

The Power of Culture

Ekkehardt Mueller

During the BRI's third meeting with African theologians and biblical scholars on the topic of magic and witchcraft, which took place on the campus of the University of Eastern Africa, Baraton, in December 2006, the following traditional practice was shared: In a certain part of Africa a father, who had daughters only, was considered more or less childless. He needed a male descendant. If one of his daughters would have married and born a boy, this child would have carried on the line of the son-in-law, not the father's own lineage. So the marriage of a daughter was no help for the father. Therefore, fathers who had only girls at times refused to give them in marriage. However, if one of the girls got pregnant without being married and a boy was born, this boy belonged to the father's house and carried on the father's line. Thus, traditionally, certain African fathers condoned that their daughters had a sexual relationship without being married from which a boy was born for the sake of the family line to be continued over against a regular marriage. This custom may have disappeared. However, customs prevalent in societies often affect also Adventist families as do the practice of magic and witchcraft these days in Africa and new standards on sexuality in the Western world. Biblical guidelines and commands concerning sexuality, premarital sex, and occult activities have been or are abandoned in favor of the customs of society and the dictates of a prevalent culture.

This problem is not new. We find biblical reports in which the same phenomenon appeared among believers in the time of Jesus. According to Matthew 15:3-9 and Mark 7:6-13 Judaism of the first century set aside the commandment to honor father and mother by the *corban* provision. Jesus accused Pharisees and scribes of invalidating the Word of God by their tradition and continued: "You do many things such as that." In Revelation 2 the churches of Pergamon and Thyatira accepted the teachings of Balaam, the Nicolaitans, and the woman Jezebel. We hear about immorality and the eating of meat offered to idols (Rev. 2:14-15, 20). Obviously they were influenced by their place and culture, where Satan dwelled (Rev. 2:13) and by "the deep things of Satan" (Rev. 2:24).

That culture and social environment have an immense impact on Christian communities can also be seen in the North American context. In her book "*You Shall Not Kill*" or *You Shall Not Murder*?" catholic author W. A. Bailey discusses the shift in Protestant translations of the sixth commandment (Ex. 20:13) from "You shall not kill" to "You shall not murder" which took place to a large degree from the middle of the 20th century onward.¹ The old English translations such as Wiclif's Bible, Tyndale's Pentateuch, the Geneva Bible, Douay (catholic), and the King James Version translate the sixth commandment as "You shall not kill." The American Standard Version, the Revised Standard Version, as well as catholic translations still retain this rendition. However, the New American Standard Bible (1960), the New International Version (1973), the New King James Version (1982), the New Revised Standard Version (1989), the English Standard Version (2001), and the Holman Christian Standard Bible (2004) have shifted to "You shall not murder" which is much more limited than the broader "You shall not kill." Such a rendering subtly influences Christians including Adventist church members, bringing about undesirable changes of understanding and behavior.

Why has this happened? There is no new manuscript evidence supporting such a shift, and Bailey shows that linguistically and theologically "You shall not kill" is the preferable translation.² In the NT Jesus broadens the sixth commandment to include even verbal abuse of another person (Matt. 5:21-22). So why the change? In a historical section she traces several faith traditions, showing that for Evangelicals the desire to become mainstream churches, the close connection to militarism, and the influence of culture led to a change of the wording of the sixth commandment as well as a change in practice.

