

# CHRISTIAN THEOLOGY AND CULTURAL PLURALITY<sup>1</sup>

RICHARD J. MOUW  
FULLER THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY.

H. Richard Niebuhr's 1951 book *Christ and Culture* has earned its status as a modern Christian classic. It has been an immensely influential work. Not only has it provided hosts of educated Christians with the categories which they employ in thinking about the patterns of Christian cultural involvement, but it has also had a significant impact on those scholars who make it their full-time business to engage in the Christian study of cultural phenomena.

When we read Niebuhr's book carefully today, however, it seems obvious that it is marred by at least one very serious defect: an almost complete inattention to the fact of cultural plurality. For some of us, it now seems impossible to spend much time thinking about Christ and *culture* without quickly getting around to questions about Christ and the *cultures*.

For one thing, the rather intense ecumenical explorations that have occurred since Niebuhr wrote his book make it clear that the differences among the perspectives that he discussed cannot be understood without considerable attention to cultural plurality. What Niebuhr took to be accounts of the relationship between Christ and culture-as-such seem to be more plausibly viewed as attempts to work out the relationship between Christ and two or more cultural systems. The Amish may be 'against' contemporary technological culture, but not because they are against culture-as-such; they are loyal to the technological 'simplicity' of an earlier rural culture. Roman Catholic liberation theologians undoubtedly believe that Christ is in some sense 'above' culture; but this does not deter them from opposing, in the name of Christ, the cultural values of capitalism. And the 'Christianized' culture of the super-patriot is not necessarily the cultural *status quo*; it is often an idealized political culture of the past. In short, when we look at the actual views and practices of proponents of the viewpoints represented in Niebuhr's typology, we find it difficult to attribute to them a stance toward culture *simpliciter*. Each group is attempting to co-ordinate the competing claims which are presented to it by conflicting cultural and subcultural systems.

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1. This paper was first presented at the Consultation of Theologians and Anthropologists at Los Angeles in April 1986.

The situation gets even more complex when we turn from the older ecumenical arguments - Reformed versus Anabaptist, Lutheran versus Catholic - to the newer discussions of cross-cultural matters as they affect the global Christian community. Here the issues raised have to do with a kind of 'ecumenism' that no Christians can avoid - least of all those Christians who are committed to bringing the gospel to the nations. For example, conservative Protestants may be able to formulate plausible theological rationales that exempt them from the meetings of conciliar ecumenism. But they cannot avoid theological challenges that arise from the kinds of 'household' discussions that occur among people from many tribes and tongues who have responded in faith to their own evangelical proclamations.

Niebuhr was not completely unaware of the issues raised by this latter kind of cross-cultural discussion. But he disposes of the subject quickly in a single paragraph in his opening chapter. He refers to scholars, particularly Troeltsch, who have argued that Christian thought and practice have become 'inextricably intertwined' with Western culture. But Niebuhr has difficulty taking this concern seriously:

Troeltsch himself . . . is highly aware of the tension between Christ and Western culture, so that even for the Westerner Jesus Christ is never merely a member of his cultural society. Furthermore, Christians in the East, and those who are looking forward to the emergence of a new civilization, are concerned not only with the Western Christ but with one who is to be distinguished from Western faith in him and who is relevant to life in other cultures. Hence culture as we are concerned with it is not a particular phenomenon but the general one, though the general thing appears only in particular forms, and though a Christian of the West cannot think about the problem save in Western terms.<sup>2</sup>

Here we have Niebuhr's own rationale for his lack of attention to cultural plurality in *Christ and Culture*. Since the Christ with whom he is concerned can never be viewed as a member of this or that cultural system, Niebuhr thinks he can legitimately ignore the differences among cultural systems and ask only the general question of how Christ relates to culture-as-such.

This seems much too facile. Indeed it has the feel of a *non sequitur*. At the very least it seems possible to move from premises similar to Niebuhr's to the opposite conclusion. If the Christ with whom we are concerned is never a member of one particular cultural system but 'is relevant to life in other cultures', then is it not important to ask how

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2. H. Richard Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture*, New York, 1951, pp. 30-31

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differing enculturated understandings of Jesus Christ are to be compared and evaluated? Don't we have to ask how Christ *can* be relevant to life in diverse cultural societies? And since 'the general thing' called culture appears, by Niebuhr's own admission, 'only in particular forms', must we not then pay much attention to those particularities?

