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Beneath the Surface of Multicultural Issues

Nick Eastmond

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A difficulty we face as teachers is knowing how to balance positive and negative sides of our lessons and to build a note of realism into a message of idealism. Maintaining this balance is challenging. This article examines this challenge based on observations my wife and I made during a three-month stay on Mauritius.

Mauritius is an island in the Indian Ocean about five hundred miles east of Madagascar. Many people know of the demise of the dodo bird on Mauritius but are otherwise unfamiliar with the island. In two classes I taught, I used a video from the Franklin Covey Leadership Series entitled *Celebrating Differences: Mauritius*.¹ In the video, management consultant Steven R. Covey argues that an organization in the United States or anywhere in the world could learn some lessons about incorporating diversity from the people of Mauritius. Each time I used the video in class, I would say, “I’ve arranged to spend part of a sabbatical year on that island. When I get there, I will find out if Covey’s assessment was true or not.” The students would smile, knowing that the reality of a culture seldom measures up to its ideal.

At the first seminar I gave at the University of Mauritius, I mentioned the Covey film and passed around the brochure about it. Everyone agreed that this acceptance of diversity was the message that Mauritians tried to convey to the rest of the world but that there are tensions that run much deeper. I inferred that there was a second half to the story. What I found, upon closer examination, was a number of

features of the local culture that supported multiculturalism, as well as some that negated or diminished it. In addition to the benefits of multiculturalism, there was a price to pay for toleration.

Factors Favoring Multicultural Acceptance

The 1.2 million inhabitants of Mauritius are generally divided into four major groups: Hindu (52 percent), Muslim (18 percent), Chinese (3 percent), and general population (27 percent), which includes Creole of African descent and Franco-Mauritians (less than 1 percent).² The Covey video notes how these groups have learned to respect and value each other, often observing each other's holidays and attending ceremonies of the other groups.

In my view, certain factors portrayed in the video build multicultural acceptance:

- Perhaps because of the Hawaii-like climate, the island is relatively calm as people go about their lives.
- Only citizens with special permits are allowed to have firearms. Only police guarding high-security items (like bank deliveries) carry guns.
- Literacy rates for the island are high, reported at 84 percent for adults ages fifteen and above in 2000.³
- Most people are bilingual or trilingual. Primary school instruction is generally in French and secondary school in English. The University of Mauritius, as well as the country, observes English as the official language. However, the first language for most is Mauritian Creole, then French. All major newspapers are in French, and many television programs are in French and Mauritian Creole. To an American observer, the ability of most people to switch immediately from one language to another is nothing short of amazing.

Strains on the Fabric of Multicultural Acceptance

It should come as no surprise that there could be flaws in the idyllic vision of this tropical paradise. Certain habits of mind and behaviors can be characterized as promoting tolerance of others' practices and beliefs, but some habits of the tolerant island border on unacceptable for those not from Mauritius.

Unequal wealth distribution. Because the land was completely uninhabited by humans prior to the arrival of the Dutch colonists from 1605 onward, there were no indigenous people to be dispossessed. The

descendants of the French colonists, who came after the Dutch had abandoned the island, are called Franco-Mauritians and are generally well-to-do. Today they account for less than 1 percent of the population but own most of the sugar estates and control an estimated 60 percent of the nation's wealth, a condition recently decried as "economic apartheid."⁴

Problem avoidance. "There seems to be a tendency," observes one French expatriate who now holds Mauritian citizenship, "of knowing that a problem exists but conspicuously avoiding its mention in conversation." Instead, safer topics are discussed, often at length, but the known problem of inequality is never addressed or solved.

Tolerance of abusive behavior. Some behavior that would be socially disruptive in another context is tolerated in Mauritius. For example, we knew a family in which, due to a longstanding family disagreement, a nephew gave the silent treatment to his aunt in her own home, over many months. Both husband and wife chose to tolerate this pattern of behavior that seemed unacceptable to me. It seemed that such behavior could be tolerated in Mauritius more readily than it would have been elsewhere.

Aberrations in public behavior. Sometimes disruptive public behavior like cutting in line and aggressive driving is tolerated in Mauritius when it would be retaliated against or penalized in the U.S. The accident rate per capita on the highways is reported as the highest in the world.⁵

Underemployment and social alienation. There is a historical legacy of both slavery of Africans prior to 1839 and massive use of indentured Indian workers, under deplorable living and working conditions over the next century.⁶ The net result is general landlessness, and large numbers of relatively low-paid workers among the descendants of both groups.

Ethnic-based economic muscle flexing. Since the country's independence from Britain in 1968, a rise in the number of Hindu people, the Mauritian ethnic majority, receiving special advantages from the system is evident. For example, from my experience and my inquiries, I discovered that of a dozen paid automobile drivers for the University of Mauritius, every one was from the Hindu majority. Certain classes of government workers—such as postal workers, police officers, and teachers—are almost entirely staffed by the Hindu majority. The irony is that before independence in 1968 these types of jobs were reserved for the colonials and the Hindus were systematically excluded. In

today's society, the minority Creole population is often excluded even though their ancestors have been on the island for centuries longer.

Legal inequalities and stereotyping. Sometimes the tactic of blaming the victim of poverty is invoked, alleging that members of a certain group are lazy, when in practice they are blocked from certain lines of employment, as explained above.

Race riots. We became aware that at times tension did erupt into race riots, the most recent being in 1999. A news article at the time reported that "at least four died in clashes with police." These riots were reportedly the worst seen in thirty years.⁷ Speaking of such tensions, while we were in Mauritius, one Creole man described his view: "We all know that tolerance of differences is required [for us to get along on this island]. We put up with it and put up with it [the injustices], but finally it erupts. Then things calm down and life goes on." Everyone is aware that the tourist trade can quickly vanish if ethnic tensions mount. As we heard in South Africa, "Nothing kills tourism like a dead tourist." Keeping the current economy operating, particularly the tourism sector, requires widespread tolerance of ethnic and cultural differences, and all segments of the society generally accept that fact.

To sum up, the Covey video is accurate in portraying an impressive mix of cultures, but these are normal people working within their unique cultural milieu, and there is more than the positive side to see. In fairness to the Covey organization, it should be noted that the race riots described above occurred a full year after the release of the video and were apparently the worst seen in three decades. However, as in much of human society, much more exists than first meets the eye.

Implications for Teachers

How would knowing about the broader picture help a teacher or observer of multiculturalism? To understand issues affecting a multicultural class, it is necessary to go below the positive sheen to deal with some tensions beneath the surface.

As religious educators, we may have a tendency to overlook the negative. For example, typical sayings in American Latter-day Saint culture are, "If you don't have something nice to say about someone, don't say it" and "Accentuate the positive; eliminate the negative." We try to focus on positive aspects of a class over the long term. We have our reasons for that emphasis, and they are often quite defensible. Teachers see this theme in the poem "The Touch of the Master's Hand" and in the story of Johnny Lingo and his eight-cow wife. In education circles, we speak of the value of the Pygmalion effect, drama-

tized by the character of Eliza Doolittle in the musical *My Fair Lady*: treat students the way you believe that they should be, and they will most often work to meet those expectations.⁸ We believe that seeing a person through the Lord's eyes—as the prophet Samuel was able to see the boy David as the powerful king he would become—is our ideal in interpersonal relations.

Yet we must not overlook the unsavory aspects of a situation that may lead to a blindness of racial or cultural tensions with long-term disastrous consequences. Tensions festering under the surface can build and eventually erupt in violence. As one Mauritian sister, just returned from a mission in the Congo, said to our congregation on the island, “We were taught that in order to really love the people [on our mission], we needed to see both the positive and the negative sides of them: the positive to appreciate their uniqueness and let them feel our love for them, and the negative to be able to help them to improve.”

Beyond that, if students perceive that messages received in class are only half truths, they will come to suspect the credibility of the other messages, concluding that the rest of the message may contain falsehoods also. I believe that we have to work to always be on the side of honesty and full disclosure, not avoiding the negative when it is obviously there. I appreciate the advice of President Spencer W. Kimball for truth telling in journal writing, a position that has relevance in a teaching about multicultural issues as well: “Your journal should contain your true self rather than a picture of you when you are ‘made up’ for a public performance. There is a temptation to paint one’s virtues in rich color and whitewash the vices, but there is also the opposite pitfall of accentuating the negative. Personally I have little respect for anyone who delves into the ugly phases of the life he is portraying, whether it be his own or another’s. The truth should be told, but we should not emphasize the negative.”⁹

In all our dealings with others, we have to keep both positive and negative elements in mind, and act accordingly. In our teaching, we have to stay connected to both the positive and negative, to keep our messages grounded in reality. That is the challenge of honesty.¹⁰

A Balance of Realism and Idealism

The General Authorities work hard to undercut the cultural blindness described above by viewing both the positive and the negative aspects of racial situations. A recent talk by President Gordon B. Hinckley in the priesthood session of April 2006 conference provides a welcome balance between realism and idealism; he does not mince

words in describing our current situation. He asks: “Why do any of us have to be so mean and unkind to others? Why can’t all of us reach out in friendship to everyone about us?” Then he responds:

I have wondered why there is so much hatred in the world. . . .

Racial strife still lifts its ugly head. I am advised that even right here among us there is some of this. I cannot understand how it can be. It seemed to me that we all rejoiced in the 1978 revelation given President Kimball. I was there in the temple at the time that that happened. There was no doubt in my mind or in the minds of my associates that what was revealed was the mind and the will of the Lord.

Now I am told that racial slurs and denigrating remarks are sometimes heard among us. I remind you that no man who makes disparaging remarks concerning those of another race can consider himself a true disciple of Christ. Nor can he consider himself to be in harmony with the teachings of the Church of Christ. How can any man holding the Melchizedek Priesthood arrogantly assume that he is eligible for the priesthood whereas another who lives a righteous life but whose skin is of a different color is ineligible?

Throughout my service as a member of the First Presidency, I have recognized and spoken a number of times on the diversity we see in our society. It is all about us, and we must make an effort to accommodate that diversity.

Let us all recognize that each of us is a son or daughter of our Father in Heaven, who loves all of His children.

Brethren, there is no basis for racial hatred among the priesthood of this Church. If any within the sound of my voice is inclined to indulge in this, then let him go before the Lord and ask for forgiveness and be no more involved in such.¹¹

President Hinckley points to the positive features of our doctrine, including the 1978 revelation on priesthood. He testifies that we are all children of our Father in Heaven and that God loves all of His children, regardless of color and ethnic background, and so should we love our siblings. But he also points to racial slurs, the attitudes of superiority that separate one group from another, and the basic hatred and fear that underlie racist actions. The talk includes both the good and the bad elements of diversity in our world.

The Doctrine of Inclusion

Another example of dealing with prejudice toward outsiders was a conference talk by Elder M. Russell Ballard entitled “Doctrine of Inclusion.” He notes that in the parable of the good Samaritan the Savior deliberately made a point about ethnicity:

Every time I read this parable I am impressed with its power and its simplicity. But have you ever wondered why the Savior chose to make the hero of this story a Samaritan? There was considerable antipathy between the Jews and the Samaritans at the time of Christ. Under normal circumstances these two groups avoided association with each other. It would still be a good, instructive parable if the man who fell among thieves had been rescued by a brother Jew.

His deliberate use of Jews and Samaritans clearly teaches that we are all neighbors and that we should love, esteem, respect, and serve one another despite our deepest differences—including religious, political, and cultural differences.¹²

It seems to me that we as teachers might choose to highlight good works of people who are commonly looked down on in our society. Highlighting the contributions of a minority group or individual can help create a sense of belonging and camaraderie. Praising the down-trodden seems to be at least part of Elder Ballard's message.

In the remainder of his talk, he describes two success stories. In one a death occurred in a family who was not affiliated with our Church, yet the local ward's compassionate response was overwhelming and positive. In the other he told of a member of the Church and a Jewish woman; both of them lived a long way from home and became very close friends.

But, in addition, Elder Ballard candidly points out certain lamentable practices of some members of the Church who teach their children to avoid making friends with people of other races or religions:

Perceptions and assumptions can be very dangerous and unfair. There are some of our members who may fail to reach out with friendly smiles, warm handshakes, and loving service to all of their neighbors. At the same time, there may be those who move into our neighborhoods who are not of our faith who come with negative preconceptions about the church and its members. Surely good neighbors should put forth every effort to understand each other and be kind to one another regardless of religion, nationality, race, or culture.

