

Humility, Difference and the Global Christian

The Ramsden Sermon preached at Braesnose College in the University of Oxford on Sunday 28th October 2018

In 2016, the issue of cultural appropriation - and the degree to which novelists should attempt to write about the experience of those with different attributes to themselves like gender or ethnicity - bubbled up in the world of creative writers. In response, the novelist Hari Kunzru issued a strong warning against the dangers for self-censorship, on the grounds that 'trespassing into otherness is a foundation of the novelist's work'; and that, indeed, 'attempting to think one's way into subjectivities, other experiences, is an act of ethical urgency'.ⁱ

Decrying the corrosive impact of the 'politics of offence', he continued, suggesting there was one simple proviso: as the writer steps into the world of another, they should proceed **not** 'with care' – for caution inhibits imaginative creativity - but with **humility**. In boldly entering the territory of the other, the writer **must** tread - with humility. His call was then to a depth of human engagement.

Humility is a virtue particularly stressed within the Abrahamic faiths, rather than one growing out of the Classical tradition or emphasized by the Enlightenment. Indeed it has long been regarded as **the** Christian virtue.

'If you should ask me what are the ways of God...' said Saint Augustine 'I would tell you that the first is humility, the second is humility, and the third is humility. Not that there are no other precepts to give, **but** if humility does not proceed all that we do, our efforts are fruitless.'ⁱⁱ

Humility demands of us that we make the move from that 'romantic lie' - that we are autonomous and independent and in control of our desires - to what one might describe as the 'novelistic truth'ⁱⁱⁱ that we are situated, located, that we are woven in; that we arrive mid-sentence to stories that precede our existence. Humility demands of us a deep commitment to realism about selves, and to the shaping of our personhood by the world – by culture, politics, status, class.

Our first reading^{iv} provides then a classic example of humility: A high status, powerful individual is in need – he is deeply afflicted, he has leprosy. He makes himself vulnerable in seeking help and receives an apparently offhand response. He is also an Aramean, so his angry response reflects his cultural identification and pride: 'are not the waters of Damascus better than all the waters of Israel?'^v

What saves him, however, is his humility. He is clearly in the habit of listening to others, including his social inferiors. And so he reflects, steps back, allows for the possibility that he may gain from an outsider from another culture, and allows himself to be radically transformed.

Our second shorter reading is more radical.^{vi} For here, we encounter a chameleon-like, shape-shifting Paul articulating a radical commitment to 'the Other': to those of different cultures and standing, a Paul prepared to abase himself, adopting different practices such that he stands as a 'slave to all' in his commitment to dialogue and encounter; as he seeks to discern the divine unfolding in the world. In so doing, he puts aside his own deep cultural attachment; his own experience and status as a 'Pharisee of Pharisees'.^{vii} Yet, whilst he distances himself from the religious prestige and privilege of such an association, he remains willing to 'put on' the requisite obligations. Extraordinarily, in this 'man for all seasons' passage, Paul declares that, as such, he becomes 'as' or 'like' a Jew.^{viii}

Indeed, this passage was so perplexing to some early Christian scribes that they omitted 'as' or 'like' on the assumption it was a mistake. For clearly Paul is a Jew, and remains a Jew.^{ix} Paul's commitment to the Other here is extraordinary in its reach: His commitment to standing with others in solidarity though an embrace of cultural context is a deeply radical statement about the universality of humanity and the call to live in a profoundly transcultural way. It steps beyond the boundary posts and markers that litter our rich human landscape.

And of course it is a statement Paul issues in the context of mission.

I am invited, however, as the Ramsden preacher to reflect on 'Church Extension' or mission within a quite particular cultural and political context – that of the 'British Commonwealth' a.k.a. largely, the former British Empire. And that, of course, brings me swiftly to a very different sort of trespass altogether.

In thinking then about what it means to be a global Christian, on what a specially **Christian** ethics and spirituality can bring to conversations about transcultural encounter at a time when the rules-based approach to the global order is under threat and xenophobia is being shamelessly stoked and stroked - my first point of three points:

A serious debate

We must have much deeper and more serious debate and interrogation of our past. The British, in particular, need to come to own their history more fully, more deeply and more honestly. So I welcome the prompting given by Oxford's recent 'Great British Empire debate'.^x

A serious debate about the British Empire is not exactly premature: Especially as a large proportion of the population, especially those who identify as English, hold the uncritical view that the Empire was 'a good thing'.

