
Pro Rege

Volume 36 | Number 3

Article 1

March 2008

What's Wrong with Multiculturalism: Christian Scholars and Cultural Diversity

Paul Fessler

Dordt College, paul.fessler@dordt.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcollections.dordt.edu/pro_rege



Part of the [Christianity Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Fessler, Paul (2008) "What's Wrong with Multiculturalism: Christian Scholars and Cultural Diversity," *Pro Rege*: Vol. 36: No. 3, 1 - 11.

Available at: https://digitalcollections.dordt.edu/pro_rege/vol36/iss3/1

This Feature Article is brought to you for free and open access by the University Publications at Dordt Digital Collections. It has been accepted for inclusion in Pro Rege by an authorized administrator of Dordt Digital Collections. For more information, please contact ingrid.mulder@dordt.edu.

What's Wrong with Multiculturalism: Christian Scholars and Cultural Diversity



by Paul Fessler

Next time you teach a class, ask your students, "Are all cultures equal?" If several sharp students respond by asking, "What do you mean by equal?" then clarify the question as, "Are all cultures equally valid? Can you say one culture is better than another culture?" Odds are, most students will say that one can't make those types of judgments. I've found this to be the overwhelmingly dominant response at both Christian and secular colleges where I've taught. It seems that the educational system in the United States (and Canada, for that

Paul Fessler is Associate Professor of History at Dordt College.

matter) has done a very efficient job of convincing our students that all cultures are equal. But is this an answer that Christian academics should embrace?

In our world civilization, Western civilization, or U.S. history survey classes, how should we approach issues of cultural pluralism? In our scholarship, how do we assess different cultures across time and place? Are all cultures equal? If we advocate multiculturalism, then we would have to respond "yes." The word "multiculturalism" seems as if it should fit well with a Christian worldview. Christian historians *should* advocate studying the rich diversity in creation, whether in Western civilization, the Muslim world, or East Asia.

However, our students and the bulk of our constituencies as Christian academics cannot differentiate between the worthy insights of multiculturalism and the worrisome ideology of multiculturalism itself. Many, if not most, U. S. institutions of higher education, for instance, offer courses in "multicultural education" within their education department, or many have offices of multicultural affairs or something similar. The acceptance of this trend is due, in part, to confusion regarding the meaning(s) of multiculturalism. It is my contention that Christian academics and historians in particular should forthrightly challenge the ideology of multiculturalism and lay out a clear alternative for cultural discernment from a distinctly Christian perspective. This task can be daunting and fear-inducing, especially if one is, like me, not particularly attuned to philosophy. Striving to

avoid any sense of triumphalism while advocating a stronger, more robust stand against this ideology has proven far more difficult than anticipated. I pray that I have been generous and charitable in my comments while walking this tightrope. However, it is becoming increasingly clear that if Christian historians do not offer an understandable, comprehensive critique of multiculturalism, our students, our communities, and our readers will be left to either embrace the dominant ideology of multiculturalism of the left or opt for the often closed-minded, triumphalist critiques of the right.

This paper begins by defining multiculturalism as it is commonly understood in American higher education and then examines multiculturalism's supporters and detractors. I will examine how Christian academics have defined (or failed to define) multiculturalism and sought to employ it in their work. Finally, the paper concludes by calling Christian historians to develop and fine-tune a third way, a way guided by a Christian worldview, to address ethnic and cultural diversity in the world today.

Unlike most other influential worldviews and ideologies, multiculturalism does not have a Karl Marx or a John Calvin to provide a systematic framework. It does not have a manifesto or seminal work providing an authoritative definition.¹ Instead, multiculturalism has slowly evolved since the late 1960s out of the culture of protest and radicalism that has become entrenched in higher education as that generation has risen to positions of leadership in the academy.² On campuses, multiculturalism (sometimes known on American campuses as simply "diversity") advocates have increased representation of traditionally oppressed groups (women, ethnic groups, and homosexuals) and created academic departments and revised curricula to help these groups and emphasize their contributions to society.³ Multiculturalism, then, defines human identity and experience through the prism of race, gender, culture and class.

