

# Culture, Worldview and Contextualization

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A key question for Christians who work cross-culturally is, “What is God’s view of culture? Is Jewish culture created by God and therefore to be imposed on everyone who follows God? Or is there some indication in scripture that God takes a different position?” I believe we have our answer in 1 Corinthians 9:19–22, where Paul articulates his (and God’s) approach to cultural diversity. Paul says, “While working with Jews, I live like a Jew” but “when working with Gentiles, I live like a Gentile.” His approach, then, is to “become all things to all men, that I may save some of them by whatever means are possible.”

The early Christians were Jewish. It was natural for them to believe that the cultural forms in which the gospel came to them were the only right ones for everyone. So, they believed, everyone who comes to Jesus must also convert to Jewish culture. But God used the apostle Paul, himself a Jew, to teach his generation and ours a different approach. In the above text, he articulates God’s approach. Then in Acts 15:2ff, we find him arguing fiercely against the majority position of the early church for the right of Gentiles to follow Jesus *within* their own socio-cultural contexts. God Himself had shown first Peter (Acts 10), then Paul and Barnabas, that this was the right way, by giving the Holy Spirit to Gentiles who had not converted to Jewish culture (Acts 13–14).

But the Church has continually forgotten the lesson of Acts 15. We have continually reverted to the assumption that becoming Christian means becoming like us culturally. When, after New Testament times, the church required everyone to adopt Roman culture, God raised up Luther to prove that God could accept people who spoke German and worshipped in German ways. Then Anglicanism arose to show that God could use English language and custom, and Wesleyanism arose to let the common people of England know that God accepted them in their culture. And so it has been that there are major cultural issues in the development of every new denomination.

But sadly, the problem persists. Communicators of the gospel continue imposing their culture or denomination on new converts. [So we attempt to apply anthropological insight to missions to protect those to whom we go from our inclination to make them like us.] If, then, we take a scriptural approach, we should *adapt ourselves and our presentation of God’s message* to the culture of the receiving people, not misrepresent God as

some early Jewish Christians did (Acts 15:1) by requiring that converts become like us to be acceptable to God.

## Culture and Worldview Defined

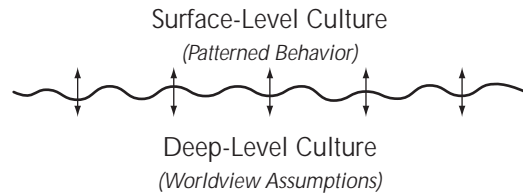
The term *culture* is the label anthropologists give to the structured customs and underlying worldview assumptions which people govern their lives. Culture (including worldview) is a peoples' way of life, their design for living, their way of coping with their biological, physical and social environment. It consists of learned, patterned assumptions (worldview), concepts and behavior, plus the resulting artifacts (material culture).

Worldview, the deep level of culture, is the culturally structured set of assumptions (including values and commitments/alliances) underlying how a people perceive and respond to reality. Worldview is *not separate* from culture. *It is included in culture* as the deepest level presuppositions upon which people base their lives.

A culture may be likened to a river, with a surface level and a deep level. The surface is visible. Most of the river, however, lies beneath the surface, and is largely invisible. But anything that happens on the surface of the river is affected by such deep-level phenomena as the current, the cleanness or dirtiness of the river, other objects in the river and so on. What happens on the surface of a river is both a response to external phenomena and a manifestation of the deep-level characteristics of the river.

So it is with culture. What we see on the surface of a culture is patterned human behavior. But this patterned or structured behavior, though impressive, is the lesser part of the culture. In the depths, are the assumptions we call *worldview*, on the basis of which people govern their surface-level behavior. When something affects the surface of a culture it may change that level. The nature and extent of that change will, however, be influenced by the deep-level worldview structuring within the culture.

Culture (including worldview) is a matter of structure or patterns. Culture does not *do* anything. Culture is like the script an actor follows. The script provides guidelines within which actors ordinarily operate,



though they may choose on occasion to modify the script, either because they have forgotten something or because someone else changed things.