One suspects that Niebuhr's lack of interest in these questions has to be understood in the light of his sympathetic reference to 'those who are looking forward to the emergence of a new civilization' - one perhaps where cultural particularities will yield to an Enlightenment-type vision, or be gathered up into some overarching synthesis-culture. But, however that may be, Niebuhr does make it clear that he favours 'the general things' over the 'particular forms'.

Niebuhr's brief comments on this subject exemplify one way in which some Christians deal with the fact of cultural plurality: they assume that the problems posed by cultural particularities are not 'deep' issues for Christians to wrestle with. If we focus on culture-as-such, 'the general thing', the surface disparities among various culturally-situated understandings of the Christian faith will eventually disappear.

It is not so common these days, however, for Christian scholars - even those who might have some sympathies for the Niebuhrian approach - to attempt to dispose of the difficulties as quickly as Niebuhr did. Most people who think about these matters at all seem to believe that significant attention must be given to the facts of cultural diversity. There are all sorts of factors that can be invoked in order to account for this change of mood since Niebuhr's day. For one thing, we have all become familiar with accusations of 'cultural imperialism' on the part of critics of the 'North Atlantic consensus' in theology. To such critics today, Niebuhr's self-confident talk about 'the general thing' will sound for all the world like 'the particular thing' in a rather familiar guise.

But it is not just because of duress that we take such things seriously. Many of us have also learned much from Christian cultural particularities other than our own. It is difficult, for example, for a white, male 'North Atlantic' theologian, even one of a rather conservative bent, to come away from a serious sampling of the writing of, say, James Cone, Gustavo Gutierrez, Kosuke Koyama and Phyllis Trible, without at least some inkling that his theological horizons have been expanded in crucial ways. Such experiences give rise to the felt need to account for the fact of cultural plurality.

But why? Why is the fact of culturally diverse theological formulations a *problem* that we must account for? Different cultures have different eating habits and different technologies for disposing of garbage. But most of us do not trouble ourselves in searching for *theories* that will somehow 'account' for those differences.

The fact is that the phenomenon of culturally diverse theological formulations *is* experienced as a problem with various degrees of intensity. Straightforward relativists will be the least troubled; they will hold that, given the absence of cross-culturally binding norms for deciding the 'correctness' of theological formulations, diversity of formulation, like culinary plurality, is a 'given' which must simply be accepted. On the other end of the spectrum are, for example, Enlightenment-influenced thinkers for whom the diversity must eventually be eliminated by means of the global spread of, say, rational technology.

Cultural plurality does pose a problem of sorts for evangelical thought. But evangelicals certainly ought not to approach the problem with a deep sense of outrage over the fact of theological diversity. There are at least four reasons why the existence of some degree of such culturally-situated diversity fits well into the evangelical worldview.

First, since all evangelicals accept some version of the doctrine of what traditional Calvinists call 'the antithesis', there is for them a basic diversity that is built into the very scheme of things from the time of the Fall until the Last Judgement. During this dispensation human society is caught up in a cosmic struggle between belief and unbelief. The basic patterns of belief and unbelief stand in radical opposition to each other. If there were no other factors which influenced human consciousness, then, we could still expect important differences to show up between the 'cultures' of righteousness and unrighteousness.

Second, there is the fact of continuing human sinfulness even *within* the Christian community. Abraham Kuyper, who was himself capable of sketching out the patterns of the antithesis in the starkest of terms, once remarked that he was continually struck by the fact that the world often acted better than he expected it to while the church often acted worse than anticipated. This is an important observation. The rebel sigh is still to be heard in each Christian heart. The global community of blood-bought sinners has not yet been fully sanctified. This 'not yet' operates alongside of the 'no longer' in the Christian community, a factor that contributes to our inability to arrive at a complete consensus on significant matters of teaching and practice.

Third, there is the fact of our finitude. Human finiteness is not a result of sin; our first parents were created perfect, but theirs was a finite perfection. Because we are beings who, even in our redeemed state, continue to be ignorant about many things, we should not be surprised over cognitive differences among Christians who are limited in their grasp of the riches of both the creation and the Creator.

