

# Culture & Cross-Cultural Differences

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*One of the first shocks a person experiences when he or she leaves his home country is the foreignness of the people and their culture. Not only do they speak an incomprehensible language, but they also dress in strange clothes, eat unpalatable foods, organize different kinds of families and have unintelligible beliefs and values. How do these differences affect the communication of the Gospel and the planting of churches in other societies?*

## THE CONCEPT OF CULTURE

In ordinary speech we use the term “culture” to refer to the behavior of the rich and elite. It is listening to Bach, Beethoven, and Brahms, having the proper taste for good clothes, and knowing which fork to use when at a banquet.

But anthropologists in their study of all humankind, in all parts of the world and at all levels of society, have broadened the concept and freed it from value judgments such as good or bad. There has been a great deal of discussion on how to define the term. For our purposes we will define culture as *the integrated system of learned patterns of behavior, ideas, and products characteristic of a society*.

## Patterns of learned behavior

The first part of this definition is “learned patterns of behavior.” We begin learning about a culture by observing the behavior of the people and looking for patterns in the behavior. For example, we have all seen two American men on meeting grasp each other’s hand and shake it. In Mexico we would see them embrace. In India each puts his hands together and raises them toward his forehead with a slight bow of the head – a gesture of greeting that is efficient, for it permits a person to greet a great many others in a single motion, and clean, for people need not touch each other. The latter is particularly important in a society where the touch of an untouchable used to defile a high-caste person

and force him to take a purification bath. Among the Siriano of South America, men spit on each other’s chests in greeting.

Probably the strangest form of greeting was observed by Dr. Jacob Loewen in Panama. On leaving the jungle on a small plane with the local native chief, he noticed the chief go to all his fellow tribesmen and suck their mouths. When

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Dr. Loewen inquired about this custom, the chief explained that they had learned this custom from the white man. They had seen that every time he went up in his plane, he sucked the mouths of his people as a magic to ensure a safe journey. If we stop and think about

it a minute, Americans, in fact, have two types of greeting, shaking hands and sucking mouths, and we must be careful not to use the wrong form with the wrong people.

Like most cultural patterns, kissing is not a universal human custom. It was absent among most primitive tribesmen and considered vulgar

and revolting to the Chinese, who thought it too suggestive of cannibalism.

Not all behavior patterns are learned. A child touching a hot stove jerks his hand away and yells, "Ouch!" His physical reaction is instinctive, but the expletive is culturally learned.

### Ideas

Culture is also the ideas people have of their world. Through their experience of it, people form mental pictures of maps of this world. For instance, a person living in Chicago has a mental image of the streets around his home, those he uses to go to church and work, and the major arteries he uses to get around town. Obviously there are a great many streets not on his mental map, and as long as he does not go to these areas, he has no need for knowing them. So also people develop conceptual schemes of their worlds.

Not all our ideas reflect the realities of the external world. Many are the creations of our minds, used to bring order and meaning in our experiences. For example, we see a great many trees in our lifetime, and each is different from all others. But it would be impossible for us to give a separate name to each of them, and to each bush, each house, each car – in short, to each experience we have. In order to think and speak, we must reduce this infinite variety of experiences into a manageable number of concepts by generalization. We call these shades of color red, those orange, and that third set yellow. These categories are the creations of our mind. Other people in other languages lump them into a single color or divide them into two, or even four, colors. Do these people see as many colors as we? Certainly. The fact is, we can create as many categories in our minds as we want, and we can organize them into larger systems for describing and explaining human experiences.

In one sense, then, a culture is a people's mental map of their world. This is not only a map of their world but also a map for determining action

(Geertz 1972: 169). It provides them with a guide for their decisions and behavior.

### Products

A third part of our definition is "products." Human thought and actions often lead to the production of material artifacts and tools. We build houses, roads, cars, and furniture. We create pictures, clothes, jewelry, coins, and a great many other objects.

Our material culture has a great effect on our lives. Imagine, for a moment, what life in America was like a hundred years ago when there were no cars or jets. The invention of writing and more recently of computers has and will have an even more profound effect upon our lives, for these permit us to store up the cultural knowledge of past generations and to build upon it.

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### Form and Meaning

Behavior patterns and cultural products are generally linked to ideas or meanings. Shaking hands means "hello." So does kissing in certain situations. We also assign meaning to shaking our fists, to frowning, to crying, to letters of the alphabet, to crosses, and to a great many other things. In fact, human beings assign meaning to almost everything they do and make.

