Christianity as a Cultural Minority

Part 2 of 2: Keys to Effective Cultural Engagement
with
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The Table Podcast  Christianity as a Cultural Minority

**Darrell Bock**
It is this contrast this way in which God enters into the pain of a fallen world despite the Bibles claim that he is an all powerful and in many ways perfect being that is the exceptional part of what represents Christianity. I could make the comparison to Islam in which you have a very sovereign God but he exercises that power and the compassion and the relational elements of a religious faith are nowhere near as prominent in Islam as they in Christianity and Judaism.

**John Dickson**
And couldn't be. Some of the things that you read in old and new testaments would be blasphemes to our Muslim neighbors.

**Darrell Bock**
Share the story of the debate that you had with the Imam that you told me about yesterday.

**John Dickson**
Well we had this public discussion that was effectively a debate. Where he gave 20 minutes, I gave 20 minutes, five minute cross-examination.

**Darrell Bock**
Do you not call it a debate in Australia is it always discussion?

**John Dickson**
Yes. We want to call it a discussion just to take the heat out of it. It didn't work. It was a very friendly conversation.

**Darrell Bock**
Frank discussions were had by all in diplomatic language.
In cross-examination we were allowed I think three questions, it was quite a few years ago now, three questions of each other and then a response. So my question to him was, "Is there anything in the Quran," which I read cover to cover, "or in the Hadith," which I read quite a portion, "where Allah is said to love those who were opposed to him?" And Dea Muhammad this Muslim advocate in Australia said, "Of course not. Are you saying there's one in the Bible?" And of course it gave me a great opportunity to talk about well actually the heart of the message is that while we were still sinners, enemies of God, Christ came into the world to die for us. That's pretty much what we're on about. And it was just such a clear night for people to see whatever the value of the arguments, these are two very different conceptions of God. Psalm 22, I often think of Psalm 22, "My God, My God why have you forsaken me?" We hear that and we think of Jesus saying it but if you just forget for a moment the later context, the Psalmist felt you could say that God and he wouldn't be upset with you. What does that say? Now our Muslim neighbors will not use that sort of language to the almighty. "I cry out to you by day but you do not listen." Huh. What's that about? And you know the lament Psalms.

Yeah. Whole category.

It's something like a quarter of the book of Psalms. That tradition speaks of a God who is so sympathetic with the plight of those who cry out that you find most especially obviously in Jesus. Who experienced injury and injustice and a final breath? And that God has entered into the ugliness. And if we can convey this through the content but also the mode of our speaking that we believe in that kind of God I just think it's really powerful against the backdrop of a culture that thinks we're about the misuse of power.

The contrast is what draws people in. It raises an issue that I think is important to reflect on and that is I often get asked, "When you're engaged in these kinds of conversations what are you trying to do? Are you trying to win a debate or win a discussion?" And a part of me says, "Yeah I'd really like to win that debate and win that discussion." But my initial goal is actually something more fundamental and more basic and that is to get the person who I'm talking with to pause. To just reflect on, might there be another way to think about what we're talking about with the hope that what I'm putting out on the table is something that they can recognize the potential merit of and then open up to consider what is being said because it's different then what they're used to hearing.
And so it's persuasion but it's not a persuasion that kind of has a hammer over your head, believe this or else but it's a persuasion that says, "What I think I'm putting out on the table for you is actually a very helpful way to think about humans should interact and live with one another." I like to say, it's not just true because it's in the Bible, it's in the Bible because it's true. And so when you flush out what that truthfulness is, the goal is to explain truth or beauty which is I'm going to come back to this because I think there's an important thing wrapped up in that conversation, that there's a certain truthfulness, there's a certain effectiveness of living that's being represented that you hope the other person, particularly if they've never had any real exposure to the Church or whatever exposure to the Church they've had is what they've picked up in the static of the culture, a kind of cultural Christianity that gives them pause and they'll start to think. I actually think that's the key first step in doing what it is that we're trying to do.

*John Dickson*

I couldn't agree more. I would only that when you're doing it in the public square, when you're in the media and there are thousands of people watching you also have to think about the many people watching you and what is effective for them. So I often feel if I lose well in the debate or discussion with a journalist or whatever but I've done it so well that I know that the audience are thinking, "Actually that Christian guy was reasonable and level headed and pretty nice." Actually that commends the gospel. I mean I don't go around trying to lose but I'm not so concerned about losing. My personality is, my instinct is to win but I think the gospel has slowly beaten Dickson into the expectation that losing well is sometimes a beautiful representation of the gospel for those looking on.

