

Reflections on the Differences Between Religion and Culture

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Culture may be thought of as a causal agent that affects the evolutionary process by uniquely human means. Religion, on the other hand, is considered a process of revelation and contains the concept of the “faithful” who receive the message of revelation. Culture permits the “self-conscious evaluation of human possibilities” and therefore presents a device for increasing human control over species change. There are dangers, however, in accepting cultural relativism without any constraint, such as respect for human life and dignity. In this article, the author attempts to clarify the boundaries between religion and culture and acknowledges that further research is needed on the religion/culture dichotomy. (*Clinical Cornerstone*®. 2004;6[1]:25–33) Copyright © 2004 Excerpta Medica, Inc.

Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger of the Roman Catholic Church has proclaimed that “faith itself is culture.”¹ If we regard this as correct then we cannot make distinctions between the two. John Bowker, in the introduction for *The Oxford Dictionary of World Religions*, states “religions are the earliest cultural systems of which we have evidence for the protection of gene-replication and the nurture of children.”² Another definition is that religion amounts to a religio-cultural tradition. Hinduism, according to Julius Lipner, “is an acceptable abbreviation for a family of culturally similar traditions. One may be polytheistic or monotheistic, monistic or pantheistic, even agnostic or atheistic, and still be a Hindu. Hinduism is essentially a cultural phenomenon.”³ Whether we regard religions as cultural systems or religio-cultural traditions, we are left with a problem. Where does

religion end and culture begin, or, depending on one’s philosophical assumptions, where does culture begin and religion end? Can the two be clearly separated? Are there any rules that help clarify the boundaries between religion and culture?

CULTURAL AND RELIGIOUS DIFFERENCES

Let us begin with an example of 2 religious services held in the same Christian church in Islamabad (Pakistan) on an average Sunday. The earlier morning service is held for the expatriates and diplomatic community and is conducted in English. The hymns are traditional and sung, accompanied by an organ. Women sit without their hair covered beside the men and dress in the Western manner (hats are usually reserved for special occasions, except for funerals and weddings or in black-led churches such as the Seventh Day Adventists). It could be any other Christian church service in Europe or North America. At the second service, held later in the morning, the liturgy, sermon, prayers, and singing are all performed in Urdu. The women sit in native dress on the right-hand side of the aisle and are veiled; the men sit on the other side of the aisle. The hymns are set to

KEY POINT

Cultures tend to be localized, whereas religions are not.

music that uses South Asian rhythms, while the accompaniment dispenses with the organ and instead uses traditional instruments from the region.

This observation could be made about the process of interaction between almost any religion and culture. In the case of Christianity, a faith that was born in Palestine was transferred to the “gentile” world in a process now called “inculturation.” At first the process was handled by representatives of the home culture (Judaism), who adapted it with the help of elements borrowed from a foreign culture (Hellenism) so that it became more accessible to Greeks. From the late 1st century onward, the inculturation process was handled by gentiles “only superficially acquainted with the Jewish religion of Jesus” so that “within a relatively short time no Jew was able to find acceptable the new incultured doctrinal legacy of Jesus.”⁴ Subsequently, Christianity was exported from Europe to the United States, and from both places to the rest of the world. Further inculturation occurred in the process, creating distinctive African, Indian, and Asian forms of Christianity that have come up against the preceding traditional religions. (In Africa these religions are ordinarily referred to as African traditional religions; in Asia they are called tribal religions and folk religions; in America, native religions and African American religions; and in Oceania, indigenous religions.) A Roman Catholic statement on traditional religions comments⁵:

Many recent converts to Christianity come from a background of traditional religions. This is true not only in those Churches where the Gospel has been preached only within the last century or so, but also in some countries where the Church has been established for many centuries. Many of these converts live in cultures and contexts influenced by these religions. This is proved by the fact that at some important moments in their lives (such as sickness, danger, marriage, birth of a child, funeral of a relative) they tend to have recourse to practices of their traditional religions or to prayer houses, healing homes, witchcraft, “prophets” or fortune-tellers.

