TOWARDS A MISSIOLOGY OF WESTERN CULTURE

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There is a vast amount of missionary literature on approaches to culture but virtually nothing on the most persuasive culture of all; the Western one. Both the power of Western culture and the degree to which the church has accommodated to it, make an analysis of the culture an urgent task.
Category: Observations

During the C19 and early C20 there was little reflection on Western culture. However, as the majority world church grew, there was a new critique and challenge for the Western church.

Â AN URGENT TASK

Newbigin believed that developing a missiology of Western culture was the most urgent task facing the global church because:

- Western culture is the most powerful global force in the world and reaches most places.
- Western culture has had a long association with Christianity that has made it almost immune to critique.
- Western Culture is a hugely powerful cultural force and has had a destructive impact on the Christian faith in the West, we must assume it will have a similar effect elsewhere.
- Though the Western church has slipped in terms of numbers, it still exerts a worldwide leadership.

MISSIONARY ENCOUNTERS WITH CULTURE: THE FAITHFUL POSITION OF THE CHURCH

When a Christian community faithfully embodies the gospel, a missionary encounter occurs between the gospel and the reigning public doctrine that shapes society. A missionary encounter is about a clash of stories.

A missionary encounter does not mean an anticultural or polemical stance. There will be dialogue and engagement and a recognition of that which is of value in the culture.

The Church in the West is not well position for this encounter:

- The church does not have a critical distance from its own culture.
- The myth of Christian culture persists and if we see the culture as Christian we donâ€™tâ€™ need to develop a counter-cultural instinct.
- The myth of a neutral secular or pluralistic society is powerful. We fail to recognise the powerful religious foundational beliefs of the West. â€œThe humanistic faith of the West is a powerful religious faith that brooks no rivals.â€

Three tasks need to be undertaken to address these issues:

THE THEOLOGICAL TASK: LIBERATING THE GOSPEL

There is a question as to whether the Western church has got into a situation where the biblical message has been so adapted to fit into modern Western culture that we are unable to hear its radical challenge. We need to:

- We must take hold of the Gospel as public truth. The message of Jesus claims to be universally valid.
    - We must avoid the relativism of our pluralistic culture, where it is domesticated as one story among many.
    - Equally we must avoid the Enlightenment temptation of seeing the Gospel merely as propositional truth.
- We must take hold of the gospel as a true story, which provides the context to understand our whole lives. â€œThe Christian churches have comprehensively failed in their one central task â€“ to retell their foundation story in a way that might speak to the timesâ€ .
- We most take hold of the gospel in its comprehensive scope. The way we understand all human life needs to be shaped by it.
  â€œThe Western church is in a state of syncretism to the degree that it has allowed the biblical story to be accommodated into the more comprehensive cultural story in much public life.â€
- We need to grasp the restorative nature of the gospel. â€œThe good news is an announcement, not that we will be taken out of this world to an otherworldly heaven, but that God will restore our lives as part of this good creation.â€
- Finally, we must take hold of the gospel as a present power It is not simply a religious doctrine, it is a declaration of what God is doing. â€œA missionary encounter will require that the church be equipped with a message that has the power to confront the commanding and powerful idolatrous story that shapes our culture.â€

THE ECCLESIOLOGICAL TASK: UNDERSTANDING OUR MISSIONAL IDENTITY.

Recovering our missional identity

At best the word â€˜missionalâ€™ describes the churchâ€™s nature, not its activities. It means that the church is a distinctive people and that it is oriented to the world: â€œan alternative community for the sake of the worldâ€ .

To often the Western church has been inward looking. This is due to â€œa misunderstanding of salvation that reduces Godâ€™s work of grace to what is done in and for us, blinded to the fact that

it is also what God does through us for the sake of the world.â€

We must be orientated to the world but we must also remain true to our identity as participants in Godâ€™s mission.

Ecclesiology is about understanding our identity; who we are and why God has chosen us.

