REALLY LISTENING TO THE GLOBAL CHURCH

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In a changing and increasingly globalised world, we have much to learn from Christians in other contexts, but we can only really gain from their insights when we read them on their own terms and not on ours.
Category: Church: World

On twitter this weekend I came across a link to an excellent post by Alistair Wilson entitled Listening to the Global Church. The post points to a number of excellent resources for those who are interested in hearing the voice of Global Christianity and I'd commend it to you.

However, while the post does a great job, I think that there is something important missing from it; a discussion of our attitudes as we read and interact with the writings of people from around the Christian world. I think there are a few things that we need to bear in mind when we read writers from Africa, Asia, Latin America and the rest.

Just Because they are Global, It Doesn't Mean They are Right: in certain circles there is a tendency to decry everything that emerges from Western Christianity while assuming that everything that emerges from the rest of the world church is super-duper. In truth, there is bad African writing, just the same that there is bad British writing and not everything that emerges from Latin American theologians is as well thought through as it might be. You need to read stuff from the world church with discernment, in the same way that you read Western theology with discernment. However, there is one corollary to this; in truth it is very difficult for Africans, Latins and Asians to get published in the West, so anything that you come across in Europe or the US, is likely to be of a fairly high standard. If not, it simply wouldn't get published or distributed - would that the same could be said of Western authors!

Read Them on Their Own Terms: while discernment is important, you need to approach Global Christianity appropriately. Modern evangelicalism has been shaped by two massive events, the Reformation and the Enlightenment. The way we do theology and our approach to Christian living reflects Western culture in particular and these two paradigm shifts in particular. However, these are European/Western realities and they do not form a major part of the cultural heritage of the church in other parts of the world. Majority world theology has been shaped by events such as colonialism, living as a minority surrounded by other religions and the crushing impact of poverty. It is all too easy for Westerners to assume that their approach to theology and Christian living is the only one that is valid. In doing so, we impose our own history on other people and refuse to see the value and validity in their experiences. The whole point of interacting with the Global Church is that they see things differently to the way that we do in the West - if we then condemn them because they don't have the same concerns or use the same language as us, then we are really missing the point.

There Is No Such Thing as the Global Church: Brits will very quickly tell you that they are not the same as Americans. They speak the same language, they have a broadly similar ethnic heritage and a shared basis for the legal code - but they are different! At the same time, we are likely to lump together All Africans together as one, despite the massive ethnic, linguistic and cultural differences across a huge continent. Even more oddly, we talk about the world church in a way that suggests that Latin Americans, Africans and Asians are all similar - when in fact the only thing they have in common is that they are not Westerners. Latin Americans disagree among themselves the same

way that North Americans do and they are no more similar to Asians than Europeans are to Africans.

In passing, this issue raises a the problem of how we talk about the church outside of the West. Some talk about the Global South - but this includes Korea, which is definitely in the Northern Hemisphere. My preferred solution is to forget about trying to use a short form and to talk about the church in Africa, Asia and Latin America, but that isn't ideal either. If anyone has a better suggest, please let me knwo.

In a changing and increasingly globalised world, we have much to learn from our brothers and sisters in other contexts, but we can only really gain from their insights when we read them on their own terms and not on ours.