SYNCRETISM AND THE WEST

Posted on April 26, 2018 by Eddie

Planks, specks, eyes and the need for Western Christianity to be careful about criticising others.
Category: Observations

In yesterday's post, I made the following comment:

> *Iâ€™m not sure that Christians in the west are in any place to go about criticising others.*

Western writers sometimes accuse the church in other parts of the world of being syncretistic - that is they intermingle Christianity with local beliefs in a way which damages the Christian faith. It is my belief that the church in the west is every bit as syncretistic, if not more so, than the church in other parts of the world. I'd like to highlight two related issues to illustrate this.

Lifestyle

In many (most?) cases, the evangelical church in the west has adopted the values of materialism and consumerism that are prevalent in our society. We avoid the excesses of equating material prosperity with God's blessing, but we blithely expect that we will be prosperous anyway. The way in which we take money and comfort for granted may not be as obviously toxic as the prosperity gospel, but it is equally deleterious to a life of discipleship. We read Jesus' words that it is easier for a camel to pass through the eye of the needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven without reflecting on the fact that most of us in the west (even those who consider ourselves poor) are fabulously wealthy in global terms.

Stephen Kneale wrote a recent blog post, where he made the following remark:

> *The biggest problem facing the British Evangelical church today is, without doubt, our own personal comfort.*

It's well worth reading the whole post. However, I would suggest that what Stephen suggests is a problem is actually a symptom of a much deeper issue. We want and expect comfort because we have accommodated our faith to western standards.

Rich people like us with access to excellent health care are on dodgy ground when we start to criticise others for their attitude to health and wealth.

The Enlightenment

In order to keep this post to a reasonable length, I'm going to have to simplify things. If you want to know more, the Wikipedia page on the Age of Enlightenment is a good place to start. Broadly speaking, Enlightenment philosophy, said that the only things that we could know for sure - facts - were things that can be observed or measured. The things which can be assessed scientifically are accepted as true for everyone and everything else is shifted into the area of private knowledge or opinion. This creates a divide between the material world - measurable and scientific and the spiritual world - the realm of speculation and opinion.

The problem is that we live in a world that is dominated by this sort of thinking and Christians in the west have absorbed it and accept it without questioning. We see the impact in the discussions about the relative importance of proclamation and social action in mission. This is actually an Enlightenment discussion which reflects the separation of reality into distinct sacred and secular realms. Christians in other parts of the world (and, to be honest, the Bible) don't make this distinction and the two are seen as an indivisible whole. We tacitly accept this division between sacred and secular in many subtle ways. We make eloquent arguments to defend the truth of Jesus' miracles, while being profoundly skeptical of any accounts of miracles today. We plan and strategise for mission on the basis of statistics, and desired impact in a way which is very different to the Spirit guided approach of the Apostles in Acts.

Our world is one of cause and effect, there is little place for the spiritual realm - powers and principalities - to impinge on our reality. The missionary anthropologist, Paul Hiebert highlighted this problem in his seminal paper the Flaw of the Excluded Middle. Christians in other parts of the world often have far more complex cosmologies than we do - they accept the reality of demons, spirits and the impact of the spiritual world in a way that we find difficult. Not only that, but they are developing theologies which take these things into account.

I'll leave the last word to Andrew Walls. If you click on the arrow, it will play the last three minutes of an 80 minute lecture. It's well worth listening to the whole thing - but at least give the last three minutes a hearing.

https://youtu.be/rnlt1EJFju8?t=1h17m20s