

Midget Gems, Wolves and Lambs

Diversity and power

We saw in the first session that identity is something that, under the conditions of postmodernity, is flexibility, negotiable and constructed.

How do communities and societies deal with the idea, and more importantly the reality, of diversity?

Under modernity, two basic options:

1. Universalism (Enlightenment rationalism)
2. Heterogeneity (Romanticism / celebration of national cultures)

Postmodernity provides a new, third option, whereby the individual is free to change their self-identity at will, since all identity is a construct.

How as Christians do we deal with issues of diversity in a postmodern context, and with the issues of power that always arise and which postmodernity makes us sensitive to?

When I was young one of the things I liked to do was to go down to the local corner shop with my friends to spend some of our pocket money on sweets. If I was a bit short on cash, then 'a quarter of Midget Gems' featured fairly frequently in my purchasing decisions. Midget Gems were great, because (a) they were cheap, (b) they were small so you got a lot of them and (c) they came in a variety of different shapes, colours and flavours. The various chemically induced flavours not only gave us an unnatural high that would today be handled with a course of Ritalin; they also provided us with an early introduction to the principles of the market economy and the laws of supply and demand. The off-white/clear ones, ostensibly grapefruit flavoured, were both the most popular and the fewest in number (and so could be traded for two or even three yellow or orange ones), whereas the pseudo-liquorice black ones couldn't be given away. None the less, the mixture was part of the attraction.

Turning a problem into an opportunity

Early attempts at diversity management formulated it in moral terms. It was seen as something that was ethically 'right' to do, even if it took time to achieve and wasn't as effective as working with homogeneous teams. Common cultural assumptions are a strong bonding mechanism, and it was long assumed that organizations and teams that were built on a common base would be more able to 'cut to the chase', and so would become more productive and higher performing quicker. Diversity was seen as a moral luxury.

Each culture makes its own assumptions as to how individuals think and learn, can be influenced, may be changed, or might be motivated ... But what works in one culture will not work, or not work so well, in another. Cultural harmony is health as well as happiness ... The first essential of organisational efficiency is cultural purity.¹

More recently, it has become recognized that diversity can contribute to the performance of an organization or team. In situations of continual change and environmental uncertainty, contexts that encourage rather than suppress difference are more likely to generate the creativity that comes up with innovative solutions to unforeseen challenges.

Existing intellectual capital is not enough. New ideas and knowledge must be created to generate internal breakthroughs in how the business operates and external breakthroughs in finding and working with new partners. A workforce with diverse perspectives provides a rich resource for creativity. New ideas will not be enough for success. It requires the inventiveness and resourcefulness of all employees to transform intellectual capital and ideas into viable products and solutions. Where will this inventiveness come from? From a diverse workforce whose contrasting perspectives can generate a competitive edge.²

Such diversity can also help us to become more aware of our own cultural preconditioning. It is easy to assume that our preferred way of doing something is the best or only way.

Multicultural teams have a built-in, heightened sensitivity as to what is biblical and what is cultural about themselves. They help their members to see themselves and the host culture from outside their individual cultures. Diverse cultural backgrounds provide perspective and help the team, as a unit, to respond appropriately.³

Lord of the jungle

Managing diversity well, and making it work, is still difficult. A dislike of that which is different might strike us as normal human behaviour. But it would seem that God intends something else:

The wolf will live with the lamb,
the leopard will lie down with the goat,
the calf and the lion and the yearling together;
and a little child will lead them.

The cow will feed with the bear,
their young will lie down together,
and the lion will eat straw like the ox.

The infant will play near the hole of the cobra,
and the young child put his hand in the viper's nest.

They will neither harm nor destroy
on all my holy mountain,
for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the Lord
as the waters cover the sea (Isaiah 11:6–9).

