



The Multi-Dimensional Issue of Culture and Christian Ministry.

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Abstract

The categories of the theology of culture developed by H. Richard Niebuhr in *Christ and Culture* can be applied to approaches to ministry. Empirical studies of the church in northern Thailand demonstrated that in terms of architecture, the forms of service and other observable forms, the churches were often 'counter-cultural'. However, in other ways, such as in the themes of sermons and how they were developed, there was a strong Thai cultural flavour. Observations show that many mainstream Australian churches express themselves in ways which are counter to contemporary culture, for example in their architecture and forms of music, although their values and emphases often reflect contemporary culture. Charismatic churches more frequently use contemporary forms of architecture and music, but are counter-cultural, for example, in their teaching on many aspects of life, such as pre-marital sexuality. Heelas and Woodhead argue that charismatic churches are closer to contemporary culture in the ways they are open to the 'subjectivity' of formation of the self in contemporary Western societies, and suggest that may explain their greater appeal to many younger people than the appeal of the mainstream churches. There are several dimensions to ministry, including, for example, contextual, substantive and essential, which may all relate to culture in different ways. The challenge for theology is to work out in which dimensions ministry should be cultural, in which it should be 'counter-cultural', and in which it should be seeking to transform the culture.

Introduction

Ministry and Culture

In 1951, H. Richard Niebuhr published his most famous work, *Christ and Culture*. In it, he reviews the history of Christian theology and outlines five ways in which theologians have identified faith in relation to culture. He summarised them under the headings of:

Christ against culture;
Christ of culture;
Christ above culture;
Christ and culture in paradox; and
Christ transforming culture.

While Niebuhr described Christian theologies, these headings can also be applied to approaches to ministry. Indeed, the dilemma of how church life should be developed in relation to culture has confronted every cross-cultural mission: to what extent should ministry be developed in a way that absorbs patterns of culture, and to what extent should ministry involve patterns which are seen to transcend every culture (see, for example, the discussions in Hesselgrave 1978 and Kraft 1979). Some approach ministry as if it is fundamentally 'against culture'. Ministry, in terms of the organisation of worship, pastoral care, and Christian guidance, is sometimes approached from a perspective which argues that the duty of Christian ministers is to ensure that the patterns of the New Testament, assumed to be the divine patterns, given by God, should be used in every aspect of personal life and the life of the church. Others, however, have argued either explicitly or implicitly that ministry must draw on the forms and processes of the receptor culture. Other approaches to ministry can be identified comparable to the other categories Niebuhr identified. The purpose of this paper is not to explore Niebuhr's categories in themselves but to demonstrate how ministry is multidimensional in relation to culture and how it may reflect both ends of the spectrum 'Christ against culture' and 'Christ in culture' at the same time. The contention of this paper is that a significant challenge in ministry is being both 'in the culture' and 'against culture' in appropriate ways.

One perspective on the history of ministry is that it has constantly been weakened by being drawn away from its New Testament roots by the culture in which it is situated. Time and again, through history, there has been a need for renewal which would revive the New Testament patterns of ministry, regarded as the divine order which transcended every culture. Such claims were a significant part of the Protestant reformation in the 15th, 16th and 17th centuries, both in the Presbyterian, Lutheran and Anabaptist movements. The Presbyterians, for example in the Prelude to The Scots Confession of Faith, saw themselves as 'embracing the purity of Christ's Gospel' (as reprinted in Owen 1984, p. 64). At the heart of Lutheranism was the teaching that the Bible was the only source of divinely revealed knowledge from God, and that the ministry of the church should be purified to reflect its teaching (Plass 1959, p. 88). Similar claims were made by the various parts of the Restoration movement of the 18th and 19th centuries when groups such as the Churches of Christ and the Brethren emerged, and again by the early Pentecostals. Such claims have been made more recently by some, such as Frost and Hirsh (2003, pp. 14-16) in *The Shaping of Things to Come*, who have hailed the end of Christendom as the end of the perversions of the faith

caused by the alliance of state and church that began with the Roman Emperor Constantine.

There are many interpretations of what it has meant to restore New Testament patterns. For the Baptists, it meant rejecting infant baptism and adopting exclusively adult baptism. For the Brethren and the Churches of Christ, it meant the rejection of clericalism. For Frost and Hirsh (2003, p. 15), it has meant the adoption of a mission-oriented spirituality. In terms of practical ministry in churches, the maintenance of ministry patterns built on the New Testament has been interpreted in a great many ways. For the Presbyterian Church of Eastern Australia, for example, it means not using musical instruments in worship and singing only the Psalms and not celebrating Christmas because Christmas is not mentioned as a festival in the New Testament. For Protestant churches, it has meant that worship revolves around the hearing of the Word of God, through the reading of Scripture and listening to its exposition in the sermon.

