

A Response to Jonathan Ingleby's Lecture on "The Failure of the West and Can the South Save the West?"

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Jonathan began his lecture with three disclaimers. May I also start with two of mine. First, this is not an academic response. It is a layperson's personal reflection on some of the issues raised. Second, coming from Singapore, I can't really say I represent the Global South. I can only speak from my experience mainly in the mission circles and churches in East Asia.

Let me begin with a story. She was known dearly as "Fifth Aunt"- a petite elderly Chinese lady, a widower of humble means. Despite the fact that she was illiterate, she managed to read the Bible, not only for herself but also to many others. Her days were full: busy visiting the sick, the poor, the lonely and elderly at home, sharing the love of Jesus with them. When she died suddenly in a car accident at the age of 90, it was acknowledged that she had led many people to Christ, probably more than even the pastor of her church. Don't be surprised then that the greatest crown in Heaven will be given to unsung evangelists like her rather than famous preachers. I guess this is what Jonathan meant by those who belonged to Life and those to the Legend. "Fifth Aunt" was my parents' friend. She has always been my role model of a Christian worker.

There is a Chinese saying: "When you drink your water, think of its origin". We were taught from a young age to always be grateful to our benefactors – predecessors, teachers, especially parents – and remember all the benefits received from them. For Asian Christians, certainly Western missionaries are included in this category. We will not and should not forget the hospitals built, schools started, churches planted by them. Had they not translated the Bible into our language and brought the Gospel to us, "Fifth Aunt" and her generation of Christians would not have known Christ. Moreover, I would probably not be here writing this.

Yet, at the same time, can I be a fair critic of the some of the practices and attitudes of Western missions, past and present? I have not done a careful historical study of the modern missionary movement in the Global South. Therefore, I should not comment on the past. As for the present, I'm afraid I have noticed traces of imperialistic elements as listed by Jonathan (commercial attitudes, cultural and linguistic imperialism, theological insensitivity, racial superiority, identification with the powerful, unwillingness to relinquish control etc.) still active in mission organisations and churches operating in Asia that are mainly led or funded by the West.

One example is seen in their organisational structures. They are almost all very hierarchical, with the top leader functioning more like a CEO than a spiritual leader (Diagram A, overleaf). Some have tried to flatten (but not necessarily lighten) that structure by having a leadership team (Diagram B, overleaf).

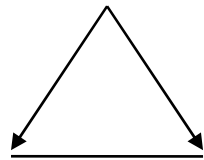


Diagram A

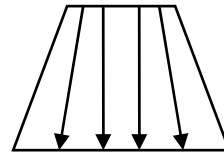


Diagram B

However, the process of decision-making continues to be top down rather than bottom up. A consultative, communicative, and inclusive culture rarely exists. If the organisational structure were to be inverted, where the leaders are the servants (Jonathan calls it “the Philippians mode”), I wonder how many would still aspire to be leaders? (Diagram C)

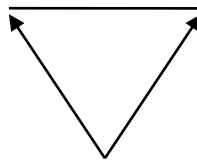


Diagram C

Take another example: racial superiority. A Western missionary couple needed someone to baby sit for them so that they could have a night out. They often asked one of their Asian colleagues nearby for help and she always obliged. Then she realised that, for the past few years, she was never invited to their social gatherings of Westerners. “Are they treating me as their voluntary nanny of their kids?” she couldn’t help wondering.

Frankly, these examples can be also found among us in the South. The sample of failures that Jonathan gave could be similarly manifested by Southerners. Those with fairer skin have prejudices against those with darker shades and are extremely good at stereotyping them; nations with stronger economic power look down at those poorer and weaker. Just look at the way foreign domestic and construction workers (mainly from the Philippines, Indonesia, India, Bangladesh) are being treated in Hong Kong, Singapore, and Malaysia. In fact, BBC News just reported on the ordeals of abused maids in Singapore (visit: <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/asia-pacific/4806130.stm>, published: 14/3/2006). We can’t say we have a better record than the West with our attitude towards immigrants in our midst. Sadly, even Christians are found guilty of these attitudes.

Is there any “pilgrim church” in Asia? I’m not sure. Successful churches want bigger and grander church buildings...where the poor will feel uncomfortable. In reality, they are being marginalised. Members with wealth and status will have a louder voice in the church and easily get elected into leadership positions regardless of their spiritual maturity. After 1949, when all the missionaries were expelled from China, the Chinese Church grew by leaps and bounds. However, it was clearly not a result of human engineering. Who would include persecutions in their church growth strategy? Therefore, no one could claim any credit except God who chose to work through the faithful remnant.

What about the Asian missionary movement? Has an alternative tradition emerged or at least is seen emerging? Probably not. The former power structure is still very much in place. Denominational churches are still rationalising their efforts of exporting to the mission fields peculiar brands of church government, modes of baptism, worship styles; even the particular version of the bible used by them. And we should stop blaming the West. We act like irresponsible grown-ups who blame their parents and family upbringing for their own criminal tendencies. Some in the South may argue that we have had only a short history of the Church and mission as compared to the West. We need more time to mature. They may be right. However, unless we stop blaming the West for our present tradition, we will never move toward maturity.

So can the South save the West? The answer may be more obvious than Jonathan or we would like to think. However, the Chinese have long believed that the baton in the “Gospel Relay” is now in their hands; that they have been entrusted by God the responsibility of completing the race, bringing the Gospel back to Jerusalem, “then the ends will come”, quoting Mathews 24:14. May be they think they should save the West.

In closing, Jonathan suggested that we should not even ask this question because it immediately leads again to the unhealthy “us” (the South) and “them” (the West) attitude. I agree with him. Instead, I think we should ask: Can the West and the South help one another? How can we enforce genuine partnership between the West and South? Most International Mission Conferences and Consultations are still funded by the West, chaired by the West, with keynote speakers mainly from the West, usually in a one-way-lecture style or monologue. There is little time for much deep discussion involving all the participants; hardly any real dialogue between the West and South. Perhaps we should replace such meetings with more “Mission Round Tables”, where no one is at the head of the table, only a moderator is needed to facilitate the West-South exchanges. This format will encourage inter-cultural exchanges, thus promoting community, unity and equality effectively. (Diagram D)

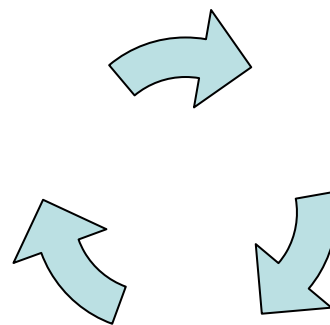


Diagram D

In conclusion, I would say, “Heed the warnings (in Jonathan’s conclusion) and hope for the future.” We realise we are redeemed sinners, imperfect children of God, living in this imperfect world. Yet our kingdom perspective should not be determined by our present frustrations but by our future hope, which is in Christ alone. In Philippians 1:4, Paul rejoices in his partnership in the gospel with the believers in Philippi from the first day (i.e. when they were still young in their faith). So it is possible to have genuine partnerships between parties of different levels of spiritual maturity and experience, as between Paul and the Philippians.

But his confidence of its success is based on the initiative and continuing work of God: “He who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus.” Meanwhile, our living and working principle for all Christians in all spheres should be: “To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with (our) God.” (Micah 6:8).

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