and the churches have to be splintered in this manner? This article argues that the predicament falls prey to “the fallacy of the false dilemma” where opposing positions are presented without consideration for a middle ground. It moves on to argue for the affirmation of deep and thoughtful actions, humility of heart, and the visible exhibition of Christian life and faith.

¹ *Mind on Fire* . . . the book remains an inspiring and thoughtful proposition for all the skeptical and indifferent in Pascal’s era. A good edited version is done by Dr James M. Houston, published by Bethany House Publisher, 1997.

² The phrases are borrowed from Carl Truemann in “What Is Mindless Christianity?”, *Themelios* Vol 32 Issue 3 (May 2007): 1-4.

Intellectual Mind and Humble Heart: The Fallacy of False Dilemma

Fallacies are logical flaws that arise in deceptive or erroneous arguments. There are two basic types of fallacies: formal and informal³, with the “fallacy of false dilemma” falling into the latter category. The “fallacy of false dilemma”⁴ involves an argument in which only two opposing options are offered while other likely alternatives are suppressed or ignored.⁵ Evidence of this fallacy is frequently exhibited in debates which pit one idea against the other; for example, being over doing, quality over quantity, faith over evidence, God’s sovereignty over human freewill, evangelism over social action. In fact, the key to resolving the dilemma is to search for plausible alternatives where apparently opposing ideas can be held together in creative tension.⁶

The proposal for addressing this dilemma is thus explored in this article. Can Christians embrace the different facets of our humanity at the same time? What prevents us from pursuing different virtues and excellences in tandem? Below we explore biblical responses that reconcile the differences by affirming both the intellectual mind and the humble heart.

Consider two biblical verses which taken together affirm the middle way. The first is from Paul’s letter to the Philippians.

Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus. Philippians 2:5 (ESV)

What is Paul’s objective in instructing the Philippians on having the mind of Christ? In the verses that follow, Paul describes Christ from the incarnation until His costly obedience to the point of death (Phil 2:6-11). Christ fully comprehends His

³ An excellent explanation of these two type of fallacies can be read in Norman L. Geisler and Ronald M. Brooks, *Come, Let Us Reason* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1992), 81-118.

⁴ Also known as the fallacy of false choice, false dichotomy, or the either-or fallacy.

⁵ Norman L. Geisler and Ronald M. Brooks, *Come, Let Us Reason* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1992), 110-111, also see http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/false_dilemma.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 110.

divinity, yet did not take advantage of this equality. Instead, He made Himself nothing and took the form of a human and a servant. Paul thus challenged the Philippians that if Christ was willing to go so far to humble Himself, how much more as sinful creatures should this spirit of humility be practiced in their lives. This is the mind of Christ that the Philippians should have.

In other words, to model the mind of Christ is indistinguishable from living out a life of humility. Matters of mind and heart are not mutually exclusive. Commenting on the Philippians 2 passage, Carl Trueman notes: “In this passage, the essence of the Christian mind is not cast in epistemological categories. . . . Rather, the accent here is on humility. . . . The Christian mind is above all the humble mind.”⁷

True humility begins with an accurate understanding of self and of God. This is a point underscored by Calvin in his *Institutes of the Christian Religion*: “Without knowledge of self, there is no knowledge of God and without knowledge of God, there is no knowledge of self”.⁸ However, in keeping with Christ’s exemplary life of obedience, these two facets of understanding must be accompanied by a willingness to submit to the plan and calling of God in our lives. Correct understanding of self and God coupled with humility and obedience frees God’s people to be used as He calls. God never calls His people to be or do everything; however they must be or do everything that He calls them to do. To carry this out consistently throughout our lives requires both intellectual responses of the mind as well as emotional responses of the heart.

The second passage to consider is from the Epistle of Peter.

But in your hearts regard Christ the Lord as holy, always being prepared to make a defense to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you; yet do it with gentleness and respect . . . 1 Peter 3:15-16a (ESV)

It was to members of a suffering community, the “elect exiles of the dispersion” (1 Peter 1:1) that the Apostle Peter called for a response of the heart. Christ should be the

⁷ Carl Trueman, What Is Mindless Christianity?, *Themelios* Vol 32 Issue 3 (May 2007), 2.

⁸ John Calvin, *Institutes of The Christian Religion*, John T. McNeill editor, Book 1 Chapter 1 (Louisville, Westminster: John Knox Press, 2006), 35-38.

Lord, set apart and sanctified in their hearts. Now while having the Lordship of Christ in their hearts would have been evidenced in their daily lives, it is interesting that Peter took a further step to instruct God's elect to use powers of reason to defend the hope that they possessed.

When Peter wrote his letter in the early days of the church, Christians were hated and suffered persecution under both Roman rulers and Jewish religious authorities. Peter was convinced that no matter how blameless their lives were and how much suffering they had to patiently endure, there was still need for Christians to articulate clear reasons to their persecutors for their continued insistence on the Lordship of Christ. In this way, the intellectual mind coupled with a heart of courage and humility served as impactful witness.

This point is similarly emphasized by Robert Leighton who noted that “If a Christian sanctifies Christ in his heart, the tongue will follow and will be prepared to give an answer (*pros apologian*), a defense or apology”.⁹ Both the “sanctification of the heart” and “the readiness of reason” coexist as channels of God's grace. Again, we conclude that the Bible provides no place for a dichotomy between the two.

Other verses in the Bible may be recalled to support the conclusion that choosing between the intellectual mind and the humble heart is indeed a false dilemma. If this is the case, how then should Christians live and pursue the two virtues?

Cultivating Deep Minds, Hearts, and Actions

The expressions of excellent mind and humble heart must be manifested in the deeds and actions that bring *evangelion* and *shalom* to the world and which, in turn, generate transformation wherever we are. To wholly obey what Jesus refers to as the great commandment – to love God and neighbor with heart, mind, soul, and strength – both seeds and promotes the growth of the whole and deep church.¹⁰

⁹ Robert Leighton and Griffith Thomas, *1,2 Peter* (Wheaton: Crossway Books, 1999) 154.

¹⁰ The term “deep church” was arguably first coined by CS Lewis in his writings “Mere Christians” to the *Church Times* published in 1952.

I recently read Jim Belcher's *Deep Church: A Third Way Beyond Emerging and Traditional*. In the book he argues that while it is necessary to embrace the current post-modern generation that stresses authentic experience and possesses a subjective take on truth, it must not be done at the expense of succumbing to the pressure of pragmatic relativism and accepting trends for the sake of being relevant and contextual.¹¹ Belcher offers a third way – what he calls “a deep church”. A “deep church” is a “missional church committed to both tradition and culture, valuing innovation in worship, arts, and communication, but also creeds and confessions”.¹² The church must be deep in how it appropriates and engages truth, evangelism, gospel, worship, preaching, discipleship, ecclesiology, and culture. In another words, the church must be deep in its mind, heart, and action.

The need to foster integration of mind, heart, and action, plus Belcher's idea of “deep church” has prompted me to reflect on my work at Fellowship of Evangelical Students (FES) Singapore¹³ where I serve as the General Secretary. The launch of the FES Vision 2020¹⁴ has birthed new and exciting initiatives that challenge and invite responses of both mind and actions. Among these include pioneering work in private campuses, strengthening international student ministries, encouraging students to be academically and culturally engaged in their campuses, and addressing global issues such as poverty, care for the environment, social injustice. These initiatives and more have all been promoted and cultivated passionately. Miroslav Volf's insistence that Christian faith must be both active and public serves as inspiration for many of the initiatives:

¹¹ Jim Belcher, *Deep Church - A Third Way Beyond Emerging and Traditional* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2009), 51-68.

¹² *Ibid*, 203-207.

¹³ FES Singapore is an interdenominational Christian organization reaching out to and serving the tertiary level students. FES Singapore was founded in 1959 and is now ministering among thousands of tertiary level students in Singapore. More details can be read at www.fessingapore.org.

¹⁴ See details at <http://www.fessingapore.org/uploads/files/Vision2020%20final.pdf>.

