

Christians Versus Culture:

Should We Love or Hate the World?

By Humberto M. Rasi

The Seventh-day Adventist Church can truly claim to be international in its work and global in its vision. After 150 years of one of the most persistent and systematic mission programs in church history, we have established Adventism in 209 of the 236 countries recognized by the United Nations. Our membership is almost nine million. We are increasingly involved in the arts, education, government, health care, mass communications, research, and socio-economic development in many parts of the world.

However, growth on a global scale produces its own dilemmas. One dilemma that confronts our church today is not a new one. In fact, it has been called the perennial Christian question: How do we relate to culture? The question was anticipated by Jesus Himself. In His high priestly prayer, The Lord petitioned "My prayer is not that you take them out of the world but that you protect them from the evil one. They are not of the world, even as I am not of it.... As you sent me into the world, I have sent them into the world" (John 17:15-18).*

A look at two passage of the Apostle John reveals an intrinsic tension. On the one hand, quoting the words of Jesus, John writes, "For God so loved the world [*kosmon* in Greek] that he gave his one and only Son" (John 3:16). On the other hand, he admonishes us, "Do not love the world [*kosmon*] or anything in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in Him" (1 John 2:15).

The issue is clear. We are in the world, a world that God loves, and a world in which we have a mission. And yet we are not of this world, and we should guard against falling in love with this world.

How do we reconcile these seemingly conflicting statements? How can we be in the world and yet not become part of it? How do we understand and interrelate culture, community, and our commitment of faith? Where do we draw the line between the demands of society and the kingdom of God?

A review of Scripture and the way Christian have handled the problem in the past will help us (a) define some key concepts; (b) outline basic response to the problem; and (c) develop an Adventist position.

Key concepts

To begin with, let us define two words: *culture and world*. In a broad sense, culture may be defined as the beliefs, values, and priorities of a community expressed through its institutions, practices, and creative manifestations.¹

To arrive at a biblical perspective of culture, we must turn to the cultural mandate God gave to our first parents at Creation: "Let us make man in our image, in our likeness, and let them rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air, over the livestock, over all the earth, and over all the creatures that move along the ground" (Genesis 1:26). "The Lord God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to work it and take care of it" (Genesis 2:15).

This mandate gives to humanity rulership over the earth. The rulership includes not just power and dominion, but also creativity, concern, and care. The Lord commanded us to "Take care" of the earth. The English phrase "to care" is rendered in Latin by *colere*, the word from which we derive *culture*. In a biblical sense, then, culture may be understood as the result of human cultivation of and interaction with God's creation. Seen thus, culture is the secondary environment that human hands and minds impose on the natural world.

The New Testament often uses the word *world (kosmon)* to refer to culture, or the results of human activity and creativity. The usage has two connotations. The first is neutral or positive one. World is seen as the created order, including the material earth (Matthew 24:21), the people living on it (Matthew 4:8; John 12:19), the sphere of human life (1 Timothy 6:7), and the target of the disciples' mission (Matthew 5:14). Though affected by the Fall, the world and its inhabitants are seen as God's creation.

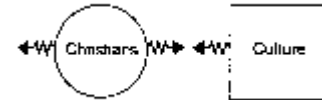
The second usage has a negative connotation. World consists of human agencies controlled by Satan, in open rebellion against God. The earth and its inhabitants are seen as involved in a cosmic struggle between spiritual forces under the command of Jesus and Satan (Ephesians 6:12). In this competing battle for loyalty, the sinful world didn't recognize Jesus as God when He came to this earth (John 1:10) and opposed Him throughout His ministry (John 16:33). Hence John warns those who follow Christ not to love this world or anything in it (1 John 2:15, 16). James adds that friendship with a world such as that is equivalent to hating God (James 4:4). Indeed, why would a Christian love such a world, for as Paul says, without God the world is hopeless anyway (Ephesians 2:12) and its wisdom is nothing more than foolishness (1 Corinthians 1:20)?

Thus the Bible posits a dual understanding of the world: on the one hand, a creation and His work toward its restoration; on the other, a world, controlled by Satan, in rebellion against God, fostering a life independent of Him. Christians are to live in the former and to flee from the latter. More than that, living in the former, they have a mission to the latter. They need not fear that world, for the powers of that world, under the dominion of the demonic forces, have already been defeated at the cross and are doomed to a final annihilation at the end of time (Malachi 4:1; Revelation 20:7-10).

Three Basic responses

Until that cataclysmic end, what should Christians do? Perhaps we can learn from history by asking the question, How have Christians in the past dealt with the problem? Richard Niebuhr's seminal work on the issue serves us to isolate three major responses that emerge as we study how Christians have struggled with culture.²

First response: opposition and separation. Basic to this posture is the assumption that the present world is evil and that Christians are "aliens and strangers" (1 Peter 2:11). Hence Christians should have nothing to do with the world.



