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# Christian Perspective on Intercultural Communication

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# A Christian Perspective on Intercultural Communication



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Intercultural communication has been taking place since the dawn of recorded human history. It occurred through trade, religious missionaries, war, romantic relations, or other forms of interaction when people from one tribe or ethnic group interacted with others whose cultures were different (Samovar & Porter, 2004; Samovar & Porter,

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2001; Rogers & Steinfatt, 1999).

As history has proven, intercultural communication is essential if one culture is to understand and respond rightly to another. As history has also proven, a culture must be educated in intercultural communication. Only a Christian approach to teaching intercultural communication considers the cause and remedy of all that prohibits intercultural communication.

## The History of Intercultural Communication

Intercultural communication started as a field of academic study after World War II. At that time, the United States Department of State established the Foreign Service Institute (FSI) to help retrain its diplomats, who, it had become obvious, were ineffectual in their work—few of them knew either the culture or the language of the country to which they were assigned. Attempts to improve international communication between U.S. diplomats and technicians and their host country counterparts led to a focused study on intercultural communication (Rogers & Steinfatt, 1999, p.68). Cummings (2006) also observes that "Intercultural communication as an academic discipline developed because of our (America's) oblivion to other people's cultures, even as guests in their country" (p. 48).

Edward T. Hall, an anthropologist who led the training courses in intercultural communication at the Foreign Service Institute, is regarded as the founder of the field of intercultural communication. Even though the intellectual roots of inter-

cultural communication were in anthropology, linguistics, and psychiatry, the first edition of Edward T. Hall's book *The Silent Language* (1959) was a key document that facilitated the process of its being recognized as a specialty field in communication studies (Rogers & Steinfatt, 1999). Since the mid-1960s, intercultural communication has become a recognized discipline in a number of university departments of communication in the United States.

## The Importance of the Study of Intercultural/ Cross-Cultural Communication

Intercultural and cross-cultural communication can be used interchangeably. However, a slight differentiation between the two is helpful for clarity. Intercultural communication involves interaction between people from different cultures whose cultural perceptions and symbol systems are distinct enough to alter a communication event (Samovar & Porter, 2004, p.15). Intercultural communication is also characterized by the fact that the people are simultaneously similar to and different from each other (Martin, Nakayama & Flores, 2002, p.65). For example, the cultures differ in values, language, nonverbal behavior, and conflict resolution, etc. However, similarities also exist in the cultures involved, for example in human experiences and in the fact that people communicate. This is why emphasizing only differences can easily lead to stereotyping and prejudice. Emphasizing only similarities, however, can lead people to ignore important cultural variations that exist (Martin et al., 2002, p.65). While we consider the countries involved, we must keep this dialectic in mind. For example, Curtis DeYoung points out that the Bible begins with the unity of humanity but that God values the diversity that emerges within the human family as society evolves. The Bible has numerous examples of how "God honors by inclusion people who represent the wide range of cultural expressions that continue to develop in this one human family. This rich mosaic of people is acknowledged and celebrated by the biblical authors" (1995, p.2).

Cross-cultural communication, on the other hand, involves a comparison of interactions among people from two different cultures, such as how people in the United States communicate differently from people in China (Lustig & Koester,

2006, p.54). This paper will use both terms synonymously.

A number of scholars have pointed out the importance of intercultural communication to a country. For example, Hybels and Weaver (like Martin and Nakayama before them) observe the changes effected by immigration:

> Many white students in college today have been raised in predominantly white environments with little personal interaction with people of color, except, perhaps, the one or two who may have lived on their street or gone to their high school. Times are changing. The chances of contacts with people from other cultures have increased dramatically with changes in the workplace; U.S. businesses expanding into world markets in a process of globalization; people now connected – via answering machines, faxes, e-mail, electronic bulletin boards, and the Internet – to other people whom they have never met face-to-face; the ever increasing mobility of U.S. families; and the changing demographics within the United States and changing immigration patterns as well. (Hybels & Weaver, 2004, p.68; Martin & Nakayama, 2001)

The twenty-first-century result of changing demographics, according to Ting-Toomey and Chung, is "direct contact with culturally different people in our neighborhoods, community, schools, and workplaces" as "an inescapable part of life. With immigrants and minority group members representing nearly 30 percent of the present workforce in the United States, practicing intercultural communication flexibility is especially critical in today's global world" (Ting-Toomey & Chung, 2005, p.2). As American workplaces employ people from different backgrounds and cultures, we must learn to communicate effectively with a wide variety of people if we are to survive as a nation. This increased contact makes studying intercultural communication essential.

