Sharing the Good News Cross-Culturally

Those who are sharing the Gospel today must keep sending it to new addresses. The recipients are constantly changing their location and no one is forwarding the mail.

It is important that Christians understand how culture works if they are to successfully present the Gospel in a pluralistic society. This article explores the issue in some depth. The reader is encouraged to consider carefully how the elements are inter-woven, in order to communicate Christ cross-culturally (and keep up with changes in culture in order to remain relevant and appealing).

A case study

The film, "The Gods Must Be Crazy" (written and directed by South African Jamie Uys) was a hit movie in the 1980s. It told the story of a Kalahari Bushman named Xixo, whose tribe had no prior contact with the outside world. One day the pilot of a small plane passing overhead discarded a Coca Cola bottle, which landed near Xixo's family. At first the bottle, perceived as a gift from the gods, was gratefully received and put to innovative uses in daily village life. Eventually, competition over control and ownership (a new concept in the community) of the bottle caused division and Xixo decided that the only remedy was to take the "thing" to the edge of the world and return it to the gods. (The elders concluded the gods must have been crazy to bestow this gift on the clan in the first place.)

During his journey Xixo met members of Western civilization for the first time. One was a scientist, another a teacher, and others still members of a militant group fleeing after an aborted coup attempt in a neighbouring country. As the story unfolded and the characters collided in unusual circumstances, the film presented a fascinating and funny interpretation of differences in cultures. Xixo eventually reached an escarpment where the countryside below was obscured by a solid layer of low-lying clouds. He believed this was the edge of the world and threw the bottle over the side before returning home to his relieved family.

I first saw "The Gods Must Be Crazy" on a British Airways flight from London to New York. It was the only time I ever observed rows of suited British businessmen laughing uproariously at an in-flight movie. The film has a powerful sub-plot and continues to have appeal to audiences around the world. It was recently re-released in DVD format and had high sales. One reason for its popularity is that it demonstrates graphically how cultural assumptions and misunderstandings between people can lead to major differences, with consequences that can be either amusing or disastrous for those involved.

Christians who desire to be relevant and touch the world for Christ need to understand the role of culture in informing what people believe, how they build and live out their existence and how they relate to one another.

What is culture?

Culture is the way we think, structure society, understand the world around us, interpret events, establish relationships, determine mores (norms for behaviour), provide and use shelter and act (eg dance, eat, dress, marry, work). Culture is not isolated. it is shared with other people. Culture unifies individuals through common experiences. People generally learn culture by growing up in a society, through language, watching and imitating others. This is known as "enculturation".

Every society has a culture, reflected in its art, literature, music, beliefs, customs, institutions, inventions, language, technology, and values. "Popular" culture includes arts and entertainment expressed via such media as television, radio, sound recordings, advertising, sports, hobbies, fads, and fashions. Culture is also demonstrated symbiologically, by the use of religious symbols, national emblems, war stories, slogans and flags.

Multiculturalism (as a policy of government) recognizes that distinct cultures can be collocated. It encourages diversity where this is the case. Multiculturalism works best in a society with different ethnic groups and a political system that promotes freedom of expression and awareness of differences. Ethnic groups bring variety and richness by introducing exogenous (external) ideas and customs. However, ethnic groups that keep their values and traditions can also threaten national unity. Many people feel confused and uneasy when they deal with people of "other" cultures.

"Ethnocentrism" is an attitude that one's culture is central, that it is the best. It contributes to nationalistic militarism (remember the stories of "ethnic cleansing in the Balkans in the early 1990s). The opposite view is "cultural relativism", which contends that no culture should be judged by the standards of others. This approach can be carried to extremes, such as promoting universal morality (or amorality) and rules that allow infanticide, genocide, cannibalism and torture.

Cultural can be local or national. Australian culture has been influenced by: the original inhabitants (as reflected in many place names); the settlement experience (convicts and free settlers); shared ancestries; common experiences in war and sport; national values (egalitarianism, "fairness", mateship); religious values (particularly our "Judeo-Christian heritage"); and economic views.

Culture and religious expression

Religion has been a supreme source of inspiration in the arts. Some of the most beautiful buildings in the world are houses of worship. A lot of the greatest music is religious. Religious stories have provided countless subjects for paintings, sculptures, literature, dance, and films. The Christian music industry is an under-reported multi-billion dollar sector in every major Western economy.

Many people follow specific religions because of heritage, tribe, or family. Judaism and Christianity have been major influences in the formation of Western

culture. The cultures of Asia have been shaped by Buddhism, Confucianism, Hinduism, Shintoism, and Daoism. Most extant religions have been influenced by older ones.

