

THE CHURCH AND THE CHALLENGE OF MULTICULTURALISM

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What is Multiculturalism?

According to Willett, "Multiculturalism has not yet been fully theorized. In part, the lack of a unifying theory stems from the fact that multiculturalism as a political, social, and cultural movement has aimed to respect a multiplicity of diverging perspectives outside of dominant traditions" (1998:1). According to Bill Martin, "the whole issue of multiculturalism raises the question of difference in a way that would seem to run against inherited forms of philosophical or social theoretical system building" (see Willett 1998: 1). The development of the concept of "multiculturalism" stems from distinct social, cultural, and historical experiences of the last few centuries. Hence, in order to understand the meaning and the evolution of the concept of "multiculturalism" we need to place it in the context of "Modernism and Postmodernism".

2. Modern and Postmodern Context

a) Modernism and Culture

Modernism has its root in the 17th century Enlightenment philosophy. The Enlightenment was a period of remarkable intellectual development and change in philosophical thought. A number of long-standing ideas and beliefs were overthrown and replaced during the Enlightenment. Overall, the Enlightenment

was characterized by the belief that people could comprehend and control the universe by means of reason and empirical research. The view was that since the physical world was dominated by natural laws, it was likely that the similar applied to the social world too. Thus it was up to the philosophers, using reason and research, to discover these social laws.

Influenced by these ideas anthropologists began to study the social laws by which human society and culture were developing. They proposed a grand law to study the progress of human culture. Taking cue from the Darwinian principle of biological evolution, anthropologists began to point out that human culture was also progressing from simple to complex stages of cultural growth. It was assumed that the Western European culture was at the peak of human civilization and all other cultures were in different stages of their progress towards civilization.

This civilizational notion dominated the intellectual, political and theological world during the 19th and 20th centuries. Western science and technology were becoming increasingly powerful, and their superiority to the sciences and technologies of other cultures seemed self-evident. Moreover, Western governments were conquering other nations and making them colonies. It was not surprising that in this context the idea of "progress" found ready acceptance as an explanation of cultural differences. Clearly the West was "civilized" and the rest of the world was "primitive".

b) Anti-colonialism and Cultural Assertion

However, the colonial contact with other societies and cultures led the colonized to begin to question the above consideration. Anti-colonial movements challenged the arrogance of the Western civilization and began to assert their cultural uniqueness and the right for their existence and promotion. This led to the collapse of the colonial empires after World War II.

Today, there is an influential group of intellectuals whose thoughts are dominated by relativistic ideas. Each society is seen as an autonomous group, with its own social organization. Its culture and worldview had an internal logic and had to be understood from within. No society had the right to judge another by its own values. To do so was considered cultural arrogance. Ethnocentrism

became the cardinal sin and cultural relativism the acknowledged good.

c) Postmodernism and Multiculturalism

This new development has led to Postmodernism. Postmodernists question all types of grand theories and generalizations. A true, deep understanding across cultural boundaries is seen as virtually impossible. Key analytic categories may not be as universally applicable as we had once imagined in modernism. Paul Heelas explains this by saying, "The cultural becomes disorganized; less black and white. The distinction between the high and the low fades away. The claim that one tradition should be adhered to because it, and it alone is valid, is rendered invalid. And rather than authority and legitimacy resting with established orders of knowledge, authority comes to rest with the person" (1998:4-5). In the words of James Beckford, post-modernity consists in a "willingness to abandon the search for over-arching or triumphalist myths, narratives or frameworks of knowledge" (as quoted in Paul Heelas, *Religion, Modernity and Post-modernity*, Oxford: Blackwell, 1998:4). Thus one can say that the postmodern critique of "grand theory" prepared the way for multiculturalism.

Multiculturalism emphasizes the contribution of cultural communities and their separate identity and recognition. It assumes a link between cultures and value-pluralism. It stresses the importance of cultural belonging and legitimizes the desire to maintain difference. Multiculturalism maintains that people must neither be discriminated on account of particular features of religion and culture nor, as a condition of citizenship, be compelled to set aside peoples cultural particularity (Bhargava, 1999:17).

