

Arnold Schwarzenegger, the Gospel and Cultures

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Total Recall: Staying Faithful by Being Relevant

By Krish Kandiah

I had my eye on Arnold Schwarzenegger as I travelled by bus from Singapore to Thailand in the summer of 1994. At that time, instead of using standardised, mass-produced film posters, each cinema would hire an artist to paint picture billboards to advertise the movies. One of the film star's blockbusters was on general release and in Chinese-majority Singapore Schwarzenegger had distinctly Chinese facial features. On our way through Malaysia our bus passed many cinemas, all of which depicted him with a more Malay-looking disposition. When I finally made it to Thailand Schwarzenegger had a noticeably Thai appearance! It seems we want our heroes to look like us!

Upon coming home to the UK I looked through a book of images of Jesus Christ and it soon became apparent that Western Christianity had been doing the same thing for centuries with the greatest hero of all. The majority of the images of Christ, whether on canvas or on film, depict the Son of God as a blue-eyed, blonde-haired, Western male. It has sometimes been said, 'God created us in his image and we have returned the compliment.' Indeed, this is what has happened.

These images of Jesus are an illustration of the very complex relationship between our cultures and the gospel. And we must consider this subject if we are going to relate the faith relevantly and faithfully to contemporary culture. The missiologist Andrew Walls has neatly summarised this relationship into two historical trends: the 'Indigenising Principle' and the 'Pilgrim Principle.'

Indigenising Principle

The indigenising principle is demonstrated when the Church seeks to connect with its host culture. For example, when the early Church, empowered by the Spirit, took the gospel to the nations, they were not afraid to translate the message into the Greek language and its thought forms. The brilliant prologue of John's Gospel shows the author reappropriating the philosophical concept of the logos to help Greek speakers understand the truth about the person of Christ. However, when this indigenising principle is taken too far, as we have seen with the images of Christ, it simply co-opts Christianity into the norms and social mores of the host culture. For example, in a materialistic Western culture, Jesus Christ is often marketed as the fulfilment of a dream of health and wealth. This danger is called syncretism.

Pilgrim Principle

To take advantage of the indigenising principle without falling into the trap of syncretism, we need Walls' counterbalance: the pilgrim principle. The gospel is a prophetic message and Christ and his Church are never fully at home in any culture. Each culture is a mix of the grace of God and rebellion against God; the gospel calls every culture to repentance and Christians are called to be 'resident aliens' who both affirm and confront the culture. But again when this is done without sufficient humility or reflection, the gospel can be exported from one culture to another, along with the cultural baggage of the missionary. The West has a history of planting churches that exported their hymn book, dress codes, leadership structures and social norms along with the gospel. This danger is called cultural imperialism.

Every genuine communicator of the gospel seeks to make the message both faithful to God's revelation and relevant to the culture they are communicating to. Yet historically and from our contemporary experience we often fail in both areas. What help is there?

Jesus Christ

Jesus is God in human flesh, but not just generic human flesh; God became Jewish flesh. Jesus abided by Jewish customs and laws, spoke Aramaic and used the local idioms. Jesus used the everyday experiences of his audience (agriculture, fishing, eating) as a means to communicate the good news of the kingdom. Jesus' message connected with people because he connected with their culture. Yet Jesus' message is prophetic; Jesus finds safe language to deliver a dangerous message. He is criticised for getting too close to the outcasts of his society, to the social misfits and moral failures; and yet, even his enemies can find no sin in him. Jesus models for us a relationship with our cultures; he demonstrates a way to be in the world but not of it.

Canon

Scripture is both human and divine; written into a specific human context and yet the unfailing word of God for all time. Good Christian communication acts as a bridge between text and context as we expound and apply the timeless truth of God. Unfortunately our preaching is often more like a pier than a bridge. Some of us are good at finding appropriate links with popular culture and telling amusing stories that grab the attention. Others of us ground our message in the solid rock of biblical truth but fail to connect it to the everyday experience of our audience. The Bible provides the vital, authoritative and indispensable revelation of God; the source material for all of our communication about God. However, the Bible also models for us that we learn about God best through story, characterisation, history, songs, dreams and letters, not simply through a three-point lecture.

Counsellor

The Holy Spirit promised to lead the first disciples into truth and his presence with his people encourages us to believe that he is more than able to transcend our cultural location in revealing God to us. The simple act of praying before opening God's word or daring to communicate it to others is more than just a formality; it is a self-conscious attempt to submit ourselves to the leading of Spirit. Reliance upon God's Holy Spirit, who is at work both in God's word and in God's world, is our only hope for effective communication.

Community

Our openness to God's truth is affected by our cultural location as so often we inherit cultural blind spots in our reading of scripture. As a Western Christian I am aware that the individualism of my society shapes the way that I read the Bible and that the affluence of my culture, for example, makes it difficult for me to hear the challenge of God's word about caring for the poor. The most obvious way around this is to make use of God's provision of a worldwide Church. By listening to Christians from other cultures as they seek to interpret God's word we are provided with another perspective on scripture which can challenge or complement our own. To our shame Western Christians are often very willing to point out the theological flaws in the rest of the world but are often unwilling to listen to our brothers and sisters return the favour and critique the syncretism rife in the Western Church. This insults the global Church and weakens the Western Church.

Culture

C.S. Lewis argued that just as fish do not feel wet, we are often unaware of our cultures and their influence on us. However, culture is to be recognised as a gift from God. The Book of Revelation hints at the persistence of different languages in heaven and that this great diversity of cultures used to worship the lamb is particularly honouring to God. The Apostle Paul, while in Athens, is not afraid to connect with the pagan poets of his day and to use them as bridge points to help bring the gospel to the spiritually needy city. Culture is good and becoming a culture-watcher is a vital part of becoming an effective communicator of the gospel for two reasons: (1) because as we become aware of our cultures we are better equipped to see how they shape our own understanding of the gospel and (2) because we will be able to communicate that gospel more effectively both within our own culture and cross-culturally.

Let me offer three tips to becoming more aware of our cultures. First, spend some time outside of your culture or at least talking with people from different cultures. Second, find a part of your own culture that you enjoy and become as well informed as you can in it. Whether it is film, art, sport, literature, politics or music, listen to the culture and find things that you can thank God for as well as

things you think God would challenge. Third, leave your armchair and listen to people, ask questions and be inquisitive. Learn about cultures at the grassroots level.

It is vital that we become both faithful and relevant in seeking to reach out with the message of Jesus Christ. By itself faithfulness can simply be a stale restatement of familiar truths, or even worse, an imposition of a past generation's cultural expression of the faith. By itself relevance can end up being faddishness, or even worse, an unwitting assimilation of the norms of our cultures. But coupled together relevance and faithfulness can allow us to become Christ-like in our communication and bring God's unchanging message to an ever-changing world.

Endnote

Walls, Andrew. 1996. "The Gospel as Prisoner and Liberator of Culture." in *The Missionary Movement in Christian History: Studies in the Transmission of Faith*. Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 7.

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