

The Clash of Cultures

How to Explain and Evaluate Cultural Differences from a Reformational-Christian Perspective

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Samevatting

Hierdie ondersoek behandel die moeilike probleem van hoe kulturele verskeidenheid verklaar en evalueer moet word. Ter inleiding word dit gemotiveer aan die hand van die huidige behoefte, asook die probleme verbonde aan 'n vergelyking van verskillende kulture. In die tweede plek volg 'n verduideliking (volgens die basiese Bybelse waarhede van skepping, sondeval en verlossing) waarom kulture so verskillend kan wees. In die derde plek stel so 'n benadering 'n mens in staat om kulture regverdig te kan beoordeel sonder om in óf kulturele etnosentrisme óf kulturele relativisme te verval. In die vierde plek word bespreek wat in 'n bepaalde kultuur as aanvaarbaar en onaanvaarbaar beskou behoort te word. Om ten slotte die praktiese waarde van so 'n interkulturele filosofiese aanpak aan te toon, word in die vyfde plek die denkwyses van tradisionele Afrika en die Weste vergelyk om aan te toon hoe veral tersiêre onderwys “geafrikaniseer” kan word.

1. Introduction: The need to reflect on cultural diversity and the problems connected to the investigation

As an introduction the author first has to briefly explore the current interest in comparing cultures in order to concentrate on two key problems.

1.1 Current interest and need for reflection

For thousands of years the world was blessed with a great variety of cultures. But except for more informed people, like travellers and scholars, many people were not aware of the great diversity of ways in which human beings responded to Gods's cultural mandate (Genesis 1:28; 2:15).

1.1.1 Globalisation

Increasing globalisation changed this situation. Very few cultures today develop in isolation. Globalisation implies the spread – all over the world – of Western science, technology, politics and economics. It is therefore a multifaceted process (cf. Van der Walt, 2006:92) and not merely economic in nature. The social, intellectual, moral, religious and cultural life of many nations are also transformed. This has both positive and negative consequences.

Globalisation, furthermore, is not always a peaceful process. Already in 1996 Huntington wrote his well-known book *The clash of civilizations*. Recently Saul (2005) draw attention to the collapse of globalisation. Non-Western countries are not simply accepting Western cultural domination, but reaffirm their own cultural heritage and identities – even in violent ways.

That especially the American so-called “cocacolasation” and “macdonaldisation” of the world is increasingly questioned, is evident from inter alia the following publications by Chomsky (2003, 2005 and 2006), Fallows (2006), Hardt (2004), Shadid (2006), Soderberg (2005) and Suskind (2006). According to the book of Barber (2002), in which he puts Jihad versus McWorld, the rebellion against the market-driven Western world, 11 September 2001 was, amongst other things, an example of the reaction to the expansive drive of American culture. Jacobs (2005) even predicts a dark age ahead.

1.1.2 Different cultures studied for better business

Against this background the interest in intercultural knowledge – both for its academic as well as practical value – is growing. A few examples from a large number of publications may serve as confirmation. Already in 1946 Benedict tried to describe the patterns of Japanese culture. Four decades later the same was done by Hall & Hall (1987). Also to be able to improve business, Saccone (1994:23-70) summarised the typical characteristics of Korean culture. Clotaire (2006) uncovers the “cultural codes” of the Americans as well as other nations to assist the USA in selling its products elsewhere. Also for commercial purposes in South African books like Boon (1996), Christie,

Lessem & Mbigi (1994), Lessem (1996) and Mbigi & Maree (1995) tries to explain the difference between Western and traditional African cultures.

1.1.3 *Relevant in many areas*

Not only the business world realised the need and value of cross-cultural knowledge. To a greater or lesser extent it is happening in all domains of life. Its theological-missiological relevance is, for example, evident in the works of Adeney (1995, especially pages 106-124), Hesselgrave (1991), Hiebert (1998), Mayers (1987) and Lingefelter & Mayers (1986).

One is not surprised that also in reformational thinking interest in this field is growing. Examples are Brugmans (2002) and Griffioen (2003) from the Netherlands. (In Griffioen, 2006 a renewed interest in Chinese culture is also evident.) In different publications Van der Walt (1999, 2001, 2003 and 2006), another Christian thinker, struggles with the cultural differences between traditional Africa and the modern West.

1.1.4 *Unanswered questions*

These examples – from a vast and growing amount of publications – clearly indicates that intercultural understanding and communication has become a topical issue. Is it possible to add something new to the world-wide discussions?

Two important problems are not discussed or not dealt with satisfactorily in most publications. In the first place writers do not explain *why* cultures differ, but simply accept it as a fact. Secondly, they do not deal with the sensitive issue of *how to evaluate* cultural differences, but simply accept their own or the foreign culture as normative. To provide a tentative answer to these two vital questions, and to try to do so from a Biblical-reformational perspective, is the main aim of this paper.

One should, however, be aware of the difficulties and even dangers of such a venture.

1.2 *The risks involved in comparative cultural studies*

Rüsen (2005:267-269) provides a summary of the following dangers also mentioned by many other authors:

- Because intercultural comparison touches the field of cultural identity, it is often involved in a struggle for power and domination. (This is especially the case in respect to Western dominance and non-Western resistance against it.)
- An epistemological difficulty is that every comparison is done in the context of a pre-given culture, viz. that of the investigator or scholar.

