

# A Response to Julie Ma on Korean Missionary Work

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I suppose the fundamental missionary challenge remains the same in every place and whoever is doing it: hearing God's call, responding, making a lasting commitment, and learning to contextualise – all undergirded by an effective personal spirituality. In this list, however, the one that stands out as specifically missional is the matter of context. And here's the additional challenge. Context changes. So, I appreciated the way that cultural considerations came up again and again in Dr Ma's presentation. Negatively, according to Dr Ma, Koreans are the victims of their own mono-culturalism – they are not always sufficiently aware of the culture of others, or find it difficult to learn another language, or are inclined to club together. They are the *good* product of their own context – Shamanism, a recent history of suffering and division, a hard won prosperity – because this has led to a disciplined spiritual life, a rugged life-style and a distinctive generosity. In these areas in particular we Westerners have much to learn from them. But, the big challenge for Korean mission is, as I have said, that cultural contexts change.

Korean mission strikes me as rather 'modern'. It is rationally organised, technologically advanced, linear in its outcomes, driven by the idea of 'progress', with fixed goals and successful outcomes. This is not necessarily a bad thing, but is culturally difficult in both pre-modern and postmodern societies. We had a Korean mission leader visit us here at Redcliffe some time ago. The big point he wanted to make was that numerically the church in Korea was growing and the church in UK was declining. It was time we Westerners took notice. He was considerably taken aback when I said that I did not think that you could measure the health of the church in the UK by counting heads! Because of our history, Christian institutions – parish churches and church attendance, for example – were part of our cultural heritage. But we were through that stage, and in many instances what we were shedding was *institutional* Christianity. In a postmodern society that was a good thing, freeing us up to take the gospel to the people, instead of spending all of our time on maintenance. My point was a simple one. If you are doing mission in a postmodern society it is into postmodernity that the gospel must be contextualised.

My second response is to take up Dr Ma's evocative phrase that Korean mission may require a 'mid-term adjustment'. I have a suggestion about this, and I think it is one that we all might like to think about. Is it possible for us to stop thinking in a binary fashion? However it is expressed, 'us' and 'them', West and the rest, Western and global south, there is a problem here. It has something to do with the Enlightenment, with colonialism, and with the sensitivity we have over our own ethnic histories. It centres around our old friend 'identity' about which we have by no means thought enough. Let me just throw out one idea.

Identity comes in three containers, as Manuel Castells has pointed out. Firstly, *legitimising* identity which comes from my upbringing, my local formation; secondly, *resistance* identity which comes from the natural tendency I have as I grow up to resist attacks, as I perceive them, on my primary, legitimising identity; a third, *project* identity, comes from the enterprise in which I choose to be engaged. Now the Apostle Paul says this: I have a project identity. It is the work of the gospel. Ultimately, it does not matter whether I am a Jew or a Greek, though I can relate to those identities, too. What gives me my rock bottom identity is the project. I have become all things to all people, that I might by all means save some. I do it all for the sake of the gospel (1 Corinthians 9:19-23).

In brief, if we could drop the 'us' and 'them' and move on to the common service of the gospel, then we might be getting somewhere.

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