

CHRISTIANTY'S CHALLENGE TO CULTURAL RELATIVISM

by Peter Corney – September 2012

Late last year I read the most profoundly disturbing book that I have read for a long time: *"The Politics of Suffering – Indigenous Australia and the end of the Liberal Consensus."* It is written by Peter Sutton one of Australia's leading anthropologists and an expert on Aboriginal culture. I recommend it to anyone who wants to try and understand why the results of our public policy on indigenous affairs have become such a tragic mess.

Peter Sutton speaks from the inside and he cares passionately about Aboriginal people but he is deeply critical of the failure of many of our policies since the 1970's. One of the reasons he states has been the unwillingness to name and tackle a number of very negative practices and values in Aboriginal culture that have been exacerbated by colonial conquest. One of the reasons for this is the influence of a particular view of indigenous cultures that took hold in the early 70's and the pressure of political correctness that protected it from any critique and has allowed it to go unchallenged till recently. This view is an example of 'Cultural relativism'.

This raised a bigger issue for me and that is the wider influence of 'Cultural Relativism' today on Western culture generally.

In this article I want to try and explain what 'Cultural relativism' is and how it has become a belief and value system that is now very influential in our public policy and popular values. I then want to explain how Christianity presents a radical challenge to this idea and belief.

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Cultural relativism is an approach to the nature and role of values in a specific culture. *"It is the view that the values and behaviours of people in one culture should not be judged according to those of another, but understood in terms of the culture concerned."*ⁱ

As a technical principle within the science of anthropology it is an important and useful tool. But it has escaped from the discipline of anthropology into the wider cultural discourse and morphed into a philosophical idea and moral value, an unquestioned belief that has significant influence on public policy and our society's value system.

As Peter Sutton points out it has had significant impact on our indigenous affairs policy. But it is also very relevant now to how we embrace and manage the new wave of immigrants and refugees from non-Western cultures to Australia. Remember most of our post WW2 migration was from Europe, people with a similar world view and value system to the majority of Australians.

In its popular form cultural relativism is closely related to ethical relativism which views moral truth as variable and not absolute. *“What constitutes right and wrong is determined solely by the individual or by a society. Since truth is not objective there can be no objective standard which applies to all cultures. No one can say if someone is right or wrong; it is a matter of personal opinion, and no society can pass judgement on another society. Cultural relativism sees nothing inherently wrong (or nothing inherently good) with any particular cultural expression.”*ⁱⁱ

All cultures and social systems have moral values, but sometimes they differ widely and are often in conflict with those of other systems. How do we determine which ones are the true or higher values, good or bad? For example the status and treatment of woman differs greatly from one culture to another, all the way from oppression to equality; or take the rigid caste system in India, it would be completely unacceptable in Australia.

When cultural values clash how do we determine which should prevail?

There are broadly three alternative answers:

1. **Allow parallel systems of values to coexist.** This can and does work at the level of certain personal values but in terms of fundamental social values like human rights it breaks down and divides a society. It would be very difficult to allow say the *sharia* legal code or certain indigenous laws to operate alongside the Western legal system. Parallel development at the level of fundamental social and political values can lead to forms of apartheid, to ghettos, to conflict and fragmentation.
2. **Adopt or agree on a common set of objective values:** for example Judeo- Christian values or a charter of human rights by which cultural values are judged.
3. **Resolve the issue by power.** The majority impose their values on the minority or a powerful leader or group impose their values on others.

As Christians in Australia today we now live in a pluralist liberal democracy that is multicultural and multi faith. Historically many of its liberal values have been significantly shaped by Christian values but they are now muted and heavily modified. We now have a multi-value situation. While we share a number of general social and political values common to most Western liberal democracy's there are at other levels considerable differences among sub groups. The current debate about marriage, gender and sexual intimacy reveals this.

Social cohesion depends on how much value difference we can tolerate and the level of agreement we can achieve on major social and political values like; universal suffrage, the status of woman, marriage and family, how conflict is resolved, how the legal system should work, honesty in business and government, freedom of speech and religion, equality of access to education, etc.

Cultural Relativists are not consistent: they claim that there are no true, good or bad values but in fact believe in and support a range of value laden views. For example many secular liberals who are cultural relativists have very strong views on woman's rights and status in society and yet this is an area of cultural values where there is great difference between various cultures.

Another example is the current investigation into the corrupt payment of bribes by Australian officials in both the Iraqi wheat sales and now the Reserve Bank's note printing business. It is well known that bribing officials and politicians is an accepted cultural practice in parts of Asia, Africa and the Middle East but it is illegal under Australian law. Bribery happens here too but it is socially unacceptable and illegal and you go to jail if you are caught. There are few if any liberal secular Journalists or cultural relativists standing up to defend this practice. Why? Because they actually believe in an objective value at this point, that bribery is wrong and corrupt. They also assume that this belief should be accepted as a vital transcultural value in a globalised business world.

During the last Asian financial crisis in the late 90's a widely respected Australian economist said that one of the reasons why the crisis got so out of control was the endemic corruption in the Asian and Indonesian banking system and their lack of prudential controls. This is a cultural issue but few if any in Australia would defend its continuance on the basis of cultural relativism.ⁱⁱⁱ

Christianity's radical challenge to cultural relativism.

