MAPPING A MINEFIELD: MISSIOLOGICAL INSIGHTS ON CULTURAL RELATIVISM FOR YOUTH MINISTRY EDUCATORS

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by
Patrick Mays, Ph.D.
Associate Professor and Chair of the Department of Theology
LeTourneau University

This missiological presentation addressing the issue of cultural relativism by looking at the historical development of this anthropological doctrine and offering a critique that indicates both positive and negative impact of its application to cross-cultural and multi-cultural Christian witness. Implications for youth ministry educators are suggested.
ABSTRACT

This missiological paper addresses the issue of cultural relativism by outlining its development as an anthropological doctrine. Then, a pragmatic critique questions the myth of primitive harmony and indicates that many societies have maladaptive practices. A biblical critique suggests God validates culture through the incarnation, but societies need transformation to conform to God’s will. Four practices are suggested for Christians to become vulnerable through dialogical witness. When Christians are informed by historical and methodological relativism without subscribing to ethical relativism, they make powerful witnesses to God’s kingdom in the world. These are missiological reminders for those who teach and work in youth ministry.
It is almost a cliché to say that we live in an era dominated by relativistic values. For Christians working in and around youth ministry, it can be a confusing, controversial, and even scary task to teach others how to navigate the cultural terrain. Do we embrace the culture and risk becoming part of the relativistic milieu, or do we avoid cultural engagement in order remain spiritually pure? How is it possible to balance Christian exclusivity in the face cultural diversity? The answer to this dilemma not only affects youth, but also youth ministry educators and workers.

As youth workers, the dilemma is a bit like walking through a minefield. Going one way, we encounter concerned parents, pastors, and prognosticators who speak and worry about the plight of youth in a relativistic culture. To suggest to them that the demise of “absolute truth” is not the source of everything that is wrong with society is to risk an explosive response of severe proportions. Going the other way, we can find whole churches and denominations who basically fail to provide real distinction to the Christian life. For example, I am a life-long United Methodist and have witnessed innumerable situations in which a lack of thoughtful discernment has led to an

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1 Examples abound, but here are a few, both anecdotal and documented: (1) I attended a lecture by a prominent Christian apologist, who spent his entire time “proving” the existence of absolute truth. The clear implication was that one must believe in a Western, Enlightenment conception of absolute truth as a precondition to having faith in Jesus Christ, although that view does not seem to be supported by biblical evidence; (2) Using a very strict definition, the Barna Group research indicated that only four percent of teens are evangelical. In a sweeping generalization they placed the blame on “growing numbers of teenagers who accept moral relativism and pluralistic theology as their faith foundation” (Lawrence); (3) One leader of a para-church youth ministry organization talks about engagement with youth culture in terms such as “dust,” “lint,” “filth,” and “corruption,” with the admonition that any hint of “toleration” with the world is a sign of moral failure (Luce 2006:337-350).
undermining of the Christian heritage. Perhaps, the marketing campaign, which now has become the denomination’s de facto motto, says it best, “Open hearts, open minds, open doors.” So, in its attempt to be all things to all people, the church risks becoming meaningless to everyone.

Thankfully, there are authors in the field of youth ministry who grapple significantly with these issues. Two are especially noteworthy. Duffy Robbins (2004) in *This Way to Youth Ministry* develops a sophisticated, yet accessible, model for understanding cultural engagement by drawing on a number of philosophical, sociological, and missiological resources. More recently, Kenda Creasy Dean (2010) offers a compelling call for missional faith building with a framework that draws from the missiological work of Andrew Walls. What is fascinating is that both these writers effectively tap into the rich literature of missiology, which, in turn, owes many insights to the field of cultural anthropology. It is the intersection of these two disciplines, cultural anthropology and missiology, that will help us explore how we can better navigate the minefield of cultural relativism.

