

Why Cultures Matter

by Miriam Adeney

At the Lausanne Conference in 1974, Ralph Winter and Donald McGavran turned Christians' attention to "peoples," to human groups in cultural contexts. "The Bible is not people-blind—Jesus did not die to make Muslims stop praying five times a day or to make Brahmins eat meat. People should not be invited into the church and all invited to play the violin," Winter quipped as he enlivened his serious arguments (Fickett 2013:6, 7, 90).

That emphasis on cultures and people groups changed Christian mission significantly. But is that era past?

Globalization scatters torrents of travelers—laborers, immigrants, students, refugees, businessmen—like a tsunami washing over every society. People mingle. The next generation often speaks English. They build new identities. Even those who stay home "live in a constant and daily tension between the global (CNN, McDonalds, Target, GAP, Microsoft) and the local, between the image (the TV sitcom groups we connect with, our internet relationships) and the real. So we constantly construct identities and create new tribes" (Harris and Schaupp 1994:383).

Amid this global whirlpool, how much do cultures matter? How much do peoples matter? Or are other priorities more important today?

Four reasons why cultures still matter may be suggested. First, understanding cultures helps to reduce conflicts. Sunnis and Shiites, Ukrainians and Russians, Palestinians and Israelis, whites and blacks in Ferguson, Missouri—all would benefit from listening to each others' stories.

Second, understanding cultures helps us do business. This includes mission business, microfinance, health and education projects, and even communicating the Christian story—any pragmatic project.

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Third, cultures are not going away. Though travel and the internet may erode differences, paradoxically they also highlight cultural distinctives and reinforce separate ethnic connections. The members of an ethnic group may be dispersed and mobile. What they treasure from their culture may differ from their grandparents. Yet their loyalty to their roots can be fierce.

There is a fourth and particularly Christian reason why cultures matter. Before exploring that, however, we will trace understandings of culture through time.

Between Us and Them

Humans naturally make distinctions between our own people and others. During the Middle Ages, Westerners called others heretics. Or monsters. During the Age of Exploration, others were seen as pagans. Or potential slaves. During the Enlightenment, others were savages, primal or primitive beings. Chinese have viewed others as barbarians. Muslims have seen others as unbelievers, infidels.

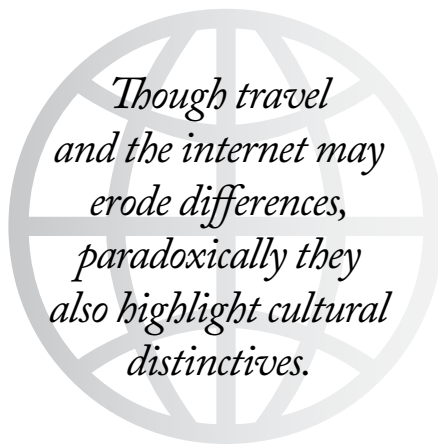
Early anthropologists like Edmund Tyler and James Frazer were *evolutionists* who affirmed not only physical but also cultural evolution. Simple cultures were dominated by magic, they taught. More advanced cultures were structured by religion. The most advanced cultures were organized around science.

As anthropology developed, and more data was collected, these broad generalizations slipped from favor. Instead, some scholars came to emphasize the material components of culture, others the social structures, and others the symbolic elements of ideas and images. Among the *materialists*, Roy Rapaport defined culture as “an adaptive mechanism for maintaining material relations with the other parts of man’s ecosystem” (1967:6). The resource base and the particular arrangements for balancing production and consumption were the realities that shaped

human lives. Ecological anthropologists continue this emphasis.

Marxist anthropologists have framed this material focus with a specific ideology. Whenever there is “private ownership of the means of production,” class struggle will ensue and intensify, eventually provoking an explosion that will eventuate in a classless society where people share the proceeds of their labor, “from each according to his ability, to each according to his need.”

