

CHRISTIANITY AGAINST CULTURAL DOMINATION AND CULTURAL PLURALITY

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Abstract

In 'n kulturele oorgangsituasie, soos die waarin ons ons bevind, kom baie vrae na vore. Dit raak sake aan soos verontregting wat in die kultuurverlede teenoor ander kulture gepleeg is, die verheffing van eie kultuurwaardes as die enigste waarde, die wysewaarop in 'n Afrikasituasie die Europese kultuur verinheems is, ensovoorts. Die onsekerheid van 'n nuwe situasie waarin 'n verskeidenheid van kulture en waardes in neweskikking teenoor mekaar te staan kom, waar kulturele absolutes vervang word met 'n veelheid van benaderingswyses en lewenstyle stel besondere eise aan die teologie. In hierdie artikel word onder meer die vraag aangeraak van godsdiens as kultuurmag, 'n Christelike kultuuroorheersing, die vraag na interkulturele norme, kulturele relativisme, kulturele pluraliteit, die moontlikheid van transkulturele dialoog en die skepping van nuwe kulturele simbole.

1. Introduction

Christianity is now put before the accusing Scilla of her own history of domination and the inviting Charibdis of religious plurality. Even though Christian cultural domination has rationally been bidden farewell, it is still going to take a longtime for the implications of this to be fully realised. The question is if all beliefs are equal in the religious 'post-imperialistic era'. What must be allowed when non-Christian cultures inculturate Christianity? What are the implications of a detente of faith? What implications does an anti-fundamentalist, post-metaphysical and pluralist religious era have for the message of Christ? These questions converge in the matter of cultural co-existence. For cultural co-existence, friendship and harmony between different cultures and religions, as are inherent in these cultures, are essential. This paper is an attempt to reflect on some facets of cultural domination and the challenges of plurality.

Any reflection on culture is *per se* cultural reflection. Theories about culture and culture criticism are determined by culture. Because culture is all encompassing and because we live in it subjectively, reflection on culture is mostly a posteriori by nature. It is only at the end of a cultural 'period' that we come to be aware of the characteristics of such an era.

It is possible to differ widely about the appropriate cultural hermeneutic and therefore, using a variety of hermeneutical angles of incidence is perhaps most suitable when discussing this issue. Culture is not always to be understood easily and for this reason also difficult to interpret and manipulate. Culture develops spontaneously and is not the simple implementation of a preconceived blueprint.

Two lines of inquiry, a theoretical approach and an empirical approach that works statistically, apparently stand in opposition to each other. An empirical approach is followed in the so-called cultural materialism that tries to quantify and measure culture (Lett 1987:89-99). The empirical approach is also theory laden. The empirical approach must also reckon with cultural anthropologists who have shown that transcultural or supracultural standards by which cultures can be compared to each other do not exist. This makes cultures difficult to compare and nearly incalculable (see also Mouw 1987:114). Perhaps one has to treat culture like one would a human being. Culture is alive. It is organic and like people cultures stand in relationships to each other in which typically human phenomena like domination, exploitation, disregard, abuse and many others are found.

In the theoretical approach to culture one also meets obstacles. One must remember that the theoretical 'grip' that we try to get on culture, remains a Western grip. Even the openness that originates from the West (and to a certain extent from Western Theology) towards other cultures, did not come to exist because of a sudden 'discovery' of other cultures, but is to be linked to developments in the West, that made us more congenial than before towards other cultures. Some of these developments are to be linked to the new appraisal of pluralism by Christianity, a more open, anti-fundamentalist and anti-metaphysical attitude and an awareness of the contingent historical bondage of Western faith and theology.

But how does this affect the South African position? The most important issues in our own situation are those of cultural co-existence, of cultural room within other cultures, of healthy crosscultural exposure that is a precondition to understanding in a culturally pluralistic community. Ideally in a pluralistic democracy, towards which we are apparently moving, cultural co-ordination and not sub-ordination could be spoken of. The debate on culture in a post-*apartheid* community is complex and is about more than just the way in which different cultures meet. There are an endless number of factors that have to be taken into consideration. Technological changes and threats, for example, influence all cultures. It would be difficult to deny that South African cultural distinctions seem to be artificial. Culture seems to be synonymous with colour. The same colour means the same culture and opens the way to the same cultural privileges. A different colour means a different culture and therefore non-whites are excluded from most of the cultural privileges of whites.

