

Christ & Culture

BOB HEERSPINK

We often think that our religious faith is separate from our culture, but is it really? How easy is it to distinguish between a cultural practice and a religious practice; and what effect does this have on evangelism? Today, Monsieur, an Arab expert on the Middle East and Islam, is joining the *Groundwork* conversation to talk about Christ in culture. Stay tuned.

DAVE BAST

So, Bob, we have been looking at the Church over these last few programs, and we have used as our framework a phrase from an ancient Christian creed or confession: We believe in one holy catholic and apostolic church; those are four marks, really; and we have looked at each one of those in turn: The unity of the Church, its essential oneness, its holiness despite the fact that Christians often aren't very holy, its apostolicity – it has to be grounded in the testimony of the Apostles, which is the New Testament; in other words, it has to be biblical; and it is catholic – it is universal – spread throughout the world.

Bob Heerspink;

But you know, a lot of Christians say there has to be yet one more mark of the Church, and that is mission. A church really isn't being the true Church – the true body of Christ – unless it is engaged in mission to the world, taking seriously the last command of Jesus Christ to the Church.

DAVE BAST

Well, that is the Great Commission, and it appears in various forms, actually. I have often pointed out that there are really multiple great commissions. There is one in each of the Gospels near the end, and one in Acts; but the most familiar one probably is from Matthew Chapter 28; the closing verses where Jesus says: ¹⁸All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me; ¹⁹therefore, go into all the world and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them... ²⁰and teaching them to observe what I have commanded.

BOB HEERSPINK

You know, that really is an amazing command, and I think sometimes we underestimate how incredible this task was given to the early Church. Here are God's people, essentially identified as the people of Israel, in one place geographically – essentially there is this one culture – and now they are going to blow the Gospel out to the world, where the Good News of Jesus Christ is going to penetrate into every culture, every society, that is on the face of the globe.

DAVE BAST

It is tough, and you are right; that adds an incredibly complex layer of complication to the whole enterprise because... that word that Jesus used there for *nations* doesn't mean what we think of as a political unit with a flag and closely defined, clearly defined, boundaries. It is the word *ethné* in Greek, from which we get *ethnic*; so he is really talking about sort of tribal groups or ethnic groups, and each of those has a distinct culture. So when the Gospel comes, it is going to come and have to find its own forms within that culture to be authentic.

BOB HEERSPINK

Yes, if you think about the movement of the Gospel outward from Jerusalem to Judea to Samaria to the uttermost parts of the earth, you see in the book of Acts some of the challenges of that movement of the Gospel into other cultural settings.

DAVE BAST

And we see it in our own world and time as well. You think about some of the ways that missionaries, for example, went and sort of imposed a western style of culture on the Christianity that they taught to the natives, you know, quote-unquote, and that sometimes created real tension and problems.

BOB HEERSPINK

Well, I am in a book group, and one of the books we read a while back was Barbara Kingsolver's *The Poisonwood Bible*, and reading that book about a missionary who takes the Gospel to Africa, and all the blunders he makes because he cannot understand the difference between the Christian faith and culture. It is painful as a pastor to read that and recognize that the story there is more than just a novel; it is really what has happened throughout the years as Christians have taken the Gospel to the world.

DAVE BAST

We often confuse some of our cultural mores or practices or customs with authentic New Testament Christianity, and that is when we get into trouble, but it is hard to separate those out at the same time. I mean, what really belongs to the essence of the Gospel that we have to insist on and preserve, and what things are culturally variable? That is a tough question.

BOB HEERSPINK

You know, there are some Christians who just want to throw culture out the door and think that they can have a Christianity that somehow transcends culture, and that is not true; we are all cultural beings; but then there are other people – Christians – who really embrace culture... really let their own culture take the Gospel captive.

