Missionary God in Western Culture

Photos by Jenny Bulcraig

This second issue of the Journal of Missional Practice focuses in an area, which is close to the journal's heart. It takes as its springboard the first of the four convictions of The Missional Network:

The missionary God is working in Western culture and we need to observe and discern the shape of the new contours the Holy Spirit is directing us towards.

This issue, indeed the whole journal, is about cultivating the capacity of missional practitioners to discern their participation in the life of the triune God, within the cultural flows of today's world. The crucial word in this regard, captured in the title and the theme, is the word "IN". Missional practitioners always participate *in* two simultaneous realities from which they can never detach themselves, namely the incarnate life of the triune God and the inculturated flows of the world in which we live. And the crucial nature of this participation *in* is mutually defined by who the Missionary God is *in relationship to* the dynamics of the cultural flows in Western Culture. It is *crucial, truly cruciform,* because a basic missional assumption is that the triune God is the subject of mission (a 'Missionary God') as the Creator and Giver of new life through the scandal of a crucified embodiment *in* this world. It is *in* the messiness of such cruciform

embodiment *in* relationship to other people, that we as practitioners receive the triune God's gift of new life.

Through the ages we as Christians have struggled with the divine mystery and cultural thickness of this "in", and have devised constant attempts to deny and avoid its messiness. While we as practitioners are well aware of this relational reality of an *out of control* mystery, thickness, and messiness, we also fall for the temptation to try and get it *under control* with our attempts to ideologize Christianity to a set of easily understandable principles or beliefs. We commodify it to nicely packaged solutions for fixing problems. We market programs, projects and events for attracting people (or, in terms of mission, strategize it for the sake of our outreach mobilization). It is especially true of those of us who live in the midst of Western cultural flows, to turn what is 'foolishness to the Greeks'[1] into modern wisdom, instrumentalizing away what is supposed to be shaped by its inherent tensions.

Therefore we are used to relating the gospel (good news) of a Missionary God to particular cultural realities through the word "and." One of the most well known examples is the classic of H. Richard Niebuhr on *Christ and Culture*.[2] An influential book like this is very helpful heuristically, to see the immense possibilities in the tension of the gospel *in* culture relationship. Niebuhr proposes five ways to conceive the interaction, but these static conceptualities do not help us with the actual particularities of everyday lives. Discerning our participation in what God is up to in these realities somehow depends on different dynamics than can be explained through static conceptualities. Discerning our participation depends on the relational dynamics of being *in* community with God and other people. As indicated by Andy Crouch in his book on *Culture Making*[3] (in quoting Richard Rohr in this regard), as well as James Smith in his books on *Desiring the Kingdom*[4] and *Imagining the Kingdom*[5], we do not think ourselves into new behavior but rather behave ourselves into new thinking. It's no different with discerning our participation in what the Missionary God is up to in Western culture. The challenge for both academics and practitioners is to theologize (thinking) *from within* the messiness of *being in* communion with God and others (behaving).

The contributions in this issue of the *Journal of Missional Practice* point us in the direction of possibilities for doing theology *from within*. I invite you to read the wonderful reflections of Abbi Macallister and Jenny Bulcraig as exactly the kind of unexpected discoveries practitioners make when they are reflecting from within their engagement with those uncontrollable realities emerging from their everyday lives. But read it also as part of your own reflections from within your own everyday contexts in the light of the keynote and main articles of this journal. The articles by Graham Cray and Dominic Erdozain give us glimpses into what is at stake theologically and culturally when we reflect on our missional experiments and practices.

Our keynote article, written by Bishop Graham Cray, is a helpful example of articulating theologically *from within* the social-embodiment of experimentations (*Fresh expressions*). He illuminates how the cultural contours of participation in the presence and activity of the Missionary God, shape up in the UK (and also other "westernized" parts of the world). His article starts us off with a fair assumption. Facing adaptive challenge in the midst of the fluidity of western cultural contours, in a globalized world, Graham Cray reminds us that there are *no blueprints*. There are no models to imitate, and no predetermined knowledge of the shapes and

forms of these contours. It is because there is no culture free Christianity, and the gospel is not free floating above culture. It is always *culturally appropriate*. The incarnate work of the Missionary God is always embodied *in* the fluidity and complexity of the discontinuous contours that lead us into an unpredictable future.

