

Perspective Digest

Manuscript 1211

Go Ye Therefore, and Insult All Nations

Edwin M. Yamauchi

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.andrews.edu/pd>

B Y E D W I N M . Y A M A U C H I *

“Go Ye Therefore, and *Insult* All Nations”

No, that's not exactly what Jesus said. But unless our Christian witness includes awareness of cultural differences, that's what we may be doing.

The revelation of God in history, as Christians understand it, was originally recorded in Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek by Jewish writers who represent a variety of cultures quite different from our own. We nonetheless understand God's message of redemption in Christ through an English translation of the Bible, often the archaic King James translation, though we may not fully appreciate the nuances of the original documents. Problems of communication are compounded when Western missionaries bring

the biblical message to primitive tribes. Rather than going in obedience to Christ's mission call to “teach all nations,” we may be going to “insult” them!

In his book *Customs and Culture*, Eugene Nida, for many years with the American Bible Society, relates how a literal translation of biblical passages can convey misleading connotations to certain African tribes.

*Edwin M. Yamauchi, a renowned linguist, teaches in the History Department of Miami University, Oxford, Ohio. “Go Ye Therefore” is a revised version of an article originally published in *Christianity Today*, of which Yamauchi was a senior editor.

The Kpelle of Liberia view the placing of branches in Jesus' path (Matt. 21:8) as an insult, since their culture requires that all leaves be cleared from the path of any dignitary. The Zanaki of Tanganyika would regard Jesus' knocking at a door (Rev. 3:20) as strange, since in their culture honest men call aloud at the door and the only ones who knock are thieves.

Cultures as well as languages differ, and these differences pose problems for understanding, communicating, and applying the Christian message. Even, as we shall discover, among our own congregation!

What Is Culture?

Modern anthropologists use the term *culture* to designate the distinctive way of life of a given society, including such things as their values, manners, morals, and artifacts. According to Kluckhohn:

"Culture consists of patterns, explicit and implicit, of and for behavior, acquired and transmitted by symbols, constituting the distinctive achievements of human groups, including their embodiment in artifacts; the essential core of culture

consists of traditional (i.e., historically derived and selected) ideas and especially their attached values; culture systems may, on the one hand, be considered as products of action, on the other as conditioning influences upon further action" (C. Kluckhohn, *Culture and Behavior*, R. Kluckhohn, ed., 1962, p. 73).

Margaret Mead defines culture as: "An abstraction from the body of learned behaviour which a group of people who share the same tradition transmit entire to their children, and, in part, to adult immigrants who become members of the society. It covers not only the arts and sciences, religions and philosophies. . . but also the system of technology, the political practices, the small intimate habits of daily life, such as the way of preparing or eating food, or of hushing a child to sleep. . ." (*Cultural Patterns and Technical Change*, 1955, p. 12).

We seldom think consciously about our own culture—the "man-made part of the environment," as Herskovits has defined it. Our own ways of thinking, feeling, and acting seem so natural that we assume they must be correct. Only when we have been exposed to or plunged into a non-Western culture do we realize



how different the ways of other people can be. Loss of familiar cues may even produce the uneasy feeling known as "culture shock."

How Cultures Vary

Anthropologists have noted that though some basic needs are common to all people, the responses in meeting these needs are almost infinitely diverse. Within the community, murder, incest, lying, and stealing are universally condemned. But how people regard property, family relations, time, and work, how they eat, drink, clothe themselves—such attitudes and activities vary from society to society. For example, Eskimos eat rotten walrus meat. The Chinese eat fermented duck eggs but cannot comprehend how Westerners can eat fermented milk (cheese).

Almost all people clothe themselves, however scantily; complete nudity is exceptional. But the ways in which people clothe their bodies are quite diverse. What is sexually provocative in one society may not be so in another. The Yapese in Micronesia consider uncovered breasts of women quite proper while bare legs are a sign of immodesty. When missionaries urged that women in the Ngbaka church in northern Congo wear blouses, an elder protested that in their area only prostitutes dressed in such a manner—only they could afford such garments.

How people relate to others also

differs from culture to culture. North Americans pride themselves on their frankness. Latin Americans may be quite reserved about telling someone what they are thinking. An Oriental is prone to tell someone what he thinks the other wishes to hear; missionaries in post-war Japan were thus misled by the seemingly proper responses their audiences gave to invitations to accept Christ.

In many societies it is important that gifts be given and received with both hands. A missionary in India insulted his congregation by passing the communion plate with his left hand. In Korea under the influence of Buddhism a person who receives a gift does not express thanks for the gift, on the principle that the giver, who obtains merit through giving, should be the one who should be thankful. Many societies seem callous to the needs of others outside their group. Yet these same people will impoverish themselves to provide for relatives. Americans' impersonal giving to strangers may arouse suspicion rather than gratitude.

