

## Globalisation, glocalisation & mission

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The relationship between local and global, it seems to me, has created a good deal of confusion in the current debate on globalisation. It is clear that globalisation is a powerful force. Economically and politically we increasingly witness situations that are global in origin and reach, but are patently outside the control of nation states or smaller centres of organisation, but which deeply affect them. The consequences of global warming are an obvious example. ('Come and visit us while we're still here' is a current slogan of the Andaman Islands tourist board!) Similarly, whether cultural globalisation (McWorld) is a good thing or bad, nobody is in any doubt that it is happening. This is not really the debate, however. The more problematic question is what happens when the global culture collides with local cultures, and what does this mean for the mission of the church? It is this relationship, between the global and the local, that I want to look at in this lecture.

Before I dive in, however, and try to address this question, I should like to take a step back and ask another one. How significant is human culture? I was impressed recently when I heard a speaker from the Christian environmentalist group *A Rocha* describe the work of saving an endangered species of frogs as 'mission'. His point was perfectly cogent. Mission has to do with human flourishing and a fully human existence is not possible without a supportive environment, one in which God intended to include frogs! Redemption is aimed at the whole creation (Romans 8) at 'a new heaven and a new earth'. Thus 'saving frogs' is an appropriate task for those involved in mission, because it has to do with the human environment. Of course environment (that which is around us) means many things – not just frogs: ecosystems, the economy, customs, family, friends, familiar habitats, traditions, language, music, food, architecture. In a word: culture, so long as we take the widest possible view of that word.

Culture critically has to do with identity, or to put it the other way about and to quote Zygmunt Bauman, 'Concerns with identity will in all probability seek anchor in the territory classified as "culture". Culture has become the last straw of hope for the seekers of solid identities in the postmodern world of contingency and mass migration.'<sup>1</sup> This is not a new idea, indeed the lesson for us missiologists is a very old one. Mission finds a way forward when it successfully allies itself with the discourse and politics of cultural identity. 'To the Jew', says, Paul, 'I became a Jew'.

The sociologist Manuel Castells, who has written widely on the subject,<sup>2</sup> has three overarching categories for identity formation. First of all he speaks of *legitimising* identity, the identity which is formed and made solid by the familiar, the essential donation made to us by our families, our upbringing and our childhood environment. We all have such an identity but of course it may be damaged. A dysfunctional family background or a disturbed childhood, for example, might give us such a damaged identity.

Castells suggests, however, that there are two other sorts of identity. One he calls *project* identity. The idea here is that some enterprise or project is so important to us that it provides us with an additional (or even an alternative) identity which becomes life transforming. This might be something as trivial as supporting a football team or as all important as becoming a follower of Jesus. Ideally it flows out of the legitimising identity, or is not seen to be in conflict with it, as in the case of someone who becomes a Christian after having been brought up in a Christian home.

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<sup>1</sup> Zygmunt Bauman, *Life in Fragments* Oxford: Blackwell, 1995, p. 186

<sup>2</sup> Manuel Castells, *The Power of Identity* Oxford: Blackwell, 2004

Castells also speaks of *resistance* identity. This means that something has come in to threaten and disrupt our legitimising identity. Resisting this process gives us a new identity. For example, growing up and becoming an independent adult, a process usually forced upon us by the need to leave the familiar circumstances of the home in which we were brought up, provides us with a resistance identity. Though in this case we are speaking about something good – gaining an adult identity – resistance identities are often defensive and unhealthy

There is another broad category (one which Castells does not sufficiently allow for, perhaps). There are those who are best described as having a confused or *hybrid* identity. The legitimising identity with which they grew up has been challenged, but they are busy, in a peaceful and constructive way, creating a new identity which will become a new legitimising identity in due course. Often the situation has been forced upon them but even so they see that it has some advantages. Like a hybrid plant which is the product of two cultures they are surprisingly hardy and fruitful.

What has all this to do with our title?

