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NO COMMON GROUND? MULTICULTURAL EDUCATION AND THE CHRISTIAN RIGHT

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There is much discussion these days in both the education community and churches across America on the desirability and effects of multicultural education (ME). Proponents allege that ME is needed in America to redress years of prejudice against minority groups, while Christians counter that ME warps the values on which the United States was founded and constitutes the first step on the slippery slope to moral relativism. Voices on both sides of the issue have become so strident that it seems doubtful that common ground between the two positions exists.

I contend, however, that cross-cultural education is as valuable for the evangelist as it is for the teacher. As someone who believed in ME before becoming a Christian, I desire to open a discussion between churches and the education community on what constitutes acceptable praxis for educators who have the right intentions but the wrong tools for carrying out their program. By the same token, I lovingly challenge Christians to carry out the promise inherent in Acts 17:26, "And He has made from one blood every nation of men for to dwell on all the face of the earth."¹ All human beings are of inestimable worth, regardless of culture, since God created them in His image and sent His Son to die for them (cf. 1 John 2:2).

Multiculturalism or Cross-Cultural Education? It is undeniable that the ethnic and religious composition of the United States has changed since its inception. The U.S. population today no longer resembles that of the Anglo-Saxon, Protestant nation of 1789 when its founders, many who were Christians, signed the Constitution. The character of U.S. immigration changed after 1840 to include first the Irish, followed by Southern and Eastern Europeans, and then Hispanics and Asians. Discrimination was alive and well before the Civil Rights era of the 1960s in the Jim Crow segregation laws of the South that barred African Americans' access to hotels, drinking fountains, and institutions of higher learning merely on the basis of race.

Multiculturalists desire to redress the historical record by destroying stereotypes and recognizing the contributions of all groups to the formation of American history.² It is the prescription for change, however, that divides multiculturalists from Christians. For example, multiculturalists place all African Americans together as a group that can never be fully compensated for the evils perpetrated against it, while Christians see each African American as an individual who has the potential for a relationship with the Creator. Christianity typically does not encourage emphasizing individual differences or dwelling on the past. The black Christian is equal to, and under the same authority as, the white Christian. All are equal in God's eyes, and there is neither Greek nor Jew, slave nor free, male nor female, but all are one in Christ Jesus (Gal. 3:28).

In fact, Christians participate with a great deal of enthusiasm in cross-cultural training. The best missionary programs immerse their participants in the culture of the group with whom they wish to share their beliefs. The grotesque caricature of the ugly American missionary, as portrayed in fictional works such as *The Poisonwood Bible*,³ generally no longer can apply. The purpose of cross-cultural training is to make missionaries aware of cultural differences so that they can lovingly, sensitively, and nonjudgmentally deliver the gospel.

The place where ME and Christianity really part company, however, is in the realm of morality. Critics charge that multiculturalism praises alternative lifestyles and non-Western cultures that have

reprehensible practices such as female circumcision. James Banks, one of multiculturalism's strongest advocates, counters this claim with his own definition of justice: "Views that violate the human rights of others, such as gay people, cannot be sanctioned or tolerated in a democracy."⁴ Diversity advocates believe that merely holding the view that homosexuality is wrong violates the human rights of gays and therefore that view should not even be expressed. The Founders, however, fashioned the First Amendment for the purpose of protecting unpopular, or "politically incorrect" speech. Christians believe that homosexual practices are clearly against the purpose and will of God, and they should be able to voice their belief. (On the other hand, Christians should not be homophobic. Jesus spent time with all kinds of people to reach their hearts for the kingdom of God, and Christians who reach out to help gay people, such as AIDS victims, set a good example.)

ME would be on firmer footing if it stuck to protecting individuals against discrimination based on race and to encouraging intercultural understanding. Thanks to the achievements of the civil rights era, such as the Civil Rights Act of 1964, students in both public and Christian schools learn about the contributions of Rosa Parks, Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., and Dr. Charles Drew. Now, unfortunately, the contributions of important thinkers are excluded from the curriculum simply because they were made by white men.⁵ ME relegates individuals to predetermined groups and keeps them there by adopting curricula that skew the historical record. One multiculturalist, for example, asserts that all Egyptian dynasties were comprised of black Africans.⁶ Such an approach, however well intentioned, rests on omission, lies, and stereotyping.

More disturbingly, empirical evidence indicates that emphasizing ethnic and racial differences to elementary school students actually creates stereotypes in the minds of young children.⁷ That someone can be black *and* a doctor is not exactly a major revelation these days. Why, then, should such a thing be emphasized as somehow remarkable to a young child who probably has many fewer prejudices than we do?