Among the Indians of North and South America, attitudes often differ from those of whites. A Hopi child is taught never to strive to get ahead of others. If an Indian becomes exceptionally rich, he is expected to share his wealth with his kinsmen. Indians of Mexico are primarily interested in the present. If they have a surplus

Many societies resist change except in peripheral areas that make life easier without drastically changing the old patterns. Americans, on the other hand, welcome change and novelty. We are oriented toward the future.

from their crops, they prefer to spend it on a fiesta rather than save for the future.

Many societies resist change except in peripheral areas that make life easier without drastically changing the old patterns. Americans, on the other hand, welcome change and novelty. We are oriented toward the future. "Time with us is handled much like a material; we earn it, spend it, save it, waste it," commented Edward T. Hall in *The Silent Language*. We value promptness. A North American kept waiting 45 minutes for an appointment in a Latin American office would be furious. In our society a last-minute invitation may be considered insulting. In the Middle East and elsewhere, however, it is pointless to send out an invitation far in advance.

Western missionaries are accustomed to a systematic universe that rules out "logical" contradictions. They too facily assume that their converts will draw the same "logical" conclusions from the Scriptures, unaware that many peoples live with

the conception of an unsystematic universe.

Biblical Cultures

To better appreciate the import of the biblical revelation, we need to know something of the cultures of those who received that revelation—the Hebrews of the Old Testament period in the midst of pagan Near Eastern neighbors, and the Jews of the New Testament period in their Greco-Roman world.

Looking back, we can understand to some degree why God chose these people to be the vessels of His revelation. Eugene Nida has pointed out that many of the non-Western societies find it easier than Westerners to understand the Scriptures with their original connotations. He comments:

"The selection of the Jewish people can be understood in some measure on the basis that God chose to reveal Himself through a people who, there at the crossroads of so many cultural influences at that point in world history, possessed a culture with greater similarities to a

*Hendrik Kraemer, the great missionary statesman,
deplored the unconscious identification of Western culture
with Christianity by missionaries who were not aware
that Western Christianity was but a relative and imperfect
adaptation of the biblical revelation.*

greater number of other cultures than has existed at any other time in the history of mankind" (*Message and Missions*, 1954, p. 49).

God's revelation in the New Testament shows continuity and also development. More than half the citations from the Old Testament are made from the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Old Testament. The spread of Greek as a common language after the conquests of Alexander the Great aided the dissemination of the gospel. The first great historian of the Hellenistic Age, Johann Droysen, firmly believed that the rise of Christianity as a world religion would not have been possible without this cultural development.

Even within the confines of the New Testament one can detect cultural factors and differences. Jesus makes no reference to the Greek athletic games that provided the Apostle Paul with so many sermon illustrations. Even Pentecost did not obliterate the cultural differences between the Hebraist and Hellenist

Jewish Christians (Acts 6:1).

Paul was able to distinguish between the unchanging supra-cultural message of the gospel and its adaptability to various cultures. In his desire to reach all groups with the gospel, he said he was ready to be "made all things to all men" (1 Cor. 9:22, KJV). Paul gave us the principle of respect for various cultural practices in his exposition of what Christians should do about meat that had been offered in sacrifices to idols (1 Cor. 10:23-33; Rom. 14; Col. 2:16; 1 Tim. 4:3, 4; cf. Acts 15:29).

The Bible and Cultural Relativity

Our culture is so different from that of biblical times that some critics (such as Bultmann) have dismissed much of the Bible as irrelevant, and others (such as Tillich) have rephrased the *kerygma* (proclamation) in such a way that it is unrecognizable. At the other pole, some conservative Christians claim biblical justification for capitalism and other facets of the American way of life. Hendrik Kraemer, the

great missionary statesman, deplored the unconscious identification of Western culture with Christianity by missionaries who were not aware that Western Christianity was but a relative and imperfect adaptation of the biblical revelation:

“It is a truly remarkable and pathetic fact that those who are the champions of the eternal and absolute validity of the Gospel perpetrate so easily the fatal mistake of raising the relative, historical expression, the earthen vessel, to the status of the absolute divine act and gift. It is one of the most subtle forms of idolatry” (*The Christian Message in a Non-Christian World*, 1938, p. 316).

I believe it is possible, though not always simple, to steer a middle course by seeking to extract from the Bible supra-cultural principles that can be applied to various cultural situations. We need to avoid the temptation of identifying any given cultural expression as the only Christian mode possible, and we must recognize the relative values in various cultural patterns. Just as it has been possible for missionaries to translate the gospel into a multitude of languages, it is certainly possible for the Holy Spirit to work in a variety of cultures.

It is an error simply to take a biblical injunction out of its cultural context and attempt to reproduce it in our society without reflection upon its significance. Orthodox Jews

believe it is unlawful to eat meat and milk dishes together on the basis of the biblical commandment, “Thou shalt not seethe [boil] a kid in its mother’s milk” (Ex. 23:19, KJV; see also Deut. 14:21). But the original intent of the injunction is made clear by a Ugaritic text of the 14th century B.C., which reveals that the prohibition was directed against a Canaanite ritual.

Among Roman Catholics (until recently) and certain Protestant groups, women have been expected to wear a hat or at least some minimal head-covering on the basis of Paul’s directive to the Corinthian church (1 Cor. 11:5, 6). When Paul writes that a man should not cover his head in prayer (1 Cor. 11:7), he is referring only to Greek practice, for Jewish and Roman men did cover their heads while praying.

The observation that an unveiled woman would be an object of shame is based upon the very ancient and widespread custom that decent women were to be veiled in public. The Middle Assyrian laws of the 12th century B.C. had strict rules for the veiling of married women. On the other hand, a “harlot must not veil herself; her head must be uncovered”; in fact, one who saw a veiled harlot had to arrest her or be flogged himself! Jewish women in Jesus’ day went out in public with their faces hidden. Qimhit, the mother of several high priests, would not uncover

her head even before the men of her own family.

Although styles have changed, the principle remains: one should not dress in a way that would offend public sensibilities (1 Cor. 11:16). It would be simply impossible, even in our post-Victorian era of morality, for either the congregation or the preacher to concentrate on the sermon if an attractive young woman walked down the church aisle in a bikini.

A more controversial example is the question of the role of women in the Christian community. Hotly debated in a number of denominations today is whether women should be ordained. A few churches will not permit women to teach men. Some issues go beyond the scope of this article. But culture may be a good beginning point in understanding them. Others may be settled by finding answers to the following: Are all Paul's statements normative? Or do some apply specifically to the culture of his day? If so, which ones? And, much to the point, what was the position of women in Jewish society?

Among the rabbis it was considered unwise to talk too much with women, including one's own wife. It was also considered scandalous to talk with a woman alone. The education of women was limited to the domestic arts; they were not expected to study the Scriptures. Dur-

ing the service women were to listen in silence (see J. Jeremias, *Jerusalem in the Time of Jesus*, 1969, p. 359; see also p. 373). The Mishnah (Kid-dushin iv:13) stipulates that women may not be teachers of children. (The same text also bars unmarried men from this occupation.)

Christianity proclaimed the ideal equality of male and female, bond and free (Gal. 3:28). To the surprise of His disciples, Jesus spoke to the Samaritan woman at the well (John 4:27). Christ had a number of devoted women among His disciples. Mary (Luke 1:46) and Timothy's mother and grandmother (2 Tim. 3:14) were women who knew the Scriptures. Women played a prominent role in the early churches, as at Philippi; Priscilla even seems to have taken precedence over her husband, Aquilla. Nonetheless, in 1 Timothy 2:11-15 Paul stresses woman's pre-eminent role as a mother and denies her a public teaching role, not suffering her "to usurp authority over the man" (v. 12).

On the other hand, in our own culture and in other cultures where women have a more equal public role with men than did the women of the first century, permitting a woman to teach in a church does not seem to be a usurpation of man's authority. According to Eugene Nida:

"Some missionaries have made the mistake of excluding women from all church responsibilities,

“Some missionaries have made the mistake of excluding women from all church responsibilities, thinking that in so doing they were adhering strictly to the rules (though not the principles) laid down by the Apostle Paul.”

—Eugene Nida

thinking that in so doing they were adhering strictly to the rules (though not the principles) laid down by the Apostle Paul. Other missionaries have thrust entirely too much authority upon women, assuming that the role of women in the indigenous culture was roughly equivalent to that which they possess in our own culture. Both extremes are ill-advised, for it is the genius of the Good News of God that by the action of the Holy Spirit it may enter in and sanctify all forms of human institutions” (*Customs and Culture*, p. 286).

Christianity’s Universal Appeal

Given the almost infinite variety of human cultures, it is a most remarkable fact that the Christian Good News of God’s redemption in Christ has been preached successfully to so many societies. Here is a message that has burst the bonds of its parochial Palestinian origins and has touched the hearts of sophisticated philosophers and savage Auca Indians. Paul affirmed that in Christ

there can be neither Greek nor Jew, circumcision nor uncircumcision, Barbarian, Scythian, slave nor free, but Christ is all and in all (Col. 3:11). Scythians were nomads from Russia who were the epitome of savagery in the ancient world: they tattooed themselves, took scalps from their captives, and smoked hemp!

In the early second century the Roman governor of northwestern Anatolia, the Younger Pliny, in a letter to the Emperor Trajan complained about the appeal of Christianity to all classes, urban and rural alike. He was alarmed “. . . for a great many individuals of every age and class, both men and women, are being brought to trial, and this is likely to continue. It is not only the towns, but villages and rural districts too which are infected through contact with this wretched cult.”

Rightly understood and rightly preached, Christ is the hope of glory for every man and woman (Col. 1:27, 28), whatever their culture, their kindred, people, tongue, or nation (Rev. 5:9) □