DAVE BAST

And then, of course, you lose the core message and really lose Christianity itself. Now there is an extra sort of trump card that is working today with us, and that is the clash between Christianity and Islam, because now we really are confronted, all of us, with this. It is no longer possible to just think: Oh, other religions are way over there. We don't have to worry; we just send our missionaries over there and convert them. Now we are seeing that there are two major religions that each have their own world view and each affect culture, or are enculturated in different ways, and they are coming increasingly, not just into touch, but into conflict.

BOB HEERSPINK

Yes; you know, years ago we would think about sending missionaries to, say, the Middle East or to Islamic countries. You know, now Muslims are moving here to North America; they are becoming our neighbors; and while there was the potential of cultural clashes years ago, now we read about the tensions, the problems, the cultural issues, almost nightly in our papers.

DAVE BAST

So, what we want to do is explore this issue and dig a little deeper into the relationship of Christianity and Islam, and ask some questions about what the future might hold, both over there in Islamic countries that are historically... in other words, majority Islam, and as Muslims increasingly come to the West and live among us, how do we best show hospitality to them and reach out to them? So we have invited a friend who is also an expert in Islam and some of these other related questions: Monsieur; and when we come back he is going to join the conversation with us.

Segment 2

BOB HEERSPINK

This is *Groundwork*, where we dig into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Bob Heerspink.

DAVE BAST

And I am Dave Bast; and joining us now is Monsieur, that is a pseudonym, but he is an Arab from the Middle East who studied Islam extensively and lives in the Middle East currently; and he has consented to be part of this discussion as we dig into the issue of our faith and our culture and how those interrelate, and especially as Christianity confronts Islam. What do we do? How do we think? How do we reach out? How do we witness? What kind of missionary efforts are appropriate? So, Monsieur, welcome. Thank you.

MONSIEUR

Thank you.

DAVE BAST

I want to start with this question: For us in the West, over the course of history, we have developed gradually to the present where we have a separation of Church and State, and we have just come to accept this that government is supposed to be at least neutral with respect to establishing a religion or a church, but that is not really true in Muslim countries, is it?

MONSIEUR

No, it isn't true with Islam as a whole. We need to remember that Islam was heavily impacted by the prevalent, extra-biblical Judaism, which emphasized the nation – the *ummah* – and incorporated its aspirations, its beliefs, its hopes, into the building up of the *ummah*; and Islam began by basing its foundation on that. It is a religious *ummah*. The Arabs had to transfer from polytheism – the different gods – to the one god – the one supreme Allah, and as a nation that was their stand.

DAVE BAST

So *ummah* means *nation* essentially...

MONSIEUR

That is right.

DAVE BAST

But it is under Allah, so it is kind of a theocracy, we might say?

MONSIEUR

Absolutely. That is why Islamic purists today are correct. If you want to follow Islamic purism, then you need to emphasize the *ummah* and Allah's control – Allah's moving of the *ummah*.

BOB HEERSPINK

So, Monsieur, is Islam really that personal religion? You know, as Christians we talk about the Gospel and having a personal relationship to Jesus Christ; is Islam more of a cultural faith?

MONSIEUR

It is both; it depends. For the vast majority of Muslims, it is basically a cultural commitment to different levels of commitment certain doctrines and beliefs and religious practices; but for the small minority there is some kind of Islamic pietism, and that takes the shape of really being meditative, being serious about your conduct, and being serious about the mission of Islam.

DAVE BAST

So in other words, they are personally engaged. It is not just kind of a form or a show. They are not nominal. They are really committed.

MONSIEUR

Yes, but these are... these tend to be very small in number.

DAVE BAST

But isn't it also true, from what I have read, that there is not much of an emphasis on a personal relationship with God, as we tend to think of as Christians – a kind of loving, fatherly God who comes to us personally in Christ or who lives within us through his Spirit.

MONSIEUR

Formally, you are a Muslim if you prescribe to certain doctrines – the five pillars of Islam – and the more you show commitment to that prescription, then your rewards in Jannah, which is paradise, would be higher; but when you talk about personal piety as such, that is really rare.

DAVE BAST

Or experiencing fellowship with God – what we would say.

