

Culture & Bible

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Culture is one of the basic concepts in social sciences, which has been defined variedly by different social scientists. Culture becomes the central concept of defining humans in anthropology. According to many anthropologists the only distinguishing factor between humans and animals is that humans have culture. Hence, culture is specifically human. Wherever human beings are, they construct a way of life, which is their culture. Thus culture is looked upon as the common heritage of humanity. At the same time, it is also seen as a common possession of a community.

1. Problems in Defining Culture

Though the term 'culture' is used so often in everyday language, we face several difficulties when we have to define it. An idealist's notion of culture is different from that of a materialist. A believer may define culture in one way, and a non-believer may define it in another way. The question of the origin of culture is another difficulty in defining culture.

Kroeber and Kluckhohn attempted to bring together the various definitions of culture. They uncovered almost three hundred definitions, and at the end, they pointed out that there are as many definitions of culture as there are anthropologists (1952). Edward Burnett Tylor (1852-1917), one of the first anthropologists from the 19th century, gave an inclusive definition of culture in 1871. "Culture or civilization" according to him "is that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom, and any other

capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society" (1871:1).

Tylor's view includes things of the mind (knowledge, belief, and morals), the way people behave (custom and habits), and things that people produce (art and law). Inclusive definitions of culture based on Tylor's view have served anthropology for a long time and still do. Many of the later definitions also echo the ideas of Tylor. For example, Robert H. Lowie defined culture as, "the sum total of what an individual acquires from his society - those beliefs, customs, artistic norms, food-habits, and crafts which come to him not by his own creative activity but as a legacy from the past, conveyed by formal or informal education" (1937:3). Linton, another important anthropologist, defined culture as "social heredity" (1936:78). According to Kluckhohn culture is, "the total life-way of a people, the social legacy the individual acquires from the group" (1949:17). We may cite one more definition of Felix Keesing who understood culture as "the behaviour acquired through social learning" (1958:18). For more definitions on culture, see Luzbetak (1988:133-135).

It is important to note that most of these anthropological definitions "were descriptive rather than essential in nature" (Luzbetak, 1988:134). Today most of the anthropological definitions of culture are based on a theory or a model (Luzbetak, 1988:135). Though there is a general agreement among anthropologists that there is a dynamic relationship between the physical, social and ideational aspects of culture; i.e. between technology, social organization and ideology, yet anthropologists differ among themselves with regard to the prime mover of human history. For example, Marxian oriented anthropologists insist that economic factors will assert themselves in culture more than others do and will be primarily responsible for the nature of that particular culture. Historically oriented anthropologists are of the opinion that culture has to be understood historically, as an interaction between economic, social, political and religious factors.

In spite of different theoretical orientations, most definitions of culture may be subsumed under three general categories: (i) as a way of life typical of a group, (ii) as a system of symbols, meanings, and cognitive schemata transmitted through symbolic codes, and (iii) as set of adaptive strategies for survival related to ecology and resources. These three views are seen not as mutually exclusive but rather as complementary.

2. Aspects of Culture

a) Culture as a Way of Life Typical of a Group

Though culture is specifically human and all humans share in the culture of humanity, yet in specific terms culture is also a common possession typical of a group. Explaining this paradoxical nature of culture, Herskovits points out, "Culture is universal in man's experience, yet each local or regional manifestation of it is unique" (1952:18).

Beals and Hoijer summarize the different meanings of the concept of culture. According to them culture "may be applied (1) to the ways of life or "designs for living" common at any one time to all mankind, (2) to the ways of living peculiar to a group of societies between which there is a greater or lesser degree of interaction, (3) to the patterns of behaviour, peculiar to a given society, and (4) to special ways of behaving characteristic of the segments of a large and complexly organized society" (1965:269).

Wagner also stresses the common aspect of culture. He says, "The notion of culture focuses attention not on isolated individuals and whatever personal characteristics they happen to possess, but instead on communities of persons occupying a certain extended and usually continuous space and on the numerous features of belief and behaviour that are held in common by members of such communities" (Wagner, 1962:2).

This view of culture as the total way of life of a group brings out that culture is a means by which people in a society meet their physical, social and ideational needs. Societies cope with their physical environment by way of norms, standards, and ideas in matters such as food production, housing, travel, and the application of various levels of technological knowledge and skill. They adapt to their social environment by means of political guidelines, kinship relationships, and countless norms guiding the interaction between members of the society in question, foremost of which are the norms for communication. Societies cope with their ideational environment by means of norms affecting such matters as knowledge, art, magic, science, philosophy, ideology, and religion.