Now Isaiah's vision of the 'peaceful realm' doesn't correspond too closely to current reality. There are not too many problems when the lambs are kept together in a field. Nor does keeping the wolves in a pack cause too much disruption. However, putting the two together is a recipe for chaos and bloodshed. Practically speaking, it might seem as though the best thing to do with people that are different is to keep them separate, to segment, to specialize. This can seem particularly wise when you want to help to

develop things that would otherwise be dominated or destroyed by others. The best way to raise a healthy flock of sheep is not to give the shepherding job to a wolf.

Diversity and power

As a white, Anglo-Saxon, English-speaking male, I am aware that in most situations of (for example) multicultural diversity I am in the position of the wolf. Men tend to dominate over women. My natural facility with my mother tongue (which by a sheer accident of historical hegemony has become the lingua franca of most international meetings) gives me an advantage in communication in such contexts. I am halfway through completing what I am saying before others have even had time to formulate a contribution into what is their second, third or fourth language. On top of this, other less-recognized cultural forces come into play.

An emphasis on different national or ethnic cultures, some of which behave as 'wolves' while others take on the role of the 'lamb', has featured strongly in the work of Geert Hofstede. Starting in 1966, he undertook a major research project in a single multinational corporation, IBM. In the course of the project, employees of IBM located in 50 different countries completed some 116,000 questionnaires. From this research, Hofstede was able to identify different characteristics of national cultures, looking at, for instance, the degree to which they emphasize the individual or the group, their degree of tolerance of ambiguity and their focus on achievement and success or the care of others.

He also identified cultures according to their 'power distance', that is, the degree of inequality in a society and the extent to which this is accepted. In 'high power distance' cultures, hierarchy is accepted as normal, and everyone has their rightful place. Superiors and subordinates have their respective roles and tend not to mix. The powerless do not feel as though they can change the system, although they may try to ascend the power hierarchy to their own personal benefit, after which, of course, they will have no incentive to change the order of things. Major changes can usually only happen when the powerless combine to overthrow the established elite, through revolution, and this usually results in the formation of a new power elite.

'High power distance' countries tend to be found in the non-Western world, although Hofstede also included 'Latin' and other southern European countries, such as Portugal, Spain, Greece, Yugoslavia, France and Belgium in this group.

An illustration of the differences in power found in such contexts and the limited ability of the powerless to change the status quo even as they strike back at the powerful is illustrated in Gabriel García Márquez' story 'One of these Days', in which a poor, small-town dentist 'without a degree' is visited by the Mayor, who is suffering terrible toothache. The dentist tells him that he will only be able to remove the tooth without anaesthesia as the Mayor has an abscess. As he removes the tooth, the dentist says, 'Now you'll pay for our twenty dead men.' The treatment over, the Mayor tells the dentist to send the bill. 'To you or to the town?' replies the dentist. 'The Mayor didn't look at him. He closed the door and said through the screen: 'It's the same damn thing.'⁴

'Low power distance' cultures, by contrast, are those in which people believe that inequality should be minimized. Hierarchy may be acceptable to the extent that it allows different tasks to be accomplished in an organization, but that is all. Superiors and subordinates should treat each other as equals, with equal rights. Those with power should try to look less powerful than they actually are. Education is widely seen as an

acceptable route to gaining more power. Countries with 'low power distance cultures' include Anglo-Saxon, Scandinavian and other northern European nations, such as the UK, the USA, Canada, Australia, Ireland, Germany, Sweden and Norway.

In international or multicultural contexts, people from 'high power distance' cultures tend to act as though they are powerless, whereas those from 'low power distance' cultures behave as though they have power. The result? The latter (usually Westerners) dominate the discussions and the planning, whereas the former appear to sit back and let them. The wolves take over; the lambs get out the way before they are devoured.

We have already noted the postmodern desire to identify and challenge the use of power. Hofstede's high/low power distance concept helps us to focus on this as an important issue in any context of diversity. How can we encourage the kind of diversity that allows Isaiah's vision of the wolf and the lamb 'lying down together' to be experienced as reality?