Research suggests that programs that emphasize group allegiance and identity engender interethnic and intergroup hostility.⁸ On the other hand, programs that foster intercultural understanding are successful because their purpose is to decategorize humans and to allow people to get to know individuals from other cultures as human beings apart from their groups.⁹ In other words, stereotypical walls come tumbling down when we relate to other people as people and learn that their likes and dislikes mirror our own.¹⁰ Cooperative learning groups comprised of people from different backgrounds work well in this respect, as do programs such as the National Conference on Community and Justice. Research that presents knowledge of another culture is useful for both teachers and evangelists; for example, teachers may wonder why Blackfoot and other American Indian children do not participate in class discussions. Buckley's work on these ethnic groups explains that in Blackfoot culture, it is impolite to disagree with someone publicly.¹¹ Teachers should seek to understand these cultural characteristics to educate their students more effectively, while Christians should seek to understand them to communicate the Good News of Jesus Christ more effectively.

Focus on Facts, Not Feelings. Good curricula should portray the contributions of all individuals in the most natural way possible within the historical record. History and literature, however, should emphasize content, not ego-building; unfortunately, multiculturalists often focus on making children feel good about their ethnicity or their caregivers' alternative lifestyles rather than on skills and content.¹² By the time they get to university, these students do not have the knowledge of great works or the common cultural lexicon to have a philosophical dialogue about the social past, present, or future. Basic knowledge of U. S. history and the political system eludes them. Because they are unprepared, a real open-minded, liberal arts education is lost on these students.¹³

Christian teachers should show love to their students and encourage each child to see the very important purpose that the Lord has for him on this earth. This includes helping each child to achieve at the highest level possible. If someone suffers from injustice, moreover, it is the responsibility of each Christian to learn the truth of the situation and to walk in that truth (Eph. 5:11). Christianity must not be abused to justify bigotry.

By the same token, multiculturalists should stop the bigotry against Christians. Overemphasis on the Establishment Clause and suppression of the Free Exercise Clause of the First Amendment have blotted out the Christian perspective of the majority of the citizens of this country, and even the historical fact of the foundation of this country on Christian principles.¹⁴ What other than our Christian origins could explain the words “In God we trust” emblazoned on our currency or the prayer *still* offered before each Democratic (yes, Democratic) Executive Committee meeting? The claim that voluntary, public prayer violates the spirit of the Constitution or the intent of the Founders is ahistorical and false.

The Acts 17:26 Christian. Accepting individuals from all backgrounds is an important goal for non-Christians and Christians alike; so are the values that make democracy work: majority rule, minority rights, equality, popular sovereignty, and popular consent. If multiculturalists can agree to work within the limits that democracy places on discrimination so that they respect everyone equally, without imposing an agenda laden with leftist values, they will find less resistance from Christians to their contributions. In similar fashion, Christians should ask God to examine their hearts and find if there is any wicked way in them (Ps. 139:23–24). In other words, Christians need to ask whether they are harboring feelings of discrimination against people of other ethnicities, or whether they are reluctant to love certain non-Christians. If so, they need to repent and attempt to emulate Christ’s example.

— Helena Benitez

NOTES

1. All Bible quotations are from the New King James Version.
2. Ron Brandt, “On Educating for Diversity: A Conversation with James A. Banks,” *Educational Leadership* 51, 8 (1994): 28–32.
3. Barbara Kingsolver, *The Poisonwood Bible* (New York: HarperCollins, 1999).
4. Brandt.
5. Sandra Stotsky, “Is It Really Multicultural Illiteracy?” *The Education Digest* 65, 4 (1999): 17–21.
6. Theodore Kalsounis, “Multicultural Education and Citizenship Education at A Crossroads,” *The Social Studies* 88, 1 (1997): 18–23.
7. Rebecca Bigler, “The Use of Multicultural Curricula and Materials to Counter Racism in Children,” *Journal of Social Issues* 55, 4 (1999): 687–714.
8. Elizabeth Whitt et. al., “Influences on Students’ Openness to Diversity and Challenge in The Second and Third Years of College,” *Journal of Higher Education* 72, 2 (2001): 172–205.
9. Kathleen Anne Ross, “Can Diversity and Community Coexist in Higher Education?” *The American Behavioral Scientist* 42, 6 (1999): 1024–40.
10. Bigler, 687.
11. Apanakhi Buckley, “Multicultural Reflection,” *Journal of Teacher Education* 51, 2 (2000): 143–49.
12. Arthur Schlesinger, “Writing, and Rewriting, History,” *The New Leader* 74, 14 (1991): 12–15.
13. Allan Bloom, *The Closing of The American Mind* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1987); E. D. Hirsch, Jr., *What Every American Needs to Know* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1987).
14. David Limbaugh, *Persecution: How Liberals Are Waging War against Christianity* (Washington, D.C.: Regnery, 2003).