MONSIEUR

That is right. Experiencing, as going through a certain religious spiritual experience, which exists among all religious people of all persuasions, that is really not the experience of the majority, but a very tiny minority.

BOB HEERSPINK

When I hear you talk I think of Western culture, where a lot of people will say: We are Christian; this is a Christian culture; and yet, so many Christians are nominal; they really don't take their faith seriously. When Muslims look to the West, can they distinguish between Western culture and the Christian faith? It seems to me that just as we might look and say: Well, this is Middle Eastern culture; it is Islamic; so also they look to us with all the fractures and warts that we have on our culture and they say: Well, that is a Christian culture. That is what Christianity is about.

MONSIEUR

Well, we need to remember that the majority of Muslims are not well read; they are not exposed to different world views; but they have a frame of mind about Christianity as a Western kind of culture; and with that you have moral looseness. They mix up what is the so-called Christianity with what they see in movies and so on, which is a problem because the West is not really, truly Christian.

DAVE BAST

Yes, they don't understand that; I mean, they don't get it. When they look at their television and see some primetime soap opera from America, they say: Well, that is Christianity.

MONSIEUR

Exactly.

BOB HEERSPINK

So, one of the challenges we have in terms of sharing the Gospel is to get through the cultural barriers that they have put around what we are saying.

MONSIEUR

Absolutely; and that is the challenge Arab Christians and other ethnic Christians in predominantly Muslim societies, first, to separate themselves from the Western culture, and that identifies that as their culture, and secondly, to point out that being a Christian is not to be identified with westernization.

DAVE BAST

But let me go back to something with which we began; this question of sort of theocracy and Islam sees the whole country as under the control of Allah, that suggests to me that there is not really ever going to be any

real religious freedom in any Muslim country; is that so?

MONSIEUR

We need to remember that not all Muslim nations are that committed to theocracy. We have the experiment of Turkey, for instance, and Indonesia, where there is an expression of democracy. The more secularization takes place in Muslim societies, the more freedom there is.

DAVE BAST

So, we really have an ironic situation here, that American Christians – Western Christians – Canadian Christians – we ought to be cheering for secularism in the Middle East; whereas we are sort of horrified by it as it creeps through our countries at home.

MONSIEUR

That is right.

BOB HEERSPINK

We should take a break here, and we will be back in just a minute and continue the conversation.

Segment 3

DAVE BAST

Welcome back. This is *Groundwork*, where we dig into the scriptures to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Dave Bast.

BOB HEERSPINK

And I am Bob Heerspink.

DAVE BAST

Bob, we just took a break, and I thought we got to a really important point. I want to just repeat that: The idea of secularism. It is such a bogeyman for most of us as Christians in North America, and we look at our societies – our countries – and decry it; and for many... in many respects that is right; but if you just flip and look from the perspective of Christians in the Middle East, secularism would be a *good* thing.

BOB HEERSPINK

Well, it opens up the door for people to consider the Gospel.

DAVE BAST

Yes, and it really means neutrality – State neutrality with respect to faith – religious freedom; practice your faith and try to bring it to bear in the public square, sure; but let's not have an imposition from above of a State religion that forbids any other because in the Middle East that means Christians are on the outside.

BOB HEERSPINK

But even though there is movement in that direction in the Middle East, you come here to North America and you've got a lot of people very nervous about the number of Muslims who are moving into North America, and what impact they are going to have on the culture. You know, as they come into what is a secularized society, with an Islamic culture, what is going to happen here? That is the fear.

DAVE BAST

Well, let's bring Monsieur into the discussion again – into our conversation. I got an e-mail a while back from a pastor in middle America – in a small town; you would never really expect this, but he said they are building a mosque nearby and a lot of Christians are up in arms about this and protesting. What should we do? What do you think? What is your opinion? Well, let me throw that question to you, Monsieur; what do you think their reaction should be?