Fourth, there also seems to be a contributing factor that has to do with special cultural 'assignments' which God distributes among the peoples of the earth. Herman Bavinck once suggested that there is a 'collective' possession of the image of God. The Lord distributes differ-

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ent aspects of the *image*, Bavinck argued, to different cultural groups.<sup>3</sup> Only when the redeemed peoples representing various tribes and tongues of the earth bring 'the glory and the honour of the nations' (see Isaiah 60:5 and Revelation 21:26) into the Holy City will we see the many-splendored image of God in its fulness.

Bavinck's proposal may be wrong, taken as an account of the *imago dei* in particular. But it may be correct in its broader intent. To be sure, there is a genuine threat here of reinforcing the kind of racist ideology that finds the 'separate development' of ethnic groups to be a showpiece of orthodox theology. But even recognizing the real and present danger of that kind of perverse thinking, it is important to recognize the strong hint in the Scriptures that there will be in the eschaton a full gathering-in of the unique gifts of different cultural groups, and that we can begin to anticipate that eschatological gathering-in here and now in the post-Pentecost church.

In one of his helpful discussions of the proper ingredients of a Christian epistemology, Arthur Holmes has argued that Christians must approach the phenomenon of human cognitive disagreement with two complementary attitudes: 'epistemic humility' and 'epistemic hope'.<sup>4</sup> Because we believe that 'all truth is God's truth', we are aware of the fact that only the Divine Knower possesses a clear and comprehensive knowledge of all things. Thus the grounds for Christian epistemic humility. But we also know that God has promised to lead us eventually into that mode of perfect knowing that is proper to us as human creatures. Thus the basis for our epistemic hope.

The bearing of these two attitudes on the issues of cross-cultural diversity should be immediately clear. We believe that all crucial issues of human cognitive disagreement are ultimately dissolvable. But we also know that for now we see through a glass darkly. Nonetheless, we can enter into cross-cultural discussion with the firm conviction that the matters about which we presently disagree as Christians, no matter how basic they may seem to be, will not forever divide us. Cross-cultural epistemic harmony will someday be attained, as a gift of the Kingdom that awaits us. And so we press on, in humility and hope.

Recognizing the tentativeness that is proper to Christian cross-cultural explorations in the present age, how then shall we live as those who are called to explore cultural particularities in the light of the Gospel?

The recent theological attention given to cultural diversity has been associated with two themes in contemporary Christian thought: contex-

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3. Cf. Herman Bavinck, *Gereformeerde Dogmatiek*, vol. II, pp. 621-622. The relevant paragraph is translated and quoted by Anthony Hoekema, *Created in God's Image*, Grand Rapids, 1986, pp. 100-101.

4. Arthur F. Holmes, *Contours of a World View*, Grand Rapids, 1983, p. 128.

tualization and liberation. In popular discussions these two themes are sometimes viewed as interwoven. But properly understood, they are clearly distinguishable; indeed, they can come into open conflict with each other.

Contextualization, like its close kin indigenization, is a theme that is emphasized by people who want to draw sympathetic attention to the ways in which the Gospel is received and interpreted in diverse cultural situations. It is not uncommon in circles where contextualization is viewed with favour to hear pleas that we take an honest and critical look, in approaching non-Western, or non-North-Atlantic, cultural situations, at the ways in which our presentations of the Gospel might be shaped by 'Western linear thinking' or 'Enlightenment rationalism' or the thought patterns of 'scientific technology'. There is a discernible bias in favour of theological pluralism in such discussions.

Defenders of liberation theology, on the other hand, do not necessarily approach diverse cultural situations with a love of pluralism. They will often be quite critical of, say, Third World cultural patterns - even though they may also share the contextualizers' fear of importing the dominant patterns of Western cultural life into other situations.

