

# **Inverse Cultural Imperialism**

## INVERSE CULTURAL IMPERIALISM

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Richard Showalter makes an important point in his analysis of cultural imperialism, showing us that it can and does take many and often subtle forms. By now most of us recognize that the mission movement during the eighteenth, nineteenth and early twentieth centuries was far too often influenced by the beliefs in cultural superiority that dominated western thought. Moreover, it too readily equated the Gospel with western cultures.

The reaction in the west to this cultural imperialism was generated, in part, by Rousseau, and later by anthropologists who rightly argued for the dignity of all humans and all cultures. But they like their predecessors operated from positions of power within western cultures, and they often used their influence to prevent others from seeking to change nonwestern cultures, arguing that they were acting "in defense of the natives". While this may have been a necessary correction for a time, it too is a form of imperialism for it assumes that western leaders know what is best for people in other parts of the world. And it denies the people the right to make their own decisions.

Today we are slowly learning that decisions to change or not to change, to adopt Western or African or Chinese ways must be made by the people themselves, and not imposed from without.

But what about we as Christians, after all are we not seeking to introduce change? There are three points I believe we must remember. First, we must never force change on anyone, and we must encourage people to make their own decisions. We are

called to bear witness to the Gospel, and in doing so we provide people with another and better option to those they already have. We may be convinced that it is the truth, but only the people themselves can decide to become disciples of Jesus.

Second, we must differentiate between our culture and the Gospel. The Good News must never be equated with western civilization. The distinction is not always easy to make, but as churches emerge around the world, they can help us to see where we have equated our cultural beliefs with Biblical truth.

Finally, we must realize that the Gospel can be meaningfully expressed in different cultural forms, and we are free to borrow Christian practices from churches in other cultures. Not only are we enriched in the process, but also such sharing helps bind us together as a community of faith that belongs to a Kingdom that is not of this world. As Christians we are tied not only to our cultural history, but also to our spiritual history. For example, we all share the Lord's Supper and Baptism with Christians down through history, and in all cultures as symbols of our unity in Christ.

But the Gospel also stands in judgement on all cultures and calls them towards God's ideals. In the past, we too often equated conversion to Christianity with the adoption of western civilization:

TRADITIONAL	(conversion)	WESTERN
PAGAN	- - - - - }	CHRISTIAN
CULTURE		CULTURE

We need rather to see it as follows:

