

Cross-cultural Implementation, Complementarity and Development in the Christian School, with specific reference to Contemporary White Australian and Aboriginal Australian Cultural Norms
by Dr. Richard Edlin, Edserv International, March 2020

The Key Question: What might be a fitting context for a discussion about appropriate patterns of cultural interaction and resulting school-based policies, teaching and learning environments, and activities in a Christian school, especially with relation to the majority western culture and a concern for Australian aboriginal culture?

Introductory Instructive Reflection

1. All Cultures are Fallen but the Concept of Culture is Biblically Faithful.

In what we often call the cultural mandate, God gave to Adam and Eve the joy-filled task of populating, naming, and generally exercising lordship over God's creation as good stewards. Creating culture was a good, God-honouring activity.

Sadly, our original parents heeded the evil voice of Satan in their conduct of this task, and culture-shaping, like all other tasks and relationships, is now warped, and will not return to God's fully holy state until Jesus' return.

Nevertheless, the concept of culture is still Godly. Jesus came to earth as a full (but sinless) member of the Jewish culture.

Humanity's abuse of culture cannot deny God's intention for human habitation. In the context of the Creation-Fall-Redemption-Renewal-Restoration biblical metanarrative, one task of God's people today, as we live within our cultural stories, is to understand our cultures, celebrate the good, and reshape the bad into forms that reflect God's created norms for life. Christian education, beginning in the home and extending outwards into churches and schools etc., in that it seeks to challenge young people with a celebration of the lordship of Christ over themselves and all of life, is an important part of that process.

Western Culture:

- a product of Greek Platonic / Aristotelian thinking;
- shaped also by Christian reformational traditions that celebrate concepts such as
 - a personal, knowable, creative, omnipotent, omnipresent, trinitarian divinity
 - an externalised concept of truth
 - the importance of transcendent reality and spirituality
 - the dignity of the family, of work, and of formalised social structures
 - the importance of gender equality (ie valuing women)
 - a commitment to marriage as being between one man and one woman
 - environmental stewardship
 - intellectual enquiry and the value of remonstrance
 - divine orderliness of the seen and unseen world
 - individual property rights
 - a respect for authority and codified laws

- strong commitment to literacy and biblical authority
- re-shaped by post-Christian “Enlightenment” or modernity that
 - rejects the transcendent in favour of dualism, naturalism, and atheism
 - places ultimate hope in a faith commitment to reason and science
 - values learning in formal, classroom, often abstract, factory settings
- re-shaped again by the postmodern disillusionment with utopian modernity that
 - retains a steadily declining commitment to some vestiges of Christian morality
 - responds creatively and competitively to transience and change
 - has descended into individualistic secular humanism, individualistic economic rationalism, and an Age of Bewilderment (=> loss of respect for elders, limited value on relationships...)
 - measures “the good life” and one’s worth by the flaunting acquisition of job, money, and personal material possessions.
 - reflects an individualist, low context culture and learning style (see chart below)

[From Edlin, (2006), *Why We Think the Way We Do*; and also Edlin (2002), *Ethnicity Forming a Learning Community*.]

Aboriginal Culture:

- The Aboriginal universe is basically one in which physical, scientific qualities are less relevant and the world takes on meaning through the qualities, relationships and laws laid down in 'the dreaming'.
- The Aboriginal world is not constrained by time or space. The land is still inhabited by the same beings which were involved in its creation - the spirits of dead people are constantly present. Ceremonies not only re-enact the activities of ancient heroes but also recreate them. English words may be inadequate to describe this historic and contemporary world.
- The value of things lies in their quality and relatedness. In a world made up of objects related through their spiritual essences, rather than their physical properties, counting is less relevant. Aboriginal languages contain very few numbers and have few terms for the objective contrasting and comparison of physical objects.
- Aboriginal society makes an individual's sense of worth dependent upon where he or she can fit into it. Cooperation rather than competition is valued and fostered. This makes contemporary Aboriginal culture ill-suited for the demands of urban, post-modern Australia, as evidenced in much distress and welfare dependency.
- Traditional Aboriginal society was a non-literate society. Knowledge about the land and the means of survival, and about kinship and religion was not written down but was held and transmitted by the older men and women of the society. Learning was then largely a matter of informal observation and imitation of the actions of older people and to a much lesser extent by verbal instruction from those who were older. Much learning was unstructured and took place within concrete contexts. The early education of Aboriginal children was undertaken by those with whom they were intimate and kin.
- Collectivist, High context culture and learning style (see chart below).