Clearly the clash between global and local has cultural consequences and is therefore an identity forming issue. In following this through and linking it with Castells' analysis I want to make a number of observations.

- (1) The *local* is where our legitimising identity is usually formed. We have said already that it is in that familiar space of family and upbringing, of the village where I grew up and the street where I lived, that this sort of identity finds its resting place.
- (2) Joining the *global* culture, particularly if we do so by our own choice, is something which often provides us with a project identity. I meet people today who have become what I call 'global citizens'. They are both shaped by the global culture and actively promoting it. Let me describe this global culture and see if you recognise those who belong to it. You might even recognise yourself!
  - There is intense mobility, or at least sophisticated communication. Globalisation demands people who are 'on the move' or 'in touch'. Paris, yesterday, New York today, Tokyo tomorrow, is not the exception, but the rule. (There is an alternative which goes 'I spoke to Paris yesterday...etc.) Rootedness in a locality is positively a hindrance.
  - There is a low-level relationship to tradition and material culture. The global citizen must be able to cope with and enjoy a wide variety of cultural experiences ('I enjoy Japanese, Chinese, Indian, Italian cuisine and live by the 'when in Rome eat like the Romans' rule!') but this is not the same thing as becoming rooted in a particular culture.
  - Because of the need to move, *not* to be rooted, to 'do business' wherever the opportunity arises, the global culture has developed its own shorthand culture. Its language is English, its relationships are ephemeral (by design), its communications are brief and businesslike (e mails), its dress is the business suit or for the young some logo enhanced casual wear – that is to say, it cannot afford to be less than smart or at least trendy, its food and drink are 'instant': it cannot afford the time to sit long over meals, its currency is American Express (somehow 'American' and 'express' are both important words).
  - It is an impersonal and depersonalising culture. Take the massive money transactions that can take place by means of the television screen, without any reference to what this might mean to actual people. (Rather like modern warfare, when the real damage done to real lives is hidden behind the images which, for all the world, seem those of a sophisticated computer game.) Businesses are no longer attached to communities (ask the miners, the steel workers, even the car workers) or if they are, they are communities who know that at any minute the business might be transferred somewhere else where the work can be done more cheaply.

- The global culture is in practice only open to those who are wealthy or who are on their way to being wealthy or who aspire to be wealthy. The technology (air tickets, international communication devices, access to the media, a subscription to the *Economist*) is not an optional extra. Are not the poor, certainly the ultra-poor, automatically excluded? As soon as the poor connect with the global culture – one thinks of the ubiquity of satellite television – then they probably come into the third category. They are no longer content with ‘village life’, even if this offers them a supportive community, a healthy environment, a satisfying occupation and a reasonable standard of living.
- (3) The threatening spread of this global culture has produced, I believe, a number of resistance identity cultures, not all of which are healthy. Some of the newly created communities, because they are a reaction to the rootlessness that is experienced in a globalised world, may be powerfully antagonistic. The vicious nationalism that is a feature of the Balkans, for example, seems to me both a product of the fear of loss of identity (something which began under the Communists, but which continues today with the advent of globalisation) and also a desperate harking back to the past. Despite the appeal to the past it is something new which is being produced, communities which are far less secure and settled, much more dependent on ephemeral factors such as charismatic leadership, nationalist slogans, the invention of enemies, and ‘heritage’ rather than history. Postcolonialism in its many forms has much to do with the formation of these new communities. For many people in the West who came from the former colonies there is not much desire to go back to their homes if this means going back to a traditional pre-modern society. But that does not mean that multiculturalism is working very well either. What people are often busy doing is creating new communities in their adoptive countries. Many of these, sadly, mirror the unhealthy qualities I have just described.
- (4) As I have suggested, there is one more category, the hybrid identity. It is this phenomenon which has produced glocalisation, a culture which is both global and local at the same time. People continue to draw identity from their locality and its traditions but are also keen to take advantage of new global opportunities, and are often quite creative in combining the two. When I send my students out to track down global influences in Gloucester, I ask them to do *two* things: find out what is new and find out also what has happened to the new things as they have been assimilated by the good folk of Gloucester. Sometimes it is the latter which is the more impressive. Gloucester City docks, once a workplace for the thousands of traders who used Gloucester as an entrepôt as they transferred their merchandise from the Atlantic to the British Midlands, is now a tourist and business centre replete with museums, pubs, cafes, shops and offices. The tourist trade is one of the world’s biggest global businesses, and Gloucester is taking advantage of this. It has adapted its traditional working centre to a new reality. As David Lyon has pointed out ‘globalism often seems to be a sort of economic triumphalism which rejoices every time a ‘world product’ becomes on offer in some remote locality’ (Lyon 2000, 101). But his point is that this triumphalism may be misplaced. Certainly the spread of a global culture is by no means the only thing worth commenting on. Local adaptability to changing circumstances may be equally remarkable.

