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Emerging Theology in India

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The Gospel and Culture: Areas of Conflict, Consent and Conversion

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Culture doesn't budge to a simplistic definition; neither does religion. The Gospel, however, is simple; yet, it is not without its systemic ramifications. Distinguishing the religious from the cultural is important for understanding both how the Gospel communicates in a culture and the elements that it comes into contact with when entering that particular culture.

Let's introduce the following two hypothesets as the formula for identifying and distinguishing elements of culture from elements of religion (in religion, also including anything of a religious nature, including ideological elements):

1. Any element that is grounded on a belief-system of a metaphysical nature is religious.

2. Any element that is grounded on nature and the natural, even if it were an imitation of it, is cultural.

On the basis of the above two hypotheses, let's preliminarily suggest the following table of elements of culture and religion (noting also that some elements mentioned here may not necessarily be present in every religion or culture):

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ELEMENTS OF CULTURE	ELEMENTS OF RELIGION/FAITH
Science/Reason	Beliefs/Faith
Entertainment	Worship
Taboo	Sin
Society	Community
Progress/Development	Salvation
Shame	Guilt
Aesthetics	Ethics
Arts	Morals
Relatives	Absolutes
Language-Grammar	Scriptures/Rites/Rituals
Communication	Prayer
Life-style	Life-values
Dynamics	Fundamentals
Change or Transition	Reformation
This-Worldliness (Secularity)	Spirituality
Vocation/Profession	Calling/Concern
Market/Shop	Temple/Shrine
Throne/Scepter	Altar/Sacrifice

Now, certainly objections are bound to arise against differentiating the cultural from the religious for the following reasons:

1. Traditional definitions of culture included religion as a part of culture. In fact, theologians such as Ernst Troeltsch (1865-1923) maintained that culture is the soil of religion and Paul Tillich (1896-1965) believed that religion is the soul of culture. To Troeltsch, transplanting a religion from its cultural soil to any other culture would mean fatal to it. However, for sure, the soil theory doesn't stand the test of anthropological studies. For instance, Buddhism took root in India, but is more at home now in China, Sri Lanka, Korea, and Japan than in India. Similarly, Christianity took root in Palestine, but "is" (?) more at home now in the West. As far as the soul theory is concerned, identifying a religion with a culture can pose problems in modern pluralistic experiences; for instance, it is possible that people sharing the same Western culture may be having a variety of different religious beliefs.

2. One of the most influential definitions of culture was given in the book Primitive Culture (1871) by Edward Tylor who defined culture as "that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, law, morals, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society."[1] Of course, Tylor saw culture and civilization as synonymous in this opening definition of his book. However, later scholars have found such a definition to be too general and much inclusivist.[2] In addition, there is also the debate about whether anthropology can be best studied as one of the humanities or as a science. Various responses to Tylor's definition tend to either look at culture in terms of its external elements (e.g. artworks) or in terms of the internal mental states (psychological behavior) of individuals sharing a culture. But, again perhaps the width of Tylor's definition can be narrowed down by not treating culture and civilization as fully synonymous.

Richard Niebuhr's (1894-1962) five-fold classification[3] of the relationship between Christ and Culture does certainly point to the fact that the religious can be distinguished from the cultural. Niebuhr's classification saw the following ways in which Christ encountered Culture:

- Christ against Culture (Antagonistic). In this model, Christ is seen as against human culture, especially the pagan one. This approach looks at culture as anti-Christian.

- Christ of Culture (Accommodating/Agreeing). In this model, Christ is seen as not against culture but conformable and interpretable by its context.

- Christ above Culture (Augmenting). This model doesn't see culture as against Christ, but it also doesn't see culture as being equal with Christ. It is based on Thomas Aquinas' bifurcation of Grace and Nature; divine revelation is superior to human reason.

- Christ and Culture in Paradox (Absurdity). This model was represented by Augustine (Two Cities), Martin Luther (Two Governments) and

1   E.B. Tylor, *Primitive Culture: Researches into the Development of Mythology, Philosophy, Religion, Art, and Custom,* Vol.1 (London: John Murray, 1871), 1

2   Jesse Prinz, *"Culture and Cognitive Science,"* Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, plato. stanford.edu, First Published Wed Nov 2, 2011. Accessed on Nov.3, 2014

3   H. Richard Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1951)

Soren Kierkegaard (Faith as Absurd) who saw in the relationship between Christ and culture a paradoxical tension between faith and reason. In essence, culture is this-worldly and impermanent, but Christ is from above and eternal.