However, there are others who have emphasised the need for ministry to be developed in the terms of the contemporary culture, perhaps reflecting a theology of the Christ of culture or the Christ above culture. They have argued that the theology, as an expression of faith, must be framed in terms that are meaningful in the contemporary culture. One of the most comprehensive statements of such views is that of Paul Tillich's systematic theology. He introduces his systematic theology as an attempt to adapt the Christian message to the modern mind through a method of correlation. He proposes a 'theological method in which message and situation are related in such a way that neither of them are obliterated' (Tillich 1968, p. 8).

In ministry, too, people have sought to use local cultural forms in their expression. This has often been most intentional in places in which the Christian faith has been planted within the last century or two. In Bali, for example, some churches have been intentional in building their churches using the patterns and forms of Balinese architecture and adorned with Balinese art. The Gospel has been proclaimed using Balinese dance and drama. The traditional black robe of the minister has been replaced by a white robe, symbolic of relations to good rather than evil spirits. It has been argued by Balinese church leaders that 'indigenization or contextualization is a tool for communicating the Gospel so that the Gospel message becomes relevant [and ..] to root itself in the soul of the society' (Mastra 1980, p. 272).

What would an outsider see if they observed Christian ministry in our Australian churches? Would they conclude that, in general, that ministry was counter-cultural, justified in terms of the patterns of the New Testament? Or would they see ministry as primarily reflecting contemporary Western culture?

Multiple Dimensions to Ministry in Thailand

Many years ago, I had the opportunity to think in-depth about this issue while observing ministry in the Church of Christ in Thailand. Taking myself out of my own culture, away from the language and patterns of my own experience, gave me the opportunity to reflect on the issue at greater depth. I spent some time examining the northern Thai culture, including observing Buddhist festivals and weekly services of worship in northern Thailand. How did the Church of Christ relate, on the one hand to Thai culture, and on the other, to the patterns of the New Testament?

The northern Thai church was founded by Presbyterian missionaries who first settled in northern Thailand around 1867. Daniel McGilvary founded the church in

northern Thailand and led it for more than 40 years until his death in 1911 (McGilvary 2002). Presbyterian missionaries continued to come to Thailand and there were a number of American Presbyterian missionaries there in the late 1970s when I conducted my research there. Most of these people were teaching in the theological college and in advisory roles. Just a few were involved in rural churches and in practical ministry. Most ministry in the local churches was conducted by Thai people who had been trained in the theological college in Chiang Mai.

On the surface, many dimensions of ministry of the northern Thai churches reflected the patterns of the Presbyterian church from which the missionaries came. The architecture of the churches was similar, with rectangular buildings and usually a tower to house a bell, as can be seen in the picture of First Church, Chiang Mai. Some modifications had been made in more recent church buildings to allow the air to circulate more easily. Inside were wooden pews similar to those in poorer churches in the USA, very different from the mats in the Buddhist temples where people sat on the floor.



The Original First Church, Chiang Mai, Northern Thailand.

Ministers wore blue robes similar to those used by the ministers of the USA, despite the warmth of the Thai climate. They spoke from pulpits similar to those of Presbyterian churches in the USA, quite different from the pulpits in the Buddhist temples where Buddhist monks would sit to read their sermons.

The music was similar to that used in the USA. Indeed, of the 247 hymns in the hymnbook of the Church of Christ in Thailand as used in 1980, just eleven had been written by Thai people, two or three came from Japan or India, and the remaining 95.5 per cent were translations from Western hymnbooks (Hughes 1983, p. 101) Churches had either a small electronic organ or a piano. Thai instruments were not used. Indeed,

Thai music is quite different from Western music, based on seven evenly spaced tones in an octave, compared with 8 unevenly spaced tones in Western music. However, Western music was always used in churches in Thailand, presumably because this was the music most familiar to the Western missionaries. The cultural patterns of ministry were predominantly Western, neither Biblical nor Thai.