**Anthropology vs. Missiology**

The relationship between anthropology and Christian missiology is captured in a lyrical phrase found in a U2 hit song of the late 1980s: “I can’t live with or without you” (1987). While it is highly unlikely that Bono was considering the uneasy pairing of anthropology and missiology when he penned this sentiment, the statement does highlight the dissonance found when attempting to hold together two competing ideas. On the one hand, anthropology is the study of humans and their interactions. It is purely humanistic study that avoids prescribing what humans could be but only describes how humans are.
In anthropological study religion and any appeal to the supernatural are considered a creative function of humanity. On the other hand, missiology is an interdisciplinary field that studies the nature, goal, and methods of Christian mission. It begins with the reality of God who is reaching out to a lost humanity. It recognizes where humans are and hopes to reconcile them to God so that they can be all that God created them to be.

In spite of the obvious differences, anthropology and missiology have benefited from each other’s presence. Anthropology emerged as a discipline in the nineteenth century when social philosophers began to speculate on the nature of human culture. Much of this speculation was fueled, not by firsthand study, but by reports from world travelers, many of whom were missionaries. Just as anthropologists benefited from missionary data, the study of mission is indebted to anthropological insights in developing appropriate methods to communicate the Christian gospel across cultural barriers. Despite this mutuality, there exists significant distrust and conflict between the anthropological and missiological communities (Whiteman 2003).

For Christians who are concerned with the communication of the gospel, whether in traditional “mission fields” or in the youth ministry trenches of a pluralistic society, direct conflict is encountered when confronting the anthropological doctrine of cultural relativism. How is it possible to balance the exclusive claims of Christianity in the face of cultural diversity and the resulting relativistic stance that anthropologists claim as necessary? Is it even appropriate for Christians to borrow insights from a discipline that seems opposed to it? The answer to this dilemma not only affects Christian anthropologists but any Christian witness. For those of us who train youth ministers and who minister to youth in various contexts, the issue takes on a personal dimension as we
help others navigate the sketchy relativistic terrain of postmodern American society. This paper addresses the problem, first, by outlining the history of the development of the concept of cultural relativism. Following this development, a critique of cultural relativism is offered using both secular and biblical sources. Finally, helpful practices that creatively explore the tension between exclusivity and relativism are suggested.

Historical Development of Cultural Relativism

Darwinian ideals and the hope of inevitable human progress dominated early anthropological development in the 1800s. As thinkers searched for a scientific explanation for the cultural diversity found in exotic venues, an evolutionary paradigm began to emerge. It was postulated that cultures, like organisms, moved from the simple to the complex. Models were developed using these assumptions, placing cultures on a hierarchy moving from savages to barbarians and, ultimately, to civilized. Many anthropologists believed that when “savage” cultures were introduced to rational thought they would leave primitive superstitions behind and move up the culture ladder, eventually achieving civilization (Whiteman 2003). Predictably, civilization to these early anthropologists looked like enlightened Western culture.

By the turn of the century, some anthropologists began to question the ethnocentrism inherent in this scheme, particularly the notion that Western culture was naturally superior. For example, in 1906 W. G. Sumner discussed the concept of ethnocentrism, describing it as “the technical name for this view of things in which one’s own group is the center of everything, and all others are scaled and rated with reference to it.” ([1906]1940:13). He not only applied the concept to primitive tribal units but also
to modern states: “Each state now regards itself as the leader of civilization, the best, the freest, and the wisest, and all others inferior” ([1906]1940:14).

Other anthropologists raised objections to the assumption of Western cultural superiority. Franz Boas stood out as a leading voice, setting the agenda for what became the doctrine of cultural relativism. Born in Minden, Germany, Boas received a traditional European education, eventually achieving the rank of Docent. His interest turned to North America through his field study of Kwakiutl Indians in the Pacific Northwest. Appreciating the academic freedom in the United States, Boas took a professorship at Columbia University. Boas ([1911]1965) helped introduce a new concept of culture and race through his research and writing. In The Mind of Primitive Man he used scientific inquiry to indicate that there is no fundamental difference between civilized and primitive humans. Rather, differences in physiology and personality, Boas proposed, largely are due to environmental factors. Not satisfied with localized study, Boas pushed for the application of his anthropological insights to the sweeping contemporary issues of his time, such as racism in America and the intolerance of the Nazi regime in Germany. In Anthropology and Modern Life, Boas concluded that other cultures “are so different that the valuations given by them to human behavior are not comparable. What is considered good by one is considered bad by another” ([1932]2004:204). For Boas, then, the recognition that customs are relative to context and, moreover, are meaningful only in their home context, was central in his teaching. This idea became the dominant stance in anthropology.