- Comparison of cultures therefore presupposes (often hidden) norms. Cultures are measured according to their distance or proximity to such norms. In most cases the norm is one's own culture (ethnocentrism). It is however, also possible to use alternatives in other cultures as normative to criticise one's own culture.
- A typology of cultural differences is methodically necessary as a hypothetical construct, but it should try to avoid the tendency to substantiate or reify cultures, in other words to treat cultures as if they are static units which can be neatly separated from each other.
- To these difficulties mentioned by Rösen should be added the fact that a typology usually stresses the differences and not the similarities between cultures. It therefore runs the risk of oversimplification and overgeneralisation.
- With these warnings as far as possible in mind an attempt will now be made to explain why cultures differ. The answer to this question will also influence the way cultures should be evaluated.

2 Why cultures are different

The emphasis on the Biblical revelation about the creation, fall and redemption of reality is a key element of a reformational worldview (cf. for example Walsh & Middleton, 1984, Wolters, 1985 and Colson & Percy, 1999). These basic concepts (formation, deformation and reformation) can also provide an explanation for the great variety in the cultures of the world (cf. Van den Toren, 2005:2-5).

2.1 The creational mandate allows for cultural diversity

The reformational tradition asks special attention for the so-called creational mandate or cultural mandate given by God to all human beings in Genesis (cf. last section of chapter 1 of Wolters, 1985). In Genesis 1:28 they are instructed to fill the earth and subdue it, and according to Genesis 2:15 they should take care of the garden of Eden. This mandate is not limited to agriculture, but to fully develop creation's potential. It includes all the other aspects of culture such as the creation of languages, simple tools and sophisticated technology, all kinds of human relations, the arts, sciences, etc. Christ's great commission (Matthew 28:19-20) should be understood as a reminder of this original, all-encompassing mandate and not – as often the case – only narrowly as a mandate to proclaim the Gospel “to win souls for Christ”.

God gave mankind clear norms, like stewardship, care, love, etc., but never a precise blueprint to fulfil the cultural mandate. He expects human beings to be creative.

That the creational mandate makes room for genuine cultural variety was not always realised. Westerners for many centuries regarded their own

culture as the only legitimate response to God's command. However, they were not an exception – one's own culture is usually regarded as the norm.

Firstly, cultures are different because of the openness of God's creation to be shaped differently. Secondly, as a result of the great variety in human creativity. Thirdly, because the environment plays a vital role in shaping a specific culture. (Different agricultural practices are examples.)

A careful study of the first eleven chapters of the book Genesis confirms the fact that God's intention was not that there should be only one culture, but the development of many different responses to his mandate. After the flood, Noah's descendants "were scattered over the earth" (Gen. 9:19). In Genesis 10 a "table of nations" is given and it is repeated (10:32) that "the nations spread out over the earth". This automatically entails cultural variation. Because of the different environmental needs different tools, forms of agriculture, languages and social structures were developed.

In Genesis 11 (the tower of Babel) it is mentioned (11:4) that the people rebelled against God because they did not want to be "scattered over the face of the whole earth". God, however, confused their language so that they could not understand each other. In Genesis 11: 8,9 it is repeated twice. "So the Lord scattered them from there over all the earth". What happened at Babel should therefore not only or primarily be understood as God's punishment. He used the confusion of language as a means to pursue his original plan of cultural diversity.

It is clear that God intended the development of different ethnic groups (nations) each with its own unique culture. To this conclusion should however be added that not every form of culture or every cultural practice is acceptable. Already in Genesis 3 the sad story of the fall of Adam and Eve is recorded. They became disobedient to God, rejecting his norms for life. Because culture, in essence, means answering to God's mandate according to his norms (cf. 3.1.3 below), sin deeply affects every aspect of culture. Thus the development of the full potential of creation was stunted.

2.2 Cultural diversity may be a consequence of human sin

The essence of the fall was that Adam and Eve no longer wanted to be God's image (*imago Dei*), or his representative, fulfilling their cultural calling. They wanted to be *sicut Deus*, like God (Gen. 3:5b), gods themselves. This furthermore implies that they rejected God's laws to become autonomous (a law unto themselves). From then on evil and wickedness increased (cf. Gen. 6:4). The fact that the creation has to be developed according to God's norms (clearly given in creational revelation) – to be able to obtain the goal He as Creator had in mind for his creation – was ignored. Finally the people became so corrupt that He decided to wipe them out from the face of the earth (Gen. 6:11, 12).

In the light of creation and fall Van den Toren identifies the following three reasons for cultural diversity: “(1) legitimate cultural variety, that shows the creativity of (man as) the image of God and glorifies the Creator; (2) cultural variety that results from not yet fully attaining the potential of creation; and (3) cultural variety that is a result of lack of respect for the (God) given structures of creation and thus an expression of disobedience and rebellion to the Creator” (Van den Toren, 2005:4).

2.3 Cultural diversity from the perspective of redemption

Apart from the perspectives of formation (creation) and deformation (the fall), cultural diversity can also be viewed from the perspective of reformation (or redemption). As the word “reformation” indicates, humanity’s cultural mandate can again be redirected according to God’s will.

At Pentecost (Acts 2:6-12) different peoples from various regions heard the apostles proclaiming the Gospel in their own languages. It is remarkable that this miracle was not needed for the purpose of communicating the Good News as most, if not all, the Jews and the proselytes from the surrounding countries present on that day could speak the *lingua franca* (Koine Greek) of those days. We, therefore, have to look for a more profound, symbolic meaning behind this miraculous event. In the author’s view it indicated that in the new dispensation the Gospel should be proclaimed, heard and expressed in one’s own language and pattern of thought. Pentecost legitimises the contextualisation of the Good News of redemption and recreation in different cultural ‘clothes’. The Spirit of God acknowledges and respects the cultural diversity as developed during all the previous centuries since Babel. In spite of their unity in faith (cf. Acts 2:42-47), it was not expected from the believers to return to one language as was the case prior to Babel. Without giving up their unique cultural identities, people of all cultures should experience the liberating power of faith in Jesus Christ.