Properly understood, the Christian faith is neither coercive nor idle. As a prophetic religion, Christian faith will be an active faith, engaged in the world in a non-coercive way - offering blessing to our endeavors, effective comfort in our failures, moral guidance in a complex world, and a framework of meaning for our lives and our activities.¹⁵

Though still at its infancy stage, the creation of spaces and platforms has been planned to facilitate our students working with students who possess other beliefs to serve the common good. These spaces would thus serve as natural venues where creative and transformative Christian engagement with the world is publicly demonstrated.

The strong focus of these initiatives, however, may be a cause for concern and reflection if they fail to pay attention to critical aspects of the Christian life. The ministry of FES can find itself in an unhealthy imbalance if its heritage of emphasizing character building is neglected. Equipping students with strong biblical foundational truth, strengthening existing campus fellowships, exposing students to traditional missionary work, intensive bible studies and life-changing discipleship are still necessary. However, I have come to realize that in ministry, it is often wiser to adopt “both-and” rather than “either-or” thinking even though it may mean slowing down the progress.

Hence, what I envision is that FES should be “deep”. We should cultivate “deep” students and produce “deep” graduates. We must take on fresh ideas but keep the good traditions. We must continue reforming but at the same time uphold our original calling in an uncompromising manner. We must remain focused on studying the Word deeply but also provide a Christian counter-cultural voice to the world. We must proclaim God’s word with our lips but also demonstrate it in our lives.

Conclusion

A prominent Christian thinker remarked recently that the two major obstacles hindering many thoughtful and morally sensible people to coming to Christ are the shallow beliefs and hypocritical lives of Christians. How ironic that many in the church are comfortable with these values and are content that the virtues affirmed in this article

¹⁵ Miroslav Volf, *A Public Faith - How Followers of Christ Should Serve the Common Good* (Grand Rapids: BrazosPress, 2011), 54.

go missing. Where the virtues are sought, they are often polarized and seldom well integrated.

In response to this reality, let us strive to live as balanced Christians who affirm the intellectual mind, the humble heart, and deep thoughtful actions. The prayer of Thomas Kempis, I trust, will serve as our inspiration:

O Lord, this is the business of a perfect man, never to relax his mind from attentive thought of heavenly things, and amid many cares to pass by, as it were, without care. Not as one destitute of all feeling, but by a certain privilege of a free mind, cleaving to no creature with inordinate affection.¹⁶

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¹⁶ Thomas A Kempis, *Of The Imitation of Christ* (New Kensington, Whitaker House, 1981), 146.

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How Deep Was It? Plumb Lining the Commitment to Integral Mission

By Natee Tanchanpongs

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Abstract

This article presents a case for Christian social responsibility and holistic missions in light of social calamity. The response of the Thai churches is examined and suggestions offered to urge the Thai church toward a deeper commitment to integral missions.

Introduction

The Thailand flood is considered the worst flood of this generation. While it is not unusual for the plains of central Thailand to flood, the magnitude and the duration of the disaster of 2011 was indeed the worst in living memory. The World Bank estimated the damages, the recovery and the reconstruction costs of this flood to be around US\$70 billion. This ranks it as the fourth most expensive natural disaster in history behind the 2011 tsunami in Japan, the 1995 Kobe earthquake, and the 2005 Hurricane Katrina.¹ On closer analysis we find that this unusual anomaly is to some degree caused by several effects of globalization. In the midst of the tragedy, the great flood offers the Thai church a way to assess itself. How deep is its commitment to a Christian mission that addresses the whole human person?

The Plumb Line: The 2011 Thai Flood Disaster (Consequences and Causes)

Wikipedia sums up the extent of the flood well when it states:

Major floods occurred during the 2011 monsoon season in Thailand. Provinces located in the Chao Phraya and Mekong River basin, including Bangkok and surrounding neighborhoods were most severely affected

¹ Bo Zhang, "Top 5 most expensive natural disasters in history." (March 30, 2011), accessed 1/19/2012, <http://www.accuweather.com/en/weather-news/top-5-most-expensive-natural-d/47459>.

directly or indirectly by inundation. Flooding also affected most provinces in Thailand's south. Flooding began around July 2011, and continued into December 2011. Over 12.8 million people were affected . . . The flooding inundated about six million hectares of land, over 300,000 hectares of which is farmland, in 58 provinces, from Chiang Mai in the North to parts of the capital city of Bangkok near the mouth of the Chao Phraya. . . . Seven major industrial estates were inundated by as much 3 meters (10 feet).²

Thailand floods every year because she has many riverbeds that supply the fertile land of the plains. At the same time, her extensive network of irrigations and dams was built to mitigate the colossal but customary amount of rainwater that furnishes the region. What caused the regular annual flooding to become an unprecedented natural disaster? The answer in part lies with the various ills of globalization.

William Scheuerman observes five characteristics of globalization. First, globalization is related with *detritorialization*, which brings about the “increased possibilities for action between and among people in situations where latitudinal and longitudinal location seems immaterial to the social activity at hand.”³ Second, it is associated with *interconnectedness* that creates “processes of change which underpin a transformation in the organization of human affairs by linking together and expanding human activity across regions and continents.”⁴ Third, globalization is also characterized by *velocity* of social activities. Scheuerman elaborates, “The linking together and expanding of social activities across borders is predicated on the possibility of relatively fast flows and movement of people, information, capital, and goods.”⁵ Fourth,

² Wikipedia. “2011 Thai Floods” last modified and accessed on January 17, 2012, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2011_Thailand_floods

³ William Scheuerman, “Globalization” in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Summer 2010 Edition), 4. <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2010/entries/globalization/>

⁴ *Ibid.*, 5.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 6.

globalization is also a *long-term* process. Even though the process has intensified as of late, globalization can be traced further back to the nineteenth-century.⁶ Lastly globalization is a *multi-pronged* process, which makes itself evident in many different areas, such as economic, political, and cultural.⁷

With these characteristics, I want to suggest that globalization has created rapid, multi-pronged and destructive transformations especially in the economic, ecological, and socio-political arenas that intensified and led to the flood disaster of 2011.

Economic Factors

Mae Elise Cannon sees capitalism as the principal driving force behind globalization. She writes,

Globalization is an economic phenomenon and may be understood as the increased flow of capital, people, commodities, ideas and cultures across national borders. Globalization also refers to the decentralization and fragmentation of production process of goods and the establishment of global institutions to regulate and control trade and markets.⁸

In 1961, Thailand implemented her first national policy to promote economic growth and to improve the standard of living. However, it wasn't until twenty years later that the country fully embraced capitalism. Since then, things for the most part have appeared to go well. Farmers, who used to plow their rice fields with water buffalos, now have tractors. All wagon roads are now paved. An extended web of inter-provincial highways has been constructed. We now have Sky Trains, Undergrounds, and extensive and raised intra-metropolitan expressways. We do not have to shop for food at soggy, smelly and scorching open markets anymore. Today, we have grocery sections in air-conditioned Mega-stores with well-stocked shelves, shopping carts, and endless roles of checkout lines to cater to their shoppers. The people get everything they need in one

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid., 7.

⁸ Mae Elise Cannon, *Social Justice Handbook: Small Steps for a Better World*, (IVP: Downers Grove, 2009), 167.

place, and while at it, they can do their banking and even trade stocks on iPads. Thailand has finally become modernized through globalization.

What then is wrong with this picture? First, with the capitalist thrust, Thailand has tied her future to the global economy too tightly. During this short episode, she has experienced an economic roller coaster. This has included a period of financial boom in the 80's and the early 90's followed by great suffering in what is now known as the "Tom Yum Khung" crisis in 1997. This pattern is repeated in the relatively short-lived economic recovery in the early 2000's followed by the recent crisis and present situation that finds her on the verge of a fiscal collapse with the rest of the world. Through it all, we have seen waves of corporate imperialism. Large multinational companies have replaced 'ma and pa shops' in Thai neighborhoods. On the surface, everyone looks better off economically while the reality is that the gap between the rich and the poor has actually widened. Those who have access to resources can invest, gain more and be better off, but those who do not have no recourse except to remain in their scarcity.

