

Hermeneutics as cross-cultural encounter: Obstacles to understanding

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Abstract

It is a curious fact that while most people intuitively understand the potential for misunderstanding in face-to-face cross-cultural conversations, no such difficulty is anticipated when reading cross-culturally. Thus Westerners automatically assume they can read the Bible without taking account of its origins in an ancient Mediterranean culture that was sharply different to anything in the modern West. This article will describe the problem and then explore six major obstacles to cross-cultural communication (written as well as oral) that play a role in Western attempts to read a Mediterranean Bible. While a number of other significant obstacles could be cited, those addressed will suffice to make the point that it is time for Western scholars to acknowledge that the peculiarities of our cognitive style, language and mode of communication create disconnects with biblical texts of which we have simply not been aware.

Traffic signs in the American city assume that drivers need directions on how to get to certain destinations. For instance, in Washington, DC drivers can pick up directional signs miles distant from the destination. Directions are given by signs placed where drivers must make a choice between two or more alternative routes and again where they will inform drivers that they have made the correct choice. The principle of giving directions to an airport seems clear enough, but consider the situation in a Japanese city where signs are posted according to a different principle. In Tokyo, drivers on their way to the international airport find that the road is marked for the airport only after the last point of choice is behind and the only possible destination up front is the airport.

(Milton J Bennett & Edward Stewart, American cultural patterns, Yarmouth, ME: Intercultural Press, 1991, p. 38)

1. INTRODUCTION

Baffling. There must be something wrong with the Japanese – or so it would seem to most westerners. But of course such cross-cultural disconnects have

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become the stuff of legend and nearly every traveler who has spent sufficient time in another culture has a stock of similar stories to tell. Cross-cultural communication is fraught with so many difficulties that in recent years a cottage industry has emerged aimed at sensitizing western diplomats, business people, exchange students and the like to the problems of intercultural communication.²

A curiosity here is that while there is widespread recognition of the problem in face-to-face cross-cultural encounters, it is less often recognized, especially by westerners, that the problem exists in written communication as well. On reflection it should seem obvious that cultural disconnects in writing would be as likely as those in oral speech, but the western (and especially American) tendency to trust the transparency of written words has a long history in our culture (Bennett & Stewart 1991:45-60).

That said, the claim that westerners like all other people, read the Bible with culturally conditioned eyes is probably news to no one – even if we do not always get the full import of that insight. At one level we know that the Bible is not in fact a western book, that it was not written by, for, or about Americans, and yet recent biblical scholarship remains filled with examples of what happens when western scholars tread this ground unawares.

To understand fully what is happening we need also to ask about the other end of the conversation: what goes on in western minds that blocks or confuses the messages being articulated by biblical authors? What accounts for our persistent projection of ourselves and thus our inability to read as ancient Mediterranean people did? And even more pointedly, what accounts for the near total inability in American churches to understand that the Bible is not a justification for American cultural values? In other words, why is this so intractable a problem? ³

² Literature, training courses, websites abound. Note especially the *Journal of Intercultural Communication*, the *European Journal of Intercultural Communication* and the many publications of Intercultural Press.

³ It is unfortunately true that the capitalist obsession with wealth that dominates American culture is regularly legitimated by the use of the Bible in American Church. Witness the recent popularity of the *Prayer of Jabez*. Individualistic achievement, personal problem-solving, affirmations of self-esteem, an entrepreneurial style and a host of other peculiarly American ways of thinking and doing find ready justification in American preaching, all with the solemn assurance that we are practicing a biblical way of life. The fact is that it still has not dawned on many American preachers or readers of the Bible that the Bible was not written about “us”. And in spite of our fondest hopes, it is not a warrant for the baptism of American cultural values.

2. THE SCOPE OF THIS STUDY

It would be far beyond the scope of this paper to list all of the possible obstacles to cross-cultural communication.⁴ The matter is simply too complex and the variations on every obstacle too numerous to try to recount them all. So instead, what we propose is to sample various types of roadblocks that plague cross-cultural communication in order to make the case for thinking more carefully than we have about the *persistence* of ethnocentric interpretation and therefore the way the peculiar western style of communication contributes to the intractability of the problem.

