

Christian History in Cross-Cultural Perspective

A great deal of Donald A. McGavran's insight can be traced to the unique advantage he had of growing up in India as a third generation missionary.

by Ralph D. Winter

There before McGavran's eyes were not only the expectable ethnic and linguistic divisions of the sub-continent (in which every given geographical area has its own area culture)—what is called *horizontal segmentation*. He early encountered the *vertical segmentation* of the world's most rigidly stratified system of social classes. The very fact that India's castes long constituted a highly visibly quasi-official structure meant that his perspective as he traveled in other parts of the world remained highly sensitized to social barriers (those barriers arising from other than racial and linguistic differences), even in places where no overt social categorization of such things existed. No wonder he has been accused of reading into a situation social differences that did not exist. In some such cases he has merely pointed out differences people wished to ignore. As a matter of fact, many nations too long have looked down on India's overt social prejudice without recognizing their own covert castes.

In any case, one of the durable common denominators among those associated with McGavran in the amorphous church growth school of thought is a parallel sensitivity to the central importance of the profound cultural diversity within the community of mankind.

This sensitivity is the basis of what may be called here cross-cultural perspective. Cross-cultural perspective is what makes possible contextualization. Cross-cultural perspective goes to the very heart of Christian theology and historiography as these disciplines have developed across the centuries, since it sheds new light on the problem of unity versus uniformity in historic dimensions.

Examples of the Problem

A number of years ago representatives of the Lutheran World Federation went to great lengths to persuade the Batak Christians of Northern Sumatra to subscribe to the "Non-Altered" Augsburg Confession.

One millennium earlier, on another mission frontier in the middle of another island (not nearly as large as Sumatra) a small group of men earnestly tried to persuade a Celtic Christian leader that he ought to subscribe to the Roman way of acting out the Christian faith.

In these two cases the external advocates of uniformity were only partially successful, since the group being persuaded possessed a good deal of autonomy and naturally preferred its own way of doing things. In both cases, unfortunately, the external advocates were not themselves readily able to distinguish between the universal and the particular elements in their own faith.

Historically speaking, as in the period preceding the Protestant Reformation, advocates of a foreign formulation of Christianity are at first successful and do not until much later face the insurgent nationalism of the surviving cultural tradition which may eventually demand its own indigenous Christian formulation.

In the Philippines, for example, the Roman tradition swept in along with a colonial power, and while the Roman witnesses to the faith are to be credited with the fact that a great amount of painstaking and quite enlightened mission work was conducted throughout the whole of the Philippines, there eventually came a time when an immense sector of the

Philippines church under Bishop Aglipay declared its independence from Rome in much the way that Luther had. To this day the Philippine Independent Church endures to this day as the largest non-Roman church in the country.

These are only a few of many possible examples which demonstrate one of the most unique and surprising things about Christianity—that it is by nature a faith that both welcomes and encourages cultural pluralism. In this sense, if Christianity must be called a religion at all, it is the only world religion of this kind. This little understood fact is clearly perceived only by means of what is also rare: *cross-cultural perspective*. First, let us discuss what cross-cultural perspective is, and then proceed to indicate some of the bright new hues which Christian history takes on when viewed from cross-cultural perspective.

A Biblical-Historical Analysis

Cross-cultural perspective is not a new skill forced upon us by the sudden smallness of the modern world. You might say that God has always had cross-cultural perspective since He was the One who was pleased to create the diverse *ta ethne*—the various tribes and tongues and families of mankind. But fallen man has never clearly seen things from God's point of view. It is almost a truism that the languages of man, apart from those affected by Christian insight, rarely if ever possess words for mankind in the generic sense. Typically, languages divide the world into *us* and *them*. We are the humans and those others are the non-humans. We are the Jews and they are the Gentiles. Even the most

primitive tribes employ this semantic distinction.

Yet man has not always been content with this kind of implicit blasphemy. We recall how exercised Alexander the Great was over the diversity of his new far-flung domain. He launched one of history's most novel experiments when he married off thousands of his own soldiers to Middle Eastern maidens. The Romans allowed a great diversity in their empire for practical reasons, but they never solved the problem of diversity on a theoretical level, and never surmounted the ethnocentrism of their hierarchical political structure. It is not surprising that the Roman mentality, perhaps bolstered by the earlier Alexandrian idealism would encourage the development of a culturally monolithic Christianity. There have been great arguments about where the center of Christendom should be located—Rome, Constantinople, Rheims, Canterbury—but the assumption is always that there has to be some one specific place as a center. This in turn implies cultural uniformity.