Classic British and American anthropologists have viewed family and social structures as the elements that are central to cultures. Around these structures, all the other parts of a culture form a system, including material



elements and worldview elements. These theorists are called *structural-functionalists*, and their influence on missionary anthropology has been great.

Besides the materialists and the social structuralists are the *symbolic anthropologists*. Claude Levi-Strauss propounded that cultures are systems imposed on the random natural world by the structure of the human mind. For him, the basic human mental structure involved binary contrasts. Other cognitive anthropologists have attempted syntactic and semantic analyses to discover what a people hold to be the constituent entities and taxonomies of the universe—the basic units and how they are organized in

categories. Clifford Geertz defined a culture as “a historically transmitted pattern of meanings embodied in a system of symbols which grids action.” Geertz also referred to culture as “webs of significance which we spin and in which we hang suspended” (1973:4–5).

All these theories are far more complex than is suggested here. Yet they also share significant commonalities. All envision regular patterns and processes, which are basic to science. All anthropologists want to be holistic. They want to study real behavior, not just ideals. Corporate groups, not just individuals. Culture in all its rich and confusing complexity, not just a few selected variables. And cultures throughout space and time. Attitudes that anthropologists cultivate include empathy, curiosity, objectivity, and tolerance for ambiguity. Within this context, they evaluate theories for their simplicity, their comprehensiveness, how well they generate significant hypotheses, and their elegance.

In our postmodern era, *deconstructionists* have arisen, particularly scholars influenced by the French philosophers Jacques Derrida and Michel Foucault. Raising questions about the nature of truth and our ability to understand it, they call all our theories into question. Some of their revisionist ideas might be summarized in several points:

1. Truth is experienced in multiple and incomplete ways, including paradox and ambiguity.
2. There is no trustworthy, overarching story or metanarrative. (Life is fragmented, truth is constructed, and changes.)
3. Subjects and objects cannot be disconnected. (What is known is affected by who is knowing it or saying it.)
4. Fact and value cannot be disconnected. (Facts are not neutral.)
5. “Truth” is often a tool used by those in power to maintain their position in the hierarchy.

6. History is not necessarily progressing.
7. Cultures are not necessarily ranked.

Such postmodern ideas draw from anthropology, and also help to shape it.

Applying Cultural Understanding in Ministry

All of these perspectives on culture can enrich our ministry. *Materially*, what is the people's resource base? That is one of the first questions to ask if we are learning about a society. What is an average meal? What is a rare luxury? If finances are tight, what strategies do they use? Beyond the immediate family, who do they regularly contribute to or share with? How do they get to work? What technology do they own? How do they get health care, and how do they pay for it? What multinational or government or foreign entities dominate the local economy, and is that influence increasing?

The material dimension matters. Recently, when some of my students surveyed Asian-American Christians, they included questions on this aspect of culture, such as, "What Asian-American economic habits reflect Christian values? On the other hand, where does the Christian faith critique Asian-American economic habits?" Good dialogues resulted.

Sensitivity to economic realities must shape our ministry. For example, if we require air conditioning, private laptops, and private jeeps, might that communicate the idea that one cannot be a top Christian leader without these things?

Similarly, the *social* dimension of culture has applications for ministry. Many missionary anthropologists have given attention to family patterns and community structures and their implications for witness, discipling, and church development (Nida, Kraft, Hiebert, Smalley in Winter and Hawthorne 2009).

The *symbolic* dimension of culture also contains useful resources. Consider

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"ethnotheologies." To minister authentically, we need to know indigenous fears and values and how local theologians tackle these. Evangelical Hispanic theologians, for example, emphasize community, the Holy Spirit, care for the needy, *mestizaje* or mixedness, marginality or exile, and God in everyday life with all its embarrassments and fights and failures. It takes time to absorb these themes, but is essential for ministry.