MONSIEUR

Well if, indeed, in pluralistic America and Canada and western nations there is freedom for people to exercise what they believe, to build mosques, to build churches, to build temples, I think – I believe that it should be pluralism for all; and that is what we long for also in Islamic nations. I would like to see that pluralism in Saudi Arabia, in Kuwait, in Iran, in Pakistan, and so on. Let people have freedom to decide for themselves. For me as a Christian, I am excited when I see Muslims in free western nations. I am not afraid of it. I thank God for it because if the Church becomes alert to such opportunities, then you have the freedom to reach these people and they have the freedom to choose to follow Christ without fear.

BOB HEERSPINK

You know, sometimes I think the fear that we have about people of other faiths coming our way is a lack of confidence in our Lord to really transform the hearts and lives of those who are coming into our communities. I mean, we shouldn't be fearful of those who are different from us; not when the Gospel we have is the true word of truth.

MONSIEUR

Absolutely; and we need to remember the core Gospel teaching that was uttered by the Lord Jesus himself. He said two things that are very important to our discussion: First, he said, "My kingdom is not of this world." We need to be careful not to mix the Christian faith with what is called Christianity. Christianity, of course, when you read in history, was involved in violence also. It was involved in persecution. It was involved in wars. That is not the kingdom of King Jesus. The kingdom of King Jesus is about the freedom of one's conscience. The kingdom of King Jesus is secondly... the second point I want to remind us of here in the teaching of Jesus is what he said: He said, "All power, all authority, is given to me; not only here on earth," Jesus says, "but also in heaven;" and he says, "Go therefore; I am with you always." So, we need to take Jesus at his word and trust him, and not become paranoid, because he rules and overrules all things to gather his people, just as Abraham was promised, from all families of the earth.

DAVE BAST

Amen; I say amen to that. You brought us back to our text with which we began; the Great Commission from Matthew. That word, paranoia, you raised; let me just follow up on that because we are hearing a lot of Christian voices, or conservative voices – non-Christians, too – who think that there is some big, world-wide plot of Muslims to take over the West – to rule in North America; and as we see them coming we should beware, and all that sort of thing. How do you react to that?

MONSIEUR

Well, let them come. If God allows it, then the Church must take advantage of the opportunity. There is no need for any Christian to be paranoid. If you trust in Jesus, you cannot be fearful about any events. After all, the Church in the First Century grew by leaps and bounds while under persecution; and here you have so much freedom in the West, and the Church is declining; and so what? Let them come. We should show them the love of Christ. We should take every advantage, every advantage of the opportunities we have to tell them that Christ makes a difference.

BOB HEERSPINK

You talk about the love of Christ; the scriptures say: Love casts out fear; and so many Christians are fearful of Muslims; and to me, it really gets to the point: Are we really going to, as the Lord, to love these neighbors with the love of Jesus, because that is going to cast out fear of witness – that is going to allow us to really welcome them as our neighbors and let them see the Gospel of Jesus living in us.

MONSIEUR

Absolutely; and that is what love is. God is love. God so loved the world that he gave... He gave his Son. Love is self-giving and our God is self-giving in Christ, and that is the big difference between the God of the Bible and other gods. God gives himself.

DAVE BAST

Or I think of a simple New Testament text: Practice hospitality. Is it Hebrews that says: Thereby some have entertained angels unaware? What if the Lord is sending angels in our midst in the guise of Muslims, and we reach out to them in love and share Christ with them... who knows what happens?

MONSIEUR

Amen.

DAVE BAST

Well, thank you, Monsieur, for being present with us. We really appreciate your willingness to share your insight.

MONSIEUR

It is a pleasure for me to fellowship with Christians.

BOB HEERSPINK

Thanks for joining our *Groundwork* conversation, and don't forget it is listeners like you asking questions and participating that keep our topics relevant to your life. So tell us what you think about what you are hearing. Suggest topics or passages that you would like to hear on future *Groundwork* programs, too. Visit us at groundworkonline.com and join the conversation.

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