Traditional religions are defined as those religions which, unlike the world religions that have spread into many countries and cultures, have remained in their original socio-cultural environment. The word *traditional* is not taken to refer to something static or unchangeable, but merely localized. This illustrates

the important point that cultures tend to be localized, whereas religions are not. For example, the headscarf (*hijab*), which is universally adopted by women in the Indian subcontinent, or other forms of covering adopted by women in Islam, the most extreme being the *burqa*. A Quranic basis, that is to say, a view based on the *Qur'an*, the sacred text of Islam (*Q.24:31*) is found for women’s modesty in dress, although its interpretation is debated. Also, in Islam there is an important precept commanding what is right and prohibiting what is wrong (*Q.3:104*). However, considerable differences exist among cultures as to right or wrong; eg, witness the collision between West African and Islamic attitudes to female nudity, where in the 15th century it was found that south of the Sahara “all the most beautiful girls walk naked among people with no covering at all.”⁶

Most women in Afghanistan wear the *burqa*, but few do so in neighboring Pakistan. People often confuse traditions rooted in local culture with religious requirements. Regional specificity is a relatively easy and straightforward test of what is distinctively a cultural rather than a religious practice. This does not mean that the distinction is always observed. “Traditional dress” in this case would be a more appropriate term than “proper Islamic apparel,” because devout Muslim women elsewhere in the world do not feel obligated to cover themselves entirely.

KEY POINT

Religions do not advocate measures that harm their followers either physically or psychologically.

Circumcision

In certain specific rites, what is cultural may become confused with what is religious. Male circumcision is a religious ritual common to both Judaism and Islam. In Judaism, the covenant of circumcision (*berit milah bris*) recalls that Abraham circumcised himself and all the male members of his household in obedience to God’s command (*Genesis 17:11–12*). The act is usually performed in a religious service on a boy 8 days of age by a specialist

known as a *mohel*.⁷ In Islam, the rite is known as *khitán* and is obligatory, although the manner in which it is performed and the age at which it is undertaken vary. The Quranic passage (*Q.2:138*) that is taken to support the practice is inexplicit but follows the statement that the Muslim creed is “the creed of Abraham, who turned away from all that is false” (*Q.2:135*). Christians may undertake male circumcision for reasons of choice or health, but from circa 50 CE (the Common Era) (*Acts 15* and *Galatians 2*), there was recognition of the practice of not circumcising gentile converts in the church of Antioch,⁸ although the Ethiopian church performs circumcision in the first week of a boy’s life before baptism.

Apart from possible psychological effects, male circumcision is considered to be harmless. Not so with female circumcision (*Khafd*) or female genital mutilation (FGM). Although arguments have been made to the contrary, this practice is generally believed to be a cultural one rather than a religious rite required by Islam and is also practiced in African Christianity (eg, in Ethiopia and Kenya). The origin of the practice appears to be tribal. Jomo Kenyatta, the late president of Kenya, argued that FGM was inherent in the initiation rite that was an essential part of being a member of the Kikuyu tribe to such an extent that abolition would “destroy the tribal system.” A study in Sierra Leone reported a similar belief about the social and political cohesion promoted by the Bundo and Sande secret societies that carry out and teach initiation mutilations.⁹ FGM is practiced only in the east African and Arab parts of the Muslim world—Egypt, Sudan, Saudi Arabia, Yemen, and Iraq—and not in the regions where most Muslims live. According to demographic surveys conducted in Egypt in 1995 and 2001, 97% of married women of childbearing age had been circumcised. The World Health Organization estimates that in Africa 100 to 140 million girls have been circumcised—a figure that grows by perhaps two million each year.¹⁰ The practice is not Quranic nor is it required by the *Sharia*, Islamic law. In the statements attributed to the Prophet Mohammed (*hadíth*), the practice is allowed, not required. Moreover, the *hadíth* is regarded as weak (*da’if*). Infibulation is certainly prohibited. In Egypt a lively debate has taken place between radical Islamist proponents of FGM and the government, which has outlawed the procedure.^{11–13} The

principle that follows is that religions do not advocate measures that harm their followers either physically or psychologically. A practice that inflicts damage on an individual is a cultural practice and does not follow the true precepts of the religion in question.

KEY POINT

Polygamy should be regarded as a cultural, and not a religious, practice.

