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Christ and Cultures: *Multiculturalism and the Gospel of Christ*

“When I was a boy, world was better spot,

What was so was so, what was not was not,

Now I am a man, world have changed a lot,

Some things *nearly* so; others *nearly* not. . . .

O-ho! Sometimes I think that people going mad.

A-ha! Sometimes I think that people not so bad. . . .

But — is a puzzlement!”

— The King of Siam (Yul Brynner), “Is a Puzzlement,” in *The King and I* (1956)

So far we have argued that morality must be based on absolute truths about human nature and that these truths are determined by the fact of our creation by God as beings designed for relationships with God and one another. Furthermore, we have claimed that a reliable, definitive expression of these absolute moral truths is to be found uniquely in the Christian revelation preserved in the Bible.

All this talk of moral absolutes based on absolute truths is, to use the usual expression, politically incorrect. Those who dare to suggest that there are absolute truths that apply to all people in all cultures are usually deemed narrow minded and culturally imperialistic.¹ The charge is made even more vehemently when the absolutes which are upheld find their normative expression within the context of the biblical, Christian world view. Belief in Jesus Christ as the only way to God is associated by almost all non-Christians, and even by many within the Christian church today, with “Eurocentrism” — a cultural mindset that exalts the perspectives and achievements of white male Europeans (and their descendants in North America) at the expense of other cultures and traditions. As Islam and the Eastern religions have come into greater cultural prominence and acceptance in the West, belief in the absolute truth of the religious and moral teachings of Christianity is now commonly viewed as arrogant, intolerant, and unrealistic in today’s pluralistic society.

How shall we respond to this increasingly common sentiment? How can we call on all people to submit to Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior and to embrace the faith and values of Christianity in a society zealous for cultural diversity?

Understanding Multiculturalism

Multiculturalism can be thought of as a reality or as an ideal. As a reality, multiculturalism is a historical phenomenon that emerged in the last half of the twentieth century. As an ideal, it is a highly controversial view of human society that has become a source of contention and conflict in the last decade of the twentieth century.

Multiculturalism: The Reality

The roots of multiculturalism as an historical reality are to be found in the turbulent years of the 1960s. The counterculture movement of that decade sharply challenged the seeming cultural superiority and homogeneity of Western civilization. Young people protested against the materialism and militarism of the West in a variety of ways. They staged rallies against the Vietnam War. Men burned their draft cards, women burned their bras. Both men and women “turned on” to sex, drugs, and rock music that glorified both. Millions pursued spiritual enlightenment through alternative religions: TM, Scientology, the Hare Krishnas, Rev. Moon’s Unification Church, the Baha’i, the Nation of Islam, a dozen major Hindu gurus and uncountable minor ones, and many other paths.

The civil rights movement laid a foundation for the multicultural emphasis on racial diversity, although arguably the multicultural form of civil rights in the 1990s is very different from that of the 1960s. Martin Luther King, Jr., the most visible leader of the civil rights movement, was one of several icons of the idealism of the 1960s who were assassinated, martyred for the cause: President John F. Kennedy, his brother Robert (“Bobby”) Kennedy, and former Nation of Islam spokesman Malcolm X were the others.

After 1968, the year in which both King and Bobby Kennedy were killed, the idealism seemed to give way to a more pragmatic pursuit of economic and political power. In the 1970s, American politics began to be seen increasingly as a struggle between various disparate groups, each complaining of oppression, each seeking to achieve political power as a voting “bloc” that could not be ignored: besides every racial group, there were women (emerging in the 1970s) as well as gays and lesbians (a notable force by the 1980s). None of these blocs were or are really monolithic: the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) does not speak for all black Americans, nor does the National Organization for Women (NOW) speak for all American women. But such organizations have played an ever more important role in the cultural and political drama of American public life.

The multicultural reality has been enhanced by the increased ethnic and religious diversity of Western society. American and European society has been transformed through the immigration of millions of people from all over the world, especially from the Indian subcontinent and Southeast and East Asia. These people have brought with them their religion, philosophy, music, art, dress, and food. At the same time, advances in technology have brought us into increasingly close contact with the rest of the world. Television has led the way in this regard, allowing us to see other cultures; now, at the end of the 1990s, the computer appears to be taking us the next step, allowing us to interact with other cultures anywhere in the world.

