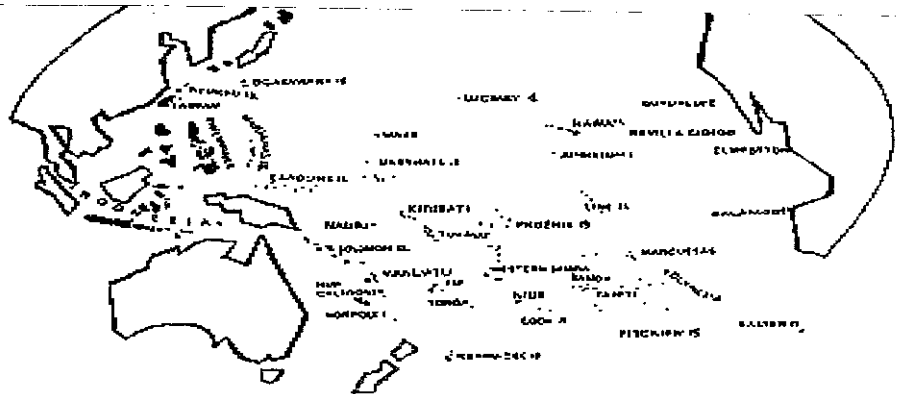


The Multicultural Vision in Christian Mission

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Editorial

by Ross Langmead



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Multiculturalism is a significant factor in understanding the task of Christian mission in Australia.

The term *multicultural*, at its most basic, is a descriptive term referring to the co-existence of several cultures. When used as a value-laden term, however, *multicultural* comes to mean a certain sort of society, and the policy of multiculturalism is carefully defined in various places in order to spell out the desirable features of such a multicultural society.

In this fuller sense, multiculturalism is an ideal blend of unity and diversity. To quote Jim Houston, in his introduction to *The Cultured Pearl*:

*The goal of multiculturalism is ... the just and harmonious co-existence of multiple cultures and life styles within the one framework of legitimacy simply provided by our all living in Australia, ... with equal access to services, power and participation.*¹

One of the doubts some Christians have about multiculturalism is the fear that culture might become too important, relativising the gospel. Australian government policy presumes a unity based on allegiance to Australian values such as democracy and law, and on English as a common language.

The unifying factor in the Christian vision of multiculturalism is the Good News of God in Jesus Christ. The Bible holds to a careful balance on how the gospel and culture are related.

diversity, unity as Australians, and equal access to the good things Australian society offers.

Encouraging cultural *diversity* is a big step away from the policies of assimilation which were pursued earlier. The White Australia policy existed so that only white migrants would come and could integrate quickly into a predominantly Anglo-Celtic Australia.

The removal of Aboriginal children took place partly to encourage them to grow up culturally as white Australians, intermarry and lose their distinctive colour.

Migrants used to be discouraged from speaking their mother tongues, practising their customs or preserving their culture. The vision of multiculturalism, in contrast, is for Australia to be

There are three elements in the Australian vision of multiculturalism: encouragement of cultural diversity, unity as Australians, and equal access to the good things Australian society offers. enriched by its migrants actively preserving their original cultures alongside each other.

The second element, *unity* under the banner of being Australian, is equally important. Federal government policy emphasises the centrality of speaking and writing English, of allegiance to Australia, and of adherence to Australian values such as democracy, non-discrimination and the rule of law. As it happens, migrants almost universally appreciate these things and tend to be more patriotic and aware of Australia's unique blend of political freedoms than Australian-born people.

The third element, equal *access* to services, power and participation, is about social justice. This is what prompted multicultural policy in the 1960s and 1970s. Migrants were numerous but politically invisible. They didn't access services because of language difficulties, ignorance of what was available, or prejudice on the part of Anglo-Celtic Australians. They were absent in parliament. They were not in the highly paid jobs. They were not getting the services they paid for in their taxes.

As a justice issue, multiculturalism aims to make the dominant culture realise that it is not the only one, and that from its position of power it needs to work to empower cultural minorities and those on the margins.

