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persuading others with radically different presuppositions, categories, and methods of reasoning. The history of philosophy is the history of attempts at communication across radically different world views and radically different values. As philosophers attempt to communicate across different *weltanschauungs* they can learn something from the history of missions that exhibits the attempts to communicate with people of different contextualized interpretations of experience in different cultural expressions of these world views. Philosophers and theologians do well to listen to missiologists and missiologists may profit from listening afresh to philosophically perceptive theologians.

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# The Church, Culture and Ethnicity: A Theological View

Eshetu Abate

**Keywords:** Church, marks of the church, culture, ethnicity, transformation, reconciliation, negotiation, contextualisation, transparency.

The church is the body of Christ. Like her Lord she has two natures, the supernatural and the natural. She shares in the supernatural (the spiritual) because of her unique access and relationship to her heavenly Lord and the natural because she exists and operates in the natural world.

It is not new for the church of Jesus Christ to operate within cultures and ethnic groups. It has done this from the very inception of the church. In fact the founder of the church, our Lord Jesus Christ, did his mission within a certain culture and ethnic group. His great commission was 'to disciple all nations (all ethnic groups), baptizing them in the Name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. . . .' The apostles obeying the Commission of our Lord went with the gospel to all parts of the known world of that time, thus reaching all ethnic and cultural groups.

This means that the church today is not starting from scratch. We, as the church, have models to follow, our Lord Jesus Christ and his apostles, in our dealings with culture and ethnicity. Besides, his promise in the great commission to be with his church to 'the very end of the age' assures his continued guidance throughout her ministry on this earth. Thus the church, guided by his Word and Spirit, can get directions on how to deal with different cultures and ethnic groups. Nevertheless, in the history of missions it has not been as easy to put this into practice as it should be.

Before we look at some theological models for the church's interaction with culture and ethnicity, let us see briefly what characteristics the church, culture and an ethnic group have.

## A. THE CHURCH

In his book *Know the Truth* Bruce Milne, lists four important characteristics of the true church. The first of these is *unity*. The true church is characterized by its unity. Unity however does not mean total uniformity. Though the basic theological conviction is one, it could be expressed in different ways. Worship is done in the one Spirit to the one God, though forms may vary from place to place. Where possible, Christians who confess the same apostolic gospel should demonstrate their oneness in faith in their visible relationships. Milne writes

The NT addressed its teaching on unity to specific Christian groups, with immediate implications for their visible relationships. ... In other words there is need to search for a fuller visible unity than is presently experienced among those who confess the apostolic gospel. ... The deepest challenge of this teaching, however, is at the level of relationships in a local church. In that setting the unity of life in Christ should express itself in genuine and tangible care for, and commitment to, one another. In default of this the claim to be an authentic Christian church is called in question.<sup>1</sup>

The second mark of a true church is *holiness*. The character of holiness is the result of the union of the church and its members with Christ, so that it may be said, 'A church which is a stranger to holiness is a stranger to Christ.' Having said that, we have to admit that the New Testament presents a picture of churches marked with division, error, sin and other limitations. Nevertheless, some visible degree of holiness has to be seen in a true church of God.

The third mark of a true church is its *catholicity* or *universality*. One distinguishing characteristic of the early church was its openness to all. Judaism and other sectarian movements of the time were not. Milne writes:

The key aspect of the early church's catholicity was its openness to all. In distinction from Judaism with its racial exclusivism and Gnosticism with its intellectual and cultic exclusivism, the church opened its arms to all who would hear its message and embrace its saviour, irrespective of colour, race, social status, intellectual capacity or moral history. It broke upon the world as a faith for all. ... Churches which erect other 'tests' should be viewed with suspicion. There is no place in a true church for racial, colour, social, intellectual or moral discrimination, provided in the last-mentioned case there is evidence of true repentance.<sup>2</sup>

The fourth mark of a true church is its *apostolicity*. The church is built 'on the foundations of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone' ([Eph. 2:20](#)). Apostolicity does not mean for us a historic continuity of bishops that goes back in succession to the first apostles and Christ but conformity to the apostolic faith.

## B. CULTURE

In comparison with the other lower animals, only human beings have cultures. This separates human beings from the lower animals. As usual there is no single definition of culture which is accepted by all. One definition given to culture is 'the integrated system

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<sup>1</sup> 1. Bruce Milne, *Know the Truth*, (Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, 1982), p. 216.