It is this linkage between an experienceable *form* and a mental *meaning* that constitutes a symbol. We see a flag, and it carries the idea of a country, so much so that men in battle will even die to preserve their flags. A culture can be viewed as the symbol systems, such as languages, rituals, gestures, and objects, that people create in order to think and communicate.

### Integration

Cultures are made up of a great many patterns of behavior, ideas, and products. But it is more than the sum of them. These patterns are integrated into larger cultural complexes and into total cultural systems.

To see this integration of cultural patterns, we need only observe the average American. On

entering an auditorium to listen to a musical performance, he looks until he finds a chair on which to perch himself. If all these platforms are occupied, he leaves because the auditorium is “full.” Obviously there are a great many places where he can sit on the floor, but this is not a culturally acceptable, at least not at the performance of a symphony orchestra.

At home the American has different kinds of platforms for sitting in the living room, at the dining table, and at his desk. He also has a large platform on which he sleeps at night. When he travels abroad, his greatest fear is being caught at night without a platform in a private room, so he makes hotel reservations well ahead of time. People from many parts of the world know that all you need is a blanket and a flat space in order to spend the night, and the world is full of flat places. In the airport, at three in the morning, the American traveler is draped uncomfortable over a chair rather than stretched out on the rug. He would rather be dignified than comfortable.

Not only do Americans sit and sleep on platforms, they build their houses on them, hang them on their walls, and put fences around them to hold their children. Why this obsession with platforms? Behind all these behavior patterns is a basic assumption that the ground and floor are dirty. This explains their obsession for getting off the floor. It also explains why they keep their shoes on when they enter the house and why the mother scolds the child when it picks a potato chip off the floor and eats it. The floor is “dirty,” even though it has just been washed, and the instant a piece of food touches it, the food becomes dirty.

On the other hand, in Japan the people believe the floor is clean. Therefore they take their shoes off at the door and sleep and sit on mats on the floor. When we walk into their home with our shoes on, they feel much like we do when someone walks on our couch with their shoes on.

At the center, then, of a culture are the basic assumptions that people have about the nature of reality and of right and wrong. Taken together, they are referred to as the people’s *worldview*.

This linkage between cultural traits and their integration into a larger system have important implications for those who seek to introduce change. When changes are made in one area of culture, changes will also occur in other areas of the culture, often in unpredictable ways. While the initial change may be good, the side effects can be devastating if care is not taken.

## CROSS-CULTURAL DIFFERENCES

In their study of various cultures, anthropologists have become aware of the profound differences between them. Not only are there differences in the ways people eat, dress, speak, and act, and in their values and beliefs, but also in the fundamental

assumptions they make about their world. Edward Sapir pointed out that people in different cultures do not simply live in the same world with different labels attached, but in different conceptual worlds.

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Edward Hall points out just how different cultures can be in his study of time (1959). When, for example, two Americans agree to meet at ten o’clock, they are “on time” if they show up from five minutes before to five minutes after ten. If one shows up at fifteen after, he is “late” and mumbles an unfinished apology. He must simply acknowledge that is late. If he shows up at half past, he should have a good apology, and by eleven he may as well not show up. His offense is unpardonable.

In parts of Arabia, the people have a different concept or map of time. If the meeting time is ten o’clock, only a servant shows up at ten – in obedience to his master. The proper time for others is from ten forty-five to eleven fifteen, just long enough after the set time to show their independence and equality. This arrangement works well, for when two equals agree to meet at

ten, each shows up, and expects the other to show up, at about ten forty-five.

The problem arises when an American meets an Arab and arranges a meeting for ten o'clock. The American shows up at ten, the "right time" according to him. The Arab shows up at ten forty-five, the "right time" according to him. The American feels the Arab has no sense of time at all (which is false), and the Arab is tempted to think Americans act like servants (which is also false).

### Cross-cultural misunderstandings

Some missionaries in Zaire had trouble in building rapport with the people. Finally one old man explained the people's hesitancy to befriend the missionaries. "When you came, you brought your strange ways," he said. "You brought tins of food. On the outside of one was a picture of corn.

When you opened it, inside was corn, and you ate

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To us the people's confusion sounds foolish, but it is all too logical. In the absence of other information, they must draw their own conclusions about our actions. But we do the same about theirs. We think they have no sense of time when, by our culture, they show up late. We accuse them of lying when they tell us things to please us rather than as they really are (although we have no trouble saying, "Just fine!" when someone asks, "how are you?"). The result is cultural misunderstanding, and this leads to poor communication and poor relationships. Cultural misunderstandings often arise out of our subconscious actions. Hall illustrates this (1959) in the way people use physical space when they stand around talking. North Americans generally stand about four or five feet apart when they

discuss general matters. They do not like to converse by shouting to people twenty feet away. On the other hand, when they want to discuss personal matters, they move in to about two or three feet and drop their voices. Latin Americans tend to stand about two or three feet apart in ordinary conversations and even closer for personal discussions.

Misunderstandings arise only when a North American meets a Latin American. The latter subconsciously moves in to about three feet. The former is vaguely uneasy about this and steps back. Now the Latin American feels like he is talking to someone across the room, and so he steps closer. Now the North American is again confused. According to his spacial distance, the Latin American should be discussing personal matters, like sharing some gossip or arranging a bank robbery. But in fact he is talking about public matters, about the weather and politics. The result is the North American thinks Latin Americans are pushy and always under his nose; the Latin American concludes that North Americans are always distant and cold.

Misunderstandings are based on ignorance about another culture. This is a problem of knowledge. The solution is to learn to know how the other culture works. **Our first task in entering a new culture is to be a student of its ways. Even later, whenever something seems to be going wrong, we must assume that the people's behavior makes sense to them and reanalyze our own understandings of their culture.**

### Ethnocentrism

Most Americans shudder when they enter an Indian restaurant and see the people eating curry and rice with their fingers. Imagine going to a Thanksgiving dinner and diving into the mashed potatoes and gravy with your hand. Our response is a natural one, to us. Early in life each of us grows up in the center of our own world. In other words, we are egocentric. Only with a great deal of difficulty do we learn to break down the circle we draw between I and You and learn to look at things from the viewpoint of others. We also grow up in a culture and learn that its ways are the right ways to do things. Anyone who does differently is not quite "civilized." This

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ethnocentrism is based on our natural tendency to judge the behavior or people in other cultures by the values and assumptions of our own.

But others judge our culture by their values and assumptions. A number of Americans went to a restaurant with an Indian guest, and someone asked the inevitable question, “Do people in India really eat with their fingers?” “Yes, we do,” the Indian replied, “but we look at it differently. You see, we wash our hands carefully, and besides, they have never been in anyone else’s mouth. But look at these spoons and forks, and think about how many other people have already had them inside their mouths!”

If cross-cultural misunderstandings are based on our knowledge of another culture, ethnocentrism is based on our feelings and values. In relating to another people, we need not only to understand them but also to deal with our feelings that distinguish between “us” and “our kind of people” and “them” and “their kind of people.” Identification takes place only when “they” become part of the circle of people we think of as “our kind of people.”

### **Premature Judgments**

We have misunderstandings on the cognitive level and ethnocentrism on the affective level, but what can go wrong on the evaluative level? The answer lies in premature judgments. When we relate to other cultures, we tend to judge them before we have learned to understand or appreciate them. In so doing, we use the values of our own culture, not of some metacultural framework. Consequently, other cultures look less civilized.

*Cultural Relativism:* Premature judgments are usually wrong. Moreover, they close the door to further understanding and communication. What then is the answer?

As anthropologists learned to understand and appreciate other cultures, they came to respect

their integrity as viable ways of organizing human life. Some were stronger in one area such as technology and others in another area such as family ties. But all “do the job,” that is, they all make life possible and more or less meaningful. Out of this recognition of the integrity of all cultures emerged the concept of cultural relativism: the belief that all cultures are equally good – that no culture has the right to stand in judgment over the others.

The position of cultural relativism is very attractive. It shows high respect for other people and their cultures and avoids the errors of ethnocentrism and premature judgments. It also deals with the difficult philosophical questions of truth and morality by withholding judgment and affirming the right of each culture to reach its own answers. The price we pay, however, in adopting total cultural relativism is the loss of such things as truth and righteousness. If all explanations of reality are equally valid, we can no longer speak of error, and if all behavior is justified according to its cultural context, we can no longer speak of sin. There is then no need for the gospel and no reason for missions.

What other alternative do we have? How can we avoid the errors of premature and ethnocentric judgments and still affirm truth and righteousness?

*Beyond Relativism:* There is a growing awareness that no human thought is free from value judgments. Scientists expect one another to be

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honest and open in the reporting of their findings and careful in the topics of their research. Social scientists must respect the rights of their clients and the people

being studied. Businessmen, government officials, and others also have values by which they live. We cannot avoid making judgments, nor can a society exist without them.