Yet, at the heart of faith for many Thai Christians, as for many Thai Buddhists, is the affirmation of the popular Thai expression of the law of karma 'Do good, receive good; do evil, receive evil'. Interviews were conducted with pastors and elders of Thai churches as part of the research on culture and faith in northern Thailand. When they were asked what they thought about karma, most said that it was a Buddhist, not a Christian, term. Others said that it could be understood from a Christian perspective as what God ordains. Another part of the research involved surveys of university students in northern Thailand. When approximately 200 Thai Christian and Buddhist university students were asked whether the statement 'Do good, receive good; do evil, receive evil' was true, 81 per cent of the Christians and 71 per cent of the Buddhists affirmed it, most others saying they did not know whether it was true or not. The differences between the Christian and Buddhist affirmation were not significant (Hughes 1983, p. 171).

Content analysis of the sermons collected in northern Thai rural churches in 1980 demonstrated that the sermons had a strong Thai flavour. The content of the preaching reflected the major tenets of the Christian faith as they had been taught. Yet, the emphases were different. There was little attempt, for example, to deal with the message of Easter. In thirty sermons that were recorded in the research in northern Thai village churches, only in three were accounts given of Jesus' death. One described it as the struggle over the powers of darkness, another as a 'sacrifice for others' and the third as a supreme expression of God's love. The concept of atonement or sacrifice for sin was never mentioned in those sermons (Hughes 1983, p. 186). Easter was offensive in the Thai worldview. It did not fit easily with the Thai sense that being murdered must mean that one has 'bad karma' from previous lives, that it is something shameful and humiliating. Christmas, on the other hand, was celebrated with great enthusiasm. This enthusiasm might be seen as rooted in the idea of the 'coming of the great king'. The king's visit is always a time of great celebration among Thai people, for the king is the great patron of the people and, in some ways, a symbol of deity. The word used in Thailand to commonly describe the event celebrated by Christmas is the same as the word used for a royal visit: 'gan-saded-ma' (Hughes 1983, p. 194).

Many of the sermons reflected teaching about good moral behaviour and religious practices. The language was Christian and Thai Buddhist terms were rarely used. However, the underlying themes were often not so different from those of the sermons in the Buddhist temples. Certainly, the practical examples of the exhortation to religious practices were a little different. Many Buddhist sermons could be seen as expositions on the theme of 'Do good, receive good; do evil, receive evil'. This is the Thai formulation of the basic moral universal law: the law of karma. We receive the consequences of our actions. So most Christian sermons could be seen as expositions of that same basic moral law. If you do good (in terms of Christian behaviour, of course), you will receive good. If you do evil, you will receive evil.

Christian ministry, as observed in Thailand at that time, was multi-dimensional in relation to culture. On the surface, in terms of the style of buildings, ministers' robes, music and orders of service, the patterns were foreign. The culture which had informed them was clearly American Presbyterian culture. In terms of the content of ministry, the

message that was conveyed through the preaching, and in those aspects of the Christian faith that were emphasised, there was a Thai cultural flavour which had its origins in the Hindu-Buddhist tradition from India.

The importance of these observations is that it is necessary to look at ministry as multi-dimensional. One might make similar observations of the multi-dimensional way in which ministry relates to culture in Australia. Different dimensions of ministry may relate to culture in quite different ways.

Multiple Dimensions to Ministry in Australia

Contemporary large charismatic churches in Australia often have seating patterns like those at a theatre: around a central stage. The music reflects contemporary styles, perhaps somewhere between a small folk band or a rock band. One might draw parallels between the form of presentation used by preachers with speakers at other events such as political rallies. The use of the data projector for songs and other information reflect contemporary teaching environments. Indeed, some charismatic and evangelical churches have been intentional in trying to develop a context in which people who do not have a history of church attendance feel at home. The context reflects the culture. In this regard, the context suggests a 'Christ of culture' pattern.

Entering a church of a mainstream denomination, however, one may well be struck by the distinctive architecture and patterns of seating. The architecture of most mainstream churches is dominated by the traditions of faith and particular theological expressions. There is nothing in contemporary culture quite like the cathedral with its rows of seats under a very high ceiling. The cross-formation of many churches is meant to be distinctively Christian. While some Catholic churches have moved to a semi-circular format since Vatican II, the dominance of the altar continues to set them apart from other contemporary buildings.