As such, distinctions based on colour are not to be equated with cultural distinctions. This can be seen in the fact that Afrikaners are culturally closer to most brown Afrikaners than to some white Europeans living here. The cultural differences that do exist are apparently experienced more strongly from the 'white' side than from the 'brown' side.

The structures of *apartheid* forced artificial distinctions on the inhabitants. This had to lead to, amongst others, embitterment among people. Cultural differences that were experienced strongly at the start of colonization, have been made absolute and the cultural distance has been fixated by the structures of *apartheid* so that the indigenous cultures, which with time have moved much closer to Western culture and Christianity, have been kept at an artificial distance, despite the Christianization of many people.

Culture is an own affair in the present political system. Culture, however, cannot be preserved by being fenced in. It is clear that an own affairs department is meant to barricade culture. The need for cultural entrenchment arises out of a feeling of being threatened culturally and this is caused by the conviction of being culturally superior and also by exclusiveness. The question is if the Afrikaans language, the Christian faith and the labour market should not also be treated as own affairs, because these are essentially part of culture. The conclusion that most people come to is that supremacy in numbers is seen as supremacy in power and this is seen as a threat to identity.

2. Culture domination

Cultural domination could develop between two opposing cultures or even between different groupings within one culture. Most cultures have its sub-cultures which are initially repressed, but may later be accepted to become part of the cultural *status quo*. Sub-cultures normally have an important and critical role to play and challenges customs that are experienced as out-dated. Out-dated customs are normally sustained by a small powerful group who have their reasons in doing so.

Strange cultures are no threat to anyone as long as they are far off. Cultural differences become acute when people have to live together and a conflict of power interests takes place. Various strategies can be used to further a certain culture or phase of culture. For this reason there are ideologies working in most cultures to safeguard those cultures and their systems of power.

2.1 Culture and power

Once there was a little lamb that believed in objective knowledge, and decided to make a study of wolves. He wondered whether all the horrid stories that he had heard of them, were true. To obtain first-hand knowledge, he asked a philosopher wolf by letter to let him know precisely what wolves were. The wolf answered fully with reference to form, size, colour, habits, thought, etc. However, he left out the eating habit of wolves, because, according to his philosophy, this was inessential to

the description of a wolf. The lamb was so impressed by the letter that he made an appointment with the philosopher, just to find how fond wolves are of fried lamb.

We also have a tendency to refer to ourselves without mentioning our 'eating habits'. We often pursue Western science with the intention of assimilating all non-Western cultures, to 'free' them in this way of all superstitions and primitiveness (Mouw 1987:117-118). It is easy to understand that the honesty of the powerful will not extend to hurting himself on purpose. Honesty about the abuse of power usually comes into existence only when that power is waning. It is typical of Western culture to accumulate power, in whatever form, for self-defence and self-advancement. That culture is already a construct of power, is not necessarily wrong. The problem arises when unfair and selective advancement of certain groups or people by such a concentration of power in a society takes place. Power is no amulet that one group has and the other group has to do without; it is characteristic of structure within all human relationships. It is typical of any society that people are dependent on each other, and this dependency will always be exploited (cf Westra 1983:113).

The question is whether the cultural use of power has its limits, and if so, what norms apply. The answer to this will probably always differ, depending on the specific classification and identity of the powers involved. In South Africa, where the authorities are mostly Western, the unwritten starting point often is the superiority of Western culture with its technology, morals and religion. It is usually maintained that plurality is weakness, and therefore a monoculture is ideal for a group wishing to retain their power base. The power of culture is reflected physically and symbolically in the reigning judicial system that thrust our moral values upon other cultures (cf Musschenga 1983:196). This could also be applied to religion, economics and so forth.

2.2 The scapegoat in each society

Ren Girard gained renown for his contention that violence underlies each culture. The theory can be explained as follows: a quarrel erupts between two people in a clan or group. The dispute is mainly about a specific thing that is desired. The strong desire of one of the two persons for the object is just what makes it more desirable for the other and *vice versa* (those with no possessions and the poor desire the wealth of the possessors). The dispute expands to include others that have become involved and it becomes to be the desire of the group. The dispute worsens and ends in confrontation between the two leaders, of which one is subsequently killed. This ends the quarrel, leaving unanimity and complacency. The person who was killed becomes the scapegoat and is made to carry the responsibility for the quarrel, because with his death peace returned.