Discussing, for example, the Southern Baptist Convention she shows that in 1917 this church supported the war effort, but already in 1921 it promoted disarmament. This was repeated in a 1932 statement in which

Southern Baptists supported complete disarmament and the abolishment of war as a national policy, because of its incompatibility with the ethical principles of Jesus. In 1940 it was urged that the United States should not participate in World War II. In 1948 a resolution stated that peace does not come out of war and rejected the notion that wars are unavoidable. In 1967 and 1971 the call was issued to study Scripture when dealing with issues of God-and-country. However, in the 1980s a strong national defense was supported. In 1991 the military was praised for its success in Desert Storm. In 1994 the participants of D-Day were commended. In 1998 a statement of the same Convention reads that “the purpose of military combat is to use force against an enemy in order to kill, damage or destroy—a purpose and essence aligned with the male role.”³ In 2002 a resolution supported the war on terror, which was considered a just war. In 2003 the war in Iraq was supported and also called a just war. In 2004 the military was praised for “maintaining peace throughout the world.”⁴ This rising support for the military and for war among Southern Baptists may be connected to the decision to translate the sixth commandment as “You shall not murder.”

With regard to the Assemblies of God, a Pentecostal church, Bailey summarizes her findings saying: “And so the same text was used in the Assemblies of God to reject killing in war at the beginning of the twentieth century and support it at the beginning of the twenty-first century.”⁵

In a somewhat provocative way she states: “People want to kill people, and they want biblical permission to do so. The translators of the NRSV and the other translations of the late twentieth century gave them that permission. Both lay people and scholars have been inculturated into the societies in which they live. Those who live in cultures that sanction killing in war and capital punishment are more likely to read the sixth commandment in a more limited way because it suits a culturally created worldview.”⁶

Where do we as Adventists stand? We too have become more mainstream and more a church than a movement, and we must recognize and admit that culture strongly influences human life including the Adventist community. Are we in danger of following older denominations by becoming completely adapted to respective cultures and social-political environments?

Culture has been understood as a framework of human belief, knowledge, and behavior that has been received and learned by one generation and passed on to the next generation. It consists of customs and traditions, language and symbols, ideas and beliefs, techniques and works of art, as well as institutions. Individuals, their physical, emotional, and mental capacities are to a large degree shaped by the culture or cultures in which they live. There are aspects of culture which are helpful for societies and are not opposed to biblical principles and the gospel of Christ and can be espoused by sincere Christians. We are not opposed to such cultural expressions at all. However, there are other aspects of culture which have to be challenged by the Word of God, and from which we must distance ourselves.

The Adventist Church has issued official statements on sexual behavior, on assault weapons, and peace.⁷ The church supports noncombatancy.⁸ These statements clarify where the worldwide Seventh-day Adventist Church stands with regard to these issues. However, what may be clear in these statements as to the position of the church may not be clear to all church members. It may not be the practice in some parts of the world. And what may be clear today may not be clear tomorrow. Although change is necessary as we—as individuals and as a church—grow toward Christ, not all change is desirable and beneficial. Beliefs and practices do not become right automatically because they are the cultural expression of certain societies. God’s will as revealed in Scripture supersedes all human institutions and customs. Therefore, we have (1) to recognize and (2) resist cultural views and practices opposed to the gospel of Christ as well as questionable Bible translations informed by societal pressures and common practice among other Christians. Otherwise a subtle and yet strong influence will be exerted which in the long run may damage our message and mission and cause us to water down our

convictions. Then Jesus' words would also apply to us: "Neglecting the commandment of God, you hold to the tradition of men" (Mark 7:8).

¹Wilma Ann Bailey, *"You Shall Not Kill" or "You shall Not Murder"? The Assault on a Biblical Text* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2005).

²Ibid., 1-25.

³"Resolution on Women in Combat," 1998, at sbc.net. Copyright © 1999-2005 Southern Baptist Convention.

⁴"On Appreciation of Our American Military," 2004, at sbc.net. Copyright © 1999-2005 Southern Baptist Convention.

⁵Bailey, 35

⁶Ibid, 52.

⁷See, Rajmund Dabrowski (ed.), *Statements, Guidelines & Other Documents* (Silver Spring: Communication Department of the General Conference of the Seventh-day Adventist Church, 2005), 94-95, 4-5, 73-80.

⁸See, www.adventistbiblicalresearch.org/documents/noncombatancy.htm.

7/07

Copyright © Biblical Research Institute General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists®