

Is God Colorblind or Colorful?



The Gospel, Globalization and Ethnicity

MIRIAM ADENEY

Isabell Ides was 101 years old when she died last June. A Makah Indian, a member of a whale-hunting people, she lived in the last house on the last road on the farthest northwest tip of the United States. Isabell was known far and wide because she loved and taught Makah culture and language. Hundreds of people learned to weave baskets under her hands. Several generations learned words in their language from her lips. Young mothers brought her their alder-smoked salmon. After chewing a bit, she could tell whether their wood was too dry. Archaeologists brought her newly excavated 3,000-year-old baskets, and she could identify what the baskets were, how they were made, and how they had been used. "It's like losing a library," an anthropologist said at her funeral.

Isabell also taught Sunday School at the Assembly of God church on the reservation. She attributed her long life to her Christian faith.

Did Isabell's basketry matter to God, as well as her Sunday school teaching? How important was her ethnic heritage in the Kingdom's big picture? This question reverberates as we explore globalization.

Creative Destruction

In the spring of 2001, representatives of 34 nations gathered in Quebec to discuss a free trade agreement that would cover the whole of the Americas. There were many worries. How can there be a level playing field between the US or Canada and Honduras or Bolivia, between some of the richest and some of the poorest



countries on the planet? Won't the small ones be gobbled up? Even Brazil, Latin America's largest economy, was skittish.

Into this discussion, U.S. Federal Reserve Chairman, Alan Greenspan, dropped the phrase "creative destruction." Yes, he said, more open global trade means some "creative destruction." Businesses will close. Jobs will be lost. "There is no doubt," Greenspan stated, "that this transition to the new high-tech economy, of which rising trade is a part, is proving difficult for a large segment of our work force.... The adjustment process is wrenching to an existing work force made redundant largely through no fault of their own." But such trauma is just part of the price of progress. As is often said, you can't make an omelet without breaking eggs. You can't garden without pruning. You can't use the computer without pressing the delete button now and then. You cannot train as an athlete without sloughing off bad habits.

Honing, sharpening, weeding out, paring down—these are positive terms. So Greenspan spoke of the "creative destruction" inherent in globalization. But, he added, "History tells us that not only is it unwise to try to hold back innovation, it is also not possible."

Ethnicity is one arena of destruction. In today's global system, local ethnic values are being trampled. Cultural values are more than commodities. They are parts of heritages on which we cannot put a price. Yet, like endangered species, cultural values are being threatened. How should we respond when globalization drowns ethnicity?

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A Place in the Story

What is God's view of ethnicity? God created us in his image, endowed us with creativity, and set us in a world of possibilities and challenges. Applying our God-given creativity, we have developed the cultures of the world.

In the beginning, God affirmed that it was not good for humans to be alone. Humans were made to live in communities of meaning. So God gave his blessing to cultural areas such as the family, the state, work, worship, arts, education, and even festivals. He gave attention to laws which preserved a balanced ecology, ordered social relations, provided for sanitation, and protected the rights of the weak, the blind, the deaf, widows, orphans, foreigners, the poor, and debtors.

He affirmed the physical world, out of which material culture is developed. He delighted in the very soil and rivers that He gave his people. It was

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“a land which the Lord your God cares for. The eyes of the Lord your God are always upon it from the beginning of the year even unto the end of the year” (Deut. 11:12)

In the picture language of the Old Testament,

God gave people oil to make their faces shine, wine to make their hearts glad, friends like iron to sharpen them, wives like fruitful vines, and children like arrows shot out of their bows. Economic, social, and artistic patterns combine to make up a culture. This is the context within which we live. It is where we were designed to live. Global systems may immerse us in virtual realities—media, packaged music, the stock market, sports scores, and news flashes—in which great tragedies are juxtaposed with beer ads. Yet if we are absorbed in the global or virtual level, we miss out on the real rhythms of nature and society. Seed time and harvest, and the health of our soil, trees, and water. Friendship, courtship, marriage, parenting, aging, and dying. Creation, use, maintenance, and repair. There are rhythms to living in God's world. These are expressed locally, through specific cultural patterns. Knowing these helps us know ourselves, our potentialities and our limits, and the resources and sequences that weave the fabric for happy choices. They cannot be known at the abstract, global level. Disciplining a child, for example, is not virtual. Being fired from a job is not a media experience. Having a baby is not a game. Coping with cancer is not abstract.

