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The Church & Managerialism

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Although Australia is a multicultural society, it is very heavily dominated by western cultural dynamics and norms, as is seen, for example, in public and private administration, in politics and in commercial activity. Part of this western cultural milieu is an emphasis on particular styles of management and organisational practice, indeed a sustained interest in what might be termed 'managerialism'. Of course, in many non-western cultures there is concern for appropriate management. However, in western societies it seems that the emphasis is on the central and crucial necessity of managerialism to alleviate anxiety, to provide certainty, and to guarantee order, efficiency, equity and transparency. Most of all, managerialism appears to provide purpose and measurable outcomes.

The question then arises as to how the Christian gospel is to interact with this cultural vital concern for managerialism. Western Christianity needs to deal with the question as to what extent this cultural norm is to be at the service of the gospel or is to dominate the expression of the gospel. Here the scriptural witness comes to our aid. In general, for Christianity the issues of the primary and the secondary are central to Christian self-understanding. The primary both in the Hebrew Scriptures (the Old Testament for Christians) and in the New Testament is the worship and service of God, known to us in Jesus Christ. The secondary are all those arts and skills necessary for human life, both individual and communal, that is, the arts and skills of the doctor, the businessperson, the manager, the accountant, the engineer, the builder, the statesman, the artist, and so on. In and of themselves, these arts and skills are important, indeed essential for human life, both individual and communal. However, these secondary abilities can never become primary in human life. Any attempt to make them so is idolatrous. This essential distinction underlies the Christian theological tradition and needs to be constantly borne in mind.

Moreover, in western cultures there is the tendency

to measure the human individual in terms of economic performance. That is, there is the contemporary tendency in such cultures to value the human person in terms of the person's ability, in economic terms, to produce or to consume or both. Again, ultimately in the Christian tradition, this is at best a secondary measure. It can never become primary.

In addition, one of the historical cultural traits of many western cultures has been that of progress. Here the Christian theological distinction between the primary and the secondary is crucial. There may be frequent and sustained progress in the arts and skills of the doctor, the businessperson, the manager, the accountant, and so on. However, progress is an inappropriate category when dealing historically with the worship and service of God. For the ultimately inexplicable will of God to be for, and with, humanity implies that the church's life cannot begin to be understood in terms of the structures and events of the world by itself.

In 1980, while I was completing my PhD dissertation, I worked in the Selly Oak Colleges Library in England at the carrel next to that of Bishop Lesslie Newbigin, who at the time was writing his commentary on the Gospel according to John. Occasionally during breaks we would discuss our work. Bishop Newbigin had returned to the United Kingdom after many years overseas, particularly in India, and I was back in Britain on study leave from Indonesia. Newbigin was overwhelmed at the 'pagan Britain' to which he had returned, and at the need to begin a new evangelisation of the country. He went on to be very influential in this area of thought. We both felt that what made it so much easier to work as a missionary either in India or in Indonesia was that one could clearly see in both places where the lines of demarcation between the gospel and the varied cultures lay. Of course, it was not easy always to see where the gospel began and where it ended in a particular Asian culture. One also had the added challenge of trying to see where a legitimate contextualisation of the gospel could take place, on the one hand, and where an inappropriate syncretism had occurred, on the other. In addition, there would always be debate as to an appropriate contextualisation. However, for our experiences, both in India and in Indonesia, the issue between gospel and culture was relatively manageable. However, the issue in the United Kingdom, and in the western world in general, was so much more difficult. During our discussions, Newbigin's insights in this area profoundly impacted me. Christianity in the west had so absorbed western culture that it was very

hard to see where the gospel actually was. Even the churches, with their long history in the British Isles, expressed a Christianity which at times seemed so dependent on the varied British cultural norms that it now seemed almost alien to the gospel. These insights were given sharper focus for us by the thinking of Asian and African contextual theologians, led by John Mbiti, who not only saw the need for contextual expressions of theology in their own societies, but who even more could see the blindness in western Christianity as it seemed to be incapable of wrestling with appropriate and inappropriate forms of contextualisation.

The issue then arises as to where the gospel begins and ends, and where the managerial expressions of western cultures start and finish. In this situation western Christianity needs to engage in what recent Indonesian theologians have termed a 'double-wrestle' between gospel and culture, in order to define Christian existence in contemporary society.

Last year (the Rev Dr John) Michael Owen published an important monograph, *Property and Progress for a Pilgrim People: How much has the Uniting Church now lost the way?* With his customary clarity, precision and incisiveness, Dr Owen dealt with a number of theological issues central to contemporary western Christianity. Although the monograph addresses theological questions particularly within the Uniting Church in Australia, it nevertheless is significant for a readership far wider than that. For its concerns are relevant to all churches in western societies.

The presenting issue in Dr Owen's monograph is the control and use of property in the Uniting Church in Australia. The Uniting Church's Basis of Union and its Constitution define areas of responsibility for church life between congregations, presbyteries, synods and the assembly. However, managerialism in western cultures often stands over against such inter-conciliar responsibilities. This occurs especially when three factors occur. First, when executive bodies are created out of councils (and even more so out of existing executives of councils) and assume to themselves responsibilities of a permanent nature, then the conciliar nature of the responsibility of

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councils is seriously imperilled. Second, when councils (presbyteries and synods) are merged, it is almost impossible for the larger of the councils not simply in effect to take over the responsibilities of both. Third, when conciliar responsibilities are taken over by executive officers, however well-meaning, again the conciliar responsibility of councils is diminished. Moreover, this thrust towards managerialism is stimulated by western cultural anxiety that conciliar responsibility is disorderly and uncontrollable.

Here is a real issue of theological existence today. The understanding of the gospel underlying the Uniting Church's Basis of Union stressed the need to wait upon the will and purpose of God as it comes to the church. How are Christians, then, to listen to the voice of God? It is not their task as Christians primarily to invoke God for their particular view of the world, but rather, in humility, to listen as that divine voice comes to them. Therefore, they need to take up this task of listening theologically, while also being very conscious of the need to discriminate between the voice of God on the one hand and their cultural and psychological impulses on the other. Thus the church has stressed the varying roles of scripture, tradition, experience of the Holy Spirit, and, specifically for the Uniting Church, deliberations and decisions of assemblies, synods, presbyteries and congregations as ways in which the voice of God can be heard and confirmed. This is to guard against the danger of individual or small group projection believing that they alone are able to express the will of God. The Basis of Union and the Constitution seek to protect the church from individuals or small groups projecting on to God their individual aspirations, hopes or even self-interest. It is intended to protect the church from self-delusion, which is most likely to occur at a time of individual or communal anxiety. Thus the Uniting Church's foundational documents are counter-cultural, in that they call for a real wrestling with the managerial cultural norms of the dominant western society.

The Uniting Church is very aware of this necessity to wrestle. It employs the 'consensus method' of decision-making in its councils. There are legitimate reservations about its use. Nevertheless it is true, that if the method is used with sincerity, and not manipulated, this method is strongly counter-cultural. If the Uniting Church is wedded to the counter-cultural consensus methodology, it will also want to be highly dubious of any attempts at centralised managerialism. Primarily the Uniting Church will do so simply ad maioram Dei gloriam (to the greater glory of God).

Note: Permission has been granted from the publisher (Morning Star Publishing, Melbourne), the book author (Rev Dr John Michael Owen) and the Preface author (Rev Professor James Haire AC) to reprint the substance of Professor Haire's Preface to the book, Property and Progress for a Pilgrim People: How much has the Uniting Church now lost the way?