A humorous example can be found in a recent publication of the Jesus Seminar, *The Five Gospels: the Search for the Authentic Words of Jesus* (Funk & Hoover 1993). They use the following translation (from their "Scholars Version" of the five Gospels) of Jesus' statement in Mt 6:22-23:

The eye is the body's lamp. It follows that if your eye is clear, your whole body will be flooded with light. If your eye is clouded, your whole body will be shrouded in darkness. If, then, the light within you is darkness, how dark that can be!

The commentary then states the following:

It was a common view in the ancient world that the eye admits light into the body (a commonsense notion). A clear eye permits the light to enter the body and penetrate the darkness. Light symbolizes good; darkness evil.

(Robert Funk & Roy Hoover 1993:151)

That both this translation and the attendant commentary are misguided is not at all difficult to demonstrate. The notion that light comes into the eye from the outside was not in fact a common view in the ancient world, indeed Plutarch (*Quaest Conv 680F*) tells us exactly the opposite:

⁴ Obviously the most important obstacle to cross-cultural communication is simple cultural ignorance. In fact we could argue that trying to understand the "other" in cultural and social terms is simply the sine qua non of responsible hermeneutics. But there is much more to this story.

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For odor, voice, and breathing are all emanations of some kind, streams of particles from living bodies, that produce sensation whenever our organs of sense are stimulated by their impact In all probability the most active stream of such emanations is that which passes through the eye. For vision, being of enormous swiftness and carried by an essence that gives off a flame-like brilliance, diffuses wondrous influence.

Or again, when commenting on the ancient belief in the evil eye, Plutarch (*Quaest Conv 681D-E*) says:

Envy, which naturally roots itself more deeply in the mind than any other passion, contaminates the body too with evil... When those possessed by envy to this degree let their glance fall upon a person, their eyes, which are close to the mind and draw from it the evil influence of the passion, then assail that person as if with poisoned arrows; hence, I conclude, it is not paradoxical or incredible that they should have an effect on the persons who encounter their gaze.

The point is that the ancients understood light to issue *out from the eye* and not penetrate into it. As Jesus says, “The eye is the lamp of the body.” Lamps do not receive light, they emit light. Sirach (23:19) reminds us that this is even true of the eyes of God: “... the eyes of the Lord are ten thousand times brighter than the sun.” Thus the idea of light entering the eye was anything but a “commonsense notion” in the ancient world.

In addition, lack of “clarity” of the eye (as the translation above would have it) is not really the issue in the Jesus saying at all (the Greek reads: ἐὰν δὲ ὁ ὀφθαλμὸς σου πονηρὸς ᾖ). Rather it is the eye’s capacity as an active agent to cause injury to others. As Plutarch indicates, that kind of injury is the result of envy in the heart that is projected outward through the eyes and onto its victim like a stream of poisoned particles. Such a glance can damage whatever it hits.

Of course one could claim that perhaps Funk and Hoover did not know about the evil eye and thus their statement in the Jesus Seminar translation/commentary was the result of cultural ignorance. However that is not quite the whole story. An extensive article on the evil eye and the way it functioned in antiquity was published by John H Elliott in *Foundations and Facets Forum* (1988:42-71). It offered a clear and full explanation of evil eye belief and provided ample documentation, both ancient and modern, from around the world. That Elliott article, which appeared well before the

Funk/Hoover volume cited above, was edited by none other than Robert Funk. As Jesus put it, “Do you have eyes, and fail to see? Do you have ears, and fail to hear? And do you not remember?” (Mk 8:18).

The point is that it is nearly impossible for modern Americans to believe that light coming into the eye is anything but a commonsense notion held by all people everywhere. Like most people, we are prone to what Laray Barna (1998:337) has called the “assumption of similarities” – an unwarranted belief in the universality of things (see more on this below). Thus we cannot conceive of an intelligent person holding Plutarch’s view. However cross-cultural studies have identified sixty-seven contemporary cultures in which belief in the evil eye persists (Elliott 1988:45). It is anything but rare or odd. In fact it persists yet today in cultures throughout the Middle East.