Culture is the total way of life of a community. Through trial-and-error methods, and in the course of their history communities have tried to be successful in meeting the physical

(biological), social and ideational (seeking meaning) challenges. Experiences have been stored in memory, in language, in customs, traditions and myths. Thus, culture exemplifies the cumulative and commonly shared experiences of a community, which are transmitted from one generation to another. The way one community faces a challenge may be different from those of other communities. Hence, cultures are indeed greatly variable; cultures are in fact unique (Herskovits, 1952:18-19). In the words of Clyde Kluckhohn, "culture refers to the distinctive way of life of a group of people, their complete "design of living" (1949:17). The various components of culture are mutually related and interdependent. They complement each other. Malinowski (1922) and Radcliffe-Brown (1922) have convincingly argued that cultures can be properly understood only if their constituent parts are viewed as interrelated and as having definite purposes or "functions" in relation to the whole.

Some anthropologists speak of cultural configurations. Configurations are the dominant, underlying premises, values and goals that permeate the various aspects of a culture and give it a characteristic wholeness (Benedict, 1934; Opler, 1945). The cultural configuration is also defined in terms of world-view or *Geist*, *Weltanschauung*, and ethos (Kroeber, 1944; Sorokin, 1937).

The great variety of cultures in the world may lead some to conclude that there is nothing common in them. Yet, on analysis we discover a common ground in all cultures.

(b) Culture as a System of Symbols

The cultural process is rooted in human's capacity for self-awareness and in the interplay of human's creative and imaginative faculties (Bidney, 1953:23-53). "Explaining the unique dimensions of the cultural process, Levi-Strauss emphasizes man's capacity for symbolization, his ability to act on, and shape, the natural flow of his experiences, to organize and codify them in a system of signs, a fact which made it possible for him to preserve and transmit them within a space-time dimension independent from, and larger than that of their original occurrence" (Zevedei Barbu, 1971:116).

Some anthropologists see culture "as cognitive, i.e., consisting of shared ideas, strategies, plans, and guidelines, and consisting of behaviour, ... This cognitive process constitutes a system of internal contexts of meaning and guidelines that are shared with others and

learned from early childhood, not genetically transmitted. It forms the basis from which individuals perceive and then respond to the world around them. Speech and other behaviours and artifacts are the outward manifestations of these shared guidelines" (Dubbs and Whitney, 1980:27). A society comprises a group of people having a shared culture. Culture exemplifies the cumulative and common experiences of a community, which are transmitted from one generation to another. Thus, culture can be thought of as the shared acquired skills and habits, a way of life consisting of the totality of tools, techniques, social institutions, attitudes, behaviour patterns, beliefs, and values (Swartz and Jordan, 1980).

In symbolic anthropology, "culture is viewed as a shared communication network that sends messages along vast and elaborate interconnected routes. Culture is therefore an interweaving of signs (bearers of messages and their meanings). These signs may be verbal or nonverbal (persons, things, or events)" (Luzbetak, 1988:154). The emphasis of the symbolic nature of culture is on *meaning* which requires constant interpretation (Geertz, 1973). Several anthropologists also stress the importance of the *emic* perspective on culture, i.e. understanding culture from the insider's point of view. "Ethnoscience feels that to be able to understand a culture the way someone who was born into it understands it, the fieldworker will have to study nonlinguistic behaviour in a manner analogous to the approaches made in linguistics; after all, language reflects the cognitive system, and verbal and nonverbal communications are very similar" (Luzbetak, 1988:150).

c) Culture as a Set of Adaptive Strategies

Some anthropologists study the relationship between geographical factors and the variety of cultures found in the world. While cultural ecologists stress the influence of natural environment on culture, the cognitive and symbolically oriented anthropologists emphasize the influence of culture on the selection and shaping of environments. Geographical determinists give primacy to climate on culture. According to them "environmental forms dictate cultural ones and, therefore, cultural phenomena can be explained and should be predictable to a large extent by reference to their contemporary environments" (Vayda and Rappaport, 1968:469).

A number of leading scholars has reacted to the approach of geographical determinism. According to them, climate, location,

topography, and soil condition did influence culture in its simple stages. Even at this stage of culture we cannot reduce humans to a passive agent of nature. Humans are never submissive slaves to their environment; rather, they tend to become the masters of nature. Today, a number of anthropologists stress the reciprocity between ecology and culture (see Michael, 1989). This reciprocal or intersectional view on the man-environmental relation as Anderson puts it, "assumes that neither man nor environment is necessarily dominant. Reciprocation is assumed to exist not between abstract culture and environment, but between men living and behaving in local populations and the organic and inorganic components with which they interact" (Anderson, 1973:185).

