

ALLIANCE THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY

Chapter Interaction Papers: Culture, Ethnocentrism, and Contextualization

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CS501

People as Social and Cultural Beings

by

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Thesis Sentence

Because culture is an important aspect of Gospel transmission, understanding culture is necessary for effective evangelism.

Summary

The title of the chapter nicely sets the reader up for what to expect: defining *culture*, exploring the pitfalls of *ethnocentrism*, and understanding the value of *contextualization* for Gospel communication. Michael Rynkiewich broadly describes culture as an “integrated system of knowledge...a system that people learn from other people around them...and a system that people use in order to change themselves as their environments change.”¹ Rynkiewich goes on nuancing what culture is and is not and provides several anecdotal stories which highlight various examples of culture playing out in society.

The chapter then moves through the topics of ethnocentrism, cultural relativism, and culture shock. It explores how each of these topics has shaped and continues to impact not only Western society’s view of culture and how it interacts with cultures outside its own, but how all cultures are impacted by their interactions with cultural contexts outside of their own. This section comes to end with the presentation of the understanding of culture in the postmodern era, which views culture as something that is contingent upon the environment, constructed out of available resources, and which can be contested by others within the society.

Finally, the chapter comes to end by marrying Gospel, and its transmission, to culture. This is evident within the Gospels themselves, which depict Jesus living within and speaking into a specific cultural context while simultaneously making claims contested by the culture He lived in. The contextualization of the New Testament, as seen through the differing perspectives

¹ Michael Rynkiewich, *Soul, Self, and Society: A Postmodern Anthropology for Mission in a Post-Colonial World* (Oregon: Cascade Books, 2011), 24.

of the Gospel authors and through the various narratives in Acts demonstrates an awareness of the necessity for contextualization of the Gospel message by the first-century Church. The chapter concludes with the idea that the dominant or mainstream culture's understanding of Christianity is not, nor was it ever, the only cultural context in which it can or should be expressed. This understanding is important the message of the Gospel is carried into various cultures in fulfillment of the Great Commission.

Personal Interaction

What stood out the most from this chapter was the Postmodern view of culture, particularly the notion that culture is something contested. As an American, the contestability of culture is at the forefront of our society now more than ever. The polarization of people groups has taken on a distinctive role in the country. Anecdotally, I said hello to stranger as I passed them by at the grocery store. The individual, an elderly male, responded with a scoff and the declaration that, "I look like a democrat." As I continued on my shopping trip, I could not help but dwell on how our society has managed to turn even a simple greeting into something remotely political.

As a Christian, I see this contestability play out within my local Church as well. For context, the Kodiak Bible Chapel is non-denominational, but features a rather even split of congregants from Evangelical and Baptist backgrounds. Within the last week, I have been engaged in discussions with one of our more passionate Baptist congregants about some theological disagreements. Despite my best efforts to get the individual to consider the Church (and her various denominational expressions) as a global phenomenon and not a distinctly Americanized religion, the individual is unwilling to accept anything outside of their beliefs as other-than-heretical. I think this contestability of the Christianity's cultural expressions, while

often not conducted in an edifying manner, is healthy for the Church. It forces individuals to examine and re-examine what they believe, and to examine their faith in light of Christianity as a global phenomenon.

Questions for Further Engagement

1. In what ways have you experienced Christianity outside of your own cultural context?
2. Are there any aspects of your faith which you have re-evaluated in light of experiencing Christianity expressed outside of your own cultural context?

Bibliography

Rynkiewich, Michael. *Soul, Self, and Society: A Postmodern Anthropology for Mission in a Post-Colonial World*. Oregon: Cascade Books, 2011.