Embedded in this tale, therefore, is a clue that opens up the focus of the current inquiry. Cultural awareness of the “other” is only half of the equation when it comes to cross-cultural communication. Cultural *self*-awareness is equally essential if we are to understand why Americans (like all other peoples) so persistently project themselves onto the language and thinking of others. Unless we know what is peculiarly American about the way we think and speak, and how it differs from the cognitive habits and communicative style of other cultures, we are not likely to understand why we cannot accurately hear what they say (or write) even when cultural knowledge of the “other” is readily available to us. In spite of our fondness for our own culture and its way of thinking/doing, the fact is that it is peculiar. It is not shared by the vast majority of those around the world and was never envisioned by those who wrote the Bible. Like it or not, they did not speak American.

Our main task, then, is to explain why cross-cultural miscommunication persists in spite of our growing knowledge of the cultural world of the Bible. What obstacles are in the way that we cannot seem to get around?

3. OBSTACLES TO UNDERSTANDING

At a rather simple and basic level, studies of cross-cultural communication indicate that when the familiar guideposts that allow people to proceed without conscious thought are missing, as they are in many cross-cultural situations, they tend to rather quickly substitute markers from their own culture. They assume that their own ways are normal, natural and right, and therefore project their own sense of things onto the situation as a simple means of finding their way (Bennett & Stewart 1991:3).

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No doubt something like that is probably at work in the example from *The Five Gospels* cited above. The familiar, the “commonsensical” (in an American mind), has replaced the unfamiliar, the belief in the evil eye, in order to make the text intelligible to American readers.

But the problem really goes much deeper than that. There are in fact a whole series of characteristically American perceptions, values, cognitive habits and styles of communication that are getting in the way. Each in its own way contributes to the persistence of cross-cultural misunderstanding and each filters what Americans hear when they read the Bible.

Obviously a full list of the various obstacles to cross-cultural understanding is beyond the scope of this paper. The matter is exceedingly complex. Nonetheless a brief look at six of the more important factors that contribute to the intractability of the problem will perhaps be an adequate base from which to make the point.

- **Language availability**

Language itself is a factor in the persistence of our cultural self-projection. Studies of intercultural communication have demonstrated that sensory data that cannot be named are not noticed. Moreover, it is only availability of language that enables distinctions. Thus Trukese (a Micronesian language) and Tarahumara (a Uto-Aztecan tongue) do not possess separate words for green and blue. One word covers both (ocean color). As a result speakers of those languages typically cannot distinguish the two colors as precisely as the typical speaker of English (Bennett & Stewart 1991:27, 47).

In the same way, a number of Asian languages, including Japanese, have highly elaborated designations for the second person singular that signal status distinctions between speaker and listener. To speak Japanese with someone requires a decision about which form of the personal pronoun to use. Thus forced with constantly making this language choice, speakers of Japanese are tuned into the status distinctions in ways American are not. (Bennett & Stewart 1991:49).

Also well known is the fact that German offers speakers two forms of the second person pronoun (Sie, Du). The appropriate choice depends on the social distance between persons in a dialogue. Thus Americans who prefer informality in all forms of speech, and who are not forced by their language constantly to choose between Sie and Du, lack German sensitivity to social distance.

As far back as 1956 Benjamin Whorf (1956:221) argued for what he called the “linguistic relativity” principle in which users of different grammar are

directed to different observations and end up with different views of the world.⁵ English for example, does not distinguish between second person singular and second person plural pronouns. The term “you” stands for both. Thus English speakers have difficulty seeing that 1 Cor 3:16-7 (“Do you not know that you [ὑμεῖς] are God's temple”) refers not to individuals but to the Corinthian congregation as a whole. The natural tendency in an individualistic society that lacks language to make the distinction between second person singular and second person plural is to assume that it refers to individual believers. The lack of available language is therefore a significant factor in what listeners notice and understand in the speech of others.