<sup>2</sup> 2. Milne, *Know the Truth*, p. 218.

of learned patterns of behaviour, ideas and products characteristic of a society'.<sup>3</sup> Sir Edward Tylor, the pioneer British anthropologist, gave the following classical definition of culture. According to him culture is 'that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society'.<sup>4</sup>

## **C. ETHNICITY**

People belonging to an ethnic group have certain factors by which they distinguish themselves from others. First of all one belongs to an ethnic group by birth. Because of this a feeling and consciousness of kinship is common among members of a particular ethnic group. Ethnic identity is not based as much on a common culture as on a common sense of identity which is expressed in certain cultural values and symbols such as language. To maintain these signs and symbols is essential to the survival of the group as a distinct body and to symbolize its identity to others.

## **THE INTERACTION OF THE CHURCH WITH CULTURES AND ETHNIC GROUPS**

### **The Incarnational Model**

The incarnational model is the one which was chosen by the creator himself. When he came to the world he took our flesh. To be specific he took not the flesh of any body but the flesh of Mary who lived in a certain geographical location (Palestine) and historical time (around 4 B.C). He had to grow as a Galilean Jew. He knew the Aramaic language, including the proverbs of his people. In a way the limitless Word limited or accommodated himself to the Jewish culture and people. In fact his was a complete immersion in and identification with the culture. This model points to the fact that no one is more suited to be a missionary or to lead a local church than the person from the local culture. One problem the church has faced throughout the ages is in her cross-cultural evangelization. This is partly due to lack of indigenous people who can do the job, and partly due to the belief that no one else can do better than the cross-cultural evangelist.

Our Lord Jesus Christ gave the challenge of cross-cultural communication to his apostles when he gave the great commission. As we stated above, the apostles obeyed the commission. The apostle Paul understood very clearly the incarnational model the gospel of Jesus Christ takes as it moves from culture to culture and from an ethnic group to another. Two instances in his letters show this fact clearly. First when writing to the Corinthians, he explained,

Though I am free and belong to no man, I make myself a slave to everyone, to win as many as possible. To the Jews I became like a Jew, to win the Jews. To those under the law I became like one under the law (though I myself am not under the law) so as to win those under the law ... I have become all things to all men so that by all possible means I might save some ([1 Cor. 9:19-23](#)).

Then again, in the reference to the dispute over the place of the Jewish law, he said,

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<sup>3</sup> 3. Paul G. Hiebert, *Cultural Anthropology*, (Grand Rapids, Baker, 1983), p. 25.

<sup>4</sup> 4. Stephen A. Grunlan and Marvin K. Mayers, *Cultural Anthropology*, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1988), p. 39.

When I saw that they were not acting in line with the truth of the gospel, I said to Peter in front of them all, 'You are a Jew, yet you live like a Gentile and not like a Jew. How is it, then, that you force Gentiles to follow Jewish customs?' ([Gal. 2:14](#)).

The apostle Paul believed that one did not need to forsake or leave one's own culture or custom to be a Christian. One can come as one is.

The cultural barrier between the evangelist and the hearers which often exists is one of the reasons why people do not understand and therefore accept the Christian gospel. Sahdu Sundar Singh, an Indian evangelist who preached the gospel to his own people as a Hindu Sahdu (Holy Man), once said, 'When the water of life is given with an European cup, most of my people refused to drink, however now when it is given with the familiar Indian cup they run to drink and quench their thirst.' This is not to deny that conversion is ultimately the work of the Holy Spirit. However, one needs to remove cultural barriers that stand in the way so that the Holy Spirit may give life to the listener.

The tremendous revival that took place in Southern Ethiopia in the 1940s and the recent revival during the Derg Regime all over the country are for the most part the result of an *incarnational model of evangelization*. The revival was accompanied mostly with songs that have taken into consideration the cultural melodies and tunes of the society.

## **THE MESSAGE OF RECONCILIATION UPGRADES CULTURE AND ETHNICITY**

### **1. Transforming Culture**

The church does not embrace all elements of culture as they are. Cultural elements which contradict the spirit of the gospel have to be discarded, as the experiences of the early church at the Jerusalem Council indicate. ([Acts 15:19-20](#)). Elements which do not contradict but express the identity of the group have to be maintained. The distinction between the two can best be made by the local people or Christians. In a way the church 'baptizes' cultures. It consecrates the whole way of life in that culture to the Lord. The church and her evangelists most often made the mistake of dictating from the outside as to which element of the culture was biblical. Sometimes, without valuing the thought patterns of the other culture, they tried to judge on the basis of their own culture. This then becomes an ethnocentric approach.