One of the most striking uniquenesses of the Bible is that it both recognizes the endemic xenophobia of Jew against Greek and nation against nation, but it goes on to propose a breath-taking solution. It says in effect that God can not only speak Hebrew, but Greek; that is, God was not only able to reveal Himself among and to the Hebrews in their language and culture, but the essential revelation was just as capable of being clothed in the words and cultural forms of the pagan Greeks.

Striking Parallels

Literally hundreds of parallels can be traced between almost everything that is said or done in the early Christian tradition and what is found in the environment of the ancient world. In its theological terminology, for example, Christology became a strong rope of three weak strands. One strand derived from the Hebrew apocalyptic concept of a Messiah. Another was the term for Lord (*kurios*), which had long been employed by the mystery cults of Eastern origin and also in

the Roman emperor worship. The third prominent strand was the Greek philosophical concept of the Word (*logos*). Each one of these key words in the Bible is thus paralleled by an identically pronounced word in the corresponding non-Christian environment.

These parallels between the Bible and the ancient world have been disputed by some who feel it is desperately important to maintain that early Christianity in all its forms was entirely unique. But those who would attempt to chip away at specific parallels between Christian and pagan forms are not only fighting a losing battle, but—in terms of cross-cultural perspective—are also fighting the wrong battle.

For one thing, we must not suppose that the message of Christianity, clothed in the new garments of the Greek world, was damaged by this new clothing. This supposition is the consistent and understandable, but erroneous assumption of many Jews (even many Christian Jews) in ancient times and still of today. Some Christian scholars have stumbled on the cultural differences and classified Paul's gospel a new religion rather than the essential Jewish revelation in Greek clothing.

The attempt to employ cross-cultural perspective does not in itself guarantee that there will be no distortion—it does not insist on the real possibility of distortionless cross-cultural communication. However, we must not be startled that so many pagan words or forms were employed, or that it seems really possible for the Christian message in its essential integrity to be faithfully transmitted. Even those who are most eager to detect the employment of new forms must admit that the new forms are generally given a new twist and a modified meaning. Where no modification has taken place, the unmodified meaning of the adopted forms is not necessarily something which is in conflict with Christian truth.

We are not suggesting that there is something so magical about the Christian message that post-biblical attempts to clothe it in new words and forms have

always been successful. This is very important to say. The fact that contextualization or "reclotting" can be accomplished, that it has been done, that it must be done, does in no way imply that the task is easy, or that it involves no dangers, nor does this mean that beyond the Bible there have never been any mistakes in the process. As a matter of fact, there are likely always mistakes in the process, mistakes which may take centuries even partially to rectify. This fact is the reason why the various national churches of the world today must be dependent upon each other: they all are involved in some misunderstandings—but not the same ones, and in symbiotic fellowship together their inadequacies tend to point each other out.

No Simple Task

There seems to be neither a simple nor an infallible way to determine whether a given utilization of a pagan form has been proper or entirely successful. Here we see the openendedness of the continuing need to evangelize and to re-express the faith. The adoration of the Virgin as a case in point, which first gained momentum in the context where the cult of the virgin Diana was already prominent, may not have been as helpful an employment of pre-existing ritual and belief as the comparatively harmless adoption of December 25th as the birthday of a Son in place of a celebration for the sun. Yet however safely removed the celebration of a December 25th Christmas now is from any original pagan connotations, it must be noted that we are still obligated to a constant and unrelenting attempt to obtain or maintain an authentically Christian meaning for the celebration. The Christian celebration of a Christmas on December 25th is probably neither harmed nor hindered by the fact that it was once another sort of festival. Even if it has been a totally new creation by Christians, its continuing Christian usefulness would not thereby be guaranteed by a supposedly "pure" origin.

