

The Bible
IN CROSS-CULTURAL PERSPECTIVE

REVISED EDITION

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The Bible in Cross-Cultural Perspective

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Cross-Cultural Perspective

Normally we look at the cultures of the Bible through the lens of our own culture, modified to some degree by our education, which introduces a minimal amount of cross-cultural information. We read, for example, that the patriarchs lived in tents, but how we imagine those tents depends on many factors, including Sunday school pictures. If we have no other information, we are likely to think of them as being like the ones we see in any modern campground.

Some of the peoples through whose eyes we look at the Bible have cultures more similar to those of the Bible than our own are. They can therefore sometimes understand aspects of biblical cultures more clearly than we do. Likewise, we can look at various major cultures of the Bible through the eyes of people of other cultures within the Bible, and thus examine the similarities and differences in the worldviews of the people of God. We can try to understand the variation in their perception of God and of their relationship to God.

Culture enables us to know how to live. Human beings do not have proportionately as many of the instincts which enable animals to do what is necessary for survival, but must learn most of the processes through a long childhood and adolescence. In fact, we never stop learning. By observation, mimicry, experimentation, education, and other forms of learning, adults are able to live much as the people around them in their own society. Our culture shapes how we think, reason, evaluate, and behave. It provides us with our religion and much of our sense of right and wrong.

In a complex society like ours, of course, culture is not uniform but has many variations, many subcultures. Yet underlying similarities also exist among them. North American culture in general differs from Chinese culture in spite of wide variations within each.

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One important function of the culture we learn is to provide us with a feeling of belonging, comfort, and security. We are used to it, normally feel at home in it, depend on it to guide our thinking and behavior. This "at home" feeling, the feeling that our culture is "right," persists even when we meet people of another culture and observe what they do. Where they differ from us, we often feel that their behavior is incongruous or even wrong. The at-home feeling also often makes us inclined to resist change.

When we were missionaries in Noanama, Colombia, my wife Anne got out our wedding picture one day and displayed it. The young woman who had already been working in our home for several years was shaken when she saw it. She said, "But you can't be married!" When Anne insisted that we were, Delia continued, "But married people fight! Husbands beat their wives, but you and your husband don't fight. I have never seen him strike you!"

In this village of forty couples, none were legally married to their partners. The people informed us quite confidently that common law was the only way to live because it assured that partners maintained mutual respect. "Once married," they said, "the husband always assumes that he is the absolute boss. Then the union is no longer peaceful or violence-free." The Noanama people did not feel comfortable with our way, nor we with theirs.

On my first trip to British Guiana, now Guyana, I arrived at the airport in Georgetown close to midnight and took a taxi. En route to the hotel I "died many deaths" as the taxi sped along the left side of the road, passing oncoming traffic on its right. Later, when I was stationed in East Africa, I myself drove on the left side of the road for almost a decade, but I still had to be careful on country roads, especially at night, when I would unthinkingly drift to the right. In ten years of driving on the left, I was never able to become fully at home with it.

But culture does change, and our feeling of what is right may also change. When I was growing up in a Mennonite community, men habitually shared a kiss of brotherhood with each other when they met, especially after an absence, or at a religious service. When I returned home on retirement, however, there were no more brotherly kisses. Even the Latin American bear hug between men was almost frowned upon. The handshake was now the standard form of greeting between men.

One area in which exposure to another culture has changed my sense of right and wrong is my attitude toward giving and receiving something with my left hand. After living in cultures where the left hand is considered unclean and where to give or to receive something with the left hand is insulting, I have come to feel an inward repulsion about receiving or giving anything with that hand. My recent stroke, which wiped out the use of my right hand, has seriously complicated this matter for me. My left hand is now my only functional one, leaving me with inward withdrawal from giving or receiving.

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Much culture change results from culture contact, when people from different cultures interact with each other. Much of that change is superficial, like learning to drive on the "wrong" side of the road. The world of urban young people mimics the clothing and mannerisms of an entertainment star. Television antennas rise above the roofs of remote villages. Thai restaurants proliferate in North American cities.

In cases like these, culture changes by outright borrowing, but usually the process of really significant change is more subtle. When people from one culture get to understand another culture's view, they may subtly begin to modify their previous views, especially in those aspects of the new culture that make good sense within their own culture.

And sometimes culture change is radical and profound. Eastern block countries have taken steps toward more democratic government and Western-style capitalism. South Africa voted down apartheid. A village of people in Central America is converted to a new relationship with God.

My Culture History

This book reflects my experience, and as a whole this study is the testimony to people of my own culture, of my faith in God's word, so I need to describe how my cross-cultural perspective was formed. I have lived among people of many cultures, sometimes having been forced to do so, sometimes willingly.