3) Globalization and Multiculturalism

Globalization is a complex multi-dimensional phenomena that involves simultaneous and complexly-related process at all levels of society – economic, political, social, cultural, technological, environmental and so forth. The impact of globalization on human society is that the whole world has been brought together in interwoven socio-economic and political relationships. As a result there has been a lot of population shifts from one culture to another. This has brought a new dimension to multiculturalism

debate among the Western academicians. In the Western world especially in U.S.A., England and other European countries, today the population composition is undergoing a tremendous change. A few decades ago the Western world consisted of mainly the white people with a common civilization and Christian religion. But today the situation is fast changing. Immigrants from Asia and Africa are settling down in U.S.A., England and other Western countries. The racial, socio-cultural and religious composition of these countries is also changing. This is a very new situation in America and in Europe which was traditionally monocultural. For example, in England there is a substantial number of Indians, Bangladeshis, Pakistanis and Afro-Caribbeans. The country's internal composition is changing. As Bhikhu Parekh points out, "Today you have a landscape with as many mosques as churches. As a result, the Brits are beginning to ask themselves: What are we? Who are we likely to become?" (Parekh, 2001:5). They are experiencing a new situation of multiculturalism. This is the context in which the problem of multiculturalism is discussed in the Western world.

4) Multiculturalism in the Indian Context

The Indian society on the other hand has been multicultural since ages, where people speak a variety of languages. India is a multi-racial and multi-religious society. If so, what is the relevance of this debate on "multiculturalism" in the Indian context now?

While it is well known that India is a multicultural, multiracial, multilingual and multi-religious society, there are very powerful social movements in contemporary India to define it in terms of mono-cultural Hindu identities. Anybody who does not subscribe to this vision of the Hindutva movements is considered enemy of the nation. In this context, the tribals, dalits, and other linguistic, ethnic and religious groups in India stress and maintain the pluralistic nature of Indian society (Michael, 1996: 294-310).

5. Theological and Missiological Challenges

a) Ethnocentric Orientations

The scholarship in the 19th and the early 20th centuries was dominated by "ethnocentric" attitudes of the Europeans. The attitude of evaluating cultures of others from one's own is known as "ethnocentrism". The assumed Western cultural superiority

made the Westerns to look at other cultures with ethnocentric eyes and critically label them "barbaric" or "savage" according to how far their physical appearance and custom differed from their own.

Many European missionaries, who were product of their time, believed in the ethnocentric attitude of their contemporaries and accordingly equated Christianity with Western culture. They with their ethnocentric attitude believed in civilizing the primitive savages through the adoption of Western model of life. For example, in 1890, T.W. Pearce pointed out that merely introducing Christianity in China was not enough. Western civilization, in its entirety, had to "overcome" Chinese civilization (Chao, 1987:12).

This approach to mission is called "Ethnocentric Model of Mission Work". This mission orientation has a connotation of (a) paternalism, (b) triumphalism and (c) racism. Thus, throughout colonial times, the Western churches generally felt that before non-Westerners could be Christianized, they had first to be "civilized", that is, Europeanized. As a result, few Westerners took other cultures seriously or sought to understand them in their own terms.

b) Relativistic Orientations

With the rise of professional anthropological science, however, a great revulsion occurred against the naiveté of this still all too popular view of ethnocentrism. With the attainment of freedom several nations began to assert their cultural identities. The native anthropologists began to study their own culture and began to produce the insider's knowledge of culture.

In reaction against ethnocentrism, anthropologists began to examine each culture on its own terms. Each society was seen as an integrated whole. Each had its own culture or conceptual paradigm. No society had the right to judge another by its own values. To do so was cultural arrogance. Anthropologists questioned whether or not the culture satisfied the needs and expectations of the people themselves. If the people were cannibals, for example, they asked whether or not the eating of human flesh was acceptable according to native values. This way of looking at other cultures in their own terms has led to cultural relativism.

It is the stand of the relativists that each culture and society had its own integrity, its own system of values, and indeed its own areas of complexity in custom. The values expressed in any culture, the relativist says, are to be both understood and valued only according to how the people concerned set up their view of life. Hence, one culture cannot be judged scientifically as better or worse than another. It can't because no absolute measure or external standard of culture-free character can be established. The argument of the relativist is that "experience is culturally defined". Hence, the "good", the "right", the beautiful" do not exist by themselves as objective or absolute entities, even though our language of generalization sometimes seems to imply this. "Mankind is one. Civilizations are many", the great anthropologist Franz Boas used to say.