The differences here seem to have come out clearly in a published discussion a few years ago in which Sister Joan Chatfield, a Maryknoll missionary, issued an urgent call for the elimination of sexism as it affects both the community of people engaged in evangelizing programs and the patriarchal cultures toward which those efforts are directed.<sup>5</sup> One of the respondents to Chatfield's article was evangelical anthropologist Marguerite Kraft, who - while agreeing that we can learn more about how God wants men and women to work together in Christian mission - insisted nonetheless that the sexism issue is

a western cultural struggle, one which we should not be dumping on the rest of the world. Status and roles are given to the individual by the culture and most cultures have a clearly defined division of labour according to the sexes. I do not see this as sexism. There is nobody so blind as one who tries to force her agenda on everyone without first trying to understand from the other person's point of view.<sup>6</sup>

Here we seem to have a clear example of the way in which contextualization and liberation can stand in tension. Situations arise for missiological reflection where we must decide whether liberation concerns are to override contextualizing considerations, or *vice versa*.

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5. Joan Chatfield, 'Women and Men: Colleagues in Mission', *Gospel in Context*, vol. 2, no. 2, April 1979, pp. 4-14.

6. Marguerite G. Kraft, response to Chatfield, *Ibid.*, p. 20.

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To be sure, both Chatfield and Kraft would likely insist upon introducing nuances in formulating their positions in more detail. Nonetheless, the differing tendencies manifested in their comments point to a very important question for a theology of cultural plurality: from what point of view, in the light of what norms, is it permissible to criticize a contextualized understanding of the Christian faith? At least four different responses to this question can be discerned in recent missiological discussion.

The first position is a straightforwardly relativistic account of theological plurality. Pure examples of this response are not easy to find: it is difficult to imagine an 'anything goes' approach to theological contextualization that still deserves to be called Christian. When, for example, Marguerite Kraft responded to Joan Chatfield's call to fight against Third World sexism, she did not say that, since right and wrong are culturally relative, sexism should be tolerated in a place like northern Nigeria. Rather she argued that what might, at first glance, *look* like a Nigerian manifestation of sexism might not in fact be so - or at least might not be *blatantly* so - when the larger cultural context is taken into account. Kraft's argument was not a live-and-let-live relativism; instead she was advocating the caution of 'first trying to understand from the other person's point of view'.

But there are writers who seem willing to concede quite a bit to a relativistic point of view. For example, the Asian theologian C. S. Song writes:

There is no such thing as a theology immune from cultural and historical influences. Theology is culturally and historically not neutral. A neutral theology is in fact a homeless theology. It does not belong anywhere.<sup>7</sup>

Song goes on to argue that it is wrong to look for an ecumenical theology that is somehow 'abstracted from' or the result of a 'synthesis' out of, particular cultural theologies. The only proper ecumenical theology is, he tells us, one that 'is confined within "particular" theologies'.<sup>8</sup>

Song says more than this - and other remarks of his suggest that we should perhaps not put too much weight on these sentences if we are to understand him correctly. But nonetheless these Kuhnian comments, taken on their own, do seem to contain a strong suggestion of relativism. Each theology is tied to its cultural 'home'. To criticize a prop-

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7. C. S. Song, 'Open Frontiers of Theology in Asia', *Netherlands Universities Foundation for International Cooperation Bulletin*, vol. 26, nos. 3/4, Summer/Autumn 1982, pp. 52-53.

8. *Ibid.*, p. 54.

erly domesticated theology is to attempt to stand outside of any 'home' whatsoever - which is impossible to do, Song seems to think. To attempt such a critical perspective, then, is to smuggle domestic norms from one home to another. All of which seems to suggest that cross-cultural evaluation is simply impossible.

A second position attributes 'privileged-culture' status to some contemporary cultural point of view. Here the perspective of a specific cultural group is taken as the reference point from which other cultural systems can be legitimately assessed. In his well-known 'lamb and wolf' speech at the 1979 World Council of Churches' Conference on Faith, Science and the Future, Rubem Alves castigated the 'scientific civilization' of the West for what he views as its project of working for 'the final assimilation of all non-western, non-scientific cultures' into itself while it dismissed 'as superstitious the beliefs of other peoples, considered primitive'.<sup>9</sup>

Alves' characterization of the situation seems to suggest that he is endorsing the perspective of one or another Third World culture. But this interpretation does not comport well with the fact that he immediately goes on to condemn the 'home'-grown dictatorial regimes of those cultures. It turns out that both the 'civilization' of the West and various non-western despotic cultures are to be critically assessed from the point of view of what Alves labels 'the culture of oppression'.<sup>10</sup> His privileged-culture, then, is the viewpoint of oppressed victims as identified by means of the categories of liberation theology.