So where does mission come in? What is the appropriate response for those of us involved in the mission of the church? In the light of our original assertion that mission and culture have a fundamental connection, and our subsequent claim that culture and identity do as well, I have the following propositions.

- (1) There is still a place for Christians to be supporting people in their legitimising identity. Some like Ched Myers and Wendell Berry think that this is *the* way ahead for mission. They are deeply disturbed by the destruction of local communities. Joel Kovel speaks of ‘the destruction of life-worlds’. Typically, he suggests, in the case of the life-world of an indigenous people there is a disruption of their relationship with the land.

With the productive foundation of society interrupted, a complex and disintegrative chain of events is set in motion. As the 'old ways' no longer make sense, a kind of desire is set loose, and as this is now relatively shapeless and boundless, the virus of capital, with its promise of limitless wealth, is able to take hold. This is always accompanied by the mass-cultural invasion that encodes capital's logos in the form of commodities. Once 'Coca-Cola the real thing' replaces traditional reality, the internal colonisation that perfects the take-over of peripheral societies is well under way.<sup>3</sup>

How do we respond, as Christians, to this sort of situation?

- (2) The global culture is a difficult place to develop a project identity for Christians involved in mission. I believe that those Christians who have joined the project of globalisation have many questions to answer. Can Christianity survive the change from local to global? What about the local church, for example? How does a global culture match with an incarnational gospel? Can the gospel be explained to, and be understood by, such a culture? If the global culture is impersonal and dehumanising does it not contrast fatally with the gospel which is intended to be people centred and people enhancing. I suspect that it is very difficult for the global culture to understand the Sermon on the Mount. But then that is what Jesus said: 'How hard it is for a rich man to accept the rule of God.' (Mark 10:23). And here we may have come to the crucial point. Perhaps the rule of God that Jesus describes and the new global culture are simply not compatible.
- (3) Those whose resistance identity is formed by opposition to the culture of globalisation may not take very kindly to the ambassadors of the gospel coming to them in the clothes of the global culture. Many Muslims, for example, attracted to a more fundamentalist position, may simply see Christianity as another expression of Western cultural imperialism aka as globalisation.
- (4) My feeling is that the call for many of us is to be *apostles to glocalisation*. I say this for a number of reasons.
  - (a) People in mixed situations (experiencing glocalisation) are likely to be the majority of our mission field in the future. A recent survey of 12 major cities in China showed that 97% of the respondents had television. *Cosmopolitan* magazine is read by 260,000 Chinese women every month. China is no longer a place where every ambition extends to wristwatches, bicycles and sewing machines.<sup>4</sup>
  - (b) People in mixed situations often form a very needy group, and, at the same time, a very receptive group. Diasporas, migrants, refugees, people on the move (in every sense), culturally confused people, people impacted by multiple new experiences, need our help and are often open to it.
  - (c) The church is ideally suited to give the help needed.
- We Christians are a hybrid people ourselves (migrants, pilgrims, 'in but not of the world', etc.)