Children of the revolution

First-century Palestine belongs to those cultures categorized as 'high power distance'. And Jesus spoke some powerful and revolutionary words into that context:

Blessed are you who are poor,
for yours is the kingdom of God.
Blessed are you who hunger now,
for you will be satisfied.
Blessed are you who weep now,
for you will laugh.
Blessed are you when men hate you,
when they exclude and insult you and reject your name as evil,
because of the Son of Man.
Rejoice in that day and leap for joy, because great is your reward in heaven. For
that is how their fathers treated the prophets.
But woe to you who are rich,
for you have already received your comfort.
Woe to you who are well fed now,
for you will go hungry.
Woe to you who laugh now,
for you will mourn and weep.
Woe to you when all men speak well of you,
for that is how their fathers treated the false prophets (Luke 6:20–26).

Eric Law, a Chinese–American Episcopalian priest, says the following about this promised revolutionary change in the order of things:

In the Judeo-Christian tradition, the attitude towards the powerful and rich is very different from the attitude toward the poor and the powerless. The powerful are challenged to give up their power and wealth, and redistribute it in order to achieve equality among the people of God. To the powerful, the emphasis is on serving and being humble.

The powerless, however, are lifted up, cared for and loved by God because of their faithfulness. God has compassion on those who are oppressed and suffering. They are loved by God even though they have no worldly power. They are blessed even though they are suffering now.⁵

The Bible has a lot to say about God's intervention on behalf of the powerless. Yet Christians rarely find it easy to identify with, for example, Pharaoh's army as it chases after the escaping Israelites, or with the proud Pharisee who proclaims his own righteousness, compared to that of the abased tax collector. This is perhaps not surprising, since it doesn't take long in reading these stories to see whose side God is on, and naturally we want to be on that side. I was once working with a church youth group on a weekend away, and I was taking them through some of the things Jesus said about the poor, hoping that they would be motivated by those stories to consider their own lifestyles, spending choices and priorities. It was intriguing, if not a little frustrating, to watch and listen as these young, mostly professional, white Christians identified themselves with the poor in those stories, rather than (for example) with the rich young ruler. Perhaps those of us from 'low power distance' cultures, and those with power in 'high power distance' contexts, sometimes unconsciously co-opt these stories to reinforce our own power by (wrongly) identifying with the powerless in the biblical narratives. In so doing we justify the personal power that we have, camouflaging it from ourselves, to prevent us having to face up to the real import of what these stories tell us.

In situations of diversity, Law comments:

power analysis becomes critical if we are to live out the fullness of the gospel. We must ask the questions: In this social, economic and political context, who has power and who has not? Who is perceived to be powerful and who is perceived to be powerless? In a multicultural world, we might find ourselves shifting back and forth between being powerful and powerless depending on the contexts in which we relate to others. In any given situation, we must determine where we stand in relation to others in the power continuum.⁶

And in such contexts those who have the power must be encouraged and enabled to give it up. This is a refrain that comes through time and again in the New Testament, and is embodied most clearly in Jesus Christ:

Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus:
Who, being in very nature God,
did not consider equality with God something to be grasped,
but made himself nothing,
taking the very nature of a servant,
being made in human likeness.
And being found in appearance as a man,
he humbled himself
and became obedient to death – even death on a cross! (Philippians 2:5–8).

So the first approach toward genuine diversity is based on power analysis, which identifies those who are perceived to have the most power in a given situation, and the surrender of that power for the sake of others. The desire to use power to do good is a tempting one, but benevolent dictators rarely stay benevolent. This temptation was recognized by the author J. R. R. Tolkien, whose epic *The Lord of the Rings* includes the response by the wizard Gandalf to Frodo's offer of the Ring: 'Do not tempt me, Frodo! I

dare not take it. Not even to keep it safe. I would use this ring from a desire to do good, but through me it would wield a power too great and terrible to imagine.ⁱ

Diversity as an asset in missionary teams

Although all humans are unique within their own culture, each national group tends to have certain characteristics which can enrich a team. Brazilian vibrancy, Korean zeal, South African commitment, and American organisation can complement each other to make the combined unit much stronger than the individual parts.⁷

A diverse workforce will not automatically generate the kind of creativity and problem solving that it is able to do; it can also remain divided and breed misunderstanding. Genuine diversity can be a useful resource in a complex and changing environment, but we must not assume it 'just happens'. Even the earliest history of Christianity shows us that it is something to be worked at.