In this rapidly changing and shrinking world, the idea that one culture is inherently superior to all others has all but disappeared. Certainly the notion of a monolithic culture

in the West based on a single stream of tradition is no longer viable. We live in a multicultural world — one in which peoples of disparate cultural heritages and traditions live and work together. In this sense, multiculturalism is a reality — a present fact of life.

Multiculturalism: The Ideal

But multiculturalism can and is also thought of as an *ideal* — as a goal toward which we ought to be moving and progressing. This is the controversial meaning which has become a focal point of conflict in our society — the focal point of what has been called the *culture wars*. Granted that we live in a world of varied cultures, ideally how should we come to terms with this multicultural reality?

Two prevalent tendencies in contemporary society certainly must be avoided. The first might be called *polyculturalism*. The relativistic belief that all cultures are equal and that there can be no ideal or standard in culture implies that people of disparate cultures cannot really *learn* from one another. All individuals, families, and institutions may be free to express whatever cultural heritage they choose, or to mix and match different elements of various cultures, but all cultural expression will be seen merely as a matter of taste. A society that actually embraced such a polyculturalism would have no basis for achieving real results in the ongoing struggle for liberty and justice for all people. Polyculturalism makes for a colorful display, but it is impotent to solve the real problems caused by the selfishness, greed, ambition, fear, anger, and mistrust which people of different nations, races, languages, religions, and cultures have exhibited in their dealings with each other throughout human history.

A good example of the multicultural ideal degenerated into polyculturalism was provided by the opening and closing ceremonies of the 1996 Centennial Olympic Games in Atlanta. These ceremonies mixed artistic expressions of the culture of the American South with tribal pagan symbols and explicit references to the “spirits” of the different continents. John Lennon’s mystical song *Imagine* and Beethoven’s *Ode to Joy* were two of the more jarringly disparate musical selections. The most reverential tribute imaginable was paid to Martin Luther King. The modern Olympic Games were heralded as a symbol of the world coming together on the basis of a humanistic belief in the inherent goodness and self-sufficiency of humankind — a not so subtle repudiation of the Christian view of humanity as a God-created race corrupted by sin. Yet this proud celebration of human goodness could not completely hide the darker reality of human nature, a reality brought vividly into view by the bombing of Centennial Park in downtown Atlanta during the Games.

The Olympic Games illustrates not only the disjointed and disunited character of polyculturalism, but the fact that it cannot provide a stable basis for *all* cultural options to enjoy full expression. Any cultural tradition which affirms a universal standard for all cultures, whether it be Muslim or Christian, must and is given short shrift in the polycultural festivities. In such a setting the courageous struggle for civil rights by a black Baptist preacher or the brilliant music of a German composer are cut off from their Christian, theological roots. The polyculturalist is like the polytheist who is willing to add Jesus to the pantheon of gods, but is shocked and outraged when told that Jesus is the *only* God and demands the elimination of all idols. There is no room in the cultural pantheon for a God who is the Lord and Judge of all cultures.

If polyculturalism is not an acceptable option, neither is replacing the Eurocentric cultural dominance with another form of *monoculturalism*. Islam has always been intrinsically monoculturalist, in a way that makes the cultural gaffes of Christian missionaries in Africa or the Pacific seem innocuous. The treatment of women in countries ruled by Islamic regimes, particularly in the Middle East, demonstrates this fact in disturbing fashion. The continued growth of Islam and its unceasingly militaristic approach to expansion and control makes Islam, not Christianity, the main enemy of multicultural cooperation and appreciation.

If there is a serious alternative to Islamic monoculturalism, it is a new paganism. Many people are discovering that the paganism of pre-Christian Europe (with its magic, astrology, witchcraft, and the like) has more in common with the ancient religious beliefs and rituals of Native American religion, tribal African religion, and Chinese folk religion, than with the monotheistic faiths of Judaism and Christianity. Since polyculturalism is inherently unstable, the push for multiculturalism is in many respects turning into a movement toward a new pagan monoculturalism in which all religious and cultural expressions of a mystical, earth-based, humanistic kind are embraced and woven together. Again, though, this is not true multiculturalism, since it excludes traditional beliefs and values of Christians, Jews, and Muslims — religions whose members account for roughly one-half of the world's population!

What, then, is — or should be — the multicultural ideal? What people seem to be trying to achieve in the name of multiculturalism seems to be fairly clear. We may identify three goals of the multicultural ideal.

First, multiculturalism means recognizing the rights of people of varying ethnic, racial, geographical, linguistic, and social roots to political freedom, economic opportunity, and societal toleration. It means bringing to an end the specter of race-based conflicts in such different places as Bosnia and Los Angeles.

Second, multiculturalism means rectifying political and economic injustice by pursuing policies that ensure freedom and opportunity for all people. Where laws or social structures systematically deprive people of freedom and opportunity, they must be changed. This does not mean pursuing an impossible ideal of equal results for all groups or classifications of people, but it does mean continuing to pursue the ideal of full opportunity for all people.

Third, multiculturalism means fostering a genuine respect for diverse cultural expressions such as music, art, literature, and dance, and diverse cultural traditions in such matters as education, the family, and work. Such respect does not mean ignoring moral or spiritual failings reflected in these cultural expressions and traditions (since these can be found in any culture, including European). It does mean recognizing that certain constants of human life — love, growth, need, aspiration, suffering, hope — find expression in all cultures.

Jesus and Multiculturalism

Is the claim that Jesus Christ is the Lord and Savior of the world relevant to a world in which so many cultures coexist in such close proximity, a world weary of conflict between peoples and nations of disparate cultures? Not only should Christians not be

embarrassed to make this claim, we should see in the cry for a multicultural ideal a tremendous opportunity to present the claim of Christ to all people.

Jesus in His Cultural Setting

Who was Jesus? Well, Jesus was at the most obvious and visible level a Jewish rabbi and prophet. He spoke in parables (as did the rabbis) and interpreted the Jewish Torah. He taught disciples and debated Jewish authorities, including other rabbis.

Although Jesus was a rabbi, he was by all accounts no ordinary one. Jesus was in crucial respects a religious and cultural revolutionary. He taught that although God had revealed himself uniquely to the Jews (John 4:22), Jewishness alone was no guarantee of favor with God (Matt. 8:10-12). He taught that the temple would be destroyed (Matt. 24; Mark 13) and that worship of God would be centered in the heart, not in Jerusalem (John 4:21-24). He taught that a kind Samaritan or a repentant tax-collector was better than a pious but proud or heartless Pharisee (Luke 10:29-37; 18:9-14). He invited women to be his disciples (Luke 10:38-42). He granted healing to Gentiles (Matt. 15:21-28) and ate in the homes of outcasts (Luke 19:1-10).

Jesus was remarkable in everything he said and did. He taught like no man ever had or has since — an evaluation that has been voiced by Christians and non-Christians alike who have read the Gospels. Jesus spoke with absolute authority — “but I say to you” — yet few find his words arrogant. He spoke to the sick and the sinner with compassion yet without sentimentality. He spoke in terms that challenged the factions of Judaism of his day that might be loosely described as the “fundamentalists” and “liberals” of that culture.

His own position was theologically closest to the Pharisees, yet his teaching defied simple categorization.

Nor was Jesus “all talk.” He performed miracles of healing, restoring health and even life to children and adults, men and women, Jews and Romans. Even most critical scholars of a skeptical bent today acknowledge that Jesus at least performed some works of healing, however they might explain them. Rather than parading the healed before the public as many faith healers do today, Jesus usually healed people in relative privacy and discouraged people from looking to him merely for miracles. His miracles were profound signs of God’s love and mercy that were remembered by his disciples as proof, not merely that he was a wonder worker, but that he was God’s beloved Son.

