

Studying the Bible across Cultures: Towards an Intercultural Hermeneutic
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[O]nly when we encounter an-other culture do we recognize the existence of our own culture as distinct; prior to that, we simply assume that our way of life and our interpretative horizon are universal. Not until I am exposed to another culture do I recognize myself as a cultural being, that is, as someone who has a particular way of life; prior to that, I simply assume that my way of life is also everyone else's.

— Virgil Elizondo (1977: 2)

[T]he elimination of the other is the amputation of oneself. — Mantovani (2000: 97)

What happens when Christians who come from radically different cultural contexts read the same biblical text and engage in conversation about its meaning and impact for their lives? When the uniqueness of different perspectives are valued as contributing to the whole, can intercultural dialogue offer a fresh understanding of the gospel as well as possibilities for personal and social transformation? Is it possible for bible study to take place, not only across cultures, but across generations, life experiences, socioeconomic and educational backgrounds?

Recent biblical scholarship—the work of Heidegger, Gadamer, Ricoeur and others in contextual hermeneutics—has led to awareness that perspective, situation and culture play major roles in the way biblical texts are interpreted. There is an intimate connection between the text as interpreted and the community for which that interpretation is made or, as Schussler Fiorenze suggests, “interpretation of” is always at the same time “interpretation for.”¹ Exegesis is inevitably eisegesis.

Within a culture, people occupy different positions on the cultural landscape.² Some people stand so close to each other their views are virtually the same. Others, at a further distance, view the same landscape from very different angles. Because positions differ, perspectives also vary as each person describes the landscape from the unique angle of their own position. These differences in perspective can either be viewed as threatening and a source of potential conflict or a variety of descriptions can be embraced for adding perspectives that enrich and broaden overall understanding.

Perspective is particularly influenced by where a person or culture stands in relation to power and privilege. Within a culture, the perspective of the dominant group is privileged as defining for that culture. Within the global landscape, cultures also occupy different positions of power and privilege. In the global context, Western culture most often represents itself as the defining culture. Similarly, with regards to biblical interpretation, Western culture tends to assume its own approach to interpretation is universal and defining for Christianity. Because those with access to the power are able to promote their particular interpretation as a universal standard, power and privilege play a major role in the construction and dissemination of what is valued as knowledge and truth.

Recently postcolonial biblical criticism has emerged as a way of analyzing the extent to which Eurocentrism has shaped biblical scholarship, too often resulting in exegesis that promotes one particular worldview as universal and superior. Though Western hermeneutical tradition tends to understand itself as culture free, in actuality, its traditions of interpretation have been influenced by Western cultural and historical contexts, as well as by the structure of English and Germanic languages. Kwok Pui-lan, for instance, notes that the emergence of a fundamentalist approach to biblical text coincided with a period of expanding colonialism when Western “Truth” and culture were exported to “primitive” cultures as superior, universal and infallible.³ Similarly, the historical-critical method which has been defining for 20th century Western hermeneutics grew out of a period when objective scientific methods were deemed superior to the myths and superstitions of popular cultures. Both methods tend to be print-oriented and focus around the construct of universal “Truth.” As a result, the bible came to be treated more as an historical document rather than a living document whose meaning is interpreted and thus made new in every time and in each community.

¹ Prepared specially for the CANAAC-CANACOM Joint Assembly/Council meeting in Georgetown, Guyana, February 25-29, 2008 by Elder Dr. Jeannie Choy Tate, Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) delegate to CANAAC.

The Western construct of universal Truth—where one position must be proven superior to another—does not lend itself well to intercultural dialogue for cultures are easily stereotyped and polarized into essentialist extremes. When the Bible engages another culture, it encounters hermeneutical traditions other than those assumed by Western interpretation. Kwok points out that because Chinese hermeneutics, for instance, has historically interacted with a wide variety of religious and scriptural sources, scripture is understood as “more fluid, dynamic and relational.”⁴ Chinese have therefore had little need to portray the written text of scripture as the infallible word of God for it to be considered sacred. Nor have issues like personal salvation, original sin, the infallibility of scripture or the Trinity—theological questions deemed extremely important in a Western context—been a central focus for Chinese philosophy which tends to have little interest in abstract speculation about “Truth.” Philosophically, Eastern culture employs a more both/and approach to interpretation than the Western approach which has been characterized as either/or. Contextual and interactive, the Chinese interpretive model is capable of living more comfortably with tension and paradox.