3. Stability and Dynamism in Culture

Culture is a living system. Every culture is in the process of adapting to newer changes occurring in the world. "Cultures are constantly changing because the individuals of the society - the architects of culture - are constantly modifying their "plan for successful living" (Luzbetak, 1988:292). Inventions, discoveries, conquests, cultural contacts bring new challenges to cultures to adopt themselves to the ever-new situations. Hence, cultures are always in the process of change. But at the same time, there is an element of stability in culture, which gives continuity to cultures. The ability of cultures to adapt to this dynamic process of change differs from culture to culture. Some cultures tend to stress the need for stability in order to preserve their cultural identity in the fast changing world of today. Some others change their institutions fast to fit into the process of change.

4. Contemporary Trends in Cultural Studies

New developments in the study of culture from other disciplines such as history, political science, literary studies, feminist studies have begun to question the traditional anthropological understanding of culture. Foucault and Gramsci have shown the power dimension in culture and developed the theory of hegemony. These theoretical perspectives have forced a reconsideration of sociological theory and of what constitutes culture, the social impact of culture, and the necessity for new approaches to the study of culture. Post-modern critiques also question the usefulness of the concept of culture in contemporary times (see Crane 1994; Polity 1994; Burke, 1997). The

process of globalization and the impact of media on the universal level annihilate space by time. What is involved in globalization is "a sense of shrinking of distances through the dramatic reduction in the time taken, either physically (for instance, via air travel) or representationally (via the transmission of electronically mediated information and images) to cross them" (Tomlinson, 1999:3). These transformations change the very fabric of cultural experiences and, indeed, affect our sense of what culture actually is in the modern world.

5. Culture & Bible

The Bible is an accumulated account of the experiences and traditions of the Jewish community and of the early Christians. It was in the making for a long period of time. The Arabs called the Jews "the people of the book". The Bible has been their "portable fatherland" (Brasch, 1955:59). In spite of migration, enslavement, exile, invasions, assimilation, conquests and Diaspora, the Jews managed to survive for more than 3000 years as a cultural group due to the possession of their Holy Scriptures. According to Dimont the Jews survived even the Greco-Roman period of their history "not by the might of their arms but by the might of their cohesive ideas" (Dimont, 1964:19).

While the Bible reveals the culture of the Jewish community over the years, it is also true that it has been influenced by this community's culture. Biblical studies have done much to increase our knowledge of the culture of the Jewish community. But at the same time to understand the Bible more deeply, researches are being done on the cultural context of the Jewish community. Biblical archaeology, which is developing as a science of its own, reveals the cultural links between the Bible and the culture of ancient Palestine. Excavations by Biblical archaeologists help recreate the cultural setting of in former times. According to Bridgwater and Seymour, "After almost 100 years of biblical archaeology, it is possible to read the Bible in a new light. It has become clear that ancient Palestine was an integral part of the whole cultural area of the ancient Near East. It should be noted, however, that the Bible transformed the material it borrowed from other cultures into profound insights on the nature of God and man. Many obscurities have been cleared up, theories in biblical criticism based on internal evidence have been disproved, and the historical data of the Old Testament have been proven more accurate than suspected" (1968:213-214).

Jewish culture evolved in the ecological set up of Palestine and later was subjected to many foreign influences. Jewish history unfolds not within one but within six civilizations. Hence, biblical ideas are influenced by all these cultural experiences. "Palestine was from the beginning a thoroughfare where East and West met and mingled, and, from a political point of view, it was, perhaps, unfortunate that Moses should have chosen a spot where the eastern and western regions were destined constantly to meet. Palestine was the melting pot of different civilizations. Foreign civilizations, Egyptian, Persian, Babylonian, and Indian, have left their traces upon Judaism, and especially upon the Jewish myths and legends which, side by side with the Law, were developed among the nation, handed down from generation to generation, and penetrated into the oral law and its Haggadic portions" (Rappoport, 1928:xx). All the same, it should be noted that the Bible transformed the material it borrowed from other cultures into profound insights on the nature of God and man (Bridgwater and Seymour, 1968: 213-214).

