

Launch of Matthew John Paul Tan's *Justice, Unity, and the Hidden Christ*

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I would like to warmly welcome you all here today. It is my honour to launch my friend and colleague's book, *Justice, Unity, and the Hidden Christ* or, as I have heard him describe it, "Crouching Justice, Hidden Christ".

Matthew John Paul Tan is someone whom I would describe as possessing robust "theological imagination". There is nothing dry or scholastic about him. There is no cultural trope, no pop culture phenomenon safe from his searching theological gaze. With a blog called "The Divine Wedgie", which features posts with titles such as "Faith in the Church of Facebook", "Bonaventure for Environmentalists", and "The Eucharist and the Zombie Apocalypse", "boring" is never a word I would use to describe Tan.

Tan has an uncanny knack for getting inside cultural phenomena in order to understand them, not from the outside, not from what just may appear to be the case, not from abstract theoretical principles, but rather from within their inevitable allegiance to a *logos*, an organizing principle, an animating commitment, an ultimate allegiance. His penchant for descending into the bowels of secular culture is not something done for mere sensationalism, novelty, or perverse imagination, but is rather pursued in the interests of understanding more deeply what Reformed theologian James K.A. Smith has called "secular liturgies". Here, the notion is that secular cultural practices, no less than sacred, in the words of Smith, "shape and constitute our identities by forming our most fundamental desires and our most basic attunement to the world"¹.

Tan's approach in *Justice, Unity, and the Hidden Christ* to the question of social justice and ecumenism as they have been pursued since in the Council is undertaken along these lines. What he thinks has been typical of the post-Conciliar approach here is a lack of appreciation for how the packaging of these pursuits according to the terms and language of secular liberal modernity has detached these important tasks from the evangelical soil of the Gospel, thus unintentionally transforming them into secular liturgies.

At the heart of this critique is his deep cognizance of what I would call the *cultural grammar of an act*. That is, he recognizes that no act or practice will ever be neutral in relation to some ultimate truth claim, some fundamental organizing principle, some object of worship, some theological or metaphysical commitment. Every act is *particular*, rooted in a particular culture and history which means that that act becomes iconic, not of some pure universal reality, but rather of its culture's necessarily partial and always to a certain extent ideological filtering of that reality. In this case, no act "signifies" except by reference to the "cultural" or historical appropriation of reality by any given society or group.

¹ *Desiring the Kingdom*, 25.

At the time of the Council, however, this properly “postmodern” intuition had not yet been fully appreciated. As Tan points out, many of the conciliar Fathers were instead preoccupied with building alliances with Modernity on the basis of a perceived “factual overlap” between Christian practices and secular practices. In this, they, like most of that generation, had little consciousness of the mediatory role that culture plays in the framing or “foregrounding” of knowledge and action: “there was here an impression that the data yielded by observing these cultural categories were self-explanatory, universally accessible and thus universally valid regardless of the social or cultural context within which the observer was situated” (18). So, it was assumed that if liberalism spoke of justice, dignity, freedom, and rights, Christians could be confident that this was more or less something they could agree with (and of course, the whole tone and tenor of large swathes of *Gaudium et Spes* expresses this hope).

In light of this assumption, the conciliar Father’s took up the task of social justice and ecumenism by adopting a program of engagement with civil society based on these apparently “universal” human values, and in this, recognizes Tan, seemed quite content to do away with any notion that the ethos of Christianity had any proper social embodiment or enactment on its own terms. That is, Christianity had to now cloak its claims in the idioms and framing of secular discourse, which of course easily fed into the notion that, publically speaking, the claim of Christ had very little to do with the essential identity of the Christian as Christian in social engagements, except perhaps to “baptize” their actions with an ambiguous intentionality or spirit.

The problem with this, according to Tan, is that in hindsight we now know that what constitutes a Christian act and what constitutes a modern, or *liberal* act, are two very different animals. Once we realized that Modernity was in fact always a particular narrative account of the person, and not simply some distillation of universal human values from a neutral point above culture and tradition, the whole project of correlating Christianity with Modernity descended into crisis, something that thinkers of all stripes and colours have recognized in the past few decades. As Tan points out, at the heart of the Christian act and the liberal act are two different anthropologies, one (the Christian) that is grounded in original peace and relationship, and which is eucharistically consummated in the “politics” of Jesus Christ, and the other (the liberal) which is grounded in original violence and the autonomous individual, and which is consummated in the competitive struggle of all against all in the “politics” of liberal consumer capitalism. Thus, there will be a distinctly different flavour given to acts performed in either context.

And so, were the Church *not* to distinguish between these competing anthropologies, and were it to adopt the grammar of the cultural act of *liberalism*, it would in fact become, as Tan puts it, “the chaplain of the capitalist order” (42). It would necessarily sign over the unique *ethos* of the practices of the peace of Jesus Christ the extent to which it binds itself to the practices—and therefore the metaphysics—of liberal culture. As a consequence, it would now be “extending the cultural logic of the market, and the violent relations that would emit from that logic” (53). More to the point in question, the Church’s attempts to engage ecumenically via the modality of social justice—e.g. to translate Christ’s love for other via a language of justice, rights, dignity, freedom and the like—would be but a particular extension

of the above logic. In in this, it would fail to promote *true* justice and *true* ecumenism, inasmuch as it failed to comprehend that the liberal account of the person is more natively grounded in the ethos of fragmentation, individuality, and violence. As Tan explains, “[w]hen framed by liberalism, any act of social justice eventually can become complicit with maintaining a social fabric which is atomizing and fundamentally grounded in conflict and coercion” (51). When an act of social justice is framed within a liberal context, then what is essential about a specifically *Christian* act—the *person* of Christ, and the destiny of the person in Christ—must give way to the generic, situated, and from Tan’s perspective, *false* universality of a secular reason that in its original act excludes the very possibility of Christ and of a deeper form of human relating beyond the strictures of the primacy of the individual. It has become vividly clear today how notions such as justice, rights, dignity, and freedom can easily be turned against the fundamental tenets of Christian faith.

For Tan, it is impossible that playing according to the rules of liberalism *not* undermine the real allegiance of the Christian. For “when spatial dominance is ceded to the state/society/market complex, even ostensibly Christian acts can declare the ultimate social reality to be something other than the Body of Christ” (62). Tan is convinced that social-political configurations draw the subject into a bodily way of living, thinking, and acting that cannot help but communicate imposing its framing onto the person. And obviously, the way that liberalism masks its own fundamental commitments and presuppositions only makes the whole process that much more insidious. The real tragedy lamented by Tan is that the ruse perpetrated by liberalism was not something that happened despite the best efforts of Christians. Rather, in large part it was aided and abetted by the cultural short-sightedness of a conciliar era that desperately wanted to be relevant and ‘open to the world.’ “In the same way that a ceding of thorns allowed the choking of the Word, the lack of Conciliar analysis of these [liberalism’s] presumptions led to the often-too-easy acceptance of a Theopolitical complex that dulls the confessionally Christian character of the acts of social justice” (83).

Tan’s real complaint is thus about a subject duped into the practices of an alternative worldview by the hidden ontology of liberalism. He does not simply bemoan individualism, atheism, consumerism, materialism and the like in the abstract, as if they were simply the fruits of a moral failure to think ‘rationally’ that could be remedied by better thinking and (perhaps) praying. Rather, his interest lies precisely at the point at which thinking and praying are already rendered void by the *practices* that inexorably pollute the best intentions of the will or heart. Immerse yourself in *these* practices, and you will *become* them: in a liberal society, you will become, to one degree or another, a subject who prizes individuality, freedom “from,” “religious freedom,” the act of consumption, one for whom transcendence is only a nominal veneer.

Conversely—and here we can begin to see Tan’s constructive alternative—immerse yourself in *Christian*, sacramental practices, and you will become a subject who prizes relationship, the ‘freedom’ of being in and for Christ regardless of the cost, and the “consumption” of the Eucharist, the true source of communion (cf. Cavanaugh). You will become someone who sees in the other the image of God, someone who suffers with the other, who enters into genuine communion with the other, who feeds, clothes, and welcomes the other, above all, in

the sharing of Christ's affective love. You will become someone hesitant to divide one's self into rigidly "secular" and "sacred" zones. This, for Tan, ought to be the cultural grammar and economy of practices that inform the task of social justice. And in order to really do this, the Church must embody its own public, both imaginatively and practically: it must make space for not simply the theory of faith that might inform otherwise secular activities, but it must also promote the conditions for a genuinely embodied *praxis* of theory.

One might think that with all of this Tan is poised to embrace a glorious return to "Christendom" in all its' unapologetic and messy splendor, or perhaps a liberation theology style of social engagement. But it's not quite that simple. While he is quite clear that Christianity must come to re-embody a real alternative public, a real site of genuinely counter-cultural embodied practices, in no way does he conceive of this as in any way justifying a coercive form of integralism or immanentization of the eschaton via social action. Tan is not afraid to take the mickey out of both left and right, to identify the ways that each, under the auspices of secular reason, are led by fundamentally liberal commitments that betray the heart of faith. For him, it is essential that the Christian transcend these polarities. For at no point can the properly Christian act be informed by the *telos* of violence, fragmentation, and force. A thick account of Christian identity—e.g. one that embodies a conviction about its universality and its more than merely private articulation—cannot be the excuse to then enlist a "strategic" occupation of space and time *à la* state/capitalist practices, where domination, surveillance, technique, profitability, results, commodification, marketability, rationalization, conformity, management, analysis, regulation and the like are 'virtues' (67–68).

For Tan, the alternative between the loss of identity by either subservience to liberalism or the adoption of its violent *modus operandi* is what should be Christianity's "tactical" occupation of time and space. That is, its practices and social engagements take place under and are thoroughly shaped by the eschatological sign of the coming kingdom. Everything the Christian does, every act of the intellect and the body, every contribution to social justice, every attempt at ecumenical dialogue, must take place within the *logos* of Christ's body, the body that has entered time and space, and definitively not the body of secular politics. This is realized above all in a "micro-politics" within Christianity understood as constituting a "concrete alternative communal site" (63), rather than a corporate or political site. And the character of the relations within this site must thus be robustly eucharistic: "Eucharistic practice poses a challenge to the status quo because the Eucharist interrupts this flattened time by having eternity 'enter history,' making the liturgy a simultaneously historical and eschatological event that transforms temporal, and indeed, political experience" (70).

What this means concretely, of course, in the context of the hegemony of secular liberalism is the question. Tan's vision is not a program or a strategy; it is not a rallying cry for the Church to take up an activist role vis-à-vis secularity in any way that would concretely invest it in those practices. Nor is it a project that anticipates social victory any time soon. Rather, it is first a call for the self to deeply consider his or her fundamental allegiance and the way this allegiance manifests itself in practices. On this plane, Tan's project is fundamentally theological, ontological, and anthropological at heart. The Christian self is called to discover

that their way of being can only be understood “from the standpoint of Trinitarian theology,” where “a person is no longer looked at as a discrete category. Instead, its definition is set in relation to other categories” (47).

At its heart, Tan’s project is an exercise in the imagination. He wants us to think about the cultural grammar of an act, think about the way acts pull us into a world. He wants us to think about our fundamental allegiances. He wants us to think about the way the Church has been complicit in modes of violence not proper to her being, so that we will not repeat the same mistakes ourselves. He wants us to think about how bearing witness to Christ in a social context always involves a certain shattering of the categories and politics of both left and right. In other words, the same imagination that has given us “Zombie Jesus” here gives us invaluable insight into the grammar of the act of social justice and ecumenism.

In conclusion, Tan has crafted a welcome addition to an ever-growing body of literature that continues to deepen analysis of Christianity’s relation to culture, practices, and the presuppositions of the present state/society/market complex of liberalism. He ably shows how an act is *necessarily* cultural, how it cannot slough off its implicit commitment to the lifeworld that constitutes it, and the way in which a thick account of Christian practices can out-narrate the practices of liberalism, providing a basis for an economy of genuine social practices. What we have here, I would say, is essential reading for an understanding of the way the grammar of the Christian act demands its own visible economy of practices. How this might be realized fully in our own times is not something that we can yet foresee but, as Tan helps us see, the first step lies in our willingness to *imagine* a social space situated, not by the practices of liberal capitalism, but by the practices of Love.