There are several levels of culture (including, of course, worldview). The "higher" the level, the more diversity is included in it. For example, we may speak of culture at *multinational* level as "Western culture" (or worldview), or "Asian culture," or "African culture." Such cultural entities include a large number of quite distinct national cultures. For example, within *Western culture* there are varieties called German, French, Italian, British and American. Within *Asian culture* are varieties called Chinese, Japanese and Korean. These national cultures, then, can include many *subcultures*. In America, for example, we have Hispanic Americans, American Indians, Korean Americans and so on. And within these subcultures we can speak of *community cultures*, *family cultures* and even *individual cultures*.

In addition, the term "culture" can designate types of strategies (or coping mechanisms) used by people of many different societies. Thus, we can speak of entities such as a *culture (or worldview) of poverty*, *deaf culture*, *youth culture*, *culture of factory workers*, *taxi drivers' culture*, even *culture of women*. Identifying people in this way is often helpful in working out strategies for their evangelization.

## People and Culture

Just as in drama we recognize the difference between actors and their scripts, so it is with culture. It has been common for both non-specialists and specialists to refer to culture as if it was a person. We often hear statements such as "Their culture *makes* them do it," or "Their worldview *determines* their view of reality." Note that the italicized verbs in these statements give the impression that a culture behaves like a person.

As in drama, the patterns are there and the actors ordinarily follow them by habit. But



the “power” that keeps people following their cultural script is the power of habit, something inside of people, not any power that culture possesses in itself. *Culture (including worldview) has no power in and of itself.*

People ordinarily follow the patterns of their culture, but not always. People regularly modify old customs and create new ones. Though the habits that result in great conformity are strong, we can change our customs. It is important that cross-cultural witnesses recognize both the possibility of change and the place and power of habit.

The distinction we are making is embodied in the contrast between the words *culture* and *society*. Culture refers to the structure, society refers to the people themselves. When we feel pressure to conform, it is the pressure of people (i.e., social pressure) that we feel, not the pressure of cultural patterning (the script) itself.

The chart below summarizes the distinction between people’s behavior and the cultural structuring of that behavior.

### Cultures and Worldviews Are to Be Respected

Cultural/worldview structuring functions both outside of us and inside of us. We are totally submerged in it, relating to it much as a fish relates to water. And we are usually as unconscious of it as a fish must be of the water or as we usually are of the air we breathe. Indeed, many of us only notice culture when

we go into another cultural territory and observe customs different from our own.

Unfortunately, when we see others living according to cultural patterns and with worldview assumptions different from our own we often feel sorry for them, as if their ways are inferior to ours. If we are able, then, we may seek ways to “rescue” them from their customs. One of the tragedies of American (including missionary) attempts to help other peoples is that we have so often shown little respect for their traditional customs.

The way of Jesus is, however, to honor a people’s culture and its incorporated worldview, not to wrest them from it. Just as He entered the cultural life of the Jews to communicate with them, so we are to enter the cultural matrix of the people we seek to win. Following Jesus’ example, we note that working from within involves a biblical critique of a people’s culture and worldview assumptions as well as acceptance of them as starting points. But if we are to witness effectively, we have to speak and behave in ways that honor the only way of life they have ever known. Likewise, if the Church is to be as meaningful to receiving peoples as Jesus wants it to be, it needs to be as appropriate to their cultural lives (though not uncritical of unbiblical customs and assumptions) as the early Church was to the lives of first century peoples. We call such appropriate churches “dynamic equivalence churches” (Kraft 1979),