Christ Transforming Culture (Altering). A more Calvinist and Reformed view sees culture as divinely instituted (God gave language and the first skin garments) and historically developed; at the same time culture is seen as tainted by human sinfulness and redeemable or transformable by the presence of Christ.
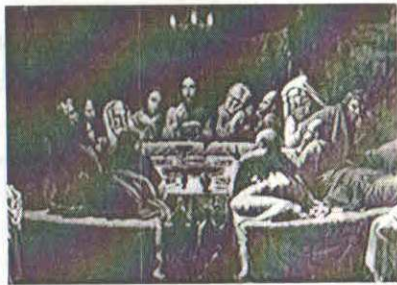
For anthropologists, however, taking the evolutionary and a-theistic approach to religion and culture, religion may be looked at as something that grows out of culture (evolving from animism on to more philosophical forms of religion). Such attempts tend increasingly towards religious relativism and the discouragement of absolutes. But, the evolutionary approach is not necessarily fool-proof. In fact, more recent studies point out that monotheism, not animism, explains several historical facts that are intractable on the evolution of religion hypothesis.4 Certainly, one can clearly notice that the elements of religion are distinguishable from the elements of culture.

Religion And Culture - Relationships
Case 1: Customs and Manners

by Joan de Joanes, c. 1562   by Manuel de Araújo Porto-alegre, 1840

Knowledge of the culture within which a religion originated plays an important role in the cultural retention of certain aspects of a religion.

4 *The World's Religions, A Lion Handbook* (Oxford, 1992), 32

However, in process of time as historical understanding develops, prior misunderstandings may be clarified. For instance, look at the paintings below:

The artist, in the first painting, attempted to keep the original cultural elements like dress forms, vessels, etc intact within the painting; however, wherever knowledge of elements went missing (for instance, table customs and manners), he supplied it from his own cultural heritage. In the second painting, however, we find the Lord's Table to more resemble the middle-eastern format (e.g. persons reclining on couches with a shorter table in the middle; also, it's not the wafer but a middle-eastern bread that is shown).

Case 2: Dress Forms and Tools

But, in cases where such historical understanding of origins may be vague or none, the cultural form is retained. For instance, there have been historical attempts to trace the origins of Aryan religion in Europe. One attempt sees relationship between the Hindu Agni and Ignus (Latin, Fire), Mithraand Mithra (Persian, Friend), Varuna and Ouranos (Greek, Heaven). However, such historical tracings are absent in the Indian narratives; consequently, the cultural forms are very local. But, where historical knowledge is present (as in Hinduism that spread to South Eastern nations), the original forms remain intact. Thus, we see that the Indian Hindu deities are adorned in the cultural dress forms (saree, dhoti); similarly, the biblical angels appear in white dress with harps and trumpets. Also, the heavenly warriors appear with swords (not with machine guns and bayonets). In other words, while cultural forms may change, cultural elements historically fixed in religion don't appear to change.

Goddess Saraswati by   Guido Reni's Michael
Raja Ravi Varma

Case 3: Language

The Scriptures of Christianity were written in Hebrew and Greek. However, globally now, translated versions are the ones in use and language is not a dogmatic element of worship. In fact, the New Testament was written not in the Jewish tongue but in the more popular Greek tongue (embracing a form of cultural globalism of the day). But, in a few other religions, the original language plays vital role. For instance, in Islam, Arabic is considered as the heavenly language and in Vedic Hinduism, Sanskrit is considered as the language of the gods.

Rationale for Differentiation

1. **Placing Science or Reason in Culture points out the non-dogmatic nature of culture, which is open to change.** This doesn't mean that religion doesn't embrace or is not born in cultures. It only tries to separate the one from the other. For instance, the gods and goddesses of Hinduism are still always portrayed as wearing sarees and dhotis (general Hindu dress). It might be considered an offence to portray them in Western clothes. This talks about the stagnancy of "religion's culture". However, Hindus don't necessarily wear only sarees and dhotis. They don't find wearing jeans or western coats as offensive. But, in a ceremony where religion is dominant, for instance during a Hindu marriage, what one wears can be an ethical issue. Similarly, modern armies use guns and bombs, but the gods and goddesses of religion may still be only pictured with swords and arrows. That depicts the difference between what culture is by itself in historical development and how religion differs from it in its conservative holding to the "original culture" in which it originated. Another example would be the dynamics of linguistic development versus the language-culture of religion. For instance, in Islam Arabic is considered to be the divine language. However, modern Arabic has a dynamic history of development and modern Arabic is not totally the same as the Arabic of the 4th century. Similarly, in Vedic Hinduism, Sanskrit is considered the language of the gods; but, in modern times Sanskrit is no longer used for conversation. It is taught in the schools but never used. That talks about the dynamics of culture versus culturalism of religion and should highlight their difference.