However, says Dominic Erdozain in the article on secularization and Christian mission, this does not mean that particular cultural shapes and forms of modern western culture need to hold us captive. Based on a sophisticated analysis of the history of secularization in relationship to the Christian church, he makes a passionate argument for not merely accepting the ways in which the secular narrative seduced the church, through the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, into a variety of problematic western cultural shapes. What concerns this author are the disturbing signs of the church's continuing acquiescence in secularization, and therefore, the church's submission to the paradigms of modernity. Respect culture, but respect the gospel more, pleads the author.

From the perspective of cultural anthropology, the very nature of cultural fluidity determines that the 'social imaginary'[6] is always reshaped by emerging dynamics within those cultural flows.[7] Or from a theological perspective, the *in* of the Missionary God at work in Western culture is always a transformative *in-betweenness* where the triune God does new things in the midst of cultural captivity. Because the good news (gospel) of a Missionary God at work in Western culture is inculturated through the incarnation of Christ, it has its own powers of transformation through the Spirit of Christ. As Andy Crouch puts it, 'the only way to change culture is to create more of it.'[8] How this 'culture making' happens in transformative ways within the concrete realities of local Christian communities and their engagement with their neighborhoods is the subject matter of a next issue of this Journal when we will explore such habits and practices of missional formation.

If the Cray and Erdozain articles help us understand what is at stake in the 'in'of the Missionary God in Western Culture, then the other articles in this issue help us identify how these contours shape up with regard to very concrete and particular contexts. Caroline Dover explores the possibilities of cultivating counter-imaginations and desires for God's kingdom in the workplace, and considers an agenda for the formation of habits and practices in this regard. Babatunde Adedibu looks at the missional potential presenting itself with Britain's Black-Majority Churches during a globalized age of migration, and therefore, reflects on what God is up to in the midst of such diasporic realities in Western Culture. Harvey Kwiyani and Ian MacRobert give us extremely thoughtful 'Rapid Responses' to the Adedibu article, which just open up the reflections on the possibilities of such profound missional contours in the midst of Western Culture. Is there an *in-betweenness* developing here as well that takes us beyond both the differentiation and the assimilation of migrant identities in their foreign environments?

This issue of the journal has laid out the adaptive challenge we face and has located discernment and participation firmly in the territory of "in-between". We respond to the incarnate God within western culture, from *within* western culture, and in relationship. But what practices will lead us into participation with this triune God in our midst? We have already seen a hint that they may involve 'culture-making'. They will certainly involve our relationships and our communities. They may be costly. The practices of participation will be explored in the next

issue of the journal: *The Practices of a Missional People*.

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[1] The title of that wonderful little Newbigin book on “the Gospel and Western Culture”: Lesslie Newbigin, *Foolishness to the Greeks: the Gospel and Western Culture* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1986).

[2] H. Richard Neibuhr, Christ and Culture (New York, NY: Harper and Row, 1981). Originally published 1951.

[3] Andy Crouch, *Culture Making: Recovering our Creative Calling* (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 2008.

[4] James K A Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom: Worship, Worldview and Cultural Formation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2009)

[5] James K A Smith, *Imagining the Kingdom: How Worship Works* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2009)

[6] Erdozain uses this expression, referencing ideas developed by Charles Taylor and others. See *Modern Social Imaginaries* by Charles Taylor (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003).

[7] See the great work of Arjun Appadurai in this regard, in his book *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions in Globalization*(Minneapolis, MN: University of Minesota Press, 1996)

[8] Crouch, *Culture Making*, 67.