

The Cult, the Crowd, and the Community: Tensions in Unity and Diversity in Asian Contexts

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Community formation, for whatever reason, is one of the aims of many governments in Asia. These attempts are seen at various levels: at the communal, village, national, and international levels. Various methods are used to create and forge a strong sense of communal identity and sentiments. There are problems encountered in doing so, of course, since the reality in many Asian contexts is the great diversity that exists, sometimes obvious to the onlooker, at other times, more subtle. To what extent should diversity be sacrificed for the sake of creating a unity that is perceived to be both a necessity and a virtue. In some situations the answers seem to be clear, at least in some circles. For instance, in the case of Tibet and China, many, especially in the west, feel that Tibetan culture and identity should not be sacrificed for the sake of strengthening China's national identity. This is seen as a case where diversity is destroyed unjustly for the sake of a pseudo-unity.

But there are other situations where diversity has to be managed to produce a liveable unity. In Singapore, for example, where different races have to live peaceably in a small congested island, ethnic diversity has to be brought together to form a peaceful community. The older generation still remembers with great anxiety the racial riots that took place in 1963. Much has been done to bring the ethnic groups together by creating a Singaporean identity, a larger unity within the diversities that exist. In an article printed in the major English-language newspaper as part of an edition to celebrate Singapore's national day, a photograph was used to portray these realities. The photograph was that of a busy street in Singapore where people of all races and walks of life were walking in various directions. The Deputy Prime Minister commented on the photograph that it was inappropriate and poorly chosen, since it showed people walking in different directions. He preferred a picture which showed greater congruency in people's directions

and efforts. The editor responded by saying that he still believed that the photograph showed sufficiently the notion of a national community.

This debate highlights the tensions that exist between the quest for unity and the reality of diversity. Put in another way, it is the tension between the individual and society. This paper will explore these tensions from an Asian perspective. Much has already been written to explore this area. People like Erich Fromm, Carl Rogers, Reinhold Niebuhr and others have attempted, from their different perspectives, to view the individual as one who has the potential to be mature and good but whose potential is marred and distorted and even destroyed by social forces that function in a pathological and malignant way. In the area of family systems theory and therapy, psychologists and care-givers have developed concepts such as enmeshment and disengagement when speaking about the way families are structured and function. In this paper, I will use the concepts of the cult, the crowd, and the community to explore the tensions that exist between unifying and diversifying forces.

The Cult: Unity Without Diversity

A 1997 court case in Singapore attracted much publicity in the newspapers. It had to do with a group called the Central Christian Church about which articles were written in a Christian magazine published in Singapore. The article asserted that this church was a cult, and the church subsequently sued the magazine for libel. The case brought into the public consciousness practices within the group and attempts to define what a cult is. Expert witnesses were brought from the United States and Australia by both sides of the case. It was claimed that this church was a cult because of the tight control over the members, with the leaders exerting their authority over very personal issues such as the choice of dating and life partners. Tight control was exerted over the members' attendance at church meetings and over their giving of money to the church. The case centred around the definition of a cult.

Referring to religious cults, Gordon Lewis's definition of a cult is that it

designates a religious group which claims authorization by Christ and the Bible but neglects or distorts the gospel, the central message of the Saviour and the Scripture. First, a cult is a religious movement. As such it ought not be confused with an essentially non-religious enterprise...second, a cult claims the

support of Christ and the Bible...Third, a cult nevertheless misses the heart of Christianity.¹

The cult has also been characterised by such things as the use of mind control to influence and control the thinking of the members by demanding total allegiance to a totalitarian worldview, the presence of a powerful charismatic leader who often declares himself or herself to be divine or to have special access to divinity, feelings of exclusivity through the creation of a strong group identity, exploitation of members by demanding that they give their time, money, and affection to the cult, alienation from family members and friends outside the group, and the use of deception to further the aims of the collective group.²

Unity without Diversity

The cult is a way of socially organising a group of people whereby a unity is often forced upon them, for example, in the way they dress, in their thought patterns, in their belief systems, and in their rituals and practices. Individual wishes and diversity do not have a premium in cults. It is easy to find fault with such a social arrangement arguing that it over-rides the concerns and rights of the individual for the sake of the larger group. However, such cultic arrangements have been noted to have some positive features and we shall look at them before examining the pathological patterns of cultic social arrangements.

