

Globalization: Setting the Stage

(Mennonite Brethren Biblical Seminary)

Globalization: Setting the Stage Mennonite Brethren Biblical Seminary Retreat

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We live in a day of rapid globalization. Travel, immigration, telephones, fax, e-mail, the superhighway, and global trade all contribute to it. Today Swiss Air books its plane reservations through a computer in New Delhi. Tomorrow it will be Luftansa. International students are a major part of this networking of the world into a single system, and you gathered here are at the center of their experiences. You struggle day to day with the problems inherent in cross-cultural living. How do we deal with cultural differences that are far deeper than simply differences in food, dress, language or even beliefs? Our international faculty, students and neighbors bring with them their worldviews, their fundamental assumptions about reality and life that shape everything they do? It should not surprise us that in the confusion of our multicultural campuses there is a great deal of misunderstanding, of ethnocentric feelings, and of misjudgments.

How do we as people seeking to build bridges between cultures on our campuses mediate between them? What we teach our students about the world is vital to our task, but let me suggest that even more important is our lives as models of what we teach--as models of what it means to be a global person. Let me offer a few suggestions regarding this for our seminary. My thesis here is that globalization begins with how we perceive the **other** and therefore **otherness**.

How Do We View Others and Otherness?

We must begin our discussion not with the details of how we relate to others, but with the ways in which we perceive them. Who are these **others**? For our views of these others are the foundations on which our relationships with them are built. We cannot for long mask our views of the other by civility and cordiality. Our true views and attitudes will soon surface in our paramessages.

The Middle Ages [10th to 15th centuries]

People have always had stereotypes of their others. In the sixteenth century Sebastian Münster described the Scotch as faithful and vengeful; the Jews prudent but envious; the Persians steadfast but disloyal; the Egyptians stable and crafty; the Greeks wise but deceitful; and the Spaniards drunken, violent and sophisticated. In 1527 Henry Agrippa declared, "In singing also the Italians bleat, the Spaniards Whine, the Germans Howl, and the French Quaver (Harris 1968, 399-400)." What have been our western perceptions of Others, and how have these changed through history?

he adds, "The cause of this cruel blinding. . . . we must impute to the infinitely cruel hatred of our ancient enemy Satan." (p.14) Their state was due to a fall from grace. (Peter Martyr 1493-1530)

If they were sinners, they could also be saved. Oviedo in Natural History of the West Indies (1526) describes spirit possession and then notes, "But since the Christian faith hath been dispersed throughout the island these devilish practices have ceased, and they of the members of the devil are made the members of Christ by baptism, forsaking the devil and his works."

Other as Savage Scientists took a different view of these others. Science was becoming increasingly secular. The earth in the fifteenth century was seen as an island (Orbis Terrarum), made up of Europe, Asia and Africa, with the Holy City of Jerusalem in the center and God in control. This sacred space was surrounded by the dark, inhuman, evil void of the deep waters. Crossing the seas and discovering new lands radically changed how Europeans viewed the earth. Now, for the first time, the world was seen as a uniform, continuous, secular space covered by continents and oceans. In this new world, Others were no longer 'fallen' and in need of redemption, they were secular humans and could be compared with other humans. But they are "barbarians" and "savages." It is we who explore the world, and name and study its people.

Other as Child. If others are savages, like children they might be trained and civilized. Bishop Pedro de Feria, Bishop of Chiapas (1585), wrote, "We must love and help the Indians as much as we can. But their base and imperfect character requires that they should be ruled, governed and guided to their appointed end by fear more than by love." Francisco de Vitoria, Spanish humanist of 16th century: "Although these barbarians not altogether mad . . . yet they are not far from being so. . . . they are not, or are no longer, capable of governing themselves any more than madmen or even wild beasts.

If they are children, they must be given names and educated in civilized ways of dress, speech and living. Todorov notes, "Columbus knows perfectly well that these island already have names. . . however, he seeks to rename places . . . to give them the **right** names; moreover nomination is equivalent to taking possession."