This paper, however, is more concerned with examining the underpinnings of multiculturalism: its underlying worldview. In an article in the *Christian Scholar's Review*, Stephen Davis notes that "a critical assumption of the [multiculturalism] movement is that human actions and beliefs are

controlled by the variables of race, gender, class, sexual identity, and ethnicity. Individuals are products of cultural and social environments; accordingly, all beliefs and theories are determined by the group or groups to which their advocates belong, and the "truth" of those beliefs and theories is relative to those groups."⁴ In other words, postmodern relativism is the dominant component of multiculturalism. Thus, in seminars, courses, and textbooks, multiculturalism in American higher education advocates a notion of tolerance requiring an affirmation of all cultures and lifestyles. This tolerance is advocated because if there is no standard of truth by which one can judge one culture or another, then, following the logic of multiculturalism, all cultures are equally valid, and no judgments can be made.

Many other Christian academics have addressed multiculturalism—especially during the mid 1990s.⁵ While many of the Christian scholars addressing the issue have sounded notes of caution and wariness towards multiculturalism, a spirit of accommodation and approval has predominated. Beginning in the mid 1990s, a burst of scholarship among Christian scholars erupted on the issue of multiculturalism. In 1994, the *Christian Scholars' Review* devoted an entire issue to this subject, with the vast majority of contributors cautiously siding with multiculturalism. In the edited volume titled *Christianity and Culture in the Crosshairs*, which brings together scholars gathered by the Calvin Center for Christian Scholarship, the most pointed criticism of postmodernism and multiculturalism came not from a Christian scholar but from a Jewish one!⁶ Although there have certainly been critiques of multiculturalism from Christian academics, the pattern outlined above typifies the current state of debate at this level.⁷

After Calvin College devoted an entire year (1996-1997) to multiculturalism—the "Multicultural Year"—the Calvin Center for Christian Scholarship produced a volume comprised of the various speeches and discussions on campus during the year. The volume focuses on celebrating diversity and incorporating multiculturalism into Calvin's campus life and curriculum. In one of the papers, David Hoekema does acknowledge (briefly) the necessity that Christian

colleges not just jump on the bandwagon and advocate multiculturalism, but he fails to provide a solid critique of multiculturalism and a Christian alternative. In fact, in an article in his edited work *Christianity and Culture in the Crosshairs*, Hoekema argues, “the conflict between postmodernism and multiculturalism, on the one side, and Christian belief, on the other, has been waged along the wrong lines of battle. Troops have been massed in defense of positions that have no strategic im-

Many other Christian academics have addressed multi-culturalism—especially during the 1990s. While many of the Christian scholars addressing the issue have sounded notes of caution and wariness towards multiculturalism, a spirit of accommodation and approval has predominated.

portance, while possibilities for negotiation and mutually beneficial settlement have repeatedly been spurned.”⁸ Linking “impersonal rationality,” objectivity, and Western civilizations as the equivalent of Christian truth and notion is a misguided notion. We are indebted to Hoekema for emphasizing this key point.

Hoekema elsewhere argues that “as Christians we stand in the cross roads, a parting of the way between faithfulness to orthodoxy and a capitulation to relativism.”⁹ Instead, he calls for Christian academics to foster “cross-fertilization” between Christians and multiculturalists, “with its attendant promise of more abundant and more delicious fruit.”¹⁰ But is this a reasonable proposal? Should

we cross-fertilize with worldviews antithetical to Christian views? I would argue that while we can learn from different perspectives and worldviews, the notion that we can somehow reach a settlement or negotiate with the worldview behind multiculturalism is troubling. In a response to Hoekema, Cornelius Plantinga, Jr., cautions that “the debate over multiculturalism in America has to do not just with inclusiveness...[.]it has to do as well with basic ways of knowing and judging truth, including moral truth.”¹¹

While Christian academics can and should work alongside postmodernist, Marxist, or Buddhist colleagues in a civil and friendly manner, we cannot give away the very foundation upon which our worldview is based. It is not being triumphalist to bring our perspective into the pluralistic mix of modern higher education.¹² Not everything is negotiable; sometimes there is a right and a wrong perspective; sometimes we need to say that something is wrong and stand up against it, especially among other Christians. Accepting dominant academic trends and philosophies puts us on a slippery slope.