- **Identity maintenance/threats**

Cultural, group and personal identity are always involved in any kind of significant communication (Collier 1994:39; Ting-Toomey 1999:267). That is because speech creates, specifies and projects identity. Positive and negative evaluations of the “other” and the fear of positive or negative reinforcement of one’s own identity thus have a strong impact on the way people understand what is being said. Identity threats, if recognized, or even suspected, often lead to either the (1) rejection of the other, (2) the projection of stereotypes onto the other or even (3) the projection of characteristics of one’s own identity that are imagined to be universal.

William Gudykunst (2003:116) notes that the “more important the group identity the stronger the tendency to treat the outgroup as having uniform characteristics.” Thus to Israelites “Cretans are always liars, vicious brutes, lazy gluttons” (Tt 1:12). Strong ingroup identification also leads to the view that outgroups are not like “us” and therefore represent a threat. Should dissimilarity be detected in the way others speak, such negative views are easily reinforced.

For our purposes it is most important to recognize that perceiving an outgroup as dissimilar creates a tendency to dislike them (Gudykunst 2003:116). Since modern Christians almost by definition should “like” the original followers of Jesus, we cannot risk imagining they were strange or too unlike ourselves. We sense intuitively that should they turn out to be quite different, Christian and American identity would be in fundamental conflict. It therefore becomes psychologically (and theologically) necessary to see early Christians as proto-Americans. In this light it is not difficult at all to see that the incentive in American churches to view Christian faith as a baptism of

⁵ For a review of the controversy over the Whorf hypothesis, see Gudykunst (2003:55-56). Research indicates that Whorf’s view operates more clearly on the grammatical level than on the lexical level.

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American cultural values is incredibly powerful. Americans Christians simply cannot risk a Christianity that would threaten to disconfirm American identity and create a dislike for the actual people who followed Jesus.

Put simply, we project ourselves onto New Testament characters, including Jesus, in order to find them compatible. We feel affirmed and acceptable to God if the followers of Jesus were like us. Witness the delight with which western capitalists “find” homespun capitalism on the lips of Jesus in the parable of the talents.⁶ Never mind that capitalism did not exist in the aristocratic empires of antiquity. Never mind that investment is a modern invention or that ancient markets were anything but “free”. We need it, so we find it. And if we can find it in the teachings of Jesus, so much the better. That is theological self-confirmation par excellence.

- **High and low context communication: Field-independent /field-dependent**

A critically important contrast in styles of communication is that between high and low context societies. Edward T Hall (1994:79) describes the two this way:

A high context communication or message is one in which most of the information is either in the physical context or internalized in the person, while very little is in the coded, explicit, transmitted part of the message. A low-context communication is just the opposite; i.e., the mass of the information is vested in the explicit code.

Using Hall’s work, Bruce Malina has demonstrated that the New Testament is in fact a high context document.⁷ That is, it presumes a high knowledge of the context on the part of the reader and explains very little. By contrast, the typical low context documents of American culture explain whatever context is needed for understanding and do not presume it is known by the reader ahead of time. Note that the difference between these two types of societies is not in the importance of context, but rather in whether the speaker can presume the listener knows the context ahead of time and does not need it spelled out.

On reflection it should be obvious that small-scale, homogeneous, face-to-face societies in which there is very little social or technological change over time would be high context societies. In such places contextual

⁶ For the evidence that this is a misunderstanding of the story see my article, “A peasant reading of the parable of the talents: A text of terror?” (Rohrbaugh 1993:32-39).

⁷ New Testament scholars were first introduced to the work of Edward T Hall on “high” and “low” context societies by Bruce Malina (1991).

knowledge is widely shared and rarely changes. Spelling it out would be tedious and redundant. Large-scale societies, however, in which there are innumerable sub-cultures, pervasive specialization, rapid social and technological change and anonymous social relations inevitably require speakers/writers to explain the context or background for whatever they mean.