... Our Creator delights in colors. He generates smells, from onion to rose. He shapes every fresh snowflake. He births billions of unique personalities. Is it any surprise if he programs us with the capacity to create an amazing kaleidoscope of cultures to enrich his world?

Cultures contain sin and must be judged, as we will discuss in the following section. But ethnic pride is not automatically sin. It is like the joy parents feel at their child's graduation. Your child marches across the platform. Your chest hammers with pride. This is not pride at the expense of your neighbor, whose face also glows as his child graduates. No, your heart swells because you know your child's stories. The sorrows he has suffered. And the gifts that have blossomed in him like flowers opening to the sun. You yourself have cried and laughed and given away years of your life in the shaping of some of those stories.

At its best, ethnicity is an expansion of this good family pride. Ethnicity is a sense of identification with people who share a culture and a history, with its suffering and successes, heroes and martyrs. Like membership in the family, ethnicity is not earned. It is a birthright, received whether you want it or not.

Human beings were created to live in community. In today's world, we still feel that need. “Even when our material needs are met, still our motivation... emotional resilience... and moral strength... must come from somewhere, from some vision of public purpose anchored in a compelling image of social reality,” according to anthropologist Clifford Geertz. Being a world citizen is too vague to provide this motivation and strength, says Geertz. World citizenship makes the common person feel insignificant. Even national citizenship may breed apathy. But when you are a member of an ethnic group, you have celebrations which give zest, values which give a cognitive framework, action patterns which give direction to your days, and associational ties which root you in a human context. You have a place in time in the universe, a base for the conviction that you are part of the continuity of life flowing from the past and pulsing on into the future. You are in the story.

When Ethnicity Becomes an Idol

God ordained culture. But customs that glorify God are not the only reality that we observe around us. Instead of loveliness, harmonious creativity, and admirable authority, we often see fragmentation, alienation, lust, corruption, selfishness, injustice and violence cultivated by our culture. No part remains pure. Science tends to serve militarism or hedonism,

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ignoring morals. Art often becomes worship without God. Mass media is full of verbal prostitutes. Businessmen pull shady deals. Politicians fill their own pockets. Workers do shoddy work. Husbands deceive their wives. Wives manipulate their husbands. Children ignore their parents as persons.

We are not only created in God's image. We are also sinners. Because we have cut ourselves off from God, the cultures we create reek with evil. We are called, then, not only to rejoice in the patterns of wisdom, beauty, and kindness in our culture, but also to confront and judge the patterns of idolatry and exploitation.

Sometimes ethnicity is turned into an idol. Like other idols of modern society—money, sex, and power, for example—ethnicity is not bad in itself. When we exalt it as though it were the highest good, however, ethnicity becomes evil. Racism, feuds, wars, and “ethnic cleansing” result. When ethnicity becomes an idol, it must be confronted and judged.

Implications for Mission

Ethnicity counters the dehumanizing bent of globalization. Even at its best, economic globalization tends to treat cultural values as commodities. Ethnicity reminds us to keep faith with our grandparents and with our human communities. It is a vital counterbalance. What does ethnicity mean for mission? We will suggest four applications.

1. Affirm the Local

First, mission should affirm local cultures. We do not do this uncritically. Working with and under local Christians, we judge patterns of idolatry and exploitation, as explained above. Yet we love the local culture. We receive it as a gift of God. And while we live in that place, we adapt gladly to those dimensions of local values that are wholesome....

We patronize local businessmen and businesswomen. We encourage local artists, musicians, and writers, rather than routinely importing foreign books or translating them.

We stay in locally owned hotels and homes. We learn from the lore of local herbalists. We safeguard local forests. We gain skills in local sports and games. We make efforts to be present at local parties and funerals. We empathize with local social reformers. If we are missionaries, we discipline our thoughts so that we are not preoccupied with our

homeland's cultural patterns. Specific heritages matter. Even the 20th century epic *The Lord of the Rings* (Tolkien, 1954) affirms the local. Columnist Mike Hickerson observes:

The Lord of the Rings suggests that God's victory on Earth (or Middle-Earth) is incomplete unless and until the victory fills the “small places.” . . . The final battle between good and evil is not some gigantic historic battle—like the destruction of the Death Star—but rather a small fight, followed by a small reconstruction of a very small place. The Good News fills every valley. . . . In their return to the Shire, the Hobbits continued their mission to its proper conclusion. Without their humble work among their own humble folk, evil would have retained a stronghold in Middle-Earth. The global is important, and so too is the local.