While there is some variation in the music in mainstream churches, many still use some form of organ and use classical styles of music that have their origins in earlier centuries. Many of the hymns were written in the 18th and 19th centuries, although there is a sprinkling of later hymns in the hymnbooks. The very fact of using a hymnbook suggests a style of gathering very different from most other gatherings of people in contemporary Western society. The National Church Life Survey reported that 70 per cent of Anglican and 71 per cent of Uniting Church attenders found traditional music helpful compared with just 17 per cent of attenders at the Assemblies of God (Kaldor et al. 1995, p. 35).

The dress used by the leader in a traditional church is also usually distinctive and bears little or no resemblance to the dress used in other contemporary contexts. According to the National Life Survey of 1991, 72 per cent of Anglican and 30 per cent of Uniting Church attenders preferred their clergy to wear robes, compared with just 1 per cent of attenders at the Assemblies of God and 1 per cent at Baptist Churches (Kaldor et al. 1995, p. 33).

The patterns of worship in mainstream churches generally reflect traditional theological patterns rather than contemporary patterns. Indeed, the patterns have been developed over hundreds of years and often use formulations, such as creeds, that were adopted fifteen hundred years ago or more. Thus, the nature of worship in most mainstream churches suggests a theology of 'Christ against culture'.

While the expressions of worship in music, the architecture of the buildings and the dress of the pastor, in most Australian Pentecostal and charismatic churches reflects contemporary Australian culture, many beliefs and values that are maintained by most Australians Pentecostals and charismatics are 'counter-cultural'.

If one takes the area of permitted sexual expression and the relationship of sexuality to marriage, for example, it is evident that Pentecostals and Baptists hold very different views to the dominant views in the Australian population. Overall, 9 per cent of the Australian population believes that sexual relations before marriage are always wrong, compared with 42 per cent of Baptists, and 78 per cent of Pentecostals (Hughes and Fraser 2014, p. 88).

On the other hand, in mainstream churches where the music, architecture and dress of the leader of worship is 'counter-cultural', many beliefs and values are close to those found in the wider society. Thus, in contrast to the Baptists and Pentecostals, just 4 per cent of Anglicans, 8 per cent of those who identify with the Uniting Church, 12 per cent of Catholics and 14 per cent of Orthodox believe that sexual relations before marriage are always wrong (Hughes and Fraser 2014, p. 88).

These different views of sexuality before marriage correlate with the age of marriage. Among people in the 20 to 24 year age group, 15 per cent of Pentecostals and 13 per cent of Baptists were in a registered marriage, compared with just 4 per cent of Anglicans and Catholics, and 5 per cent of Orthodox and Uniting Church people, and 6 per cent of the total population (Hughes and Fraser 2014, p. 35). In this regard, then, the patterns of life among Pentecostals and Baptists reflect teaching which is quite different from the dominant patterns in Australian culture, while the patterns in the mainstream denominations are similar to those in the wider culture.

The Essential Dimension of Ministry

In their study of religion and spirituality, Heelas and Woodhead (2005) make some interesting observations. They argue that the major change in the nature of Western culture has been a re-defining of the goals of life. At its heart, they see a change in how the aims of life are conceived: from fulfilling duties associated with one's social roles (referred to as 'life-as') to the fulfilment of the individual in terms of knowing oneself and responding to one's inner deep desires (referred to as 'subjective-life'). While they argue that this change in culture initiated what they describe as the 'spiritual revolution', it also had a varied impact on different types of churches. They argued that those churches which were least open to the fulfilment of the subjectivity of individuals declined most rapidly while those churches most attuned to fulfilling the subjectivity of individuals experienced least decline, some even growing. In other words, they are suggesting that there is an 'essential' dimension of ministry which has to do to the ways in which ministry relates to how people approach the fulfilment of life. They argue that how this 'essential' dimension of ministry is developed will affect whether churches will attract or deter people from participating. In other words, if ministry is seen by people to correlate with how they see life being fulfilled, then people will be attracted to it. If it is not seen as correlated to that fulfilment, it will be seen as irrelevant to life.

The general argument of Heelas and Woodhead is that religion is associated with 'life-as' modes of living and is thus experiencing decline. On the other hand, spirituality is associated with 'subjective-life' and is consequently attracting more people. Contemporary forms of spirituality are more in tune with current Western culture, with the exploration of the inner self, than religion, which is primarily about duties defined in

terms of obedience to external authorities, such as church institutions, the Bible or God. Heelas and Woodhead argue that religion continues to be primarily about fulfilling 'life-as' roles well: about being a better mother, a more devoted follower of Jesus, a more obedient child (Heelas and Woodhead 2005, Chapter 4, Section 4, para.2). The spiritual practitioners do not demand commitment to particular doctrinal belief systems. The people who turn to them do not face the prospect of being 'preached at or judged' (Heelas and Woodhead 2005, Chapter 4, Section 2, para. 17). Rather, clients are invited to explore what works for them, what fits with their personal experience.