On what basis, then, can we judge other cultures without being ethnocentric? We have a right as individuals to make judgments with regard to ourselves, and this includes judging other cultures. But these judgments should be well informed. We need to understand and appreciate other cultures *before* we judge them. Our tendency is to make premature judgments based on ignorance and ethnocentrism.

As Christians we claim another basis for evaluation, namely, Biblical norms. As divine revelation they stand in judgment on all cultures, affirming the good in human creativity and condemning the evil. To be sure, non-Christians may reject these biblical norms and use their own. We can only present the gospel in a spirit of redemptive love and let it speak for itself. Truth, in the end, does not depend on what we think or say, but on reality itself. When we bear witness to the truth, we do not claim a superiority for ourselves but affirm the truth of the gospel.

But what is to keep us from interpreting the Scripture from our own cultural point of view and so imposing many of our own cultural norms on the people? First, we need to recognize that we have biases when we interpret the Scriptures and thus be open to correction. We also need to let the gospel work in the lives of new Christians and through them in their culture, recognizing that the same Holy Spirit who leads us is at work in them and leading them to the truth.

Second, we need to study both the values of the culture in which we minister and those of our own. By this approach, we can develop a metacultural framework that enables us to compare and evaluate the two. The process of genuinely seeking to understand another system of values goes a long way in breaking down our monocultural perspectives. It enables us to appreciate the good in other systems and be more critical of our own.

Since even in the formulation of a metacultural system of values our own cultural biases come into play, we need to involve Christian leaders from other cultures in the process. They can detect our cultural blind spots better than we can, just as we often see their cultural prejudgments better than they.

We will find that there is much in every culture that is worthwhile and should not only be retained but encouraged. For instance, most cultures are much better than ours in human relationships and social concern, and we can learn much from them. Much, too, is “neutral” and need not be changed. In most settings wood houses serve as well as mud or brick ones, and a dress is not better than a sari or sarong. Some things in all cultures, however, are false and evil. Since all people are sinners, we should not be

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surprised that the social structures and cultures they create are affected by sin. It is our corporate sins, not only our individual sins, that God seeks to change.  
Now back to the discussion of translation.

Beginning in Genesis we read, “In the beginning God...” The question is, how shall we translate the word “God”? In Telugu, a south Indian language, we can use the words “Isvarudu,” “Devudu,” “Bhagavanthudu,” or a number of others. The problem is that each of these carries the Hindu connotation that gods have exactly the same kind of life as human beings, only more of it. They are not categorically different from people. There is no word that carries the same connotations as the Biblical concept of God.

This also raises the problem of translating the Biblical concept of “incarnation.” In the Biblical setting, incarnation is seen as an infinite God crossing the great gulf between Himself and human beings and becoming a person. In other words, He crossed from one category to another. In the Indian setting, gods constantly become incarnate by moving down within the same category to the level of people.

Obviously this concept of incarnation is fundamentally different from the Christian one. To use it is to lose much of the meaning of the

Christian message. But how then can we translate the Biblical concepts of God and incarnation in Telugu or other Indian languages?

We might coin a new word for “God” or “incarnation,” but then the people will not understand it. Or we can use one of the Telugu words, but then we face the danger that the Biblical message will be seriously distorted. Often the best we can do is use a word with which the people are familiar but then teach them the meaning we are giving to it. It may take years and even generations before the people understand the new meanings and the total Biblical worldview within which these meanings make sense.

This process may seem to take too long. What about the illiterate peasant who accepts Christ at an evening service? Do not his concepts and worldview change immediately? Obviously not. But his salvation is not dependent on whether he has a Christian worldview or not, but on whether he accepts Christ’s salvation however he understands it and becomes His follower. However, for the long-range building of the church, the people and their leaders must have an understanding of the Biblical concepts and worldview if the message is to be preserved over the generations.

## **IMPLICATIONS OF CULTURAL DIFFERENCES FOR MISSIONS**

It is clear that cultural differences are important to a missionary who must go through culture shock, learn to overcome misunderstandings and ethnocentric feelings, and translate his message so that it is understood in the local language and culture. But there are a number of other important implications that need to be touch briefly.

### **The Gospel and Culture**

We must distinguish between the Gospel and culture. If we do not, we will be in danger of

making our culture the message. The Gospel then becomes democracy, capitalism, pews and pulpits, Robert’s Rules of Order, clothes, and suits and ties on Sunday. One of the primary hindrances to communication is the foreignness of the message, and to a great extent the foreignness of Christianity has been the cultural load we have placed upon it. As Mr. Murthi, an Indian evangelist put it, “Do not bring us the Gospel as a potted plant. Bring us the seed of the Gospel and plant it in our soil.”