In missionary training programs, this emphasis must be made. There is a tendency for missionaries from dominant cultures to assert their ethnic heritage as though it were God's pattern for everybody. Western missionaries do this. Chinese and Korean missionaries do it in Central and Southeast Asia. Latinos do it in indigenous communities....

2. Be Pilgrims

Many people have several ethnic identities. Consider this situation: On the west coast of America, earlier generations of Asians were prevented by law from marrying Caucasians. Quite a few Filipino immigrants married Native Americans. Picture three adult children in such a family today. One identifies primarily as a Filipino, the second as a Native American, and the third as an American. But all three switch identities from time to time.

Furthermore, cultures change continually. In the process, new identity combinations emerge. The renowned Wing Luke Museum is re-opening this week in my home city, Seattle, Washington. Reportedly it is the only pan-Asian-Pacific-American museum in the USA. What is an Asian-Pacific-American? “Not a race, ethnic group, or nationality,” according to Jack Broom in the *Seattle Times*. “It's a census category that historically combined people from more than 40 countries making up a vast portion of the globe, stretching from Tahiti to Pakistan, Japan to Indonesia, Hawaii to India.”

Fourteen percent of my county's population is Asian Pacific American. In spite of the *Seattle Times'*

disclaimer, this is a significant ethnic category, a measurable group with enough identity to support a noted museum. In a nesting hierarchy of ethnic identities, it constitutes one level. The *Times* article goes on to say that the high numbers “reflect the Northwest’s perch on the Pacific Rim.”

Multiple identities are not unusual. Spanish speakers in the USA grew by 50% from 1980 to 1990. They now make up 30% of the population of New York City. Most speak English as well. In the same decade, the number of Chinese speakers in the U.S. increased by 98%. Four-fifths of these people continue to prefer speaking Chinese at home even though most speak English.

At the core, ethnic identity rests on self-ascription as a member of a shared culture, a shared community, a shared heritage. In a multiethnic society, you may not see much difference between the economic, social, and worldview patterns of people whose parents came from different countries. They may shop at the same stores and make jokes about the same sports events.

What matters is not the depth of observable difference but the depth of the identification with distinctive communities. A people’s history, for example, is their private property. The Jews have their history. The Chinese have their history. African-Americans have their history. Nobody can take this from them. It is their heritage. When the history involves suffering, and when heroes have arisen in the midst of that suffering, communal ties are even stronger.

Heritage matters, but a lot of people have more than one, and are at various points on an identity continuum. Some balance several identities. People may not put this into words, or even into conscious thought. But they know when they feel uncomfortable, when they feel cramped into inappropriate categories, into boxes that don’t fit. It is important to respect the way people identify themselves at any particular time; however, doing so may scramble our categories or lists of people groups. Individuals from the same ancestry—even siblings—may choose to identify differently.

What is the identity of the refugee immigrant? The bi-racial child? The Navaho who wonders whether home is the reservation or the city? The cosmopolitans and the youth who buy and wear goods from everywhere and who read, listen to, and watch media from everywhere? Who are their people? Are they destined to be global nomads?

Wherever they are, the gospel offers them a home. God doesn’t stereotype us. He meets us each as

the exceptions that we are, with our multiple and overlapping identities, our unique pilgrimages, our individual quirks. God doesn’t slot us into pigeonholes. Whether we have permanently lost our community, or are temporarily adrift, or have patched together bits of several heritages, God welcomes us into his people. The gospel offers us a home beyond the structures of this world.

Local cultures are gifts of God, but they are never enough. Yes, like Jeremiah, we “seek the welfare of the city” where we find ourselves (Jer 29:7, NASB). Yet, like Abraham, we know that this is not our final resting place. We remain pilgrims, seeking the city “whose builder and maker is God” (Heb 11:8-10, KJV).

3. Build Bridges

In 1964, when he was 14, Zia entered a school for the blind in Afghanistan. He became a joyful Christian. Over the next years, he learned to speak the Dari, Pushtu, Arabic, English, German, Russian, and Urdu languages, and to read these languages where Braille script was available. During the Russian occupation of Afghanistan, Zia was put in charge of the school for the blind. Later, because he would not join the Communist Party, he was thrown into prison. He escaped to Pakistan in the disguise of a blind beggar, which was his actual state.

In Pakistan, because Zia was translating the Old Testament, he was offered a scholarship to go to the United States to study Hebrew. He declined the opportunity. Why? He was too busy ministering locally. Although he didn’t think he had time to extract himself to learn Hebrew, he did learn Urdu as his seventh language in order to reach Pakistanis. Eventually he was martyred.