The Cult in Positive Perspective

In his psychological study of the Unification Church (Moonies), Roger Dean describes the strongly manipulative techniques employed by the cult, and the deceptive strategies used in recruitment.³ Nevertheless, he also argues that there are positive features he noted when studying the cult in some of the American centres. Of the members of the cult, he wrote:

The truth about Moonies (at least as I observed it) is neither dramatic nor simple. Certainly the cult members I met were not the strange or alien creatures the media would have us believe. Rather they are, for the most part, the youthful products of a sanitized suburban environment, holding the same hopes, fears, illusions and dreams as most other middle class Americans.⁴

According to Dean, the potential recruit of a cult is usually one who is marginalised by society, one who is a social misfit or one who is unhappy

with the status quo. Nevertheless, such a person still longs to have social approval and status. Such needs are met by joining a cult such as the Moonies, where the recruit feels accepted and develops a sense of belonging. But there is a cost for doing this and we will explore two aspects of this in the following section.

The Demise of the Individual

The cultic entity takes on its own life and consumes the individual identity of its members. Individual diversity is minimised by the wearing of similar clothes, using similar language, and adopting similar lifestyles and habits. Members are often forced to submit to authoritarian leadership and the relationship between the member and the cultic leader takes on infantile patterns. The individual is subsumed under the larger rubric of the group.

Cultic structures and patterns can be noted and experienced at different levels. One level is the nation. In his fascinating study of the origins and spread of nationalism, Benedict Anderson postulates that nations are in fact "imagined communities."⁵

It is imagined because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion.⁶

According to Anderson, the nation, even the largest one, is firstly imagined as limited. Secondly it is imagined as sovereign. Thirdly, it is imagined as a community, as a fraternity of horizontal relationships worth fighting and dying for. The origins of national consciousness are located in the development of print languages. A common language is a vehicle for a nationally imagined community. If this is so, it will help us to understand why nations attempt to promote and enforce the use of national languages. In a nation with diverse cultures and languages, the national language will be that of the majority ethnic group. India is a good example of this. Many languages are spoken by the diverse ethnic groups found in the nation but Hindi is the official national language. This attempt to unify the nation linguistically is resisted locally by those who fear that their ethnic identities will be destroyed by succumbing to such strategies to produce a more homogenous community. Therefore, regional states such as Tamil Nadu still use their own ethnic languages, thus maintaining the diversity that is within the nation.

A common language, especially if it has a written script, contributes to the formation of communal and national identity. It is for this reason that the Thai government actively resists any attempt by foreign missionaries from developing a written script for the spoken languages of the hill tribes. These missionaries are trying to do this so as to translate literature into the tribal languages. The government does not want any written script for the tribal people because that will strengthen their identity. Anderson correctly points out that while the government resists such attempts, it is quite indifferent to the spoken languages of the hill tribes, since spoken language is not so resistant to changes and attempts to unify a nation linguistically.⁷ It is interesting to note that in China, while there are many spoken dialects, they are all united by a single common script for all. This common script helps to contribute significantly to the national feeling of being Han Chinese.

Besides linguistic means to achieve national identity and consciousness, governments also employ culture and religion as vehicles for creating national unity. In the Malaysian context, the government has repeatedly tried to strengthen the identity of the majority Malays, or bumiputras (sons of the land) as they are called. Almost all Malays are Muslims so much so that it is expected that to be a Malay is to be a Muslim. The government has also made it illegal and punishable for anyone to even try converting a Malay to another religion. Any Malay who converts will also go through severe persecution and trouble. While the national constitution declares the principle of freedom of religion, in reality the government expects a homogenous religious identity among Malays, obviously believing that this religious unity was necessary for ethnic identity. Religious pluralism, while it exists in the larger nation, is nevertheless eschewed among the Malays.

