HOW MULTI-CULTURAL SHOULD WE BE?
THE CHRISTIAN AND “CULTURAL DIVERSITY”

Christopher K. Lensch

Introduction

America was founded by religious immigrants. From the Pilgrims and Puritans in New England, to Swedish and German Lutherans in Delaware and Pennsylvania, to the French Huguenots and Scots-Irish Presbyterians in the Carolinas, America from the beginning has been a haven for the persecuted longing to breathe free.

These religious immigrants represented diverse ethnic groups, establishing North America as a rich, multi-cultural melting pot. While the English language and culture have been dominant, most other ethnic cultures of the world have been welcome on our shores. Multiculturalism has worked in North America unlike most other areas of the world.

Multiculturalism vs. “Cultural Relativism”

Part of the equation for the success of a diverse multiculturalism here has been the legal protections of minorities. More than that, the spirit of the First Amendment cultivates tolerance for others’ freedom of expression and freedom of religion. This has created a climate that allows a healthy exchange of ideas.

With the advent of “politically correct” elitism, multiculturalism is subtly being replaced by “cultural relativism.” The latter is the denial that any culture can be said to be better or worse than another. Therefore, instead of cultural interactions within the melting pot, other cultures or value systems cannot be publicly criticized—not even those in foreign lands. This leads to the absurd conclusion that competing cultures have equal merit. But we have moved beyond questions of preserving dignity when we cannot criticize a culture that:

- executes its petty criminals so that it can harvest their body organs;
- practices infanticide to control its population growth;
- denies education opportunities to its women;
- arrests citizens and visiting westerners for mentioning Jesus in public.

Cultural relativism is just that—relativism. There are no absolute standards of judgment in determining normal behavior and superior values for any society. As such, cultural relativism is a child of the postmodern age of relativism. Therefore, modern humanists with rosy presuppositions have no trouble denigrating that with which they are most familiar while praising obscure societies. The fog of time or the opinions of a handful of anthropologists conveniently blur the full picture of obscure civilizations.
From this type of non-objective perspective, it is easy to pillory American pioneers of European descent who “spread disease and oppression” in the New World. Native American cultures, on the other hand, are lionized as free and noble civilizations. This mindset, however, belies the influence of the European philosopher of revolution, Jean Jacques Rousseau. Rousseau touted the nostrum of the superiority of “the happy savage.”

Whether critics of western civilization compare the west to other past or present cultures, or whether they simply focus on the failings of their own culture, all these critics appear to be idealists who hold western culture up to a false, utopian ideal.

Rather than promote a healthy mix of co-existing cultures, cultural relativists attempt to impose a leveling of all cultures into one. To do this, of course, means minimizing Christian civilization while promoting pagan cultures. In this regard these pseudo-critics represent the cultural element of Marxism that has long sought to level the economic classes of society. On a comparable social plane, they say there can be no superiority of one culture over another.

This position, of course, is absurd. Had not the terrorist attack of September 11 been such a shock to an otherwise docile public, there undoubtedly would have been some brazen talking heads in the media calling upon Americans to consider the grievances of the Moslem extremists!

Consider these anti-cultural attacks of certain academic ideologues to overcome a tradition of western cultural superiority:

- revision of reading lists in schools to minimize the influence of “dead white males;”
- demands for monetary reparations to the descendents of slaves in the new world;
- verbal lashings of 19th century western colonialists for using their advanced technology to exploit primitive cultures.

This last sentiment has extreme exponents who condemn the “theological imperialism” of western Christian missions to third world nations. They accuse Christians of audacity in foisting their values and beliefs on other cultures that have “equally significant values.” Sadly, even so-called Christian groups like the World Council of Churches promote this ideology.

When academic types are bashing the west for its colonial imperialism or its involvement in the slave trade, in their idealism they rarely address these developments within the flow of history. It seems as if they have not studied history. Nor do these critics offer any positive benefits from the advance of western civilization.

For starters, slavery is not unique to the west—it was an age-old institution. All of the “great” civilizations practiced slavery for eons: Greece, Rome, China. Slave raiding and slave holding was normal for Africans and native Americans also. But which of these cultures had pangs of conscience over enslaving aliens and neighbors? The Protestant West took the lead in banning slavery, first in Great Britain, and then, with an unimaginable expense of blood and treasure, in America. Slavery is as old as civilization. But the abolition of slavery began in the
Protestant West. Meanwhile, modern Islamic cultures like the Sudanese government still sanction kidnapping and slave trading of non-Islamics.

Consider that western colonialism, now fallen away since World War II, has transformed primitive territories and backwater regions into flourishing countries that pride themselves in their economic and political independence. Prime examples are Singapore and Hong Kong, two former British colonies, that are the envy of the west Pacific. America’s well-intentioned efforts at nation-building have not been successful, largely because the social infrastructures (values and institutions) of our target nations could not sustain a democracy. Still, many of America’s allies, and even its former enemies, have been lifted from poverty and chaos by their association with one of the most generous societies in history. In its current prosecution of rooting out international terrorism, America is not only dropping bombs on its enemies, but is airlifting food for Afghanistan’s refugees. This unprecedented policy may have pragmatic motivations; still, it is “…an expression of aggressive goodness to defy a heartless enemy.”

Democracy, capitalism, and equality under the rule of law are the fruit of the West’s quest for freedom. These social boons have grown out of the dynamic philosophy and the theology of western thinkers. With all its openness and individual freedoms, the marvel of western civilization is that it is sustained less by force of arms than by the power of its ideas and institutions. This could not be possible without a responsible citizenry investing itself in the cohesive values of freedom.