In “Multiculturalism and the Christian Historian,” in *History and the Christian Historian*, the late Ed Van Kley rightly notes that Christian historians need to address “multiculturalism” as we head into the twenty-first century. As a historian of immigration and ethnicity, a field of study where multiculturalism remains a pervasive influence, I heartily concur. Still, the question remains as to *how* we, as Christians, should address multiculturalism. According to Van Kley, multiculturalism

embraces not only an *acceptance* of a variety of cultures but also an attempt to understand and respect cultural traditions other than our own in order to better understand our neighbors in this racially and culturally diverse nation and on this shrinking planet. Furthermore we often come to a richer understanding of ourselves, mirror fashion in comparison with other cultures. We may bumble a bit in our attempts to implement this ideal, but in the academy there appears to be a rather wide acceptance of it. Certainly our colleges and universities, however much or little they presently embody the ideal, must prepare the next genera-

tion to live in this multicultural global village (emphasis mine).¹³

Upon first glance (or hearing, as it may be), this definition of multiculturalism does not seem particularly problematic. Van Kley echoes many other Christian historians in noting that studying other cultures in various eras opens up opportunities for greater self-reflection. I would also heartily agree that we must prepare our students to live within a more globally minded society.

If so, *how* should we, as Christian historians and professors, prepare our students to live within that international “multicultural” society? We must help our students build a distinctly Christian worldview to guide how they work, act, and live in and among the variety of cultures and people drawn increasingly closer to our daily lives despite geographical distances. Does that worldview include simple acceptance? Van Kley’s definition of multiculturalism emphasizes an *acceptance* of a variety of cultures but never defines what is meant by *acceptance*. The problem here is that multiculturalism, as defined by most of those in higher education, defines *acceptance* as a relativistic embrace of any and all cultures without value judgments.

For example, how do we judge the Nazi era in German history? By what standards do we make interpretive judgments when discussing it? Are we to avoid judgment (discernment), even with a humble and cautious tone? Do we not as Christians have the moral standards by which to judge cultures that created the Holocaust? Can Christian historians ignore the problems of that society—the immoral consequences stemming from that specific culture—in order to merely focus on distanced causation? In both teaching and writing, Christian historians need to make clear our presuppositions—the basis for our judgments. As we do, we cannot simply embrace the notion of multiculturalism and lightly pass over its presuppositions in the belief that its inherent postmodern worldview offers insights that could benefit Christians. Christians *should* be more aware of the wonderful diversity in God’s creation but only through a Christian understanding of culture and creation, not through reliance on the underlying worldview and ideology of multiculturalism.

Unfortunately, most North American Christians are turning to mainline conservative critiques of multiculturalism.¹⁴ For Christian historians, these critiques are problematic. For the most part, these conservative verdicts start from faulty assumptions—at least faulty from a Christian perspective. People who read such conservative verdicts—especially Christians—will be exposed to analyses that favor a lopsidedly pro-Western, pro-American agenda. Because so many of the vocal critics of multiculturalism are identified as right-wing conservatives, my sense is that Christian academics are hesitant to criticize multiculturalism themselves. After all, what self-respecting academic wants to jump into a debate where superficially, at least, one would be grouped with Rush Limbaugh? No wonder most Christian academics shy away from this debate. Yet this is precisely why Christian historians cannot ignore such issues.

Christian academics writing on this subject thus rightly attack many of the conservative critiques and their pro-Western triumphalism but fall short of providing a substantive critique of their own. For example, Hoekema exerts far more effort dissecting the comments of D’nesh Dsouza (a conservative writer) on multiculturalism than he does offering a Christian critique of this ideology. Many Christians in the United States, especially evangelical Christians, already tend to advocate an over-inflated view of Western civilization and the United States in particular; so critiques such as Hoekema’s are very necessary.¹⁵ Most tend to view America as a Christian nation and, by association, Western civilization as Christian in general. In the eyes of many if not most Christians in the U.S., criticism of either of these cultural heritages can wrongly be seen as criticizing Christianity itself. However, Hoekema fails to present a clear critique of multiculturalism himself. Equally useful and necessary, therefore, would be the crafting of a counter-critique from a clearly Christian perspective.

