

Engaging Cultural Critique with Gracious Presence



The following is an excerpt from an interview with pastor Tim Coomar on City to City's [How to Reach the West Again](#) podcast. In the discussion, Coomar challenges the church to actively listen to and engage with critiques of worldliness in the church to bring the hope of the gospel to a hurting world.

BRANDON J. O'BRIEN: You pastor in Athens. Can you start us off by explaining what sort of cultural and intellectual influences are shaping the way young Athenians think about culture, faith, and each other? What questions or issues are foremost in their minds right now?

TIM COOMAR: Mine is an inner-city context; Athens is a capital city in Europe. It has many features of a global city and Western culture that you would find in many other European capitals. It's also, in part, a Greek Orthodox context, but the younger people are trying to escape from the shackles of traditionalism. To be more specific, they're sensitive to complicated social issues—but there are plenty who would not *actively* engage in activism because they want to remain more mainstream. They might post on social media, but they wouldn't necessarily attend a protest, for instance.

However, I am in contact with those who *are* directly engaged and involved in trying to change things, trying to be involved in the day-to-day life of the city. And the interesting thing is that these people are setting the tone of public discourse in a way. The issues they're discussing, even if they are not necessarily part of the mainstream public discourse today, will be at the forefront tomorrow, specifically due to their activism. They don't often have political victories, but they may have an even more significant impact because of how they're able to

shape the direction of culture and the terms of public discourse. It's interesting being right in the middle of that for me—you kind of get to see what the Athenian culture (and Greek culture, by extension) of tomorrow looks like.



BJO: From your point of view, what critiques of traditional Western culture do you see that you agree with, find helpful, or maybe even align with your own critiques and concerns as a believer?

TC: I think one of the big ones would be that Western culture tends to center itself. Greece occupies an interesting position between the East and the West, having features of both. The Enlightenment bypassed Greece completely—we've never had that kind of experience. Young people do recognize that in Western society there are more opportunities for personal and professional progress without some of the more traditional, static structures in place. But at the same time, they are aware of how poorly Greek people have been treated by the rest of Europe. On the political end of things, though Greece has often attempted to act as a modern Western democracy, it has been treated as a backward Eastern nation. The country has never had the sense that it's in a partnership of equals, even when it's included with the rest of the West.

Young Greeks know that tax evasion and corruption are an issue, but at the same time, they know that the issues of debt and political corruption exist in many other countries, even in the West. Yet, for some reason, Greece gets singled out. So, they don't identify with the West, even though they want to be part of it. It creates a kind of uneasy situation, but because of it, Greek people are more aware of this tendency of Western culture to center itself.

A couple of other critiques that are big in Greece are the church—it's considered part of the Western narrative and a barrier to progress—and the idea of the moral, cultural, and political bankruptcy of the West. There is the sense that in the midst of all of this crisis, leaders genuinely don't seem to have anything to offer. As I said earlier, it's more and more common for young people in cities to have a social conscience and to be sensitive to various issues, but when they look around for leadership, they aren't seeing anyone with serious answers, so they are beginning to frame this tension in terms of a failing of Western culture itself.

They see people in power chasing power for its own sake rather than working towards solutions for their people.

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It's like being between a rock and a hard place. Even if one believes that Western culture has certain principles that, in theory, would be able to right the ship, there's no one to turn to, no institutions left that would be able to serve that function. Because they're all considered to have not just failed, but are part of the problem, basically.

BJO: Because the church is allegedly part of the broader Western culture that Greek youth have largely lost confidence in, are there particular critiques of Christianity that young Athenians are highlighting?

TC: Well, here's where things get slightly more complicated. The critiques of Christianity and the church in Greece are mostly directed at the Eastern Orthodox Church, so I have to answer that question in two stages. Firstly, I have to name the critiques I'm hearing, but then apply them to my own context as an evangelical Christian in Greece.

The main critiques we hear are things such as the church not being accessible—they don't speak in the vernacular, even in the liturgy. It's a more ancient form of the language so that it's intentionally obtuse. It fosters a mysticism where things are not supposed to be accessible in a rational sense.

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One other issue that they have with the church is that it is in love with power. There's also the church's relationship with the state. Technically, Greece doesn't have a union of church and state, but in practice it does. Children are forced to take part in religious ceremonies in school from a very young age; the bishops have an incredible amount of power and closeness to political figures.

And I don't know if it's fair to make this connection, but it does seem that the mysticism and the power dynamic go hand-in-hand. When you're not opening yourself up to a rational inquiry, it's easy to remain unchallenged, for everything to stay in place. Now, obviously, the mysticism of liturgical rites doesn't exist for that reason—there are historical and theological reasons for that—but it does seem quite convenient to maintaining power. It provides a reason not to change. It causes the churches to be seen as an obstacle to progress.