While Heelas and Woodhead argue that all churches see truth and goodness, not in terms of the cultivation of the unique self but in terms of obedience to God, they actually relate to 'subjective-life' differently. Heelas and Woodhead have developed a typology of churches reflecting these differences and they identify them as:

- churches of humanity
- churches of difference
- churches of experiential difference, and
- churches of experiential humanity.

The churches of humanity emphasise the worship of God through the service of humanity. Many of these churches, Heelas and Woodhead suggest, are mainline and liberal, both Protestant and Catholic. They are liberal in that they offer a level of freedom and tolerance and emphasise ethics over dogma and love over the law. However, Heelas and Woodhead (2005, Chapter 1, Section 2, para. 10) suggest that because of their strong emphasis on serving others, they are the least open to the exploration of the subjective self of all the church types. They pay little attention to the individual's experiences, needs, desires and moods, directing attention to the service of others.

Indeed, according to Heelas and Woodhead, even personal faith is not often discussed in the churches of humanity. The repetition of set liturgies, responses and hymns, the use of the lectionary, they argue, encourages people to conform their subjectivities to the common life of the church and discourages people from thinking about their own lives. Heelas and Woodhead argue that while there is some interest among members of the 'churches of humanity' in subjective-life forms, such as in mysticism, meditation and so on, these churches focus on life-as duties to others. There has been a humanising of faith, but not a subjectivising.

The churches of difference, Heelas and Woodhead (2005, Chapter 1, Section 2, para. 9) suggest, are churches which 'stress the distance between God and humanity, creator and creation, and the necessary subordination of the latter to the former'. These are mostly the evangelical churches. Heelas and Woodhead argue that they actually give more attention to 'subjective life' in their focus on reconstructing it, on 'being born again to new life'. These churches, they argue, appeal to those people whose lives are not working. They offer healing and peace, hope and security as they emphasise that people are loved by God. These congregations actually pay considerable attention to life's problems and to enhancing memories, moods and feelings, for example, through the singing of choruses. They seek to make people *feel* better (Heelas and Woodhead 2005, Chapter 1, Section 2, para. 13). On the other hand, these churches seek to do that by encouraging people to surrender their lives and their autonomy to God and, to that extent, reject some of the inner experiences and directions a person may have.

The experiential form of churches of difference, Heelas and Woodhead (2005, Chapter 1, Section 2, para 14) argue, is found in the charismatic churches. Here, the 'Word' is not just the external body of Scripture but the living reality of God in people's lives. There is less emphasis on external conformity in the 'experiential churches of difference' than on the Holy Spirit becoming the inner core of subjective life and guiding and directing it from within. Thus, worship is less regulated and more personally subjective, although Heelas and Woodhead argue that only a narrow range of emotions are able to be expressed in worship, in particular, gratitude, joy, love and celebration. Heelas and Woodhead also note that only certain forms of subjective life are permitted. For example, homosexual feelings are taught as being unacceptable. People are constantly reminded they must fix their eyes on Jesus.

Heelas and Woodhead (2005, Chapter 1, Section 2, para. 17) argue that churches which went furthest in 'authorizing subjective-life' were the **churches of experiential humanity** which include Unitarians and the Society of Friends. These churches, they suggested, encouraged individuals 'to forge their own unique life paths'. They allowed people to disagree and to form their own opinions. They encouraged people to experiment with different types of spirituality, following their hearts. God is presented not as an external authority, but as the deepest, spiritual dimension of all life. Nevertheless, Heelas and Woodhead argue there remains in these churches a strong stress on the overriding duty of caring for others and for the whole planet.

In relation to the basic way of approaching life, then, Heelas and Woodhead have argued that the 'churches of humanity' are 'counter-cultural'. Despite their attitudes to some issues such as sexuality, their dominant patterns of ministry provide little space for the self-realisation of the individual.

In contrast, Heelas and Woodhead argue that the evangelical churches are predominantly 'churches of difference' and actually give greater space to personal feelings and to people's individual challenges in life in a way that, to some extent, provides some space for the subjectivity of the individual. On the other hand, Heelas and Woodhead argue, these churches place significant limits on self-realisation and self-expression in their stress of submission to God's will. If Heelas and Woodhead were using Neibuhr's terminology, they might be suggesting that in this fundamental dimension of ministry, the churches of difference are advocating a 'Christ as transformer of culture' approach.