A Muslim opposition party has gone beyond the national government in Malaysia. PAS (Parti Islam), the state government in Kelantan, believes in the islamisation of the nation, that the nation must share Islamic values and practices. It has therefore repeatedly attempted to pass laws in the state that would impose on non-Muslims the same expectations that exist for the Muslims. Night celebrations and art-forms such as wayang kulit (traditional shadow-plays) have been made illegal with the argument that they are against the Islamic way of life. PAS is aware that such rulings will also affect non-Muslims.

A third way in which governments have attempted to create national unity is through political authoritarianism and ideological monopoly. Political diversity and ideological deviations are not normally welcomed in many

Asian nations. This is more so in East and Southeast Asia. In China, while the government under Deng Xiaoping experimented with economic diversification and liberalisation, it resolutely resisted any attempts to do the same in the political arena, as was so painfully evident in what is called the Tiananmen Square massacre in June 1989. Many western intellectuals have condemned Asian political leaders for their unwillingness to allow for greater political diversification through the process of democracy. Asian leaders rebut by saying that there are different ways of experiencing democracy and that authoritarian government fits in better with Asian values which focus on respect for authority and a familial relationship between the ruler and the ruled.

It is for this reason that many nations in Asia have been ruled by the same political entities for years, regular elections notwithstanding. There are also criticisms that those in political power tend to persecute or make it very difficult for opposition political voices. In addition to these, governments have also attempted to define national ideologies and values to eliminate too much diversity among intellectual and political voices. In Indonesia, the government has espoused *pancasila* or the five national principles. One of the principles is belief in God.⁸ This means that the government recognises only those religions which belief in a God. Tribal animistic religions are not recognised and therefore since everyone is expected to belong to one of the officially recognised religions, those who fall outside these are forced to change their religious identities so as to have a recognised status.

In Singapore, the idea of a national ideology was first raised in 1988 and was further developed when the President identified four core values when he opened the seventh parliament in January 1989. He said:

If we are not to lose our bearings, we should preserve the cultural heritage of each of our communities, and uphold certain common values, which capture the essence of being a Singaporean. These core values include placing society above self, upholding the family as the basic block of society, resolving major issues through consensus instead of contention, and stressing racial and religious tolerance and harmony. We need to enshrine these fundamental ideas in a National Ideology. Such a formal statement will bond us together as Singaporeans, with our own distinct identity and destiny. We need to inculcate this National Ideology in all Singaporeans, especially the young.⁹

The present Prime Minister who was then the First Deputy Prime Minister, Mr Goh Chok Tong commented that in recent times in Singapore he has noted a definite shift in values, especially among the younger Singaporeans, from communitarianism to individualism.¹⁰ The government welcomed representations and feedback on the proposed national values and several groups responded. Many expressed the need for a balance between individualism and communitarianism and cautioned against the replacement of individualism with communitarianism. Rather, an equilibrium needed to be found between the two tendencies. This dialogue highlights the tensions that exist in nation building between the need for unity and diversity. How this is achieved, and what the problems are, we will have to take up later. But for now, we need to look at another danger in a cultic structuring of society where unity is achieved at the cost of diversity.

The Cult and the Loss of Personal Responsibility

In forging a strong cultic identity by enforcing conformity and unity, the cult takes over the responsibility for the lives of its members. The cult becomes a strong entity whose energies are fuelled by the wishes, whims and fancies of its leader or leaders.

This loss of personal responsibility is seen in the operation of groups which may tend to function as cults, with cultic structures and functions. The army is an example. Psychiatrist Scott Peck has made a fascinating study of group evil which he discusses in his book, *People of the Lie*.¹¹ In several ways the army functions like a cult. The members wear a uniform, thus reducing individual diversity. Conformity to set patterns and rituals is highly expected in the army; transgressions and deviations are punishable. Unquestioning obedience to authority is held as a virtue on which the army operates.