Reproduction and Birth Control

The central precept of Judaism is to be fruitful and multiply (*Genesis 1:28; 9:1*). Following the birth of a son and a daughter, couples may prevent the birth of an unwanted child by total abstinence from sexual relations or by engaging in them in a way that frustrates conception, although there are counter-commands (*Isaiah 45:18*: “not for void did He create the world, but for habitation did He form it”). Those who follow the Orthodox position equate contraception by artificial means with masturbation (which is prohibited: *Genesis 38:9*) and permit it only where the life of the wife might be endangered by pregnancy.⁸ Abortion is permissible if a woman’s life is endangered by the child she is carrying; however, it is prohibited as a means of birth control, for economic reasons, or to prevent the birth of an unwanted child. In Christian churches contraception, in vitro fertilization, and abortion are all contentious issues. The Roman Catholic position tends to be the most conservative, with sexual abstinence and the rhythm method approved as the only forms of contraception, as was expressed by successive popes in two pastoral letters,¹⁴ and abortion opposed because “from the time that the ovum is fertilized, a human life is begun.”¹⁵ However, while many Christians in the West are concerned about the use of human embryos or fetuses for experimentation and also about the principle and timing of abortion, Roman Catholic teaching on contraception has caused great opposition and may well be ignored by many Catholics as an unwarranted intrusion into their private lives and an attempt to impose a cultural practice under the guise of religion.

In Islam, fertility is highly prized and children are seen as a gift of God to bring “joy to our eyes” (Q.25:74). Conservatives argue that family planning displays a lack of trust in the sustaining God, citing texts such as “there is no creeping being on earth but that upon God is its sustenance” (Q.11:6). From the earliest times, however, contraception in the form of coitus interruptus (*'azl*) has been practiced by Muslims. Abortion in the first 4 months of pregnancy is allowed by the 4 main *Sunni* Muslim schools of law, while jurists of the *Shiite Zaidiva* believe in the total permissibility of abortion before life is breathed into the fetus no matter whether one has a justifiable excuse or not. Sterilization, however, is not allowed.^{16,17}

Marriage

Though the matter remains controversial, because the majority of Muslims do not practice it, polygamy is best regarded as a cultural practice. It is not specifically condoned in the Quran except in circumstances where, as a result of warfare, there are a surplus of widows and numerous orphans to be maintained (Q. 4:3). The Quran recognizes that for most males it would be difficult to be equally fair to several wives (Q.4:3; 4:129). Under the terms of the proposed reform of the marriage laws in Morocco, a polygamous marriage would be allowed only with the prior legal assent of the first and second wives, with the first wife being allowed the right of divorce if the subsequent marriage is contracted against her will.¹⁸

At times of collective tension in India, when politicians seek to exploit the opportunity for stigmatizing “the other,” Muslims have been condemned by Hindu nationalists for keeping up to 4 wives and for excessively high rates of procreation. Although polygamy was practiced in ancient Hindu society (“A *Brahmana* can take three wives. A *Kshatriya* can take two wives. As regards the *Vaishya*, he should take a wife from only his own order. The children born of these wives should be regarded as equal”: *Anusasana Parva*, section XLIV), it is banned by law in India. In practice, the incidence of polygamy is highest among the tribal people known as the *Adivasis* (15.25% of marriages) followed by Buddhists (7.9%), Jains (6.7%), and Hindus (5.8%), with a slightly lower incidence among Muslims (5.7%). Research conducted by Mallika B. Mistry, Gokhale Institute of Pune,¹⁹ concludes that “there is no evidence that the

percentage of polygamous marriages (among Muslims) is larger than for Hindus.” A comparison of marriage patterns for Hindus and Muslims shows great similarity, while the incidence of polygamy has been declining among both.²⁰

Endogamy is proclaimed as a religious requirement in the *Torah* (Pentateuch of the *Old Testament*) (*Deuteronomy* 7:1–3) and also by Ezra’s law (*Ezra* 9:2; 10:3–5, which refers to “holy seed” being mingled with other non-Jewish people). However, in spite of this requirement, 47% of American Jews who married between 1996 and 2001 took a non-Jewish spouse. The US National Jewish Population Survey of 2003 reported that only one third of children with intermarried parents are being raised as Jews, illustrating the Jewish community’s concern that intermarriage threatens Jewish continuity.^{21,22}

Intermarriage within the Christian community is usual but not obligatory. Where sectarian divisions are strong, as in Northern Ireland, considerable stress may occur in cases of intermarriage between different Christian denominations. Some Christian groups vehemently oppose intermarriage with other religions, but this is now much less true of the mainstream churches. According to Yvonne Haddad, professor of Islamic history specializing in Christian-Muslim relations at Georgetown University, Muslims in the United States are just as concerned about intermarriage as are American Jews. (Roughly the same number of Muslims and Jews live in the United States—about 6 million each—though there are many more Muslims in the world: 1.1 billion to some 20 million Jews.) The rules of Islam mirror those of Judaism, but in reverse. A Muslim man may marry a non-Muslim, though only if she is Jewish or Christian (both Jews and Christians are considered “people of the Book”). Under no circumstances may a Muslim woman marry a non-Muslim. Even in the United States, according to Haddad, women who break the rules are likely to be cut off entirely by their families and mosques.²³

