

# Deconstructing colonial spirituality

## Ethnocentrism and homogeneity

Joon Park

The transformation of a culturally and racially homogeneous church into an intercultural church inherently carries a postcolonial, decolonial dimension.

The term *colonialism* is usually discussed in terms of power, violence, and coercion. But its ultimate goal is to suppress, control, and eliminate all cultural and racial differences in order to establish a single, uniform culture (homogeneity) rooted in self-centered thinking (ethnocentrism).

Therefore, when we say we are moving toward an intercultural church, two fundamental reflections are required: on ethnocentrism and homogeneity. These are not only the driving forces of colonialism but also core aspects of humanity's sinful nature.

Without a thorough repentance and overcoming of these two tendencies, all intercultural or multicultural church efforts—no matter how well-intentioned—will inevitably regress to their original state. That is, they will once again become racially homogeneous and confined to self-centered ways of thinking. And in the end, the spirit of colonization will triumph once again: *One Unholy Uniform Church*.

From this point forward, I will explore ethnocentrism and homogeneity as the most persistent spiritual adversaries that remain in the postcolonial context of church life, including for the Mennonite church.<sup>1</sup>

### Ethnocentrism

Do you remember the movie *My Big Fat Greek Wedding*, directed by Joel Zwick, which was a huge box-office hit in the early 2000s? It is a story about a young Greek American woman, Toula Portokalos, falling in love with a non-Greek WASP, Ian Miller, and struggling to get her family to accept him while she comes to terms with her ethnic heritage and cultural identity.

Acclaimed as a romantic comedy spiced with a celebration of ethnicity, this movie goes beyond that. Toula's Greek father Gus's dialogue comically represents the exaltation of the Greek culture and accompanies the inevitable ethnocentric point of view:

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1 The following reflections were originally published in *Canadian Mennonite* in 2024 and have been edited here to align with the purpose of this *Vision* issue.

*Gus (Father): Now, gimme a word, any word, and I'll show you how the root of that word is Greek.*

*Young Athena: Oh, not this again.*

*Gus: Okay? How about arachnophobia? Arachna, that comes from the Greek word for spider, and phobia is a phobia, is mean fear. So, fear of spider, there you go.*

*Schoolgirl: Okay, Mr. Portokalos. How about the word kimono?*

*Young Athena: Good one.*

*Gus: Kimono, kimono, kimono. Ha! Of course! Kimono is come from the Greek word himona, is mean winter. So, what do you wear in the winter-time to stay warm? A robe. You see, robe, kimono. There you go!<sup>2</sup>*

In Gus's perspective, there exist only two kinds of people in the world: Greek, and everyone else who wishes they were Greek.

The greatest barrier to decolonizing and becoming an intercultural church does not lie in any external elements—buildings, capitals, or the others—but in our own ethnocentric tendency, a.k.a. ethnocentrism, which puts one's own group (or its assumption and judgment) in the center (*kentron* in Greek) of every thing/nation (*ethnos*); it also develops into a rigid belief that some or all aspects of its culture are superior to those of other groups, finally contributing to dividing the whole with the concepts of in-group and out-group (segregation).

For example, the ancient Greeks perceived other groups as barbarians (which means “babblers”); in the Greek ear, speakers of a foreign tongue made unintelligible sounds (“bar bar”). The Inuktitut word *Inuit* means (real) human beings, compared to a racially charged word like *Eskimo*, which means raw meat eaters. The Chinese call their country the “Middle/Center Kingdom” (中華).

No one is free from ethnocentric tendencies unless we are born out of nowhere or from a state of cultural and political vacuum. So ethnocentrism is not a modern creation but an ancient phenomenon, even though the word itself was coined by the American sociologist William Graham Sumner (1840–1910) in his book *Folkways: A Study of the Sociological Importance of Usages, Manners, Customs, Mores, and Morals* (Ginn and Company, 1906). In this book, he introduced ethnocentrism as a view that one's own group is the center of everything and all others are downgraded to its reference.

In Christianity, its origin even goes back to Genesis. Ethnocentrism was inherited from the birth of humans, who were kicked out of the Paradise

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2 A corrective note by Wikipedia: The kimono (きもの/着物, lit. “thing to wear”) is a traditional Japanese garment and the national dress of Japan. It is not Greek!

where no human centrality was allowed. The Wisdom of Solomon<sup>3</sup> already predicted this human centeredness: “While over those people alone heavy night was spread, an image of the darkness that was destined to receive them; but still heavier than darkness were *they to themselves*” (17:21, NRSV; emphasis added).