This trend was continued throughout history. For example, the New Testament itself was written in a different language (Greek) than the Aramaic spoken by Jesus and his disciples.

The emerging church first experienced great difficulty to respect the cultural diversity amongst its members. But finally (cf. Acts 15) it was decided that Christians from a Hellenistic cultural background should not be required to embrace the cultural aspects – not even the important ceremony of circumcision – of the Jewish religion.

During the subsequent history the Gospel entered and changed many different pagan cultures: from Jerusalem to Samaria, Ethiopia, Damascus, Antioch, Rome, Northern Europe, North America, Latin America, Asia and Africa ...

That his development of a multicultural Christianity was not simply God's concession to what happened during history is also clear from the book of Revelation. When history comes to a conclusion at the consummation, God will not *undo* cultural diversity. On the contrary, it will be *appreciated* on the new earth: The glory and honour of the nations will be brought into the New Jerusalem (Rev. 21:26). Note that verse 27 adds that nothing impure (sinful) will enter the new creation. Only good cultural products ("the *honour* and *glory* of the nations") will be acceptable. Good culture has eternal value.

Not only will their cultures be accepted, but also the different nations will retain their distinctive identities. Revelation 5:9 and 7:9 mention *every* language, tribe, people and nation.

The conclusion is that the revelation in the creation story, viz., that God loves cultural diversity, is confirmed in his plan for the recreation of the world.

2.4 Summary

On the question why cultures differ the following concluding answer can now be given in the light of the Scriptures:

- because God intended his cultural mandate to be answered in a variety of ways;
- because of the creativity of humankind – during thousands of years peoples developed different gifts to fulfil their cultural mandate;
- because God wanted human beings to develop the whole earth, they experienced different environments and challenges to survive;
- because of the sinfulness of mankind (his disobedience to God's norms) the development of creation can either be one-sided (different cultures over-emphasise different relationships, like the relationship to the self, as is the case in Western individualism, or the relationship to the other, as in African communalism – cf. Van der Walt, 2001: 12-15) or development can be stunted.

As the nature of the human being (as God's representative on earth, responsible for its development) was not changed by the fall, s/he will never stop creating culture. What changed was the direction of his/her cultural activity: it is either done in disobedience or obedience to God's norms. Christ's redemption enables believers to transform culture (Rom. 12:2). The Word of God (cf. above) promises that such a transformed culture will not be in vain – it will become part of the new creation.

3. How to evaluate cultural diversity

The reasons for cultural diversity already provide ways of evaluating it from a reformational perspective. Christians evaluate culture in different

ways (cf. Niebuhr's classic *Christ and culture* (1951) and also recent works like Brugmans, 2002 and Verbeek, 2005:111-120). Apart from the reformational way, we should be aware of how cultures are evaluated when the Word of God is not employed as norm.

3.1 Different ways of evaluation

Two ways of evaluating cultural diversity should be rejected: ethnocentrism and relativism (cf. Griffioen, 2003: 196-201). A critical look at both theories with an alternative follows.

3.1.1 Ethnocentrism

In the past cultural evolutionism placed all cultures on a single line of development, beginning with so-called primitive or simple cultures towards modern or more complex cultures. Proponents of this viewpoint usually spoke about "culture" (singular). Culture, according to them, was not influenced by differences in place and time. Each culture has to climb the developmental "ladder". Western culture was regarded as superior to other cultures, because it was believed to be the most highly developed civilisation.

This evolutionistic viewpoint was also applied to Christianity – it was regarded as the highest religion. Accordingly Christian mission was often viewed as the export of the Western form of Christianity to the "uncivilised" non-Western world.

The implication was a one-sided, Eurocentric way of evaluating cultures: Western culture became the norm according to which every other culture had to be judged.

It should be mentioned that the West not always evaluated "primitive" cultures negatively as something "underdeveloped" or "backwards". Some scholars adhered to a "romantic" viewpoint: Because the so-called primitive cultures represent the original beginning, the ideal of the West should be to return to the state of the "noble barbarian or savage".

Such a perspective, however, boils down to reverse ethnocentrism: Western culture is evaluated according to the norm of (a) "primitive" culture. A present-day Afrocentric reaction against Eurocentrism will also be a form of ethnocentrism and therefore equally unacceptable.

According to both the creation story in the Bible, as well as the prophecies about the recreation, it is evident that cultural diversity *as such* is not something to be lamented or eradicated. God himself did not want us to develop a monolithic culture. Cultural diversity can be something good which enriches us and therefore has to be appreciated. This implies a clear rejection of the different ethnocentric viewpoints.

Griffioen (2003:162), however, makes a distinction between negative ethnocentrism and positive ethnocentrism. The first he describes as follows: when *universal* meaning is attached to a *specific* culture with the result that it is regarded as the *norm* in the comparison of different cultures. Positive ethnocentrism is the natural fact that one takes pride in one's own culture.