People ( <i>Society</i> )	Culture
<p style="text-align: center;"><b>Surface-Level Behavior</b></p> <p>What we do, think, say or feel either consciously or unconsciously, mostly habitually but also creatively</p>	<p style="text-align: center;"><b>Surface-Level Structure</b></p> <p>The cultural patterns in terms of which we habitually do, think, say or feel</p>
<p style="text-align: center;"><b>Deep-Level Behavior</b></p> <p>Assuming, evaluating and committing mostly habitually but also creatively:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Concerning choosing, feeling, reasoning, interpreting and valuing.</li> <li>2. Concerning the assigning of meaning.</li> <li>3. Concerning explaining, relating to others, committing ourselves, and adapting to or deciding to try to change things that go on around us.</li> </ol>	<p style="text-align: center;"><b>Deep-Level Structure</b> (<i>Worldview</i>)</p> <p>The patterns in terms of which we carry out the assumptions, evaluations and commitments of deep-level behavior. Patterns of choosing, feeling, reasoning, interpreting, valuing, explaining, relating to others, committing ourselves and adapting to or deciding to try to change things that go on around us.</p>



“contextualized churches” (see below) or “inculturated churches.”

## CHARACTERISTICS OF CULTURE (INCLUDING WORLDVIEW)

There are a number of characteristics of culture and worldview that may be listed. Space does not allow us to detail these. A fuller discussion of them may be found in my book *Anthropology for Christian Witness* (1996).

## CHARACTERISTICS OF CULTURE AND WORLDVIEW

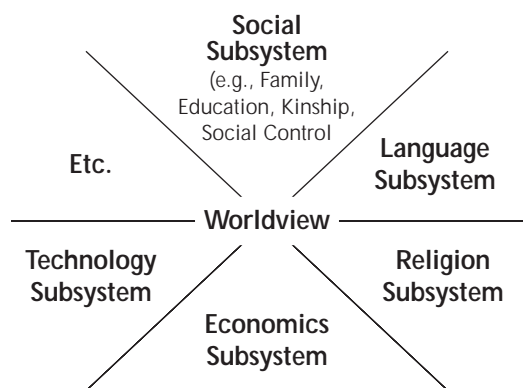
1. Culture/worldview provides a *total design for living*, dealing with every aspect of life and providing people with a way to regulate their lives.
2. Culture/worldview is a legacy from the past, *learned as if it were absolute and perfect*.
3. Culture/worldview *makes sense to those within it*.
4. But *no culture/worldview seems to be perfectly adequate* either to the realities of biology and environment or to the answering of all of the questions of a people.
5. Culture/worldview is an *adaptive system*, a *mechanism for coping*. It provides patterns and strategies to enable people to adapt to the physical and social conditions around them.
6. Culture tends to show *more or less tight integration* around its worldview. Worldview assumptions provide the “glue” with which people hold their culture together.
7. Culture/worldview is *complex*. No simple culture/worldview has ever been found.
8. Cultural/worldview practices and assumptions are *based on group or “multi-personal” agreements*. A social group unconsciously agrees to govern themselves according to their cultural patterns.
9. Culture/worldview is *structure*. It doesn’t *do* anything. People do things either according to their cultural script or by modifying that script. Any supposed power of culture or worldview lies in the *habits* of people.
10. Though analytically we need to treat people and culture/worldview as separate entities, *in real life people and culture/worldview function together*.

## ADDITIONAL CHARACTERISTICS OF WORLDVIEW

1. A worldview consists of the *assumptions (including images)* underlying all cultural values, allegiances and behaviors.
2. Worldview assumptions and images underlie *our perception of reality and responses to it*.
3. There are two realities, REALITY as God sees and perceptual reality as we with human limitations see (1 Cor 13:12). Our worldview provides us with *the lens, model or map* by of which we perceive, interpret, structure and respond to God’s REALITY.
4. Worldview assumptions or premises are learned from our elders, *not reasoned out, but assumed to be true without prior proof*. It seldom occurs to us that there may be people of other groups who do not share our assumptions.
5. We organize our lives and experiences according to our worldview and *seldom question it* unless our experience challenges some of its assumptions.
6. In cross-cultural ministry, *the problems that arise from differences in worldview are the most difficult to deal with*.

## The Subsystems of Culture

With worldview at the center, influencing all of culture, we can divide surface-level culture into *subsystems*. There are many cultural subsystems, some of which are diagrammed below. These subsystems provide various behavioral expressions of worldview assumptions.