Rituals commemorate historical events. The Jewish Passover ritual recalls the meal the Israelites ate before their departure from slavery in Egypt. Christian celebrations of Communion (an echo of the Passover) are related to the last meal that Jesus shared with His disciples before His death. Hindu rituals reflect ancient stories. Rituals mark important life events, such as ceremonies making sacred events out of birth, marriage and death. Rites of passage (from one stage of life to another, such as puberty) serve to transition young people into the religion and society. In Judaism, circumcision is performed on baby boys. Some Christians "baptize" babies soon after birth; others baptize only teenagers or adults. Traditional Aboriginal circumcision signalled passage to manhood.

Many cultures are "closed", not allowing outsiders into the group, even through marriage, and ostracizing those who change their religious affiliation – unless the whole group does so. (The notion of "people movements", entire groups coming to Christ, has existed since the days of the early church).

Why people fear cultural change

Culture is never static. It is dynamic and constantly changing. Some people fear and oppose change. One effect of change can be the substitution of a culture for another (such as using the vernacular instead of Latin in Roman Catholic liturgy); loss of culture (eg young Catholics not using the rosary, or young Muslims not praying 5 times a day), incremental culture (additions to traditional forms) through television, food franchises and the Internet and fusion of new cultures on what already exists, and consequent loss of value systems, through the atrophying of language or oral traditions. Let me give an example. Roman Catholic churches in Australia were recently reproved for using gluten-free bread in masses (introduced to serve people with gluten intolerance), because the change was considered by the Vatican to be inconsistent with long-held protocols about trans-substantiation. The changes had nothing to do with Biblical truths, but those who feared change moved against it with ecclesiastical authority.

We need to understand the nature of culture if we are to appreciate the nuances of religious systems and how to reach people with the Gospel. This includes the historical role of the caste system in Hinduism; the influence of the "land" in defining Judaism; Islam as a total culture for those within its fold; the role of "the Dreaming" in Aboriginal identity and self-determination; the influence of Irish Catholicism in the Australian Labor Party and the impact of our economic and business priorities on editorial value in the print and electronic media.

How far are we prepared to tolerate pluralism? People I meet tell me they are tolerant but would object to a mosque with a 20 metre minaret being built in their street. Others have issues working with Sikhs' wearing turbans in Government service departments; being surrounded by people speaking another language; being served by Muslim women wearing the *hijab*, and dealing with people of

other faiths who take work breaks for prayer. Celebration of multiculturalism and positive discrimination in favour of non-Christian traditions, at a government level has had the effect of making evangelicalism appear grossly intolerant. It is now considered offensive to criticize other faiths, while the radio and print media have reduced scorn of Christianity to an art form.

Christianity is not Western

I once sat on a flight between Riyadh (Saudi Arabia) and Dubai (United Arab Emirates) discussing Christianity and Islam with a Muslim cleric. He spoke about Christians and the excess of Western culture in the same breath, as though they were the same thing. He was surprised when I told him Anglo-Saxon Christians are a minority group in the world-wide Christian movement and that people he observed to be living immoral lives in the West were not true believers. I said it not to assuage his concerns, but because it is true.

Christianity is not quintessentially Western. It is a faith system that had its genesis in Judaism and oriental values, language and values. Moreover, in a sense, it is not human, because it is predicated on divine revelation. But the moment we act as though "our" culture is the right one to be a vehicle for saving faith and genuine worship we alienate the rest of the world. The same thing happens when churches take sides in political debates and alienate half the population on matters that are not even central to the Gospel (God does not vote Labor, Liberal, Democrat, Republican, or even Christian Democrat).

There is nothing efficacious about Western culture. As Christians we cannot be captive to the human environment that produced us. After all, we are born "from above" (John 3:3-8). God is our heavenly Father and His desire is to make us like His Son. The Holy Spirit in us, transforming our minds, hearts and attitudes makes us more and more like Jesus, not our cultural icons.

Improving receptivity and responsiveness

In Biblical Christianity, culture is broken down. There can be no distinction between Jews and Greeks (Galatians 3:26-28), Americans and Sudanese, Germans and Chinese. We belong to the family of God. The Bible describes a multiplicity of languages, tribes, kinships and forms of worship serving Jesus Christ in His Kingdom. These differences speak to the diversity of the Christian community, differences that make us one, not opponents or exclusive sects. If we cannot embrace a Christian from another culture because they look, act, smell, dress and sing differently, we are not acting in the spirit of Christ.

How can a Biblical Christian operate in a pluralistic world? The answer is simple. The same way the early church worked it out. The geo-political environment that obtained in the first century was characterised by pantheons of gods, hostile political systems and innumerable vested interests. Our world is not very different. In every generation, the Holy Spirit enables the people of God to transcend cultural differences and proclaim that Christ died for all people, so that whoever believes in him will not perish, but have eternal life.