3.1.2 *Relativism*

Cultural relativism was a justifiable reaction against cultural evolutionism. Especially cultural anthropologists became aware of the great variety in cultures and accordingly did not speak about "culture" (singular) any longer, but about "cultures" (plural). Cultures should also not be arranged *hierarchically*, from lower to higher. They exist *alongside* each other and are – in spite of great differences – equal in value. This viewpoint is therefore of the opinion that, as each culture is "true" on its own terms, one culture does not have the right to evaluate or judge another. Cultural habits have to be accepted as long as a particular culture condones such practices.

The implication of this viewpoint is that culture – any culture – is above critique. There can be no argument about a statement like: "This is how we behave in our culture". One could only reply by saying: "Obey what your culture prescribes". Such an attitude, however, makes people the captives of their own culture.

Together with the rejection of cultural evolutionism also clear norms for evaluating different cultural customs disappeared. Because it is difficult – impossible – to maintain such a "neutral" point of view, cultural relativism (at least in its radical form) does not have many advocates left.

Today emphasis is placed on the dynamic, heterogenous nature of a culture as well as the fact that, in creative ways, people adapt to different situations. Culture is not regarded as "a thing" (the so-called reification of culture), but as a way of life. All these approaches could, however, not solve the problem of relativism.

The relativist viewpoint is clearly unacceptable to Christians who believe that God's revelation contains "supra"-cultural norms. According to his will human sacrifices, slavery, the burning of widows together with their deceased husbands, the caste system, the pursuit of a "master race", loveless capitalism and many more are wrong, sinful practices. Cultural diversity can only be appreciated to the degree that it confirms to God's norms and his goal for creation. Because of the sinfulness of human beings this is seldom the case.

Even when conduct is labelled as "Christian", we cannot accept every behaviour and practice as a genuine expression of discipleship of Jesus Christ.

3.1.3 *A third way*

According to the Christian anthropologist Onvlee (1973) as well as the Christian philosophers Geertsema (cf. Buijs *et al.*, 2005) and Griffioen (2003 & 2006) human beings are called to answer to God and his revelation. Every culture (not only a culture created by Christians) is fundamentally a religious response to a divine calling (cf. 2.1 above). The human cultural answer has to obey God's norms or principles for different areas of life or societal relationships. Human beings have to positivise or concretise these divine norms according to God's central commandment of love towards Himself and his fellow-creatures (cf. Matthew 22:37-40)

Onvlee (1973:272-3) correctly states that, in spite of the fact that *each* culture is dignified in its own way, *no* culture is so good that it can be accepted as a norm to measure other cultures because of the fact that *no* culture is a fully obedient response to God's norms (cf. Romans 3:10-12).

One should, therefore, clearly distinguish the *divine* norm from the *fallible* ways as is understood by sinful humans. Cultural variety is an indication of the various ways peoples – correctly or wrongly – apply God's norms in their lives.

Such a “third way” of viewing culture provides an alternative to both cultural evolutionism (ethnocentrism) and cultural relativism. It rejects (negative) ethnocentrism, because one is not allowed to judge another culture according to one's own fallible response to God's calling. It also rejects the relativist idea that one should withhold any judgement about culture. Both one's own and the culture of another person have no choice of either obeying or disobeying God's fundamental norms.

3.1.4 *Important distinctions*

From the preceding it is clear that culture cannot be isolated from either one's religious orientation towards God (or an idol in his place) or from the various societal institutions. Mouw & Griffioen (1993:17) and Griffioen (2003:13, 98, 171 and 2006:7) therefore distinguish between the following three kinds of plurality or diversity: (1) the religious (or directional), (2) the structural (or associational) and (3) the cultural (or contextual). These three should be distinguished but can not be separated.

Structural diversity (the diversity of different societal relationships) is an expression of deep-seated religious and worldviewish convictions. Viewed from the side of one's religious commitment, religion shapes the different societal relationships like marriage, the family, school, business etc.

Augustine already indicated this in the following way: Every human being (1) either serves the true God or an idol in his place; (2) human beings look like or bear the image of the God/idol they serve; (3) they create a societal life according to their own image of being human. How societal

life is structured (3), reveals how humans view themselves (2), and ultimately which God/god they serve (1).

Different religions are also the “heart” or motivating force behind all cultures. Also, the reverse is true: religious convictions are shaped by a specific culture.

Summarised: Every ethnic group combines the religious and structural dimensions into a unique cultural configuration.

The religious, structural and cultural dimensions should be distinguished and acknowledged. Cultural relativism, for example, ignores the truth claims of opposing religious directions. (This, of course, does not imply a neutral viewpoint, because relativists believe in their own perspective.)

At the same time the religious element should never be separated from the structural and cultural element; the structural should not be isolated from the religious and cultural aspects; and the cultural cannot be viewed correctly when it is separated from religion and the structures of society.

In a nutshell: in the (1) cultural (2) the structural is opened or developed in (3) different (religious) directions. The cultural is one facet of one’s all-encompassing response to God’s calling.

3.1.5 Cultural diversity evaluated in the light of God’s revelation

Cultural evaluation can take place at different levels: the cognitive, affective and evaluative (cf. Hiebert, 1998:92,93). On the cognitive level (the way people think) it can lead to misunderstanding; on the emotional level (the affective) it could lead to feelings of superiority towards people of a different culture; on the level of values (the evaluative) unnecessary condemnation of another may take place. Evaluating cultures, is therefore, a difficult responsibility.

Because we today live in the time after the fall and Christ’s redemptive work, we experience a mixed situation. On the one hand horrible consequences of the fall are evident. On the other hand clear signs of God’s grace are visible. O’Donovan (2000:15) correctly states: “No culture is best. No culture is right in everything. There are things in every culture that must be rejected by the sincere Christian because they are not pleasing to God. There are also beneficial things which can be learned from every culture”.