Endogamy, or intermarriage within the group, is much stricter among the peoples of the Indian subcontinent. The great “untouchable” leader, Dr B. R. Ambedkar, noted that endogamy was the basis of the caste system²⁴:

The absence of intermarriage—endogamy, to be concise—is . . . the essence of Caste when rightly under-

stood. . . *Endogamy is the only characteristic that is peculiar to Caste...* with exogamy as the rule there could be no Caste, for exogamy means fusion. But we have castes; consequently in the final analysis creation of Castes, so far as India is concerned, means the superposition of endogamy on exogamy.

Diet and Cleanliness

It is sensible to link a religion’s food and cleanliness regimens with its attitude toward marriage outside the group (exogamy). Judaism has strict food and cleanliness regulations. Hands are washed before meals and by Orthodox Jews before prayers. The dietary laws (*Leviticus* 11; *Deuteronomy* 14:3–21, 14:4–5) when interpreted strictly require the keeping of a kosher home in which the separation of meat and milk in the kitchen (usually by means of 2 separate sinks for the washing of utensils) is maintained and the other dietary laws are observed.²¹ Frogs, eels, and all shellfish such as crabs and shrimp are not kosher. Only animals that have cloven hooves and chew their cud are permitted (the pig has cloven hooves but does not chew the cud and is therefore forbidden).

The young Christian church inherited the Jewish food and cleanliness regimen. “The Samaritan woman asked Jesus, ‘How is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria?’ For Jews have no dealings with Samaritans” (*John* 4:9). However, after Peter’s vision recorded in *Acts* 10:15 (“What God has cleansed, you must not call common”), the Jewish dietary rules were dropped as part of the ministry to the gentiles (*Acts* 11:18). In modern Christianity some committed Catholics prefer to eat fish on Fridays, but this is more of a cultural practice than a religious requirement.

Islam adopted Judaic food regulations with few changes (*Q.2:172–173*; *Q.5:2, 4*; *Q.6:146*; *Q.16:115*). *Halal* foods are foods or food products that contain no pork, lard, bacon, ham, alcohol, or any of their byproducts. For Muslims, ablutions are compulsory before daily prayers and must be performed in the correct manner.

THE CASTE SYSTEM

Traditional scholarship has described this more than 2,000-year-old system within the context of the 4 principal *varnas*, or large caste categories. In order of precedence these are the *Brahmins* (priests and teach-

KEY POINT

Cultures are concerned with increasing human control over change and adopt a relativist approach. Religions seek to harmonize change and are hostile to relativism.

ers), the *Kshatriyas* (rulers and soldiers), the *Vaisyas* (merchants and traders), and the *Shudras* (laborers and artisans). A fifth category falls outside the *varna* system and consists of those known as ‘untouchables’ or *Dalits*; they are often assigned tasks too ritually polluting to merit inclusion within the traditional *varna* system. Almost identical structures are also visible in Nepal.

The Human Rights Watch Report “Caste Discrimination: a Global Concern” (2001) estimated that 240 million *Untouchables* or *Dalits* live in South Asia.²⁵ On India it commented: Despite its constitutional abolition [in India] in 1950, the practice of *untouchability*—the imposition of social disabilities on persons by reason of birth into a particular caste—remains very much a part of rural India. Representing over one sixth of India’s population—or some 160 million people—*Dalits* endure near complete social ostracism. Untouchables may not cross the line dividing their part of the village from that occupied by higher castes. They may not use the same wells, visit the same temples, or drink from the same cups in tea stalls. *Dalit* children are frequently made to sit at the back of classrooms. In what has been called India’s “hidden apartheid,” entire villages in many Indian states remain completely segregated by caste.

Strict prohibitions are placed on the sharing of food between members of different castes. Members of higher castes may avoid taking food from members of lower castes, although lower-caste persons may not mind taking food from members of the higher orders. Sexual contact between persons of different castes is discouraged, and intercaste marriage is rare. When intercaste sexual affairs do occur, they are almost always between men of higher caste and women of lower caste, for it is less polluting to send forth substances than to receive them. In the past, women who

had sexual contact with men of lower caste were killed, and even today such women would be ostracized at the very least. As commented in The Human Rights Watch Report on caste discrimination,²⁶ “In India the condemnation can be quite severe, ranging from social ostracism to punitive violence.”