Other as Slave The western commercial world saw the newly discovered Others as a source of goods and labor--of gold and slaves. Exploration was not random. The explorers were looking *for* something: namely gold, spices and labor. But what right did the Europeans have to enslave other peoples? Many argued that these Others were like children. If so, the Europeans were justified in their colonial expansion in which they acted as parents, educating and managing the natives' wealth for the natives' own good.

The Age of Reason and the Modern Enlightenment [18th - 20th cent.]

The definition of the Other changed with the coming of the Enlightenment. The shift is epitomized in the experiences of Robinson Crusoe, the quintessential Enlightenment man--solitary

Other as Primitive Crusoe marks the transition into the world of the Enlightenment. Three fundamental shifts mark this change in the scientific and popular world. First, Others were no longer 'pagans' and potential 'Christian,' but "unenlightened." Evil was no longer sin, it was ignorance. The earlier distinction between refined-Christian vs. idolatrous-savage was replaced by the *civilized-European* vs. the superstitious-ignorant-*primitive*.

Other as Aboriginal and Ancestor As the theory of cultural evolution emerged, primitives increasingly were seen as fossil humans, stuck in earlier stages of evolution, while the rest of us moved on. They represented humans who had not evolved as we have. They still lived in the 'stone age'. We can arrange all cultures along a line of development, and trace the whole of human history.¹

But if primitives are aboriginals, they are therefore like our ancestors thousands of years ago. These primitives are the same as **we used to be!** Joseph Conrad captures this view in his description of his trip in Africa,

We penetrated deeper and deeper into the heart of darkness. . . . But suddenly as we struggled around a bend, there would be a glimpse of peaked grass roofs, a burst of yells, a whirl of black limbs, a mass of hands, clapping, of feet stamping, of bodies swaying. . . . It was unearthly, and the men were--No, they were not inhuman. . . . They howled and leaped . . . but what thrilled you was just the thought of their humanity--like yours--the thought of your remote kinship (1950, 105)

The "we" here remains an exclusive we. It leaves the other outside of the discussion. We talk about the Other, not to the other, and supposedly the reader knows he or she is part of 'we' because the Other is assumed to be nonliterate.

Anthropologists of the time saw the world as a museum. In the Amazon we see our remotest ancestors, in New Guinea, we can see stage two, and so on. The people of the world reveal *our* history, and the only audience who can understand the play is, of course, "us." We have the benefit of hindsight: we know how the story ends, we *are* how the story ends. It was clear to the scientists that western civilization is the most evolved of all cultures. In this light, the colonial venture is not oppressive, it is our benevolent endeavor to help the Others join us in our full humanity.

Other as Savage: The Rousseauian reaction to modernity preserved the notion of other as Savage--as part of nature. In the mind of modern humans there remained a gnawing doubt. Is it possible that savages are Nobel Savages who are happier than we? Alfred Wallace wrote²,

¹ This view was reinforced by the rediscovery of the ancient Greeks and ancient civilizations at this time.

² The cofounder with Darwin of the origin of species, writing about going up the Amazon River in the 1840s.

The Rise of Pluralism and the Post-Modern World [20th century]

Just as Crusoe, in his encounter with 'Friday', came to see him as increasingly as a man, so western encounters with Others forced westerners to see others as fully and equally human. This raised new questions. How could the Others be equal to us, and yet Other? New paradigms emerged in anthropology to answer this.

