

Positive Pluralism

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A response to Mark Chan's 'Sowing Subversion in the Field of Relativism?'

To facilitate a truly global conversation, we ask Christian leaders from around the world to respond to the Global Conversation's lead articles. These points of view do not necessarily represent Christianity Today magazine or the Lausanne Movement. They are designed to stimulate discussion from all points of the compass and from different segments of the Christian community. Please add your perspective by posting a comment so that we can learn and grow together in the unity of the Spirit.

My lips were watering as I read Mark Chan's erudite article. For me, Singapore conjures up memories of outdoor banquets by sunset, with my table laden with the best the hawker stands have to offer: Thai soups, Malaysian Satay Chicken, Chinese Szechuan-style noodles, Sri Lankan sweetmeats and so much more. There is so much to commend in Chan's article, but reading it one could forget that diversity is good and not just for the taste buds.

You don't have to be in the sunshine city of Singapore to experience interconnecting cultures. The diversity on our doorsteps brings with it incredible opportunities for Christian mission and theology as well as a taste of eternity. We no longer need a passport to discover this. For many of us we only need to turn up at work, fire up Firefox, or phone up the parents of our child's classmates.

As we navigate our pluralist societies we need to avoid two dangers tourists often fall into. We do not want to be the tactless tourist who presumes that shouting louder will make our foreign tongue more decipherable. Nor should we be the reluctant tourist who seeks out McDonalds in Madrid, Dunkin Donuts in Delhi, or Burger King in Bangkok. But unfortunately these are the approaches the church has often adopted when engaging pluralism.

Tactless Tourism

The tactless approach to pluralism can lead the church to retreat into an arrogant absolutism. Out of fear and misunderstanding we end up believing we have nothing to learn from people from other cultures and religions and so we resort to shouting the truth of the gospel at them and often not hanging around to listen to the response. I would like to balance Chan's dire warnings of the dangers of postmodernity with the positive things postmoderns can bring to the discussion. Postmoderns help us recognize that we are all culturally biased, and therefore in every missionary encounter we have something to learn. The apostle Peter spent three years on the road with Jesus and preached the Pentecost sermon where thousands were converted, yet he still had more to learn about the implications of the gospel. It was only as he crossed cultural boundaries to evangelize that he realized 'God does not show favouritism but accepts those from every nation who fear him and do what is right' (Acts 10:34-35, TNIV). I believe the gospel is God's unique truth, but I also believe that we Christians cannot claim to have comprehended it exhaustively. We must learn the boldness to speak but also the humility to listen and learn.

Reluctant Tourism

The second danger is that we are reluctant to engage other cultures and so retreat into our own ghettos. I have eaten in McDonald's on Hong Kong's Repulse Bay, on Moscow's Pushkin Square and on Hollywood Boulevard, and I know that as I walk through the door, it doesn't matter which continent I am on. I get the same sense of cultural dislocation when I walk into many churches around the world, as I find recognizable books, songs, and fashions. I agree with Chan that the gospel is 'universal truth', but when this is emphasized at the expense of valuing culture, we can

end up with a bland 'McDonaldized' evangel. A fast-food message cannot compare to the nourishment offered by a local flavoursome organic church.

Unity in Diversity

Diversity is not to be feared or avoided but to be welcomed and celebrated. When a predominantly white church in a very multicultural part of London began to grasp this fact, the church began to change. It went from resembling the cultural diversity of the Ku Klux Klan to mirroring the ethnic richness of both the community it was in and the kingdom of God. Of course some long-standing members left, unable to cope with the changes. But those who stayed learned that converts from Kurdistan have a lot to teach us about coping with persecution. They learned that Kenyan Christians could help us become more passionate and rhythmic in our worship. They even learned that Muslim Kosovan asylum seekers could teach us a lot about community and generosity.

Cultural pluralism within the church speaks of the gospel of peace in a way that monotone churches never will. In an increasingly diverse and fragmented society, we need to proclaim with authority the only hope we have; the Christ who died for the world. But we also need to model the unity and diversity of our Trinitarian God. Only then will our gospel give people a taste of God's multicultural kingdom.

And they sang a new song:

"You are worthy to take the scroll
and to open its seals,
because you were slain,
and with your blood you purchased men for God
from every tribe and language and people and nation.
You have made them to be a kingdom and priests to serve our God,
and they will reign on the earth."

Revelation 5:9-10, NIV

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