Boas is remembered not only for his innovative scholarship but also for the work of his students who continued to interpret and extend his original ideas. For example,
Ruth Benedict’s ([1934]:1989) comparative study of three distinct cultures in *Patterns of Cultures* provided what many consider the prototypical treatise on cultural relativism. Benedict pointed out the need to move beyond thinking that one’s own culture is universal and see that cultures naturally develop diversity in adapting to particular circumstances. As Benedict delineated her understanding of this study, she arrived at the following conclusions. First, because of varying contexts, one cannot bring judgment on another culture. In other words, evaluations of a culture can be made based only on that particular culture’s criteria. Second, individuals are shaped by the institutional forces of the society in which they are raised. Third, one must be able to move beyond absolute definitions of morality based on one’s own culture and “be willing to take account of changing normalities even when the question is of the morality in which we were bred” (1989[1934]:271). Fourth, the embracing of cultural relativism, while causing discomfort, will be the basis for tolerance and coexistence.

Another Boas student, Melville J. Herskovits, recognized that there were serious philosophical implications to the facts of cultural relativism and critiqued efforts to separate them (1972:50-51). In tackling head-on the issue of cross-cultural ethics, Herskovits suggested that not only customs but also reality and truth are relative. “Cultural relativism developed because the facts of differences in these concepts of reality or in moral systems, plus our knowledge of the mechanisms of cultural learning, forced the realization of the problem of finding valid cross-cultural norms” (Herskovits 1972:56). Even though he claimed that relativism required the withholding of judgment on such “customs as repugnant to [one’s] personal experience as infanticide, head-hunting, various ‘unpleasant’ dietary and sanitary habits, and the like” ([1955]1967:67),
Herskovits did not call for behavioral anarchy. He attempted to differentiate between “ absolutes” and “universals.”

It is essential, in considering cultural relativism, that we differentiate absolute from universals. Absolutes are fixed, and, as far as convention is concerned, are not admitted to have variation, to differ from culture to culture, from epoch to epoch. Universals, on the other hand, are those least common denominators to be extracted from the range of variation that all phenomena of the natural or cultural world manifest. If we apply the distinction between these two concepts in drawing an answer to the points raised in our question, these criticisms are found to lose their force. To say that there is no absolute criterion of values or morals, or even, psychologically, of time or space, does not mean that such criteria, in differing forms, do not comprise universals in human culture. Morality is a universal, and so is enjoyment of beauty, and some standard for truth. The many forms these concepts take are but products of the particular historical experience of the societies that manifest them. In each, criteria are subject to continuous questioning, continuous change. But the basic conceptions remain, to channel though and direct conduct, to give purpose to living. (1972:31-32)

The line that Herskovits was attempting to hold, at least from his point of view, was crossed by what Robert Edgerton (1992:26) calls “a far more radical version of the concept,” the epistemological relativism of Clifford Geertz and David M. Schneider. This radical relativism asserts that cultures cannot even be compared and, in fact, that a culture can only be understood by someone enculturated in that culture. By insisting that cultures are incommensurable, this view moves beyond the questioning of absolutes and further suggests that there are no universals that can be applied cross-culturally.

From this brief historical review of the development of the anthropological doctrine of cultural relativism, four points emerge.

1. Societies’ customs and values must be understood in the context of that culture.
2. There are no absolute standards for judging customs.
3. All cultures and cultural values are of equal value and dignity.
4. We, therefore, should have tolerance and respect for cultural aspects different from our own, even if they are considered evil by our cultural standards.