As an African proverb states, "The child who has never had a meal outside his own home thinks that only his mother can prepare a good meal." Cross-cultural interaction and experience enable us to see what other cultures can teach us about God's world. Our own cultural experience is not enough to conclude that the way we do things, the

way we think, the values we adhere to, and the way we communicate are the best and the standards that everyone else should adopt.

Therefore, while the study of intercultural communication should begin as a journey into an unfamiliar culture and end as a journey into our own culture, we should understand that the study

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of cultures is actually the study of people, people in specific cultural contexts. Further, to lose sight of the humanity at the core of the topic is to lose sight of something fundamentally important in understanding communication between people from different cultures. It is easy to study culture and intercultural communication from a theoretical, or abstract and technical, perspective and to ignore the fact that we are dealing with human beings with personalities, feelings, histories, struggles, hopes, and dreams.

Our study of human cultures not only must expose us to knowledge that helps us understand people who are different from us but must also challenge us to find ways to accept and love them. In that light, Curtis DeYoung writes,

> [B]y interacting with people of other cultures, we learn more about ourselves as humans…[A]s people who are created in the image of God, we gain a greater knowledge of our God when we understand the many cultural reflections of God's image. (1995, p.179)

In other words, studying intercultural communication with an open mind and a genuine desire to know other people allows us to witness and appreciate the rich diversity of humankind (Rothwell, 2004, p.92).

Diversity of humankind introduces matters of evaluation and direction. Dordt College communications professor Charles Veenstra, in his discussion of culture and communication, states, "…given the fact that culture is directional, we must face the question of relativism in culture: Are all cultures equally good? And to what extent may we evaluate elements of culture?" (1986, p.18). To answer, he suggests that "Even though the ways of living of one set of people may not be superior to the way of living of another set of people, we need to discern the religious direction of each culture within the larger picture of culture being for or against God." Albert Wolters explains the concept of cultural direction:

> Direction…designates the order of sin and redemption, the distortion or perversion of creation through the fall on the one hand and the redemption and restoration of creation in Christ on the other. Anything in creation can be directed either toward or away from God – that is, directed either in obedience or disobedience to his law. (1985, p.49)

In our efforts to identify and understand the religious direction of various cultures, then, we must not forget that all cultures express and portray the depravity and rebellion of human nature, though they do so in different ways. Even though the religious direction of all cultures is not towards serving the one, triune God revealed in the incarnation of Jesus Christ, the religious direction of some sub-cultures (or co-cultures) reflects a search for and a journey of trying to discover what it means to live normatively, according to God's standards for all of life.

Some people become uncomfortable at the idea of celebrating cultural diversity. For example, a senior student in my 2004 cross-cultural communication class saw cultural diversity this way:

> I have generally not been overly fond of the common idea and focus on celebrating differences between people. I have come to prefer celebrating

things we have in common, while acknowledging and being sensitive to differences. Celebrating differences seems to be a recipe for dissension and divisions because it focuses on the things which can cause separation. After all, it is our common ability to use language that allows communication with other humans and prevents any sort of deep communication with honeybees. If differences were the key to communication, we would communicate best with sponges.

Even if, like this student, we choose not to focus on "the things which can cause separation," we can still create space that respects people for who they are. We may differ with certain customs and cultural practices. In fact, we may differ with the basic worldview and philosophy of certain cultural communities; however, we can celebrate our common humanity as it finds its expressions in various cultural artifacts, e.g., music, dance, dress, etc. The United States is an example of a plural culture that needs to create such a space. God's common grace sustains all human beings, but to live peaceably together means respecting and enjoying the differences. Those differences simply show how a people have responded to the cultural mandate.