In other words, suppose that 2,000 years ago the entire language and culture of early Christianity had been cut out of new

cloth such that there were no possibility of tracing any Christian word or form to any pre-existing language or culture. Today, two thousand years later, would we have a purer or safer form of God's revelation (truth) in our hands? Would it necessarily be closer to the message which God is speaking to mankind? Would not even these brand new forms and words be susceptible to the loss of their Christian meaning? The answer must be yes. Therefore, we come full circle to the observation that pagan forms can as easily gain new Christian meaning as newly minted "Christian" forms could lose their originally pure meaning. It would appear that God is not in the business of replacing cultures but transforming them.

We discover something else by means of cross-cultural perspective: the Bible is provisionally multicultural *internally*. Suppose God had allowed a written revelation to be encapsulated in a single culture, whether Hebrew or Greek, would not that kind of monocultural revelation have been, 1) much more seriously subject to a mere mechanical external transmission, 2) less successfully interpreted as a universal faith, and indeed, 3) would not its internal meaning have been less reliably understandable than it is in the case of a multicultural Bible such as we have, which helpfully portrays truth in cultural transition?

It is not always possible to be sure of the reasons God has had in what He has done, but it is tantamount to a linguistic theorem that if the same truth is propounded by two different men in two different languages and cultures as totally dissimilar, say, as Hebrew and Greek, that the result will inevitably be more reliably interpretable 2,000 years later.

Anthropologically sophisticated missionaries today are applauded in their straightforward attempts to allow people to be culturally authentic in their expression of their Christian faith. Is it not then curious that we could be disturbed to discover that a similar openness to various

cultural forms existed in the ancient world as the Christian movement took upon itself Greek, Roman, and Celtic garments? Why is it a good procedure for a careful missionary linguist today to select key words from a primitive vocabulary in order to express Christian faith, but it is not so easy to conceive of the New Testament epistles being written as the result of such a process? If we believe this process in the New Testament was carried on under unique inspiration, does that mean we are not to see the process itself as an example

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to us? Indeed, is it not our very conviction regarding its inspiration that makes it so valuable an example?

Quite confidently then, we may look on the experiences of the early church as a divinely preserved, full-blown case study of the missionary adaptation of the Christian message to Greek linguistic and cultural forms. We misunderstand God's intent if we suppose that the precise words chosen in that particular feat of communication were somehow better (in their unmodified pagan usage) than other words that may be chosen in a parallel way in other cultures. The inspiration of the Bible thus does not lie in the contemporary secular meaning of the key words employed but in the unique use the biblical makes of otherwise quite ordinary words. Least of all must we feel that the procedure of dipping into pagan vocabularies was illicit. We must confidently expect that such borrowing was done, and for the same reason we must confidently continue to recommunicate and to retool contemporary words and forms as we meet new cultures in other places around the world today. We must do the same as we face new developments in our own culture with the change of generations. The great

value of the Bible is therefore not merely that it constitutes the one inspired case of truth transmitted cross-culturally. It is of special strategic and missionary value as it stands as an inspired example, not only of the gospel in two different cultures, but as an inspired example of the process whereby a cross-cultural bridge of communication may be built between two cultures.

The New Testament as Example

Every book written on the subject of the New Testament—indeed every student of the New Testament—is forced to observe the clash of cultures in the period of the early church. Some expositors have tried to make Paul out to be the originator of a "new religion" by treating the changes as evidence of heresy. Others have treated the changes as the result of a

new dispensation in which God himself takes a new approach in certain things. Some may agree that new forms were employed while effective communication of the same basic message took place. In the latter case, however, their discussions often focus more attention on the details of the new formulations than they do on the nature (and limits) of the contextualization process whereby those new formulations were achieved. That is, their emphasis does not seem to anticipate the necessity later on in mission history of similar cross-cultural reformulations to take place, and therefore they deprive themselves of the great value of the Bible in casting light on those later reformulations.

