



TRUTH OR DARE

THE POST MODERN DILEMMA

IN TODAY'S SOCIETY WE HAVE AS MANY OPTIONS OF WHAT TO BELIEVE AS WE DO BREAKFAST CEREAL CHOICES ON THE SUPERMARKET SHELVES. IN AN AGE WHERE THE PURSUIT OF RELIGIOUS TOLERANCE AND CULTURAL ACCEPTANCE RULES WITH AN ALMOST IRON FIST, HAYLEE FREUDIGMANN ASKS THE QUESTION YOU'VE THOUGHT BUT MIGHT NOT HAVE DARED TO SPEAK: IS THERE EVEN A PLACE FOR CHRISTIAN MISSION?

A dangerous question, might I say, considering I work for a mission organisation, but one that seems to have permeated the thinking of many who tick 'Christian' on the census form. In the church, mission is reclaiming lost ground and there are more people than ever (young and old) travelling on short-term mission trips. However, it seems that in our everyday lives there is a big question mark hanging over whether we, as Jesus-followers, have the right to share our faith with others.

Today, the catch cry of the majority is: What I believe is what I believe, and you can believe whatever you like.

In this pluralistic¹ climate, it can seem downright wrong to share our faith with others. In the name of religious tolerance maybe we should keep our beliefs to ourselves, private, so that we don't offend others of different faiths. After all, what right do I have to claim that, in Jesus, I hold the truth and everyone else has got it wrong? Even Gandhi (and he is not someone people like to disagree with) is quoted as saying: "It is super arrogance to assume you alone possess the key to spiritual joy and peace."² The role of mission is looking a little shaky.

But before you start arranging coffee with your mission pastor to let them know they are out of a job, let's dig a little deeper. The challenge of mission's place in a pluralistic and 'tolerant' society is nothing new. We only need to look at the world into which Jesus came and the early church began: many cultures unified under the one Roman banner, polytheistic³ worship, Jesus-followers a tiny and misunderstood minority (often thought of as atheists as they did not pay honour to the myriad of gods worshipped). The Jewish faith was tolerated (or ignored) along with all the others in a pluralistic society that integrated superstition and magic into everyday life. It was in this climate that God chose to bring about his new covenant through Jesus. This is mission at its very core.

The early followers of the Way (AKA Christians) took up this mission and ran with it. Not because they were under compulsion, nor because it was a prerequisite for prosperity, but rather their experience of Jesus and his transformative power could not be contained. It was a no-brainer. They simply had to share it in order to be who God had created them to be.

However, for all the similarities between the Roman Empire and modern day Australia there are also major differences. 2,000 years of development tends to do that. Today our job of sharing the message of Jesus may be a little more difficult. Yes, both are pluralistic environments but today we no longer have the luxury of 'truth'. For all their multiculturalism, the Romans' worldview maintained that the concept of truth could be known. Yet in the last few hundred years, as any first-year philosophy student will tell you, Descartes' mantra "I think therefore I am" and Kant's non-conformist relativism, have left us doubting whether anything can be truly known.

In response to this, it would seem that we've worked hard to make Christianity more palatable. But in the process, have we perhaps domesticated Jesus? He is no longer the radical who stood for truth, a deep and knowable love and a revolutionary message of eternal hope for all who follow him. But rather we have transformed him into a meek, unchallenging and all-round nice guy who loved everyone, and offended no-one. While I think this has occurred in the hope that more will come to an understanding of him, in many cases what we have actually achieved is a diluted message of Jesus in which both he and his church have simply become background noise.

How then can we say that Jesus is the way, when we are told that there is no 'way' to begin with?

There is definitely something to be said for the first believers' experience of Jesus which motivated them for mission. Whether they ever actually met Jesus or simply heard about his life and death (and life again), their mission came out of their deep experience of being loved by the creator of the universe, through the power of the Holy Spirit.

The great need to tell others about Jesus can be easily dismissed if our own experience of Jesus and walk with him is simply ho-hum. If I have not allowed my life to be fully transformed by the grace of God, then why would I share this with anyone else? The first major step in understanding the role of mission in our pluralistic culture is to truly dig into our own relationship with God. While truth is always under debate, if the life, death and resurrection of Jesus aren't real for me, then mission is not required.

However, if it is real, then we have a life-changing experience to share, and mission is definitely on the table. And it is here that I think the words of missionary, theologian and author, Lesslie Newbigin ring oh so true:

"When Christians affirm... that Jesus is the way, the true and living way by whom we come to the Father, (we) are not claiming to know everything. (We) are claiming to be on the way, and inviting others to join (us) as (we) press forward toward the fullness of the truth, toward the day when we shall know as we have been known."⁴

Here Newbigin points to a few simple gems about mission in a pluralistic society. First, as followers of Jesus, we are to affirm (confirm, announce, insist – good on you, trusty thesaurus) that Jesus is the truth and the way to the living God.

Secondly, in affirming this truth of Jesus, we are not claiming to know everything (because let's face it... we don't). We are simply on the journey with Jesus. A journey that will not be complete until the day we meet him face to face.

And finally, we are to invite others on this journey. Not coercing, threatening, scheming or guilting people into believing, but rather inviting them to enter into a meaningful journey of discovery with Jesus. This is mission.

In this framework of mission, respect for other cultures, religions and the people who adhere to them is vital. Religious tolerance and interfaith dialogue can continue in a meaningful way that does not dilute the message of Jesus but rather actively demonstrates his love for all.

So back to the original question: Is there a place for Christian mission in a world that is focused on religious tolerance? While it's important to express love and understanding towards those adhering to a myriad of belief systems, to invite people on a life transforming journey with Jesus is nothing short of a mighty privilege. So I guess in the end, the answer to our question is actually quite simple... Yes, definitely!

¹ Religious pluralism – the belief that the differences between the religions are not a matter of truth and falsehood, but of different perceptions of one truth.

² Jindal, B. Has Ecumenism Made Evangelism Irrelevant? America, July 31, 1993, Vol 169, No. 3, 12
³The belief in more than one god or many gods.

⁴ Newbigin, L. The Gospel in a Pluralist Society. Eerdmans Publishing: Grand Rapids, 2001, 12