Change and Complexity

Deconstruction theory prods us to think about change and complexity. We should not assume that cultures are static. Most people wish life were a little different. They have dreams and aspirations, and would like new opportunities. Cultures always are on the move. Nevertheless, continuity complements change. In spite of their faults, our cultures remain dear because it is our cultures that give us our categories. "We do not contemplate reality face to face. From the moment we are born, things do not come before us in all their nakedness. They come dressed in the names some community has given them" (Alves 1985:26).

Besides emphasizing change, deconstruction theory also reminds us that individuals may have multiple cultural identities, and that these may shift around. A Filipino-American marries a Native American. Their children are Filipino-American, Native American, members of a specific tribe, and general American. One child may choose to emphasize one label. His brother may feel more connected with another. At different times they may move back and forth, switching identities.

Subcultural identities matter too, even though they may be overlapping or cross-cutting. In Drew Dyck's book,

Generation Ex-Christian: Why Young Adults Are Leaving the Faith and How to Bring Them Back, he identifies five subcultures among young Americans, and suggests gospel bridges to each:

1. *Postmoderns* distrust explanations, analysis, and logical argumentation. Truth is too complex. So Dyck recommends telling stories, true stories—your own "mini-narrative" and the great "enchanted metanarrative." Be sensitive to nuance. Acknowledge mystery. Be humble. Build trust. And invite them to serve alongside you even before all the answers are spelled out.
2. *Recoilers* have been wounded or perhaps offended by hypocrisy. Empathize with their anger and hurt. Talk about how Christ joins us in our pain. Then enjoy your faith, and model hope beyond wounds and cynicism.
3. *Moderns do* want reasons. So discuss worldviews, and push them to defend theirs. Ask them: Why be good? Avoid triteness. Model a serious effort to think. And, in the course of your discussions, clear out bizarre misconceptions of Christianity.
4. *Earthkeepers* honor nature, women as the nurturers of life, and prayer. They approach the supernatural with awe and reverence.
5. *Rebels* want justice and freedom.

Finally, power is one of deconstructionism's most important themes. Multiculturalism is not a level playing field. In a plural society, stronger groups tend to dominate others. Inequality of opportunity results. Often serious oppression occurs. "White privilege" is the term used in the U.S. to refer to this unfair advantage. Although white people can be victimized by affirmative

action programs, generally they are in the default position of power.

In India, people at the bottom of the caste system are called Dalits. Successful Christian witness here does not build on beautiful ideas in traditional Hindu literature. What has Hinduism done for Dalits? Instead, these people want to hear about dignity, justice, and opportunity. Wise witnesses note the power relations in society.

Deconstruction theory reminds us that many people do not fit into traditional cultural categories: What is the identity of the biracial child? The Navaho who oscillates between the reservation and the city? The Filipino who labors for 40 years in Abu Dhabi but cannot retire there? The youth who buy and wear goods and watch media from everywhere? The refugee immigrant? Who are their people?

Whoever they are, the gospel offers them a home. God doesn't stereotype us, but meets us each as the exceptions we are, with our multiple and overlapping identities, our unique pilgrimages, our individual quirks. God doesn't slot us into pigeonholes. Whether we have permanently lost our community, or are temporarily adrift, or have patched together bits of several heritages, God welcomes us into his people, offering us a community that stretches even beyond the systems of this world.

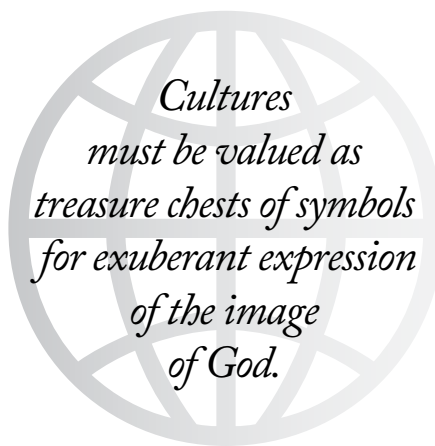
Culture is a Gift of God

Here we come to the fourth reason that culture matters.