The first challenge comes from the Bible's teaching about the Kingdom of God. The Kingdom, or final uninterrupted reign of God, which is looked forward to by the Jewish scriptures (the Old Testament), is inaugurated by Christ through his incarnation, life, death, resurrection, ascension and return as Lord of all. The New Testament teaches that all other kingdoms and cultures are ultimately subject to Christ's reign and the values of his kingdom.^{iv}

(It should be noted that the Kingdom and the Church are not the same. The Church is to proclaim the Kingdom and to be a witness to it in word and life but they are not one and the same thing. The Kingdom of God is a much bigger more encompassing reality than the Church. The Church has often failed in its witness to the Kingdom.)

Now, there are no perfect cultures, they are all formed by fallen people and so are a mixture of good and bad, constructive and destructive, positive and negative practices, values and attitudes. They are all subject to the critique of the values of the Kingdom of God. These values are found in the scriptures and supremely in the life and teaching of Jesus.

Once a person by faith and baptism has entered the community of Jesus the values of all the other communities that have shaped and influenced them come under its critique and are subject to its values which are the values of the Kingdom of God. We become dual citizens, citizens of the kingdoms of this world and citizens of God's Kingdom. When a clash of loyalty arises our first duty is to the Kingdom of God. Our confession is that *"Jesus Christ is Lord."* The New Testament expresses it this way: *"Here we have no enduring city", "Our citizenship is in heaven", we are "fellow citizens with Gods people and members of God's household".*^v

The second challenge to cultural relativism is the great central aim and vision of the mission of God in the world. Through Christ God is bringing the fractured and fragmented world back into unity with himself; people with one another, tribe with tribe, culture with culture, men with woman and humanity with the exploited creation.

The New Testament makes the ultimate goal crystal clear:

"For God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him (Christ), and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through his blood shed on the cross."^{vi}

"You are all children of God through faith in Christ Jesus, for all of you who were baptised 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."^{vii}

In Ephesians 2:11- 22 the model for the future unity of all things is described in the breaking down of the barrier between Jew and Gentile through Christ, *"God's purpose was to create in himself one new humanity out of the two, thus making peace."*

From Isaiah to Jesus all the great Biblical visions of the final consummation of the Kingdom of God – the final result of Gods act of salvation – use the metaphor of a great banquet where all the nations of the world are gathered together in peace and unity and joy in a great celebration in the renewed creation - the Messianic banquet!

Here is the prophet Isaiah:

'On this mountain the Lord almighty will prepare a feast of rich food for all people, the best of meats and the finest of wines. On this mountain he will destroy the shroud that enfolds all peoples, the sheet that covers all nations; he will swallow up death for ever. The Sovereign Lord will wipe away the tears from all faces.'^{viii}

It is Jesus' favourite image of the fully realised kingdom of God. It features in three of his parables and when he inaugurates the Lords supper he explains that it is an anticipation of the Messianic banquet. The scriptures end in the book of Revelation with the picture of the Marriage supper of the lamb.^{ix}

Liberal democracy's utopian dream of a united peaceful multicultural society is really a longing for the Biblical vision planted in our hearts by God, but it will only ever be fully achieved in Christ. That does not mean of course that we should not strive to create our political approximations of it now, but we should not be too disappointed by our partial successes or failures, or naïve about the threats to the dream that we carry in our fallen natures. Utopian political endeavours do not have a great track record, especially in the 20thC. We can see the difficulties today as we watch the struggles of the EU with its current challenges, not only financially, but socially with large flows of immigration from vastly different cultures. In Australia we need to be very realistic and practical as we identify our common values and determine the key building blocks of social cohesion that we want to establish, or keep in place and strengthen, in multicultural Australia.

When Barak Obama was running for the US Presidency, on July 24th 2008 he spoke to a crowd of 200,000 people in Berlin and said in a stirring speech: *"We must build a world that stands as one. The walls between races and tribes, natives and immigrants; Christian and Muslim and Jew cannot stand. These are now the walls we must tear down.... Yes we can!"*^x He has found that easier to say than do.

The disunity and confusion which followed the Tower of Babel is only finally and fully resolved in the unity and fellowship of the great Messianic Banquet. This is the hope we offer to the world.

In the 5thC in his great book 'The City of God', Augustine wrote: *"Adam lies scattered over the earth.....he has fallen, and having been broken to pieces, as it were, he has filled the universe with his debris and disunity. However God's mercy has gathered together from everywhere his scattered fragments and by fusing them in the fire of his love, he has reconstituted their broken unity."*^{xi}

The fire of God's love is focussed in the cross of Christ.^{xii}

REFERENCES

ⁱ Peter Sutton "The politics of Suffering" MUP 2009 (p.216).

ⁱⁱ www.gotquestions.org (2002-2012).

ⁱⁱⁱ Professor Ian Harper Access Economics.

^{iv} See Mark 1:14-15., Phillipian's 2:5-11., Colossian's 1:15-20., Revelation 11:15-17., Isaiah 9:6-7., Luke 14: 15-23., 22:14-30.

^v Phillipians 2:11., Hebrews 13:14., Phillipians 3:20., Ephesians 2:19.

^{vi} Colossians 1: 19-20.

^{vii} Galatians 3:26-28.

^{viii} Isaiah 25:6-8.

^{ix} Luke 14:15-24., 22:7-30., 15:22-24., Mathew 22:1-13., Revelation 19.

^x The Age 25/5/08.

^{xi} "The City of God" Augustine of Hippo.

^{xii} Ephesians 2:14-18., Colossians 1:20.