Larry Samovar and Richard Porter (1994:23) list four major differences in the communication expectations of high and low context societies. First, low context societies take verbal messages to be the heart of the matter and do not learn how to discern information from the environment. Second, high-context people suspect the credibility of low context speakers. Third, non-verbal clues are critically important in high context cultures. And finally, in high context cultures speech is minimized. The multiplication of words draws suspicion. Note the comment of Jesus: "When you are praying, do not heap up empty phrases as the Gentiles do; for they think that they will be heard because of their many words" (Mt 6:7). The main problem here for readers of the Bible, then, is that we do not know what we do not know. The spare descriptions of context in the Bible often leave us without the essential ingredient for understanding the message.⁸

Closely related to this notion of high and low context communication is what Devorah Lieberman (1994:179) calls "field-dependent/field-independent" communication. If high context societies expect listeners to know the context and low context societies expect to have to spell it out, nonetheless in neither type of society is context always given the same level of importance.

Field-dependent speakers assume that words, messages, context, emotional factors and the relations between speakers are all inextricably intertwined. Abstraction is not their style. Instead they stick with context as the key to meaning. Research shows that it is collectivist cultures that are predominantly field-dependent in their style of communication. That is because speech, like identity, is understood to be a collective phenomenon. It is completely dependent on the color and character of the social relations in a given situation.

⁸ Nowhere is this truer than in our understanding of parables. The current consensus view of parables is that they are something like open-ended, extended metaphors that force the reader to arrive at conclusions of his/her own. That may or may not be accurate, but of course the missing piece is knowledge of the context. If we knew all about the setting in which these stories were first told perhaps we could get the point in the fashion a high context person would expect. But lacking it, and more importantly, lacking the sense that context is "mutually non-detachable" (to use Hall's term) from the meaning of a parable, we arrive at conclusions that often bear no relation to an ancient context whatsoever. That this "consensus" is often little more than a means of freeing ourselves from the constraints of context in order to import congenial messages of our own creation is not hard to see.

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It is individualist cultures that are field-independent in their style of communication. Field-independent persons tend to abstract ideas from contextual messages and arrange them in linear, cause-effect sequences. They de-emphasize the emotional or relational aspects of the communication and thereby see context as of lesser importance.

In other words, cultures differ markedly in the relative importance of context in their style of communication (Hall 1990:79). A story reported by Bennett & Stewart (1994:165-66) illustrates the matter:

An American student listens with growing impatience to a Nigerian student, who is responding to a simple question about his religion with several long stories about his childhood. Finally, the American breaks in and makes her own point clearly and logically. The American evaluates the Nigerian negatively as being stupid or devious (for talking "in circles"). The Nigerian evaluates the American as being childish or unsophisticated (for being unable to understand subtlety). The American urges the Nigerian to state his point more clearly, and in response the Nigerian intensifies his efforts to provide more context.

Nigerians assume that the conclusion, the "point," will be obvious if enough is known about the context. Since the American lacks knowledge of the Nigerian context, that is the information the Nigerian seeks to provide. Of course had the Nigerian been speaking with someone from his own high-context culture the stories about context would have been unnecessary. But that is not the point here. The point is that what the American student wanted is the ideas abstracted from the context in typical field-independent style.

Where we get into trouble is when field-independent persons try to abstract the meaning from field-dependent communication. Doing so inevitably changes the meaning even though the listener has no intention of doing so. Since abstraction is a common habit in the individualistic cultures of the West, especially in Christian theology, we are often completely unaware how we change the meaning of biblical texts in the very process of deriving our theology from them.

- **Individualism/collectivism**

The differences between collectivist and individualist societies are also well-known to New Testament scholars.⁹ Collectivist cultures produce a dependent

⁹ See Malina & Neyrey (1991:67-96). For the use of the concept in interpreting a biblical text, see Rohrbaugh (2002).

sense of the self as if the group *is* the self. Individualist cultures produce an independent sense of the self that remains detached. Collectivist cultures focus on community, collaboration, tradition, group values, group loyalty and group honor. Individualistic cultures focus on individual rights, personal privacy, opinion, responsibility and autonomy, freedom, self-worth and self-expression.

The result is that persons from these two types of cultures often have great difficulty understanding each other. In fact specialists in intercultural communication usually see the individualist-collectivist divide as the primary dimension of intercultural communication difficulties (Stella Ting-Toomey 1999:66; Anderson et al 2003:77). Recognizing that America is probably the most individualistic culture that has ever existed and that the culture out of which the New Testament came was far over at the collectivist end of the spectrum, we should not be surprised to find miscommunication between them.