In the early 1500s, Bartolomé de Las Casas was a plantation owner in Latin America. He experienced Christian conversion, grew in grace, and then increasingly came to lament European exploitation of indigenous peoples. Over a period of years, he shared his concerns with the Pope. In 1537, Paul III issued the authoritative document *Sublimis Deus*. This affirms that native people everywhere are fully human. (As a result, when the Spanish came to Philippines

in the later 1500s, they could not exploit Filipinos quite as cruelly as they had the Latin American Indians because the Filipinos were seen as true human beings, at least in theory.)

A Christian theology of culture holds that although other peoples may seem strange, they are not monsters, or savages, or barbarians, or primal or primitive beings. They are not fundamentally pagans or heretics or potential slaves. They are human beings, made in God's image. This means, in part, that they are gifted with a bit of God's creativity. Using this gift, people in different parts of the world have constructed distinctive family patterns, economic exchange systems, cuisines, music, architectural styles,



and philosophies. In other words, they have built cultures, employing God's gift of creativity. Cultures, then, must be valued as treasure chests of symbols for exuberant expression of the image of God.

Such cultures enrich God's world. Like a mosaic, like a kaleidoscope, this diversity appears in biblical texts about God's kingdom at the end of time, such as Isaiah 60. The God who creates billions of unique snowflakes and personalities, who dazzles with diverse colors and infuses our inhaling with aromas, who imagines a boggling array of tropical fish in the oceans and even varieties of granite hidden deep in the earth—this God delights in diversity.

He is the one who has generated the possibility for cultural variation.

Yet that is not the whole picture. To say we are in God's image does not describe our nature completely. We also are sinners. That is the tragic truth. Patterns of exploitation and idolatry pulse through our cultures. How well we know the corruption, the waste, the lust, the power-grabbing, the environmental degradation. Every culture reeks of selfishness, with people wounding each other continually.

In the middle of this dynamic tension between our creativity and our sin, the gospel arrives. It affirms the gifts of God's creativity. It critiques the patterns of exploitation and idolatry. The expression of this critique should be led by indigenous leaders who are immersed in the Word and the Spirit. Tragically, missionaries sometimes have dominated, and in the process have judged the local culture more harshly than their own. To correct that, we must bend over backward. We must acknowledge, "If you are a sinner in need of a Savior, so am I. If your people are sinners, and if your culture is exploitative, so are mine. We are in the same boat. And God in his mercy has reached out to all of us."

Culture Takes Time

It takes time to learn a language, to adapt to a way of life, to be a friend. It requires openness to ambiguity and even to failure. If we are going to absorb the historic continuity, the connotative richness, and the contextual integration of a culture—even a mixed culture—it will be hard work. To honor that culture, we will have to die a little to our own ways of thinking and acting. Like a seed falling into the ground, we will find it dark and uncomfortable. But then we will be reborn. At first ignorant and incompetent, almost helpless, we will have to practice and repeat, over and over, like a toddler.

A lot of mission workers want to avoid that death. So they just rush in and take action. But nobody deserves to be acted upon. Nobody should be our project. If, on the other hand, we *are* willing to go through the death and rebirth that is part of adapting to a culture, the yield in God's good time will be a hundred-fold—brothers and sisters and fathers and mothers. This is the pain and the joy of true global Christianity.

Today that Christianity is being lived in thousands of cultures by believers who are working to express their family and workplace relationships, their economic exchanges, their praise rituals, and their philosophical and theological ideas, in ways that are consistent with their heritage and also with the glory of God.

And when civil ties break down, as they do so often today, Christians who love cultures without idolizing them often can be found on the front lines. They step out into the margins

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and reach hands across the chasms with true respect for God's image and true empathy for fellow sinners. They lead societies across bridges of reconciliation. This is one more way that a Christian understanding of culture may serve in our time. **IJFM**

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