[Adapted from Hughes & More (1997), *Aboriginal Ways of Learning and Learning Styles*, AECA Conference, Brisbane

These two brief overviews show that there are some similarities in how western (i.e. modern mainstream Australia) cf Aboriginal Australian culture view the world and education, but also that

there are huge differences as well. One is more influenced by Christianity than the other; neither can claim to be particularly Christian in their contemporary forms or beliefs; one is better equipped for rapidly changing urban lifestyles than the other; one hallows the extended family relationships more than the other as both a primary source of relationship and learning; etc.

Stereotypical Overview

Traditional High context Cultures

1. Establish social trust first
2. Value personal relations and goodwill
3. Negotiations slow and ritualistic
4. Agreement by general trust
5. Motives indirectly expressed
6. Communication is implicit, non-verbal
7. Formal
8. Goal-oriented
9. Emotionally controlled
10. Self effacing and modest
11. Long-term and asymmetrical reciprocity
12. Personal and public relationships often overlap

Low context Cultures

1. Get down to business first
2. Value expertise and performance
3. Negotiations as efficient as possible
4. Agreement by specific, legalistic contract
5. Motives directly expressed
6. Communication is explicit, verbal
7. Informal
8. Spontaneous
9. Emotionally expressive
10. Self-promoting and ego-centric
11. Short-term and symmetrical reciprocity
12. Personal and public relationships are often separate

[from Kalé, S. (2001). *It's a Question of Context*.

2. Cultural Embeddedness of the Gospels – the examples of Matthew and John.

Once again, let's recognise that the concept of culture is not wrong. John wrote about the story of Jesus in his gospel in the New Testament. Matthew also wrote about the story of Jesus in the New Testament. Both narratives are true, but each unravels God's big story differently, in a manner that is appropriate to the contextualised understanding and priorities of the culture being addressed – Matthew to Jews, and John to Greeks.

It is important to recognise that the Holy Spirit's leading of John and Matthew (and of all the other biblical writers in their contexts as well) seems designed not to destroy Greek or Jewish culture per se. The Spirit's leading was designed firstly to express the glorious Christ-centred gospel story in culturally understandable ways, and secondly to urge the transformation of those cultures and their peoples into faithful, authentic, vibrant, hope-filled, interdependent, God-honouring communities in their own particular time and place settings.

3. Bathing Babies

Walsh and Middleton, in their paradigm-shifting book on worldviews, retell Margaret Mead's famous illustration of the patterns of baby washing in Japan compared to baby washing in Canada. In Japan, it is an all-immersion experience, often with the parent or grandparent bathing in the tub along with the child in a strongly bonding experience. This reflects docility, gentleness and dependence. By contrast, bathing the child in the Canadian cultural context is a much more clinical and individualistic experience, focussed almost solely upon enduring the experience to ensure that full hygiene requirements are met. This fosters a perspective of self-sufficiency, efficiency, and solitary dedication to a purpose and express outcome.

The point here is not to emphasise the difference, but rather to just recognise that there is one, reflecting differing cultural values and norms. Each culture probably would judge the bathing patterns of the other as being strange and even unhealthy, but within their own cultural settings, their habits are normal and right.