Aspects of Cultural Relativism

At this point it will be helpful to distinguish different aspects of cultural relativism. Four will be considered: historical relativism, relativity of knowledge, methodological relativism, and ethical relativism.

Historical Relativism

This is a descriptive status indicating that each culture is a unique reflection of its historical context by which the understanding of self, institution, and society becomes relative to the cultural perspective. In other words, cultures develop differently because each group of people is presented with a different set of historical circumstances to which they must adapt. Boas ([1911]1965) used this concept to try to dispel the idea that primitive people were somehow biological inferior. Understanding historical context became a key to unlocking various cultural practices. For example, Benedict explained that a culture will develop a personality characteristic that “is stressed in certain cultures and not in others because of historical events that have in one place fostered its development and in others have ruled it out” ([1934]1989:233).

Relativity of Knowledge

Established by the empirical evidence of cultural diversity, the relativity of knowledge indicates that each culture has a unique “data base” of knowledge that it chooses to use in its particular context. This is seen in the structure of language as it orients people to certain views of the world, giving attention to some aspects while ignoring others. For example, the Dani of West New Guinea use two words, translated as
“dark” and “light,” to represent all colors (Lustig and Koestler 2003:217-220). It stands to reason that if basic concepts, like color, are perceived differently, then more complex existential ideas certainly influence the way people from different cultures perceive life.

*Methodological Relativism*

Methodological relativism refers to the research procedure anthropologists use when they enter a culture as a participant-observer. In participant-observation one should shed one’s own cultural view when examining another culture and suspend judgment until research ends. The goal is to understand customs the way the members of the culture understand them before bringing in outside criteria for evaluation. Dorothy Lee offers a compelling description of what an anthropological researcher experiences in participant-observation:

> Eventually, I plunged into the experience of another culture, until I found myself liking what the members of the other society liked, frightened by what gave them fear, grieved by their sorrows, delighted in the situations which filled them with satisfaction and joy; and until their categories seemed natural and right, and my own rigid and misleading. (1987:4).

*Ethical Relativism*

Whether one subscribes to the “soft” ethical relativism of Herskovits’ (1972) universals in the absence of absolutes or to the radical epistemological relativism that denies the possibility of comparative cultural study, the content of morality is called into question. Since moral principles vary from culture to culture, ethical relativism suggests that one cannot live a moral life in one culture without violating the morality of another culture. The result, then, is that no one from outside a culture should bring moral judgment upon a culture. All practices should be respected and tolerated.
Cultural Relativism: A Critique

Benefits of Cultural Relativism

There is much to commend in cultural relativism. As a central doctrine in anthropology, it provides an effective counter-balance to the evolutionary ideas that affected earlier studies in human diversity which saw cultures evolving up a ladder of progress. This calls into question the assumed superiority of Western culture over less technologically advanced and primitive cultures, opening the possibility for seeing diverse cultures on their own terms and revealing a beauty and harmony in various societal systems. In many ways, cultural relativism put understanding, respect, and tolerance on the agenda of Western powers in place of colonization, subjugation, and oppression.

The Possibility of Sick Societies

Even so, cultural relativism is not without its problems. Cultural relativism rests on two conclusions: (1) all cultural values are equally valid; (2) all cultural values are worthy of acceptance and tolerance. However, an objective study of cultures reveals that most customs have both positive and negative aspects. As a result, not everyone in a particular culture benefits. While one certainly wants to avoid labeling a whole culture as bad, specific practices within a culture can be evaluated. In his groundbreaking book, Sick Societies, anthropologist Robert Edgerton goes even further when he says, “All societies are sick, but some are sicker than others” (1992:1). Edgerton contends that anthropologists have failed to see the maladaptations of cultures because the constriction of relativism caused anthropologists to romanticize their ethnographies, explaining away or even ignoring dark aspects of culture. Edgerton meticulously documents various
maladaptive cultural practices that endanger people’s health, happiness, and survival. By making all values relative, except tolerance, anthropologists have avoided careful scrutiny and evaluative analysis in favor of uncritical assumption. Edgerton’s critique is noteworthy and an important reminder to all that cultural relativism must be applied carefully. However, he presupposes rationality to be better than irrationality, putting superstitions, witchcraft, and most religious beliefs in the irrational category. In Edgerton’s view of the world, there still is no place for the reality of the supernatural.