I once worked as a Community Relations Officer in my own suburb of Footscray, in the western suburbs of Melbourne. In Footscray, forty-two per cent of the residents were born overseas, and over forty per cent of non-English speaking background. My job was to help the local Council realise that it had to learn about the many cultures present in the city, employ people who spoke other languages, put out leaflets translated into several languages, consult community groups from non-English backgrounds, and celebrate with these groups in their New Year celebrations. Only if the dominant culture makes the effort will the marginalised groups be able to be heard and to participate effectively.

The biblical foundations of multiculturalism

What are the biblical foundations of multiculturalism? Going back a step, does the Bible suggest at all that the most appropriate form of the church and of an ideal society is one where many cultures mix harmoniously? If so, what does it say?

The Bible itself is, of course, a multicultural text. It is full of variety, even tension. It bristles with intertextuality, as the postmodern writers would say. That is, it comes alive in the interplay

between perspectives. One text helps to interpret another. Sometimes one text subverts or deconstructs another. There is no single biblical view on multiculturalism. There are monoculturalist strands, arguing for Jewish purity, and there are multiculturalist strands, opening up to a vision of intercultural harmony.

Consider a few salient passages which address intercultural questions.

Humans, all like God but different (Gen 1:26-27)

Although we are equal before God and made in God's likeness, we come in all shapes and cultures. God made us all and loves all people, of every culture, nation, race, class, sex, age.² As Emmanuel Lartey has said, "Every human person is in certain respects like all others, like some others and like no other."³ Although we have a fundamental unity as God's creatures, it is expressed in cultural difference and individual uniqueness.

Welcome the migrant (Deut 10:19)

What does the Lord require of Israel? What is the essence of the law? To love God and walk in God's ways. These include executing justice for the orphan and the widow, loving strangers or migrants, and providing them with clothing and food. Israel is asked to show grace towards others as a response to the grace that was extended to them. "You shall also love the stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt" (Deut 10:19). Any sense of being at home is a gift from God and is to be shared with others.

Be involved in society; seek its welfare (Jer 29:7)

Jeremiah wrote to the exiles in Babylon telling them to plant gardens, build houses and seek the welfare of the city where they were. Both faithfulness to God and involvement in wider community life is possible, Jeremiah was saying.⁴

It is fascinating to remind ourselves of what happened to Jewish theology during the time of the exile, while the Hebrews were rubbing shoulders with another culture. Many of the stories and laws were edited into what we have in the first five books of the Old Testament. Prophetic themes were developed, such as those in the later chapters of Isaiah. The hope that God would bring a new Exodus grew. A new awareness of God as universal creator was evident. A new identity for Israel grew, connected to suffering and servanthood. An appreciation is

found for God working through non-Jews, such as the emperor Cyrus. All of this was happening while the Jews were displaced in Babylon. There was a rich harvest from this multicultural period of Israel's history.⁵

Jesus' love of neighbour all-inclusive (Lk 10:25-37)

Jesus grew up in a multicultural setting, suggesting that "God's definitive presence with us, the incarnation, was in a context of diverse cultures".⁶

Jesus ministered among various cultures, and taught (in the parable of the Good Samaritan) that true neighbourliness is that which treats people of other cultures not with disdain but with respect and costly care. Jesus put people before cultural prohibitions when he healed people on the Sabbath, and thereby challenged his cultural surroundings. He neither rejected culture nor accepted it, but "radically reappropriated it, identifying its heart and sitting lightly to the rest".⁷

The church: multicultural almost from the start (Acts 2, 10, 11, 15, 17)

One of the central tensions in the earliest church was that between Jews and Gentiles, and it resolved itself, with some difficulty, after various visions on the part of Peter, and councils on the part of the Jerusalem Christians. Peter declared that people of all nations and cultures are acceptable before God and that Jesus is Lord of all (Acts 10:34).

Neither Jew nor Gentile (Gal 3:28)

One of the centrepieces of Paul's theology is the famous passage in Gal 3:28 declaring the equality before God of all baptised believers. John Barclay argues that Paul, like Jesus, does not *erase* cultural differences (ignoring culture), nor does he *accept* cultural barriers; instead he *relativises* them.⁸ For Paul Christian faith allows people to, at the same time, be different and overcome cultural barriers.

The Gospel is not a new culture, replacing old cultures. "It is rather a cluster of values, focused in love, which enables the creation of a new community in which variant cultural traditions can be practised".⁹ It is in this context that we should understand Gal 4:4, which talks of one Lord, one faith and one baptism. Our being a new creation in Christ gives us a fundamental unity, without erasing differences, though certainly overcoming barriers.

Barclay agrees with recent trends in interpreting Paul which suggest that overcoming Gentile-Jewish conflict was a central part of Paul's work.

Paul has often been interpreted on a spiritual plane when he talks about a new life in the Spirit, whereas his *new life* is to do with a new, welcoming, inclusive and non-hierarchical set of relationships rooted in the practicalities of everyday living. Barclay concludes:

*Thus the new perspective suggests that Paul could serve as a valuable resource in our struggles to fashion a harmonious but multicultural society. It reads Paul as the fashioner of multiethnic and multicultural communities, which function not to erase but to moderate between differing cultural specificities.*¹⁰

The theological vision of multiculturalism

The question of the extent to which the church ought to live by a multicultural vision is one of the central questions of gospel and culture. I will consider four crucial theological issues involved in the vision of a multicultural church and society, those of culture, welcoming *the other*, marginality and diversity.

Gospel and culture

The first observation is that the gospel stands in a critically affirmative relationship to culture.

One of the doubts some Christians have about multiculturalism is the fear that culture might become too important, relativising the gospel. As we noted above, Australian government policy presumes a unity based on allegiance to Australian values such as democracy and law, and on English as a common language. The unifying factor in the Christian vision of multiculturalism is the Good News of God in Jesus Christ. The Bible holds to a careful balance on how the gospel and culture are related.

Paul Hiebert summarises it well: first, the gospel must be distinguished from all human cultures. Second, it must always be expressed in cultural forms. "Not only are all cultures capable of expressing the heart of the gospel, but each also brings to light certain salient features of the gospel that have remained less visible or even hidden in other cultures". Third, the gospel calls all cultures to change.¹¹

This means that in mission the church must always try to discern both the face of God in a culture and what needs to be challenged. It asks what can be affirmed and what must be rejected or transformed? Multiculturalism does not mean a

romantic view of diversity, but a critical and prophetic one. In the words of Frank Moloney:

*The life, teaching, death and resurrection of Jesus stand as a challenge to the absolutisation of all religions, all particular cultures and the exaltation of any historical period. ... Here we are at the heart of a theology of multiculturalism.*¹²

Welcoming *the other*

A second theological observation is that the tradition of hospitality to the stranger, already mentioned above, is close to the heart of the gospel.

Often in the bible we come across God hidden in the stranger. Abraham welcomed three strangers who turned out to be God's messengers promising Abraham and Sarah a son (Gen 18). The sin of Sodom and Gomorrah was the refusal to host strangers (Gen 19). God's messengers often appear as strange visitors, such as to the women at the tomb of Jesus (Lk 24:2). Jesus himself appeared on the road to Emmaus unrecognised (Lk 24:13-35). Paul exhorted Christians to show hospitality to strangers (Rom 12:13), as did the writer to the Hebrews, promising that we will often entertain angels unawares (Heb 13:3). Throughout we are asked to avoid oppressing the stranger, to provide for him or her, and to be open to blessing from the stranger.¹³

Even more deeply, God's incarnation as an ordinary carpenter in undistinguished Nazareth is an example of the hiddenness of God, as the cross is a symbol of life hidden in death.¹⁴ Paul talks of victory in apparent defeat and joy in suffering. These opposites, surprises and paradoxes prod us to realise that what is *other* to us, alien or unwanted, is often the key to our self-knowledge or new life. In Jungian terms we might say that the welcoming of our shadow is integral to our path towards wholeness. Otherness is a gift from God.

In the language of postmodernism, for an adequate interpretation of a text or of life, we need to hear the many voices which clamour to be heard, the *multiple discourses*. In these days, when we are beginning to hear the voices of the marginalised, the poor, the foreigner, and even the insane, we may not actually want to hear them. In a multicultural context we may even find the smells and sounds and customs of another culture repugnant - they are deeply *other*. But, as David Tracy argues, "Only by beginning to listen to those

other voices may we also begin to hear the otherness within our own discourse and within ourselves. What we might then begin to hear, above our own chatter, are possibilities we have never dared to dream."¹⁵

So a good metaphor for a theology of multicultural mission is that of hospitality to the stranger.¹⁶

Seeing marginality differently

A third observation addresses those on the edges. It is expressed very well by Jung Young Lee, a Korean American, in his book *Marginality: The key to multicultural theology*.¹⁷

Theologically speaking, to live on the margins can be a rich place to be, if we reconceive it, not in terms of powerlessness, but - following the example of Jesus - see it in terms of the place where God wants us, richer for being poorer, more sensitive for identifying with others on the edge, and benefiting from the clearer view that being on the margins offers.

Lee writes as a migrant. Migrants often feel homeless because they are in between cultures. They don't share the power of the dominant group, who are the genuine *insiders*. But he is inspired by the incarnation, in which God takes shape as a marginal person.

Jesus was not only marginal in terms of economic, political, social and ethnic considerations. Cosmically speaking, he suffered rejection by his people and the world. The incarnation, Lee argues, is a story of divine marginalisation. And yet this is God at work, with world-changing love, transforming all people, and particularly those who were also on the edges.

So Lee suggests that instead of feeling *in-between* cultures, migrants should see themselves as *in-both* cultures, defining the experience positively as well as negatively: "A marginal person is in-both worlds without giving up either. I am more than an Asian because I am an American, and I am more than an American because I am an Asian. ... To be in-both is as authentic as to be in-between".¹⁸

What this means for ethnic minorities in the Australian church is that in seeing themselves differently it is possible to claim a new sense of both dignity and mission. There are echoes here of the questions of liberation theology: where would Jesus be? Exactly where you are, on the edges. Relish it and value its benefits at the same time as fighting its disadvantages.

The vision of a multicultural church

The fourth theological observation to be made here is that Christians pursuing a multicultural vision need to live in the tension between *the unity of the church* on the one hand, consisting of congregations that break down barriers and incorporate all types of people; and *the diversity of the church* on the other hand, with congregations that worship in different languages and use different customs, churches that deeply express faith in different cultural forms.

Putting the issue sharply, is it appropriate for the wider *multicultural church* to consist mainly of mono-ethnic churches, or should multiculturalism be practised right down to the level of the local congregation? Should we support the idea of local homogeneous units, where people feel at home worshipping in their own culture, or should we be developing *rainbow churches*, celebrating diversity week by week?

We should begin, perhaps, by acknowledging that the multicultural vision of God's gracious rule is an eschatological vision. This means that though it impinges on our daily life today, the overcoming of barriers will only happen completely when God reigns fully. It has an *already-but-not-yet* character, challenging us, drawing us into God's future, but beyond full realisation this week or this year. This means some local churches will look more like a multicultural church than others.

What is more, it is appropriate to worship in a language we understand. Mono-ethnic migrant churches often begin in order to provide worship in the mother tongue of migrants, and this is fine and good. Whether the congregation should continue after the second or third generation, when gradual integration into the adopted society is occurring, is another question. We at least ought to question whether churches based on a single class, economic group, age, gender or skin colour should be comfortable with a continuing existence.

Advocates of the Church Growth Movement, very conscious of barriers to communication, argue that for the sake of mission we should meet in homogeneous groups. Bikers will hear the gospel best from Christian bikies. Poor people won't feel comfortable entering a church of rich people. Young people best hear the gospel in the sub-culture of youth.