The distinction is not easy to make, for the Gospel, like any message, must be put into cultural forms in order to be understood and communicated by people. We cannot think without conceptual categories and symbols to express them. But we can be careful not to add to the Biblical message our own.

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A failure to differentiate between the Biblical message and other messages leads to a confusion between cultural relativism and Biblical absolutes. For example, in many churches where it was once considered sinful for women to cut their hair or wear lipstick, or for people to attend movies, these are now acceptable. Some, therefore, argue that today premarital sex and adultery are thought to be sinful, but that in time they too will be accepted.

It is true that many things we once considered sin are now accepted. Are there then no moral absolutes? We must recognize that each culture defines certain behavior as “sinful” and that as the culture changes, its definitions of what is sin also change. There are, on the other hand, certain moral principles in the Scriptures that we hold to be absolute. However, even here we must be careful. Some Biblical norms, such as leaving the land fallow every seventh year and not reaping the harvest (Leviticus 25) or greeting one another with a holy kiss (1 Thessalonians 5:26) seem to apply to specific cultural situations.

### **Syncretism versus Indigenization**

Not only must we separate the Gospel from our own culture, we must seek to express it in terms of the culture to which we go. The people may sit on the floor, sing songs to native rhythms and melodies, and look at the pictures of Christ who is Black or Chinese. The Church may reject democracy in favor of wise elders, or turn to drama to communicate its message.

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new so that the essential nature of each is lost. If we are careful to preserve the meaning of the Gospel even as we express it in native forms, we have *indigenization*. This may involve introducing a new symbolic form, or it may involve reinterpreting a native symbol. For example, bridesmaids, now associated with Christian weddings, were originally used by our non-Christian ancestors to confuse the demons who, they thought, has come to carry off the bride.

### **Conversion and Unforeseen Side Effects**

Since cultural traits are linked together into larger wholes, changes in one or more of them lead often to unforeseen changes in other areas of the culture. For example, in one part of Africa, when the people became Christians, their villages also became dirty. The reason for this was that they were now not afraid of evil spirits, which they believed hid in the refuse. So they no longer had to clean it up.

Many cultural traits serve important functions in the lives of the people. If we remove these without providing a substitute, the consequences can be tragic. In some places husbands with more than one wife had to give up all but one when they became Christians. But no

arrangements were made for the wives who were put away. Many of them ended up in prostitution or slavery.

### **Theological Autonomy and World Christianity**

As Christianity becomes indigenous in cultures around the world, the question of the unity of the church arises. There is an increasing stress that the churches in each cultural setting become autonomous: self-supporting, self-administering, and self-propagating. But how do we cope with theological variety? How do we react when the churches we help plant want theological autonomy and call for a socialist or even Marxist evangelical Christianity?

It is clear that cultures vary a great deal. As the Gospel becomes indigenous to them, their theologies – their understandings and applications of this Gospel – will also vary. What, then, does it mean to be a Christian? And how can Christians who disagree in some points of theology have true fellowship with one another?

Here we must remember two things. In the first place, we need to understand the nature of human knowledge and recognize its limitations. People experience an infinitely varied world around them and try to find order and meaning in their experiences. In part they discover the order that exists in the world itself, and in part they impose a mental order on it. They create concepts that allow them to generalize, to lump a great many experiences into one. They also act like a movie editor, linking certain experiences with certain other ones in order to make sense of them. For example, experiences in the same classroom on a number of different days are put together and called Introduction to Anthropology. A different set is thought of as “church activities.” When we read the Scriptures, we must remember that we interpret them in terms of our own culture and personal experiences. Others will not interpret them in exactly the same way. We must, therefore, distinguish between the Scriptures themselves and our theology or understanding of them. The former is the record of God’s revelation of Himself to humankind. The latter is our partial, and hopefully growing, understanding of that revelation. If we make this distinction, we can accept variations in

interpretation and yet find fellowship with those who are truly committed followers of Christ.

In the second place, we must never forget that the same Holy Spirit who helps us to understand the Scriptures is also interpreting them to believers in other cultures. Ultimately it is He and not we who is responsible for preserving divine truth and revealing it to us. We must make

certain that we are committed followers of Jesus Christ and open to the instruction of His Spirit.

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