True there is much good in capitalism, but Cannon rejects its basic assumption that the quest of self-gain would in the end lead to a greater good of the whole. She explains,

A fundamental assumption of capitalism is, according to Adam Smith, that the pursuit of personal gain is a natural human tendency and should be given free reign within society. This contradicts Christian belief that selfish ambition and pursuit of material possessions are not attributes of faithful believers. Luke 12:15 says, 'Watch out! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; life does not consist in an abundance of possessions.' Nonetheless, the principles of capitalism suggest that the more individuals pursue self-gain and personal development, the greater the good that occurs within society for the whole.⁹

In the end, the unbridled pursuit of personal prosperity and the accumulation of wealth in capitalism encourage greed. It is this human greed that generates tragic

⁹ Ibid., 133.

consequences not only in the economic realm, but also in the ecological and socio-political as well.

Ecological Factors

A prominent Thai television news channel, the Thai Public Broadcasting Services (Thai PBS), recently offered the following analysis:

There are many factors indeed if we talk about the cause of Thailand's worst flood in living memories. One major factor we cannot forget to mention is global warming, which messes up all the natural cycles not only in this region but also in many areas around the world. In Thailand's case, the annual rains came much earlier than expected this year as those familiar with the climate here would know the rainy season starts around midyear. The average number of tropical storms in this region is around 31, but 2011 saw 38. But there were 5 which directly affected Thailand and led to the massive flood: Haima in June, Nokten in July, Nay-Sard in September, Haitang in October, and also Naigae in October. The continuous rain caused dams in the North and Northeast, including some in the Central region to reach capacities. Flood occurs in many areas and when this water flows down and converges on the central plains together creating a massive wade of water, ravaging Nakhon Sawan, Lop Buri, Ayutthaya, Nonthaburi, Pathum Thani, and Bangkok, raking massive destruction in its path.¹⁰

The evidence for global warming is mounting and there is increased understanding and acceptance among evangelicals about the problem of human-induced climate change. To be sure, climate change is a natural cyclical phenomenon, but it is accelerated by human actions. Particularly, the big industrialized nations shoulder responsibility for the bulk of greenhouse gas emissions that cause the depletion of the ozone layer, which in turn have led to the accelerated climate change at the global and

¹⁰ Thai PBS, "Worst Flood: The After Math", aired Dec 30th 2011, <http://www3.thaipbs.or.th/flood54/preview.asp?newsid=C0002533>

local levels. Driven by economic pursuit, these nations are reluctant to regulate the emission of the greenhouse gases, fearing that ecologically responsible actions would hamper their economic progress.

Socio-political Factors

O'Brian, O'Keefe, Rose and Wisner propose a way to incorporate climate change into the science of disaster management. They begin by distinguishing between two main approaches to disaster management: natural/technological hazard prevention and humanitarian/complex emergencies response.¹¹ Today, natural disasters are dealt with more commonly using the latter need assessments and delivery of humanitarian assistance approach. However, O'Brian *et al.* suggest that the reality of climate change must be incorporated holistically into the more proactive approach of hazard prevention.¹² For them, the main focus in natural disaster management should be risk assessment and reduction, where risk is a function of both hazards and vulnerability. They explain,

Risk to human population is a function of the frequency of a hazard event, its severity and people's vulnerability. Vulnerability depends on many factors that influence the amount of damage and the loss of human life that a particular hazard can cause. These variables include exposure, physical susceptibility, socio-economic fragility and lack of resilience. *Vulnerability, and hence risk, is socially determined*, and Wisner *et. al.* therefore conclude that vulnerability is made up of 'the characteristics of a person or group and their situation that influence their capacity to anticipate, to cope with, resist and recover from the impact of a natural hazard.'¹³

¹¹ Geoff O'Brian, Phil O'Keefe, Joanne Rose, Ben Wisner. "Climate Change and Disaster Management", (Disasters 30:1, Mar 1st, 2006), 65-69.
<http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/j.1467.2006.00307.x/pdf>

¹² *Ibid.*, 69.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 69-70. *Emphasis mine.*

In the end, the authors conclude that, “since risk is a function of both hazards and vulnerability, and hazards are, at least to some extent, known and constant, vulnerability appears to be the main factor that distinguishes between those who suffer loss and those who escape it.”¹⁴

The 2011 flood disaster in Thailand demonstrated climate-related vulnerability and highlighted “the set of social, economic, political and physical factors that determines the amount of damage a given event will cause and also the capacity to anticipate, cope with, resist and recovery from the damage.”¹⁵ Once again the Thai PBS analyzed the flood aftermath, pointing out the problems with the national water management.¹⁶ On paper the Royal Irrigation Department and Thailand Department of Water Resources had a comprehensive plan to cope with a flood of this magnitude that would result in minimal loss of lives and damage to property. First, they had planned to use rice fields in the north central and west central plains along the Chao Phraya and the Thajean river basins as temporary reservoirs to help regulate the floodwater. The government would then compensate the rice farmers there for any crops that were destroyed. Second, since the early 1990s, there has existed a zoning law passed by the central government making the entire flood plain to the east of Bangkok a floodway. No permanent constructions, businesses or residential areas were to be developed in this area. The entire district was designated as farmlands, which would become an express waterway to quickly deliver the floodwater to the ocean should the need arise. Third, the Bangkok Metropolitan Authorities have constructed an elaborate network of canals and giant underground water tunnels to help deliver large amounts of rainwater that must flow through the city every monsoon season. The overall plan was brilliant: regulate floodwater through dams and rice fields in the north while dispensing the water as quickly as possible through the floodway down to the ocean. Only the overflow would go in and through Bangkok canals and water tunnels. Why then did this plan not work?

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 70.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 71-72.

¹⁶ Thai PBS, “People’s Voice Changing the Nation: Investigating the Flood” aired Dec 18th, 2011, <http://www3.thaipbs.or.th/flood54/preview.asp?newsid=C0002504>

First, the rice fields in the west central plains were not allowed to flood. The government had passed a lucrative subsidy policy to purchase rice at a level much higher than market price. While some farmers benefited from this economic policy, most of the profit went to wealthy rice merchants who functioned as middlemen. If the fields were flooded before rice was harvested, flood compensations would have gone to the rice farmers and not to the merchants. As such, powerful political figures who also controlled the national water management mechanism allegedly ordered a delay of the floodwater from flowing into their regions until the farmers had harvested all their crops. This significant delay forced the floodwater to be restricted through a narrower passageway and hence significantly increased its destructive power as the mass of water flowed southward.

Second, the zoning law was not enforced. Influential businessmen found ways around this law through bribes, kickbacks and other corrupt practices. They built residential neighborhoods, housing complexes, industrial parks, and other businesses within the supposed floodway. Most astonishing of all, the Suvarnabhumi Airport, considered by many to be one of the top international airports in Asia, is also located here. The floodway east of Bangkok no longer can function as such. For the most part, floodwater was diverted to the provinces west of Bangkok where the topography is much less conducive for large amounts of floodwater to flow through.

Third, the canals and water tunnels were significantly underutilized. Politicians did their best to prevent floodwater to pass through their areas thus risking flood damage. This was especially true in Bangkok. In addition to protecting political constituency, the Bangkok Metropolitan Authorities chose to protect the heart of the economic center of the country by letting floodwater drain through canals and water tunnels as little as possible. Floodwater bottlenecked outside Bangkok for weeks on end, waiting to be pumped out and drained through the much less favorable western provinces.

With the breakdown in the water management motivated by socio-political and economic reasons, the floods of 2011 became an unprecedented disaster. The analysis of the disaster illustrates how Thailand has succumbed to the greed-driven transformation of globalized, free-market capitalism and the pressure of urban expansion. As a result, areas of the country that flooded yearly were flooded in an unparalleled way in 2011. Areas that should not have flooded were flooded. Areas which were expected to flood early did

not flood until after the rice was harvested. Areas that averted the flood ordinarily should have been flooded.

How Deep Was It?