6. Bible and Universal History

The birth of Christ and the subsequent experience of the early Christians recorded in the New Testament of the Bible began to influence the cultures of several civilizations. As noted earlier, culture is conceived as the values, norms, beliefs and attitudes of the entire population or of subgroups within the population. The Greco-Roman civilization was substantially modified by the message of the Bible in its cultural components of values, norms, beliefs and attitudes. Several other aspects of culture like music, art, architecture, law, customs and manners, education and the like have been influenced by the ideas of the Bible. No other book ever produced has been read by so many people worldwide or played so significant a part in the history of humanity as that of the Bible. Historical studies on the impact of religious values on social and economic institutions point out the influence of biblical ideas in the modern world (Weber 1958; Dawson, 1949).

While it is true that at one time the Bible combined cultural ideas of several civilizations, now it is true that biblical ideas have penetrated almost all the civilizations of the world. The idea of a weekly day of rest is of biblical origin, and has become universally accepted. Mohammed created Islam on the foundations of the Bible, he even called it "the religion of Abraham" (Brasch, 1955:230). Today,

biblical ideas are playing a universal role in influencing the cultures of humanity. World history is reckoned from the birth of Christ as before and after. The biblical notion of justice is transforming cultures everywhere. For example, in India the modern Hindu renaissance concerning the abolition of Sati (widow-burning), child-marriage, and of untouchability was heavily influenced by biblical ideas. Similarly, in several other parts of the globe, the Christian message is playing a tremendous transformative role. In modern times the world has been transformed by information technologies into what has been called the global village. These huge transformative processes which globalization has brought about cannot be properly understood unless the conceptual vocabulary of culture has been grasped. In essence globalization is an ever-growing fine-meshed network of interconnections and inter-dependencies that characterize modern life (Tomlinson, 1999:2). What impact this will have on biblical ideas, and how biblical ideas in turn will influence the future course of human history remains to be seen.

7. Bible in the Midst of Cultural Pluralism

While it is true that biblical ideas are influential worldwide, it is becoming more and more clear that there are other religious scriptures in different cultures, which also claim universal validity. Some thinkers blame biblical ideas for the ecological crisis of the modern world. Some others are apprehensive of the biblical mission ideals of conversion. The result, they feel, may be the destruction of many cultures if the world is moving towards a monolithic cultural worldview. In order to safeguard their own cultural identity, some nations now revitalize the past in fundamentalist movements. But at the same time, the oppressed masses in those cultures organize counter culture movements against the oppressive elements of their cultures. For example, Dalit and tribal movements in India are against the oppressive Brahminical culture in India. Their movements aim at establishing a just society in India based on the principles of equality, fraternity and social justice (see Michael, 1999). So, culture itself is highly politicized today in the movements of Hindu cultural nationalism and Hindutva ideology (Michael, 1996:294-310; 1998:65-83; 1998a; 1999).

However, cultural pluralism is now a fact that has to be taken into consideration by Christians. Whether the world-views of different scriptures can co-exist or one or the other world-view may

ultimately gain the upper hand in the attempt to achieve global influence remains to be seen. The New age movements based on eclectic and syncretistic attempts to combine spiritual traditions from different cultures are being received enthusiastically by many people in Western countries in these years. Scripture scholars have to think seriously about the message of the Bible in this context of an emerging universal culture and the quest of local and regional cultures for survival, identity and contribution to the cultural pattern of the world in the new millennium.

8. Conclusion

There are religious ideas at the beginning of every great civilization. In the course of human history, several civilizations have emerged on the basis of certain religious ideas, for example, ancient Egypt, Babylon and Assyria. Studies on culture and the Bible reveal that while the Bible has been influenced by many cultures for several thousand years, yet three essential Biblical truths have never been compromised over the years, namely (i) fidelity and adherence to Yahweh, (ii) faithfulness to the covenant, and (iii) the faith in the Risen Lord as the Saviour of the world.

Today, the world is moving towards a global civilization. What is the role of the Bible in this context? What part is Christianity going to play in the new global culture of the modern world? Will the Bible be able to revitalize cultures as it has done so often in the past? What will be the role of Christ in the future world? As Christians do we still believe that the hand of God is visible in world history? What role is the biblical idea of human dignity going to play in the Indian context of caste discriminations? How far will it be a formative influence on dalit, tribal, women's movements and other suppressed groups in their struggle for equality and better living conditions? Since these issues are central to the conversion controversy today what would the biblical answers to these complex problems be? Since salvation in Christ is for everybody how will the message of the Bible interact with Indian civilization to create a new society?

These are some of the questions we need to reflect at the beginning of this new millennium.

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