Russian Mennonite Cultural Experience

I was born in 1922, in Russia, when that country was already in the throes of the Bolshevik revolution after World War I. My family lived in an isolated and relatively closed German Mennonite colony near the Ural Mountains. Up to then, the colony had enjoyed its own local government and its own German schools; it had taken care of all its own affairs. But now everything was in flux. A succession of revolutionary governments was turning everything upside down. The latest crisis had even put an atheist teacher, teaching in Russian, into the local Mennonite school. That was the last straw for my mother and my stepfather, so they kept me out of school and began preparing to leave Russia.

I never knew my real father, Jacob Isaak. He had returned from alternative service at the end of the war and had married my mother, but by the time I was born, he was seriously ill, probably of typhoid fever. He died before I reached my third month.

I was born allergic to milk, even mother's milk, and almost immediately became eczematous. Untreated, I became an oozing mass of seeping ulcerations. My mother speaks of picking me up and pulling off part of my

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scalp where my hair had dried to the bedding.

The pious neighbors began praying for my demise, kindly asking God to relieve this poor widow of her hopeless, festering burden. Such prayers were daggers in my young mother's heart, as the baby was all she had. In desperation, one night she threw herself across my wooden cradle and harangued her Maker in prayer, "Lord, if you cannot heal him, then take him right now. But if you can heal him, I will take care of him as long as you see fit to afflict him. I dedicate him to your service." The knowledge that this event took place lies deep in my psyche, helping form my own personal culture, even though it occurred when I was so young that I cannot remember it.

When my family arrived in Moscow, the city was clogged with some 25,000 Mennonite refugees desperately wanting to leave the country, although the government wasn't issuing exit permits. The German government finally extracted a promise from the Russians that any German-speaking person who would be in Moscow on November 25, 1929, would be given an exit permit. So the Russians systematically filled up trains of cattle cars with Mennonites and shipped them to concentration camps far from Moscow, in the Siberian Arctic.

In Moscow, the home in which my family found lodging had eight rooms. A Russian caretaker lived in one, a Mennonite family in each of the others. Each family had to pay rent for the whole house, and do so for six months in advance. During the five months that my family was there, the secret police visited nearly every night, rounding up Mennonites to send to a concentration camp. The owner of the house must have been adept at bribery, as any family which had enough money to pay the exorbitant rent was not taken. When money ran out, the family was picked up by the police.

I still remember those terror-filled moments, night after night, when the secret police came, gun butts banging on the door or on the floor, angry stentorian commands, mothers rousing the children to kneel and cry to God for deliverance, while fathers presented our papers to the police. The fear of armed men has never fully left me.

Finally, only the six families remaining in our house were still left in our whole area. On November 25, 1929, we were still in Moscow, together with some 1,500 other Mennonites who had escaped the forced exodus. We received the promised permission to emigrate to Canada.

Subsequent Cultural Experience

The religious climate in which I grew up was highly evangelical, fervently revivalistic and tending towards fundamentalism. Even in Canada, the communities in which I lived were solidly Mennonite. The pressures of church

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and community for conformity to the accepted religious mores were strong. I grew up in a church in which conversion was defined as the once-and-for-all transaction that transformed sinners into children of God. A favorite sermon text was, "Therefore if any man *be* in Christ, *he* is a new creature: old things are passed away; behold all things are become new" (2 Cor 5:17 KJV). I underwent a crisis conversion at ten years of age, and spent the succeeding years in intense inner conflict over the difference between the actuality of my experience and the ideal proclaimed from the pulpit.

The church ordained me as a minister in 1943, after I began preparing for missionary service. I was considered too young to preach on Sunday mornings, so was restricted to evenings. Even so, time and again on Monday morning the church elders would inform me that what I had said might well be true, but that I was too young to say it.

However, in spite of the strength of this core Mennonite culture, when World War II began in 1939, the closed community was torn wide open by high-paying jobs in urban centers, and intense tensions began to develop within it. Soon beckoning economic opportunities caused many traditional Mennonite values to wither. Piety and thrift were replaced by education, accumulation of wealth, and conspicuous consumption. Our minority culture was changing in various parts and to varying degrees toward the dominant culture.

My missionary preparation involved five winters of Bible school, one year at a missionary medical school, two summers at the Summer Institute of Linguistics, and a four-year college degree, in that order. My wife Anne and I were then sent to Colombia, to the Waunana Indians, to develop a writing system for their language and to translate the Scriptures into it. I arrived convinced that I knew the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth, but quickly became aware that the truth is not easy to communicate cross-culturally.

The most common complaint I heard from the Waunana was that they were suffering from fever spirits, an illness which I was usually able to diagnose as malaria. So I enlightened them with the true cause of their illness, showing them what malarial parasites looked like through a microscope.

When the Waunana saw the blue-stained parasites on a glass slide, they were amazed. "We always knew that fever spirits had blue noses," they said, "but we didn't know that they were all blue and that they were so small." I was ready to tear out my hair because instead of communicating the "truth" to them, I was reinforcing their "error."

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