Relativism from a Biblical Perspective

For those operating from a biblical worldview, Edgerton’s suggestion of cultural maladaptations provides a helpful insight, but his insistence on rationality to the exclusion of religion is unacceptable. What insights are gained from the biblical perspective? First, the biblical witness agrees with Edgerton that all societies are sick and are in need of transformation. God’s concern for how a society treats its people, for example, is seen in his condemnation through Amos’s prophesies of the corrupt practices of Israel and its neighbors, practices that included mistreatment of the poor, profane religious rituals, and oppression through violence. What God desires, instead, is to “let justice roll on like a river, righteousness like a never-failing stream” (Amos 5:24). The things that God desires become clearer in Jesus’ delineation of kingdom values in the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5-7). God’s kingdom is noted for its spiritual thirst, comfort in sorrow, meekness, mercy, purity, and peace. These are the values by which individuals and societies are judged.

Second, the biblical perspective shows an appreciation for the diversity and acceptance of a variety of cultural expressions. True, God did choose one group, Israel,
for a special purpose. But, this purpose was not for all the nations to adopt the culture of Israel, but that through Israel all nations would be blessed. The realization of the blessing of all nations was initiated in Abraham and found fulfillment in Jesus, the Jewish Messiah and the Savior of the world. The Jerusalem Council in Acts 15 made this clear when it decided that Gentiles did not have to become Jewish (through the sign of circumcision) first before being reconciled to God through Christ. This decision opened up the possibility that Christianity would be a truly universal religion in which people could be restored to God and worship God in their own culture. As missiologist Lamin Sanneh writes, “God does not absolutize any one culture . . . all cultures have cast upon them the breath of God’s favor, thus cleansing them from all stigma of inferiority and untouchability” (1995:47). This is not done on the basis of diversity or rationality, but because “faith, as the absolute gift of a loving God, is the relativizing leaven of culture” (Sanneh 1995:47).

That God appreciates the diversity of cultures is, perhaps, best seen in what Christian anthropologist, Darrell Whiteman, calls the “incarnational connection” (2003:407-409). The incarnation, the doctrine that God became human in the person of Jesus Christ, validates all cultures. It is significant to note that God came to a particular culture in a specific time, taking on all the limitations of the imperfect first-century Jewish culture. The early church embraced this reality as seen in Paul’s letter to the Philippians (2:5-8):

Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus: Who being very nature God, did not consider equality to God something to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient to death – even death on a cross.
When one truly takes on the attitude of Jesus, as the previous verses command, then the incarnation becomes more than a statement of belief. It also becomes a model for the Christian witness.

The Vulnerability of Christian Witness

God calls Christians to cross barriers. He crossed the ultimate barrier when He became human in a particular culture to bring the message of salvation. Likewise, in our time we must be willing to enter other cultures, living and proclaiming the gospel in forms that make sense to them. Cultural relativism suggests that Christian witness is a dubious enterprise, whether across cultural boundaries or within a multi-cultural society. Since all cultural customs and values are valid and should be respected and tolerated, then any proposal that people should change the way they behave and believe is wrong and insensitive. Is it possible to remain sensitive to other cultural values and still be an effective Christian witness? I believe it is when we incarnationally enter another person’s world with an appreciation for the diversity of cultures but still holding out the possibility that transformation and reconciliation to God is necessary for a complete life. In anthropological terms this means gaining insight and understanding from historical relativism, the relativity of knowledge, and methodological relativism without subscribing to ethical relativism. Whiteman notes the importance of anthropological understanding when he writes, “I submit that without the insights of anthropology that help us to understand and appreciate cultural differences, we will automatically revert to our ethnocentric mode of interpretation and behavior” (2003:408).