Tolerance in a Free Society

One of the hallmarks of modern western freedom has been our willingness to “agree to disagree.” Historically, despots have enforced a national religion and common cultural values to galvanize their nations against external foes. The Protestant West, however, has enshrined freedom of conscience as one of its highest common values.

Freedom of conscious without fear of reprisal from one’s philosophical opponents, and the free exercise of religion has turned America into a sanctuary for the persecuted of the world. With so many disparate ethnic groups, as well as home-grown free thinkers, the principle of mutual tolerance is essential for the preservation of a free society.

Christian Forbearance

Mutual tolerance is a pragmatic value that works. It also is an ideal that has its roots in Christian ethics. The Bible teaches that Christians must “in honor give preference to one another.” This biblical charge (Rom. 12:10) comes in the historical context of Christians being persecuted for their faith (12:12, 14, 17). While exercising patience with their adversaries (12:12), they also show hospitality, offer blessing in the face of cursing, and, as much as possible, “live peaceably with all men” (12:18).
How can Christians do this? Because they know that ultimate justice for their cause rests with the Judge of all the earth (Rom. 12:19). Therefore they go the extra mile, and for Christ’s sake, they heap hot coals upon the heads of their enemies (12:20) by returning good for evil.

Rather than coercing their foes, Christians seek to win them through goodness and truth bathed in prayer.

**Tolerance vs. Acceptance**

“Mutual preference” that Christians practice toward one other is stronger than western civilization’s institution of “mutual tolerance.” While Christians must show forbearance to non-Christians, they cannot demand tolerance for themselves as a “human right.” Rather, their Master has taught them to expect tribulation in the world.3

On the other hand, Western humanists who have reaped the benefits of Christian civilization have viewed mutual tolerance as an inalienable right. The benefits of mutual tolerance are patently clear, but the basis of this so-called right is nebulous. Society and its members can claim no ultimate authority beyond pragmatism or tradition to justify social tolerance. The Christian, however, looks to God as his higher Authority. While he may not demand social tolerance as a right, still he is free. In terms of “freedom of conscience,” the Christian insists that he “must obey God rather than men.”4

The modern humanist who has no authority beyond historical or contemporary consensus will be subject to shifting values. From a position of mutual tolerance to mutual acceptance is a small, but radical, step. It is a modern mistake to confuse tolerance and acceptance. To allow others their freedom of conscience while disagreeing with their beliefs and behavior is one thing, while it is another matter to insist on the acceptance, and even the public promotion, of one’s beliefs. An illustration of this confusion is found in recent efforts surpassing mutual tolerance that legislate mandatory indoctrination in homosexuality issues. School boards, corporations, and state legislatures are succumbing to elitist pressures to promote acceptance of homosexuality (or abortion) in an effort to overcome perceived pockets of social intolerance.

What used to contribute to the strength of the American melting pot, a healthy competition and exchange of cultural ideas, now is being smothered by legislation, threat of law suits, and public policy directives. Recently, the county executive for the Seattle area directed county employees no longer to use religious phrases on the job like “Merry Christmas,” “Happy Hanukah,” or “have a wonderful Kwanza.” Rather, the politically correct statement of “Happy Holidays” would offer a potentially less offensive statement of good wishes. Misguided measures like this illustrate that mutual respect and tolerance are no longer cultural ideals. Rather, intolerance of true diversity is subtly and silently becoming the norm. Over-sensitivity yields, not a rich, but a bland cultural fabric. Anything but diversity is promoted. Perversity and intolerance are the results.
Religious Intolerance

Because of the Christian graces of love and forbearance, biblical Christianity has always been tolerant of non-sinful expressions of individual personality or social custom. Christian leaders may work to change people(s) in bringing them to maturity in Christ, but a stifling, condemning spirit should not be behind the effort. This is because Christians do not merely tolerate one another—they accept one another as objects of God’s grace.

This cannot be said about Islam. Islam is a moralistic religion that teaches auto-salvation through obedience to Islamic customs. Islam is perpetuated and propagated through efforts of the flesh and even by means of the sword. For fear of the free exchange of religious ideas, Moslem nations are most intolerant.

The Church Is the True Melting Pot

While Christianity and Islam are both exclusivistic (both teach only one way to God) and both have a world mission, true Christianity would never use force to spread the gospel. Grace and freedom reflect the beauty and genius of God’s plan to redeem the nations. This plan is from eternity. It is given early expression in the words of the Abrahamic covenant (“in you shall all the nations of the earth be blessed”), and it culminates in Jesus’ Great Commission to “go into all the world.”

There is no surprise then to see a multi-racial membership in the early church. Grace and freedom in Christ drew the Ethiopian eunuch to the church. Jews and Gentiles of various races constituted the church at Antioch. From the age of the prophets to the coming kingdom they foresaw, the church would be made from all nations.

Conclusion

Christians cannot demand tolerance as a right, but Christian teaching has created a climate where mutual tolerance can flourish. Christians deny that all value systems are equal and deserving of acceptance. Acceptance or even tolerance of wicked values is never acceptable.

Social tolerance as a generic principle is acceptable. Still, tolerance is not God’s ultimate ideal. What is? “Preferring one another,” at least in the society of the church, is preferred.

3 John 16:33.
4 Acts 5:29.
5 Gen. 12:3; Mt. 28:20; Acts 1:8.
6 Acts 13:1; note especially Simeon who was nicked-named “The Black One.”
7 Acts 17:26-27 “And hath made of one blood all nations of men for to dwell on all the face of the earth,… that they should seek the Lord…. ”