People are fed up with the church apparently being more interested in gold than feeding the poor. They're not welcoming to the foreigners; there's even a hostile rhetoric against immigrants and refugees. They don't speak truth to power. It's

very patriarchal—there are a bunch of men running the show with women having no voice. And these kinds of things weigh heavily on young people. There's this idea of hypocrisy; people know what the church is supposed to do, but there is little direct contact with the Bible or Christianity itself. Enlightened Western society just doesn't have any place for this hypocritical presence anymore.

BJO: In Athens, as well as in other large portions of Europe, a person's primary exposure to Christianity is probably not evangelical Christianity. It will likely be some sort of a traditional denomination or a state denomination. Do you face any particular assumptions or concerns about evangelical Christianity in Athens, or are you off the radar altogether?

TC: Where I am, people are fairly well-read, so generally they would be able to make the distinction. In a sense, they would almost initially relax upon hearing that we are Protestant Christians. So, a lot of that critique I just mentioned wouldn't be the first thing on their minds. But instead, they might think of televangelists or Christian nationalists in America. They would want to establish whether or not we have any connection with that, and they'd be wary of us until they found out whether or not that was the case. You can see that the contact people do have with evangelicals or evangelical groups is almost never a positive experience for people in Greece.



BJO: Whether it's Orthodoxy or the associations with evangelicalism, or even your own experience in the networks that you're part of, how do you process the critiques of people who have concerns about Christianity? How do you decide which ones to inform your ministry and shape how you engage?

TC: That's a great question. We often refer to Acts 17 as a great example of cultural engagement. We see Paul quote pagan philosophers back to the pagan culture as a way to connect with them on their own terms but also as a way to challenge them through their own beliefs. This is something that we have followed and sought to train ourselves to do, but I'm beginning to realize more

and more the necessity of another part of the process, which is to challenge the culture of the *church* by means of these critiques leveled at it by the culture.

Most of the negative rhetoric directed at the church by culture pertains either to disagreements they have with certain Christian doctrines and moral teachings or to the bad behavior of the church. As evangelicals, what I'm seeing is that we tend to automatically get into one of two modes: with regard to the doctrines, we rush to arm ourselves with the arguments, explanations, and statistics necessary to defend the doctrines under attack. With regard to the bad behavior, we usually just shrug it off—at least in Greece.

And the long and short of it is that, in both cases, we don't really engage. We simply defend our position without interrogating it, without checking to see if those critiques have any kind of purchase to cause us to analyze our culture or do some soul-searching. This has lots of negative effects that I'm beginning to see more and more.

Firstly, it means that we are becoming less and less able to hear what people are trying to say to us. So, people might be saying something that we need to hear—maybe they're not saying it in the best way, but it doesn't mean that there's nothing to critique. And by fostering a relationship with culture that's more reactive rather than proactive, we eliminate our ability to hear what they're saying to us.

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Tom Holland has a brilliant analysis of the “Me Too” movement. Greece is going through its own “Me Too” movement in a huge way, not just the kind dominated by celebrity culture, but including the issues of femicides and domestic abuse.

Holland argues that there seems to be a popular perception that the Me Too movement is widely advocated by the children of the sexual revolution—not just feminists, but people who would advocate for sexual freedoms and free love and the throwing off of the shackles of tradition. But Holland takes us back to the Roman empire. He says in the Roman empire, the sexual ethic was as follows: if you were a male Roman citizen, you had the right to sexually use anyone you wanted in any way you wanted, as long as they were below you on the social ladder. Then, Christianity comes in and basically puts a stop to that. It tells powerful men that they cannot use other people sexually in any way that they want, that they have to learn to control themselves.

The “Me Too” movement is saying the exact same thing, so the “Me Too” movement is not the continuation of the sexual revolution; in a sense, it's actually a return to Christian morality. Then, Holland makes the brilliant point that the Greek god Dionysus—who is essentially the embodiment of the sexual revolution and this idea of free love—was essentially a rapist, as were many of the powerful men who served as models for that ancient culture and sexual ethic.



But here's the thing: you don't get to Holland's conclusion without addressing the patriarchy. And, in my experience, this is where most evangelical Christians stumble. I think Christians are very happy to talk about how harmful the sexual revolution has been for society, but they confine the discussion to matters of sexual practice. The connection that Holland is making is not about ethics and morality on an individual level. He's talking about structures within society. He's talking about men being able to do whatever they want.

When you have this knee-jerk response to the discussion that's taking place in the culture about the issues having to do with the patriarchy and those conversations are shut down by Christians, you lose all ability to take that critique. For me, the church can find not only its relevance in the eyes of the culture again but also a powerful critique of the culture by going through that whole process.