Other as Native In anthropology the other was redefined as 'native'. Others are not primitive, but fully rational beings having their own autonomous cultures. The key transition here is from the word "civilization" to "cultures." Anthropologists began to reject the arrogance and ethnocentrism associated with the word "Civilization," and replaced it with the word "culture." This shift in terms reflect profound changes in how anthropologists began to view other peoples. McGrane writes,

The emergence of the concept "culture" has made possible the democratization of differences. . . . The twentieth-century concept of "culture" has rescued the non-European Other from the depths of the past and prehistory and reasserted him in the present; he is, once again contemporary with us. Twentieth-century "culture" was a concept forged in the teeth of "evolution," in a struggle to the death with "evolution" and the hierarchical scheme implicit in it (McGrane 1989, 114)

The anthropologists used the plural form 'cultures' not only to affirm their autonomy but also their diversity. 'Culture' affirms that the Other is fully human and contemporary, not a fossil ancestor. Cultures are unique and *sui generis*. Each is discrete, bounded and self-contained, and 'functions' to maintain a harmonious society. Cultures are also morally neutral. People in one culture should not judge other cultures. To do so is ethnocentric and imperialist. There are no universals against which cultures can be evaluated.

At first anthropologists studied people from their scientific points of view. Then they sought to see the world through the eyes of the people they were studying. The others now became *natives* who had their own cultures with their own internal logic and coherence.

This view of others as natives and culture as morally neutral has deeply influenced our western Christian view of the world. Cultural fundamentalists see cultures as integrated wholes which should not be changed. Their preservation is of supreme value. Some now reject our right to study and speak for Others. Let them speak for themselves. To describe them is to define them, and to exercise a new colonialism over them. The result is an insurmountable barrier between Us and Them--between We and Others.

A Christian Global Response

Where do we go from here? It is clear that as Christians we have been influenced more by our world than by the Word in how we view others. We need to return to a biblical view of

new life in Christ bridges the human distinctions of ethnicity (Gal 2:11-21), class (1 Cor 10: - 11:) and gender (Gal 3:28, Acts 2:44f, 4:32).

How do you and I view others, particularly our International colleagues and students? The way we see them determines in large measure how we relate to them. We need to model in our relationship to them the awareness of our oneness as humans, and our oneness as Christians.

How Do We Model Global Relationships

Seeing others as humans created in the image of God and like us does not mean that building relationships with them is easy. All of you know from personal experience that while all people are fully and equally humans, they come from different cultures, and these cultural differences create a great many problems on our campuses. How can we understand and respond to these differences?

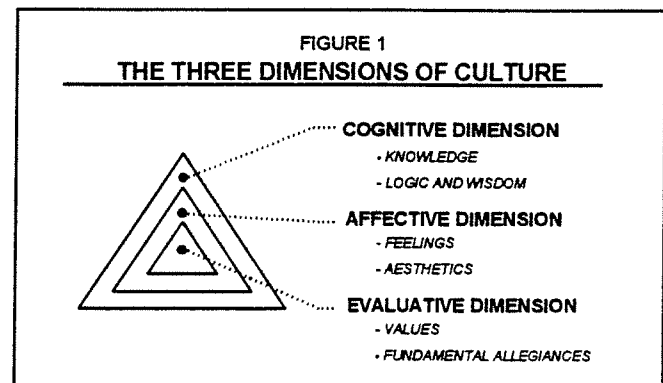
Let us begin with a simple definition of 'culture' (keeping in mind the limitations this word carries as noted above): namely, "the more or less integrated patterns of behavior and products shared by a community of people which regulate what they think, feel and do. Let us unpack some of its meanings. Note, first that culture relates to "ideas, feelings and values." There are three basic dimension to culture, and each of these presents us with unique problems in inter-cultural relationships (figure 1).

The Cognitive Dimension

Knowledge ideas, beliefs, and worldviews provide the conceptual content of a culture. It provides the people with linguistic categories with which to think, the logic they should use, and information about what exists and what does not. Without this shared knowledge life, communication and community life are impossible. On the other hand, because it provides us with the fundamental ingredients of our thoughts, we find it almost impossible to break away from its grasp.

The first barrier to relating to people in another culture is **misunderstanding**. This has to do with a lack of knowledge and understanding of the culture of another culture--and that leads to confusion.