At this point, we can say that:

- *The concept of culture is not wrong – it is God-given.*
- *Because all people are made in God's image, and because the law of God, and the search for him are inescapable aspects of the human condition (Acts 17: 24-28), all cultures acknowledge some aspects of the character of God.*
- *Because of common grace but also because of human sinfulness, all cultures practise their rights and customs (and their education) in both good ways (i.e. godly faithful ways) and bad ways.*
- *No human culture is inherently Christian. All cultures and peoples (Western and Aboriginal) need to experience repentance and hope-filled regeneration in the light of the gospel story revealed in God's Word.*
- *There are huge cultural differences between the two cultures under discussion here. In the life of the Christian school, some differences will require complementarity (i.e. living distinctly but together); others need to be addressed in an integrated way based upon biblical priorities and the expressed mission and goal of the school.*

Response to the Key Question: All Discussion should be shaped by the Purpose and Nature of the Christian school, with its *a priori* commitment to the Word of God in Christ.

For example, a Christian school I have been working with claims to deliberately reflect and nurture its students in the beliefs and traditions of a Presbyterian, Christian outlook on life, inspiring young people to learn, lead, and serve as they strive for wisdom and excellence together in the context of a Christian worldview.

This particular school's documentation further states that the school community seeks to nurture young men (it is an all boys school) towards human flourishing, who are:

- *Confident, well-grounded men of integrity with a strong sense of identity, spirituality, values, humble masculinity, and character.*
- *Motivated, disciplined and equipped to pursue the art of scholarship as an integral part of a rich and rewarding life.*
- *Principled, compassionate and engaged citizens of their College, their community and their world.*
- *Erudite and wise, with a worldview that acknowledges a respect for the past, a discerning insight into the present, and innovative thinking about the global future.*

This foundation suggests that discussions concerning cross-cultural issues should not start with an uncritical, status quo commitment to either western culture or aboriginal culture. Discussion should start with a commitment to the gospel of Christ and the subsequent guiding principles and beliefs of a Christian worldview, as found in the Holy Scriptures.

Because all education is culturally committed, discussions concerning cross-cultural issues at the school should reflect the context of the school's students, but will screen contemporary cultural priorities through a Christian prism.

Enculturation is, “the process by which an individual learns the traditional content of a culture and assimilates its practices and values.” For the Christian school, enculturation in relation to broader society should be insightful and discerning. For example:

1. the contemporary western cultural tradition for fulfilment through competitive advancement and individualistic materialism is ameliorated by a Christian and relational concern for others, and by fulfilment found in a life guided by an other-centred commitment to Jesus Christ and a robust and stewardly understanding of God’s world God’s way.
2. respect for patterns and beliefs incorporated in western and aboriginal cultural traditions will be recognised but also screened and adapted through the application of a Christian worldview. Consider for example, the issue of the often required “Acknowledgement of Country” that occurs at the beginning of many formal ceremonies in Australia. This oration might focus on the notion of trusteeship for all inhabitants, ancient and modern, but first recognising God as the owner of the land and the responsibility of all of us to use our cultural mandate trusteeship wisely to His honour and glory and to the welfare of all people. Thus, an “Acknowledgement of Country” at the start of Australian Christian school ceremonies might look something like the declaration in the box below

Acknowledgement of Country in an Australian Christian School:

We acknowledge that our wise and loving Creator in His goodness, created and owns these lands upon which we meet.

We acknowledge that the aboriginal people in Australia are ancient stewards of God’s trusteeship of this land and culture, and we offer respect to their elders, past and present.

Together with these ancient custodians, we acknowledge our responsibility today, to appreciate and protect the deep beauty, knowledge, and spirituality that is a necessary aspect of human flourishing.

We commit to examining and critiquing all human traditions, ancient and modern, and to encourage all people on these lands to discover God’s plan for all humankind through His Son Jesus Christ.

We resolve to ensure that the life patterns and enculturation that we adopt in 21st century Australia today and for the future, are constructive, stewardly discerning, and God-honouring.