Staying grounded in a scripturally informed Christian worldview while being tossed about in a cultural milieu is a tall order, but there is a way forward. Whiteman
(2003:409) offers seven practices for incarnational witness that I revise in the four following points. First, we must become vulnerable not relative. There is no power in the mere acceptance and tolerance of other cultures. Neither is there power in shutting off ourselves from other cultures by creating homogenized Christian enclaves. There is power, though, by allowing ourselves to be vulnerable to the diversity of cultures while at the same time calling ourselves and others to transformation in Jesus. Mathias Zahniser (1994) declares that these “close encounters of the vulnerable kind” require “dialogical proclamation” in the context of intimate relationships. When we become vulnerable in relationships, then God’s Spirit has opportunity to engage us and our partners “in dialogue in the painful but liberating process of conviction” (Zahniser 1994:77).

Second, we should start where people are, taking their culture and context seriously. We can do this by discerning appropriate anthropological insights that will help our witness. For example, borrowing from methodological relativism, we can enter another person’s world as a participant-observer. When we do, we will see how that person perceives life through both the limitations and the opportunities that the person’s worldview offers. In doing so, we will hear the questions one is asking before we provide our answers. Most importantly, by closely observing and participating in another reality, we will be able to discern where God’s prevenient grace is already at work in the culture. Rather than coming with our preset formulas, we will let God set the agenda.

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2 Prevenient grace is a helpful Wesleyan understanding of the work of the Holy Spirit in people’s lives prior to justification through events and circumstances that draw people back to God. See Steve Harper’s (1983:37-46) John Wesley’s Message for Today for a concise description. Zahniser points out that “given this prevenient gracious activity of God’s spirit that goes on everywhere, it is foolish to proclaim the Gospel without first being sensitive to that activity among the people, or in the person, to whom we direct our witness” (1994:75).
Third, it is crucial that we walk with another person in humility, realizing that we are outsiders with much to learn. In the not so distant past, the missionary enterprise was closely tied to the colonial power structure. Given the technological advancement of Western societies, at least in the mechanistic sense, Christian missionaries entered other cultures draped with prestige, power, and, at times, domination. In the brief review of the development of cultural relativism, we can see that the supposed superiority of Western culture is an outgrowth of ethnocentrism. This cannot be a part of authentic Christian witness. Likewise, parents, church boards, and senior pastors often expect youth ministers to serve more as the superior moral police, by addressing external behaviors of youth, like drinking, sex, and the like. One gets the idea, then, that youth ministry exists to serve the adults by easing their worry about adolescent behavior. Of course, it is easier to get youth to act a certain way, in the short term, at least, than it is to walk in the turbulent struggles adolescent identity formation in the face of competing cultural voices. We should avoid the persona of Answer Man, who says, “I have all the answers you will need,” before even hearing the questions. Rather, we should come as the Fellow Sojourner, who invites others to “join me on the journey.”

Fourth, the previous points highlight the need for us to have our identities tied to the kingdom of God, which will free us to live among, learn from, and love people from any culture. The goal is not to make them become like us but to encourage them to become like Christ. So, when every knee bows and every tongue confesses Jesus as Lord (Philippians 2:10-11), there will be representatives “from every nation, tribe, people and language” (Revelation 7:9).
The Open Hand

In this brief review and critique of the anthropological doctrine of cultural relativism and its impact on Christian witness, it is easy to see that cultural relativism threatens Christianity. Cultural relativism questions absolute truth. It suggests that reality is a matter of cultural or personal perception. In its most radical form, it excludes the possibility of the existence of any universals across cultures. Obviously, this makes it difficult to claim that Christianity is a universal religion, thereby severely inhibiting Christian witness.