And as a middle-aged, Oxbridge-educated white male - with a growing but only partial understanding of the extent of my own privilege – the fact that most academic defenders of a 'redemptive vision of Empire' look a quite a lot like me is hardly irrelevant: Of course, the free play of the intellect is essential to the life of the University, but to think that embodiment,

enculturation or positionality is largely irrelevant to the questions you ask or the presuppositions you hold is at best intellectually naïve, and in some cases plain arrogant.

It takes, for example, a quite particular perspective pair of spectacles to uncritically praise the British for the nineteenth century abolition of the Slave Trade and whitewash the preceding two centuries of relentless cruelty and inhumanity.^{xi} And if we were remotely tempted to think 'the past is the past' we only have to consider the way in which the ramifications echo down the generations, think, for example, of the recent scandal relating to some of the Windrush generation and their children.^{xii}

So, I would welcome serious engagement with the claims that British imperialism helped the spread of certain important ideals, like democracy or universal human rights - denied, of course, in practice to subdued and exploited populations; I would welcome a much wider appreciation of how so many people's sense of identity even of their own embodiment or skin colour became distorted through the subtle but pervasive cultural dynamics we describe as the 'colonization of the mind'.^{xiii} And most critically, I would welcome serious public discussion of the legacies of the successions of enterprises that the British engaged in over a number of centuries in different parts of the globe under the banner of a 'civilising' mission.

Radical commitment to the Other

My second point concerning our calling to be Global Christians picks up on Paul's radical commitment to 'put on' the other; to a personal embodiment of transcultural engagement.

Within the envelope of the British Empire there were clear examples of some British missionaries prepared to take such a step and to bear the cost of ridicule and abuse from their compatriots; those whose faithfulness to the Gospel imperative lead them to a strong identification and solidarity with local people: to probe and challenge their own assumptions and adapt and to facilitate a deep inculturation of the gospel. Prophetic characters like Arthur Cripps who lived and taught in what is now Northern Zimbabwe (Mashonaland), a biting satirist, his play of 1908, *The Black Christ* depicts the British Empire in the most graphic language as a demonic fiend; or C.F. Andrewes, a strong supporter of Indian independence and a close friend of Mahatma Gandhi (indeed the person who persuaded Gandhi to return to India from South Africa).^{xiv}

So, today the Christian engaged in transcultural dialogue and in mission needs to be **radical but realistic** - to be prepared to look squarely at the world and challenge the axioms of their own culture. Christians should not then be carried along by a faith misplaced in naïve ideas of providence, like that of the British vision of an imperial 'civilizing mission'. But equally they should not step back apologetically thinking that enlightened humanitarianism or the discourse of universal human rights and the various international agencies than incarnate these ideals have the answers.^{xv} These NGOs, secular successors to the traditional missionary whose mission make manifest a secularized version of the vision of the Kingdom of God are

struggling in our modern world: Certainly with attacks from without; but also from within – with the revelations earlier this year of abuses within the development sector – which we witnessed rather dramatically earlier this year.^{xvi} Listening to these accounts, one can almost hear the utilitarian arguments being crafted over the third cheap beer by privileged middle-aged men justifying their use of local prostitutes.

Rather, the Christian is called to go deeper - to the truth that undergirds the powerful aspirations behind our contemporary humanitarianism, to that cornerstone of the Abrahamic faiths: that we are all made in the image of God, each and every one of us; a non-negotiable transcendent anchoring of the value of human life against **all** the forces that instrumentalise and de-grade humanity.