Justin Thacker traces the history of how Evangelicals have grappled with the precise relationship between Christian social action and evangelism from the 1974 Lausanne Covenant to the Micah Network Declaration.¹⁷

Integral Mission

The Micah Network was started in 2001 with the aim of promoting evangelicals to do integral mission especially among the poor. The initiative reflects the church's response in seeking "to offer a compelling alternative" to "the devastating effects that globalisation is having on the poor communities around the world."¹⁸ As such, Micah Network defines integral mission as

. . . the proclamation and demonstration of the gospel. It is not simply that evangelism and social involvement are to be done alongside each other. Rather, in integral mission our proclamation has social consequences as we call people to love and repentance in all areas of life. And our social involvement has evangelistic consequences as we bear witness to the transforming grace of Jesus Christ.¹⁹

The Micah Network Declaration then states that the task of integral mission properly belongs to the local churches. It elaborates,

The future of integral mission is in planting and enabling local churches to transform the communities of which they are part. Churches as caring and

¹⁷ Justin Thacker, "A Holistic Gospel: Some Biblical, Historical and Ethical Considerations", (October 2008) 1-4. <http://www.eauk.org/theology/wea/upload/A-Holistic-Gospel.pdf>

¹⁸ Micah Network Declaration on Integral Mission, 1.

¹⁹ Ibid.

inclusive communities are at the heart of what it means to do integral mission.²⁰

Vinoth Ramachandra seeks to clarify and perhaps augment the Micah Network statement. He suggests that integral mission as defined in the declaration is often interpreted as “a strategy or methodology for our mission outreach.”²¹ However, Ramachandra suggests that integral mission has more to do with the church’s integrity and less with the activities of the church. He explains,

Integral mission is then a way of calling the church to keep together, in her theology as well as in her practice, what the Triune God of the Biblical narrative always brings together: ‘being’ and ‘doing’, the ‘spiritual’ and the ‘physical’, the ‘individual’ and the ‘social’, ‘justice’ and ‘mercy’, witness’ and ‘unity’, ‘preaching truth’ and ‘practicing the truth’, and so on. The emphasis lies, then, not so much in the practical ‘balancing’ of our various activities, but rather in the firm refusal to draw unbiblical distinctions.²²

That which Ramachandra proposes is simple but stupendously profound. He is telling us to be God’s people and in *everything* that we do we must do them God’s way. Doing integral mission, according to him, is to stay true to what God is making us to be in *every area* of our lives and to do whatever our hand finds to do in God’s way. Ramachandra sums up,

‘Integral mission’ has to do with this basic issue of integrity of the church’s life, the consistency between what the church is and what it proclaims. On this understanding, what makes an ‘evangelical’ politician

²⁰ Ibid, 2.

²¹ Vinoth Ramachandra, “What is Integral Mission?” in Micah Network Integral Mission Initiative, 1.
http://www.micahnetwork.org/sites/default/files/doc/library/whatisintegralmission_imi-the-001.pdf

²² Ibid., 1-2.

truly ‘evangelical’ is not that he adds gospel preaching onto his daily political activities, to make the latter more ‘holistic’; but rather that his political outlook and agenda are profoundly shaped by a vision and values that spring out of the Evangel . . . ²³

Questions About the Church and the Flood

So how deep was the local churches’ commitment to integral mission in addressing the flood of 2011? How deep was it when compared to the extent of the flood and the suffering that it had brought? How deep was it vis-à-vis the human ills of globalization that had contributed to this disaster? Given how we delineate integral mission, the question of our commitment to integral mission is thus tied to the question of how well we respond to particular situations as a people who claim to be shaped by the vision and values of God’s Word. For instance, when a church found itself in the middle of a disaster area, how did it respond as God’s people shaped by the values of sacrificial love? Did the Christian community choose to save itself and move out of the flood area just like most people in the area did? Or did some among the covenant community choose to stay, despite the inconvenience of living in a flooded area, in order to help and serve those who could not move out? How well did the churches outside the disaster areas mobilize themselves to gather and send human, financial, material and other resources to help the flood victims? The response to a disaster typically has five stages: life saving, emergency relief, community stabilization, economic revitalization, and the rebuilding of infrastructure.²⁴ To see all five through shows a bona fide commitment on the part of those involved. How sustainable was the Thai church’s disaster management? As a whole, how well did the churches execute the five stages of disaster response?

We must face the hard reality that the churches did not respond well to the effects of the flood. A generous estimate shows that less than 20% of the 400 churches in and around the Metropolitan Bangkok actually helped with the flood relief and recovery operations in any significant ways. Most churches would have prayed for the flood victims and situations, but few actually went out to do something about them. For those

²³ *Ibid.*, 10.

²⁴ Mae Elise Cannon, *Social Justice Handbook*, 142-144.

that did, most saw flood relief operations only as a bridge to evangelism. The 2011 flood awoke many churches to the need for a more holistic love of our neighbors. Yet many remained in slumber.

Unfortunately, the churches' failure to be involved with the relief work is not an isolated incident, but is symptomatic of a deeper predicament – a lack of a holistic framework to interact with the people around us. We have already seen that the focus of disaster management has shifted from a reactive approach to a more proactive and more holistic one.²⁵ The relief and response approach attempts to address the effects of the disaster, while the risk management approach wrestles with its causes. Just as the disaster management community has become integral in its mission, so also must the Christian community.

The church must not merely respond reactively to the effects of flooding, but must also proactively attend to the ill effects that have intensified them. We saw earlier that globalization has created various degenerative transformations at the economic, ecological, and socio-political levels. How well did the churches attempt to engage that prevalent culture and try to combat those ills? How well did God's people fare against human greed hiding behind the lie that says all are better off when free to pursue self-interest? The Scripture warns us that the love of money is the root of all kinds of evils (1 Timothy 6:10). This was very much the case here, for human greed that is exacerbated by the economic transformation of globalization magnified environmental and socio-political evils. For example, Peter Harris suggests that the 2008 global financial crisis can be seen as a metaphor of the ecological realm that demonstrates the tragic outcome of "a way of life that goes well beyond our means."²⁶ Like the economic crisis, we are finding ourselves in ecological disasters because of human greed.

How much has the church done to be good stewards of God's creation? For instant, how did the church address the deforestation problems that have gone on for decades, the result of which was directly linked to the flood disaster of 2011? In the section "We love God's World" of the Cape Town Commitment, the writers remind Christians that we must be environmental advocates and that we must do so for the right

²⁵ O'Brien et al. "Climate Change and Disaster Management", 74.

²⁶ Peter Harris, "Why Theology Matters to Mangroves", 21.

reasons. The first reason is that we must love this creation because it is God's creation. If God is our Lord whom we say we love, we must also care for what is his. Second, we must care for his world because it is a part of God's Integral Mission. The document states,

The Bible declares God's redemptive purpose for creation itself. Integral mission means discerning, proclaiming, and living out the biblical truth that the gospel is God's good news, through the cross and resurrection of Jesus Christ, for individual persons, and for society, and for creation. All three are broken and suffering because of sin; all three are included in the redeeming love and mission of God; all three must be part of comprehensive mission of God's people.²⁷

Gladys Thielke presents the findings of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC)²⁸ and suggests two types of responses to the environmental predicament. The first is mitigation by limiting the greenhouse gas emissions in order to reduce further effects of climate change.²⁹ This response requires a change in lifestyle in such areas as the use of transportation, eating habits, methods of building construction, and the general way we live. The second response is one of adaptation in order to reduce vulnerability. This, Thielke explains, is done in the following ways:³⁰

1. Identify local risk.
2. Assess present level of vulnerability.
3. Identify where preparedness should be enhanced.
4. Make improvements on identified areas that need enhancement.
5. Verify enhanced preparedness.
6. Re-assess capacities in a dynamic environment.

²⁷ The Lausanne Movement, "The Cape Town Commitment: A Confession of Faith and a Call to Action", Oct 1st, 2010, 14-15.

<http://www.lausanne.org/docs/CapeTownCommitment.pdf>.

²⁸ Gladys Thielke, *The connection Between Green and Peace*, 55-63.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 64-66.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 66-67.