Surprisingly, despite the tremendous inspiration of his teaching and the impressive power of his miraculous works of healing, Jesus was remembered primarily for the way he died than for the way he lived. All four of the Gospels focus on Jesus’ death, with his teachings and miracles serving more as preludes than the main point. Jesus’ death itself was unusual: he died on a Roman cross, convicted of treason by claiming to be the King of the Jews. Crucifixion was viewed universally in the ancient world with such revulsion that the Christians would never have made Jesus’ crucifixion part of their faith if it had not really happened, and if they had not seen in it a transcendent significance. The New Testament implicates everyone in the death of Jesus — Jewish religious leaders, Roman political authorities, even one of Jesus’ own followers. Thus, to use the Crucifixion as a pretext for anti-Semitism contradicts the New Testament, which implicates all groups of people and

whose authors were, with only one exception (Luke), Jewish. Indeed, by implicating all groups of people in Jesus' death, the Gospels present his death as redemptive for all people.

The story of Jesus does not end with his death, however. The unanimous witness of all of the New Testament writers and of the church from its earliest days was that Jesus had risen from the dead. Since the traditional Jewish expectation was that all people would be resurrected at the end of history, the notion of an individual being raised from the dead in the midst of the historical process would hardly have occurred to the disciples, even as a myth. That the story was not a myth is made plain by the fact that all four Gospels report that the first ones to see Jesus alive from the dead were women. Since this was an honor that Jewish men of the first century were not likely to bestow on women in a fictional story, evidently this is how it really happened. By appearing first to women, Jesus affirmed their dignity and once again challenged traditional first-century cultural prejudices. Of course, Jesus made several appearances to men as well, appearances that are reported in independent sources in Scripture — to individuals (Peter, James), to the eleven men disciples, and to even larger groups. Jesus' resurrection, a documentable historical fact, established the truth of his claim to be God's Son and the meaning of his death on the cross as a redemptive work of God.

Jesus in His Multicultural Significance

In a classic work of theology, H. Richard Niebuhr asked about the relationship between *Christ and Culture*.² Does Christ transform culture? Does Christ stand against all culture? Does Christ reveal himself through culture? Niebuhr identified five distinct

approaches to the relationship between Christ and culture — and the corresponding relation between the church and the world — which he correlated with distinct Christian traditions (e.g., Lutheran, Calvinist, and Anabaptist).

While Niebuhr's analysis was and is illuminating, various theologians have noted some weaknesses in Niebuhr's approach. Perhaps the major problem was Niebuhr's assumption of culture as a single, unitary reality whose relation to Christ and the church could be defined in one way.³ In an increasingly multicultural world, we must now ask about Christ and *cultures*: How does Christ relate to the diverse cultural traditions and expressions in our world? And how do these diverse cultural traditions relate to one another in Christ?

We suggest that the relation between Christ and our plurality of cultures may be understood from at least three perspectives. First, Christ is the *Reconciler* of cultures — he is the one who can bring people of different cultures together. Second, Christ is the *Redeemer* of cultures — he brings wholeness and hope to people of all cultures. Third, Christ is the *Ruler* of cultures — he is the one who establishes the standards by which all cultures are ultimately to be judged. We will elaborate on each of these perspectives.

Christ the Reconciler of Cultures

By both his life and his death, Jesus offered reconciliation to all cultures. By his teaching Christ called Jew and Gentile together; both were offered a place in God's kingdom, with the ethnicity of the Jews giving them no advantage whatsoever. While Jesus modeled this reconciliation in his own life and ministry, it took his followers some time to

put this aspect of his message into effect. When they did, however, the results were revolutionary. The Jewish disciples of Jesus were taught to reach out with love and acceptance to the Gentiles, whom they had come to think of as beasts. The Gentiles were invited into fellowship with the Jewish disciples without having to become Jewish.

Christ even more decisively brought about reconciliation between Jews and Gentiles through his death. Both Jews and Romans found themselves implicated in the death of Christ, but also forgiven through the death of Christ. One's relationship with God was now based on the experience of God's love through Christ as shown supremely in his death, not on one's Jewish identity. Gentile believers came to see that the God of Israel, of the Jews, was the true God. Jewish believers came to see that their God was to be made known to all people.