Cultural differences are handled in a variety of ways. Some people approach these differences with curiosity; others avoid these differences at all costs or respond as if they didn't exist. Susan Eckert (2006, p.14) observes that at one time in the history of the United States, people believed that the solution to equality and intercultural harmony was color-blindness, or blindness to any cultural difference. However, as Eckert points out, it is naïve to claim to be blind to any cultural difference:

> Being color-blind means you cannot see color. Blindness to difference means you cannot see that which is different. Hiding our heads in the sand and pretending that we do not see what is different means we err in making the assumption that we are the same – that those who are different think as we do, believe as we do, and share the same practices and social norms.…[F]ailing to acknowledge what is different…has the potential to result in greater conflict as it often renders the 'other' invisible or invalid. (2006, p. 14)

It is our deep-seated beliefs and attitudes in response to those differences that are critical. Accepting a Native American (or First Nations person), an African, a Caucasian, a Chinese, or a Hispanic as fully human, endowed with God's gifts but different in appearance and cultural practices, creates the foundation from which to communicate and learn. This learning is a two-way street: all the participants from different cultures who are living in one country must be willing to open up and discover each other's world if they are ever to develop in unity.

Participants must be willing to do so because diversity is part of God's creation. If God wanted uniformity, he would not have created different animal, bird, insect, or plant species; and all human beings would look the same in terms of their physical appearance. Even though God created us in His own image, one person looks different from the next person, even if we come from the same family or the same ethnic group. While God manifests His creativity and the beauty of His creation in our diversity, we allow racial, language, political, and religious differences to destroy respect for others, and with respect, unity with others, because of our sinfulness. Instead, we should celebrate the goodness and greatness of God reflected in cultural differences.

However, celebrating cultural diversity in no way endorses cultural relativism, which accepts the view that the way of life of any people is legitimate and that we cannot question their morality because there is no absolute standard of right or wrong. God's normative Word, revealed in creation and in the Bible, is still the authority by which all cultures must be weighed.

The issue of cultural diversity involves the reciprocal influence of culture and communication (Rothwell, 2004, p.93). Veenstra explains the interdependence of culture and communication:

> Communication is essential to cultural activity since communication allows sharing. Although they are similar and interdependent, culture and communication are not identical. Culture is the larger term which involves all of the activities of people within the created order, while communication is an essential activity deeply embedded in that process of cultural activity. Without commu-

nication, it would be impossible to be engaged with other people in cultural activity. Communication enables people to develop relationships and thus live in culture and do culture. (1986, p.18-19)

While culture and communication reciprocally influence each other, it is essential when one is studying cross-cultural communication to distinguish between the characteristics of the two concepts for the purpose of understanding the complex relationship between them (Ting-Toomey & Chung, 2005, p.26).

Intercultural communication, i.e., the reciprocal influence of culture and communication, can call into question our core basic assumptions about ourselves, our culture, and our worldviews. On the other hand, it challenges our existing and preferred beliefs, values, and patterns of behavior (Martin & Nakayama, 2004, p.36). It challenges our worldview, which forms the basis of our culture. That challenge forces us to articulate, affirm, and live out our worldview.

**The Basis of Teaching
Intercultural Communication**

A course in cross-cultural communication must begin, therefore, with an understanding of creation, culture, and worldview. Our discussions begin, then, with creation—the fact that all human beings are created in the image of God—and the oneness of the human family. In Genesis 1:26-27, we read,

> And God said, "Let us make man in our image, in our likeness, and let him rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air, over the livestock, over all the earth, and over all the creatures that move along the ground." So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them. (NIV)

Creation was followed by the cultural mandate, of Genesis 1:28: "fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky and over every living creature that moves on the ground." Here God gave to human beings the work of their lives—to develop and care for His creation.

Creation and the cultural mandate resulted in

culture, the key to consider in intercultural communication, especially the impact of culture on communicative behavior. Quentin Schultz describes culture this way:

> [I]n the broadest sense, culture is everything that exists on earth because of human effort. God created the world but turned it over to human beings to cultivate. From this perspective, culture includes our values (what we believe), our practices (what we do), and our artifacts (the physical things that we make). (2000, p. 20)

*However, celebrating cultural diversity in no way endorses cultural relativism, which accepts the view that the way of life of any people is legitimate and that we cannot question their morality because there is no absolute standard of right or wrong.*

Culture, then, is reflected in a people's use of language, their nonverbal behavior, and the way they relate to others. It also shapes relationships within and between family and friends and provides prescriptions for forms of communication, appropriate to a variety of social situations (Somovar & Porter, 2004, p. 3).

