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Beauty of Diversity and the Problem of Multiculturalism

Abstract

A biblical view of diversity celebrates all of God's people from all different ethnic groups as the image-bearers of God.

Keywords

diversity, Christianity

Disciplines

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Comments

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The Beauty of Diversity and the Problem of Multiculturalism



“Are all cultures equal?”

When I ask students this question, a sharp student will usually respond by asking, “What do you mean by equal?”

“All right,” I’ll say, “as Christians, can we make judgments regarding societies? Can we judge whether a culture’s practices are God honoring and reflect biblical principles?”

Overwhelmingly, students—whether in high school or college—will argue that we shouldn’t make these types of judgments. Some students will argue passionately that it is discriminatory to judge someone else’s society. Many even believe it is wrong to judge their own culture and its practices. In part, this is the legacy of multiculturalism.

Multiculturalism is seemingly everywhere—championed by denominational leaders, corporate boards, and school systems. Nearly all teacher education and social work programs, including those at Christian colleges, require a course in multicultural education. Even though this ideology is coming under scrutiny in Europe, it is continuing to spread across North America—including Christian schools.

What is multiculturalism? In part, it is an ideology that celebrates the diversity of cultures (especially traditionally oppressed groups) and emphasizes their contributions to society. This is the part of multiculturalism that is compatible with a Christian worldview. This is what many well-meaning Christians highlight when advocating multiculturalism. We cannot, however, ignore the less well known, but problematic worldview at the heart of multiculturalism. It is also reductionistic and relativistic.

Multiculturalism is reductionistic. Diversity, as defined by multiculturalism, reduces human beings to categories of race (ethnicity), gender (or sexual orientation), and class. While some of these characteristics can be useful and good, Richard Mouw, President of Fuller Theological Seminary, points out that they do not deal with deeper meanings, “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” (77). Rather than placing God at the center of reality, multiculturalism places humans at the center. Mouw further notes that God does not like all kinds of diversity—especially those of competing value systems and worldviews: “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” (77–78). By defining human beings in such narrow terms, multiculturalism reduces our office as image-bearers of God, which brings unity to our beautiful diversity (for example, race, ethnicity, and gender) under God.

Multiculturalism’s worldview is also relativistic. Its moral relativism breeds a worrisome version of tolerance. The “tolerance” of multiculturalism affirms all cultures and lifestyles. If there is no standard of truth by which one can judge one culture or another, then, following the logic of multiculturalism, all perspectives and worldviews are equally valid and we cannot make judgments regarding right and wrong along biblical principles. While multiculturalism, like other secular worldviews, can sometimes bring into relief issues that need greater attention and focus, the very real dangers of multiculturalism cannot be ignored.

Clearly, we cannot reject Christianity’s claim to uniqueness. We cannot say that other worldviews are as equally valid as Christianity. Rather, we must help our students learn how to be discerning Christians, who are constantly judging their own society and other societies and peoples from a loving, biblical perspective. We cannot advocate the notion that Western civilization—closely intertwined with Christianity for much of its history—is “good” merely on the basis of this association, or that non-Christian Asian societies are inherently “bad.”

Compare multiculturalism’s relativism to biblical models of behavior. Jesus modeled behavior profoundly different from multiculturalism’s tolerance; he demonstrated community, accountability, as well as love for every person (regardless of their gender, ethnicity, or wealth) because God created them. Accountability and community involve loving discipline and wise judgment. While scripture warns against being judgmental and hypocritical, it also calls us to wisely judge between what is right and wrong. Just as Jesus told the rich young ruler uncomfortable truths about his lifestyle and culture, we cannot be afraid of being discerning Christians in a fallen world.

Christian educators have the challenging job to develop such discernment in students. Students must learn to sort out the cultural practices and worldviews that are God-honoring and follow biblical principles and those that do not. A biblical view of diversity celebrates all of God's people from all different ethnic groups as the image-bearers of God. Although all societies and people have at least some cultural, artistic, or societal expressions and contributions that are God-honoring, some societies will reflect biblical norms better than will others. Thus, we can (and should) study and critique the Muslim world or ancient Mesopotamia, because these societies, as part of creation under the sovereignty of God, can offer valuable gifts and insights to Christians. By discerning these insights through the prism of biblical principles, we can better champion the wonderful diversity of creation without having to incorporate the problematic vision of multiculturalism.

Diversity is a great gift from God. However, we need to articulate a distinctly Christian approach to diversity rather than passively accept the often troubling mainstream definition framed by multiculturalism. The varied races, ethnic groups, and people in the world today are a good and blessed gift from our Lord. Our human diversity echoes the diversity that we see in the rest of the natural world that God created as a good thing. Diversity is a critical part of God's plan; his saving work will be effected by his image-bearers from every nation and people around the globe, not only by those of us in North America—or, more specifically, Dutch-American Calvinists in West Michigan (despite how much this German-Lutheran turned Calvinist has grown to love them and *oliebollen*)! People of different cultures and ethnic groups are advancing the kingdom in ways North Americans can't in places like Kenya, Uruguay, China, and Korea.

Christian teachers and school boards—not ministers or politicians or bureaucrats—need to take the lead in developing a Christian approach to diversity in the classroom. When the issue of multiculturalism comes up, we cannot merely parrot secular models. Nor should we take the seductive, easier path of staying quiet and avoiding such hard decisions and difficult debates. Multiculturalism, along with our own sinful inclination, encourages us to avoid such potentially contentious discussions, especially when issues of race, ethnicity, and gender are involved. Christian educators, from elementary teachers to college professors, need to develop a Christian view of diversity with humility, patience, and love. As Mouw notes, “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” (143).

Works Cited

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