Indeed our whole attitude subtly and profoundly changes toward what happened within the pages of the New Testament once we sense the essential repeatability—*and the necessity for repetition*—of the process whereby Paul bridged over to the Greek culture. In a parallel way Luther demanded that there be a bridge to the Germanic culture area and helped to build that bridge. Just as Paul defended the Greek Christians against Roman formulations which, in effect, became

legalistic in the Hellenistic situation, so Luther stoutly defended the Germans against the imperialism of a Roman formulation. Bultmann and Fletcher, in their demythologizing and "situation ethics," have groped ineffectively but with the same problem, trying to achieve aspects of a new formulation for our generation. With greater clarity of purpose, I feel, Leslie Dewart has noted the distance the modern world has drifted away from Greek thought and has called for a massive "dehellenization" of the present-day Roman tradition to communicate to a no-longer Hellenic world, and so on. In a significant development, American scholars in the colonial period thrust away the tradition of studying the pagan classics in college and embraced Hebrew as the divine language, which they expected to be spoken in heaven; college presidents delivered commencement addresses in Hebrew. Specifically, this latter was a case of attempted restoration rather than reformulation. But in the process of rejecting Hellenistic molds, some real Americanization did take place under the guise of Hebraicization. Thus the process of cultural reformulation has gone on again and again down through history but has not always been clearly recognized as a necessary or wholesome process.

Cross-Cultural Analysis of Christian History

Thus the early moments of the Christian movement expose it and sanction a cross-cultural perspective in which the diversity of cultural forms is not seen as an obstacle to the expansion of the faith or even a nuisance. We do well, therefore, not to consider human diversity a part of the *problem* of the Christian mission but an essential feature in an exciting *solution*. This solution is for all mankind the wholesome fullness of God's redemption which ideally reaches man in all his diversity (without condemning the diversity itself), resolving the profound alienation between man and God which is the source of all man's sufferings and evil. The outward sweep of the Christian

movement is therefore the story of a long succession of encounters between a universal faith and many particular contexts.

Rather than to try to condense or even list all such encounters in Christian history in which the Christian mission has endeavored to cross cultural bridges, it may be well to explore the varied experiences of a single ethnic group outside of the Mediterranean world, one concerning which we have at least some continuous evidence.

While no one example is ideal, it should not be surprising that we would choose a society beyond the furthest reaches of the Roman legions, living in island isolation as well. Such might be the minimal conditions that would provide a laboratory of investigation concerning the possibility of local diversity being compatible with a universal faith. It has been said that:

...Ireland was the only head-taking, cattle-raiding culture to be converted to Christianity while retaining its tribal economic and social structure...(Scott, 1967:193).

This of course is a reference to the period of the early expansion of Christianity. There are many such societies in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries which have undergone similar experiences. Indeed, the relevance of this ancient example to modern times provides part of the impetus of our discussion.

The primary literature alone highlighting the whole Irish experience is voluminous. A brief treatment can only sketch the basic outlines of the encounter of this people with Christianity. It may also be noted that only comparatively recently has the subject itself undergone the kind of objective scholarly study it has long merited. Anglo-Saxon scholarship, for reasons which may appear more clearly below, has to be supplemented in such studies by French, German and Norwegian scholarship, the whole "Irish question" seemingly having postponed objective English investigation of the subject. Speaking of this tendency, Charles Thomas (1965:259) explains that:

Nearly all general accounts of the period tend to be unevenly biased in favour of the Germanic-speaking invaders... The reasons for this are complex, but the main one is probably that, until the present century, almost no major historian of the period had any knowledge of, or indeed interest in, the story of the Celtic-speaking peoples of early Britain.

Indeed, with the continuing hostilities in the north, feelings on the Emerald Island are running so high that it is not possible even now to speak of events that happened fifteen centuries ago without being enmeshed in arguments that have misleading emotional overtones. Nevertheless, it is the worldwide experience of the emerging new nations that had brought into being so many parallels that many ancient questions long considered closed may be resurrected with new impetus and insight. Ours is pre-eminently the age in which the minority voice is going to be heard.

At this point, however, cross-cultural perspective may likely be considered a bias in favor of the Irish tradition. This may as well be confessed. We will certainly get nowhere if we do not recognize mechanisms of prejudice of one kind or another. In one sense cross-cultural perspective precisely consists of the ability to anticipate, to recognize and to tolerate prejudice between disparate cultures. The Irish situation is rich with examples of prejudice.