The experiential form of churches of difference, predominantly the charismatic and Pentecostal churches, give greater space to personal feelings and to self-realisation than the evangelical churches, according to Heelas and Woodhead. They do this through their emphasis on the work of the Holy Spirit in the inner lives of individuals. Hence, while the language these churches use is often quite distinctive in its references to the Holy Spirit, rather than to the psychological terminology of self-expression and self-realisation, Heelas and Woodhead believe that ministry in these churches is more aligned than in most other churches with the ways people conceive of life within contemporary Western culture.

One wonders whether or not the observation of Heelas and Woodhead is true of Australian Pentecostal churches. Certainly, the patterns of ethics and behaviour among Pentecostals in relation to sexuality and marriage are highly distinctive. Even more than evangelical churches, the Pentecostals appear to be quite strongly 'counter-cultural' in these matters. More research would need to be done in Australia to determine whether

the assessment of Heelas and Woodhead is valid. The point is that the relationship between culture and Christian ministry is multi-dimensional. Three major dimensions of the relationship have been explored here. We will use three words to describe them:

- **the contextual dimension:** the environment and patterns of ministry, including, for example, the style of architecture of the church building, the dress of the leader and the style of music;
- **the substantive dimension:** which has to do with the 'substance' of ministry and includes the teaching about faith and about the values associated with faith, such as values associated with sexuality and marriage; and
- **the essential dimension:** which is the ways ministry seeks to address the meaning and fulfilment of life.

What has been observed is that the ministry in a church may relate to culture in several ways at the same time. In some aspects, the patterns of ministry may be counter-cultural, in other ways, they may reflect the culture, and in other ways again, may suggest they are seeking to transform the culture.

How Then Should Ministry Relate to Culture?

A major challenge for Christian ministry is working out in what ways ministry should relate to culture, noting that this is a multi-dimensional problem. Heelas and Woodhead argue that if the cultural pattern of contemporary Western society in which life is conceived in terms of the fulfilment of the subjective life of the individual, is ignored, people will simply ignore the churches. The very aims and objectives of the church will make little sense to them. In reality, it is probably not as simple as that. There are probably people who would prefer that the 'self' is presented to them in a concrete way rather than discovering it through 'self-realisation'. Nevertheless, the point that Heelas and Woodhead are making, that religious groups need to take some account of the basic conceptions of life that are rooted deep in the culture, is worth noting.

It is beyond the scope of this paper to draw firm theological conclusions as to how the contextual and substantive dimensions of ministry should relate to culture. Every aspect of ministry in those contextual, substantive and essential dimensions needs separate consideration. Many aspects of ministry, such as patterns of leadership, include both contextual and substantive dimensions. One might argue, for example, that at one level the processes of decision-making and the roles played by leadership in those are 'contextual'. At another level, the extent to which leadership seeks to develop patterns of either the 'big man' or 'the servant' come much closer to the very nature of what Christian communities are about, and thus may be considered 'substantive' (see, for example, the discussion in Roxburgh and Romanuk 2006). The point of this paper is not to resolve these issues, or to enter into theological debate about the details, but to point out that these issues of ministry are multi-dimensional. There is no simple choice between ministry which is 'counter-cultural' and ministry which accommodates to the cultural context. Rather, ministry can be, at the same time, both counter-cultural in some aspects and contextualised in others. All ministry must, in some respects, be counter-cultural and in other respects accommodate to the local culture in which it takes place.

What is clear from both the Thai and Australian examples and the research of Heelas and Paul is that, the ways in which ministry is both counter-cultural and

accommodates to the cultural context are significant for effective communication with people. In very simple terms, in the processes of communication, there must be some accommodation to culture, or what is communicated will not be understood. On the other hand, unless there is something to communicate, and that content or substance offers something new or different, it is likely that the communication will be considered irrelevant.

In other words, ministry must take place within cultural contexts and forms and to that extent be 'of the local culture', if it is going to be understood. This is commonly noted in the desire that ministry be incarnational (see, for example, the discussion in Hughes 1982). At the same time, the incarnation was not simply the appearance of another human being. Through the difference in the way Jesus lived his life, people caught a glimpse of a God who transcends the boundaries of every culture.

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