The difficulty presented by the caste system is whether to describe it as a religious or a cultural phenomenon. In origins, there can be no doubt that it received a religious sanction from Hinduism. The laws of Manu enjoin the 4-fold division of castes and specify that *Brahmins* are to be the highest caste²⁷:

8.270. A once-born man a *Sudra*, who insults a twice-born man with gross invective, shall have his tongue cut out, for he is of low origin.

8.271. If he mentions the names and castes (*gati*) of the (twice-born) with contumely, an iron nail, ten fingers long, shall be thrust red-hot into his mouth.

8.272. If he arrogantly teaches *Brahmanas* their duty, the king shall cause hot oil to be poured into his mouth and into his ears.

8:281. A low-caste man who tries to place himself on the same seat with a man of a high caste, shall be branded on his hip and be banished, or (the king) shall cause his buttock to be gashed.

9.334. But to serve *Brahmanas* who are learned in the *Vedas*, householders, and famous for virtue is the highest duty of a *Sudra*, which leads to beatitude.

9.335. (A *Sudra* who is) pure, the servant of his betters, gentle in his speech, and free from pride, and always seeks a refuge with *Brahmanas*, attains (in his next life) a higher caste.

9.336. The excellent law for the conduct of the [four] castes (*varna*), (when they are) not in distress, has been thus promulgated; now hear in order their (several duties) in times of distress.

11.85. By his origin alone a *Brahmana* is a deity even for the gods, and (his teaching is) authoritative for men, because the *Veda* is the foundation for that.

11.127. One fourth (of the penance) for the murder of a *Brahmana* is prescribed (as expiation) for (intentionally) killing a *Kshatriya*, one-eighth for killing a *Vaisya*; know that it is one-sixteenth for killing a virtuous *Sudra*.

Famously, Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar led a mass conversion of his followers to Buddhism to escape what he saw as a permanently inferior status enshrined by Hinduism.²⁸

A Hindu by birth who denies he is a Hindu by religion, Ramendra Nath criticizes the present social structure of India²⁹: “Caste based on birth and untouchability still exist in the Hindu society, in spite of the fact that untouchability has been abolished by the Indian constitution.”

Yet there is good reason to argue that, albeit prescribed originally by the Hindu religion, the caste system is now so widespread, and the fragmentation of the large castes into 2000 or so subcastes or social groups has now proceeded so far, that the system has to be described as cultural rather than religious in its function and practice. The reason for this is that caste differences are to be found among other faiths, even in cases where the faith itself condemns such differences. Among the Muslims of India a 2-tier hierarchy has developed. The upper class, called *Sharif Jat*, includes Muslims who belonged to the higher levels in caste hierarchy and also Muslims who came to India from foreign countries. The lower class, called *Ajlaf Jat*, includes Muslim converts from lower castes.

A Pakistani asked an *imâm* for guidance: “In Pakistan, there is a caste system for families and many will only marry within caste. However, this only reflects family heritage. If our Holy Prophet... was from the Honourable Tribe of *Quresh*, which also represents a family heritage, then why are Pakistani people criticized for following their heritage?” To which the *imâm* replied: “It is not prohibited for a person to marry within his heritage. However, it is prohibited for a person of any heritage or caste to regard themselves as superior and look down upon others.”³⁰ In other words, in Islam you may not act as if you are a member of a caste even if you follow caste principles of endogamy.

In human rights terms, caste is correctly perceived as an “exclusion from” benefits that operate in favor of the upper castes and against the oppressed groups; but as a cultural custom, it is also a form of “belonging to,” a form of association between groups. This is why the caste system has proliferated among nonresident Indians in the United States and Europe. Indeed, the basis for temples and community centers is often caste rather than creed, or we might argue, cultural rather than religious. The objection to this cultural practice is its discriminatory purpose. “Although South Africa’s apartheid was effectively

challenged by the international community, South Asia's 'hidden apartheid' continues to condemn *Dalits* or 'untouchables' to a lifetime of slavery, segregation, exploitation, and violence," argues Smita Narula of Human Rights Watch. "In the post-apartheid era, *de facto* rather than *de jure* discrimination takes on immense significance. The discriminatory effect of racist practices in criminal justice, public policy and administrative practice cannot be ignored."³¹

KEY POINT

There is much debate, but no consensus, as to whether the revelation of God via the mechanism of the world's religions is culture-relative or culturally independent.