In arguing that the point of view of the oppressed peoples of the earth provides us with a critical reference point in evaluating other culturally situated claims, Alves is agreeing with his westernised opponents that there is indeed an existing privileged-culture perspective. His disagreement with those opponents - which is, of course, more than a trivial one - is over *whose* cultural perspective provides us with a reliable Archimedean-point.

A third position is one that we might label 'dialectical'. This is a viewpoint that gets negative mention in the comments by C.S. Song that were quoted above, where Song tells us that a proper ecumenical theology is not to be found by looking for a 'synthesis' to emerge out of the interplay of particular enculturated theologies.

It is unlikely, however, that Song's warning will be sufficient to stem the current tide of Hegelianism. The hope for a dialectically-produced synthesis beats strong in the bosom of contemporary Christian thought. To cite just one prominent case: in *God Has Many Names*,

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9. Rubem Alves, 'On the Eating Habits of Science: A Response', *Faith and Science in an Unjust World: Report of the World Council of Churches' Conference on Faith, Science and the Future*, vol. I, edited by Roger L. Shinn, Philadelphia, 1980, p. 41.

10. Alves, *Ibid.*, pp. 42-43.

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John Hick expresses the confident expectation that we will someday achieve not merely a synthetic Christian theology, but a synthetic 'world theology' as such:

A global theology would consist of theories or hypotheses designed to interpret the religious experience of mankind, as it occurs not only within Christianity, but also within the other great streams of religious life, and indeed in the great non-religious faiths also, Marxism and Maoism and perhaps - according to one's definition of 'religion' - Confucianism and certain forms of Buddhism. The project of a global theology is obviously vast, requiring the co-operative labours of many individual and groups over a period of several generations.<sup>11</sup>

On this account it is indeed possible to criticize particularized theologies - but only from the point of view of a future synthesized theology which we do not presently possess. Our present criticisms of cultural particularities can only be based on assessments of what will or will not move us creatively in the direction of the future synthesis.

None of the three positions mentioned thus far will be satisfactory to evangelicals. Each of them is, we might say, too *historicistic*. Each invests some aspect of cultural development as such with normative status. The relativistic position assumes that the plurality of culturally developed perspectives is a 'given' that we cannot get beyond. The privileged-cultural position absolutizes a specific contemporary cultural perspective, whether it be that of Western 'scientific technology' or the culture of the 'oppressed of the earth'. The dialectical position absolutizes the point of view that will be manifested in some future cultural synthesis, which will emerge out of the interaction among present particularities.

A fourth, non-historicistic - and more satisfactory - position is given theological formulation by the black South African Allan Boesak. In the course of his critical discussion of the Black Theologies of North America, Boesak takes note of James Cone's insistence that theology be done 'in the light of the black situation'. This insistence - obviously stemming from privileged-culture tendencies - is, Boesak argues, misleading:

The black situation is the situation within which reflection and action take place, but it is the Word of God which illuminates the reflection and guides the action. We fear that Cone attaches too much

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11. John Hick, *God Has Many Names: Britain's New Religious Pluralism*, London, 1980, p. 8.

theological import to the black experience and the black situation as if these realities *within themselves* have revelational value on a par with Scripture. God, it seems to us, reveals himself *in* the situation. The black experience provides the framework within which blacks understand the revelation of God in Jesus Christ. No more, no less.<sup>12</sup>

This last comment is a telling one. The black experience, Boesak insists, is not itself divine revelation; rather it is no more than the situation in which blacks have received that revelation. But neither is it *less* than a situation to which God has addressed his revelation. This means that while the black historical experience is not on a par with Scriptural revelation, it is at least on a par with the *white* historical experience, which must *also* be denied revelatory status.

On this view, cultural particularities are 'situations' in which Christian people receive, and give theological shape to, the Gospel message. No such situation constitutes a privileged-cultural perspective as such. The test of theological truth is not whether a claim is espoused by a particular cultural group, but whether that claim can be shown to be legitimate in the light of the revelatory source, the Scriptures. The Bible alone has privileged status as an Archimedean-point for testing enculturated theological claims.