Not only do persons in these two kinds of cultures communicate differently, they also hold different expectations of what is important in the communications of others. Individualists notice what pertains to self-independency or, if they cannot find it, adapt what they do find to fit that value. The widespread expectation in American Christianity that Jesus is the solution to *personal* problems and theologies about Jesus as “personal” savior provide an example.

Collectivists by contrast would be more likely to assume that Jesus articulates the characteristics of a group-dependent self and offers one membership in his group on the basis of loyalty, conformity and the suppression of independent thinking. Should American Christians discover that this is what Jesus was really like, it would be hard not to imagine a growing dislike for New Testament followers of Jesus and a perceived threat to the American value of the individual.

A closely related aspect of individualist expectations is the American approval of merit rather than status. We celebrate character and identity by pointing to achievements, assuming these to be unique to each individual. Collectivist cultures, however, celebrate status rather than achievement. As a result they are attuned to status indicators in ways Americans are not and use ascriptive language when describing persons.

Similarly, individualist cultures often fall into what Cookie and Walter Stephan (2003:115) call the “fundamental attribution error”, that is, the western “tendency to attribute the behavior of others to internal traits.” Psychology becomes the explanation for human behavior and the focus of western descriptions of persons. Psychology is imagined to explain nearly

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every behavior westerners observe. Collectivist cultures, however, attribute behavior to external causes and situations. Psychology is irrelevant. For them it is context that explains the motivations for human behavior.

The extensive psychologizing of western biblical interpretation provides an example of ethnocentric confusion on this point. A title like the following by Jack Dominian (1998) says it all: *One like us: a Psychological interpretation of Jesus*. Other recent examples include: Anthony Bash (2001:51-67), *A psychodynamic approach to the interpretation of 2 Corinthians 10-13*; Michael Reichardt (1999), *Psychologische Erklärung der paulinischen Damaskusvision? Ein Beitrag zum interdisziplinären Gespräch zwischen Exegese und Psychologie seit dem 18. Jahrhundert*; Martin Leiner (1995), *Psychologie und Exegese: Grundlagen einer textpsychologischen Exegese des Neuen Testaments*; John A Sanford (1993), *Mystical Christianity: A psychological commentary on the Gospel of John*; Gerd Theissen (1987), *Psychological aspects of Pauline theology*.

- **Unwarranted assumptions of human similarity**

A common assumption, alluded to above, is that there is sufficient similarity among all people everywhere that communication should not be difficult. The result is often a failure to recognize self-projection when it occurs or to believe that communication difficulties are real.

A simple gesture such as a smile can be an example. Americans assume it to be a universal gesture of friendliness. It is not. In a number of Asian cultures a smile at a stranger is either rude or an indication of sexual deviance. Tears, especially public tears on the part of a male, have a very different connotation in Middle Eastern culture than they do in the West.

Many assume that basic biological similarities or perhaps the universal need for food, shelter, and the like, provide a basis for common patterns of communication. The problem of course is that the cultural expressions of these fundamental human needs are so varied that even communication about the basics is fraught with difficulty. Laray Barna (1998:337) has argued, for example, that "... there seem to be no universals or 'human nature' that can be used as the basis for automatic understanding." He argues we must "treat each encounter as an individual case, searching for whatever perceptions and communication means are held in common and proceed from there." Barna's conclusion is that seeking out the "cultural modifiers" in expressions of basic need is a strategy that offers hope, whereas unwarranted assumptions of human similarity only confuse the matter.

Of course westerners often assume not only that such universals exist but also that they can be abstracted from the biblical writings in the form of theological or ethical ideas.

- **Cognitive style**

Cognitive style, or what Devorah Lieberman (1994) has called “ethnocognitivism”, is another factor that has a major impact on the communication styles of different cultures. The term simply refers to the thought patterns or habits of mind that dominate a given culture. The subject is enormously complex and it is beyond our scope to recount it fully, but the impact can be illustrated with a few important examples.