The concept of cultural relativity states that standards of rightness and wrongs (values) and of usage and effectiveness (custom) are relative to the given culture of which they are a part. In its most extreme form, it holds that every custom is valid in terms of its own cultural setting.

The notion of cultural relativism has very much influenced the theological and missiological thinking today. As a consequence all religions are considered to be same – different paths leading to the same goal. The view that "all religions are the same" is quite similar to and in basic agreement with that of "all are relative". To hold that any religion is intrinsically better than another is felt to be somehow wrong, offensive, and narrow-minded. God is one, He manifests Himself in several forms and names. Hence every religion is good and salvific and missionaries should not disturb the belief patterns of people. Claim for the uniqueness of Christ is looked at with indignation.

Hence, the emphasis is on dialogue and not so much on proclamation. On one level, dialogue is a way to understand other religions so as to make the Gospel known clearly to people in those religions. In religious relativism and pluralism, however, it came to mean the process by which we learn from other religions or seek a religious synthesis that eliminates our differences. Such a consensus is often found in common worship services, spiritual exercises, and theologies of God and creation. What is sacrificed in

this is the uniqueness of Christ and his Salvation, because this is considered to be an offense to non-Christians.

c) Christian Response: Beyond Ethnocentrism and Relativism

While cultural relativism is vastly preferable to the ethnocentric approach, both positions represent extreme viewpoints. The anticolonial reaction which gave rise to cultural relativism was a necessary corrective. It called into question Western cultural superiority, and it forced Western Christians to differentiate between the Gospel and culture. All the same, cultural relativism has its own limitations. Cultural relativism leaves us as separate islands of subjective being. Both positions i.e. – ethnocentrism and relativism – represent extreme viewpoints.

It is true that the anticolonial era challenged the ethnocentrism of earlier theories and led anthropologists to understand other cultures in greater depth. All the same, recently, the bald position of relativism as an outlook on life was not only been called increasingly into question by anthropologists but has come under attack from philosophers and others as well. Redfield, for example, considers that the viewpoint of "ethical neutrality" is an unrealistic one. He points out that anthropologists have been comfortable enough in looking with equal benevolence upon all kinds of values among small and remote peoples, but are hard put to maintain the position, say, in the face of Nazism, or of a highly disorganized culture where the individual may lose his "desire to live". Raymond Firth, following the same lines of thought, says of such a view that "the affirmation that we should have respect and tolerance for the values of other cultures, is itself a value which is not derivable from the proposition that all values are relative".

The cultural relativists fail to see that cultural ideologies are effective precisely because they are believed and acknowledged to have absolute value to their adherents for all humankind, not only for their adherents. If a given value system were not accepted as objectively valid, it would soon lose its effectiveness as a motivation for conduct. The practical and effective alternatives are not cultural ethnocentrism versus cultural relativism, but rather rational norms with a potentiality for universal acceptance and realization.

Hence, today there is an important need to go beyond "ethnocentrism" and "relativism" in Christian theology and missiology (see Michael 1998: 5-11). This understanding of going beyond ethnocentrism and relativism should be the future of the mission in the twenty-first century. The confusion with regard to cultural and religious relativism has given rise to two responses. Some, sensing the void of relativism, turn back, looking for certainty in more subtle forms of fundamentalism. Others look forward, past the present relativizing experience of pluralism for deeper foundations beyond. Berger's metaphor is helpful. In positivism we stand on the firm ground of absolutes. When we enter the river of pluralism, the water rises to our necks. Some retreat in fear to the solid bank behind them. Some continue on and are swept away by the river. Some swim to the firm bank beyond. What is that bank beyond? For Christians certainly it is Christ. If Jesus has been revealed as Christ and God, this "truest of truths" should be communicated to the people of cultures and religions with sensitivity and respect. The best example to understand the relationship between Christianity and cultures comes from the Gospel.

6) Lessons from the Gospel-Culture Encounter

In the context of Christianity and multiculturalism there is a naïve presupposition that all cultures have necessarily positive values. Hence, Christianity should not make any value judgement on them. It is, however, important to understand that while culture is the sincere attempt of a community to meet all their physical, social and spiritual needs, it is never a finished product. Every culture is in space and time and in a process. Hence, it is not perfect. Every culture requires constant conversion. This is the context in which the Gospel-culture interaction has to be understood.