Van der Walt (2001: 12-15) also says that in spite of the fact that a specific culture may overemphasise certain aspects of creation or certain relationships, it still contains moments of truth. On the one hand one can be grateful because every culture – also one’s own – contains something good. On the other hand one should be humbled, because every cultural activity – including one’s own – contains defects and has to be reformed in the light of God’s revelation.

To what is clearly good or clearly bad in a culture, Hiebert (1998:1-4) adds a third category, viz. neutral elements. According to him in every culture there are many things which are worthwhile and therefore should not only be retained but also encouraged (e.g. certain cultures's emphasis on good personal relationships). Many things in a culture are neutral and need not be changed (e.g. the different ways in which houses are built or people dress). Since people are sinful, there are, however, also things which are clearly wrong and even sinful, which therefore should change (e.g. the already mentioned human sacrifices, burning of widows, a suppressive caste system as well as contemporary ideologies like secular capitalism).

The question remains whether Hiebert's neutral cultural products can really be regarded as a separate category in one's evaluation of a culture. Different *styles* of housing in different cultures are acceptable. But houses are either built well as safe places to inhabit or built carelessly without their inhabitants's safety in mind. Women can either dress modestly or alluring. In the end we again have two basic categories: good or bad, with in between the two various degrees of good and bad.

4. How to decide what is acceptable in a culture and what not

Dealing with a mixed situation in the same culture and between cultures is clearly not easy; producing clear-cut answers is difficult. The reason is that the spiritual *direction* of a culture (its obedience or disobedience to God's norms) cannot always be clearly *located* in specific cultural behaviour or structures.

4.1 An example

We cannot, for example, simply say that the extended family system in traditional African societies (different from the Western nuclear family, consisting only of a father, mother and children) is the ideal. Neither can we regard it as simply wrong. Depending on different socio-economic circumstances (a rural, agricultural economy or a modern money economy) – the structural element – it can either assist the family or a couple or financially ruin their marriage.

The reason why it is so difficult to decide what is good and what is not, is that since the fall the human heart itself is divided. From this deep-seated origin of all we do (the directional), good and bad permeate every cultural activity. The great apostle Paul bemoans the fact that the good he strives to do does not realise, but rather the bad things he tries to evade.

4.2 Degrees between two limits

In trying to solve this complex issue, Van den Toren (2005: 5,6) distinguishes between degrees with an upper and a lower limit. The upper limit is the ideal situation for which we should aim. "This is a situation in

which all cultural variety ... reflects the rich potential of cultural creativity given with creation and on the other hand respects the structures of creation and the reality of redemption as given by God" (p. 5). The lower limit is decided by asking the question what sort of cultural variation can be accepted that still can be legitimately identified as "Christian".

To explain what he has in mind with his lower limit, Van den Toren employs as an analogy the concept of heresy. Something (a practice or doctrine) is regarded as a heresy when it undermines one's Christian identity, understanding and practice of Christ's redemption. In a similar way Christians have to ask themselves which truths and cultural practices are essential to be called Christian. When true Christian behaviour becomes endangered one has reached the lower limit.

4.3 Difficult to apply Christian norms in the public domain

Van den Toren realises, however, that Christians do not live as individuals in isolation from the rest of society. In their private and ecclesiastical life they may – perhaps – still be able to stay above the lower limit, striving towards the upper limit. But in our growing multicultural, multireligious and secular societies it will be very difficult, if not impossible, to adhere to God's criteria. This problem, according to him, can only be solved in dialogue between the different cultures and religions. Christians and people of other faiths have, for example, to discuss how marriage and family life, the workplace and government have to be organised.

Van den Toren is of the opinion that such an honest dialogue may also be insightful for Christians, because Christians may become imprisoned by their surrounding culture. They may even be reminded by people of other faiths and cultures about the need to respect the God-given order for creation!

4.4 God's creational ordinances as common ground

The basis for this kind of intercultural dialogue is that all ways of organising life are – whether it is acknowledged or not – responses to God's creation ordinances or norms. In his "general" revelation in creation God speaks not only to Christians, but also to every human being, revealing his ordinances for the different spheres of life. Not only Christians, but all human beings can for instance, be aware of the fact that mutual fidelity is the norm for married life, justice the norm for politics (the state), care the norm for family life, that honesty is required in business, etc. From perceiving the (good) order *in* creation we can conclude to God's order *for* creation. (For detail see the clear exposition about God's creational revelation in chapter 2 of Wolters, 1985.)

These divine creational ordinances or structural principles are *constant*. The way in which they are given shape in different cultures usually *varies*.

Stated differently: the human *form* which they acquire in a specific culture should not be identified with the divine *norm*. This fact explains the great cultural variety and also emphasises that it should be positively appreciated (cf. Griffioen, 2003:173). At the same time it reminds every culture that its form (shape) should continuously be reformed according to the divine norm.

People of different cultures will therefore have to decide in dialogue with each other what cultural practices contribute to the opening up of the inherent potential and goal of reality and what cultural concepts and customs rather stunt development or are even destructive.

4.5 Red and green indicators

A different way to explain the situation is the following (cf. Van der Walt, 1999:83). Not only Christians, but most (normal) human beings are able to see which cultural practices cause harm, pain and different other kinds of suffering. (This is not denying the fact that in some cases the influence of a culture can be so strong that such suffering is explained away or regarded as ‘necessary’ or ‘normal’.) Because the aim of God’s creation ordinances (his directions for life) is to enable us to enjoy life in its fullness, suffering usually is an indication that God’s will is not obeyed. (Not ignoring other reasons or propagating the idea that every form of suffering is a direct punishment from God). We can, therefore, regard suffering as red warning signals (having reached the lower limit in Van den Toren’s terms).