To survive, the eye-opened Adam and Eve in the unknown world put themselves at the center, seeking to define and control their surroundings. This human impulse toward self-centeredness and superiority reappears throughout scripture, including in Israel’s story, where the struggle to live faithfully as God’s covenant people often intertwined with tendencies toward ethnocentrism and exclusion. Yet the prophets continually called Israel—and, by extension, all humanity—back to humility and justice, reminding us that God’s covenant extends beyond any one nation or culture. Early Christians, reflecting on this same human tendency, came to see in Christ the revelation that “Gentiles are fellow heirs, members of the same body, and sharers in the promise” (Ephesians 3:6). This vision invites all people, not one tradition over another, toward a posture of humility, interdependence, and shared belonging before God.

So we modern-day ethnocentrists seem indelibly indebted to these early human ancestors, because we are still ethnocentric, even though we are not aware that we are ethnocentric, insular, and self-serving. We are now defenselessly bombarded by ceaseless sociocultural bastards of ethnocentrism such as cultural bias, prejudice, stereotyping, discrimination, xenophobia, racism, and genocide. Are we now living in a world that is culturally more relativistic or dignifying compared to the ancient era?

The church that should have been the last resort or refuge from these unfortunate anti-gospel phenomena is no safer. It has become a hotbed of superiority, nationalism, and discrimination under the guise of protecting its purity and fidelity to God and its ethnic and cultural identity.

In the united, intercultural body of Christ there is no place for ethnocentrism. Remember how the Gospel of Jesus crossed cultural boundaries and ministered to the gentiles (*ethnos*)? Jesus’s references to the widow of Zarephath in Elijah’s time and the healing of Naaman the Syrian (Luke 4:25–27), the healing of a gentile (Samaritan) in the group of ten lepers (Luke 17:11–19), the healing of the Syrophenician’s daughter (Matthew 15:21–28), the healing of the Roman centurion’s servant (Matthew 8:5–13), and the story of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25–37)—these are only a few examples.

Ethnocentrism and the teachings of Jesus cannot be compatible or reconcilable. There is no middle way in between. Ethnocentrism, a

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3 The Wisdom of Solomon is found in Catholic and Orthodox Bibles as part of the Deuterocanonical books, while in most Protestant Bibles it is considered apocryphal.

beginning and final destination of colonized mindset, is the very thing to be crushed, *deconstructed* by the power of the Gospel that is universally true



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and applicable. We cannot be ethnocentric and a follower of Jesus at the same time. Jesus on the cross ended human ethnocentrism. Why do we keep singing “Jesus Be the Center”<sup>4</sup> in Sunday worship? Because the one and only

centeredness we need is not in and through us, but only through Jesus Christ our Lord. “Jesus be the center, be my source, be my light, Jesus . . .” Let’s sing out loud!

### Homogeneity

No one would disagree that the world, be it big or small, urban or rural, has become heterogeneous. If you do not believe it, go to the nearest McDonald’s and see who is sitting there! Or tune your ears to CBC News; I recently read about a Chinese immigrant family farming in the backcountry of a white-dominant province—Saskatchewan—in Canada. In this era of cultural boundarylessness, making excuses not to be heterogenous at church for demographic reasons—“No, our church is in a rural area,” or “No, our community is so small,” etc.—seems a bit thin.

Thom S. Rainer, the founder of Church Answers and author of *Autopsy of a Deceased Church* (B&H Publishing, 2014) shared his first-hand experience with homogeneity on his blog:

*I grew up in the racist world of the Deep South. We whites had our own churches, places of business, and country clubs. No one else was allowed. If you went to the doctor, there were separate waiting rooms for whites and African Americans (“Coloreds”). It was abysmal. It was sickening. I know racism is not gone. But I am grateful that my children and grandchildren don’t even know why a person of a different color should not be their friend or colleague. The culture has changed. We are living in a heterogeneous culture. But not all churches have changed. Those that haven’t will die.*<sup>5</sup>

He prophetically warns that seeing homogeneity as a form of segregation—the main purpose of *effective* colonization—is not Gospel-centric.

But when it comes to the Mennonite church setting, another new theory is heard: Homogeneity is not absolute, but necessary in order for us

4 *Voices Together* (MennoMedia, 2020), 584, text and music by Michael Frye.

5 Thom S. Rainer, “Five Reasons the Homogeneous Church Is Declining and Dying,” *Church Answers*, 4 Dec. 2017, <https://churchanswers.com/blog/five-reasons-homogeneous-church-declining-dying/>.

to keep our 500-year-old Mennonite identity unique and peculiar in “all set” worship styles, pew arrangements, potluck menus, and church politics. It is a lamentable fact that there are still many Mennonite churches in the twenty-first century where the spirit of homogeneity is living and active for the sake of preserving Mennonite identity. (Do we have to return to Daniel Kauffman’s era of the *Manual of Bible Doctrines* (1898–1944), formulating/codifying Mennonite faith in all possible aspects, including uniform dress and deportment?)

In the 1970s the word *homogeneity* went viral among the North American Evangelical churches struggling to adjust to the changing multicultural demographic that asked for accommodation and integration. Racial integration was very limited and faced resistance even among religious institutions because of the assumption of expected disunity (*It is a universal truth that no one likes being messed up!*).