Though it is tempting to present Christianity as the replacement of a traditional religion with the religious forms of Western Christianity, this is the wrong way to witness. Christianity is to be directed at the worldview of a people so that it will influence each of these subsystems from the very core of the culture. Truly converted people (whether in America or overseas) need to manifest biblical Christian attitudes and behavior in all of their cultural life, not just in their religious practices.

If we are to reach people for Christ and to see them gathered into Christ-honoring and culture-affirming churches, we will have to deal with them within their culture and in terms of their worldview. We will do this either wisely or unwisely. It is hoped that by understanding more of what culture and worldview are all about, we can deal with them more wisely than might otherwise have been the case.

### Worldview and Culture Change

Significant culture change is always a matter of changes in the worldview. Just as anything that affects the roots of a tree influences its fruit, so anything that affects a people's worldview will affect the whole culture and, of course, the people who operate in terms of that culture.

Jesus knew this. When He wanted to get across important points, He aimed at the worldview level. Someone asked, "Who is my neighbor?" So He told them a story and then asked who was being neighborly (Lk 10:29-37). He was leading them to reconsider and, hopefully, change a basic value deep in their system.

On another occasion Jesus said, "You have heard that it was said, 'Love your friends, hate your enemies.' But now I tell you: love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you...If anyone slaps you on the right cheek, let him slap your left cheek too" (Matt 5:43,44, 39 GNB). Again the seeds were being planted for change at the deep worldview level.

When there is change at a deep level, however, it frequently throws things off balance. And any imbalance at the worldview center of a culture tends to cause difficulty through the rest of the culture. For example, when we

in the U.S. believed at the worldview level that we could not be defeated in war, but then could not win in Vietnam, there was a deep sense of demoralization that rippled throughout the society, contributing greatly to the disequilibrium in our land at this time.

Major worldview problems can be caused when even good changes, introduced by well-meaning people such as missionaries, are applied at the surface level without due attention to the deep-level meanings people attach to them. For example, the almost universal missionary requirement that Africans who have more than one wife divorce the "extras" before they can be baptized has led both Christian and non-Christian Africans to certain undesirable worldview assumptions concerning the Christian God. Among these are: God is against the real leaders of African society, God is not in favor of women having help and companionship around the home, God wants men to be enslaved to a single wife (like whites seem to be), God favors divorce, social irresponsibility and even prostitution. None of these conclusions is irrational or far-fetched from their point of view.

Though we believe God intends that each man have only one wife, this change was forced too quickly, unlike God's patient approach in the Old Testament where He took many generations to do away with the custom.

As mentioned, even good changes, if they are introduced in the wrong way can lead to cultural disequilibrium and demoralization. Among the Ibibio people of southern Nigeria the message of God's gracious forgiveness resulted in many people turning to the Christian God because He was seen as much more lenient than their traditional god. But the converts saw no need to be righteous, since they believed God would always forgive them, whatever they did. In aboriginal Australia, among the Yir Yoront people, the introduction by missionaries of steel axes to replace the traditional stone axes had a powerful disruptive effect simply because the axes were given to the women and younger men who traditionally were required to borrow axes from the older men. This change, though providing the people with better technology, challenged their worldview assumptions, leading to the



destruction of the authority of the leaders, widespread social disruption and the near extinction of the people. Add to such examples the enormous damage (both cultural and spiritual) among non-Western peoples that has been done through the influence of Western schools (including those run by missions), and you can understand that there are at least a few valid reasons (among the invalid ones) for certain anthropologists to be critical of missionary work.

### Contextualized (*Appropriate*) Christianity

The aim of Christian witness is to see people come to Christ and to be formed into groups we call churches that are both biblically and culturally appropriate. The process by means of which the church becomes “inculturated” in the life of a people has been called “indigenization,” but now is more frequently referred to as “contextualization.”

The contextualization of Christianity is part and parcel of the New Testament record. This is the process that the apostles were involved in as they took the Christian message that had come to them in Aramaic language and culture and communicated it to those who spoke Greek. In order to contextualize Christianity for Greek speakers, the apostles expressed Christian truth in the thought patterns of their receptors. Indigenous words and concepts were used (and transformed in their usage) to deal with such topics as God, church, sin, conversion, repentance, initiation, “word” (*logos*) and most other areas of Christian life and practice.