How much did the church do to mitigate the effects of climate change and to reduce vulnerability for those who were at risk? This is where ecological problems intersect with social-political ones. Those who are most vulnerable are typically the poor who have little choice but to live in the flood prone areas. How well did the church work for better and safer living conditions? How well did the church fight for the weak and powerless, who are often exploited by government officials, politicians, and greed driven economic, social and political systems? In Micah 6:8, God tells us how he wants his people to live and walk with him. According to Tim Keller, this verse commands us to “do justice out of merciful love”, and doing justice is “giving people what they are due” whether it is the meting out of punishment to wrong doers or giving protection and care of the vulnerable.³¹ Hence, doing justice must include the work of advocacy against the powers that oppress and exploit the weak and powerless.³² How well has the church become an advocate of the vulnerable prior, during and after the flood?

Finally, it is quite apparent that the socio-political ills exacerbated by the flood were tied to corruption practices whether at the policy making level or when upholding and enforcement of the existing law. Corruption is evil and is condemned in the Bible because “it undermines economic development, distorts fair decision-making and destroys social cohesion.”³³ How much has the church fought to uphold zoning laws or involve in the water management policy making?

Concluding Remarks

The answer to these questions tells us something about the Thai church’s commitment to integral mission. Could the 2011 flood have been prevented? Perhaps not, but the degree and duration of the disaster might have been lessened if the church had taken integral mission more seriously. Unfortunately, the church has been indifferent to the ills of economic “progress.” It was unaware of the problems of ecological change and uninterested in the evils of socio-political power. The great flood of 2011 offers the Thai

³¹ Tim Keller, *Generous Justice: How God’s Grace Makes us Just* (NYC: Dutton, 2010), 3-4.

³² “The Cape Town Commitment”, 16.

³³ *Ibid.*, 26.

church an opportunity to assess itself. How deep is our commitment to the gospel - the whole gospel? How deep is our conviction that we must address the whole human person as we live out the gospel imperatives? The church was unprepared and her mission for the most part was washed over and swept away by floodwater. In the end, it lacks a holistic theological framework that would have driven the mission to address not only the immediate effects of the flood, but also the various aspects of globalized transformation that magnified this disaster. If the church is to be more relevant, she must have a better grasp of the gospel and express that conviction through integral mission.

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About the Author



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Christian *Communitas* in the *Missio Dei*: Living Faithfully in the Tension Between Cultural Osmosis and Alienation¹

By Paul De Neui

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Abstract

Through Christian *communitas* the church is called to live faithfully in the tension between cultural osmosis and cultural alienation. Those members of the body of Christ who have made this choice of joyful obedience undergo ongoing transformation to God through partnership with the *missio Dei* already at work in the culture wherein God has placed them. *Communitas* occurs through mutual commitment to a task greater than the group itself.

To the Sons and Daughters of Issachar who understand the times and know what Israel should do. (1 Chron 12:32)

Introduction

There is a story by Kukrit Pramoj, former prime minister and leading Buddhist scholar from Thailand, based on the NT account of a man born blind whom he called Simon. The story describes the difficult life of blind young Simon, and how upon the death of his father life became desperate. Simon began to beg in the streets to support his widowed mother. One day a fruit vendor named Ruth took pity on him. She led him to the market where he was able to increase his income. Through Ruth's eyes and kind descriptions the world became full of color and beauty to him for the first time. Eventually they fell in love.

One day Ruth heard that a man named Jesus from Nazareth would be passing by. The miraculous reputation of this Jesus had preceded him so that when he came near Simon cried out, "Lord! Son of God! Please help me to see!" And he was healed.

¹ Paul De Neui. Christian *Communitas* in the *Missio Dei*: Living Faithfully in the Tension Between Cultural Osmosis and Alienation. *Ex Auditu*. Vol. 23, 2007, 92-107. Used by permission of Wipf and Stock Publishers. www.wipfandstock.com.

Turning to find the first person he sought, healed Simon was disappointed to find that Ruth was nowhere to be found. Then what did he see? The filth of a poor Asian market, debris in muddy piles, dead bodies of animals lying unburied, emitting a stench never noticed before, crowds of people, faces bathed in sweat, vendors' fatigued faces, cruelty, malnourishment, and death.

Closing his eyes he retraced his way home, but the ancient, toothless woman who answered the door praising God for her son's healing repulsed him. Making his way to Ruth's home where she was hiding, Simon insisted that she show herself. At last she opened the door, but his joy turned to immediate fear and disgust. There stood his beloved Ruth so hideously deformed by a burn that he could not stand to look at her. Finally he saw Jesus crucified. Falling on his knees Simon cried, "Oh God, give me back my blindness!"¹

I find Kukrit's story both jarring and revealing, and frankly I often need that. How quickly I am absorbed by my cultural environment of comfort and optimism and forget that for many people suffering is their daily reality of life. Culture is where the blind Simons of the world must somehow survive in the contradiction between the promises of a healing Jesus and the present cruelties of the human condition. As Gustavo Gutierrez said, "How do you tell the poor that God really loves them when everything in their life points in the other direction?"² As a Christ follower living in a broken world, I live in a tension between cultural absorption that blinds me from following God's priorities in the world and complete cultural separation from the world that makes me or the God I profess unintelligible to the culture in which God has placed me. In the words of Lucien Legrand, this is the tension of the "puzzling tangle of intercultural dependence and counterculture, of osmosis and protest."³ I have chosen to call it the challenge of living faithfully in the tension between cultural osmosis and cultural alienation.

If nothing else, my years as a missionary taught me that God had plenty of work to do in my heart as I sought to partner with what God was already doing in the Buddhist culture of northeast Thailand. I found it impossible to live faithfully in the cultural tension between osmosis and alienation on my own or even as a missionary family. With our Thai sisters and brothers we had to become something known in anthropology as *communitas*, companions together sharing, not bread,⁴ but rice and the mutual experience of God's grace at work in us as we sought to follow God's lead. The thesis of my paper is

that through Christian *communitas* the church lives faithfully in the tension between cultural osmosis and alienation and is continually transformed to God through partnership with the *missio Dei* already at work in the culture wherein God has placed her.

The *Missio Dei*

Christianity's engagement with culture is actually about participation in God's greater mission at work in and with all the world's cultures. As a missiologist, the starting point for theology and praxis is the *missio Dei*. This term, literally the sending of God, describes who God is, the one who sent the Son and then sent the Spirit and now sends the church to partner with the work that God continues to do in every corner of creation.⁵ Mission is not something the church owns, but it is a role to which she is called by God, for God, and to God.

Mission is *missio Dei*, which seeks to subsume into itself the *missiones ecclesiae*, the missionary programs of the church. It is not the church which "undertakes" mission; it is the *missio Dei* that constitutes the church. . . The *missio Dei* purifies the church. It sets it under the cross—the only place where it is ever safe. . . The *missio Dei* is God's activity, which embraces both the church and the world, and in which the church may be privileged to participate.⁶

As a missionary myself it was always comforting to realize that I did not bring God along with my physical and cultural baggage to my new host country. God was already there, and I was being asked to join God's bigger mission. Initially I considered myself a fairly important piece in this strategy. I was a seminary graduate with church experience and plenty of technical knowledge. However, entering into years of language and culture learning soon taught me that I had a long way to go. Eventually I learned that it was the *missio Dei* already at work that was calling people like Banpote Wetchgama when he recognized God in the sound of the Lao *kaen* and began to use for the worship of Jesus Christ this popular local instrument which had been used to call up evil spirits. Before that it was the *missio Dei* which compelled an elderly grandmother to rise up off the floor in the middle of a Bible discussion and caused her to dance to a Holy Spirit led inner music in a transformed expression of worship.⁷ Even further back in Lao and

Siamese history, it was the *missio Dei* that had planted within the oral Buddhist tradition the promise of *Pra See An*,⁸ the savior to come, so that when the good news of Christ appeared it was not a foreign religion but the fulfillment of all that for which people had been waiting for centuries. God had been actively working within the cultural context before the missionary arrived, but God also chose human partners in bringing about a deeper transformation. This process of ongoing transformation was both in the receptors and in the missionary agents as they participated in this greater mission.