In this complex context, a new homogeneous church model was birthed, which proclaimed: “It is okay to not necessarily mingle with other cultural or racial groups at church.” We know people like to gather with those who look, talk, think, and act like them. Church is a place for the similar or like-minded, not demanding any behavioral change! Its goal is to make conforming disciples first, not taking a risk to integrate, making people uncomfortable, and sacrificing.

The credit for discovering this new homogeneous church phenomenon goes to Donald McGavran, a third-generation missionary to India who spent more than three decades from the 1920s to the 1950s prioritizing his missional focus on the Great Commission, converting over one thousand people *without crossing racial, linguistic, or class barriers*. He later developed his experience into a new church-growth theory called the homogenous unit principle (HUP) through his seminal publication *Understanding Church Growth* (Eerdmans, 1970), which asserts that people are more open to accepting the Gospel when it’s shared by someone similar to them in language, culture, social standing, or ethnicity.

Thirsty for church growth and grappling with the multicultural drive in the 1970s, North American churches welcomed this expedient and practical theory with great enthusiasm, regardless of its weak biblical foundation: Does the Bible (or Jesus) support isolation, stratification, and separation for the sake of church growth (or to preserve our Mennonite identity)?

A half century has passed, and there have been countless critiques against this church-growth model—a model that borrowed its concept from Western colonization. As of today, it seems that no one steps forward as a defender of the HUP (Thanks be to God!). It is regarded as a cold reality rather than an ideal for growth.

Instead, the space it left behind is now being filled with the success and faithfulness of many emerging heterogeneous churches, whose ultimate goal is to “anticipate on earth the life of heaven,” breaking down any (colonial) walls through “cultural richness and heterogenous fellowship” among all people, in contrary to building walls up.<sup>6</sup>

The old belief that heterogeneity is an impractical and unachievable ideal is wrong. The HUP is long gone. We are now in an era where *heterogeneity* is the norm, which is biblically right, ecclesiastically hopeful, and politically decolonizing. And a new humanity in Christ is born.

“Awake, O north wind; And come, thou south; Blow upon my [Mennonite] garden, That the [heterogeneous] spices thereof may flow out. Let my beloved come into his garden, And eat his pleasant fruits” (Song of Solomon 4:16, KJV).

## Reflection

Pursuing an intercultural church goes far deeper than simply trying to make a declining church more numerically prosperous or vibrant. Being an intercultural church is not a way to escape the harsh reality of young people leaving and older generations passing away.

What we need to do in an intercultural church—or to seed and nurture this intercultural vision within our homogeneous Mennonite context—is to help all people, people of color, and people from different races and ethnicities who are gathered in Christ’s name to find their true selves, their true identities, and their true sense of belonging. This is distinct from the notion of “fitting in” or assimilation.

Brené Brown, a prominent researcher on belonging and author of *Braving the Wilderness* (Random House, 2017), defines “fitting in” in contrast to “true belonging” as the process of assessing a situation and adapting oneself to meet the perceived expectations of others for acceptance.<sup>7</sup> In other words, fitting in involves erasing or suppressing one’s authentic self to conform to a culture that seems larger or more dominant than one’s own.

At this point, we need to reflect on:

1. Whether the historically white-dominant culture of the North American Mennonite church, combined with the universal human tendency toward ethnocentrism, has created an environment where newcomers are expected to “fit in” rather than freely express their identities.

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6 Lausanne Committee for World Evangelization, “The Pasadena Consultation: Homogeneous Unit Principle,” *Lausanne Occasional Paper No. 1* (1978).

7 Brené Brown, *The Gifts of Imperfection*, 10th Anniversary Edition (Hazelden, 2020), xxvii.

2. Whether the homogeneous Mennonite aversion to conflict or tension, under the guise of “peace,” has hindered newcomers from finding their authentic expressions of who they are in worship or other church activities.

If an intercultural church merely becomes a place that produces model minorities or fit-ins—people of color who are polite, compliant, and exem-

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plary—it will fail. If it becomes a place where newcomers are forced to fit in with the old norms to create a stronger, homogeneous, ethnocentric unity/identity, it will fail. What makes our intercultural church different from Charlie Chaplin’s factory, which churns out identical items?

A church that is truly intercultural should be fundamentally different. It should be a place where all people feel safe as they journey to discover their true, authentic selves in the midst of unfamiliarity and discomfort. It should

be a space where their unacknowledged, untapped gifts can be shared for the well-being of everyone.

The work of building a church that is voluntarily mixed—where people of different cultures, languages, and histories come together to find their true colors and shape a third culture, again, a kind of new humanity in Christ—is not a burden. It is a blessing, not a curse. It is a victory, not a failure. It is a bold resistance to the grip of colonial spirituality that still lingers in many Christian traditions.

And so I finally ask: Where does our Mennonite church stand in this ongoing journey of decolonization and transformation?

### **About the author**

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