

GLIMPSING THE REIGN OF GOD:
Rules for Engaging Culture in Mission

ForMission
June 14, 2010

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Introduction

The suggestion of Sr. Yvonne about this second session this morning was that it should be practical—“‘how to’ in terms of their mission and ministry in general and in specific as formation,” as she put it. When I first read this I almost panicked—I am much more a theologian than a practitioner, and what I hope is that *other people* will work out some of the practical implications of what I say more theologically and theoretically.

However, I do have quite a lot of experience in living in another culture, and living in multicultural and intercultural situations, so as I began to think about it I wrote down a number of things—“rules,” we might call them—that have certainly helped me over the years. I have to admit from the getgo, however, that I have not always lived up to these rules, but I still think they are good ones and I wish I had. If I had I would have been a much better missionary and community member. You, too, might not be able to live up to all the rules I lay down, but I think even just to have them as ideals will help us do mission in a way that is worthy of the privilege that it is. One thing I’m convinced of, in any case, is that if we do try the best we can to engage culture as we do mission, we will get a glimpse of the Reign of God that we preach, serve and witness to in our missionary service.

These “rules” are in no particular order—except, perhaps, for the last one. There certainly may be more, and you might be able to share some in our discussion afterwards. These are ones that I have thought of, though, and have been—or could have been—helpful for me through the years.

Rule 1: Learn the Language

I said that these rules are in no particular order. However, if there were to be an order—and this might be an interesting exercise in your discussions—it is very possible that this first rule would be at the top of the list. Language, I believe, is the key to everything. If you learn the language of the people and place among which and in which you work you will get an inside look into the culture, because language is kind of like the gift box in which the culture is contained.

Language reveals how people relate to one another—formally or informally, like Sie and Du in German or tu and Lei in Italian or tu and Usted in Spanish, or the multiple forms of address in Korean. It reveals structures in society or in the family. It reveals the way people understand agency—English pretty much prefers the active voice, while Ilocano, the language I tried to speak in the Philippines, prefers something more akin to the passive voice. It is a lot more indirect. Titles are important in some languages, while less important in English. Some languages—like African languages—speak a lot in

proverbs, and only when you know the proverbs and how to use them have you mastered the language.

Learning a language—even struggling to learn it or speaking it in the beginning in a halting way—tells the people among whom you work how important they are in your eyes. People are always honored by the fact that you have made an effort to learn their language. It means that you take their lives and culture seriously. As my friend Jon Kirby, a long-time missionary in Ghana, says, language learning is not just *preparation* for mission. It is already mission itself.

Language, finally, is your passport into people's lives. If you know people's language they will invite you into their homes, they will share themselves with you, they will tell you all sorts of things about the culture that you could never know by reading books or attending classes. I must say that I never really mastered Italian when I was a student in Rome, nor did I master Ilocano when I worked in the Philippines. I regret that very much. However, as much as I did learn I did have an *entrée* into people's lives—I became very good friends with a number of youth in Italy, and I gained the affection of many Filipinos with my efforts at Ilocano. I can't stress this enough.

Rule 2: Bond with the People

I mentioned my friend Jon Kirby in the above section. A good number of years ago now I spent three weeks with Jon at an institute of culture and language learning that he ran in Ghana. One of the things he had us read was an article by a couple, Tom and Betty Sue Brewster, who taught at Fuller Seminary in California. The article talked about the importance of *bonding* with the people among whom the missionary works. They said that oftentimes missionaries arrive in a particular place, and begin to study the language, but they live in isolation and insulation in language institutes or missionary compounds. Even after they have learned the language and have learned to negotiate the culture, they basically stick with their own kind, and don't really develop relationships with the people among whom they work. As my colleague Dianne Bergant put it once, there are missionaries who have lived for years in another country and culture, but have not really ever left their home country and culture.

This is really unacceptable for a missionary today, or for a cross-cultural or intercultural worker in today's church. Mission, we are discovering more and more, is about *relationship*. What is of the essence of Mission is not what we do *for* people, but *who we are* among the people. And so, right from the beginning, we need to make friends among the people. When we do this, the culture in which we work will not be something outside ourselves, that we learn to deal with or tolerate. We will never become a complete part of the culture, but we can begin to see it from the inside. The people we work among will not just be recipients of our missionary zeal. They will have faces. This will spur us on to learn the language better, enjoy their food more, savor their customs. Again, not because we have to, but because we want to understand and enjoy our friends more.

