

The Gospel and the Cultures in Australian Cities

Tim Foster, vice-principal of Ridley College, has recently written a book, The Suburban Captivity of the Church: Contextualising the Gospel for Post-Christian Australia. It describes three different cultural contexts of city life in Australia, suburban, urban and battler, and argues that the gospel needs to intersect with these sub-cultures in different ways. At the heart of the book is the assertion that the gospel narrative both 'affirms and critiques culture, providing a new vision for life shaped by God's new order' (p.5).

Foster notes that when he moved into an inner-urban area, he turned first to the statistics to understand the area. However, he quickly came to the conclusion 'that statistics are superficial and tell us almost nothing of any importance' (p.30). He goes on to argue that 'the thing that shapes our lives, provides our identity and creates meaning is the cultural narrative, or story that we embrace' (p.30).

The cultural narrative, says Foster, is not linear, nor written down.

It is told through the myths found in books, magazines, films, advertising, blogs and anecdotes. It is symbolised in fashion, brands, technology, art, music and architecture. It is ritualised in the practices that govern each day, week and year. It is embodied in the values, pronouncements and lifestyles of our heroes and celebrities. (p.33)

Foster takes the symbol of the car as an example. Choosing a Toyota Prius symbolises ecological concern, while choosing a four-wheel drive demonstrates mastery over the environment (p.38). He suggests that many other symbols are more camouflaged and their meaning more elusive.

There are various levels to this narrative. While there is the local narrative which is shared 'with those from a similar socioeconomic background who also live in reasonable proximity to one another', there is a tribal level of narrative, shared among groups with a common interest such as bikers and surfies (p.36). There is also a national level of narrative. For Australians, the national narrative has its particular cast of characters including convicts, bushrangers and ANZACs (p.35).

The Suburban Understanding of Faith

Foster argues that the suburbs were developed to promote key evangelical values, 'notably its domestic vision of the family living in a secure environment in natural surroundings' (p.61). He describes how, in England, William Wilberforce developed the model



suburb in Clapham, outside London, as an alternative to the slums of industrial cities. Homes were built on large blocks of land, surrounded by gardens (p.63). In this context, the men commuted to work in the city while the women stayed in the home raising the children. This vision, Foster says, inspired developers in the 1880s, providing 'Clapham-like seclusion for the middle class' in suburbs like Ashfield and Strathfield in Sydney (p.64).

Foster notes that prior to the 1800s, people had close ties to their neighbours and fellow members of trade guilds, clubs and societies. However, in the new suburbs, this changed and the focus was inward: on the home and the nuclear family (p.68). In the new suburbs, the more wealthy were protected from the immorality and 'unseemliness' of the working class (p.69). Here, the middle-class could pursue their aspirations for well-paid jobs and life in some luxury.

The suburban vision, says Foster, is 'the pursuit of a comfortable, secure and settled life, in an ordered domain, with one's family and closest friends, where each individual is free to pursue those interests that will bring happiness with minimal disruption' (p.75). However, he notes that consumption is conspicuous and functions as a sign of upward mobility in the suburbs. Competition is also inherent in the suburban ethos, not only in consumption, but in spectator sports, cooking and parties, and even giving one's children private education (p.76). The evangelical churches are strongest in the suburban areas as the values they espouse may be closest to suburban culture in terms of their emphasis on family life. Yet, God often has little place in the suburban vision, Foster says, except to bless the aspirations and assist in their fulfilment (p.77). People sometimes turn to God when things go off the rails.

Foster suggests some key gospel themes in which the values of suburbia are taken as the starting point, but also critiqued. He suggests that the suburban sense of community needs to be confronted with the challenge that our homes should not be refuges from others, but opportunities to show hospitality and serve others. God's way is not the way of power, but of weakness and humility and the aspiration to be truly great is found

by serving others. It is better to give to others than accumulate wealth.

Good News for Urbanites

Foster traces the origin of the urban culture back to the bohemians of 1840s Paris. The bohemians were protesting against the bourgeoisie, the middle-class, who were gaining power in France at that time. He sees this same counter-cultural movement as reappearing in the 'Beats' of the 1940s and the hippies of the 1960s. He thinks that the 'yuppies' of the 1980s and 1990s, professionals, highly educated and earning high salaries, were also part of the same social trajectory (p.88). He suggests that they continued the anti-mainstream sentiment, progressive politics, and environmental credentials with their own refined consumerism (p.89). He suggests that the 'yuppie' has morphed and diversified into a range of sub-groups, each with their own take on fashions and music, but sharing alternative worldviews, progressive political attitudes, and deep social concern.

Foster notes the propensity among the urban 'yuppies' to vote for the Australian Greens and the fact they share many of the values of the Greens, such as deep concern for the environment and the importance of standing up to multinationals. They are also concerned about poverty and refugees,



housing affordability, marriage equality and peace and justice, Foster says.

He believes that most urban people have rejected Christianity along with suburban values. On the other hand, there is an interest in spirituality which he discusses as a 'quest for transcendence'. Foster says that urban spirituality is about a unity that overcomes the dualisms of mind and body, self and others, and self and nature (p.101). It tends to be more comfortable with Eastern paths of experience and feeling, rather than the Western paths of analysis and reason (p.101).