How the *missio Dei* operates is a great mystery. Initially it is the witness that “goes out into all the earth, with words to the ends of the world.”⁹ It is the myriad cultural lenses through which God’s invisible qualities are clearly seen.¹⁰ It encompasses the rising and falling of all the world’s peoples and nations ($\pi\alpha\acute{\nu}\ \epsilon\theta\nu\omicron\varsigma$) so that all “would seek God and perhaps reach out and find God, though he is not far from any of us.”¹¹ The *missio Dei* also involves human agents, some willing, some unknowing, and is ultimately clearly revealed in Jesus Christ.

The process of that calling and sending in the *missio Dei* always involves a change in the agent who participates. Sometimes this change is quite radical. It can be metaphysical as in a bush that burns but is not consumed¹² or supernatural as when a donkey is given human speech.¹³ Christ referred to this when the Pharisees urged him to quiet the loud praising voices of his disciples, “I tell you if they keep quiet, the stones will cry out.”¹⁴ The *missio Dei* will continue. A deeper transformation occurs in the human agents who are sent by God in the wider mission. This is seen in the life of Abram when God sent him from all that was known in order to bless all peoples of the world and in the process brought about a work of faith in his life.¹⁵ This transformation is evident in the life of Ruth whose filial piety drew her to the God of her less than missional mother-in-law.¹⁶ Unwilling agents are left in a liminal phase. Will they take the next step and be agents of transformation while also receiving the transformation that God desires? Sarah laughed at the possibility; Esther needed three days of fasting to think it over; for Gideon two fleeces were required. God used a call, a storm, heathen sailors, a fish, a city, a vine, heat, shade, and a worm to invite Jonah to join the transforming process. God’s question to him is also for us, “I care, shouldn’t you?”

In the NT many examples could be cited of how God changed people in the process of participating in the *missio Dei*. The stories include common herdsmen, foreign spiritualists, uneducated fishermen, prostitutes, widows, corrupt government workers, religious leaders, and military officials. Jesus himself identified with this preparation process by going through baptism and a subsequent time of testing before entering into his mission. It was the transforming work of the *missio Dei* that sent a fearful Annanias to face a religious fanatic who had been breathing murderous threats against his people and, not only to call this former enemy “brother,” but to pray for his physical healing and spiritual anointing.¹⁷ How many missionaries are doing that today? At times the *missio Dei* also sent those from outside the community of faith to purify it and bring it back to God’s direction and wider purpose. The *missio Dei* sent an unclean Gentile named *Cornelius* to direct the missionary Peter and ultimately brought about a transformation, not only in Peter, but in the theological understanding of the entire church of Jesus Christ. Many other examples could be given.¹⁸ All of creation can be employed and sent by the triune God in *missio Dei* into the cultures of the world.¹⁹

Culture and the *Missio Dei*

For the human element of creation, culture is the arena of the *missio Dei*, and it is within this cultural arena of mission that theology is given birth, context, meaning, and life practice.²⁰ Culture is a human product that cannot be separated from humans, and God is not ashamed to enter incarnationally into culture fully and completely.²¹ The Latin root *cultura* originally indicated the ordered tilling of the soil. Today the English word “culture” primarily refers to the “orderedness” of human existence. The variations of “orderedness” that social groupings produce express something of the creativity of God, each in its own way.

Culture is not an isolated or independent force that compels people to act in certain socially-accepted fashions. It is people that compel one another to act and speak and influence each other’s thought patterns. Cultures can neither bind people together nor alienate people from each other without human agents.

People who speak of a culture as if it were a pseudo-personal entity that goes around doing things to people, have let themselves fall into a kind of

cultural determinism that implies little or no room for human choice. . . . Culture is not a person. It does not *do* anything. Only people do things. The fact that people ordinarily do what they do by following the cultural “tracks” laid down for them should not lead us to treat culture itself as something possessing a life of its own.²²

It is common to hear the term culture used in combination with an ethnic or demographic adjective as in the cases of “Black culture,” “Hispanic culture,” “urban culture,” “gay culture,” “non-Western culture,” and others. Sometimes religious words are attached to it that also indicate categories of humans such as “Muslim culture” or “Buddhist Culture.” In these cases social groupings are being labeled, and the proper term should be “people.” Everyone possesses and embodies some type of culture (or combination of cultures) even if they cannot identify it.

Paul Hiebert further defined culture as the learned behavior patterns, ideas, and products created by a group of people.²³ Mimi White summarized culture as “meanings and the making of them.”²⁴ Once again, these are embodied in people. What occurs within the people of a particular society both individually and corporately holds significance for that culture. These items could also be termed worldview values. Culture could be defined as who I am without my ever having to think about it.

Identification of one’s own culture may be an extremely difficult task, particularly for those who are of the dominant cultural group. These features are mutually understood by insiders but may be nearly impossible for those same insiders to perceive or define. One may be part of a dominant cultural structure and never recognize this until it is somehow threatened. This is when the deepest meanings held by that culture tend to surface. Kathryn Tanner writes that “a culture is definable *as a culture* only in distinction from others that it is not.”²⁵ Only by looking at ourselves through the lens of another culture do we ever really get to see and even begin to understand our own cultural values and distinctiveness. Only exposure to the other allows us to see ourselves. Through the stories of the blind Simons of the world our own perspectives expand, and God uses such insights and experiences to build new understandings, both theological and cultural. This seems to be a missiological approach that God often uses to move people beyond themselves in his transforming process.

Two Sides of Culture

Cultures have two sides. On one side the myriad of diverse human cultures represents the vastness of the creative triune God continually desiring to express itself for God's praise and glory in our world and in the heavenly realms.²⁶ Cultures include components that are true, noble, right, pure, lovely, admirable, excellent, and praiseworthy.²⁷ The evidence of these components can be tangible, social, physical, material, and even spiritual. John Calvin stated, "All the notable endowments that manifest themselves among unbelievers are gifts of God."²⁸ Craig Detweiler and Barry Taylor state, "God shines through even the most debased pop cultural products."²⁹ This is the *imago Dei* found in individuals, cultural groupings, and their collective products. All are part of the very good creation of God awaiting the final fulfillment.³⁰ Jacob Loewen wrote, "We may never see the full richness of God's revelation until we are able to participate in the multitude of different perspectives brought to it by the multitude of languages and cultures in the world."³¹

The opposite side of culture is also true. Just as human cultures reflect the *imago Dei*, they also contain the imprint of the fallenness of humanity. Culture and the worldview values behind them display "both the wisdom of God and the flaws of sin."³² These flaws are generated and expressed individually, corporately, and globally. They can also be evidenced on levels external, visible, social, physical, material, and even spiritual. Human cultures strive with one another in a continual desire to express themselves for the sake of self-centered praise and glory. These attempts counterfeit the true created purpose of humanity by following the original temptation of self-deification.³³

It was not because of the good in human culture nor even the redeemable remnant of *imago Dei* retained somewhere in human culture that caused God to desire to restore humanity. The starting point of the *missio Dei* is solely the initiation of a God who, in spite of the sinful fallen condition of all the world's cultures, continued to love the entire created order and precisely at that point of rejection decided to do something about it.³⁴

Missio Dei and the Tension of Faithful Living in Culture

Generations of theologians, missiologists, and practitioners thinking about Christianity's engagement with culture have been influenced by H. Richard Niebuhr's

seminal work *Christ in Culture*. All critiques of Christendom and modernist tendencies aside, one of the major omissions of Niebuhr and many of his critics is their ignoring the fact that the transformation of culture God desires is not somewhere out there but is first and foremost required in the life of those who claim to be Christ followers. David Bosch said it best, “The first missionary task of the church is not to change the world but to change herself.”³⁵

The reality of living in human culture is the ongoing pressure to conform. The pressure to conform comes from the people within the culture. Some of these pressures are good and maintain the welfare of the society; other pressures are not. Ultimate absorption into culture is subtle, a comfortably slow decline into osmosis.