Though perhaps more Western than Christian, Western hermeneutics has nonetheless set itself as the norm from which other cultures are judged. Approaches to interpretation that reflect different cultural styles and values are likely to be discredited. Thus when missionaries from the West carried Christianity to other cultures to “believe” in Christian dogma usually meant a person also had to believe in Western philosophy and its hermeneutical tradition. Similarly, when non-Western churches attempt to adapt Christian doctrine to their own cultures, they are likely to be denigrated as “syncretists.”

Postcolonial criticism seeks to return the locus of interpretation to local interpretive communities. Honoring the pluralistic and multicultural nature of the world, it respects the particularity of faith incarnate in different cultures and communities. In particular, postcolonial criticism shares a conviction that to read the Bible “from the perspective of the poor” exposes interpretation to a socio-cultural context closer to that in which the biblical text originated.⁵ It also affirms interpretation in the oral-aural tradition as closer to the transmission employed in biblical times. Indeed, both the Old Testament and the events of Jesus’ life were originally interpreted orally and only later written down as text. In an oral-aural culture, meaning is negotiated in the context of interpersonal relationships through face-to-face interaction. This form of transmission was employed by Jesus and was central in shaping his message.

Western culture was to become increasingly print dominant, however, and would move towards an understanding of the written text as infallible, literal and culture-free.⁶ With printed text, meaning is assumed to exist in a relatively fixed and final form which can be read apart from any particular context or interpersonal relationship.⁷ Or, Bradt suggests, “Truth” became “stuffed and mounted on a wall of paper.”⁸ This understanding fails to acknowledge that the process of writing inevitably adds a layer of interpretation and selection to historical events that is at further remove from the initial interaction. Each time a text is read, whether in an early faith community or in a current setting, yet another layer of interpretation and selection occurs. Even with the invention of writing, the oral tradition lives in constant interaction with written texts. Different faith communities, for instance, even within the same denomination, continue today to interpret scripture in relation to their community’s own theological tradition and in light of their current lived reality.

To shift from a Western approach to hermeneutics to interpretation within local communities has its own set of limitations, however. While more likely to be socially relevant and lead to living faith experiences, local communities can also be self-reinforcing in their homogeneity, subject to limited cultural horizons and prevailing ideologies.⁹ Nor are they immune from the power dynamics which force a dominant interpretive perspective onto others—as occurs, for instance, in patriarchal and class oppression.

A relatively new shoot on the hermeneutical tree, intercultural hermeneutics seeks to rectify the limitations of doing bible study in fairly homogenous, sometimes isolated communities. Moving beyond simply being multicultural, intercultural hermeneutics brings together people from different cultures and life experiences to explore what lies beyond their cultural horizon. Intercultural dialogue seeks to create a place of sanctuary, healing and transformation where each person and cultural group brings their own life experience and interpretive perspective in the expectation that these differences will be respected and a diversity of perspectives will not only to be accepted but encouraged. In this process, a dialogue is created between the universal and the contextual, between that which transcends time and culture and that which is incarnate in a particular people and setting.¹⁰

Intercultural dialogue is not however an easy process. Cultural bias comes in many forms and is often

learned unconsciously by non-verbal cues as well as by what is not said or what it is taboo to say. Because the subtle nature of bias makes it difficult and emotional to uncover, an intercultural hermeneutic requires a deeper level of cultural awareness and a different way of interacting. This awareness is more than either cultural appreciation or cultural enrichment—which limit their concern to the products and rituals of culture—are able to supply. Rather than arguing from one's own perspective to prove that another's perspective or position is false, there needs to be a humility that acknowledges the limitations of one's own perspective and an openness to listening to those who are different. This also involves a willingness to risk being vulnerable in the act of claiming the truth of one's own position and experience—particularly if that perspective has been previously marginalized.

Because perspective is particularly influenced by where a person or culture stands in relationship to power and privilege, true dialogue cannot occur without awareness that—where there is difference—there are inevitably power differentials. For the most part, the liberal ideology of multiculturalism has failed to confront the reality that different cultures and populations do not all compete on the same footing. Indeed, as Kwok says, “All voices are not equal and some cultures dominate center stage, with the power to push the rest to the periphery.”¹¹ Even the concept of “inclusivity,” for instance, is a cultural assumption that becomes a bias when universally applied with the intention of overlooking differences or including others into the dominant (European American) worldview.