Religion will have to use cultural elements for sure, because it is always born in some culture or the other. However, cultures don't remain stagnant; they progress, inter-change, embrace new patterns. But, there is a kind of dogmatic stance, an absolutist aspect to religion in general. There are many such examples that can be cited in this regard. However, it also seems that certain cultural practices (e.g. Birthday Cakes and Candles) will remain unchanged and may even be absorbed by other cultures due to their simplicity and appeal. Yet, the difference between what is cultural and what is religion will be evident in that the cultural element, unlike the religious one, doesn't have metaphysical issues attached to it.

2. **By placing Altar/Sacrifice in Religion, it is only meant to indicate that wherever such ideas are found, these are not cultural symbols but religious symbols.**

3. **When we say that culture is about aesthetics, but religion is about ethics, it is meant that cultural context plays an important role in what is considered beautiful or valuable and what is not** (for instance, in some cultures a long neck would be considered beautiful and in some cultures girls are fed to make them look stout because leanness is considered unattractive). However, religion/ideology is very prescriptive, more in the ethical sense because it gives the rationale for why an action is wrong and why it is right and describes the consequences, in religious/ideological/philosophical terms. For instance, one cannot say, "In modern American culture, homosexuality is not wrong." One can say that most Conservative Evangelicals believe homosexuality is sin; and, many liberals and atheists consider homosexuality to be okay. In this case, ethics is certainly not a cultural but an ideological/religious issue.

4. **By placing Entertainment in Culture and Worship in Religion, we are using the** terms only as exemplary symbolic representations. Culture contains entertaining elements like dance, arts, drama, and music. Religion will use these elements and give them a particular form (for instance, church music or Hindu bhaktibhajan). In some cultures, religion even becomes the patron of some form of arts. For instance, the god Shiva in Hinduism is called the god of dance. But, those are religious attempts of claim over certain cultural elements.

Modern dance-forms in culture may have far departed from the classical forms. In some cases, such freedom may be allowed; but in others, not.

The Gospel And Culture

Culture may be seen more as the dynamic framework of group understanding that makes social communication possible in that group. It is possible that individuals in that particular group may have further exposures, but when coming back to their group they will still need to adapt to the semantic delimitations of that culture. For instance, in Plato'sparable of the cavemen in his The Republic, all the men are chained and faced towards the wall on which they see only shadows of people passing by. However, one of them has his shackles loosed and is able to get out of the cave and explore the world where the sun shines and the fields are lush and green. But, his friends in the cave cannot understand his language about the "real world out there" because they are still limited by the world of shadows. This poses communication and ideological problems as well and results in conflict. However, the nature of cultural interactions may not be so discontinuous as the world of reality and the world of shadows; especially, in an age of globalization. Yet, the possibility of individual pluralism (each individual being adapted to more than one culture) does exist. Another example would be of Paul whose natural argument on the basis of cultural semantics seems to be very rigorous in certain cases, for instance when talking about headcovering to the Corinthians.

In 1Corinthians 11:4-14, Paul gives instructions regarding headcovering in the Church. He instructs that women should cover their head while praying or prophesying in the public. However, with regard to men, he says that a man ought not to cover his head. His arguments are as follows:

1. A man who prays or prophesies, having his head covered, dishonors his head.
2. A woman who prays or prophesies, without having her head covered, dishonors her head.

3. A man ought not to cover his head since he is the image and glory of God.
4. A woman ought to cover her head since she is the glory of man.
5. Headcovering is seen as a symbol of authority (1Cor.11:10), at least in that culture.
6. A woman ought to cover her head because of the angels (1Cor.11:10).
7. "Nature" (that is laws of understanding, in this regard, as related to the culture) teaches that it is shameful for a man to have long hair, but it is an honor for a woman to have long hair (1Cor.11: 14)

Conclusively, a woman's hair ought to be long and, during prayer, must be covered.

