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Negotiating Christian Cultural Identity through

Imaginative Theological Reflection

The question I have been interested in for some time and which this paper addresses is; how can ordinary Christians develop a 'christian conscientization' about their cultural (and possibly national) identity without physically leaving their own land or place?

My proposal is to use a method of theological reflection (hereafter referred to as TR) from the field of 'practical theology' which I discovered while researching the *Education for Ministry*[1] course (hereafter *EFM)* for my doctoral studies. *EFM* uses a method of theological reflection that requires the facilitator to lead the participants into many different human 'worlds.'

EFM normally takes place for participants over four years and uses a methodology called "Theological Education by Extension." Participants study written material at home before attending the weekly group TR session. However for the purposes of this paper we are only concerned with the method of theological reflection which the course employs. This is described in some detail in a book called *The Art of Theological Reflection* by Killen and De Beer (1994) and so I won't go into much further detail here.

Essentially the method creates a metaphor or image which is interrogated with theological 'perspective questions' (but which are not couched in theological language). This creates and imaginary world in the mind of learners which is lived in and explored. The same process is then completed with a piece of Scripture or tradition that is related to the metaphor and then the results from the two created 'worlds' are compared and contrasted. From this new insights and truths for living emerge, according to Killen and De Beer.

The *EFM* Method Applied

For my purposes I propose a truncated form of the *EFM* Method for engaging with the cultural identity of course participants.

The starting point is a basic metaphor, proverb or saying from the culture of the people. There is plenty of evidence that proverbs and their associated metaphors are

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[1] Full details of the course can be found at www.efmuk.org.uk

fundamentally descriptive of culture (Sybertz and Healey, 1997; Fox, 2004; Nussbaum, 1998).

In a pilot study at the end of my doctoral research (Rooms, 2008) I used Kate Fox's anthropological study of the English (2004) to define a useful starting metaphor for a TR with two groups of *EFM* graduates. Thus we began with the proverb "The Englishman's home is his castle." This proverb contains the metaphor of home as castle which encapsulates the key English cultural value of privacy (2004: 402).

I learnt that it is the perspective questions that enable the deconstruction of the metaphor to take place while affirming aspects of its goodness.

Traditionally in *EFM* there are four (sometimes five) groups of perspective questions that are put to the metaphor:
Creation: What kind of world is this? (where home is castle) What is valued, attractive, good about this world?
Sin: What moves us away from God in this world? What is least attractive, seductive, tempting about it?
Judgment: What makes us stop and think in this world? What surprises, confronts, challenges us?
(Redemption: What would fix, mend, make this world better? What brings hope and completion to it?)
Eschaton: What would be a reason for a big party in this world?

Thus begins both the incarnational living within the reality of the metaphorical world and its possible transformation into something better. Here is where the cultural boundary of the world is reached and explored (without actually physically moving to it). However I find the themes of the *EFM* perspective questions to be perhaps overly dialectical and I propose to slightly change their emphasis in my continuing research.

In one of the groups, which did not know the theme of the TR that I had chosen, there was a specific moment when the metaphor was unmasked – 'that saying is an English myth,' remarked a male member! In the other group an insight was that, as the English are also 'us' the use of the myth shows up our own insecurities (exactly the point Kate Fox made about the cultural use of the original proverb).

The next stage of the TR process is for the group to choose a verse or phrase of Scripture or tradition that resonates with the metaphor/proverb. This is then interrogated in the same way with the same perspective questions as it creates another 'world' which can be investigated.

In the pilot study the tradition source was helpful in both groups – each using a very different verse of Scripture (one each from OT and NT).[2] These offered further critique of the starting metaphor as they were brought into conversation with it. The results of looking at the two 'worlds' through the perspective questions are then compared and contrasted and *insights*, in *EFM* terms then arise. There also follows

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[2] The OT was Jeremiah 29:5 "Build houses and live in them" and NT John 20:19 "when the doors were locked" [in the upper room].

discussion from the other two sources (since the starting point was culture) i.e. action and position. Participants are asked what incidents from their lives the reflection evokes in them and they tell these stories as appropriate. Next they take up their 'positions' where they give a brief statement of what they believe at the end of the reflection. Finally they are asked what action they will undertake as a result of what has happened and where they now stand.

Both groups dealt with some very deep and personal issues in the discussion – ranging over identity, community, belonging, the meaning of home and the physical buildings in which we live.

Interestingly the position statements provided more of a conclusion to the reflection than the actions which were offered.[3] It was here that the insights gained could be translated into a kind of statement of faith and the platform from which action could be taken – a few examples demonstrate the inculturated nature of these positions:

> The castle is all gift
> The walls of church and home must be porous
> The castle as home is mine and not mine – it's to be shared
> This isn't my real home – it's not permanent

The actions offered were not as significant, but some were clearly affirmed in their attitudes to their current home and others were challenged about it – one even relating the reflection to recent thoughts about moving house.

Conclusion

We have raised a key question about cultural identity for ordinary Christian discipleship and proposed an imaginative theological educational course that may go some way to addressing the question. My plan is to conduct further research amongst the English and write this up in book form.

Of course several other questions are raised at this point. How transferable is the process to different cultures other than the English? Is it simply too subjective a method? How could the questions be dealt with corporately rather than by individuals undertaking a course? How are cultural and national/political identities related and will these be addressed by the method?

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[3] Killen and De Beer state that changes in position may be as significant as actions undertaken.

Bibliography

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