CONCLUSION

For John Bowker, "Religious organizations may become an end in themselves; but the creative health of religions lies in the recognition that the system is not the end, but a means to ends which transcend the organization... Religions, each in different ways, map the conditions and terms of approval and disapproval, and of acceptance and rejection." Religions also extend the family beyond the grave or funeral pyre. They give "accounts of the state of the dead of such a kind that the living can either remain in some form of communion with them, or can have assurance about them and can continue to care for them." They also "protect and transmit the means through which the proximate and ultimate goals of life, as they are designated within the systems themselves, can be attained." Religions thus bind "people together in a common enterprise; and it is in the forms and modes of religious assembly that much of the transmission of religious information takes place."²

How then do religions differ from culture? Culture may be thought of as a causal agent that affects the evolutionary process by uniquely human means. Whereas with religions, to a greater or lesser extent, there is a process of revelation and a concept of the "faithful" who receive the message of revelation, culture permits "the self-conscious evaluation of human

possibilities in the light of a system of values that reflect prevailing ideas about what human life ought to be." In this interpretation, culture becomes "an indispensable device for increasing human control over the direction in which our species changes."³²

There are dangers inherent in accepting cultural relativism without any constraint, such as respect for human life and dignity. In the 19th century, the Western imperial powers used customs like the burning of widows on the late husband's funeral pyre as a rationale for imposing their own rule of law over people who practiced this rite, notably in India. By the late 20th century, the anthropological profession was urging its students to see ceremonies of this kind not as evidence of barbarism but as authentic expressions of particular cultures. The idea that Westerners might intervene in the name of their own universal principles had itself become a cultural offense. Keith Windschuttle warns³³:

If assessments or values are always derived from some culture, and there are no universal moral principles, then no culture can itself be assessed, because there could be no transcultural values to stand in judgment over any particular culture. Cultural relativism, in short, cannot condemn any culture as a whole and hence no outsider can condemn any cultural practice, no matter how barbaric. Indeed, it disables any external form of moral criticism and endorses any practice that the culture itself regards as desirable.

Cultural relativism is regarded with great suspicion by some of the religious traditions, notably by Roman Catholics within the Christian tradition. Is the revelation of God via the mechanism of the world's religions culture-relative or is it culturally independent? If it is related to the culture, then "the message of a revelation will inevitably become less clear as it is passed from one culture to another," argues Richard Swinburne. "If revelation is to answer questions raised by a new culture, it needs a Church to interpret it, in one of the ways compatible with its original meaning rather than in other ways, so as to give true answers to the questions of the new culture, answers which could not have been provided in sentences available to members of the culture of the original revelation."³⁴ From a Christian perspective, "Faith has entered a given culture when Christian values and meanings cease to be experienced as alien or incon-

gruous, but have been integrated into the overall set of meanings and values with which that community orders its day-to-day life.”³⁵

The way in which faiths achieve this is by no means clear-cut. In an important document produced in 1993 on “The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church,” the Roman Catholic tradition cast its verdict on this process from a Christian perspective. Other faiths might have given a somewhat different emphasis, but some of the basic features would have been similar³⁶:

While it may constitute the basic step, the translation of biblical texts cannot... ensure by itself a thorough inculturation. Translation has to be followed by interpretation, which should set the biblical message in more explicit relationship with the ways of feeling, thinking, living and self-expression which are proper to the local culture. From interpretation, one passes then to other stages of inculturation, which lead to the formation of a local Christian culture, extending to all aspects of life (prayer, work, social life, customs, legislation, arts and sciences, philosophical and theological reflection). The Word of God is, in effect, a seed, which extracts from the earth in which it is planted the elements which are useful for its growth and fruitfulness... This is not a one-way process; it involves “mutual enrichment.” On the one hand, the treasures contained in diverse cultures allow the Word of God to produce new fruits and, on the other hand, the light of the Word allows for a certain selectivity with respect to what cultures have to offer: harmful elements can be left aside and the development of valuable ones be encouraged...

It may not be possible to achieve a consensus in answer to the question as to whether the revelation of God via the mechanism of the world’s religions is culture-relative or culturally independent; but it is safe to conclude that the religion–culture polarity/dichotomy remains one of the most fruitful areas for future research by specialists on interfaith and intercultural issues.

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