The early Greek churches were in danger of being dominated by Jewish religious practices because those who led them were Jews. God, however, led the apostle Paul and others to struggle against the Jewish Christians to develop a contextualized Christianity for Greek-speaking Gentiles. In order to do this, Paul had to fight a running battle with many of the Jewish church leaders who felt that it was the job of Christian preachers to simply impose Jewish theological concepts on new converts (see Acts 15). These conservative Jews were the heretics against whom Paul fought for the right for Greek-speaking Christians to have the gospel expressed in

their language and culture. We conclude from such passages as Acts 10 and 15 that it is the intent of God that biblical Christianity be “reincarnated” in every language and culture at every point in history.

Biblically, the contextualization of Christianity is not simply to be the passing on of a *product* that has been developed once for all in Europe or America. It is, rather, the imitating of the *process* that the early apostles went through. To return to our tree analogy, Christianity is not supposed to be like a tree that was nourished and grew in one society and then was transplanted to a new cultural environment, with leaves, branches and fruit that mark it indelibly as a product of the sending society. The gospel is to be *planted as a seed* that will sprout within and be nourished by the rain and nutrients in the cultural soil of the receiving peoples. What sprouts from true gospel seed may look quite different above ground from the way it looked in the sending society, but beneath the ground, at the worldview level, the roots are to be the same and the life comes from the same source.

In a truly contextualized church, even though the surface level “tree” may look different, the essential message will be the same and the central doctrines of our faith will be in clear focus, since they are based on the same Bible. But the formulation of that message and the relative prominence of many of the issues addressed will differ from society to society. For cultural reasons, such things as what the Bible says about family relationships, fear and evil spirits, and the advocacy of dance and prescribed rituals will be much more in focus in contextualized African Christianity than they might be in America.

God intends today’s Christianity to be dynamically equivalent to New Testament Christianity, perceived by people today as excitingly relevant to the problems they struggle with. Though many non-Western churches today are dominated by Western approaches to doctrine and worship, it is not scriptural that they remain so. There are, of course, similar basic problems (e.g., the problem of sin, the need for a relationship with Christ) that peoples of all societies need to deal with. But the ways those problems manifest themselves differ from people to



people and need to be approached in different ways, culturally appropriate ways, for each cultural group.

### Contextualizing Christianity is Very Risky

There are great risks involved in attempting to promote a Christianity that is culturally and biblically appropriate. The risk of *syncretism* is always present. Syncretism is the mixing of Christian assumptions with those worldview assumptions that are incompatible with Christianity so that the result is not biblical Christianity.

Syncretism exists whenever people practice Christian rituals because they consider them magic, or use the Bible to cast spells on people or, as in India, consider Jesus just another of many human manifestations of one of their deities, or as in Latin America, practice pagan divination and witchcraft right in the churches, or insist that people convert to a different culture to become Christians. In America it is syncretistic, unbiblical Christianity that sees “the American way of life” as identical with biblical Christianity or assumes that, by generating enough faith we can pressure God into giving us whatever we want, or that we should out of love and tolerance regard homosexuality and even homosexual “marriage” to go unopposed despite clear biblical condemnations.

But there are at least two paths to syncretism. One is by importing foreign expressions of the faith and allowing the receiving people to attach their own worldview assumptions to these practices with little or no guidance from the missionaries. The result is a kind of “nativistic” Christianity or even, as in Latin America, “Christo-paganism.” Roman Catholic missionaries, especially, have fallen into this trap by assuming that when people practice so-called “Christian” rituals and use “Christian” terminology, they mean by them the same thing that European Christians mean.