This is all true, but the multicultural vision is that this will only be the doorway to a new reality, in which cultural barriers are overcome and difference is celebrated in the name of Christ.

Admittedly this is a difficult question. African-American Christianity is so culturally different from white-American Christianity that many would say that it is effectively another language (verbally, in body movements, in emotional expression and so on). We may grant this. But to take another example, to foster a totally separate youth congregation on Sunday evenings as a permanent arrangement seems to institutionalise segmentation by age. Where do young people get to experience the transforming power of the gospel if they are never stretched to worship alongside older people, and vice versa?

Some of the tragedies of history have been where Christians have justified apartheid on the grounds of cultural diversity, or where affluent Christians go their way oblivious to the material need of the very poor worshipping nearby. This seems to go directly against the message of the gospel.

Therefore, active links and accountability are the very least we can expect. If churches exist for one language group, for street kids or for executives at lunch-time in the city, they do well to go looking for links with other groups and even offering to be accountable to wider groupings that are multicultural in nature. In other words, diversity ought to be balanced by unity in Christ. Denominations ought to be multicultural by active design. Congregations sharing buildings ought to work hard at being enriched by each other.

This journey towards inclusiveness is urgently needed in Australian churches. Sometimes there is a critique made of new-migrant churches remaining isolated from other influences, but the most glaring example of mono-ethnic Christianity in Australia is that of white Protestantism.

One of the central issues in Christian mission in Australia is whether the church will lead the way, on theological grounds, towards a healthy multicultural reality both in the church and in society, or whether the church will change ever so slowly, well after society has changed, dragging its feet because security and comfort is what counts in weekly worship rather than the call to leave our comfort zones and be enriched by *the other*, in whom we may well discover the presence of Christ.

The following statement from the Anglican report, *A garden of many colours*, sums up these theological comments on multiculturalism:

In Christian understanding, world, church and kingdom are alike multicultural. The Christian vision is of a diversity of peoples joined together

by Christ into a harmonious, united new humanity. God may therefore be said to have a policy of multiculturalism in its fullest sense.¹⁹

Exploring multicultural Australia and the church

Something like this vision lies behind the thoughtful reflections in the articles in this issue on multicultural Australia.

Sociologist and priest Gary Bouma brings together an overview of Australian society and an exploration of what it is to be the Christian church in a pluralistic and multicultural context. Intercultural sensitivity, he suggests, will mean that we are at ease in a pluralistic context while prepared to share the specific tradition we have chosen to follow. Unconditional love, following the pattern of Jesus, is the key to overcoming multicultural barriers.

Jim Houston argues in his contribution that multiculturalism means that no one immigrant group holds the right to cultural privilege over other groups. Like Bouma, Houston draws links between the benefits of a mature multicultural society and a theological vision of unity in diversity.

Philip Hughes, Alan Black and Peter Kaldor look at responses to the multiplicity of faiths in Australia, noting that religion is the bearer of identity for many immigrants. They show from recent data that Australians are increasingly less wedded to organised religious traditions and more interested in broad spiritual questions and practices, often pursued privately and eclectically. Plurality is the growing context. In a time of growing fundamentalism and fragmented spirituality it becomes even more important for the Christian church to offer committed communities of faith.

Joy Sandefur explores the sensitive matter of the place of indigenous Australians in the multicultural debate. Unwilling to be treated as just another ethnic group, and wary of their spirituality being co-opted by New Age enthusiasts, indigenous people ask to be recognised as unique amongst the cultures represented in Australia. Sandefur outlines recent moves by the church to allow appropriate cultural space for Aboriginal Christians and to train their leaders in ways which respect their ancient culture ■

We have also included a Report from Roger Kemp on the IAMS Conference held in South Africa, as well as a reflection on missionary life from Larry Nemer, and book reviews from Seton Arndell and Gary Trompf.

Jim Mulrone (publishing editor)

END NOTES

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