We who are strong ought to bear with the failings of the weak and not to please ourselves. Each of us should please his neighbour for his good, to build him up (Romans 15:1–2).

Before certain men came from James, he [Peter] used to eat with the Gentiles. But when they arrived, he began to draw back and separate himself from the Gentiles because he was afraid of those who belonged to the circumcision group (Galatians 2:12).

he himself is our peace, who has made the two one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility ... (Ephesians 2:14).

Even Paul and the other apostles had to work hard, to teach and to write to the early Christian communities, to ensure that the church did not remain a culturally monolithic Jewish sect. A nationally, generationally and organizationally diverse future is forcing itself upon us whether we like it or not. It may not be easy to get the best from it, but live in it we must.

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ⁱ Dialogue from the 2001 film *The Lord of the Rings: The Fellowship of the Ring*.

Geert Hofstede

Hofstede identified five different dimensions of national cultures. Each national culture can be situated somewhere along the axis of each dimension. The five dimensions he identified are:

Power distance: the extent to which less powerful members of that culture accept that power is distributed unequally (i.e. the distance between those who have power and those who do not). This dimension reflects inequality, accepted from below, not imposed from above. Power distance is high in Latin, Asian and African countries and low in Germanic, Scandinavian and Anglo-Saxon nations.

Individualism–Collectivism: the extent to which individuals are integrated into groups or not. Individualism prevails in Western and other developed countries and collectivism is common in Eastern and less developed countries. Japan takes a middle position in this dimension.

Masculinity–Femininity: this refers not so much to gender roles as to the degree of emphasis in a culture on success, achievement and assertiveness or caring, modesty and inclusiveness. The former is held to reflect male values and the latter female values. Masculinity is high in Japan, Germanic countries and moderately so in Anglo-Saxon countries. It is low in Scandinavia and the Netherlands and moderately low in some Latin and Asian countries like France, Spain and Thailand.

Uncertainty avoidance: a society's tolerance for uncertainty and ambiguity. Uncertainty-avoiding cultures minimize the possibility of novel or unstructured situations through strict laws and rules, safety and security measures, and a philosophical/religious commitment to the concept of absolute truth. They are motivated by inner nervous energy and are more emotional. Uncertainty-accepting cultures are more tolerant of different opinions, reflective and phlegmatic. Latin and Germanic countries and Japan are high in uncertainty avoidance; Chinese, Scandinavian and Anglo-Saxon countries are more uncertainty accepting.

Long-term or short-term orientation: this deals with the issue of virtue. Long-term cultures value thrift and perseverance; short-term cultures value tradition, the fulfilment of social obligations and protecting one's 'face' or honour. A long-term orientation is associated with East Asian countries and Hofstede notes that their recent economic success has been built on this.

For further information go to www.geerthofstede.com

Geert Hofstede, *Culture's Consequences: Comparing Values, Behaviours, Institutions and Organisations across Nations* (Corwin Press, 2001).

Charles Hampden-Turner and Fons Trompenaars

These researchers take a similar approach to Hofstede, locating national cultures along six different axes. Some of these are similar to Hofstede's categories; others are different.

Universalism–particularism: universalist cultures emphasize rules, laws and generalizations; particularist cultures consider the exceptions, special circumstances and obligation created by relationships. Their classic expression of this axis is to ask what you would do if you were in a car being driven by a friend who hits a pedestrian. Universalist cultures (such as Anglo-Saxon and Germanic countries) would not expect you to testify that he or she was driving at a slower speed than he or she actually was; in particularist cultures (such as Russia, China, and India) there would be more expectation that you would.