Misunderstandings are often humorous and may have little serious consequence. We may extend our hand to someone from Japan, only to find that he or she is bowing graciously. We



The Affective Dimension

Culture also has to do with feelings people have--with their attitudes, notions of beauty, tastes in food and dress, likes and dislikes, and ways of enjoying themselves. People on one culture like the food spicy, in another sweet and bland. Members of some societies express their emotions and may be aggressive and bellicose; in others they learn to be self-controlled and calm. Emotions also play an important part in all human relationships, in our notions of etiquette and propriety, and in fellowship.

Cross-cultural confusion on the affective level leads to **ethnocentrism**--the attitude that their culture is better and more civilized than other cultures. This response has to do with feelings about other cultures, not with understanding them.

The root of ethnocentrism is our human tendency to respond to other people's ways by using our own affective assumptions, and to reinforce these responses with deep feelings of approval or disapproval. When we are confronted by another culture, our own is called into question. Our defense is to avoid the issue by concluding that our culture is better and other people are less civilized.

But ethnocentrism is a two-way street. We feel that people in other cultures are primitive, and they judge us to be uncivilized. For example, some North Americans were hosting a visiting Indian scholar at a restaurant. One of them who had never been abroad asked, "Do you really eat with your fingers in India?" Implicit in his question, of course, was his cultural attitude that eating with one's fingers is crude and dirty. North Americans use fingers for carrots sticks and potato chips, but never for mashed potatoes and gravy or T-bone steaks. The Indian scholar replied, "You know, in India we look at it differently than you do. I always wash my hands carefully before I eat, and I only use my right hand. And besides, my fingers have never been in anyone else's mouth. When I look at a fork or spoon, I often wonder how many other strangers have already had them in their mouths!"

Ethnocentrism occurs wherever cultural differences are found. North Americans are shocked when they see the poor of other cultures living in the streets. People in those societies are appalled when we surrender our aged and sick and the bodies of our departed to strangers for care.

The solution to ethnocentrism is empathy. We need to appreciate other cultures and their ways. But our feelings of superiority and our negative attitudes towards strange customs run deep and are not easily rooted out. One way to overcome ethnocentrism is to be learners of other cultures, for our self-centeredness is often rooted in our ignorance of others. Another is to deal with the philosophical questions raised by cultural pluralism. If we do not examine them, we will be unconsciously threatened by accepting another culture, for to do so calls into question our implicit belief that our own culture is right or better, and others are wrong. A third way to overcome ethnocentrism is to avoid stereotyping people in other cultures, but rather to see them

perspectives of truth and righteousness. Our temptation, when we first realize that other cultures have different norms, is to reject them without examination, and to justify our own as biblical. This only closes the door for us to examine our own moral standards to determine which of them are based on biblical foundations and which on our cultural values.

Having experienced the shattering of our own cultural absolutes and faced the abyss of relativism, we can move beyond monoculturalism and relativism to an affirmation of the transcultural norms of Scripture and the affirmation and critique of cultures. We will find that a great many norms in other cultures are "good." A high value is often placed on taking time to relate, to care for the aged, and to share with the needy. On the other hand, we will find norms that conflict with biblical morality, such as self-centeredness, arrogance, manipulation, wife-beating and blatantly breaking the laws of society.

Living in Two Worlds

As bicultural brokers that live between two worlds--the American world and the worlds of our International Students, we are in a difficult position. We are essential mediators between these worlds, like moneychangers at the airport, but we are also distrusted by both sides who feel we have not taken them seriously. Our temptation is to become more rigidly American and defend it with the fact that these students are in an American institution and must abide by its rules. Or we adopt a sentimental affirmation of the students' cultures and apologize for the way American works. Neither of these solves the problems we face. Rather we need to affirm both our American ways and recognize the validity of the students' ways and seek to help them move into our culture with a minimum of shock and pain. As Christian institutions we have a particular advantage, for despite the differences and our fallen lives, there is a transcultural oneness we all share that makes one body. That oneness is often best seen and affirmed in our worship services as we gather from many nations to worship our Lord together, and to join in Christian love and fellowship.

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