### **2. Reconciling Cultures and Ethnic Group**

The church's message of reconciliation is the result of the cross—the death and resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ. The church itself is the result of the cross, that is the reconciliation made available by our Lord. As people from a culture are incorporated into the church they become a reconciled people and a people of reconciliation. We can see this from two angles.

#### *A) Reconciliation with God*

There is no question about this. Christ has done it all. It is finished. One has simply to make oneself available and accept the finished work. The way to God has been opened. The sin which blocked our free access to God is taken away.

#### *B) Reconciliation of Ethnic Groups*

It was taboo for a Jew even to associate with a Samaritan or a Gentile, quite apart from eating together. It would have made sense for an ethnic group not to associate with the

other if it had a unique merit or a reason to boast. But now in the church of Jesus Christ, as we are all reconciled alike on a common basis, the death and resurrection of our Lord, we have a reason to be together as brothers and sisters. Our Lord has carried the sin of the world. That includes the sin and atrocities done by one ethnic group upon another and vice versa. If we see from the perspective of the cross and the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ, we have no reason to be guilt ridden, nor do we have to keep on counting the guilt of others. The cross has forgiven all and removed all sins. Therefore the former oppressor and the oppressed can come together as equals and with dignity in front of the cross. 'You are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus, for all of you who were baptized into Christ, have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus' ([Gal. 3:26-28](#)). Paul G Hiebert rightly says ' ... The gospel breaks down the barriers of ethnocentrism that divide people in opposing camps of Jews and Gentiles, slaves and masters, and males and females. It seeks to restore fellowship between God and humans, and between humans.'<sup>5</sup>

This is what the church should exemplify by the brotherly love, respect and harmonious relationship that exists between its members from different cultural and ethnic backgrounds.

We are in Christ a new community. The church forms a new community, a community of the redeemed. The ethos of this community is not the same as that from which its members came. The apostle addresses the Christian community in his time saying, 'But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light. Once you were not a people, but now you are the people of God, once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy' ([1 Pet. 2:9-10](#)). As people of God, the new community, we have to think about things above.

## **THE GLOBAL AND ETHIOPIAN CONTEXT**

### **1. The Global Context**

In the global scene the cold war ended after forty years of rivalry between the U.S.A and the former Soviet Union. The fall of communism with the Soviet Union, created a vacuum for different forces to replace it. Ninan Koshy writes:

An important feature of the emerging global situation is the contest between the forces of integration and those of fragmentation. On the one hand, barriers that have historically separated nations and peoples in politics, economics, technology and culture are breaking down. Technology and economics have become truly transnational. ... On the other hand, forces of disintegration within nations and states are gathering momentum. Large states whose continued existence has been taken for granted have broken into pieces. New demands for nationhood—and revival of old demands—threaten many more states.<sup>6</sup>

To a certain extent the disorder in the international scene is caused by ethnic conflicts. The ethnic group has probably become the predominant grassroots political unit in the world today. Analysts tell us that in the last two decades ethnic conflicts have become especially widespread and that ethnicity has been at the centre of politics in country after country. As such it has become a challenge to the unity of states and a cause of international tension. The September 1998 issue of a World Vision News Letter, MARC

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<sup>5</sup> 5. Hiebert, *Cultural Anthropology*, p. xx.

<sup>6</sup> 6. Ninan Koshy, *Churches in the World Of Nations*, (Geneva: WCC, 1994), pp. 107–108.

reports that there are 8000 identifiable separate cultural groups on earth and potentially 5000 of them could demand the right of self-determination and creation of their own states.

One of the reasons for the explosion of ethnic conflicts on world scene is the fact that throughout the cold war ancient cultural, ethnic and linguistic groups remained trapped and largely separated within artificial frontiers that had been imposed upon them. In connection with this development religion is making a growing influence in the politics of ethnic and national identity. Sometimes situations have been created in which it has been difficult to separate a certain religion from an ethnic group and nation. For example, in the former Soviet Union, Armenians are 'Christians' while the Azerbaijanis are 'Muslims'.