On the other hand the flourishing of human well-being – not solely to be identified with economic well-fare – can be described as green lights, signals of God’s blessing, because his order for creation is obeyed (Van den Toren’s upper limit).

4.6 Careful study and sensitive discernment needed

In conclusion it should be kept in mind that the perspectives developed on the preceding pages provide only some very general criteria for the evaluation of cultures. Most cultural ideas and practices can not be compared to either red “stop!” lights or green “go!” lights. They will occur on different levels or degrees, either closer to the ideal (Van den Toren’s upper limit) or closer to failure (the lower limit). Instead of a general judgement (like “this is absolutely beautiful” or “this is totally wrong”), every cultural concept and behaviour should be studied very carefully and be weighed on the scale of God’s infallible directions.

5. Conclusion: not embarrassing, but enriching

The encounter between cultures can be embarrassing and can lead to sometimes even violent conflicts (see Introduction). In the light of the

preceding pages – the fact that God intended cultural diversity to enrich us – the author can not accept these tensions. The difference between them should rather be seen positively as a God-given opportunity for mutual enrichment and empowerment.

The author is furthermore convinced that when one is willing to listen and observe carefully God’s threefold revelation (in creation, in the Scriptures and in Christ) it will be possible to determine which aspects of a culture can and which cannot contribute towards enrichment and well-being as well as the development of God’s whole creation towards its final goal. Studying and evaluating cultures in the light of God’s revelation provides a “third way”, transcending both ethnocentric cultural imperialism and relativism. Obeying God’s will liberates, enriches and empowers every culture!

6. A comparison between the modes of thinking of the West and (traditional) Africa and its application to education

First an overview of the differences between the Western and African ways of thinking will be given. Secondly, its implications for education will be investigated.

6.1 A comparison

Following the contours of the African mode of thought is not easy. There are significant cultural differences between the different ethnic groups and regions in Africa which may not be ignored. Yet it is possible to identify general features and to speak of *African* thought (cf. for example, the schematic comparisons with the Western way of thought in O’Donovan, 2000:21; Wiher, 2003:428-431 and Van der Walt, 2003:187-188).

In African cities especially widespread urbanisation has taken place, so that the original, traditional African way of thought is not found in its pure form everywhere. Different authors, however, point out that traditional thought, in spite of many outside influences, shows a tough tendency to survive.

Furthermore there are many sources (especially anthropological) on (various) African cultures in general, but little on the African mode of thought specifically.

The most important differences can be summarised in key words in the following table (from Van der Walt, 2006:210-211):

THE WEST	AFRICA
A. The aim/direction/focus of knowledge	
1. Scientific-technical control of visible reality	Magic-ritual manipulation of the spiritual world
2. Focused on knowledge of universal regularities	Focused on the individual, concrete phenomena
3. Conceptual direction – concepts are important	Relational direction – relationships are important
4. Knowledge for the sake of better insight in matters – epistemology important	Knowledge for the sake of the right actions – ethics is important
B. The nature of the one who knows	
5. Emphasis on the individual – individual autonomy	Emphasis on the person in the community – socially sensitive
6. Contextually independent	Contextually bound
7. More progressive – open for new ideas	More bound by tradition – less readily accepts new ideas
8. Independent-critical attitude	Inclined to mere reproduction of facts
C. The knowing activity or process	
9. Hearing is important – auditory way	Seeing is important – visual way
10. More rational	More intuitive
11. More intellectual and clinical	More emotional
12. Dualistic – faith and other presuppositions may not play a role in the process of knowing	Integral – presuppositions involved in process of knowing
D. The nature of the object of knowledge	
13. Material things	Spiritual powers and forces
14. Distance between one who knows and object of knowledge	One who knows more involved with the object of knowledge
15. Natural causes and laws that regulate things	The spiritual (supernatural) causes that determine events
16. The object of knowledge seen as more static	The object of knowledge seen as dynamic
E. The characteristics of the result of knowing (knowledge)	
17. Abstract knowledge, distanced from reality	Concrete knowledge, nearer to the object of knowledge
18. Analytically reduced knowledge of subdivisions	Synthetic, integral knowledge in which the whole object and its relations are involved

19. Systematic – organised according to a clear categorical framework to form a pattern or system	Seemingly unsystematic – details not systematically connected according to a logical framework
20. Step-logic: one thought is built logically on the previous with a clear-cut conclusion; more rigid – judgements are either right or wrong; more geared to differences than to similarities	Block-logic: central theme is often repeated without a clear-cut conclusion; more flowing and linked together (and-and style); more geared to analogies and similarities than to differences
F. How knowledge (truth) is transmitted)	
21. Without mincing matters	In a circumspect, indirect way

6.2 Africanising Western education and Westernising African education

This section is limited to only two examples from Africa of which the first emphasises the Africanising of teaching and learning styles, while the second investigation asks attention for the approach that (the more Western) independent analytical thought may not be absent from today's (tertiary) education in Africa.

6.2.1 Africanising of teaching and learning styles

While Earl Bowen (1984) focused more on the learning styles of African students, his wife, Dorothy Bowen (1984) focused on the best teaching styles. Together they published in a popularised form the results of their theses in Bowen & Bowen (1984) and Bowen & Bowen (1986). In her study – to which we limit ourselves in the rest of this exposition – she (1984) strongly emphasises the need for the Africanising of education.