Peck, who was appointed as chairman of a committee of three psychiatrists to study what is known as the My Lai massacre¹², and to make recommendations for research, suggests that groups have a propensity to descend to a lower level of psychological maturity and moral functioning unless the individuals of the group exercise their individual responsibility for the decisions and behaviour of the group. Drawing from this observation, we can understand how in a group, for instance a committee, the group can take on its own impersonal identity so that responsibility for the group's decision is taken away from the hands of real people and placed in the hands of the group. If this is true, then groups have the potential of

doing much evil unless the individuals of the group are given the opportunity to exercise and take responsibility for their decision. Individual diversity must not be sacrificed for group unity and identity.

The danger of homogenous groups with an enmeshed unity at the expense of diversity is that they have a higher tendency of creating, promoting, and maintaining evil. Large authoritarian structures such as armed forces, have shown repeatedly that this is the case.

In summary, we have briefly looked at the dangers of forcing a unity by minimising or eliminating the diversity in a group. Conformity to the norms of the group can result in the loss of personal identity and fulfillment and this is the danger of attempting to make the life of institutions, at whatever level, more important than the life of the individual. The collective story of totalitarian systems can violate and abuse personal stories. The strong can violate the weak, and therefore this has to be avoided by avoiding tendencies towards cultic structures and functioning. These structures can also diminish personal responsibility and create an environment for evil to thrive as we saw above. It is for these reasons that we need to be vigilant against cultic tendencies. But the opposite trend has also to be guarded against and we shall now look at that polarity.

The Crowd

The opposite extreme to creating unity without diversity is to create diversity without any unity.

While there are forces of globalisation working in the world, there are also equally powerful forces of localisation. The past decade saw the strengthening of regional groupings such as the European Community and the formation of new groupings such as NAFTA (North American Free Trade Agreement), but also the ethnic pluralisation resulting in the breakup of nations such as Yugoslavia and Czechoslovakia. While the latter was quite peacefully done, the former was painfully violent. We shall examine briefly this process of pluralisation that is seen at various levels of life.

Diversity can be healthy and useful in the normal course of life. We saw earlier the danger of seeking unity at the expense of diversity. However, diversity without a unity can also be harmful and leave life meaningless and dry. This is best seen by examining extreme forms of individualism

where people exist as individuals but are alienated from one another and there is a failure of community in the way they are organised.

The Culture of Narcissism

The late American historian, Christopher Lasch, examines what he calls the "culture of narcissism" in modern American society. The failure of community is seen in the growing evidence of selfish behaviour and attitudes. This arises from a loss of faith in society.

Through the intermediary of the family, social patterns reproduce themselves in personality. Social arrangements live on in the individual, buried in the mind below the level of consciousness, even after they have become objectively undesirable and unnecessary - as many of our present arrangements are now widely acknowledged to have become. The perception of the world as a dangerous and forbidding place, though it originates in a realistic awareness of the insecurity of contemporary social life, receives reinforcement from the narcissistic projection of aggressive impulses outward. The belief that society has no future, while it rests on a certain realism about the dangers ahead, also incorporates a narcissistic inability to identify with posterity or to feel oneself part of a historical stream.¹³

This loss of faith in society can be attributed to the loss of social unity in a world of diversities and individualistic trends. There is, in many places, a loss of the kind of unity, which was seen in the way life was organised in medieval times, where villages and towns were structured around the religious perspective on life. The sacred held together the various diverse aspects of life and the diverse members of the community. Today, the forces that tend to cause a fragmentation of life, together with secularising processes and the lack of substitutes to replace the loss of the sacred, all contribute to the loss of community.

Diversity without a satisfying unity can be seen in the way the modern free market operates. This market works on the principle of supply and demand and the desires of individual consumers. It took off the ground when economic producers wanted to expand their trade and therefore created a new middle class which would be turned into a nation of consumers who would buy the products in the marketplace. The result has been a spreading rampant materialism and consumerism that threaten the quality of human

life. This is obvious in the way life has become very competitive, even at the international level. Nations compete for limited markets, believing that having the competitive edge over other nations will ensure national survival. A similar attitude is played out in smaller and more mundane spheres of life.

