



Tokyo 2010 and the “Western/Non-Western” Distinction

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The Tokyo 2010 Consultation consisted of 967 delegates from 73 countries, not including the 927 Japanese observers. According to David Hupp, Tokyo 2010’s administrator, “Using a definition of ‘Non-Western’ as any place other than the USA, Canada, Western Europe, New Zealand and Australia, the Non-Western representation ranges from 66% to 75%.” This is quite a change from Edinburgh 1910 and was one of the strengths of the meeting. Hupp adds, “At the same time, I would propose that ‘Western’ and ‘Non-Western’ is an increasingly blurred distinction, for several factors, and may be worth more study.”

I heartily agree with David. The trouble begins with inconsistency in defining “the West” as distinct from the non-Western world. If considered historically and culturally, the Western world is that part of the world shaped to a great extent by Greek and Roman culture. Others see it more as an economic designation, where “Western” means “developed.” But this doesn’t clear anything up either. The 2009 rankings of gross domestic product (GDP) by the IMF include Japan at number two, China at number three, Brazil at number eight, India at number eleven and Mexico at number fourteen. What does your GDP need to be to be considered “Western?” Indeed, the relationship between geography and prosperity is no longer so easy to categorize.

Newer terms such as “Global South” are equally unhelpful. The North/South distinction is largely economic, where the North is supposedly where high-income and advanced economies reside, and the South is where “developing” countries reside. But again it doesn’t work unless

you erase Australia and New Zealand off the map and ignore the fact that the southern hemisphere contains considerably less land mass than the north (only 1/3 of Africa) and only 10% of the human population. Of course, most of us don’t get that technical. To us, the Global South is simply Asia, Africa and Latin America. But again, problems still remain due to the major variations within these regions.

Therefore, the concepts of “Western” and “Non-Western” as well as “Global South” are increasingly unhelpful categories for those of us within the mission enterprise. Such macro-terms only confuse the fact that all of us come from micro-contexts where the macro-terms are insufficient. With each passing day, globalization makes these categories less and less relevant. One thing we soon learn in mission is that context is nearly everything.

For example, there is now increasing critique of so-called “insider movements.” But some criticisms refer mistakenly to “the insider movement,” as if it is a monolithic reality, whereas the truth is that numerous types of insider movements are taking place in numerous contexts. The world consists of numerous cultural, religious and socio-linguistic contexts, with little making sense in mission thinking outside of those contexts. Deep missiological thinking requires the use of micro-terms to describe micro-contexts.

Here are two suggestions. First, let’s stop using “Western,” “Non-Western” and “Global South” altogether. We seem to have done away with the “Occident” and the “Orient,” so there is precedent for discontinuing these other terms.

Second, since macro-level designations are often needed to get conversations started, let’s use affinity blocs instead. These are (according to Joshua Project) Jew, Arab, Horn of Africa-Cushitic, Sub-Saharan African, Iranian-Median, Turkic, Tibetan-Himalayan, South Asian, Southeast Asian, Malay, East Asian, Pacific Islander, North American, Latin-Caribbean American, Eurasian and Unclassified. Wouldn’t this make more sense? Even so, we should use these designations sparingly and only as background for more meaningful discussion.

Let me conclude by suggesting an even better way. Categorization is part of the legacy of modernism; though it can be helpful, it can also divide. The best category for any believer on this earth is “disciple of Jesus,” and I hope for a day when we can interact more on that basis than on the basis of the cultural contexts into which we were born. Today people often understand themselves through dominant lenses such as “Western” or “Non-Western” or “African” or “Asian.” But I don’t think that is good enough for those within the Kingdom of God.

For example, my allegiance to the Kingdom is much greater than my allegiance to the USA. Therefore, I struggle when I am defined primarily as “Western” or “American,” for this is not my primary identity as a disciple of Jesus. Neither is the reader’s primary identity that of being “Non-Western” or “African” or “Asian.” We are children of God, called to live under the rule of God, in order to fulfill the purposes of God. Our first birth may divide us in many ways, but our second birth unites us in ways that are potentially much, much greater. 🌐