Even though multiculturalism’s presuppositions and its inherently postmodern worldview are insidious, many Christians—especially those in higher education—tend to shy away from direct criticism of multiculturalism. In “Christianity, Philosophy, and Multiculturalism,” published in

The Christian Scholar's Review, Stephen Davis describes himself as a moderate on multiculturalism. While he sees much that is worrisome in it, he can't go along with the conservative critics on this position.¹⁶ On this point, I agree. That is why it is so crucial to reject the ideology of multiculturalism and put forth a distinctively Christian position. Davis, by contrast, remains optimistic and relatively unconcerned about the notion of multiculturalism. This tone was picked up by one of his respondents, Jeff Jordan, a philosophy professor, who noted that his own experience with multiculturalism is far different in the real world from the optimistic belief of Davis:

While knowledge about other cultures is both valuable and prudent, many of the demands commonly furlled beneath the banner of multiculturalism have nothing to do with learning about someone else's culture. There are ideological demands, which are highly questionable and in need of debate.¹⁷

Failing to repudiate such a worldview/ideology because its most vocal critics would make poor bedfellows is akin to saying 50 years ago, "I can't reject communism because Joseph McCarthy's brand of anti-communism is immoral and disturbing." It is up to us as Christian academics and historians to put forth a counter-vision for how the diversity in creation *should* be viewed and critiqued, beginning from a Christian position. According to conventional wisdom, if one is against multiculturalism, one is viewed as closed-minded at best. Most self-respecting Christian historians want to be seen as progressive, enlightened, and "not like those Christian Right types." As a result, most criticism of multiculturalism has been muted. Multiculturalism needs to be perceived as based on a *competing worldview* to Christianity. The difference is *not* just a matter of semantics. Multiculturalism is *not* a benign or neutral idea.

As Christian historians become increasingly active in higher education, the desire to be seen as respectable can lull many into becoming blind to such ideological threats. Fearful of repeating mistakes in the past where perhaps battle lines were drawn and wars erupted that should have been avoidable, Christian academics since the

1960s have been especially careful to seek points of compromise and dialogue wherever possible. While secular/non-Christian philosophies can offer points of insight to Christian historians, we must be careful not to accept the presuppositions from which some of those insights originate. For example, it is one thing to say that Marx offers insight into the shortcomings of capitalism during the early nineteenth century, and it is another thing entirely to accept the wider philosophical basis from which those insights emerged. In other

*Even though
multiculturalism's
presuppositions and its
inherently postmodern
worldview are insidious,
many Christians—
especially those in higher
education—tend to shy away
from direct criticism of
multiculturalism.*

words, a Christian can argue that Marx had some useful insights, but he shouldn't note that a believer can become a Christian Marxist—it's an oxymoron. Similarly, Christian historians and academics can find value and insight from some postmodern and multiculturalism critiques. They can sometimes bring into relief issues that needed greater attention and focus. Recognizing that contribution, however, is very different from advocating Christian postmodernism or Christian multiculturalism. The very real dangers of postmodernism and multiculturalism cannot be ignored.

Multiculturalism has gone mainstream in the nearly ten years since the last large burst of Christian scholarly writing on this subject. The notions inherent in its underlying worldview permeate Western culture and media. Yet Christian

academics and intellectuals increasingly can be perceived as accepting this cultural trend by seeming to accept the notions of multiculturalism in the fact that we have failed to clarify the situation for our students and readers. The “Christian Right” offers overheated rhetoric on this subject. It also advances notions that tend to conflate the U.S. and Christianity while making Western and American values synonymous with Christian values. For many Christians, embracing a carefully nuanced approach to multiculturalism seems the better alternative to being linked to such critiques from the right.

Using a term pregnant with multiple and distinctly opposite meanings can be confusing—to ourselves, our students, and our readers. If we do not inform our audience of the problematic presuppositions inherent in multiculturalism as it is generally understood in the wider academic, social, and political arenas, we are not serving our students and readers well. For example, virtually all education departments granting masters degrees to our graduates will use the term *multiculturalism*, a term and concept that Christians should find highly problematic. How will and do our students react? If they have not received preparation regarding the pitfalls of multiculturalism and training to develop a distinctly Christian alternative, our students will probably accept the views of their graduate professors and further internalize the lessons of multiculturalism.

However, a number of Christian intellectuals and academics continue walking this ideological tightrope without making clear distinctions between underlying worldviews and treatment of people from other cultures. We, as Christian scholars and historians, have an obligation to teach these distinctions to not only our students but also laypeople (non-academics) faced with these often bewildering debates. These are the “non-intellectuals” whom Christian academics should serve—our students, the general public, our congregations. Rather than giving in to the overheated rhetoric on either the right or the left, Christian historians need to craft a solid critique of multiculturalism and popularize a better approach to different cultures and religions without accommodating either of these extremes.