Christians have certainly failed to embody the full potential of reconciliation which Christ came to bring to all cultures. Throughout most of church history the Gentile nations that have professed the Christian faith have created deep wounds of division between Gentiles and Jews, culminating in the devastation in this century of the Holocaust. To our shame, Christians have made Blacks their slaves instead of their brothers. The still largely segregated churches in America testify to the continuing need for reconciliation between white and black Christians.

But there have been positive signs as well. Christian conviction was a primary factor in the abolitionist movements in England and America, and was also prominent in the civil rights movement of the 1960s. Although churches still tend to be quite segregated, Christians of all races and nations regard one another as brothers and sisters, and have come

together in parachurch settings such as the many college campus ministries or the recent phenomenon of Promise Keepers.

By his death Christ offers reconciliation between all peoples today. He offers reconciliation between Jew and Arab, Jew and German, and Jew and black. He offers reconciliation between whites and blacks in America and in South Africa. He offers reconciliation between Catholics and Protestants in Northern Ireland. He offers reconciliation between the descendants of European colonialists and Native Americans. He offers reconciliation between Croats and Serbs. He offers reconciliation between men and women, rich and poor, criminals and victims. There are no ethnic, national, cultural, or social barriers that Christ cannot tear down.

Christ the Redeemer of Cultures

What can Christ do to bring reconciliation between peoples and cultures which have historically regarded each other with suspicion if not hatred? Christ effects reconciliation between people of different cultures by bringing redemption to those people. Only those who have experienced the redemption which Christ provides can know the reconciliation which he brings. This redemption is of multifaceted significance for the cultures of the world.

First of all, Christ offers *forgiveness* to people of all cultures. Christ forgave the worst sinners of his own culture; he also forgave those who professed him but then denied him. Christ teaches us to forgive others as he forgives us (Matt. 6:14-15) — and this must include forgiving the sins of the past as well as of the present.

Second, Christ offers *healing* to people of all cultures. Christ's physical healing of Jews and Gentiles symbolized his spiritual healing for all. He offers spiritual healing to all individuals who come to him, and for cultural institutions that honor him. Christ offers healing of relationships between people of differing cultures — a healing that comes as people forgive each other and accept each other in Christ's name.

Third, Christ offers *cleansing* to people of all cultures. He challenges all cultures to accept the transforming power of his redemptive love. Christ challenges traditionally Christian cultures to repent of their sins and to make restitution to peoples they have wronged. At the same time, he challenges cultures largely untouched by him to trust themselves *to him* — not to European culture. It is as they both seek to know the cleansing and transforming power of Christ in their lives and cultures that European and non-European cultures will eagerly and sincerely come to learn from each other.

Fourth, in his work as redeemer Christ offers *hope* to people of all cultures. He promises an eternal future for people of all tribes, nations, and languages. But the hope is not exclusively future: Christ offers people of all cultures spiritual power now for personal and community transformation.

Christ the Ruler of Cultures

Christ's work of reconciling people of all cultures to himself and to one another through himself, then, is effected by Christ's redeeming work of bringing forgiveness, healing, cleansing, and hope to all who believe in him. By his death Jesus Christ brings people of all cultures together to confess their need of redemption and to place their trust

in him instead of in the false self-sufficiency of their proud cultures. Part of entrusting ourselves to Christ is submission to him as the Ruler of cultures.

The claim of Christ's universal authority over all cultures is undoubtedly the most troubling and "politically incorrect" aspect of the Christian faith, but it is non-negotiable (Matt. 28:18). On what basis do we claim that Christ is the Lord to whom all cultures must bow — that he is for all people and not only for some? Is this not simply a bit of cultural imperialism, to exalt one religious founder over all others?