God gave his image-bearers the ability, mandate, and freedom to create culture. In fact, Charles Kraft explains the origin of culture and the existence of so many cultures in terms of not only a God-given "culture-creating (and modifying) capacity" but also "some kind of culture to start with. Since we know of no language without a culture, the fact that Adam spoke a language would seem to indicate that he also had culture." (2001, p. 45).

That culture-creating capacity is not neutral. Because of Adam and Eve's fall from perfection, our response in creating culture is made in obedience or disobedience to God's norms. Scripture states that "There is not a righteous man on earth who does what is right and never sins" (Ecclesiastes 7:20). Similarly, Romans 3:23 states, "For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God." However, as G. J. Spykman points out, "Sin can and did and still does distort our humanness, but it cannot destroy it. Implied in this view is the recognition of a rightful distinction between who we are structurally and directionally by virtue of creation, and who we now are as misdirected sinners" (1992, p. 197). Since the early history of humankind, then, we have carried out the cultural mandate as misdirected sinners—all that we create and attempt, as we develop culture, is marred by sin.

The way we communicate, which is a product of our cultural upbringing, is equally distorted and corrupted by sin, as are all our attempts to improve communication. Quentin Schultze explains the source of that corruption as "Our alienation from God that radically corrupts our ability to communicate in ways that promote God's peace and justice" (2000, p. 75). Schultze also explains the commonly held remedy of poor communication, apart from recognizing the "reality of sin": [W]e …wrongly assume that all we need for better communication is a bit more common sense, greater education, or additional practice. We …act as if there is nothing fundamentally wrong with us" (2000, p.75).

Since, as Schultz points out, we falsely assume that our culture is correct culture and that the problems in cross-cultural communication can be solved through education, we need the correcting view offered by B. J. Van der Walt, in *Man and God: The Transforming Power of Biblical Religion.* There he explains that because every culture has sinned, not one is righteous, wise, or correct (1998, p.460). He also explains that as people in all cultures respond disobediently to God's Word, we should not accept any culture as it is or use it as a criterion to measure others. On the contrary, we have to evaluate every culture against God's norms (1998, p.460-462). To begin to evaluate a culture, therefore, we must learn about ourselves. Van der Walt suggests

that to learn about ourselves, we must take the cultures of others seriously: "Understanding oneself is closely related to understanding others. To do the one, you must start with the other and vice versa" (1998, p.443).

Even though all human beings are corrupt, the cultures and cultural patterns they create reveal humanity's obedience and disobedience to God. As a result, every culture has its own beauty, dignity, and legitimacy because it answers questions about God's creational revelation and focuses on an aspect of God's creation and humanity's response.

However, every culture also "reveals a lack of beauty, dignity, and legitimacy, because it does not listen carefully enough to God's creational revelation [; as a result, each culture] tends to suppress and replace it with a lie" (Van der Walt, 1998, p. 457). From that lie, as explained by Van der Walt, a culture "over-emphasizes one aspect of God's multifaceted creation, resulting in an –ism (pantheism, individualism, etc) which becomes the main perspective from which the rest of creation is misinterpreted" (1998, p.457). This distortion of culture in cultural patterns results from "force of habit," according to J. Kraft, "[b]ut even a habit can be changed with some effort (1989, p. 56-57). Helping students to understand the concept of culture as a "shared learned behavior…transmitted from one generation to another for purposes of promoting individual and social survival, adaptation, and growth and development" (Marsella 1994, p. 8) is important because some students believe that only tribal people in non-Western countries have a culture.

As students learn that all people learn culture by habit for survival, they also learn that every culture is based in a worldview. Albert M. Walters defines worldview as "the comprehensive framework of one's basic beliefs about something" (A.M. Wolters and M.W. Goheen, 2005, p. 20). Nancy Pearcey explains that worldview is "the way we answer the core questions of life that everyone has to struggle with. What are we here for? What is ultimate truth? Is there anything worth living for?" (2005, p.51). Samovar and Porter define it as "a culture's orientation toward God, humanity, nature, questions of existence, the universe and cosmos, life, moral and ethical reasoning, suffering, sickness,

death, and other philosophical issues that influence how its members perceive their world" (2004, p. 85). And Charles Kraft states that "worldview lies at the very heart of culture, touching, interacting with, and strongly influencing every aspect of the culture" (1991, p.53).