In order to craft a Christian alternative to multiculturalism, we can turn to Christian scholars and historians (including those who tend to downplay the problems of multiculturalism as outlined above) who have already laid strong foundations and arguments.¹⁸ Applying these resources to a firm critique of multiculturalism, we can begin answering questions vital to Christian historians and their audiences: How can Christians study other cultures and societies across the chasm of time? If Christians reject the relativism of multiculturalism, how should we frame our study of other cultures? How can a Christian definition of diversity be clearly differentiated from the secular term currently employed? How do we make discerning historical judgments while remaining tolerant and accepting of our neighbors? What kinds of judgments or discernments should we make as historians?

Bobby Fong and Caroline Simon, in their introduction to the issue of *Christian Scholars Review* focusing on multiculturalism, offer a useful starting point from St. Augustine:

This heavenly city, then, while it sojourns on earth, calls citizens out of all nations, and gathers together a society of pilgrims of all languages, not scrupling about diversities in the manners, laws, and institutions whereby earthly peace is secured and maintained, but recognizing that, however various these are, they all tend to one and the same end of earthly peace. It therefore is so far from rescinding and abolishing these diversities, that it even preserves and adopts them, so long only as no hindrance to the worship of the one supreme and true God is thus introduced.¹⁹

Fong and Simon carefully note that Augustine does not emphasize diversity as “an absolute value; cultural practices must foster earthly peace and must not hinder the worship of God. Augustine’s is a stirring vision: unity which does not homogenize; differences which are not decisive.” As long as one realizes and emphasizes the fact that Augustine’s notion of diversity is *far different* from the modern, multiculturalist definition of diversity (a notion downplayed by many of the Christian scholars noted above), we have a good starting point as Christian historians. Here lies part of the answer

to our conundrum. We need to reclaim diversity from the postmodern multiculturalists.

Richard Mouw and George Marsden point out several problems with multiculturalism for a Christian. Richard Mouw argues that God does not like all kinds of diversity—especially those of competing value systems and worldviews:

Is the Creator also disturbed by this kind of pluralism? [competing value systems and worldviews] If we take the Bible seriously, then we really have no choice but to say that he is—that God doesn't like this kind of diversity.... God disapproves of the pluralisms of ideologies...[.] either your view of reality and goodness is God-centered, as laid out in the Bible, or it is not.... If it places something or someone else at the center, it is idolatrous.... This does not mean that idolaters have nothing to teach us.²⁰

In multiculturalism, for example, the labels of race, gender, and culture define the ultimate expression of human identity, a notion not compatible with a Christian view of human identity.

In multiculturalism, for example, the labels of race, gender, and culture define the ultimate expression of human identity, a notion not compatible with a Christian view of human identity. Likewise, fellow historian George Marsden has noted that contemporary society tends to

view people as objects, consumers, numbers in a computer, abstract classes, as workers, industrialists, conservatives, radicals and the like. The Christian on the other hand should insist that these abstract and scientific classifications are in a sense illusory, that true knowledge of other persons must involve an affective dimensions. We see persons as

creatures of God, created in his image, to be valued individually. We attempt to value not only those like ourselves, and not only the rich and the powerful, but also the weak and the oppressed.²¹

This is one of the problems of multiculturalism: it is reductionist. The philosophy of multiculturalism inherently views individuals as primarily part of a group—that's what defines them. A person's skin color, ethnicity, or lifestyle choice defines that person. Mouw points out that while these labels of "race, gender, culture, and class" can be useful, they do not touch upon matters of goodness and Biblical principles: "being a Swedish-American rural woman from Minnesota doesn't 'weigh' more or less on the scales of truth and goodness than being an African-American inner-city man from Memphis. Questions of truth and goodness come in only at the worldview level."²²

So then how should we make judgments? Can we make judgments—even at the worldview level? How should we as Christian historians make judgments while still adopting a stance of "acceptance," as Van Kley noted? First, Christians need to clearly define tolerance when lecturing, writing, or talking with others. In today's world, tolerance has come to resemble G.K. Chesterton's definition that "...tolerance is the virtue of the man without convictions."²³ S.D. Gaede, provost at Gordon College, helpfully notes that "The fundamental assumption [of multiculturalism] is that it is good to be tolerant of different ideas and different perspectives...[.] because all cultural perspectives are equally valid, every idea of perspective ought to be included. Indeed to be exclusive about truth (to assert that one can distinguish between truth and error) is bad, while to be inclusive of all truth claims is good. The *raison d'être* of multiculturalism becomes tolerance."²⁴