Western education

Although it was well meant, the Western way of teaching (during the colonial period, but also later) did not take into account the traditional culture and mode of thought of the people of Africa. It even clashed with it (cf. Bowen, 1984:2-7). Africans regarded this type of education as too abstract-academic, too much focused on memorisation and geared towards examinations. As a result of strange educational methods they could not give their best either. So Bowen's research attempted to ascertain what exactly the cognitive styles of African students are and to find teaching styles which would be adapted to these.

Cognitive styles and methods of determining them

“Cognitive styles” simply means (cf. Bowen, 1984:20) how one takes note of one's environment, obtain information and create meaning from it.

Many factors are involved in this process, like one's culture, background, one's world of experience and family.

Knowledge of cognitive styles are particularly important in education, for they determine: (1) the interests of learners and students, preferences for certain kinds of reading matter and even choice of occupation; (2) learners's academic development; (3) the best way of learning for students and how teachers/lecturers teach. There are a number of different psychological tests to determine styles of learning.

In two tests Bowen uses the "field-dependent" and "field-independent" approach. She chose this method because in her opinion it is the method most applied – also in teaching (cf. Bowen, 1984:23-26).

The difference between "field-dependent" (fd) and "field-independent" (fi) has to do with how the person acquiring knowledge experiences the field, domain or object of knowledge. A person for whom the subdivisions of the field fuse, thinks 'fd' (in a more holistic manner), while a person thinks 'fi' if he/she clearly distinguishes the subdivisions (therefore thinks more analytically).

An 'fd' person is more dependent on his environment and (external) social relations, while an 'fi' person thinks more individualistically and autonomously. The former is more person-oriented, while the latter is more clinical and task-oriented. It is therefore clear why 'fd' learners are greatly dependent in the learning process on the structuring and guidance of their teachers, while 'fi' persons can and want to learn more independently.

Further it is important to bring to the attention (cf. Bowen, 1984:19, 29, 121) that cognitive styles do not measure the intelligence of learners, but the way they think. Neither does adapting teaching to the learning styles of students mean that the contents of the teaching must change. Only the methods have to change.

Results

Bowen (1984:123) found that 91% of all the African students tested were 'fd'. It is the highest among theological students (97%) while in government schools it is significantly lower (83%). There also are regional differences. West African (Nigerian) students are 100% 'fd', while the East African (Kenyan) students are only 84% 'fd'.

These psychological tests thus confirm the comparative table above (6.1) of the African way of thought. Amongst other things 'fd' points to the following ways of thinking: relational (3), community-oriented (5), bound by tradition (7), reproductive (8), visual (9), closely involved with the object of knowledge (14), concrete (17), synthetic and integral (18).

Recommendations

Bowen (1984:109, 120) therefore cannot accept that African students think and learn in the same way as Western students. In stead (cf. Bowen, 1984: 111-117) she recommends 26 new teaching strategies which join up much better with the Africans's way of thinking and learning. Limited space permit only three examples.

- Since African students think more integrally and holistically, overviews of the work and material to be learnt is valuable to them.
- Linking up with the strong community feeling (communalism) she recommends that individual competition between students is not a good method of teaching. Achievement should not be measured against that of other students, but by impersonal criteria. Students should also be allowed to study in groups as far as possible (e.g. group discussions, group assignments and even group papers).
- Since African students are very much visually oriented, the traditional method of lecturing (just listening) is not ideal. Different types of reading work, the use of an overhead projector, films, videos, slides, illustrations, role play, field work and other concrete experiences are far more suitable and therefore also more effective.

6.2.2 Stimulating independent analytical thought

Buconyori (1991) also uses the 'fd'- 'fi' method for his research and his results agree with Bowen's. He found that 79.24% of the tested students think 'fd' and only 20.58% 'fi'. Once again theological students are more 'fd' (90%) than the students from Christian "liberal arts" colleges who are only 77.58% 'fd'. (What could be the reason? Does it have a connection with the type of teaching, the fact that most theological schools do not stimulate independent thought?) Further it is interesting (once more confirming Bowen's research) that female students are more 'fd' than men. Once more Buconyori's psychological tests confirm the comparison under part 6.1 above.

More critical

Although Buconyori in many respects build on the work done by Bowen, he is more critical. For instance, he tries to adapt his tests better to African students. For, says he (cf. Buconyori, 1991:46), the standard psychometric tests to determine cognitive styles are (1) closely linked to Western culture; (2) consequently 'fi' thinking students are favoured; (3) the tests suppose that people are either 'fd' or 'fi' and therefore cannot test students who are equally strong in both; (4) the tests are also too strictly spatially and physically oriented.

His own contribution

Although Buconyori appreciates the fact that Bowen and others recommend teaching styles which are more suitable to the learning styles of students from Africa, it is his opinion that this is not sufficient to improve the situation in education in Africa. According to him (Buconyori, 1991:179) his predecessors did not indicate what can be done to improve the reasoning faculty of African students. He does not mean that Africans cannot reason, but that they are not strong in independent analytical thought (like Westerners). They are inclined to memorise prescribed matter almost mechanically and reproduce it in tests (cf. Buconyori, 1991:5). They experience difficulty with analysis and critical evaluation to reach logical conclusions (cf. Buconyori, 1991:106).