The history of Christianity is replete with examples of this response. Early Christians rejected Greco-Roman culture, declaring it idolatrous and corrupt. The monastic movement of the Middle Ages reflected the desire for complete withdrawal from the world. Many Protestant sectarian movements--the Brethren, Mennonites, Anabaptists, Quakers, and also the Millerites (forerunners of our church)--also embraced this approach.

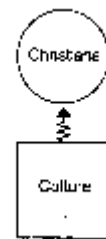
How should we evaluate this response? Those who chose this route did so with a sincere belief that they were faithfully applying the lordship of Jesus Christ to their lives. Their sincerity should be respected, and their courage in enduring persecution and martyrdom should be admired. Theirs was not a rosy path. Their total commitment to the gospel and the radical nature of their Christianity often led to revival and reformation in history.

However, the Bible does not mandate a complete withdrawal and isolation from the world; indeed, even as it cautions that we do not completely identify ourselves with the world and its preoccupations, it urges us to mediate God's message to that world in need. Christians cannot escape culture. We are created to be social beings, and it is within a society or a culture that we live, work, worship, and witness. At most those who break away from the world simply develop a different culture or subculture. More importantly, the response of withdrawal assumes that sin is caused by the external world, whereas the Bible teaches that sin begins within the mind. Excessive emphasis on separation from the world makes religion irrelevant and communication of the gospel difficult.

Second response: tension. This response recognizes in this world evidences of both the goodness of God's original creation and of the evil of human fallenness. But this reality is marked with unavoidable tension between the two: Christians have sought to solve this dilemma in different ways:

Christianity as superior to culture. Such a view considers culture as basically good but deficient and hence in need of improvement. Christians should involve themselves in all lawful worldly activities but live by a higher standard of goodness prompted by divine love. Human intellect can achieve only imperfect knowledge and happiness; ultimate wisdom and true fulfillment are received only through Jesus Christ.

We have here a rational basis for cooperation between Christians and non-Christians for the improvement of life on gospel's distinctiveness. Believers who have embraced this view have had a positive influence on the arts, education, government, and the sciences. However, this response doesn't acknowledge the presence of evil in every human undertaking, leaving Christians with the risk of attending to the preservation and improvement of culture rather than to the establishment of the divine kingdom.

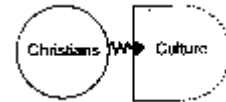


Christianity in juxtaposition to culture. This dualist position acknowledges that the result of human activity in that the world is usually evil but necessary. There is an unavoidable conflict between God's righteousness and human sinfulness. Reason is tainted with selfishness, and culture is infected with godlessness. Although Christians are aware of the situation, they cannot escape it. The apostle Paul saw that society's efforts in the moral realm are designed more to prevent evil from becoming destructive rather than to provide a positive good (see Romans 13:4). Likewise, Martin Luther (1483-1546) saw Christian life on this planet as both tragic and joyful--a dilemma without resolution on this side of death.



However, Christian dualists have to face the tension between God's ideals and human reality, between grace and sin. So believers involving themselves with the world do so without any illusions. They stress individual conversion and like, Paul, they view social institutions as merely restrainers of anarchy rather than constructive forces providing for human freedom and justice.

Christianity as culture-transformer. This posture considers culture as fallen but redeemable. The present world still reflects God's creation, albeit imperfectly. The problem is perverted good not essential evilness. Culture needs to be transformed, not discarded, and Christians can help change the world to God's glory.



Augustine (354-430) and John Calvin (1509-1564) are representatives of this hopeful stance. The involvement of Christians in "worldly affairs"--business, education, health care, and science, for example--has resulted in admirable improvement of various societies. However, the very nature of socio-political activism raises two significant cautions for the Christian. First, over time social activism can easily erode the core Christian concerns of the gospel. Second, there is the presumption that the ultimate solution of human predicament lies in social programs rather than in the biblical teaching that God will intervene and establish His eternal kingdom.

Third response: assimilation. This position assumes that culture is basically good. It points to the abundant evidences of God's presence and activity itself established in the past a close connection with a culture or mindset (e.g., medieval Catholicism, enlightened capitalism, or Christian socialism)?



Stressing cooperation and communication, this approach allows the gospel to be interpreted, understood, and embraced in different cultural settings. In the process, a tendency to compromise the essence of the gospel creeps in, resulting in the emergence of Christ the great moral teacher rather than the Lord of life and sole Savior of the world. Thus, Christianity becomes an all-embracing humanitarianism. The blurred distinction between the realms of God and Satan, propped by a moralistic humanism, offers on a silver plate universal salvation.

