

Doing New Testament Research and Teaching in a Cross-Cultural Context

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The initiative of the Asia Pacific Liaison Committee of the *Society for New Testament Studies* in arranging a regional conference in Hong Kong under the leadership of its chair, our host, Professor Eric Wong, has given me cause to reflect on what it means to do New Testament research and to teach in a cross-cultural context.

As a New Zealander, resident now for 36 years in Australia, so also an Australian, I am increasingly aware that this is my situation, too, not so much in relating to the slightly different cultures in each, but in relating as a New Testament scholar to the Christianity and to the wider community in both. There are serious dangers if I forget that I live and work in a relatively multi-cultural society which is nevertheless western at its base and I work in relation to Christianity largely in the form in which the west domesticated Christianity, at times even harnessing it to sanction its western values. Similarly much, though not all, of what we recognise as Christianity came to our Asia-Pacific region in western dress. I am regularly confronted by the phenomenon of nineteenth century forms of Christianity meeting me most recently in Melanesian or Polynesian dress and the same is true of much indigenous Christianity in Australia.

Part of the role I set myself in my Australian context is to help people see that their engagement with the New Testament must be seen as, in itself, a cross-cultural encounter in which we engage the other and need to respect the distance and strangeness typical of genuine cross-cultural encounter which can then form the context of real meeting. Recognising and respecting the difference and distinctiveness of the other rather hearing only what suits us or colonising others with our preferences belongs in my view to the essence of all good relations, whether with ancient texts or with other human beings, including our spouses and families. Paradoxically it is only on the basis of respecting distance that we can experience true proximity and real encounter can take place. If you let me take you to hear something ancient and strange, such as the writings of first century believers, you may find that what they say will also sound familiar, or more than that, have something directly to say to you and yours. Preaching can effect such a word and one of the tasks of New Testament scholars is to educate and resource preachers so that they can facilitate this encounter with integrity and not run the shortcut of treating the texts as timeless and infallible.

In my Australian context one of the cherished values is that every person matters, usually accompanied by a strong rejection of hierarchies. Historically this derives in part from the collapse of pretence in the early days of settlement. Confronted by the harsh climate and rugged outback it made no sense to play the English games of class superiority with tie and suit. Everyone needed to get in and help. Everyone needed to get their hands dirty. Everyone needed to pull their weight if the early communities were to survive. So we have a strong commitment to solidarity, on the whole rejecting the claims of some to be superior to others by birth and affirming support for the underdog – except of course in sport and business! This goes some way towards the ethic of Jesus, but our faith asserts something more than solidarity with the underdog. It also asserts God's love for sinners. Australians usually draw the line at that. So solidarity with the underdog counts as long as you are not a bad person. Social justice can be defined as helping the worthy. Christ lived and died, however,

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also for the so-called unworthy. Worthiness and worth, including wealth, easily morphs into prosperity theologies according to which Proverbs is right: the righteous prosper and by implication, those who prosper are righteous, a flaw against which there is a large cross in theology and also in the life of God.

Engagement in cross-cultural encounter has accompanied the Judeo-Christian tradition from the beginning. If we were Old Testament scholars, I would be expanding at length on the emergence of Israelite traditions, including toward henotheism and monotheism and reflecting on the impact of the Babylonian exile. Of more direct relevance for New Testament scholars is the exposure to Greco-Roman thought both through the impact of Hellenism in Palestine and its impact on the huge numbers of Jews living in the diaspora. The days are now past when speculation raged about a Hellenistic Galilee and a Cynic-like Jesus and we have come to a realisation that it makes no sense to try to understand Jesus independent of the strongly Jewish tradition which informs everything from his family names to his eschatology and central message. We are, nevertheless, seeing in Jesus a phenomenon of the times, namely different foci on what belongs to the core of faith, what values inform the hierarchy of priorities which inform behaviour. Such differences are played out in Jesus' conflicts with those for whom cult and purity concerns mattered most or at least equally to concerns with helping and healing people.

It is not by chance that with increasing exposure to other cultures many will choose to put their focus on values applicable to the cultures in which they live and sometimes compatible with them, especially notions of a universal God, of creation, and of ethics, in contrast to their own culture-specific cultic and ritual requirements. Both options are evident in such contexts: affirmation of universal values and sitting light to cultic concerns, on the one hand, and being all the more defensive about one's distinctive culture to a degree that often made diaspora Jews more defensive than those of the homeland. Paul, perhaps exemplifies first the latter and then converts to the former. The former could collapse into syncretism, where Yahweh becomes interchangeable with Zeus, and, as Philo complains, the holy Law is abandoned. The latter could retreat into separatism as among the Essenes.

In part, stimulated by Jesus' own approach, which, I would argue, is, on the whole, reliably preserved in the conflict anecdotes, early Christianity faced the challenges of cross-cultural encounter in a much more direct way than had been the case with Jesus. Apparently he never needed to deal with the issue of circumcision. They did. He seems to have had minimal contact with Gentiles – according to John, whose detail at times appears to preserve more reliable history, only at the last minute via Philip. Their expansion had to confront the issue of whether Gentiles could now be incorporated into God's people and on what basis. Some creative thought led to the resolution that the previous model set out in Genesis 17 to deal with a few was hardly adequate to the new situation which was dealing with large numbers. As we know, the movement was divided, first over whether circumcision should be imposed, and then more broadly whether other biblical or biblically based laws should be upheld about food and commensality.

When you take your faith into a new culture, how do you decide what is essential and what can be left behind? Such issues continue to confront believers. Debates about the authority of the Bible and biblical provisions about a range of issues from women's ordination to divorce and remarriage and much else re-run the issues. Do you run with Paul's opponents and insist that if the Bible demands circumcision, not to require it offends God or do you run with Paul, who argues from God's nature to put core values such as love and inclusivity at the centre of ethics and theology and make them the measure of hermeneutics? How far do you go? What are the limits?