## **2. The Ethiopian Context**

The Ethiopian context is not very much different from the global context. There are over eighty ethnic groups in the Ethiopia. With the fall of Communism, the country has been divided administratively into fourteen regional states based primarily on ethnicity. These fourteen states are under the Federal Government, implying that each state has its own limited autonomy. In some circles also we hear and see ethnic revival and a desire for self determination. It is in this context that churches of Ethiopia exercise the biblically based transformation, reconciliation and mutual respect which we described above.

## **THE CHURCH AS A MODEL OF RECONCILIATION**

The above conditions exert their influence on the churches and on the different ethnic groups who are members of the churches either directly or indirectly. In some cases they may even result in conflicts.

The solution in such cases is to truly come to the common faith and investigate the kind of relationship that should exist in its light. As Christians, with the apostle Paul, we should value the new community or 'the new ethnicity' in the Lord more than our natural descent or relation ([Philp. 3:4-11](#); [John 1:12-13](#)).

One of the factors that aggravates ethnic conflict within a local church is lack of transparency. According to the teaching of our Lord there is nothing hidden which will not come to the light. Non-transparency only broods distrust and division. Therefore the churches should create an open forum for their members to discuss issues of concern and find solutions. Ethnic conflicts are one of them. Nevertheless one has to admit that it is not easy to come to a consensus because there are many conflicting forces from inside and outside the church, from above and from below. The church is not made up of only the redeemed. Our Lord likened the kingdom of God to a net that has collected both good and bad fish. In the same way we have in the church people of different backgrounds and levels of understanding.

Another factor that can help solve conflicts is negotiation. A learned anthropologist once remarked that when conflicts arise, negotiations should continue until a consensus is reached. In such situations there is no use in stopping the negotiation before a consensus is reached.

If ethnic conflicts are solved in the church, this can be a model society at large. The churches should put forward their own well studied Manifesto of ethnic relationships that can be a model for society at large to follow. The whole Manifesto should centre around Christ's actions in reconciling the world with his Father and with one another. There is a limitless resource in the cross and resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ to straighten the relationships between ethnic groups and cultures. We, the Evangelical Churches of Ethiopia, together with others should very soon embark on doing that by carrying the

message of reconciliation and harmony wrought in the death and resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ.

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# Mission, the Bible and Israel-Palestine

Andrew M. Lord

**Key words:** Israel, Palestine, hermeneutics, mission, holistic, Zionism, discrimination, justice, reconciliation, prophecy;

Israel-Palestine<sup>1</sup> is known for its political tensions and fighting. It is also a region with a deep biblical history focused on the Jewish nation. This biblical history has motivated Christians for mission amongst Jews, and yet has also led to the oppression of Palestinians living in the Israeli Occupied Territories. This article aims to listen to some of the voices of Christians living in Israel-Palestine, to reflect upon their concept of mission and use of the Bible. In particular I will be considering how divisions in the land are reflected in the mission hermeneutics of Christians there. For me these issues have been given life by visits to Israel-Palestine, feeling the contrast between spending time at the Palestinian led Bethlehem Bible College and the Church's Ministry amongst Jewish People (CMJ) Hostel at Christ Church, Jerusalem.<sup>2</sup>

Israel-Palestine is a land steeped in history and we need to begin by outlining very briefly the recent history in order to understand the context for mission. In 1918 Arabs formed over 90 per cent of the population, and yet within fifty years they have become a minority in the land, without political power or authority. Palestinians lived under Ottoman rule until 1917 when the land fell under British control during the First World War. Due to anti-Semitic pogroms in Europe, Jews began arriving in the land from the 1880s with a desire to regenerate their culture and thus Zionism was born. This was encouraged by the British Government, particularly as a result of the 'Balfour Declaration' which stated that 'His Majesty's Government view will favour the establishment in

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<sup>1</sup> 1. With Naim Ateek I have chosen to call the land 'Israel-Palestine' rather than 'Israel' which does not acknowledge the Palestinian presence, or the 'Holy Land' which conjures up images of the past rather than the present. See Naim S. Ateek, *Justice and Only Justice: A Palestinian Theology of Liberation* (New York: Orbis, 1989), pp. 4–5.

<sup>2</sup> 2. The Church's Ministry amongst Jewish People is an evangelical Anglican missionary agency founded in 1809.