[Adapted by Richard Edlin from a statement by Aboriginal Christian pastor Rev. Ray Minniecon]

CONCLUSION

In their book (p.7) entitled *Christian Philosophy*, Craig Bartholomew and Mike Goheen report on an incident involving intrepid Scottish Presbyterian missionary Lesslie Newbigin:

Lesslie Newbigin tells the story of attending a major conference on mission, where he was sitting next to an Indonesian general. At a certain point in the conference Newbigin heard the general mutter under his breath, "Of course, the number one question is, Can the West be converted?"

After spending some forty years as a missionary in India, Newbigin and his wife returned to the United Kingdom [in 1974]. In the remaining years of his life, Newbigin did his best to rouse Western Christians from their slumber to attend to the mission on their doorsteps. The problem with culture is that it is like the water the fish swims in: we get so used to it that it appears normal, until we enter a very different culture and start to see that what we assumed was normal and "Christian" is not necessarily so. [We all] urgently need a deep understanding of the culture [we] live in with all its strengths and weaknesses.

Newbigin's reflection underscores the basic conclusion of this paper, in the light of contemporary Australian culture and a Christian school's mission and mandate:

1. The Spirit's leading of biblical writers was designed firstly to express the glorious Christ-centred gospel story in culturally understandable ways, and secondly to urge the transformation of those cultures and their peoples into faithful, authentic, vibrant, hope-filled, interdependent, God-honouring communities in their own particular time and place settings.
2. This foundation suggests that discussions concerning cross-cultural issues in the Christian school should not start with an uncritical, status quo commitment to either Western culture or Aboriginal culture. Discussion should start with a missional commitment to guiding principles and beliefs of a Christian worldview, as found in the Holy Scriptures.
3. This starting point enables Godly principles to be established and then used to critique all actual or suggested inputs/interactions in the life of the school – from whichever cultural perspective – and humbly but confidently agree upon consequential patterns and priorities for the modern 21st century Australian school.



Comparing Christian Education & Mainstream Western Education
[a general reflection, despite being somewhat stereotypical]
Richard J Edlin in collaboration

CATEGORY	CHRISTIAN SCHOOLING	MAINSTREAM PUBLIC SCHOOLING IN WESTERN CULTURES (also some private schools)	COMMONALITIES
Basic Orientation & Moral Compass	Christian – Christ the beginning and end (Colossians 1)	Humanistic & Nationalistic (“the [XYZ country] way”) Enlightenment naturalism w/- observation and reason and the beginning and end point	
Worldview/Religion	Christianity	Secularism	
Goal of Education	Shalom ambassadors	Personal fulfilment	
School Success	Indicated by progress in equipping students for informed, biblically authentic, worshipful, cultural engagement	Indicated by high rankings in external examination league tables (note the emphasis on this in school publications & reports)	
Education Approach and Measurement	Collaborative (exams are important but not determinative)	Competitive (the key is to do well in exams to guarantee one’s future prospects)	
Student Outcomes	Hope-filled, humble, equipped	Autonomous	
Pedagogical Principles	Guided by and responsive to a Christian commitment and understanding of the child; Culturally contextualised	Humanism’s Ideological fundamentalism masquerading as neutrality; Culturally contextualised	
Student Prospects	Equipped to be Christ’s ambassadors in any cultural context	Leaders / cultural elite (“preparing the leaders of tomorrow”)	
Role of the Teacher	Mentors & Exemplars Committed & dedicated	Facilitators Committed & dedicated	
Place of God and the Bible	Key orientator for everything inside & outside of class	Intolerant – they’re irrelevant and must be fiercely excluded from regular classes	
Parental Perspective	Interdependent community	Fee-for-service	
Curriculum Emphasis	Forming then informing	Informing, then forming	
Key Descriptors	God-centred and child-focussed, grounded	Content-centred (positivist) or Child-centred (postmodern), be your own guide	Innovative, rigorous, creative, ICT natives