Recovering the counter-cultural dimensions of our mission

An important task is to recover the counter-cultural dimension of the gospel. According to Walsh and Keesmat Western Christianity has by and large accepted the empire of economic globalisation and consumerism as normal.

The comprehensive scope of mission and authentic engagement of the public square

Bosch sees five traditions for engagement. The first two are more or less sub-Christian.

- **Constantinian:** The church fins a small place as part of the broader culture and loses sight of its prophetic calling.
- **Pietistic:** has been strong in evangelical circles; is individualistic and otherworldly. Salvation is about the individual going to heaven and the things that matter for Christians are â€˜sacredâ€™ ones. This can lead to a withdrawl from society altogether.
- **Liberationist:** the church is to side with those who are marginalized and impoverished by the unjust structures of society. Salvation involves liberation from an oppressive order.
- **Anabaptist:** this is gaining favour in N. America.
    - It is anti-Christendom.
    - It emphasises the communal nature of missionary witness.
    - The church is critical of culture.
- **Reformist**: this approach recognises that there is creational good in some structures and is concerned that revolution might sweep away that which is good and just.

It is interesting to compare the positions of Romans 13, which calls for engagement with the Roman Empire and Revelation 13 which is much more confrontational. The Romans passage is more reformist, while Revelation is more akin to liberationist or Anabaptist positions.

Our changing culture means that the church will constantly struggle with the shape of its mission in the public square.

THE CULTURAL TASK: A MISSIONARY ANALYSIS OF WESTERN CULTURE

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The religious core of culture.

The standard assumption is that we have moved from being a religious culture to a secular one. But this has to be challenged.

There are four metaphors used to describe how culture and religion relate:

Newbiggin talks of a religious foundation for culture which supports and gives shape to culture

Conn speaks of the religious core of culture. It is religion that gives direction to life.

Schuurman talks of a religious root sending sap into the whole culture.

Goudswaard talks about religion as the chief end of culture

Western culture is a pattern of life that is animated by a dominant religious vision of what it means to be human.

Telling the Story That Shapes Us

There are perhaps two dominant themes to our story:

Nietzsheâ€™s madman â€“ must we become Gods

The second is Baconâ€™s â€˜knowledge is powerâ€™

These statements are woven into the story of the developing worldview of the west.

Discerning the religious spirits today.

- **Postmodernism**: this challenges many of the Enlightenment assumptions.
- **Economic Goblalisation**: has generated huge amounts of wealth, but it is not evenly distributed.
- **Consumerism**: is part of the facric of Western life and drives the unequal nature of globalisation.

A contrast community in the West

A list of suggestions of areas that the church needs to address in a missionary response to Western culture.

- Self â€“giving love in a world of self-interest
- Wisdom in a world of proliferating knowledge and information technology
- Justice in a world of economic injustice
- Creational care in a world of ecological destruction
- Humility in a world of arrogant self-indulgent and self-centred behaviour
- Patience in a world of immediate gratification
- Compassion in a world numbed by overexposure to violence and tragedy
- Joy in a world dominated by a frantic and hedonistic pursuit of pleasure
- Thanksgiving in a world of entitlement
- Self-control and marital fidelity in a world saturated by sex
- Truth (in humility and boldness) in a world of uncertainty
- Living moment by moment in Godâ€™s presence in a secular world
- Generosity in a world of consumption
- Simplicity (of enough) in a world of excess
- Forgiveness in a world of competition, violence, grudge and revenge
- Praise in a world of narcissism
- Hope in a world of despair and consumer satiation
- Edifying communication in a world of destructive words
- Commitment in a world of apathy

This is part of my continuing series making notes onÂ Â Introducing Christian Mission Today: Scripture, History and IssuesÂ by Mike Goheen.Â If you are finding these notes helpful, a small contribution to the running costs of Kouyanet would not go amiss â€“ or you could get us a book from the list on the right.Â