Seen from a biblical perspective, though, it is possible to embrace cultural diversity without succumbing to a relativity of values. God calls all people and cultures through the transformative power of the incarnation. Jesus, the King of the Jews, is also Jesus, the Savior of all. When our identity is in Christ, we are freed to be citizens of any and all cultures of the world.

In my first significant cross-cultural exposure, I experienced a little of what it means to be an incarnational witness across cultural barriers, which I find helpful in ministering across cultures and among youth. My wife and I spent the summer of 1986 as English teachers in a small Japanese church on the outskirts of Tokyo. Because of our short time in Japan, we were able to learn only snippets of the language, just enough to shop and travel. One night I was returning to our small village from Tokyo by train. As I got off the train at my station, a ticket clerk checked to see that I had purchased the appropriate ticket. As I handed him my ticket, he said something to me that I did not understand. I somehow figured out that I had bought the wrong ticket and that I owed more money. I could also see that he was telling me how much I owed, but in my limited
Japanese I could not understand the exact amount. My heart began to pound, and I could feel perspiration began to pop out on my forehead. Finally, I did the only thing that I could think of. I reached into my pocket and retrieved all of my change, which made up a good portion of my small weekly stipend. With my hand open exposing all my money, I nodded to the clerk. He dug through the coins, found what he needed, and I was free to go.

When I consider the implications of incarnational ministry, I am reminded of this brief incident. When we enter another person’s world, we should come with an open hand. We come with an openness to learn from other views of life and with a willingness to see where God is already at work. Also, we come with an open-handed invitation for others to join the journey to life in Christ. It is risky and, sometimes, even scary. But, it shows our willingness to appreciate cultural diversity, and it reveals the concern that God has for people of every culture.

Implications for Youth Ministry Educators and Workers

Living the Christian life within a multi-cultural society without societal constructs that support one’s faith is a tenuous enterprise. In a world in which relativism and tolerance reign as supreme values, those who minister to youth are on the front lines of a clash of worlds. The above critique of the anthropological doctrine of cultural relativism hopefully offers some missiological insights and a way forward that avoids irrelevant sub-cultural Christian bunker-building and irrelevant accommodating syncretism. Following are suggestions to begin putting these insights into practice.

1. Become better formed and informed by cultural anthropology. As youth ministry educators and workers, we recognize that youth ministry effectiveness demands that we
be excellent cultural exegetes as well as excellent biblical exegetes. Cultural anthropology is the academic field that provides the tools for rich cultural analysis. Since there is no one formulaic career path or graduate degree for youth ministry professors, it is possible that many have not studied cultural anthropology. This can be remedied through self-study by starting with a book like *Introducing Cultural Anthropology* by Howell and Paris (2011). Auditing a cultural anthropology class and/or developing a mentoring relationship with a cultural anthropology professor are other suggestions to begin one’s study.

2. *Begin to read and study in the field of missiology.* Here, one can follow the lead of Duffy Robbins (2004) and Kenda Creasy Dean (2010). I am not going to provide a list of titles, but reading anything by Paul Hiebert or Andrew Walls would be beneficial. As one explores the missiological literature, the applications for current youth ministry will become readily apparent.

3. *Make cultural anthropology and/or higher level mission courses a requirement for youth ministry degrees.* It is often said that youth ministry is a mission field, yet do the youth ministry students enter this mission field with the appropriate anthropological and missiological tools that would make them effective? I recognize the difficulty of burdening an already crowded degree plan with another requirement. Costs and benefits will have to be weighed, but I would suggest it is worth it.

4. *Finally, model discernment for your students.* It is all too easy to take a complex issue, like cultural relativism, and demarcate it in stark black and white terms. How much better, though, to wade through an issue meticulously, as I have modestly attempted here? I suggest it is better for our witness, our intellect, our faith, and, dare I say, our
reputations in the world to be able to embrace historical relativism, methodological relativism, and relativism of knowledge as a testimony to God’s creative diversity. By doing so, I believe we can gain a hearing as we challenge ethical relativism and work for transformation in this world.
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