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<sup>3</sup> Joel Kovel, *The Enemy of Nature* London: Zed, 2002, p. 54

<sup>4</sup> Erla Zwingle, 'A World Together' *National Geographic*, August 1999 pp.6-33

- The church is constructed to work ‘at different spatial scales’<sup>5</sup>. For example, the theme of combining global and local is echoed by the familiar juxtaposition of the universal and local church. The importance of both these concepts has been insisted upon by Christians, in fact we may feel that the church itself was set up originally on a model – you might call it ‘decentred interconnectedness’ – which reflects this. While at the very beginning of the story of the church there is a ‘mother church’ as described in the Acts of the Apostles, Paul’s missionary methods envisaged autonomous local churches (though not independent ones). It might also be argued that later centralising trends (Rome as the geographical and administrative centre, a Papacy at the head of an ecclesiastical hierarchy, uniform creeds etc.) were contrary to the original apostolic pattern and that they contained their own nemesis. Certainly, the idea of a universal church is authoritatively stated in the Christian creeds but also the idea of the importance of belonging to a local Christian community has New Testament warrant and is, besides, a near universal practice.
  - Within the fellowship of the church there is also a double vision. It is partly a matter of ‘here there is neither Jew nor Greek’ and partly ‘every tribe and kindred and nation’ before the throne. In Ephesians 3 there are two mysteries. Gentiles and Jews are incorporated in one body in Christ (6) but also the church demonstrates ‘the wisdom of God in its infinite variety’ (10 REB translation). I think we should add that, as in many tensions of this sort, it is not easy to keep a healthy balance. ‘All one in Christ Jesus’ is a motto to which we can subscribe, no doubt. But what does it mean in practice? What about cultural differences within the Christian community? Where do they come into the picture? Do our calls for unity all too often mask our desire to have things our own way? On the other hand does an insistence on cultural difference amount to little more than a narrow defence of our own upbringing, even our own preferences? Consider the situation in the College where I teach which is a multi-cultural community. The students certainly need to be wary of an apparent global unity which tends only to mean that western students ‘do it our (i.e. Western) way’. On the other hand neither do we want students to use their cultural diversity to emphasise their differences – the Africans sitting all together at one table and the Koreans at another.
- (d) Finally, in this section, ‘mediating modernity’ is a phrase I am fond of. The idea here is that Christians form a bridge between the local and global, the traditional and modern society. Where missionaries find themselves to be representatives of globalisation, they can try to make sure that its influence on the locality is benign. Presumably this would entail acting as ‘gatekeepers’ to some extent, though whether it is possible to act as a gatekeeper to globalisation is questionable. A more positive way of describing this process would be to say that somebody needs to equip people who are facing the onrush of globalisation with the necessary skills to cope with the inevitable changes that it brings.

If all the above is true, it means that we need to be more than ever aware of *mixed* situations, characterised by hybridity and confusion of identities. Much will have to change as we adjust our thinking to this new situation, and I conclude with two examples. Too many of our mission strategies today are based on the ‘people group’ pattern. This clearly had its value, particularly in freeing us from our Eurocentric models, but it is an inadequate model for today’s world. It owes too much to the idea of cultural purity and pays too little attention to the phenomenon I have just described. Similarly, in terms of training, the old patterns inherited from cultural anthropology – discrete cultures studied in depth – will have to be revised (postcolonial studies may help us here). In race, culture, and identity we are becoming an increasingly hybrid world. Mission cannot afford to ignore that fact.

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<sup>5</sup> David Harvey, *Spaces of Hope*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh U.P., 2000 p. 51

Perhaps we are getting back to something much nearer to the world of the Roman Empire that Paul knew. Like Paul we shall need to become not just a Jew to the Jews, but all things to all men. This is a complex and demanding task. Paul adds, 'I do all this for the sake of the gospel, that I may share in its blessings.' It may be a tough task, but none of us, I think, would choose to serve a different cause.

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