



Who Am I? Who Are We? And Does It Matter?

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If the U.S. Center for World Mission is known for anything, it is the concept of reaching unreached people groups. We have been one of the champions of people group thinking, and our very identity is wound up in it. As a result, it would be quite natural for us to be defensive about people group critiques. We could become “intellectual tyrants” who believe too strongly in the ideas that have shaped us. It is hard to top Tolstoy’s observation:

I know that most men, including those at ease with problems of the greatest complexity, can seldom accept even the simplest and most obvious truth if it would oblige them to admit the falsity of conclusions which they have delighted in explaining to colleagues, proudly taught to others, and which they have woven, thread by thread, into the fabric of their lives.

Profound words! Intellectual pride can easily get in the way of clear thinking. Who likes to admit that he is wrong when his professional credibility is on the line? So this is a trap we must avoid. I hope you’ve seen a balanced and fair response from our writers on the people group critique. I find the discussion invigorating because it prompts us to continue to push our understanding deeper and deeper. There is a continuous need to reassess what we “know” based on the rapid increase of information and new knowledge out there. In fact, you could say that mission history is, in part, the record of new ideas and insights that shape and reshape mission practice. The unreached peoples concept was in this sense nothing new; it was simply one in a long string of new ideas that changed the way we think about and practice mission. More new ideas have since been championed on various fronts, and

more will inevitably mold our thinking in the future. That being said, some ideas are more profound and more lasting than others. In my opinion, the ideas that last the longest, that separate themselves from mere fads, are the ones that most closely reflect reality. For 35 years now, the people group concept has been widely accepted as an idea that accurately reflects the reality that a person’s greatest allegiance is to the social/cultural/religious community into which (s)he is born.

Is this still a present reality? Are we making too much of people group identity? Are we transposing a framework/categorization onto a reality that no longer fits? It is true that people groups have never been, nor are today, monolithic structures. It seems obvious today that there is great segmentation within people groups, and not just those in urban settings. Yet ethnic realities remain very strong. I would propose that both are true: in some cases ethnic identity remains curiously strong and in others quite malleable.

I find it interesting that many who read this magazine, and are therefore sincerely interested in this topic, are the same people whose own ethnicity is significantly diluted. I’m referring to your typical white American. While our forefathers kept ethnic lines “pure” for awhile after immigrating to America, it only took a few generations for people to start marrying outside those lines (as is presently happening with more recent immigrants), with the result that many of us describe our ethnic heritage using fractions. I myself am half Dutch with the other half some combination of Irish, Scotch and English. While there are some “full-blooded” Americans out there that represent only one ethnic strain, most are a combination of several.

Ethnic rigidity was not strong enough to overcome geographic isolation. Eventually, ethnicity was diluted and the people group identity was changed to the extent that many of us of Dutch descent do not speak a lick of Dutch, know nothing of Dutch history and culture, and would be just as clueless on a trip to the Netherlands as we would on a trip to Africa. So while there is still a strong Dutch heritage, it is largely a veneer that provides good jokes but not a lot of substance. We may have some wooden shoes on the mantle or some windmill spoons in the kitchen, but our “Dutchness” is largely decorative, not formative.

Yet, on the other hand, some people groups seem strong enough to remain intact amidst the forces of geographic isolation. Witness the many Muslim populations in Europe. Even after several decades now, they appear to demonstrate a resilience of people group identity.

Many of us embody the very feature that calls into question people group thinking. We exemplify the fact that people group realities do change, sometimes quite drastically, to the extent that a new people group is formed. There are now several barriers of both understanding and acceptance that separate me from my relatives in the Netherlands. Like it or not, I have become part of a separate people group. When one thinks of the recent and current immigration that is taking place all around the world, it is easy to see why questions are being raised about people group thinking. How many new people groups are in the process of being formed as we speak? And yet for others this is strikingly not the new reality; for these, ethnic distinction and boundaries are safeguarded. As with so many issues in mission, context will reveal varying realities. This discussion is just beginning. f