The scapegoats are usually minority or powerless groups or sub-cultures within a community. They are distinguished by skin colour (e.g. blacks are responsible for inflation, low productivity and increase in population), by bodily illness or disability (AIDS), or by some positive characteristic (the Jews who possess all the money, rulers [whites] who possess all the land).

Each society tries as far as possible to camouflage the violence done to the (innocent) scapegoat. It is a way to ward off the culture crisis caused by it. This is done by the religion, myths and laws of a society. In the religion the killing of the scapegoat becomes cultic and is repeated, the laws prohibit what gave rise to the dispute and the myths elevate the scapegoat to the holy (cf the Oedipus saga).

Religion aims to undo this violence in society by the sacrifice in which the scapegoat is symbolically killed and by which the latent aggression is alleviated (Zijlstra, Von Woudenberg 1987:72-75; Burbuck 1989:219-221).

It would be possible to indicate that our own society lives on the scapegoat mechanism. Several individuals are indicated as scapegoats responsible for the evils descending on us (sanctions, violence, disorder). Therefore many of them are sacrificed on the altar of detention without trial, censure, restriction, limitation of news, etc. On the 'altar' the lamb (goat) is physically mute before his shearers. The scapegoat mechanism functions so well that few people find anything wrong with the actions taken and especially do not try to find any scapegoats from among their own. To reduce culture domination to cultural neighbourliness, cultural openness will have to replace scapegoat mechanisms.

2.3 Religion as cultural power. Christian cultural domination?

The connection between faith and culture remains problematic. On the one hand faith is seen by many believers as the final revealed truth which transcends all culture, on the other it is clear that faith is imbedded in culture (by language, signs and symbols). The cultural cloak of the gospel is also influenced by changes in fashion, whether we like these changes or not. Even if Christian faith works with distinctions such as eternal truth - historical human ideas; the transcendent - the immanent; God's will - the will of man; and so on, these distinctions remain cultural distinctions. This notion became prominent especially in hermeneutic developments during the last part of the twentieth century. Faith could, however, have no impact if it didn't make final claims. The question, however, is not the elimination of one's own final claims, but whether room should be left for the conflicting final claims of others. Normally consensus is reached in society by accepting general maxims that benefit all in a multicultural system.

The Christian faith has always made a distinction between church and world. This distinction has been made within societies orientated by Christianity and has not just indicated people who do or do not believe, but referred to a specific Christian lifestyle. This specific Christian lifestyle could also be typified culturally although believers may typify it as transcultural. It cannot be denied that a specific expression of culture, especially on the terrain of what is morally acceptable, can be normative for being accepted or rejected by the church.

Christian tradition cannot be understood without the concept of 'unity'. Christianity is one in accepting one God, one faith, one baptism, one Lord, one 'end' when everything will become one again in Christ. This unity is symbolic of the way in which the Christian understands himself. Although Christian unity is not identical to cultural unity, a strong tie remains between the two. Even a religion which claims

universal truth, uses the language, imagery and views of the culture in which the religion appears. Christianity was responsible for the furthering of the idea of a monoculture. When Christianity became a state religion, it took over Roman cultural views and a specific expression of culture was favoured above others (Shorter 1988:18ff).

Christian mission was culturally imperialistic at the start. Christianity, by way of the gospel, is aggressively against idolatry. There is indeed, according to the New Testament, just one name which was given by which the world will be saved. This one name, however, is identical with the many images and systems of thought used by Western theologies. The name is also identified with a specific church identity and the dictum *extra ecclesiam nulla salus*. Christianity uses an unchanging view of revelation and a specific system of morality. The Christian systems of morality, with their Western hue, were transferred with the gospel and therefore influenced the lifestyle of the receivers of the gospel. From within Christianity much about other cultures was diligently studied, but very little was learned or transferred from other cultures because of the feeling of superiority.