It is important to note here that headcovering for men, as well as uncut hair, was common among the Jews (Lev.16:4; Zech.3:5; Num.6:5). However, the same was not considered "natural" among the Romans. Of course, commentators like John Gill believed that this change in the New Testament was because Christ the head of the man is now in heaven and man is so liberated; however, since the head of woman is man, she ought to cover her head. Nevertheless, the very language that associates covering with headship and honor suggests a semantic association rather than an ontic one; that is, the relation doesn't appear to be compelled by a logical necessity but only by the grammar of a culture that gives a practice its semantic sense. The chief point of the instruction is that one must not disregard the cultural sense of honor and shame in public worship. Of course, culture is not static and undergoes changes as its elements also undergo semantic changes - their meanings change. For instance, folding of sleeves might be symbolic of vandalism (because of some historic association with a behavior pattern, i.e. semantic usage) at some time, somewhere. It might symbolize a common fashion at some other time at some other place. Whatever, one must not be insensitive to cultural language (especially, when elements that have one meaning in our culture have another meaning in some other culture).

One important thing to note is that the Bible doesn't lament a culture if that culture properly functions to safeguard the Christian virtues. However, it does oppose any culture that turns the natural into unnatural, that promotes a false sense of shame and honor and despises what God has

divinely instituted in nature. Therefore, whenever a clothing or even hair style is culturally distinguished as masculine or feminine, violation of the same within that culture is considered unnatural by God – not because a dress form is absolutely masculine or feminine, but because the dress form in the language of the particular culture means either masculine or feminine (Deut.22:5; 1Cor.11:14). Therefore, violation of the dress form becomes a violation of nature itself in the same manner that one cannot violate grammar of a particular language and still make sense in that language. The argument that the violation doesn't exist in another language will not apply in this particular language.

Areas of Conflict

We have hypothesized that the areas of conflict will only be where elements have a pure metaphysical implication. For instance, the belief that one must not step in with the left leg first is a belief, and so is not a cultural element but a faith-element since it refers to a metaphysical connection (leftness is ontologically connected with misfortune). The Gospel is bound to come into conflict in this area. Now, this doesn't ignore the fact that there can be a-theistic or non-religious cultures as well (for instance, the Pirahas). We are only speaking of areas where religious or faith-elements exist and can be possible areas of conflict. However, when such ideological connections are absent (for instance, in the use of language and in dress forms), the conflict is absent. In fact, the Gospel uses the cultural elements and is bound to use them to relate to people in that culture.

Areas of Consent

But, where such conflicts don't exist, cultural elements may be absorbed. One good example of it is the use of art-forms and music by the Gospel. Also, one doesn't argue that all Christians must eat bread because Jesus and His disciples ate bread and not rice. However, when it comes to the issue of the Lord's Table, compromising the symbols of bread and wine is not just a cultural issue. Though some have extrapolated the symbols into contextualization, into say rice and rasam, such stretching of symbols cannot be done carelessly, unless a rationale is offered supporting the retention of the original meaning (the Bread symbolizes Christ's Body and the Wine symbolizes His Blood). The same goes with also baptism in water.

Areas of Conversion

There are certain areas that may need conversion when they come under the light of the Gospel. Some of these may not have any metaphysical implication as such, but might function as semantic supports for the communication of the Gospel. One example of that is the ritual of the Peace Child in the Sawi tribe that the missionary Don Richardson discovered as the most effective parabolic narrative for communicating Christ as the Peace Child in that culture. In that case, that particular ritual received another level of meaning in the light of the Gospel. In other cases, however, the Gospel directly convicts culture where it has departed from the "natural use" (cf. Rom.1:26).

Conclusion

Certainly, the area of culture and religion is a very tricky one. But, it is important for missiologists to have the right tools for distinguishing the elements that need to be distinguished, to avoid false conflicts, and to properly communicate the Gospel in a culture. One must refrain from trying to sell a culture along with the Gospel. Similarly, one must also be careful not to buy in a culture at the cost of the Gospel. One safe device of differentiation would be to look at culture as composed of the more natural and earthly elements while seeing faith as relating to absolutes, cosmology, metaphysics, and ethics.

Oh! May the God of great hope fill you up with joy, fill you up with peace, so that your believing lives, filled with the life-giving energy of the Holy Spirit, will brim over with hope!

Romans 15:13