The gifts of intercultural encounter

Finally, the globally aware Christian is engaged in a mission that is deeply mutual and participative, undertaken with a humility that understands, like Naaman, that to engage in a deep listening, to accept the gift of another is to be transformed and to receive something into the depths of one's self. A view underpinned by the understanding that God is already active in the world, ahead of us, the fruits of that action brought to light and life by those who tread gently with humility.^{xvii}

Amidst the moral ruin of the world, God calls us all, then as part of human vocation to extend our moral imaginations and to sit lightly to those aspects of our personal histories and culture that bolster our sense of power and security in the world. He calls us strive for a radical solidarity with others, especially those at the margins of our worlds; he calls us to redeem, to repair, to reconcile and, often, to repent - what has been. It is an ethical task of depth and seriousness, and it invites each one of us into a journey of deep personal listening – for a true healing of histories, and the scars and wounds inflicted involves the painful exploration of the wound rather than the simple whitewash of the bandage.

Amen

ⁱ See: 'Whose life is it anyway? Novelists have their say on cultural appropriation', Saturday 1 October 2016 *The Guardian* <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2016/oct/01/novelists-cultural-appropriation-literature-lionel-shriver>.

ⁱⁱ Saint Augustine, *Letter 118*, Augustine to Dioscorus (410 AD), para 22.

ⁱⁱⁱ This distinction is made by René Girard in: Girard, 1965, *Deceit, Desire and the Novel: Self and other in Literary Structure*, The John Hopkins Press.

^{iv} The story of Naaman is related in 2 *Kings* 5: vv. 1-19a.

^v *Ibid*, v. 12

^{vi} 1 *Corinthians* vv. 19-23

^{vii} See *Philippians* 3 vv. 4-7.

^{viii} See 1 *Corinthians* 9 v 20. The parallel is imperfect, but it is an interesting exercise of moral imagination, to relate to the important aspects of one's culture, say as a British man, or Korean or Jamaican woman on an 'as if' basis; adopting rather than assuming the identity in question.

^{ix} Rabbinic Judaism and Christianity are the two inheritors of a diverse legacy of Jewish practice and belief of first century. As developments from the same soil, they are in that sense, both 'Rebecca's children' and share more axioms than are commonly acknowledged (See Alan Segal, 1989, *Rebecca's Children: Judaism and Christianity in the Roman World*, Harvard University Press). In the assessment of C.K. Barrett: 'Paul remained in many respects not merely a Jew but a Pharisee and a Rabbi: yes he differed from all non-Christian Pharisees in that he was ready to cease to be a Jew.' Barrett, 1971, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, A & C Black, p. 211.

^x A debate sparked by the publication and subsequent response to an article by Bruce Gilley, 'The Case for Colonialism' in *Third World Quarterly* in 2017, and further, by a defence of the case from Professor Nigel Biggar in *The Times*, (November 30, 2017) entitled 'Don't feel guilty about our colonial history'. See also: Kenan Malik, 'The Great British Empire Debate' in the *New York Times*, January 26, 2018.

<https://www.nybooks.com/daily/2018/01/26/the-great-british-empire-debate/>

^{xi} As Malik puts in the New York Times piece: 'The suggestion that the British Empire was good because it ended slavery reflects historical amnesia of the most decadent kind'.

^{xii} See also, Rose Hudson-Wilkin's comments, 'Church "has no integrity to speak out on the Windrush scandal', *Church of England Newspaper*, <http://www.churchnewspaper.com/51011/archives>.

^{xiii} There is an extensive literature from the writings of Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952, trans 1967) and *The Wretched of the Earth* (1961, trans 1963) onwards.

^{xiv} Dubbed the 'Atheists of Empire', see the chapter of that title in D. O'Connor, Ed, 2000, *Three Centuries of Mission: The United Society for the Propagation of the Gospel 1701-2000*, Continuum, pp 99-108, and the chapter on Arthur Cripps, pp. 371-381.

^{xv} There is an extensive literature on the problems associated with the conception and operation of universal human rights. The philosopher Baroness Onora O'Neill has articulated a number of the issues with admirable clarity, see for example O'Neill, 'The dark side of human rights', *International Affairs*, 2005, 81:2:1-14.

^{xvi} See: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-43112200> and the case of Roland Van Hauwermeiren.

^{xvii} In our complex globalizing world, there is a key role for inter-cultural encounters which are marked by a real quality of human engagement, i.e. one that has depth and humility and is transformative of all those involved. See for example USPG's **Journey with Us** programme <http://www.uspg.org.uk/travel/placements/>.