We may think of such a position as 'dialogical' in nature. Of course, the importance of dialogic activity of some sort or another can be stressed from the point of view of, say, dialecticism. Hick, for example, writes of the need for 'dialogue' among representatives of world religions. But on this fourth view, dialogue is understood, to use a distinction recently formulated by Alasdair MacIntyre, not as aiming at a 'dissolution' of opposites into a 'synthetic both/and' but as an encounter in which we are open to the possibility that there will be an 'either/or of incommensurability' that can only be decided 'in the exclusive favor of the victor'.<sup>13</sup>

The dialogical position being proposed here does not entail the view that truth as such is whatever emerges out of serious cross-cultural dialogue. The test for truth is not tied to the results of *any* sort of human activity. Again, 'all truth is God's truth'. But dialogue may be a crucial *strategy* for discerning God's truth with increasing clarity. Cross-cultural dialogue - talking together about the way the Word has been appropriated by us in our diverse cultural particularities - is an indispensable part of the process whereby the Christian community grows in

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12. Allan A Boesak, *Farewell to Innocence: A Socio-Ethical Study on Black Theology and Power*, New York, 1977, p. 12.

13. Alasdair MacIntyre, 'Bernstein's Distorting Mirrors: A Rejoinder', *Soundings*, vol. LXVII, no.1, Spring 1984, pp 32-33.

wisdom.

Like the proponents of the dialectical position, then, we will cherish the process of give-and-take among representatives of various cultural viewpoints, even though we do not thereby mean to imply that truth is nothing more than that which emerges out of an ongoing dialectic. And like the privileged-culture position, we will be open to the possibility that cross-cultural dialogue will sometimes require 'either/or' choices among conflicting perspectives - although it is to be hoped that the requisite attitudes of epistemic humility will keep us from regularly insisting that 'exclusive victories' be declared.

And what of the first perspective? Is there also something that we must concede to relativistic pluralism? Here it might be instructive to attend to a piece of advice offered by two professors from the bastion of North American fundamentalism, Liberty Baptist University, Ed Dobson and Ed Hindson, co-authors of *The Fundamentalist Phenomenon*. One consistent theme in their extensive defence of fundamentalism is a focussing on the existence of ethical 'absolutes', a reality to which they think other Christians, including many of us in the broader reaches of evangelicalism pay insufficient attention. Having stated their bold *apologia*, however, Dobson and Hindson turn in their own final chapter to a rather remarkable critique of the weaknesses of fundamentalism as a movement. They list ten such weaknesses. For our purposes here, though, Weakness Number Eight deserves special mention: 'Because of the Fundamentalists' commitment to the truth, there is a tendency among them to overabsolutism . . .'<sup>14</sup> It is difficult to improve on this charming formulation. We must be absolutists. But we must avoid 'overabsolutism'.

Relativistic pluralism, taken as a comprehensive theory about cross-cultural truth (or the lack thereof) is false. But it may serve nonetheless as an important procedural warning to us, lest we, like the Fundamentalists criticized by the Liberty Baptist professors, be so zealous in our 'commitment to the truth' that we err in the direction of 'overabsolutism'.

More specifically, while we must show zeal for the truth in cross-cultural matters, we must be careful not to squeeze all the riches of theology into the territory of the cognitive. There may be a residual, stubbornly-resistant core of theological plurality that will be with us even after we have become longtime citizens of the eternal Kingdom. All theological issues that are strictly matters of truth will surely be decisively settled in the presence of the eternal Throne. But it may be that some of our cross-cultural - and perhaps even our *intra*-cultural -

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14. *The Fundamentalist Phenomenon: The Resurgence of Conservative Christianity*, edited by Jerry Falwell, with Ed Dobson and Ed Hindson, New York 1981, p. 183.

theological differences have more to do with differences of style and temperament and cultural 'tone' than with the 'truth' in the strictest sense. Perhaps something of the many-splendored riches of our diverse cultural 'assignments' will be celebrated *in* their cultural particularities long after the last tribal delegation has entered in through the open gates of the New Jerusalem.