The reason why Holland's argument is so powerful is that it incorporates that kind of structural injustice. If we take that, apply it to the church, and then make the argument, culture will see we are doing exactly what they've been asking for. Once you have Christians who say, "Yes, we see this, and we recognize that this is a problem in the church as well, but here's how the gospel speaks to both of us and calls us to repentance both on the individual level and the structural level," then all of a sudden that argument becomes compelling.

BJO: What I hear you inviting us to do is recognize that the critiques of the broader culture will have some bearing on our own institutions and organizations to the extent that we participate in those things. And then we can model the self-examination that the broader culture is asking for and lead the example of recognizing those dynamics in ourselves.

TC: We often refer to the problem of hypocrisy. This is the major issue that people have with the church, but what do we do? We immediately individualize it by saying the way to address the issue of hypocrisy is for each of us to start living more in line with what we believe. And that's certainly a huge part of the

problem, but by rushing to individualize the issue, we fail to address the problem at the macro level.

Of course, hypocrisy is a problem, but I think we also need to start talking more about worldliness. For instance, what are the problems of the church when it comes to the subjects to which we just referred? The problem is not only in the fact that you also have instances of sexual abuse and misconduct within the church. We also need to start talking about how the issue is not so much hypocrisy, per se, that the abuses are individual cases, but that the church has borrowed the mindset of society—it has adopted a worldly attitude and view of sexuality. And society itself is naming this as a problem, but the church is refusing to accept its existence. Usually what you're seeing is that they'll maybe concede an issue exists outside the church, but they refuse to accept that it's something that the church needs to deal with as well.

So, when I talk about worldliness, it's about allowing the issues that are being brought to our attention by the broader culture to wash over us and start asking those same questions about church culture—and recognizing that maybe the root of the problem is that there's more of the world in the church than we were prepared to admit.



BJO: How would ministry leaders' preaching change if they started to process these critiques more? How do they also help their congregation process them?

TC: Often, examples from the culture are used in sermons as a way to accentuate a point that is being made. However, much of what is taking place in the culture

could be received as a call from the culture to repentance. And I think that can be so powerful because we don't realize how much a part of the culture we are.

When someone receives this call, it's usually framed in biblical language directed at them by a pastor. It can be easy for non-Christians or even believers who have heard the same type of language many times to write it off. If that same call, though, comes to them in a way that they're already familiar with and resonates with them, and they are able to see how this call is going to help them accomplish what the gospel is calling them to do, that has a huge amount of power to drive down deep into people's hearts.

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In my own preaching, I want to get people to take the issue seriously in the way that the world is helping us to take it seriously, because in many cases it's a blind spot for us. But I also want us to go where the gospel takes us so we can see the places that we've been viewing issues of injustice incorrectly—that we are called to fight against that injustice as well as acknowledge where we're more of a perpetrator than we realized. My engagement needs to be enriched and driven by this attitude of gospel repentance.

So much of activism is driven by guilt and tokenism, and the ones who are serious about it often run out of steam. No individual or group has the resources required for facing down these massive systems of injustice that exist. What Christians need to say is, “The only real resources you have for being in this fight come from the gospel.”

When Christians try to shut down these types of conversations, it limits people in the church from seeing how transformative the gospel is. It also cuts those who need that fight to be validated out of the conversation. There is no true, lasting resolution to all the injustices we experience in this life. The hope of the gospel is the resurrection. It is the new creation. Cutting that out of the conversation entirely and not helping them complete that picture removes the possibility of helping them remain in the church in any meaningful way—in order to continue that journey of engagement, they have to go elsewhere.

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BJO: What makes you hopeful in these current circumstances? What calms your anxiety in the face of what seem to be really difficult challenges in ministry in the Western world?

TC: When I look at the political scene and social media and all of these industries that are driven by what could only be defined as a wall—people being at each other's throats—I see people tired of being at war. By being a church that extends the hand of friendship where it's not expected, by being gracious in our interactions with people, people are bowled over.

The only way for the church to live in a space of grace is for us to take the gospel and apply it to our cultural engagement. Otherwise, we are going to have an

attitude of pride, defensiveness, and moral superiority. When we're intentional about applying the gospel in order to be a gracious presence in a world at war, I've seen what a difference that can make.

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And there's only one explanation for this—it's the Holy Spirit that creates this peace between us. He's starting to reverse all of the effects of the war. We're seeing doors being opened for the gospel to be heard, but the space is created by the church acting as this gracious presence. That opens up a space for the gospel to be heard. And we know that that is the only hope.



About the Author

Tim Coomar is the co-pastor of Exarcheia Church, a congregation in downtown Athens that he planted in 2013 with Alexandros Pipilios. He and Alexandros also help oversee the vision of Polis, a church planting network in Athens.