Rule 3: Listen for At Least a Year before Speaking

One of the hardest, and yet necessary, disciplines for someone coming into a culture or context for the first time is that of learning to listen. Listening is difficult, because we tend to hear what we want to hear, but real listening tries to hear what is being said on its own terms. One way to learn to listen is to resolve not to speak for a while—I suggest about a year. Don't try to offer your opinions right away. You don't know the situation—the people involved, their history with each other, the history of the culture or situation, the way a particular incident fits into the larger picture. So often newcomers come in and think they know better than the people who are indigenous to the culture or who have been working in it for years. They certainly might know a thing or two, but they should not be so sure.

The attitude that we have to bring is what my friend José de Mesa speaks of as a “hermeneutics of appreciation.” Rather than begin by listening critically, the new missionary needs to be open to the culture, to what is being said, to how people say it. Only then will she or he begin to hear what is really being said, and eventually she or he can contribute to the ongoing conversation. But she or he should be very cautious at first. Don't presume you know what people are talking about, or what an answer should be.

Rule 4: Be Careful in Asking Questions

The South African theologian Albert Nolan once said that in order to do inculturation, pastoral works should “listen, listen, listen, ask questions, and then listen.” Yes, by all means listen and ask questions, but be very careful about what you ask, and very careful how you ask. One way of asking a question would be—as you begin to make friends with people from the context in which you are working—“I don't understand why people laugh when I say such-and-such. Could you help me understand?” This is an open and honest question. But then there's a question like “Why do these people always laugh at me? Why can't they tell me what I'm doing wrong?” This is a question that presupposes that you are right and *they* are wrong, or that they are being ungracious and unfriendly. And this is not necessarily the case.

My colleagues Claude Marie Barbour and Eleanor Doidge, who regularly take students on an exposure trip to South Dakota on the Rosebud and ----- Native American reservations, tell the students not to ask any questions at all, but let the people teach them what they want to teach them. As the people discover that they are willing to listen and be taught the gradually tell them more and more, and then eventually, when a relationship is formed, they might be able to ask questions.

I do think that the main thing, again, is to listen and to observe, and not to bombard one's hosts in a new culture with lots of questions. Gradually, as one listens and learns to look, things come together. We always have to remember that questions always come out of our own perspective or point of view. Suspending our questions helps in suspending the way *we* see and hear things, and so help us to be more open to what is really going on. It is a great discipline!

Rule 5: Practice Seeing: Read Poetry

“The stranger has eyes like saucers,” a Ghanaian proverb goes, “but sees nothing.” When we come into a new situation there is certainly plenty to see: people

dress differently, they walk differently, they have their own aesthetics, there is perhaps poverty on a scale that we have never seen before, people have their own facial expressions and bodily gestures. But often what we see on the surface is not what is really there—or at least what has any significance in the context. A classic example is a story told by the great historian of religion Mircea Eliade about a group of aid workers in Africa that were teaching the people in a far-off village how to use non-flush toilets. When they showed the people a film about the toilets, and about all the advantages of the resulting hygiene, the people, when asked what they saw said that they saw a chicken! Sure enough, when the film was rewound and shown again there was a chicken flying across the screen at one point. That's what the people were familiar with, and that's what caught their attention—not the lesson about the toilets! On a less dramatic scale, on a recent visit to the Philippines it took me several days to begin to see the beauty of the garden in the house where I was staying. At first it seemed dry and dusty and haphazard. After a few days, though, I began to see it for what it was, and probably how the local people saw it—a real oasis from the hustle and bustle of the city around it. We need to practice really seeing, seeing with the eyes of the heart, seeing with understanding.

This might be strange, but I think a good way to practice seeing is to regularly read poetry—from one's own culture, or especially from the culture and context in which one is working. Poets see to the heart of things, and as we read them we begin to see with new eyes. Recently I've been reading Nobel Prize winner Seamus Heaney's book called—appropriately in this context—*Seeing Things*. The poetry is very difficult to follow, and very private, but as I read poem after poem (I read one a day) I found some amazing phrases that literally opened my eyes. One of my favorite poems was about the poet's original resistance to putting in a skylight in his house, and then realizing when it was done how it was like the miracle of Jesus healing the paralytic after the roof had been opened by the man's friends. Nigerian Jesuit Agbonkhianmeghe Orobator has written a poem listing a number of African names of God that give a glimpse of the things Africans deem important. Let me quote a few lines here:

Ancient deity,
Unbreakable stone,
Consoler and comforter providing salvation,
Grandfather who alone is the great one,
Watcher of everything who is not surprised by anything,
Piler of rocks into towering mountains
;;;
Sun too bright for our gaze,
Eye of the sun, Artist-in-chief
Drummer of life,
Owner of the head

A great exercise might be to find out who the local poets are in a particular context and begin reading them. They will sharpen our eyes!

Rule 6: Pray about Your Experiences

It might be a good practice to spend a few minutes every day thinking about what you experienced during that day and offering that up to God. We might have begun the day going to the market—so pray for the vendors in the market, and the farmers who grew the food you bought. We might have visited a sick person during the day—so pray for her, and for her family. We might have been confused by the language during our language lessons—so pray for patience and praise God for the beauty and complexity and difference of the language. Have we been offended during the day, and so need to pray for the person, who might have no clue that he did something that hurt us? Did we experience a flash of intimacy with one of our co-workers, or one of the people in the parish where we work? Then breathe a prayer of thanksgiving.

I think the more we see things in God's light the clearer we see them. Prayer, too, is often just listening (listening again!), and as we listen in silence we might be struck by a new meaning, or a new way of seeing things. The Spirit is living and active within the culture into which we have come, but she is also living and active in us. Crossing into another cultural context is not something that only involves technique and skill and knowledge. It is a truly spiritual journey, and we need to work at being aware of where we are on that journey as we pray.

Rule 7: Get a Spiritual Director

Because living in another culture is a spiritual journey, you are going to need a spiritual guide. As soon as possible when you arrive in your new situation, find a person with whom you can be frank and honest, to whom you can bare your soul, as it were. I'd say make a contract for a year or two with that person, so that if she or he proves unhelpful you can work with another person. Meet with your spiritual director regularly and keep no secrets from her or him. Talk about your fascination with the culture. Talk frankly about your disgust at some people, some places, and some practices in the culture. Review how your prayer in reflection on the culture is going. For an hour or so on that regular basis, realize that you don't have to be careful about what you say or how you say it. Your spiritual director will understand and will be able to encourage you or challenge you further. Oftentimes is just trying to say out loud what you are feeling and struggling with that will open up ways of healing, or give you strength to continue the hard work of language learning, feeling like a little child, feeling like you have no social skills, struggling with relationships both with members of the local culture and people of your own and other cultures.

Again, this is more than therapy. A good spiritual director can really help you discern where the Spirit is leading you or consoling you as you stretch and are stretched by the new world that you are becoming part of.

Rule 8: Read the Literature, Listen to the Music, Watch Television

One of the best ways of getting an insight into a particular culture is to go through its artists—its poets, novelists, musicians especially. We've already talked about reading poetry as an exercise in learning to see, but poets can also be a way of helping us grasp some of the deepest values of a culture, its deepest ideals. I think of how the poetry of U. S. Americans Robert Frost, Emily Dickenson, or Carl Sandburg can express some of the

cherished ideals of this particular culture. I remember how eye-opening it was to read the great patriotic novels of Philippine National Hero José Rizal, the *Noli Me Tangere* and *El Filibusterismo*. It is amazing how Rizal's writings have influenced the Filipino imagination. I refer again to my recent trip to the Philippines, where I was really impressed by the amount and quality of Tagalog hymns, and how they seemed to capture the heart of people. It would be important as well to listen to Filipino secular music, or contemporary Mexican popular music, or to watch music videos of Indian pop stars. I would think that Mexican "telenovelas," like American soap operas, would provide a keen perspective on what is going on in the culture today. I've seen them in the Philippines as well, and also on a visit to Malaysia a few years ago.

The art of both classical and popular culture is important. The classical art—the great poets of a culture's past, its novelists, its musicians—is a key to what is deep and subtle in a culture. Popular culture—rock music, music videos, comic books, magazines, television programs like the equivalent to "American Idol"—are ways of getting to an understanding of what is going on in people's lives here and now, especially the youth.

Rule 9: Read the Anthropologists

I remember how enlightening it was for me to read a bit of anthropology when I first came to the Philippines. I especially remember reading works about basic Filipino values like *utang na loob* (debt of gratitude) and *hiya* (shame), and about the phenomenon called "split level Christianity," where Filipinos were very religious and yet very superstitious or immoral at the same time. Just these few articles and books helped me tremendously to understand my Filipino hosts, and later on when I read more anthropology about Filipino families I profited even more.

You probably should always have a novel going—preferably and maybe three or four a year from the local culture—and a book of local anthropology or history. You simply can't learn enough about the culture and its practices and values. As you read you will see the ideas validated in your everyday experience, and it will sharpen your eyes and ears to see and hear more keenly.

Rule 10: Accept the Fact that You Will Always Be a Stranger

One of my favorite stories about adapting to a culture is one that was told to me early on during my years in the Philippines. An old Spanish priest who had been in the country for some fifty years was asked if now, after all these years, he had begun to understand Philippine culture. His wise reply was "el alma del Filipino es un misterio!"—the soul of the Filipino is a mystery! My own experience was that the longer I was in the country the less I realized that I knew. As one German missionary to India put it once, if you stop over at an airport in India you want to write a book about your experiences; if you stay a year you will want to write an article; but if you stay a few years you will realize that you can't really write anything at all! But this is not bad, or at least it wasn't for me. It was kind of, as the Medieval mystics would say, a kind of *docta ignorantia*, a *learned* ignorance. Knowing how little I knew was real knowledge, and kept me humble and made me gentler among the people with whom I worked. It was a kind of joyful, freeing kind of knowledge.

No matter how long we stay among a people, no matter how much we “feel at home” among them, we will always be outsiders. I will never be a Filipino, even though there were times when I ached to be “just like them.” African Americans will never be White. Anglos will never become Latino/as. There’s nothing wrong with that. I think it’s important that we always have a sense that we can’t fully understand the people among whom we work, and that we should use real caution in thinking that we can speak for them, or make decisions for them.

In a strange way, the more I tried to understand and live comfortably within Philippine culture the more I recognized how *American* I was. This was, ironically, an unexpected gift, and while I loved Filipino culture (though I struggled with it too), I really began to treasure my own cultural identity. Along with reading novels and anthropological studies in our *host* culture we should be reading the literature of our own culture, and learning about that strange species that anthropologists say we are. Never despise your own culture. It’s who you are in your deepest identity. I’ve seen missionaries do this, especially when they get home, and I think it is a shame.

Rule 11: Practice Schreiter’s Rule

My colleague Bob Schreiter talks about a rule that he has when he lives in or visits another culture. He calls it “Schreiter’s Rule.” To understand the rule, you have to understand everything that I’ve said so far in these reflections: you have to approach the culture with a “hermeneutics of appreciation,” a “hermeneutics of generosity.” You have to accept feeling like a little child, you have to “take off your shoes” in recognition of the culture’s beauty and holiness. But Bob’s rule is this: *Once a day you are permitted a negative or nasty thought about the culture.* Not out loud, not in public, maybe to a friend or a spiritual director though, you are allowed to say or feel one negative thing like “why does this language have no logic?” or “why can’t drivers here obey the traffic rules?” or “why do people have to talk so loud, or stand so close?”

I think this rule helps a lot. Trying to understand and live within a new culture is terribly hard work, and it really makes us vulnerable and to feel stupid. So it is good psychology to be able to take charge a bit, especially when our frustration might be warranted. After all, cultures are not perfect, and they are shot through with ambiguity. We shouldn’t worry if we get frustrated or angry. That’s simply part of the process. Practicing Schreiter’s Rule is a way of letting off some of the steam we have built up in a pretty harmless, fairly humorous way.

Conclusion

I’ve already intimated it in some of my reflections above, but I think that learning to cross a culture boils down to having or practicing a spirituality. What I’m proposing is, first of all, a spirituality of *attending*. It is in making efforts to listen, to see, to feel that we begin to stretch and achieve a greater capacity to appreciate the situation in which we find ourselves. Secondly, this is a spirituality of *reflection*. If we don’t take some time to process all that we are experiencing we will never fully appreciate what is happening to us as we grow in so many new ways—and if we don’t reflect the growth just won’t happen, or it won’t happen as abundantly. Finally, this is a spirituality of *joy*. Crossing

cultures is hard work, but to use a typically American word, it is or at least can be a lot of fun. As the grain of wheat dies, new abundant life springs up. As we are opened up to new ways of thinking, feeling and seeing, new friendships are born, new pleasures are found, new horizons are discovered. Not every day, but pretty regularly, if we follow the rules I've set forth here, we will get glimpses of the Reign of God which is already here, not yet fully realized, and coming because of our efforts to join God in the great work of Mission.

May 28, 2010