Tolerance as defined by Richard Mouw, in his work *Uncommon Decency*, and other thoughtful Christians is often rejected by adherents of multiculturalism. Mouw's work focuses largely on interpersonal relations and the role of civility—how to deal with those who disagree with us on an individual basis, for the most part. Following historians' time-honored tradition of taking ideas, we can use Mouw's ideas as a starting point for examin-

ing the study of cultures and civilizations—both historical and contemporary. Mouw points us in the right direction on how to address these issues. He notes that “civility cannot mean relativism. All beliefs and values are not on a moral par. When we show kindness and reverence toward people with whom we disagree about important issues, it cannot be because we don’t care about the ultimate questions of truth and goodness.”²⁵

Christian historians, though, must not underestimate the problem of disentangling cultural diversity from worldview/value-system diversity. In part, this is the task of Christian historians at the start of the twenty-first century. Christian historians should clearly affirm the necessity of studying the Muslim world, for example, but need to do so while making careful judgments and discernments. We need to help our students, readers, and colleagues discern what is good—God-honoring and God-centered—in that culture from what is not. This is an extraordinarily difficult task we have set before us. The ideology of multiculturalism, however, clearly wants us to avoid this disentangling. In fact, it deplores precisely this type of approach.²⁶

We clearly cannot reject Christianity’s claim to uniqueness—this is the starting point for Christian historians addressing this issue. Multiculturalism (and its inherent relativism) categorically rejects Christianity’s claims of truth and authority. We must clearly acknowledge this reality and transmit it to our students and our readers. We *cannot* compromise on this issue. We *cannot* say that Islam or Buddhism or Mormonism is as equally valid as Christianity. Of course, we cannot then advocate the notion that Western civilization—closely intertwined with Christianity for much of its history—is “good” merely on the basis of this association and that Muslim societies are necessarily “bad.”

Is making such judgments part of our task as Christian historians? Should a historian worry about judging cultures? George Marsden insists that Christian historians need to critique, sometimes implicitly and sometimes explicitly, the dominant worldviews that guide debate and insight. In our age, one of the most influential false ideologies is multiculturalism. Following this line of reasoning, we see that exposing the ideology

of multiculturalism and its inherent relativism to the “transforming values of Christ” is part of our job.²⁷ We should not acquiesce to views of human culture that are reductionist and relative, such as multiculturalism. Christian historians play a role in exerting judgment in our interpretations as historians, argues Marsden:

Using as our norms the stands of Christian moral and spiritual values, Christian historians will inevitably give more approval to some historical acts and events than to others. Constantly we will be making such when we appraise man’s cultural achievements or expose his culture religions. Continually we will be suggesting standards for human relationships of which we approve and those of which we disapprove. . . . Inevitably we must evaluate their [human beings’] ideals and actions in terms of the revealed standards for man’s proper relationship to God.²⁸

More recently, Marsden has commented upon the contemporary postmodern notions guiding much academic discussion in the United States today. The predominate notion is moral relativism:

[I]f considerations about God are a priori eliminated from consideration, then the accounts of human morality that make the best sense are those that posit that they have evolved as survival mechanisms. Moral standards are constructed simply to serve various cultural interests. It follows, then, that no moral standards are absolute. Rather, they are to be valued only insofar as one approves of the cultural functions they perform. Yet there is no independent standard for evaluating cultural functions. All we are left with is our own interests and our own preferences. Some sort of moral relativism seems the only consistent option. . . . [Christian scholars] will insist principles of morality originate with God. God has provided humans with a moral law which, however imperfectly we may understand it, should be our guide. Cultural constructions of morality are thus not in principle equal. Some are closer to what God commands and some are further away. One may need to be modest about making judgments on many fine points. On the other hand, Christians should see themselves as working within a uni-

verse of God-created laws in which some acts are simply wrong.²⁹

Marsden wisely cautions that such judgments should be made in a loving spirit, not with a tone of condemnation. Christian morality, the basis of our judgments, should be about love, sympathy, and understandings. We can apply these judgments in a historical fashion so as to better understand our own culture and to teach our students how to respond appropriately.³⁰ Thus, the position outlined above should not be viewed as a form of militant Christian triumphalism but as a necessary, firm stance that should be taken with humility and resolve.³¹