Jerome may or may not have been reporting accurately when he recalled an encampment of Irish cannibals from his experience in Gaul (D'Alton, 1936:36), nor can we credit him with objective charity when he referred to the famous Celtic scholar Pelagius as an "Irish dog." What is apparently incontrovertible is that some of the Irish became Christians at a fairly early date and that they were for a long time, mainly for geographic reasons, beyond the power of emperor or pope. These were the conditions that fostered, or at least allowed, considerable indigeneity in their resulting Christianity. Harold Cook (1971:46) quotes O'Donovan with approval, saying:

Patrick engrafted Christianity on the pagan superstitions with so much skill that he won the people to the Christian religion before they understood the exact difference between the two systems of belief and much of this half-pagan, half-Christian religion will be found not only in the Irish stories of the Middle Ages, but in the superstitions of the peasantry of the present day.

Cook goes on to summarize:

This is what we should naturally expect. The remarkable thing is that this syncretistic tendency did not go further and pervert the basic Christian message. Perhaps it was the emphasis on the scriptures that provided the safeguard. It is certainly notable that in the last century after Patrick Ireland became a major center of Christian learning, even attracting students from the Continent. Moreover, it is beginning to send its own missionaries far and wide, even as far as Italy itself.

In the attempt to understand early insular Celtic Christianity and specifically Irish Christianity, our chief problem is that the preservation of their story was, for one reason or another, constantly left in the hands of non-Irish groups.

Pelagius and Bede

Pelagius is a case in point. What we know of his teaching remains today primarily in the writings of his opponents against words of his disciples. Looking back we can recognize possible discrepancies in differing cultural connotations of the same Latin words, with the result that those of different backgrounds employed different explanations (theological formulations). If grace had a sinister meaning for Pelagius (as for example in the Theodosian Code) implying favoritism (Hughes, 1966:20,21) we can almost assume the need for honest divergence between Celtic and Roman theologians.

Less significant theologically, perhaps, are the divergences between the Insular Celts and the Western tradition in the matter of tonsure and Easter date. In this case, the offending diversity was not homemade but came simply from the opposite end of the Mediterranean. Yet beneath these two tangible symbols of

independence from Western Roman customs was the much more important discrepancy that was probably based somehow on Irish tribal structure: the Celtic form of monasticism. This too derived from the East, but if it had not had some kind of resonance with indigenous social structure it may not have been so durably opposed to the implantation of the Roman diocesan system of territorial bishops.

Unlike those classical instances of Roman religion being planted by force in Saxony and in eastern Europe, in Ireland Rome's physical power was always totally inadequate to enforce any kind of uniformity. Bede's ostensibly pro-Roman account paints Augustine's mission to England in bold strokes, but clearly records that the only force available to his mission (as he tried to win over the Celtic Christians) was what could be called threats about the afterlife coupled with the assumed prestige of the see of Peter—as against John the Beloved on whose word the Celts relied.

Meanwhile, by the Synod of Whitby in the Seventh Century, Rome was handicapped profoundly by the centuries of confusion in the Mediterranean itself induced by the Barbarian invasions in the West and subsequent see-sawing between Gothic and Eastern Roman military power. Irish scholars, for whom Latin was never a native tongue, were finally needed to teach Latin in the city of Rome. (This would be like black African Christians coming to the United States to teach English in the year 2030, following one-half century of Chinese occupation of North America). For similar reasons, it was Irish scholarship traditions that were reinstated on the Continent—with the help (of course) of Anglo-Saxon scholars whose own scholarly formation, if not always their actual training, derived from Celtic centers of learning in Ireland or England.

Eventually the Danish (Viking) invasions became a violent force inflicted against the Irish Christian tradition, but not a force conforming them to Roman Christianity except in the sense that their scholars fled to the Continent, taking with

them manuscripts and learning in even greater abundance than had the steady stream of Irish missionaries. This exodus greatly enhanced the curious development whereby the Irish system of private confession became the "Roman" confessional, the Irish collar the "Roman" collar, and the Irish orthography, the "Carolingian" minuscule. To this day the "Roman" alphabet, except for upper case letters, is really Irish not Roman. Even Irish manuscript illumination became known for a time as "Anglo-Saxon" (Zimmer, 1891:16).