Zia represents the millions of Christian witnesses over the centuries who have discovered that the gospel links us with the globe. We begin locally, but we do not stop there.

Today the world desperately needs people like Zia. Economic and technological globalization connect us at superficial levels. Societies must have people who can make deeper connections. Thomas Friedman explores this idea in his powerful book, *The Lexus and the Olive Tree*, where the Lexus represents the global economy and the olive tree represents local traditions. Clifford Geertz writes about the tension between epochalism and essentialism, between the need to be part of the contemporary epoch versus the need to maintain our essential identities, to know who we are. Manuel Castells in *The Rise of the Networked Society* argues that although a networked globe means an integration of power, this happens on

a level increasingly divorced from our personal lives. He calls it “structural schizophrenia” and warns, “Unless cultural, political, and physical bridges are deliberately built...we may be heading toward life in parallel universes whose times cannot meet.”

Who can build bridges? What movement spans nations, races, genders, *ethne*, rich and poor, illiterates and Ph.D.'s? It is an awesome thing to realize that there are scarcely any people more suitably poised to connect interculturally than the church universal.

When civil ties break down, it is often believers who can lead societies across bridges of reconciliation, reaching out to clasp hands with brothers and sisters on the other side. Our loyalties do not stop at the edges of our culture. We are pilgrims. We can step out into the margins. Indeed, that has always been the Christian mandate. Abraham was called to be a blessing to all the families of the earth (Gen 12:1-3). David sang, “May all the peoples praise you, O God” (Ps 67:3,5). Paul was propelled by a passion for the unreached peoples (Rom 15:20-21). John vibrated with a vision of peoples and tribes and kindreds and nations gathered together around the throne of God at the end of time (Rev 4-5).

Making cross-cultural connections has been our mandate from the beginning. Our involvement in globalization is rooted not in economics but in God's love for his world. We cannot be isolationists, content in our cocoons. The love of God compels us to step outside our boundaries. Where there is conflict, we step out as peacemakers. Where the gospel is not known, we step out as witnesses. Global connections also make it possible for us to step out to serve the Church of Jesus Christ worldwide more swiftly and comprehensively than ever before.

To whom much has been given, from them much is required. Are we building bridges?

4. Nurture Ethnic Churches

Finally, we must consider distinct ethnic churches in our own communities. Some people ask: “If 11:00 a.m. on Sunday is the most segregated hour in America, aren't ethnic churches racist? Certainly they foster evangelism and fellowship. But just because something succeeds doesn't make it right. The devil has lots of success, too.”

How can we answer? In this chapter, we have laid the foundation for arguing that ethnic churches are justified not only for pragmatic reasons—because

they work—but also because they are rooted in the doctrine of creation. In God's image, expressing God-given creativity, people have developed different cultures. These cultures offer complementary glimpses of beauty and truth, and complementary critiques of evil.

Every church must welcome people of every race and culture. Some people flourish in multicultural churches. Others treasure their own tradition. For them, culture remains important in worship. They pray in their heart language, with meaningful gestures, ululations, and prostrations. Their culture will affect the way they do evangelism, discipling, teaching, administration, counseling, finances, youth work, leader training, discipline, curriculum development, relief, development, and advocacy. Their theologians complement other cultures' understanding of the Bible.

Separate congregations are not bad. What is bad is a lack of love. This lack of love is too often found in churches in which the majority of the members are from the subculture at the top of the power hierarchy. Wealthier, more powerful churches do have special obligations....

In this context, ethnic churches have great value. Like a mosaic, like a kaleidoscope, the whole spectrum of cultures—and ethnic churches—enriches God's world. Just as strong, healthy families are the building blocks for strong healthy communities, so strong ethnic churches can be the building blocks for strong multicultural fellowships. It is when we learn commitment and cooperation at home that we are prepared to practice those skills at large.

Ethnic churches are a good place to begin global mission work too. We can partner with international Christians who live in our own cities—students, businessmen, temporary visitors, refugees, immigrants. Many represent relatively “unreached” peoples. Many regularly return to their homeland to help dig wells, set up clinics, teach in Bible schools, publish hymnbooks and training textbooks, etc. We can pray with them, help them grow to maturity as Christ's disciples, and reach out together to their peoples.

When ethnicity is treasured as a gift but not worshiped as an idol, God's world is blessed, and we enjoy a foretaste of heaven. Let us keep that vision before us. †