In their study of the peculiar ways of thinking that have emerged in western culture since the industrial revolution Peter and Brigitte Berger and Hansfried Kellner (1974) have demonstrated that certain ways of living become “carriers”, to use their term, for certain cognitive styles. By this they mean that institutionalized processes or groups can create the conditions for, transmit, nurture and reinforce particular habits of mind. If, for example, the technological mode of production and a problem-solving habit of mind tend to go together, and they do, we could speak of the technological mode of production as the “carrier” of that particular cognitive style.¹⁰ In the same way bureaucracy is the carrier of a taxonomic mentality. The mode of living and the cognitive style it carries thus form what Berger, et al(1974) call a “package.” If you get the one you tend to get the other.

Of course not all carriers have exactly the same force. Some are simply more potent than others. But the point is that some carriers – the technological mode of production and bureaucracy being the most important – are so fundamental that the cognitive styles they nurture cannot be “thought away.” Try as we might, the problem-solving mentality cannot simply be “thought away” from the technological mode of production. It is inherent, and therefore has become one of those persistent perceptions westerners invariably project into cross-cultural dialogue.

¹⁰ The style of work which characterizes the technological mode of production is heavily rationalized and is structured in ways that differ sharply from those of earlier eras. Most striking is its mechanistic, a term Berger et al (1974) borrow from Thorstein Veblen. The work process itself has machine-like qualities that render actions in it reproducible and measurable, and indeed mechanomorphic metaphors used in all areas of modern life derive directly from it. It thus serves as a social location for habits of thinking that follow machine-like patterns. In the words of Elizabeth Sewell, the method of the machine “constructs the mind at the same time that it constructs the constructions of the mind.” Or to put it somewhat more cautiously, the technological mode of production provides the occasion for habits of mind to develop that are closely correlated with the production process itself.

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In addition, Berger, et al (1974) have shown that such habits of mind tend to “carry over” into all areas of life. By this they mean that a particular element of cognitive style tends to diffuse from its original context into other areas of life. It is easily illustrated by the ubiquitous “How To ...” manuals in American life. They address not only the mechanical and technical problems of modern living but everything from marriage enrichment to sexual compatibility and beyond. The way this pragmatic bent of mind affects the American communication style we shall return to in a moment.¹¹

As Bennett and Stewart (1991) point out, American habits of mind frequently lie at one end of a spectrum with much of the non-western world at the other. It is a situation ready-made for miscommunication. Americans, for example, are “fact-oriented,” considering empirical data to be observable, measurable, located in time and space, objective and reliable. Quantification bears the ring of truth, a notion almost absent in the non-western world. Unlike much of the world Americans are also prone to counter-factual speculation, to trial and error, to trying on hypotheses and collecting data to substantiate them as a means of gaining clarity and certainty. Yet many Europeans and Asians strongly resist counter-factual thinking as evidence of confusion or a source of manipulation (Bennett and Stewart 1991:32). The Japanese, for example, rarely consider alternatives or perform feasibility studies.

Because “doing” (as opposed to “being”) is a core American value, operational procedures (“How to ...”) are often the center of American attention. We prefer what Berger, et al (1974) call “functional” rationality rather than abstract rationality. Bennett and Stewart describe this as an American preference for “procedural knowledge” that focuses on how to get things done. They contrast it with the German preference for “declarative knowledge” that offers descriptions of the world (1991:32). Procedural knowledge goes hand in hand with a problem-solving mentality that results in the well-known American pragmatism and obsession with technique. By contrast, Germans and Arabs prefer description and see functional rationality as lacking theoretical clarity. The Japanese style is different yet, emphasizing intuition.

It is well-known that a future orientation dominates the American perception of time. Much of the non-western world, however, is oriented toward the past or present. In American procedural thinking this future orientation takes the form of “anticipated consequences,” a habit of mind that undergirds much of our capitalist economic activity. It stands in stark contrast

¹¹ Of course there is occasionally substantial motivation to prevent this from happening. In some areas we are successful in putting on the brakes to prevent carryover from happening. Berger, et al (1974) call that phenomenon “stoppage”. The struggle to maintain touch with the “natural” world as relief from excessively mechanistic ways of doing things in most areas of modern life is a prime example.

to the present-time orientation of Mediterranean peasants (and much of the non-western world) who are more likely to “take no thought for tomorrow, for tomorrow will take thought for itself” (Mt 6:34).

