

A Response to Jonathan Ingleby's Lectures

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I loved reading these lectures – how I wish I had been there to hear them! At last, a Westerner who can give an honest assessment and ask the hard questions concerning our past and contemporary engagement in mission.

Jonathan's list of Western failures is honest and straightforward (finally, a Brit who offers honesty over politeness!) – we squirm because we know it is true. We are racist, we do lazily employ unhelpful stereotypes, we do consider ourselves the default setting with that unexpressed but somehow innate superiority (do I have a complex, coming from the Antipodes or is that superiority really there – you decide), we do secretly find immigrants difficult, we do believe in capitalism and so on.

Yes, Jonathan has really unpacked and exposed (some of) our weaknesses and how these weaknesses have harmed our engagement in mission. Yes, we have short memories – a Western luxury. They remember the demise of colonialism, we remember the fall of Communism. Yes, a solid enough analysis of our problem... and the solution? Would the South were “less like us” he posits. Let me quote his understanding of a better way for mission:

- We must remain rooted in the true humility of contextualization
- We must resist technological fixes, what some have called ‘managerial mission’
- We must be poor enough to help the poor
- We must attend to the margins
- Our strategies must be bottom up, not top down (Jonathan, I note you still believe in strategies...)

Does any Western mission society really do this – I doubt it. Individuals may, but mission agencies, by their very nature and form, struggle. He goes on to ask, “can the South save the West?” - and replies that he does not know. A sensible and honest answer. Some Western romantics see our salvation in the strength of the Global South – God is doing a new thing and this ‘mission in reverse’ (a profoundly Eurocentric expression), the gospel traversing the Silk Rd (who called it that?) in the other direction will be our salvation.

Of course it is not all rosy in the Global South either – but we are not allowed to say that. Have we taught them too well to mimic our ‘successes’? Or is that just condescension of the highest degree? Can they see through Western Christendom? As Jonathan says, “The English sahibs and the Indian rajahs have mostly departed from the clubs set up by the British Raj, but the clubs have not ceased to exist. One set of wealthy and privileged people has replaced another.” Can the Global South free themselves from the power structures and privilege, “Better to have a Western theological qualification than one that nobody really recognises and that keeps me permanently at the bottom of the church’s hierarchy” to give us an alternative paradigm, an alternative approach, an alternative engagement? But even if they did, would we recognise it and know how to listen? Could we make space for it? Even more poignantly, he asks if we can move away from the binary distinctions of the West-South divide and start again? How can we do this?

Maybe his second lecture offers some clues, where he reflects on strangers, culture and identity and how to create community (the Kingdom). He offers the idea of a third space or “the broken middle” (Gillian Rose) – a place of confusion, a place of mis-recognition, a place where we see through a glass darkly. I can hear the sighs already – fine words, intriguing ideas, academic waffle – but how does this help? Perhaps this is a call for less certainty, more humility, confusion while we struggle to recognise who is our neighbour (Muslim/gay/lesbian/black/New Age/abuser/whatever), while our previous recognitions (our binary distinctions?) become mis-recognitions, where our confusion allows openness and new beginnings...

I don't know – there is a lot to think on here and I like the idea of a “broken middle” because we are such fixers – let's remain broken for a while and see how it feels. Maybe that is the heart of mission, and maybe it is not that difficult – but maybe for us in the West, it is the most difficult thing in the world.

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