On what grounds, then, can we approach the study of obviously non-Christian civilizations such as the Ottoman Empire or ancient Athens? The answer, I believe, emerges from the Reformed (Kuyperian) doctrine of common grace. Abraham Kuyper, developing a doctrine long present in the Reformed tradition, starts from the key notion that God is Lord of all creation and life, not just of the Church. Thus God, not Satan, is in charge of the earth, ruling fairly and lovingly over both the saved and unsaved.³² According to this approach, there are two kinds of grace: special (or saving) grace and common grace. Special grace is the grace by which we receive salvation through Jesus Christ. Common grace, by contrast, is God's gift to all of creation. Common grace curbs the effects of sin throughout creation in order to allow prosperity and goodness to exist in all cultures and in all places—regardless of whether or not that culture or society is Christian. As a result, every culture and society, as part of a creation whose activities have been touched by common grace, is worthy of study by Christians. And all cultures and eras are fair game for criticism from a Christian perspective, as well—including Western civilization.³³

Let's return to the original questions posed at the beginning of the paper. Are all cultures equal? Can we judge different cultures? The ideology of multiculturalism, with its postmodern relativism, affirms the equality of all cultures and societies. Guided by this ideology, a historian could not engage in evaluating different cultures across time and space because such discernments and judg-

ments would be invalid and not within the realm of an historian's task. Diversity, as defined by multiculturalism, is the ultimate reality and goal, whereby people and societies are defined by categories of race, gender, and class. This reductionist worldview cannot mesh with the goals of Christian historians. Instead, Christian historians need to proclaim that while all cultures and societies may not be equal in morality, cultural practices, and products, they *are* all equally worthy of study and examination. Defining diversity from a distinctly Christian perspective, Christian historians value cultural differences and diversity in creation but not absolutely. Christians have the duty to discern which cultural practices and products are God-honoring. Therefore, while all societies will have at least several cultural, artistic, or societal expres-

*... Christians historians
need to proclaim that while
all cultures and societies
may not be equal in
morality, cultural practices,
and products, they are all
equally worthy of study and
examination.*

sions and contributions that are God-honoring, some societies will reflect such God-honoring, biblical norms far better than will others. How is this possible? The doctrine of common grace provides the most useful framework from which Christian historians can examine a wide range of cultures and societies across time. Thus, we can and should study the Muslim world or ancient Mesopotamia, not merely to understand non-Christian societies and worldviews better but because these societies, as part of creation under the sovereignty of God, can offer valuable gifts and insights to Christians of all ages. By discerning these insights through the prism of biblical norms, Christian historians

can approach the full spectrum of historical fields without incorporating the problematic ideology of multiculturalism.