What are the minimum acceptable Christian truths of faith that have to be taken over by another culture during the process of inculturation? Do Christians have to decide about it from within a Western context, or can it be left to other cultures to decide for themselves? There are different requirements that have to be met. Inculturation could mean anything from totally supplanting other cultures, to selectively supplanting other cultures, to acknowledging cultural equality, where other cultures are left to decide for themselves how they wish to inculturate Christianity.

Because most religions are rather fundamentalist about their traditions, this also has strong implications for the appreciation of other cultures. Christian contact with other cultures cannot be seen separate of the Christian view of revelation. When a view of revelation is used where truths are fundamentalistically held to be normatively absolute, it is to be expected that intermingling with other religions or cultures cannot be accepted. The Christian faith was at first threatened and therefore pureness of faith was essential for own identity. To strive for pureness of faith is typical of most beliefs. The truths of faith are revealed and therefore eternal and constant. Because of this one has to guard against any form of eclecticism or syncretism, articles of faith have to be compiled to be used as norm for conservation, any form of heresy has to be avoided. All research should repeat, strengthen and confirm the existing faith, but shouldn't change or expand it.

3. Cultural plurality

About plurality within a specific church, between churches and between religions, much has already been written (cf (Vlijm 1981). Culture is *per se* pluralistic because so many things can be seen to be part of it. When cultural plurality is being discussed, not only the multiplicity (variants of culture, subcultures) within a specific culture is important, but also a multiplicity of juxtaposed cultures that influence each

other. Normally people believe that a culture is a monoculture with fixed characteristics that distinguishes it from other cultures. This is not so. Although certain generalising characteristics can be indicated to identify a specific culture, almost all cultures are dynamic and changing. When different influences are inculcated the process usually occurs in an evolutionary fashion or in the case of a revolutionary change it happens because people want it. The idea of a monoculture is an illusion today. Most communities are being influenced by a multitude of co-ordinated cultural ideas.

Cultural plurality becomes a problem where conflict arises from the power interests of sub-groups within one culture, or of different cultures within one society. Where different cultures are grouped together, the norms of one culture are usually dominant. My culture can thus count against me if it differs from that of the dominant culture group. If there is only one official language (and other culture symbols) which are not what I would choose, then indirectly I am being harmed. Although sympathy may be expressed towards your specific cultural preferences, society may be structured to benefit only supporters of a certain culture.

3.1 The quest for intercultural norms

Cultural plurality implies tolerance towards and acknowledgement of others. It is, however, not a case of clear-cut cultural units existing next to each other, but of mutual influence, of offence and difference, of missing final norms which can be appealed to. Cultural tolerance theoretically makes it possible to understand cannibalism, cultural infanticide, Nazism, colonialism and *apartheid* against a specific background, but doesn't mean that one would accept any of these in a pluralistic culture today. For this reason culture cannot easily be used to excuse malpractice. No one in today's society can use cultural determinism as an excuse for atrocities committed. Each culture is responsible to explain and justify itself in the light of critique from the side of other cultures.

To expose subtle culture domination, intercultural criticism of norms in a pluralistic society should not be rejected as meddling with own affairs. A universal bill of rights could be used as an example of agreement between different cultures to a common norm, acceptable to everybody. Such a bill could be instrumental in handling the culture traffic in a multi-cultural society. In a South African micro-environment consensus will have to be reached about something like a manifesto for cultural rights that will protect cultures, make cultural interaction possible, eliminate cultural domination by maintaining a cultural power balance, guarantee the protection of individual expressions of culture but also create over-arching culture symbols with which the different people living together can identify themselves.

In a multi-cultural society strategies will have to be designed to make people culturally tolerant of each other. Such tolerance makes people sensitive to their own cultural horizon, but also to that of others. The search for interculturally acceptable norms is certainly very complex, but not impossible. That each religion works with final (ultimate) values, cannot be denied and does not necessarily have to be eliminated. The question is, however, if two sets of final values (ultimates) can exist next to each other without the collapse of the idea of the ultimate.

The norms regarded as absolute by one culture or religion are not necessarily absolute to a different culture or religion. Because of this, absolute starting points and a consciousness of relativity will have to go together (cf Gilkey 1987:45-50). Lastly it is the *praxis* (action) that shows the way out from the dead end between what is absolute and relative. Reality calls for action, even if it is experienced as biased and relative by some and as absolute by others. For this reason relativity and ultimateness will have to be acknowledged in any discourse on culture. It is part of existence to find the imperfect next to the perfect. The treasure, as we know, is to be found in clay pots.

3.2 Cultural relativism

Cultural relativism is analogous to moral relativism. Two kinds of relativism could be distinguished: descriptive cultural relativism, which indicates the culturally determined nature of all thought, observation and actions, as is clear from different concepts and habits; evaluative cultural relativism, which indicates the socio-cultural context of values, concepts and habits. According to this there are no supra-cultural norms by which all cultures can be judged (Musschenga 1983:200).

Relativism is never a problem when it is about a multiplicity where I have a free choice according to my own preferences, tastes and values. It becomes a problem when the multiplicity is confusing and competitive and when there are no clear norms on which to fall back when making a choice. Most cultures have absolute values where no choice is left to the group by which they could act according to their own options. One can think of religion, marriage practices and other norms that can also be barricaded by law. Most cultures keep a balance between fixed norms on the one hand and open choices on the other (personal preferences; individual taste).

There is a wide range of affairs left open where individuals can make their own choices. Even though people are theoretically aware of a relative multiplicity, in everyday affairs they act non-relativistic and absolute. When a culture which has been rather closed, comes into contact with other cultures that on the one hand strongly differ and on the other appear very attractive, it leads to a culture crisis, that doesn't necessarily have to be negative. Culture crises do not belong to the past: as a matter of fact the West is experiencing such a crisis today. Most African cultures coming into contact with Western culture experienced culture shock when traditional customs and values are challenged.

3.3 Cultural plurality - a postmodern view

Modernism had a strong influence on Western culture with the optimistic evolutionistic idea of accumulative linear prosperity. The Western culture was ethnocentrically elevated to the highest norm and measure. Ritschl, for example, had to give up the absoluteness of Christianity to acknowledge that Christianity was absolute to Christians like other religions are absolute to their followers (compare Lessing's *Nathan der Weise*).

The Western view of superiority, however, is changing. Developments in Western systems of thought, history and technology, make it impossible to speak with the same attitude of superiority as before and make one more aware of parity with other

cultures and developments. After 1945 the Western feeling of being militarily, politically, morally and religiously superior started changing. It was the post-colonial era, Europe was no longer the most important centre of power; other non-European centres of power with other religions and life styles have come forward. Western faith comes to stand in sub-ordination next to other religions, Christian morality stands accused before several charges (imperialism, insipidity), and other religions gain ground where before Christianity reigned supreme. Gilkey (1987:39-40) calls it an awakening from a naive self-centredness. Because of this, cultures will increasingly be seen in co-ordination to each other, and the earlier Western view that all culture culminates in Western thought and theology will lose validity more and more.

Plurality is not necessarily a preoccupation with unity. Plurality, according to Panikkar, is not the eschatological expectation that everything in the end will be one. Plurality doesn't wish to say either that truth is one, or that it is many. If truth were one, we would have to oppose plurality for the sake of truth. If it were many, our thoughts would continuously have been occupied by contradictions. Pluralism is valid simply because reality is pluralistic, that is immeasurable, and therefore not to be expressed in unity or multiplicity. The immeasurability of reality lends it mythical dimensions. Mythical, not because it doesn't exist, but because everything is included within it. Myth is the primal base, the womb in which all faiths can find themselves again. Once again it is us that impress the scheme of unity on this reality. In this way reality becomes a text which everyone reads differently; a text which leaves space for many religious texts. The mystery of the Trinity (as more than unity and more than multiplicity) is what Panikkar sees as the base of plurality (Panikkar 1987:109-111).

Within post-modern thought the layering of cultures could be indicated. Cultural archeology will be able to show how different cultures completed culture cycles in interaction with their environment and history. Culture artefacts witness to the contingency of cultures. The historicity of the articles of faith can for example be indicated (Snook 1986:162-3).

Information taken to be absolute and unalterable is also historical. Driver, for example, says in relation to the repression of women, that their repression cannot be understood primarily in the light of anatomical differences, but that it must be seen as arising from the difference in the history of the sexes. Analogically he sees the difference between religions as historical. The difference between religions, like that between man and woman, is their history. We live within our historical skin and this skin can stubbornly last very long before a historical peeling takes place to indicate the relative side of the absolute. History is contingent and the bringing about of a single centre for the history of the entire mankind is pluralistically irreconcilable. For this reason Christianity is, according to Driver (1987:210-215), guilty of the idolization (petrification) of Christ, because He was made to be the immovable centre of history. Authors like John Hick, Raimundo Panikkar, Stanley Samartha and others promote a theocentric model, where God is the centre of religion that can be reached by using many entrance routes (cf Knitter 1985:145-167).

4. Cultural co-existence

4.1 The possibility of transcultural dialogue

According to Panikkar, the Christians were characterized from the start by their testimony, that up to the fall of Rome strongly coincided with the idea of martyrdom. After that, many converts were characterised by the attitude that they were better than non-Christians. This superiority was later proved by the courage to fight for the truth during crusades. Again, after that Christians felt themselves obliged to responsibly take the whole world on their shoulders with the start of world mission. Now Christians begin to realise that their religion is not the only one and a willingness to enter into dialogue arises.

If inequality of power exists between cultures, dialogue becomes difficult because any productive dialogue demands equal partners. By inequality of power is meant that one group has certain political, economic, structural or other advantages that leave the other group vulnerable and therefore prevent honest dialogue. Dialogue between different churches or religions is often determined by factors outside religion. To make contact with other groups the power balance as a condition for dialogue is not always possible or controllable. Inequality of power, however, doesn't have to stop dialogue as long as there is a willingness to speak about this inequality.

Dialogue between religions perhaps requires of the Christian to be a Jew among Jews and a Gentile among Gentiles without himself losing the law.

4.2 The creation of new cultural symbols

Cultural changes do not happen overnight. They also don't take place by a few decisions. Culture change is reached soonest by exposure to new experiences, changed structures that touch the way people live. Even then changes can be rather artificial. There are different cultural levels. The deeper the level, the more intimate it becomes and the closer it touches people. One of the deepest levels is the symbolic, where convictions, values, and the like are rooted (Shorter 1988:35 ff).

In symbolic anthropology attention is especially given to the way symbols function in a community. Culture codes function on a symbolic level. The symbols do not function on the level of language only, because most actions in a specific culture also have symbolic meaning. Symbolic anthropology works holistically and culture is seen as integrated into a specific society. The symbolic system incorporates the aims, interests and ideals of a culture and communicates mostly on an emotional level (Luzbetak 1988:154-155). In a culturally pluralistic community the establishment of overarching symbols, myths and heroic figures is of equal importance to the establishment of overarching values on which for example the judicial system and practical organization of a community are based. Overarching symbols, heroic figures and myths need not threaten individual symbols. A common environment (the city), common threats (ecological crisis), joint dreams (peace, economic growth) inevitably have as a result that different people share the same symbols giving expression to these identical dreams and threats.

4.3 A culture dream

A culture dream will find the utopia of an overarching peace culture possible. It is the realised eschatology where the lamb and the lion graze together, where swords have become ploughshares and the creator spirit translates Babel to Pentecost. But can paradigms that exclude each other exist next to each other? The only alternative to assimilation or annihilation of a different culture is for cultures to co-exist without threatening each other, but influencing each other. Reciprocal influence cannot take place as long as white thought remains limited to conservative and culturally exclusive strategies.

To leave room for an honest discovery of each other, cultures will have to accept each other as equals before they will be willing to meet each other as equals. That there is much which gives offence on both sides has to be admitted. Offence often arises from a lack of knowledge and isolation. Cultural openness means to get to know not only oneself, but also the other. It is an open relationship with the other which unawares provides identity, while a self-conscious limitation leads to an artificial identity. In a dynamic relationship with the other, persons continually rediscover themselves, while a self-centered isolation leads to stagnation. Cultural intermarriage could even lead to deformity. A closed culture quickly decays to a sub-culture. For this reason Afrikaner culture has to lift its one-sided directed isolation. To find a different culture inferior is to make your own culture despicable in the eyes of others. *Apartheid* has become a symbol of contempt for indigenous cultures. The removal of the stigma of *apartheid* that clings to the Afrikaner is conditional for the dynamic continued existence of the Afrikaner culture and its faith. The vision of the future of all cultures is a mosaic.

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