Occasionally I hear of members offending those of other faiths by overlooking them and leaving them out. This can occur especially in communities where our members are the majority. I have heard about narrow-minded parents who tell children that they cannot play with a particular child in the neighborhood simply because his or her family does not belong to our Church. This kind of behavior is not in keeping with the teachings of the Lord Jesus Christ. I cannot comprehend why any member of our Church would allow these kinds of things to happen. I have been a member of this Church my entire life. . . . I have never taught—nor have I ever heard taught—a doctrine of exclusion. I have never heard the members of this Church urged to be anything

but loving, kind, tolerant, and benevolent to our friends and neighbors of other faiths.¹³

In these two instances of our General Authorities counseling members of the Church to improve their levels of tolerance and acceptance of people different from themselves, we see a pattern of (1) praising good practice where it is found, (2) citing bad practice and labeling it as such, and (3) drawing attention to gospel principles that should guide all of our actions. It seems that teachers in the seminaries and institutes, as well as Sunday School and other teachers, could profit by these examples. These are real, ongoing problems. W. E. B. Du Bois cited “the color line” (racism) as the central problem of the twentieth century,¹⁴ and it seems fair to say that it has spilled over into the current century as well.

Showing Our Beliefs by Our Actions

There is, of course, one more element in teaching behavior, and that concerns our actions. It will not do for us to espouse principles of inclusion but then to show disdain and revulsion toward people different from ourselves. An example of how to deal with someone from another culture would be Christ’s matter-of-fact but respectful treatment of the Samaritan woman at the well. His lack of reserve was so noticeable that the woman herself commented on it. Christ dealt with her in a way that showed his recognition of her as a daughter of God, not as a woman who had “had five husbands,” was living with a man who was not her husband, and somehow needed to be shamed (see John 4:9).

Another historical example of dealing well across racial and cultural boundaries was President Abraham Lincoln in his dealings with Frederick Douglass, a former escaped slave and then a leader of the Abolitionist movement. Douglass praised Lincoln in a letter: “In all my interviews with Mr. Lincoln I was impressed with his entire freedom from popular prejudice against the colored race. He was the first great man that I talked with in the United States freely, who in no single instance reminded me of the difference between himself and myself, of the difference of color, and I thought that all the more remarkable because he came from a state where there were black laws.”¹⁵ That was high praise for a president who had many detractors during the difficult Civil War days.

Conclusion

In an age of international terrorism and social upheaval, the ongoing calm of life of most Mauritians is admirable. From my point of view, however, tolerance and tranquillity require compromises that can leave tensions under the surface. The lessons that Mauritians can teach the rest of the world, about how to respect and value other cultures are many. So in my view, we need to see beyond the calm on the surface of multiculturalism to the deeper levels that are part of the experience of life. As teachers, we can find ways to address real issues in race and diversity matters, pointing out good and bad aspects of current situations, but always teaching correct principles and demonstrating our belief in them through our actions. ■ RE

Notes

An earlier version of this paper appeared in the newsletter of the Utah Chapter of the National Association for Multicultural Education, March 2006, 1, 3.

1. *Celebrating Differences: Mauritius*, videocassette, Salt Lake City: Franklin Covey, 1998.

2. Central Statistical Office of Mauritius, 2001–2002; <http://statsmauritius.gov.mu>.

3. Central Statistical Office of Mauritius, 2001–2002.

4. D. Viraswamy, “Effects of Globalization in Mauritius,” speech given at the University of Mauritius, August 24, 2005.

5. U.S. State Department bulletin provided to U.S. citizens arriving in Mauritius, 2005.

6. John Addison and K. Hazareesingh, *A New History of Mauritius* (Rose Hill, Mauritius: Editions de l’Ocean Indien).

7. Tricenter News, “Mauritian riot after murder of Berger Agathe,” February 20, 1999; <http://www.raceandhistory.com/historicalviews/mauritianriot.htm/>.

8. Robert Rosenthal and L. Jacobsen, “Pygmalion in the Classroom,” *Urban Review* 3, no. 1 (1968): 16–20.

9. Edward L. Kimball, *Lengthen Your Stride: The Presidency of Spencer W. Kimball* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2005), 185–86.

10. Frances Menlove, “The Challenge of Honesty,” *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 1, no. 1 (Spring 1966): 44–53.

11. Gordon B. Hinckley, “The Need for Greater Kindness,” *Ensign*, May 2006, 58.

12. M. Russell Ballard, “Doctrine of Inclusion,” *Ensign*, November 2001, 36.

13. Ballard, “Doctrine of Inclusion,” 36–37.

14. W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (New York: Bantam Classic, 1989), xxxi.

15. Russell Freedman, *Lincoln: A Photobiography* (New York: Clarion, 1987), 103–4.