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J. H. Olthius offers the following comprehensive definition of worldview:

> A worldview (or vision of life) is a framework or set of fundamental beliefs, through which we view the world and our calling and future in it. This vision need not be fully articulated: it may be so internalized that it goes largely unquestioned, it may not be explicitly developed into a systematic conception of life, it may not even be codified into creedal form, and it may be greatly refined through cultural-historical development. Nevertheless, this vision is a channel for the ultimate beliefs which give direction and meaning to life. It is the integrative and interpretive framework by which order and disorder is judged, it is the set of hinges on which all our everyday thinking and doing turns. (1989, p.29)

Worldview is, therefore, the central element that forms and unites the patterns of a culture. As such, it has a pervasive influence not only on people's perceptions of the world but also on their actions, including how they communicate. The underlying assumptions that are prevalent among people in a particular society, shape and control their perception and interaction with others (Samovar & Porter, 2004, p.33). The study of worldview enables us to understand its expression in a culture's perception, beliefs, and values (Samovar & Porter, 2004, p.85)

Even cultural differences, such as language, food, dress, attitudes toward time, work habits, and social behavior, are rooted in worldview and can cause either frustrating or successful intercultural contacts. However, these differences account for only some of the problems associated with intercultural communication. The deep structures [its views of binary oppositions of gender, class, etc.) of culture often create the greatest problems for effective intercultural communication (Samovar & Porter, 2004, p.23-24).

A truly Christian education, therefore, must be transformational. It must enable students to be renewed in their minds as they acquire cognitive knowledge of a culture's worldview and consequent practices and critically reflect on these. This knowledge must, in turn, positively influence behavioral change. That behavioral change became evident in one student. He wrote,

> The reflection on prejudice in my life has opened my eyes. I was never aware of how prejudiced I was towards less intelligent people. I have been convicted of my sin and humbled by it. God has used this realization to push down my ego and get me back on track. While I may still struggle with the issue of my superiority over those I consider intellectually inferior, I am aware of it. This awareness will help me in future situations to accept others for who God has created them to be, and for all that they have to offer in His kingdom. Meanwhile, I will continue to pray for a renewed mind, a heart of acceptance, and forgiveness of my prejudice.

I responded with the following comment:

> God wants to transform our motives, attitudes, beliefs, values, behavior, etc. Being transformed into the image of Christ is a process. Every now and then we will be exposed to situations which God will use either to convict us or to mold us. When we respond obediently to the promptings of the Holy Spirit, we see change in our lives. Right

here on earth now, we can experience a glimpse of what God has in store in the new heavens and the new earth – people from different cultures, born again of God's Spirit, can love, respect, and enjoy each other as the redeemed of the LORD!

## Conclusion

The Christian gospel is radical in its claims and scope; therefore, it demands radical, transformed, and continually reforming lifestyles that reflect values of the kingdom. Attitudes that are a result of racism or prejudice are sinful. Looking down on other people and discriminating against them because of their skin color closes the door to meaningful communication. These are attitudes that I hope the teaching of the course will shed light on and force students to confront.

They must be confronted with God's truth as it relates to intercultural communication. They have a responsibility in our contemporary society to respond to the challenge of communicating with people of different cultural beliefs, values, and ways of behaving. I tell students to be willing to make mistakes and laugh at themselves as they try to reach out cross-culturally. We must all try to reach out to one another across the racial and cultural divide whatever the cost. In that way, I concur with Paul Marshall when he said, " We do not live now in a time of perfection and completeness. Nor do we live in a time when the kingdom of God is extinct. We live in the time before the final winnowing, the time when the wheat and the tares continue to grow together" (1984, p. 151-152). Right now, there is work to be done as we teach and shape the worldview of many young people with "serviceable insight" (Dordt College, l996, p. 11), informed by the gospel of Christ. Some day, when God's eternal kingdom is finally ushered in, all the fights and divisions that we see and experience because of racial differences will pale in significance as ALL people groups meet before God. Revelation 7:9-10 captures the scene in these picturesque words:

> After this I looked and there before me was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language, standing before the throne and in front of the Lamb. They were wearing white robes and were holding palm branches in their hands. And they cried out in a loud voice: "Salvation belongs to our God, who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb."

I look forward to that day with hope. Like the cry of the Apostle John on the Island of Patmos, the cry of my heart is, "Come soon, Lord Jesus."

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