Endnotes

1. See Peter Wood, *Diversity: The Invention of a Concept* (San Francisco, CA: Encounter Books, 2003).
2. George Marsden, *The Outrageous idea of Christian Scholarship* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 36.
3. Stephen Davis, "Multiculturalism, Christianity and Affirmative Action: A Response," *Christian Scholar's Review* 25, no. 4 (June 1996): 430.
4. Stephen Davis, "Christianity, Philosophy and Multiculturalism," *Christian Scholar's Review* 25, no. 4 (June 1996): 394-5.
5. Among the other insightful studies not examined here in greater detail, see Richard Mouw and Sander Griffioen, *Pluralisms and Horizons* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1993); Ronald Nash, *Worldviews in Conflict: Choosing Christianity in a World of Ideas* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1992); John W. Cooper, "Reformed Apologetics and the Challenge of Post-modern Relativism," *Calvin Theological Journal* 28 (1993): 108-20; and D.G. Hart, "The Incarnation & Multiculturalism" at ModernReformation.org (www.modernreformation.org/mr94/novdec/mr9406multiculturalism.html)
6. Jacob Neusner, "Christmas and Israel: How Secularism Turns Religion into Culture," in *Christianity and Culture in the Crossfire*, eds. David A Hoekema and Bobby Fong (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans and the Calvin Center for Christian Scholarship, 1997), 51-65.
7. Though many of these works focus primarily upon issues of theology and evangelization, the issues raised and debated are extremely useful for Christian academics exploring issues of multiculturalism and postmodernism. See Sherwood Lingenfelter, *Transforming Culture: A Challenge for Christian Mission* 2nd edition (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1998); Roger Lundin, *The Culture of Interpretation: Christian Faith and the Postmodern World* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1993); Timothy Phillips and Dennis Okholm, eds, *Christian Apologetics in the Postmodern World* (Downer's Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 1995), Dale Soden and Kathleen Storm, "How Firm a Foundation: Postmodernism and the Multicultural Agenda," *Christian Scholar's Review* 24, no.4 (June 1996) .
8. David Hoekema, "Introduction," *Christianity and Culture in the Crossfire*, eds. David A Hoekema and Bobby Fong (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans and the Calvin Center for Christian Scholarship, 1997), 3.
9. Hoekema, "Introduction," 11.
10. Hoekema, "Introduction," 11.
11. Cornelius Plantinga Jr., "Multicultural Openness and Victimization: A Response to David A. Hoekema," in *The One in the Many: Christian Identity in a Multicultural World*, ed. Thomas R. Thompson (Maryland: University of Press of America, 1998), 63-64.
12. George Marsden, *The Outrageous Idea of Christian Scholarship*, 32-37.
13. Edwin Van Kley, "Christianity, History, and Multiculturalism," in *History and the Christian Historian*, ed. Ronald A. Wells (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1998), 235.
14. Among the best of these critiques are James Davison Hunter, *Culture Wars: The Struggle to Define America* (New York: Basic Books, 1991); Alvin J. Schmidt, *The Menace of Multiculturalism: Trojan Horse in America* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 1997); and Peter Wood, *Diversity* (San Francisco: Encounter Books, 2004).
15. Hoekema, David, "Cultures and Communities of Higher Learning: Riding on the Bandwagon of Nonconformity," in *The One in the Many: Christian Identity in a Multicultural World*, ed., Thomas R. Thompson (Maryland: University of Press of America, 1998), 51-62.
16. Jacob Neusner, "Christmas and Israel: How Secularism Turns Religion into Culture," in *Christianity and Culture in the Crossfire*, eds. David A Hoekema and Bobby Fong (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans and the Calvin Center for Christian Scholarship, 1997), 51-65.
17. Jeff Jordan, "Paved with Good Intentions," in *Christian Scholar's Review* 24. 4 (June 1996): 430.
18. Should we even use the term multiculturalism—or should we use another term like cross-cultural studies? Or are we just playing a game of semantics? I'm not sure how to answer that myself. I lean towards employing an alternative term in the interest of clarity. If we do use the word "multiculturalism," though, we need to lay out explicitly the ways in which we define it.
19. Marcus Dods, trans., *The City of God* (New York: Modern Library, 1950), 696, as quoted from Caroline J Simon and Bobby Fong, "Introduction to the Theme Issue Christianity and Multiculturalism," *Christian Scholar's Review* 25, no. 4 (June 1996); 391.
20. Richard Mouw, *Uncommon Decency*, (Downer's Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 1992), 77-78.
21. George Marsden, "Common Sense and the Spiritual Vision of History," in *History and Historical Understanding*,

- ed. Ron Wells (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1984), 64.
22. Mouw, *Uncommon Decency*, 77.
23. As quoted in S. D. Gaede, *When Tolerance is No Virtue: Political Correctness, Multiculturalism & the Future of Truth & Justice* (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 1993), 27.
24. Gaede, *When Tolerance is No Virtue*, 37-38.
25. Mouw, *Uncommon Decency*, 143.
26. Mouw, *Uncommon Decency*, 77-78.
27. Marsden, "A Christian Perspective for the Teaching of History," 33-34.
28. Marsden, "A Christian Perspective for the Teaching of History," 47-49.
29. George Marsden, "What Difference Might a Christian Perspective Make," in *History and the Christian Historian*, ed. Ronald A. Wells (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1998), 17.
30. George Marsden, "A Christian Perspective for the Teaching of History," in *A Christian View of History*, eds. George Marsden and Frank Roberts (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1975), 49.
31. Richard Mouw, *Distorted Truth: What Every Christian Needs to Know About the Battle for the Mind* (New York: Harpers and Row, 1989), 144-148.
32. See Abraham Kuyper, "Voorwoord," in *De Gemeene Gratie*, vol 1, as cited in Abraham Kuyper: *A Centennial Reader*, ed. James Bratt (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1998), 166.
33. For a much more detailed and readable description of the common grace doctrine, see Richard Mouw, *He Shines in All That's Fair* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2001).