When the seed of Christian faith enters a culture there could be several possibilities of faith-culture encounters. There could be immersion, intercultural exchanges, counter-cultural challenges and cross-fertilization. What is essential to keep in mind is that Christian faith is the same everywhere, but its expression differs from culture to culture. In the context of cultural pluralism and the Christian faith, we could learn some lessons on inculturation from the Bible. Studies on culture and the Bible reveal that the Bible has

been influenced by many cultures for several thousand years. But what is unique to the Bible is that it transformed the material borrowed from other cultures into profound insights on the nature of God and of humanity (see Legrand, 2001; Michael 2000: 94-107). In the course of encountering different cultures, two essential Biblical foundations have never been compromised, in spite of unfaithfulness to the covenant, namely belief in monotheism and faith in the Risen Lord as the Saviour of the world.

Hence, the important lesson that we learn from the Gospel-culture encounter is that even when Christianity is expressed in culture, it is bound to be limited, requiring constant conversion towards the Gospel values.

7. Christianity & Multiculturalism in the Context of Globalization

In the context of globalization the cultural contact between different communities will increase tremendously. This will not give rise to monocultural world. Cultural identities of different communities and religions will be there. Each religion is bound to claim a universal validity and a sense of universal mission.

It is very important to understand that every religion has been developed from a specific world-view. Each religion motivates its people to order their lives from an ethical behaviour. Hence, there are real differences between religions. For example, the Brahmanic Hindu world-view is based on the ethical principles of (i) *Karma, Dharma* and *Moksha*; (ii) the concept of rebirth; and (iii) the notion of purity and pollution. This world-view justifies the hierarchical caste system and untouchability. The world-view of Buddhism is that everything is in a constant flux. Hence, we need to concentrate on the inner self to see the light for a moral and ethical life. Similarly we can talk about Islam, Sikhism, Jainism and other tribal religions. The world view of Christianity is that we are all created in the image of God and we are all children of God, our Father. Christ preached and lived the above world-view and died for it and rose again to tell us that we should order our life on this ethical principle for our salvation. Hence, there are real differences between the world-views of religions.

Today, every religion is claiming a universal mission. In this context, the world-view of Christianity is very essential to build the

global world into human communities. This has to be done in collaboration with other religions. The role of Christianity in the global world becomes very vital because of the negative consequences that accompany globalization. The process of globalization with its market economy leads to consumerism, dehumanization and exploitation of nature. Hence, Christianity has to play a very important role as a counter-cultural witness urging cultures and peoples to live with human and the Gospel values. Certainly this has to be done in dialogue with other religions. But, to do this Christianity has to be rooted firmly in its faith believing in its world-view. The coming decades will be a great challenge to Christianity.

8. Christianity and Multiculturalism in India

The Christian presence in India in the midst of many cultures and ethnic communities also faces a lot of challenges. Indian civilization is built up by several streams of cultural influences. Today this pluralism is under attack by the monocultural ideologies of the *Sangh Parivar*. In this context, some of the Indian theologians are trying to Hinduise Christianity. This will be a great mistake. We need to insist the multicultural nature of Indian society. India is a pluralistic country and Christianity as a religion is already rooted in the soil for several centuries. It has much to give and take (see Michael, 1991: 5-16). Hence, the process of inculturation in India should be done very carefully. Despite the extreme importance of inculturation, the Indian Church must learn to look at her own cultures critically in the light of the Gospel and in the context of multiculturalism in India (see Michael, 1990: 6-18). The symbols that Christianity in India chooses should be authentic to the Christian worldview. It should not be a mere copying or imitating of any one religion of India but of creative integration with a Christian spirit, identity and meaning. Christian world-view has to penetrate the values of the Indian ethos. Christianity in India will integrate itself in the soil by mutual fecundation of its creative and life giving values with the cultures and religions in India.

9. Conclusion

Multiculturalism has become the world ethos of today. The process of urbanization, industrialization and globalization will shift the cultural communities of the world from their roots and place them in a multicultural world. In this context, Christianity

will be increasingly in the midst of many cultures and religions. This means Christians need to be rooted more deeply than ever in their faith and yet be open to the riches of cultures and religions in a multicultural world.

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