Another key habit of American thinking is what Bennett and Stewart call a “preoccupation with causation.” As they say, we are obsessed with “how” questions” (Bennett & Stewart 1991:39). We want to know how things work or how they came to be as they are. Berger, et al (1974) speak of “componential” thinking, by which they mean an analytical tendency to break things down into their constituent parts in order to display (and therefore reproduce) the sequential causation that makes them tick. By contrast, description-oriented cultures prefer layered and cumulative attention to details. The Chinese, Japanese and Brazilians resist analysis and prefer a more holistic type of thought (Stewart & Bennett 1991:41).

The analytical thinking that characterizes American technicism can be contrasted with the thinking patterns of other cultures in another way. Americans are *inductive* thinkers, deriving principles from multiple examples or amassed data. Many Europeans are *deductive* thinkers, giving priority to theory and concepts for which illustrative examples can then be sought. Even more important for biblical scholars is the fact that much of the non-western world, including the Mediterranean area, prefers *relational* thinking. What matters there are not data and derived principles but context, status, relationships, and the ascriptive qualities of persons. Only from factors of this sort can conclusions be drawn.

While there are many more characteristics of the American cognitive style that could be cited perhaps enough has been said to indicate that a communication style built on American habits of mind will not resonate with much of the world. Nor will the reverse be true. The inability to understand this is another major cause in the communication disconnect between Americans and the Bible.

4. CONCLUSION

By now it is perhaps obvious that wishing communication failures away, ignoring them, or pretending they are transcended by the commonalities of human nature will only exacerbate the problem. The fact is that the intractability of the problem has a solid basis in the cultural peculiarities of communication style.

Moreover, a host of additional obstacles to cross-cultural communication could easily be cited. For example, much more could be said about cultural values or the culture-specific character of gender expectations

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in communication. The way language functions (as opposed to what it means) in different cultural situation is equally important. Additional aspects of cognitive style such as anonymous social relations, moralized anonymity, segmented jurisdictions, expectations of distributive justice, and the tendency to progressivity (newer, bigger, better) could also be taken into account. Code preference (verbal or non-verbal), speech-sequencing (linear, spiral, dialectical) and a wide variety of other factors also differ from culture to culture. All affect communication.

Nonetheless the list of obstacles cited above should be sufficient to make at least two important points. First, the intractability of the problem of projecting ourselves onto the pages of the Bible goes far beyond simple cultural ignorance on our part, important as that factor may be. That is because it has very deep roots in the styles of communication that are peculiar to western and non-western cultures. Knowledge of the biblical culture therefore is only a part, albeit a critically important part, of the hermeneutical problem. Self-knowledge, especially knowledge of what the non-western world does *not* share in our western style of communication, is every bit as much a factor in reading biblical texts.

Second, when Americans read the Bible using (and assuming the universality of) the American style of communication they make misunderstanding inevitable. We think we understand when in fact we do not. We are simply projecting our own cultural perceptions onto the texts we claim we are reading to see what they might say to us. We often remain oblivious to the distortions we introduce simply because of who we are and the way we speak.

In sum, what has come into view here is an explanation for the near total inability of American Bible readers to distinguish between canon and culture. We often claim the canon to be the rule for faith and practice in the Christian community and yet we demonstrate by the way we read the Bible that our commitment to culture has been far more profound than we have been willing to admit. Culture, not canon, has too often shaped the life of the Church

Finally, the point is simple. Without clarity about the peculiarities of the cognitive world we Westerners in habit, communication with the biblical writers is not possible. As has often been said, exegesis becomes a soliloquy. In short without this kind of clarity we would have to raise serious questions about whether we are actually hearing the biblical writers speak rather than imagining congenial messages of our own creation.

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