This state of affairs do not correspond with the main aim of higher education and study, namely to convert learners into thinkers (cf. Buconyori, 1991:50). He therefore formulates the goal of his study as follows: “The purpose of this research was to explore the various ways African students use their minds to think and reason. The ultimate goal was to determine possible implications for better teaching and encouraging reasoning in higher education in general and Christian higher education in particular in East Africa” (Buconyori, 1991: 172, also 94).

This researcher therefore realises that modern education, apart from linking up with the traditional culture, should also stimulate a more Western independent analytical mode of thought. How can this be done?

Practical hints

How can teaching strategies be devised which would link up with the cognitive styles of the Africans and yet promote independent reasoning faculties? Buconyori (1991:173) first says what he means by analytical thought. It is the ability of a student to (1) select the most important fact(s) from among a number of others; (2) integrate it in his current knowledge; (3) draw deductions from it; (4) come to logical conclusions.

From among numerous strategies suggested by Buconyori (1991:185 *et seq.*) to further such a type of thinking, we mention only a few examples:

- Dovetail one’s teaching with the visual orientation of the students without sticking to it.
- Factual knowledge (contents of the learning matter) should be presented in such a way that it does not promote parroting but reflection. The lecturer therefore has to ask many questions and also stimulate his students to formulate their own questions.

- Help the student to focus on the most salient aspects of the subject and identify the real problems.
- Stimulate creativity in the forming of new ideas. But do it by linking up with the communalistic orientation of the students, working co-operatively in groups and not in the form of competition between individuals.
- Analytical thought is also encouraged by classifying the learning matter; discovering differences and similarities; determining relations and patterns; discerning main thoughts from less important ones; not to confuse facts and principles and paying attention to logical order.
- Different ways can be used (like weekly reports, group discussions, class tests and assignments) to see to it that new knowledge is well integrated with existing knowledge.
- Since African students are mostly practically oriented, all the strategies mentioned will be even more successful if they can be led to see what the use of independent analytical thought is.

6.2.3 *Similar changes in Western education*

Different gifts are better developed in certain cultures than in others. These gifts also include the cognitive gifts – the gifts of knowing by means of which people attempt to understand reality and make sense of it. Knowledge of reality may, however, be acquired in different ways (a person *knows* more than that which he can *logically know*), and articulated and transmitted in different ways. The different cultures (from the East, Africa and the West) are a clear proof of this.

Fortunately getting to know is today no longer – not even in the West – in a unilateral manner regarded as listening, reading, memorising and writing by means of language and numbers. Already in the sixties Arnheim (1969) emphasised that thinking requires more than the formation of concepts. It calls for the unravelling of relations, for the disclosure of elusive structures. A work of art is an interplay of vision and thought, of visual thinking.

More than twenty years ago Gardner (1983) already pointed out that we should differentiate between kinds of “intelligence” (maybe rather styles of thinking and learning). Not only people who can work with words and numbers are “intelligent”. People can for instance also learn by means of visual images, bodily action, in an aesthetic manner (music, dance, visual arts, et cetera), by social intercourse and in a technical way. These other types of learning styles do not mean that the person is *less* gifted (intelligent), but merely gifted *in a different way*.

Not so long ago Olthuis in a book with the title *Knowing other-wise* (1997:6) stressed the same point: “Instead of judging that emotions are

subversive of knowledge, or at best irrational urges that need to be controlled by reason, we believe emotions, as emotions, are vital and honourable ways of knowing. Feelings are themselves indispensable thermometers, signals registering how we apprehend, situate and motivate ourselves in engaging the world. There is also tactile-kinesthetic knowing as there is knowing a friend, and, to employ a Biblical idiom, knowing one's wife. In other words reasoning is only one of the ways in which we engage (i.e. know) die world”.

Olthuis (1997:6) continues by saying something of great importance: “Knowing is the multidimensional, embodied, gendered way human beings engage the world in order to situate themselves meaningfully (spiritually) and come close responsibly (ethically) to the different and other. We also know by touch, by feel, by taste, by sight, by sounds, by smell, by symbols, by sex, by trust – by means of every modality of human experience”.

He then proceeds with something even more important: “Knowing by thinking is no better, no worse, than any of the other modalities. Each modality, according to its own style, is an important and indispensable way in which we actively engage the world. In any human act of engagement, all the ways of knowing are reciprocally interwoven, simultaneously present, even when, as the case may be, one of the ways of knowing stands out and marks that particular activity in a heightened way” (Olthuis, 1997: 6).

In a recent book edited by Kok (2005), entitled *Ways of knowing in concert*, the same point is illustrated by different writers from various fields of study. (From personal contacts the author is also aware that a standard feature of John van Dyk's work at Dordt College in the USA is to emphasise wholistic teaching and learning.)

7. Conclusion: a challenge

That which Olthuis and others explain in a systematic fashion (the theory of modalities as devised by reformational Christian philosophers like Dooyeweerd, Vollenhoven and Stoker) was approached in this paper from a cultural-philosophic approach. To get real knowledge of God's creation, we need all the different capacities (functions or modalities) – not merely the logic-analytical. Since in some cultures some of these functions are better developed than in others – and are even over-emphasised – they once more draw the attention of another culture to that which it has neglected.

Mutually acknowledging cultural pluralism is therefore the correct approach. A strictly Eurocentric, or Orientalistic or Afrocentric orientation is no longer appropriate in education in the fast integrating world of the 21st century.

Apart from being mutually *acknowledging* this cultural pluralism should also be mutually *correcting*. If correction can take place in the light of God's Word – which transforms every culture – the result can be even richer and more liberating.

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Key concepts

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Kernbegrippe

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