Mark's tradition reveals that not only compassion and inclusivity, namely the removing of barriers of discrimination, shapes his theology but also solid rationality, as in the argument which dismisses concerns with food laws or anything entering the body because surely it simply enter the stomach and then exits into the toilet. Only the ethical attitudes from within and their expression make a person unclean. Others do not use such arguments to dismiss biblical law as not making sense, but do so at least to relativise certain commands and we find already within biblical material such rationales: thus circumcision of the heart matters more; compassion matters more than sacrifice.

Pushed to breaking point John's community reallocates their Bible's role, including its Law, to being God's gift which foreshadowed what would one day replace it at a higher level, thus providing a new christo-centric basis for theology and ethics. Despite its high christology and partly because of it, the fourth gospel's transformation of the good news into a message about finding true bread, light, and life through openness in faith to God in Christ, rather than primarily in concepts couched in Jewish messianism and cultic readings of Jesus' death, turned it into a major source for cross-cultural engagement. For other cultures too expressed human spiritual need in such terms. At the other end of the spectrum, Matthew's community, clinging on for dear life to their Jewishness, asserted the Q tradition that the biblical law remained intact to the smallest detail, while radically reframing its priorities in terms of a righteousness which was characterised by goodness and generosity in attitude and act.

Engagement backwards as it were with tradition raises the issue of continuity and integrity. What is retained and on what basis? What is discarded and on what basis? This is inevitably the stuff of controversy. There is also a different kind of engagement where the pressure is not from those within the tradition but from forces outside it. For Jesus to have spoken of a new *basileia* to come implied the present order, that administered through the temple and the Herodians or Pilate and ultimately by Rome, was inadequate. Hope for change is implicitly political and the powers that be will want to watch carefully where hopes are raised. From their point of view the safest movements are those which look for hope on the other side of death or in a spiritual realm beyond everyday life within, or through the ecstatic.

If a movement not only looks to a future divine intervention but sees that vision as an agenda for change in the present, then that movement should at least go on file. Busy administrations rarely have time to research carefully, so that a movement which uses the subversive language of change and raises the expectations of the disadvantaged is often best extinguished before it becomes something worse. Such a rationale would certainly have made sense in first century Judea. Did not such various movements eventually coalesce in a revolt against Rome? The execution of Jesus made good sense in those terms, whether or not he really sported with the appellation "Messiah", "King of the Jews". The assumption would have been that his execution should have put an end to his Galilean followers' enthusiasm. It did not. The authorities will have regretted not executing them as well.

The movement trod a dangerous path in nevertheless claiming him the Christ, the Messiah, which they would ever thereafter have to disentangle from its more common meaning. It helped eventually that Christ gave way to less nationalistically and politically flavoured designations and was diluted to a surname, but even then to acclaim him as Lord and Son of God and to hail his good news of peace brought potential collision with Rome's imperial propaganda which also employed such terms. They could have very quickly run into trouble as the movement spread into the empire, even though the message was now more about the messenger than about the proclamation of the

basileia, namely the kingdom or empire of God. Perhaps because they were such a minority and mostly not noticed, their proclamation of Jesus as Lord was not often taken up as a direct counterclaim to Rome's claims, which implicitly it was. We are now in a period of New Testament scholarship where some read the silence of the texts as implying a ubiquitous anti-imperial agenda, which just failed to leave much of a trace. The reality was that this was a movement which hailed Jesus and usually did so with an awareness that this implied advocacy of his radically egalitarian values, difficult as that was to sustain over time. There were, after all, some popular philosophers who espoused similar views, at least in theory, such as Emperor Nero's teacher, Seneca. Whatever else conspired to bring Peter's and Paul's execution at his hands in the 60s, we can be sure that it was also part of the totalitarian tidying up of dissent, as had been the case with Jesus. Revelation brings us close to the friction: serious trouble in Asia Minor.

Later generations had to grapple with how to live as communities of faith in the Roman world, some adapting the strategy not only of advocating respect for imperial authority and prayer for the emperor, but also of outdoing society at its own game. They did this by claiming to create ideal families which matched exactly what the moralists of the time saw as ideal: a household headed by a father with a submissive wife, keeping her mouth shut in public discourse, and obedient children and where applicable, slaves, and gathering in communities led by men. That would eventually endear them to the authorities and protect them from the slander that they effected the opposite, which they could hardly be charged with. They were so far down the track from the Jesus who dislocated some families for his cause.

This brings me back to today and the rich possibilities there can be in our reflecting on what the issues are for us in each of our situations. In mine the task of getting church people to engage their tradition is as great as advocacy to the wider community. Western domesticated Christianity, whether in my land or yours, stands in both continuity and discontinuity with the New Testament tradition, is both good news and bad news, and part of my role is to educate and enable bearers of that tradition to handle it with care, recognising both the harm and the hope it brings, and to discern the difference.

Some of the good news, such as human rights and the dignity of all without discrimination, is more widely espoused in our world far beyond the churches, and sometimes far more effectively, than at any other time in history, and this should make us strong. That universality, at least in rhetoric, does provide common ground with the powers that be which ostensibly espouse it. We are no less treading precariously than our New Testament forbears, though differently. Whenever we acclaim God and God's love, in some contexts we are laying ourselves open to suspicion and sometimes danger by impatient authorities, in others of being confined to irrelevance or at best of being treated as aesthetic artefacts.

What is it like for you as a New Testament scholar – in relation to the forms of Christianity in your part of the world and in relation to your wider cultural/political context?