Foster believes that the gospel can be re-framed around many aspects of this urban narrative such as the environment, the concern for the marginalised and for social justice, and the passion for peace and reconciliation. However, he believes a major critique of the urban narrative has to do with the means of

achieving a better world. According to Foster, the gospel says that 'we cannot simply create this kind of society by trying hard', but that evil was defeated in the cross. God calls on us 'to trust that he has destroyed evil, that He is Lord of creation and that He will complete this work' (p.108).

Foster suggests that the methods of communicating with urbanites and suburbanites are different. Urbanites do not respond well to speeches (such as sermons), but want to be engaged in discussion and dialogue.

Good News for Battlers

The battlers have been the working class. Foster sees them and their views of the world captured well in the film *The Castle* in which a proud family in their ramshackle home fight an airport which wants to requisition their home for its expansion. Foster notes that, in Australian cities, the working class has diminished as the middle class has grown. Some of the other groups who are at the bottom of the socio-economic range, such as refugees and some non-Western immigrants, some people with disability and mental illness and some on long-term social benefits, share some characteristics of the battlers, but each of these sub-groups is distinct in their own ways (p.116).

Foster sees the battlers as people whose major objective in life is to survive in a world in which the rich and powerful and those in authority are constantly trying to oppress them. They have disdain for the government as wielding power over them and often sees the church as 'do-gooders' who do not understand them (p.124). They see themselves as victims, deprived of what they are entitled to. The women in the homes are often the people who keep the family together and manage the day to day details of survival. If the men become unemployed, they often lose their sense of identity, self-respect and pride (p.130).

Foster suggests that Jesus was 'a battler'. The birth narratives make that evident. Jesus announced his mission in the synagogue of Nazareth as 'good news to the poor' (p.131). The gospel speaks of a new order in which the last, the powerless, will be first. The system will be overturned. Battlers who lack the security of home ownership and superannuation will find meaning, Foster suggests, in God's care and provision. Foster says the gospel speaks of God overturning injustice as God's new society slowly breaks into the world. He sees God calling the battlers to trust that God will destroy evil and complete the work of justice (p.135).

Summary

The book is most helpful in drawing attention to the fact that there are a variety of cultural narratives in

Table 1. Australian Midi-Narratives Using Tim Foster's Descriptions of Australian City Cultural Narratives

Aspects of the Midi-Narrative	Suburbanites	Urbanites (Yuppies)	Battlers
Aims or goals in life	Financially and physically secure family life	A fair go for all people and high quality education	Survival against the opposing forces of power and wealth
Means of achieving those goals	Good education, well-paying employment and owning a home	Fight for social justice, including gay rights and affordable housing	Earning what one can and taking advantage of one's entitlements
Means of dealing with challenges	Perhaps turning to God	Engage the community to work together to obtain goals	Individual and family perseverance
Environment	Secure, well-spaced housing in leafy suburbs and ownership of large cars	Care for environment. Work for a world that is peaceful and just	Holding on to whatever one has

Australian cities. These narratives include myths and symbols, values and rituals. One way in which CRA's research has attempted to describe these narratives has been to focus on what has been described as 'midi-narratives' (Hughes 2007, p.170). These midi-narratives start with what people consider to be their aims or goals in life, how they see themselves as achieving those aims or goals, and how they meet the challenges along the way. The midi-narrative also considers what sort of environment they want to live in and how that environment is best created. Table 1 uses this concept of 'midi-narrative' as a structure in which to place some of Foster's observations.

It is not at all clear in the book how Tim Foster has come to his descriptions of the various cultural narratives. It would appear that there has been no systematic gathering of information, but rather, an intuitive development of his own experiences. Indeed, Foster has not been systematic in his search for the cultural narrative, but has intuited its shape and its content. As a result, the pictures he draws tend to be a little 'stereo-typical', rather than a careful description of how people actually think and behave. For example, not everyone in the suburban cities aspires to a BMW or Lexus SUV (p.72). Not all the urbanites vote Green or many are not meaningfully involved in the causes of social justice. Perhaps Foster's dismissal of statistics has closed off an important means of obtaining information that would help to ensure that his narratives were carefully balanced and the variability in the

narratives noted. On the other hand, Foster has helpfully noted that Census statistics, for example, are not adequate to give a full picture of how people think, even if they can provide some hints in that direction. He also fails to note that, to some extent, the narratives are related to different stages in life, and many people move from one narrative to another as they move, for example, from life as a single adult or young couple into family life with the responsibility of children.

Theologically, Foster sees the church in strongly evangelical terms and has failed to note that different denominations have related well to different sectors of our Australian city cultures. It would have been more appropriate to title the book 'The Suburban Captivity of the Evangelical Church'. On the other hand, the book usefully draws attention to the variety of different cultural narratives within different sectors of Australian society and the needs to interact with each of these in their own grounds.

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Reference:

Foster, Tim (2014) *The Suburban Captivity of the Church: Contextualising the Gospel for Post-Christian Australia*, Melbourne: Acorn Press.

Hughes, P. (2007) *Putting Life Together: Findings from Australian Youth Spirituality Research*, Melbourne: Christian Research Association.