We have already discussed the radical universality of the message and ministry of Jesus. What is not often considered, however, is the importance of his cultural identity. The fact that Jesus was a Jew makes him ideally suited to bring people of all cultures together. For one thing, the Jews are a people whose numbers have always been relatively small and who have never been politically dominant — unlike the Arabs, Europeans, Chinese, and other such ethnically related peoples. Indeed, the Jewish people's experience of oppression can be appreciated by people of many other cultural and ethnic histories. Moreover, by coming in a people of such distinct cultural heritage, Christ affirmed the value of particular ethnic and cultural traditions. Jesus was not a bland Everyman, representing a homogeneous ideal for humanity, but a man of distinct racial appearance, language, customs, and history. It is also striking to note that the Jewish people in Jesus' time had lived for over a millennium at the crossroads of the three continents of the Eastern Hemisphere — Europe, Africa, and Asia. Thus, in many and surprising ways the cultural heritage of Jesus makes him an ideal figure to unite people of every culture. This is one reason why it is so important to recognize and understand the Jewishness of Jesus.

If his Jewish cultural identity ideally positioned Jesus to bring people of all cultures together, what authorizes him to be the Ruler of all cultures is his resurrection from the dead. Jesus is the only major religious figure in history who is even reputed by his followers to have risen physically from the grave. As we have seen, the evidence clearly shows that Jesus' resurrection really happened and was not a myth that developed some time after Jesus' death. The Resurrection makes Jesus Christ a unique figure among all the religious teachers, prophets, sages, and leaders of world history. It shows that he has the power of life and death, and is the proof of his claims to uniquely reveal God (Acts 2:36; Rom. 1:3-4; Rev. 1:18).

The near-universal appeal and attraction which Jesus Christ has evoked even outside Christianity confirms the claim that only he can truly unite people of all cultures. It is notable that the three largest non-Christian religions all have sought to come to terms with Jesus in some way. Islam, which numbers roughly a billion people, views Jesus as a great prophet and miracle-worker. Hinduism, numbering roughly 750 million, often views Jesus as an avatar of Vishnu — one of many incarnations of one of the many Hindu forms of God. Buddhism, which accounts for about 300 million people of the world, typically regards Jesus as an enlightened one for the West. What these religions unwittingly attest by extending such honors to Jesus is that he is the one religious figure in history that simply cannot be ignored.

What does it mean to honor Christ as the Ruler, the Lord of all cultures? It means, first of all, to accept him on his own terms, as he has revealed himself. It means to accept the revelation of Christ given through his own disciples. We should not be embarrassed to

say that Christ calls upon all people to become *Christians*. This does not mean, of course, that everyone should become culturally European, any more than in the first century all Christians had to become culturally Jewish. But if European culture was at all influenced for the better by its acceptance (however flawed) of Christ as Lord, surely those who submit to Christ as Lord of whatever culture will not find it necessary to despise or reject all things European.

Honoring Christ as Ruler of cultures means, further, to accept his rulership over every aspect of one's life, including one's culture and one's relationship to people of other cultures. It means to accept his offer of redemption — forgiveness, spiritual healing, and hope — and to place our hope for redemption in him only. It means to accept his teachings on all subjects on which he speaks in the Gospels (Matt. 28:18-20).

Thus, if we honor Christ as Ruler of cultures, we will do as Christ taught and place our faith in God as Creator, Provider, Father, and King over all cultures. We will love and respect people of all cultures. We will critically examine the beliefs and practices of our own culture to see if they conform to the teachings of Christ. We will seek to submit every area of life, including culture, to the will of the God revealed to us in Christ. This God, according to Christ himself, has revealed his will definitively in Scripture (Matt. 5:17-18). And so it is on the basis of the teaching of Jesus Christ, the Ruler of cultures, that we call upon all cultures — including our own — to submit itself to the will of God as revealed in Scripture.

Yet this view of Scripture as preserving an unchanging and absolute will of God for all people has fallen on hard times, even within the church. In the next chapter, then, we will consider key objections to the absolute moral authority of Scripture.

Notes for Chapter 11: Christ and Cultures

¹One of the rare examples in American politics in recent years of a speech emphasizing moral absolutes that was generally very well received was General Colin Powell's keynote address at the 1996 Republican National Convention.

²H. Richard Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture* (New York: Harper & Row, 1951).

³Cf. Robert E. Webber, *The Church in the World: Opposition, Tension, or Transformation?* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1986), 262-64.