Understandably, partnering with the *missio Dei* requires full incarnation with the culture, identifying with people, speaking their language, allowing the gospel to be understood and to address clearly deep, heartfelt values in ways that make response possible. The other extreme is to be completely alienated from one’s culture to such an extent that the prophetic voice is unintelligible, so foreign it cannot elicit a response, or as the old saying goes, “so spiritually minded as to be of no earthly good.”

Lucien Legrand’s review of Scripture’s teaching about the life of the called of God in relation to their cultural context details this tension very clearly.³⁶ God is at work in two seemingly contradictory ways in culture and calls his people to partner in this apparent tension. On one side God is fully committed to a complete identification with the human condition through incarnation, not for the sake of relevance, but in order that the other seemingly opposite position of raising a prophetic voice against the evils found in that same human culture may be clearly understood and responded to. It is a call to live in the tension which I have diagrammed below, dedicated to complete incarnation without absorption and faithfulness to the prophetic role without total alienation.

Model of Legrande's Cultural Tension

Indistinguishable Completely Familiar	Compassionately Incarnational	Unintelligible Completely Foreign
•—————•		
Osmosis	Prophetically Intelligible	Alienation

Absorption Through Osmosis

Statistics show that Christians basically do whatever the world does. Christians watch the same movies, buy the same kind of cars, listen to the same music, and eat and drink the same as everyone else.³⁷ The divorce rate of Christians is no different from that of non-Christians and in some cases is higher.³⁸ Rather than saying that Christianity has an engagement with culture, perhaps we should say that Christianity has an incestuous relationship with culture since the culture is really an expression of ourselves. Attempts to jar Christians out of their comfortable position both intellectually and in their lifestyle include Mark Noll's *The Scandal of the Evangelical Mind*³⁹ and Ron Sider's more recent publication *The Scandal of the Evangelical Conscience*.⁴⁰

Nearly every week we can find another article in the local paper or another headline story featuring a fallen religious leader, a popular media-promoting theme which apparently Christians also enjoy learning about. Even a figure as venerated as Mother Teresa is not exempt from this publicity as *Time* magazine's recent article detailing her private struggle of faith would indicate.⁴¹ False examples of faith abound in the movies wherein the pastor, priest, or Christian spiritual leader is inevitably deeply flawed and often beyond redemption. The reality is that cultural osmosis deeply impacts and pressures all Christ followers but especially those of us who claim to be leaders and representatives of the church of Jesus Christ. It is a reality to which we must be honest in our personal confessions to each other and to the world.⁴²

Protest and Alienation

At the other end of the spectrum, while the community of Christian faith needs to be incarnational enough to be heard and not completely absorbed by cultural osmosis, how are we doing as Christ followers and as a church in raising the prophetic voice in our culture? Are there Christian voices speaking out against ungodly culture and

dehumanizing injustices? Are these voices understood in ways that allow a response to the gospel, or are they instilling cultural alienation away from it?

Perhaps one of the most popular approaches to allow the voice of the gospel to be heard in the culture is through the attempt to disassociate oneself from the established church and to reject and revile the evils of the Christian past, particularly those under the rubric of Christendom. Craig Carter has done this in his appeal to rethink Niebuhr's positions:

If you reject Christendom, you will sometimes appear left wing to your right-wing friends (or enemies) and you will often appear right wing to your left-wing friends (or enemies). When everyone has a problem with you, then you know that you are doing something right. . . . Our goal is to be indigestible to the world."⁴³

While the emergent church movement may or may not be new in its various approaches, it is an attempt to live a faithful witness in a world that has many legitimate complaints with the church. It is an appeal to say to the culture, "Wait! Don't go! The gospel is not what you think it is!"

Since the origin of Christendom the military approach to opponents has had a certain appeal that some might attribute to God's commands to Moses and Joshua to conquer the land and claim it for God. Today the militant voice of Christians is raised against the sins of culture in a variety of forms. Peter Kreeft's *How to Win the Culture War: A Christian Battle Plan for a Society in Crisis* states, "This book will offend many people, for the same reason it will delight many others: because it is not only *about* a war—'a culture war,' a spiritual war, a jihad—but it is itself an *act* of war. . . . If nobody wants to crucify you, you're not doing your job. Or else your job isn't *his* work."⁴⁴ Kreeft goes on to say that the clock can and must be reversed since, "we invented it, we can break it, and we can fix it."⁴⁵ He calls for a return to the times of spiritual persecution that purified the church, "If God still loves his Church in America, he will soon make it small and poor and persecuted, just as he did to ancient Israel. If he loves us, he will cut the deadwood away, and we will bleed . . . for Christ's work is bloody. Christ's work is a blood transfusion. That is how salvation happens."⁴⁶

Christian youth movements are also engaged in the battle against culture. One example is Teen Mania Ministries (TMM), a mobilizing missionary sending agency whose mission is, “To provoke a young generation to passionately pursue Jesus Christ and to take His life-giving message to the ends of the earth!”⁴⁷ TMM has recently developed a project called BattleCry that fights against many social evils. Quoting from their website:

A stealthy enemy has infiltrated our country and is preying upon the hearts and minds of thirty-three million American teens. Corporations, media conglomerates, and purveyors of popular culture have spent billions to seduce and enslave our youth. So far, the enemy is winning. But there is plenty we can do. We need to take action. We need to answer the Battle Cry.⁴⁸

Reporting upon the impact of a BattleCry visitation on his city, journalist Joe Garafoli of the *San Francisco Chronicle* reported:

This battle is taken seriously. TMM has taken BattleCry to major cities where thousands of teens are encouraged to use their skills in “ruffling people’s feathers” for God (Wu). At the San Francisco rally of 25,000 teens 44-year-old TMM founder Ron Luce challenged the sellout crowd of 25,000 mostly teenage youth, “Are you ready to go to battle for your generation?” he asked, and the young people roared “yes!” and some waved triangular red flags flown from long, medieval-looking poles. The battle lines are clearly drawn. “This is more than a culture clash,” Luce said. “It’s a culture war.”⁴⁹

San Francisco’s leadership was less than appreciative and issued citations against the group’s visits in the future. Nevertheless, BattleCry returned the following summer. Some would find this approach on the extreme of alienation; however, it is popular among a certain conservative evangelical population. A CNN reporter describing the reactionary demonstrations and shouting matches labeled it, “the intersection of faith and the secular world.” Afterwards one tearful young participant wanted to clarify a misconception, “Our war is not against people, it is against the evils of our culture.”⁵⁰

Unfortunately this attempt to soften the blow becomes meaningless when culture is understood as what people themselves embody it to be. When, for example, homosexuality is the identifying characteristic of a highly profiled segment of society, to speak of loving the sinner and hating the sin is to speak a foreign language entirely.⁵¹ BattleCry's attempt to speak out boldly for Christ through militant marching demonstrations is judged primarily by San Francisco culture as committing the unforgivable sin of intolerance and the raising up of a new generation of intolerant people. What may reinforce the zeal of the committed serves to widen the gap of cultural alienation.

One area in which Christians have attempted to avoid complete cultural alienation and allow the gospel to speak intelligently to the culture is through the arts. Here is the lonely desert of the present day prophet, often critiqued and "indigestible" by both church and culture. It is possible for Christian expressions of the arts to maintain the prophetic voice incarnationally with integrity and intelligence. William Romanowski urges the Christian artist to avoid a reactionary approach to culture, "Even if we are overrun with popular artworks that indulge evil, Christians should resist the temptation to try to balance them out with portraits of life on the bright side—a penchant that makes their own art bear little resemblance to reality."⁵² The masks of false piety are quickly noticed by those who know them well. Just as the blind man didn't want to see the reality of the broken and dirty world around him, so Christians have sometimes been in denial of the reality of the pain and hurt inside and outside the church. At times the sanctuary-from-the-world mentality is actually less of a removal from other people as it is from honesty with self. Each of us continues to carry in our mortal selves both the image of God and the dishonesty that seeks to hide in shame from what we really are.

Living Faithfully Within the Tension

At the same time that we mark the rapid decline in the world around us, we are entrenched so deeply in our cultural matrix and comfort that we do not notice the changes that simultaneously occur in us. Western culture in particular values the idea of change and for many years has linked this with the concept of civilization to show progress and forward movement of our society. Ours is a pool of cultural products and ideas constantly being stirred and never allowed to settle. The challenge is to remain rooted and fluently

speaking the language of the culture yet with eyes and values fixed upon the standards of Jesus.