Toward an Adventist position

Which of these approaches has been the Adventist attitude toward the world during our 150-year history? And what should our present posture be? Obviously, it needs to be both consistent with biblical revelation and flexible enough to respond to the diverse cultures and settings in which Adventists live and witness. I propose that such a stance include at least three principles:

1. Nurture a biblical worldview that includes the Great Controversy motif.³ This overarching narrative is the framework within which Adventists place salvation history. It consists of seven great moments:

- *God.* "In the beginning God" (Genesis 1:1). An Adventist worldview must begin with the assertion of God's self-existence as a Person.
- *Creation.* God creates a perfect universe and populates it with intelligent beings. He also fashions this earth, creates plant and animal life, and brings into existence our first parents.
- *Satan.* Lucifer, an exalted angel, rebels against God and is expelled from heaven with his followers.
- *Fall.* Satan tempts Adam and Eve into sin. The entire world suffers the consequences.
- *Redemption.* Jesus Christ, the Creator, comes to this world in human flesh and through His death and resurrection offers salvation to those who accept Him.
- *Second Coming.* Christ returns to this earth in glory, grants immortality to those who have received Him as Savior, and takes them home to heaven.
- *Consummation.* At the end of the millennium God destroys those who have rejected His salvation, eliminates evil from the universe, and restores creation to its pristine state.

The great Controversy centers on two conflicting views of God's character and principles: one that considers God as loving, gracious, and just; the other that considers God as arbitrary, unjust, and unfair. Our world has become a battleground for these opposing forces of good and evil, and the battle is played out principally

through human lives. Although created in the image of God, we have fallen from our original perfect state. Without supernatural help, we cannot hope to return to our original condition.

2. Seek a critical engagement with the surrounding culture. Such a stance requires that we balance four biblical approaches to the world.

Separation from anything openly contrary to God's revealed will. God is holy; those who choose to love Him seek holiness (1 Peter 2:9) and "avoid every kind of evil" (1 Thessalonians 5:22). Christ expects total allegiance from His followers to His principles (Matthew 6:24; 12:30) and total rejection of evil (Revelation 18:2, 4).

Affirmation of everything that is compatible with God's revelation and original plan for humanity. God is the source of all truth, justice, and beauty attainable by humans (James 1:17). In addition, God has conveyed through His Holy Spirit the basic guiding principles of goodness to operate in the human environment (John 16:13; Romans 2:14,15). So Christians must affirm, as did Paul, all acceptable aspects of culture, and use them to carry out the gospel mandate to live and witness as Christians (1 Corinthians 9:22, 23; Acts 17:19-34).

Transformation of individual human beings, the exertion of a positive influence over social structures and practices through these individuals, and the movement of culture toward greater conformity with God's principles (Matthew 6:10). For this reason, Seventh-day Adventists give priority to spiritual conversion and view teaching, healing, and socio-economic development as complementary activities in the transformation of humanity. To honor God must ever remain the ultimate goal of all activities in which Christians engage (1 Corinthians 10:31; Colossians 3:17).

Contribution to the surrounding culture through elements that benefit humanity and enhance life. Jesus launched His earthly ministry by stressing the spiritual and social dimensions of His mission (Luke 4:18, 19). Throughout history, the world has been enriched by the contributions of Christian artists, benefactors, lawmakers, missionaries, musicians, scientists, and other professionals. Indeed, Christians have promoted religious liberty, extended education to those with limited opportunities, founded modern science, abolished slavery, and produced works of art that awaken the best in human beings.



This eclectic approach to the world can be diagrammed as follows:

3. Study God's Word, pray for discernment, and listen to the insights of other committed Adventists.

In our unavoidable involvement with the world, we should seek wisdom from the Holy Spirit. Together with other Adventists, we also need to discuss how the Bible's counsel applies to our relationship with the culture in which we live. We should not fear to be counter-cultural, if necessary. As Jesus promised (John 16:13), the Holy Spirit will guide us in our choice--our career or profession, our entertainment, the use of our resources, participation in social processes as voting, and our stand on issues such as freedom and justice, life and death, war and peace, environment and public health.

Doing God's will where we are

Meanwhile, Jesus expects us to do His will where we are--just as He did with the demon-possessed man of Mark 5:1-20. After He freed the man, Jesus and His disciples were preparing to go to the other side of the lake. The man who had experienced the healing power of Jesus wanted to follow Him. But Jesus told His new follower to return home--to his own culture--and share the good news with his family and friends. Therein lies the key to a Christian understanding of culture: Be a follower of Jesus where you are, and testify to the wonders of His grace in a worlds torn apart in different directions. As Niebuhr has noted: "Belief in him [Christ] and loyalty to his cause involves men in the double movement from world to God and from God to world . . . Christians . . . are forever being challenged to abandon all things for the sake of God; and forever being sent back into the world to teach and practice all the things that have been commanded them."⁴

Notes and references

¹ I have adapted Oliver R. Barclay's definition in *The Intellect and Beyond* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan Corporation, 1985), p. 123.

² See Richard Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture* (New York: Harper and Row, 1951).

³ See John M. Fowler, "The Making of a Christian Worldview," *Dialogue 2:1* (1990), pp. 5-8, 3, 31; and Humberto M. Rasi, "Fighting on Two Fronts," *Dialogue 3:1* (1991), pp. 4-7, 22, 23.

⁴ Niebuhr, p. 178.