

Director's Update

LAWRENCE TONG



A balanced response to cultures

The myriad of cultures in the world is a gift from God reflecting His beauty and diversity. Engaging complex cultures should not frighten or discourage us. Yet no culture is above the teaching of the Bible. Cultures change constantly; Scripture does not. We should never allow the 'culture card' to be a negotiating tool exempting one cultural group from international standards or agreements. Cultural clichés are no excuse for double standards in a global organisation.

At the same time, every culture deserves respect and understanding. No single culture is better than another; failing to acknowledge this accounts for many of the problems in our world. We are too quick to label people and end up using stereotypes that block us from seeing someone made in the image of God. People become targets and commodities when lumped together in the name of missiology. I have met well-meaning missionaries whose goal was to change others' culture in the name of progress rather than infusing their hosts' cultural worldview with Biblical truth. This type of thinking needs to change. Every culture makes assumptions about other cultures that are often false or distorted. We accept that every culture should be respected, but we can fail to recognise that all cultures – including our own – are fundamentally broken before God. We can share this common brokenness rather than strive for superiority.

Heaven is ready for all the cultures of this world: "After this I looked, and there before me was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language, standing before the throne and before the Lamb" (Rev. 7:9, NIV). In the meantime, our task as Jesus followers is to engage with other cultures for the sake of the gospel.

Love covers all

In OM, we are so accustomed to people from dozens of different cultures living and working together that cultural boundaries fade. They are only re-activated when

someone offends another's culture. It might involve a sense of humour, an unwitting hand gesture, or whatever. If a foreigner makes a cultural mistake, we have an obligation to correct them, but in private. The Chinese see burping as a compliment to the chef but, when I once did so, naively, on the ship, my table mates were deeply offended.

However, when we offend, do our sincere apologies create an opportunity for growth in the offended party? We have no right to go around insulting others, but the world we operate in does so. Equipping our people must include teaching them to handle insult and offense in a godly way. If we want our people to be durable and flexible in foreign fields, we should not overly shield them. Rather, they need to learn to face cultural offense with grace and determination. One way is to train ourselves to find the good in other cultures and to learn from them, especially in areas where another's cultural practice might be an improvement on ours!

Discerning human nature and culture comes with maturity and experience. Ideally, we will learn to recognise the difference, which is useful in team situations. If a person is acting out of line, is it a matter of personal character or their culture? Both require a suitable response.

Release your cultural baggage into heaven's culture and follow its rules of grace. Look to Jesus and how He dealt with offense: He confronted wrongdoing as needed, He rebuked His errant disciples in private; He never belittled anyone for their ethnicity.

Let us set an example in being gracious to other cultures without needing to apologise for our own. Learn to lighten up, because the journey ahead may be long!

The way I see it

BY ALI GEAKE



Aliens do exist

When I first left my home country (England) and went to live in another culture (South Africa), I knew I would experience 'culture shock' and things would be different. What I hadn't considered was how much the 'simple' act of living somewhere else would transform what I thought, believed, and behaved. Transformation sounds exciting, but the process is painful, difficult, and confusing.

It felt like every little thing came under the microscope. How much did culture shape the way I prayed, expected to hear God, treated people of different backgrounds or ethnicities, or disciplined my children? I felt like an alien from outer space – not knowing the rules; not knowing how much of 'me' I get to keep.

A small example - I needed to learn to ask, 'how are you?' every time I greeted anyone. Easy with friends but more difficult when you're asking a question of someone in a supermarket. In the UK it would be odd to start a sentence with 'how are you?' to a stranger but in South Africa it's rude not to.

I frequently needed to change my behaviour, my language, and my expectations to consider my new cultural norms. Sometimes, however, I needed to resist adjusting. We had a street WhatsApp group and many times people would make racist comments encouraging others to think the same – a hangover from Apartheid days. We would need to hold on to different values; ones we had learned from an alternative culture. In these instances, we needed to be comfortable in 'offending'.

As time went on, I started asking myself different questions. What did I need to change that wasn't helpful in my own culture? What did I need to resist adopting from the culture I was living in? What would Jesus do? Living according to biblical values is the obvious 'answer' but sometimes the Bible has been used to argue a point either way. Life isn't that black and white, and I needed to learn to live in the grey.

A friend of mine explained that South African laws require companies to have a certain percentage of non-white workers. This was problematic for my friend's company as it was much easier to find white applicants with the right skills, due to a history of preferential education.

The company decided to try harder and spend more time looking. They resisted the urge to be impatient. They hired a black lady – not just for her colour but also for her skill. My friend recounted, "We now have someone in our team who brings a different outlook, a fresh voice, and sees things from an alternative position. It has made our team that much richer and we are so grateful we took the time to find her. Now everybody wins."

I learned that my culture doesn't have all the answers. It's not better to be British or worse to be South African. It's also not better to be South African and worse to be British. I needed to take responsibility for the cultural failings of my home culture and learn new ways of living. This is the most interesting and exciting part of living elsewhere. You learn things you cannot read in a book, understand on a trip, or have explained to you by someone else. Investing in deep friendships with locals brings a richness to life that has changed me forever.

Today, after six years in South Africa, I am living back in the UK and I find I feel more an alien than ever before. Starting a conversation with 'how are you' gets raised eyebrows! I could easily slip back into conforming to all cultural norms, but instead I find I continue to question if they are helpful. I realise the experience of living in a different culture has changed me and taught me to be a global citizen, always considering culture as an influencing factor. England no longer feels like home like it used to and I miss my 'other' home in South Africa. But I am richer for the experience. I seek out people from other cultures, I make the effort with people 'not like me', and I hope that means that everybody wins.

I am now an alien wherever I go, and I love it.

Author's bio: Having arrived unexpectedly earlier this year after six years in South Africa, Ali currently lives on the south coast of England with her mum, her husband, and her two young children. Ali serves as OM's Internal Communications Director, working part-time and spending the rest of the time making puzzles, painting, and enjoying the English countryside with her kids. She previously worked for global companies in the telecommunications and film industries, joining OM in 2013.

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