Because the dominant perspective is assumed to be defining and universal, it is extremely difficult for a person or culture of privilege to be aware that their perspective is not the only perspective. Sampson suggests that, when a person or culture of privilege engages in conversation with an other who is different, the person of privilege is most likely to engage that person only as they have been defined by the dominant point-of-view.¹² The other, their difference either unacknowledged or invisible, is too easily reduced to a stereotypic, homogenous grouping and cast by privilege into the role of applauding audience for the defining perspective. The result is a monologue between the self of privilege and their own definition of reality.

Change and transformation are never easy. Disorientation is inevitable as the sense that one has made of the world and one's faith initially feels threatened by exposure to difference. The power of cultural influence on core beliefs is so great that other understandings feel unnatural, even immoral. Even when cultural differences are intellectually understood to be simply “different,” often the sense remains that something core to one's sense of being has been violated. Protective defenses automatically rise to the fore.

In intercultural dialogue, rather than denying difference or imposing one perspective onto another—either by force or through the power of persuasion—the goal is one of clarifying differences through clear articulation, respectful listening and self-discovery. Cultural differences cannot, and should not, always be resolved. Understanding is always partial and the tension of living with differences remains. Indeed intercultural dialogue fails if it is understood to produce some kind of homogenous “universal” culture. In time, however, as conversation partners learn to trust that their unique social and cultural locations are valued contributions, a more articulated sense of a self and faith evolves, along with an increased ability to contribute more fully to a mutually-shaped conversation.

When each party is able to open to hearing alternative voices and experiences, by contrast, what Buber referred to as a “dialogic third sphere” or a “sphere of between” is created. In this “sphere of between” lies the potential for living interpretations of text and faith that are something more than either party or culture is able to create on their own. Through exposure to other perspectives—whether those of other cultures or those of marginalized communities within one's own culture—change and transformation do occur. Each party becomes a little more of the other but at the same time, more fully one's own self as deeper layers of nuance are discovered in the perception of both the self and the other and the boundaries of identity and community expand. Thus intercultural encounters reveal the cultural self and its influence on faith and understanding in ways that expand Christian community and the biblical text to become a living text continually constructed and re-constructed in interpretive communities.

While we may be unable to fully cross over into another culture, we may still catch a whiff of it and feel a way of life by listening to people talk, observing them greet each other, laugh, and weep, and by participating in their hymn singing and partaking with them in their celebration of the Lord's Supper. – Vroom 2003: 228.

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Endnotes:

1. Fishbone describes this interaction as a “bittersweet tension between traditum (the authoritative text) and traditio (its actualisation). It is the traditio, which keep the traditum alive and gives it vitality. At the same time, the existence of the traditio undermines the authority of the traditum as a revealed text.” Michael Fishbone, *biblical Interpretation in ancient Israel*, Oxford, 1985, 15.
2. Gonzalez, 1996: 16-17.
3. Kwok, 1995: 23.
4. Kwok, 1995: 2, 10-11.
5. Sugithasajah, 2000: 34.
6. The creation of the Biblical canon—in a process that was as much social and political as theological—played a major role in the move away from a more communal oral-aural understanding of making meaning as the Bible became a closed tradition. Because the canon closed at a particular point in history with a limited cultural perspective, voices marginalized at that time—such as the voices of women and those of other cultural traditions—were excluded from the canon (Kwok, 1995: 49). Thus Western culture is able to maintain its cultural dominance in interpreting Christianity. Even with the creation of a written canon, an oral tradition exists side-by-side in constant interaction with written texts and the majority of Christians continue to access the Bible through the more fluid oral, aural, visual and performative methods of transmission similar to those Jesus himself employed.
7. Once Hebrew Law was written down, for instance, it no longer needed to be internalized the same way as oral code. The advantage was that people had more direct access to the moral codes and their interpretation rather than relying on prophets. On the other hand with the evolution of written texts, scribes and Pharisees claimed the authority to interpret the Law and the legal tradition began to calcify and become more remote from the common person (Meyers, 2005: 35, 36, 44).
8. Bradt, 1997: x-xi.
9. Kwok, 2005:22.
10. One project in intercultural hermeneutics, for instance, linked approximately 200 groups of Christians from more than 30 countries with partner groups from other cultures (de Wit, 2002: 19-64). Each group read and discussed the same biblical story. Reports of the discussion were then translated and exchanged between groups. As they explored similarities and differences in perspective, participants attempted to see the biblical passage through the eyes of the other. Later partners exchanged their reactions.
11. Kwok, 1995: 95.
12. Sampson, 1993: 4, 82.