The free market has been criticised as not encouraging a caring and compassionate society because it creates nervous selfishness and narcissism. It turns the marketplace into a Darwinian jungle where the survival of the fittest is the game. There is little concern for the collective good. There is diversity (individualism) but little unity (community). Ironically, the diversity is lost in the end when it is over-ridden by something larger than itself. We shall see this later. Meanwhile, we shall look at some Asian contexts for this notion of diversity without unity.

Diversity without unity in Asian contexts

In his very helpful analysis of trust in various societies, social analyst Francis Fukuyama discusses how Chinese society is organised economically.¹⁴ Fukuyama asserts that a large percentage of small businesses found in Hong Kong, Taiwan, and Singapore is owned by single families.¹⁵ He also notes that since Chinese society is strongly familistic in nature, its economic patterns are determined and limited by this familial focus. The patterns of economic growth are different in Chinese societies such as Taiwan and Singapore as compared to other Asian nations such as Japan and South Korea. In the latter, the growth has been in terms of the rapid increase in the scale of economic enterprises while in the former it has been achieved by the increase in the number of family-run small businesses.¹⁶ Fukuyama has also pointed out the great difficulty in Chinese family businesses in shifting from family to professional management, as illustrated by the case of Wang Laboratories.¹⁷

The reason for the phenomena mentioned above, according to Fukuyama, is the lack of trust outside the family in Chinese societies. This makes it difficult for people to form groups or organisations, even economic ones, comprising unrelated people. This is well illustrated by Chinese writer Lin Yu-tang's observation that while Japanese society can be likened to a piece of granite, Chinese society functioned like a loose tray of sand.¹⁸ Paradoxically, while Chinese society has been described as authoritarian and hierarchical, patterned along Confucian notions of obligation and conformity, it can also be seen to be highly individualistic, a "loose tray of

sand," where allegiance to larger communities may not be so clearly seen or forthcoming.

In summary, we have briefly looked at the dangers of trying to create in group diversity without meaningful unity. There can be no meaningful and redemptive relationships in a system which is extremely diversified to the point of being individualistic. People living in such an environment would feel alienated. Their relationships would be transactions marked by pragmatism rather than love because of the lack of community. Both the cultic (a piece of granite) and crowd-like tendencies (a loose tray of sand) fail in creating a community which would not only help us secure our human identities, but also live justly and lovingly. Pastoral theology and pastoral care to be meaningful, must look at this carefully. And we now turn our attention to this point.

Unity and Diversity in Community

We have seen both the weaknesses of unity without diversity and diversity without unity. This tension is resolved in community where unity exists in diversity and diversity is organised in a more fundamental unity.

A Trinitarian perspective

Community is ontologically fundamental for human existence and this has theological roots – in the Christian doctrine of the Trinity. The Cappadocian fathers contributed significantly to the development of the Christian doctrine of the Trinity with their formulation which concluded the early church's understanding of the doctrine. Their formulation respected and held in tension both the Jewish tradition of monotheism and the Christian understanding of the divinity of Christ and the Holy Spirit. In more recent times, Karl Barth, Wolfhart Pannenberg, and Karl Rahner have written to argue for the centrality of the doctrine of the Trinity in our theology: In his book, *The One, the Three, and the Many*, theologian Colin Gunton illustrates the dangers of losing the tension between unity and diversity and argues for the necessity for a trinitarian perspective of life, which would be essential for a correct understanding of community. If community is fundamental to divinity, theologically, it should also be fundamental to human being. If God is love, then we who share God's image are also called to love and be loved. This is possible only in community. The basis of this Christian community is the Trinity in whose name we are baptised and incorporated into the life of the community. Our identity is rooted fundamentally in the Trinitarian community.