Individualism–communitarianism: this category is similar to that of Hofstede, with a respective emphasis on self-achievement, or the achievement of goals and objectives within a community framework.

Specificity–diffusion: the degree to which one concentrates on the specifics or the whole, the immediate or the context. Specificity emphasizes distinct roles, whereas diffuse cultures see little distinction between the public and private worlds. In Ilyas Halil's story "No One to Yell At" the Turkish manager (diffuse) working in Montreal doesn't understand why his Canadian employee (specific) scowls when she is sent out to buy two Turkish coffees for him and a client.

Achieved status–ascribed status: achievement cultures judge you on your own personal record of achievement ('What did you study?'); ascription cultures judge you on birth, kinship and connections ('Where did you study?').

Inner direction–outer direction: are you motivated by inner convictions and conscience or by the example and influence of others? Does one seek to control and change one's environment, or adapt and flow with it? It is no surprise that boxing grew out of inner-directed cultures, whereas judo (where one seeks to use one's opponent's weight and momentum in achieving a throw) emerged from an outer-directed context.

sequential time or synchronous time: sequential time is an arrow, whereas synchronous time is a circle. In the former case, 'time is money'; in the latter, 'timing is everything'. National cultures that tend to a sequential view of time include Turkey, India and the United States, whereas Hong Kong, Israel and South Korea approximate more closely to the latter.

For further information go to www.thtconsulting.com

Charles Hampden-Turner and Fons Trompenaars, *Building Cross-cultural Competence: How to Create Wealth from Conflicting Values* (Chichester: John Wiley, 2000).

Richard Lewis

Lewis does not classify national cultures along a series of bilateral axes. Instead he identifies three different types of culture and then locates different national cultures in relation to those three basic types, as below:

Linear-active cultures ('one thing at a time'): These are task-oriented cultures, which see themselves as efficient, focusing on getting the job done within the scheduled time. Time is linear and clock-related. Their strengths are found in economy of discussion and a focus on the matter at hand. Their weakness is that they can be too fact-oriented, with insufficient focus on people.

Multi-active cultures ('jugglers'): People from these cultures are flexible and feel more fulfilled when doing several things at once. They see no reason why various tasks cannot overlap. Time is event- and person-related, and not something that human beings should be dominated by. These cultures are good at (eventually) finding all-embracing solutions and thinking laterally. They can, however, be too random, too argumentative, and generate too many ideas.

Reactive cultures ('listeners'): These cultures emphasize concentrated listening followed by silent reflection before finally formulating their own thoughts. Discussion is undertaken through a spiral of monologues, and utterances are often incomplete, relying on the listener to interpret their meaning. They enable the development of all-round agreement, but communication can be unclear, and decision making is often a slow process.

For more information go to www.crossculture.com, www.cultureactive.com

Richard D. Lewis, *When Cultures Collide: Managing Successfully across Cultures* (London: Nicholas Brealey, 1996).

¹ Charles Handy, *Gods of Management: The Changing Work of Organisations* (London: Arrow, 1995), pp. 46, 68.

² Interview with Terence Brake of TMA Americas, available at www.dialogin.com, 11 March 2003.

³ David Greenlee, Yong Joong Cho and Abraham Thulare, 'The Potential and Pitfalls of Multicultural Mission Teams' in Kelly O'Donnell (ed.), *Doing Member Care Well: Perspectives and Practices from around the World* (Pasadena, California: William Carey Library, 2002), p. 400.

⁴ Gabriel García Márquez, 'One of these Days' in Gabriel García Márquez, *No One Writes to the Colonel and Other Stories*, J. S. Bernstein (tr.) (London: Harper & Row, 1968), pp. 109–10.

⁵ Eric Law, *The Wolf shall Dwell with the Lamb: A Spirituality for Leadership in a Multicultural Community* (St Louis, Missouri: Chalice Press, 1993), p. 41.

⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 57–8.

⁷ Greenlee, Cho and Thulare, 'The Potential and Pitfalls of Multicultural Mission Teams', p. 400.