In many other ways Irish Christian virility first saved the Roman tradition and then itself became labeled "Roman." The Irish have been generalized as savage in the fourth and fifth centuries, and as saints in the sixth, seventh, and eighth centuries. Then, with the destruction wrought by the Vikings in the ninth and tenth centuries the shattered remains of Irish Christianity became looked upon as much too rebellious a deviation from the Roman tradition. This view perhaps underlay the reasoning behind the pope's "gift" of Ireland to the Norman conquerors in 1164, which for the first time sent what could be called Roman(ized) force across the Irish sea. As a result, a drastically heightened antagonism between the Irish and the English (whether Anglo-Saxon or Norman) laid the basic for a final ironic twist at the time of the Reformation. Now the Irish, in order to continue to differentiate themselves from the now suddenly anti-Roman Anglo-Saxons on the larger island decided finally they would rather be Roman than Protestant. It is significant that the "gift" of Ireland to England was made by a pope who happened to be the only Englishman ever to be a pope.

The Irish people thus represent in a tragic and classical sense the plight of the people in a minority culture who at best can only choose between the dominant flavors of their environment, lying low as the major powers clash, choosing first one and now another of the foreign traditions, whichever seems best to favor their local free expression.

The Tragedy and Irony

The tragedy is that the Christian tradition itself has not more clearly enunciated the principles inherent in cross-cultural perspective. The Irish from early times have never been a tightly knit society. The very existence of rival clans and tribes and perpetual feuding favored the development of a Christianity which was by no means perfectly uniform in Ireland itself. It was not the Irish who were perplexed about achieving any kind of uniformity. Pluralism would not have been hard for them to understand. Kathleen Hughes (1966:104) observes that:

Celtic clerics seem to have been untroubled by the diversity of practice. Why should they be? The church had endured such problems for centuries, and the popes had no clear official pronouncement. 'Let Gaul, I beg, contain us side by side, who the kingdom of Heaven shall contain' writes Columbanus to the Gallican synod. To him, even in the mist of the Easter controversy, there were matters which seemed of far greater importance in the life of the church than liturgical diversity.

The greatest irony of all—looking now beyond the Irish illustration to the experience of many other minorities encountered by the advancing wave of Christianity—is the fact that at about the time all of these questions seemed resolved in the Western world, the whole profusion of cultural diversity within the Christian Church has burst forth as the result of the missionary movement in the non-Western world.

The angriest problems in the world today are not international imperialism but questions of conformity within national states—in a word, civil wars: Vietnam, Nigeria, Sudan, and (here we are again) Ireland. The question is how long the Amharas can dominate the Gallas in Ethiopia, whether the Kikuyus shall forever dominate the government in Kenya, whether a handful of whites shall run the country in Rhodesia, etc. The reason these problems are so nearly insoluble is the same: 700,000 Celtic people who speak Welsh do not feel that

their potential contribution to the larger world is ideally fulfilled in the present political structure. There is not space to mention the Basques, the Bretons, the Navajos, and other over-run minorities still encapsulated in the Western world, whose minority cultures are not treated with adequate cross-cultural perspective by secular political powers.

However, the failure of secular rulers to view things with Christian cross-cultural perspective is no excuse for Christian strategists to ignore the heightened urgency of the whole problem as the world Christian family struggles to understand and accept both its unity and diversity.

The ecumenical movement will become a tyrannical power if cross-cultural perspective does not prevent its projection of simplistic democracy as the only means for disparate Christian tradition to sit down in fellowship together. The Christian family is more complex than the small town in which a pure democracy has been made classical. Both union churches (single congregation) and united denominations can proceed with democratically correct procedures to trample on the minority cultures. Homogeneous churches in one social stratum in India are not the most likely instruments of evangelism within other strata holding drastically different customs and traditions. Only monolithic concepts of unity can blind us to the healthy diversity God has intended among his people and the peoples of the world.

In Conclusion

There is no particular value in opening ancient wounds and re-arguing issues long thought to be settled unless this holds promise for superior insight into the modern situation. Despite the outbreak of hostilities in Ireland and the continued existence of many unresolved problems of cultural diversity within the Christian tradition in the Western world today, it may still be possible that historical studies are the only studies which offer ready opportunity for the understanding of cross-

cultural perspective at an objective level and distance. Who knows what specific tensions in overseas countries may be resolvable only if parallels can be deeply and intelligently drawn between the present and conflicts long ago? At least it is with this profound hope that this has been written.

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