How is it possible to live faithfully in the tension between cultural osmosis and cultural alienation? How can the Christian community continue to be salt and light in a culture that attempts to water it down and darken it? At this point I would like to turn to anthropology and look from a social science perspective at how cultures change and what sustains those changes on a secular level to see how this might also address ongoing spiritual and cultural transformation.⁵³

How do cultures change? Harvie M. Conn describes cultures as incomplete structures that are in constant movement. Social reinforcement generally holds cultures together, but even among those labeled as high cultures there are still rough and restless edges on the cultural margins where social changes are most likely to occur.

Cultures are neither aggregates of accumulated traits nor seamless garments. There is a dynamic to human cultures that makes full integration incomplete; gaps and inconsistencies provide opportunities for change and modification, some rapid and some slow.⁵⁴

In his study of the Ndembu people of Zambia, Victor Turner observed that groups experiencing healing rites became bonded into what he called *communitas*, a Latin term he borrowed to indicate those who have moved somewhere across the threshold or limen into a liminal phase that will move them toward a mutually achievable goal. *Communitas* is a bond of oneness beyond ordinary community, an actual communion together that does not destroy individuality but brings alive the full gifts of each participant. It is a leveling process wherein “he who is high must experience what it is like to be low,”⁵⁵ yet accomplished in a setting that is accepting, life-giving, and unifying.

Communitas liberates individuals from conformity to general norms. It is the fount and origin of the gift of togetherness, and thus of the gifts of organization, and therefore of all structures of social behavior, and at the same time it is the critique of structure that is overly law-bound. . . . It is richly charged with feeling, mainly pleasurable. It has something magical about it. Those who experience *communitas* feel the presence of spiritual power.⁵⁶

Communitas is a withdrawal from the larger society but continues to impact the larger society even after the conclusion of the liminal phase. The benefits of *communitas* include joy, healing, the gift of “seeing,” mutual help, religious experience, the gift of knowledge, and long term ties with others. Changes are not only individual; they ultimately result in a “utopian blueprint for the reform of society.”⁵⁷ According to Michael Frost, “Societies need the liminal experience of *communitas* because it pushes society forward, nurturing it with the freshness and vitality that come from the deeper communion that is experienced there. It is the liberation experienced in *communitas* that sows the seeds of cultural regeneration back in normal society.”⁵⁸

What is the significance of *communitas* for followers of Christ? How is this related to faithful living in the tension between cultural absorption and cultural alienation? *Communitas* occurs through mutual commitment to a task greater than the group itself. Let me illustrate Christian *communitas* with another story from Thailand, this from one of the poorest districts of one of the poorest provinces in the northeast of the country. It was here that God brought about a transforming movement toward Christ through a common mission to reach out to those touched by AIDS.

In one particular village, close to a temporary shelter for the HIV positive, was a small home gathering of Christ followers, none of whom had ever met anyone with AIDS before. A beautiful little girl under the age of two whose parents both had AIDS was completely rejected by her extended family. A woman in the Christian community decided to bring her home to adopt her. Through this demonstration of love the parents found the new life and hope that Christ offered them and were eager to learn more of the reality of this path. The adoptive mother, Mrs. Pon, invited the parents, while they were still living, to the local worship gathering in her village.

When Mrs. Pon brought the girl Jimlim home, the small collection of Christ followers of Lao Klang village entered a liminal phase. They were embarking on a mission that would change them socially, theologically, spiritually, and possibly even physically. Together they had to face some serious questions. Were they willing to pay the price of their decision to welcome those with AIDS into their fellowship? In a tradition that practiced the Lord’s Supper using one ball of rice and one common cup, would they all soon become infected? What if someone were to bleed on the straw mat where they were sitting during the worship service and that night a church member were

to sleep on top of it? Could they get AIDS through mosquito bites? More importantly, what would the larger community think? Should the children play together? Would they be allowed to attend the school? Could they allow those with AIDS to use the same village well? With no sewer system in Lao Klang, should the HIV positive be restricted from washing their clothes and their bodies within the perimeters of their neighborhood? Should they share or build separate outhouses for them? Eventually would they be allowed to hold a cremation for them in the local temple or not? Would they all eventually be driven out of the village completely?

Over a period of several months all of these questions and many others were addressed. The church realized that AIDS was not spread through saliva. A common cup was passed at communion. The HIV positive, well-experienced by now with social rejection, had already prepared separate cups in which to pour any drinks that were offered them. They asked that their food be placed in their own containers and thereby not infect the food of others. However, the Christ followers learned to dip fingers into the common rice basket and even to share the same common bowl of soup with separate spoons. Together they learned the limits of how far they could go. Those in the final stages of AIDS were too shamed by their sores and darkened skin to bathe in public with others and either bathed at night or at distant locations. AIDS orphans were enrolled in the same school. In reaction some parents pulled their children out, but others were more supportive. This small community of Christ followers became a model for what could be done to integrate the outcasts into the larger social community.

With time there was greater understanding that all of this was not done merely to be socially or morally just. If asked, none of the Christ followers would admit to being a hero, but all would admit they had been changed. When their new brothers and sisters died of AIDS all of the Christ followers came bringing wood to build the funeral pyres, even though blood relations would refuse to come to honor their own dead. As the flames rose they sang of the transformation that came to them in Christ Jesus, and it moved the whole society. They had gone through the task together to become truly *communitas*, and this included the missionaries. Together we were changed people who had changed society in one small corner of a poor province of Thailand.

Connecting Christian *Communitas* with *Missio Dei*

Connecting with the *missio Dei*, partnering with a cause greater than oneself, and experiencing *communitas* would appear to be a natural fit for the church. Christian *communitas* and its byproduct of Christian community is at least an ideal, if not a reality in most churches. Would not the opportunity to partner in God's greater mission and to deepen relation with God, with each other, and the world be attractive? In his book *A World Waiting to Be Born* M. Scott Peck shares his experience when he developed the Foundation for Community Encouragement (FCE) , an organization dedicated to promoting his version of genuine transformative community.

When we began FCE, we assumed that the church would be a natural market for its services. Christians generally knew that the early church seemed to have had an extraordinary amount of community. . . . Many clergy and laypeople bemoaned the lack of community within their churches. . . . What organization could possibly be more interested in welcoming the presence of God into its midst?⁵⁹

The results within the church were disappointing. Churches showed virtually no interest in building a deeper sense of commitment to each other or their surrounding culture. After analyzing possible reasons for this resistance, Peck concludes:

Community requires a great deal of time and work. The workplace is the center of most people's lives. Next comes the family. Church, if it comes in at all, is usually a poor third or fourth. Most churchgoers simply do not have the time to "do" community at church. Nor do they want to do the painful work of emotionally stretching at church that community requires. The few who make attempts to actualize the church as a place of the Kingdom of God on earth may find themselves silenced by the congregation with an enormously powerful, subtle effectiveness.⁶⁰

Communitas, if it is experienced at all in churches, now occurs during short one to two week periods where we are taken out of our comfort zone and placed in a situation where we are supposed to do something. This is also known as the short term mission trip. The glowing reports that come back reflect the changes that have occurred in the

lives of the sent. Youth complain that church is nothing like that and wonder why *communitas* cannot be a regular, rather than a once-in-a-lifetime, event.

According to Peck's research *communitas* does exist in Western culture, but not in the church. It is alive and well in the business world. "Here is where a single decision may cost [people] their employment, their livelihood. Here is where millions of dollars may be in play every day—sums of money a thousand times greater than their entire annual church budget. These decisions *count*."⁶¹

If the task is urgent enough, if it is truly life and death, then those involved will be willing to pay the price to experience and become *communitas*. Otherwise, we sit comfortably and allow the creeping influence of cultural osmosis to slowly do its work. Understanding the urgency of our participation with the *missio Dei* transforms our cultural blindness to compassionate incarnation and prophetic intelligibility.

Endnotes

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