The other way to syncretism is to so dominate a receiving people’s practice of Christianity that both the surface-level practices and the deep-level assumptions are imported. The re-

sult is a totally foreign, unadapted kind of Christianity that requires people to worship and practice their faith according to foreign patterns and to develop a special set of worldview assumptions for church situations that are largely ignored in the rest of their lives. Their traditional worldview, then, remains almost untouched by biblical principles. This is the kind of Christianity evangelical Protestants have most often advocated, probably out of a fear of the first kind of syncretism. In many situations, this kind of Christianity is attracting some of those who are westernizing. But the masses of traditional people find little or nothing in Christianity that meets their needs, simply because it is presented and practiced in foreign ways to which they cannot connect.

We are to always point to the Holy Spirit (not ourselves) as the Guide while participating with them in discovering His leading.

Though we must be cautious concerning syncretism, there is a middle road that involves deep trust in the Holy Spirit’s ability to guide people and the receiving people’s ability to follow that guidance. We, then, are to always point to the Holy Spirit (not ourselves) as the Guide while participating with them in discovering His leading. We can assure people that the Holy Spirit will always guide them in accordance with the Scriptures. Practicing this approach, missionary Jacob Loewen chose to never answer directly any questions from the new Christians such as, “What should we do?” Instead, he would ask them, “What is the Holy Spirit showing you?” Only after they had struggled with the answer to that question would he participate with them in seeking guidance, and even then his approach was to offer them at least three alternative approaches from which they might choose. In response to this approach they usually developed a fourth alternative that was uniquely their own. If that approach worked they would continue it. If it did not, they felt free to change it in needed ways, since it was their own and did not come with the prestige that often accompanies the suggestions of respected outsiders.



Though the risk of syncretism is always present when Christians attempt to inculturate Christianity, it is a risk that needs to be taken in order that people experience New Testament Christianity. Whether in a pioneer situation or after a foreign brand of our faith has been practiced for years, the quest for a vital, dynamic, biblical, contextualized Christianity will require experimenting with new, culturally and biblically appropriate ways of understanding, presenting and practicing the “faith which once and for all God has given to his people” (Jude 3 GNB). It will especially require attention to what is going on at the worldview level. To this end the insights of anthropologists into culture and worldview can be harnessed to enable us to advocate a Christianity that is truly contextualized, truly relevant and truly meaningful.

### Understanding Culture Aids Contextualization

Understandings of culture and worldview such as those presented above have helped us greatly in our attempts to understand what biblical and cultural appropriateness means. Among the understandings that have come from such studies are the following:

1. God loves people as they are culturally. As we see from the Bible, He is willing to work within everyone’s culture and language without requiring them to convert to another culture.
2. The cultures and languages of the Bible are not special, God-made cultures and languages. They are normal human, indeed pagan cultures and languages, just like any of the more than 6,000 cultures and languages in our world today. The

Bible demonstrates that God can use any pagan culture (even Greek or American) with its language to convey His messages to humans.

3. The Bible shows that God worked with His people in culturally appropriate ways. He took customs already in use and invested them with new meaning, guiding people to use them for His purposes and on the basis of new worldview understandings. Among such customs are circumcision, baptism, worship on mountains, sacrifice, the synagogue, the temple, anointing and praying. God wants churches today to be culturally appropriate, using most of the customs of a people but attaching new meaning to them by using them for God’s purposes. In this way, people get changed at the worldview level as well as at the surface.
4. But God’s working within culture never leaves that culture unchanged. God changes people first, then through them the cultural structures. Whatever changes are to take place in the structures are to be made by the people themselves on the basis of their understandings of the Scriptures and God’s workings in their lives, led and empowered by the Holy Spirit, not pressured by an outsider.
5. Though contextualization within a new culture risks a nativistic kind of syncretism, a Christianity that is dominated by foreign cultural forms with imported meanings is anti-scriptural and just as syncretistic. We are, therefore, to follow scripture and risk the use of receptor-culture forms.

### References

- Kraft, Charles H. *Anthropology for Christian Witness*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1996.  
 Kraft, Charles H. *Christianity in Culture*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1979.

### Study Questions

1. How does worldview affect behavior?
2. Does culture cause any specific actions? Does it influence patterns of thought or action?
3. Why do we seldom question our worldview assumptions?