And so I also find this in social media. So I've got quite a number of Facebook and Twitter followers. And sometimes atheist come and pursue me and sometimes they are angry at me and occasionally I say things that I probably shouldn't of a little smug or whatever but generally I am thinking how are the many people watching this conversation responding? And often I'm quite happy when the atheist gets raved because it's conveying something about their atheism. I think Richard Dawkins is actually doing us a favor in the long term because he is so extreme, so uncompromising, I think the average, thoughtful doubter out there, thinks, "Yeah that's not an approach I like. I thought the Christian did a little bit better there." That is winning.
It's funny that you say this because I just did a media panel for an event that was hosted in New York City by BioLogos and they asked on a panel with another Christian and two journalists and we were talking about how to engage the media. And I got asked, "What's your primary goal when you go on the air?" And I said, "My primary goal is that I'm not so concerned with the opponent that the media often pitches me against as the contrast. I am much more interested in how the audience is responding to what's happening then in my trying to defeat the person on the other side of the microphone who's taking a different position. My goal is to engage but to engage in such a way that hopefully I am commending what it is that I represent as opposed to winning a debate.

So the first rule I always have is, "I'm engaged in a conversation versus a debate. I'm not trying to win anything. All that I'm trying to do is demonstrate what I hope is the reasonableness of what I believe in a way that will draw people in to consider what it is that's being said." That's very much what you're saying. And it's interesting because a lot of the people in the audience after this presentation came up to me and said, "I've done a few things on the media and I've never thought of it that way." Their goal was I'm here to represent the position and my goal is to win that conversation and win that debate. And again it's not that you're trying to lose but your goal is to understand that I'm probably not going to convince the guy on the other side of the microphone but I’m interested in the person who's trying to decide which microphone am I going to believe and hopefully draw them in my direction as opposed to the direction of the person who I may be pitted against.

And if we think of Christianity as not only true but good then you've got to allow that sometimes you won't be able to convince an audience that it's true but you might be able to convince them through tone and behavior that it's good. And if they have a sense that it's good and beautiful and drawing then in some ways that's as good as convincing them in their head that there's a very good argument that Jesus will rise again.

And in fact it's probably the first step, it's a first step in moving them towards a potential recognition that maybe the way I've thought about this, there's another way to think about it.
And of course that was C.S. Lewis's whole approach in the end. He came very much to believe that if he can convey the beauty of Christianity to people it opens them up to the truth. He didn't draw a real dichotomy between those two things but he was so aware that many of our beliefs about what's true are motivated by something. So he wanted to convey the beauty of ideas to allow people to open up to the possibility that they're also true. To want it to be true is a step along the path to knowing it's true.

It's an interesting concept because in fact and you even see this in the way marketing gets done here in the United States. There is a pitch, I'm going to use advertising terminology, there's a pitch to the emotions as much as there is a pitch of the product. We just went through our Super Bowl which is the equivalent of the Aussie Rules Final and -

You've got much better ads though.

Well it really is a cultural experience. And I happened to watch it with someone who was from Germany, who lived in Germany. So I'm explaining these commercials to this European who's lived here for several years and has some understanding of culture but obviously hasn't been immersed in the details of our culture. And the constant question he had was, "What does that have to do with the product?" And this question most have come up a half dozen or more times during the game. And I said, "Well really it's not just the fact of the product they're trying to create a feeling around the product." There's a very famous set of commercials - I don't know how famous they are but they're widely distributed, "I'm loving it." That's what Mc Donald's is pitching right now. Who loves a hamburger? You might like certain hamburger but who loves a Mc Donald's hamburger. Mc Donald's hamburgers they're a dime a dozen but they're trying to create a feeling around coming to the hamburger or another one Budweiser beer; their key image is the Clydesdale horse. And this German is looking at me like, "What does a horse have to do with it?" And so I had to explain the history of how originally beer was delivered and that they've used this horse -

You explained beer to a German?
Darrell Bock

I explained a beer commercial to a German. It's not the same thing; it's a good observation though. And the point was if you understood the history of what lead originally to how the beer got to people you understand why they used a horse to bring it and people they feel something about these beautiful horses, these Clydesdales and the point that I think we're making with this is there is an opening up of the human soul through the depiction of beauty and value and positive emotion if I can say it that way that sometimes leads you into places that you wouldn't go normally rationally as your first stop.

John Dickson

Aristotle distinguished between two kinds of beauty in persuasion. We all know his Logos, the intellectual argument which he was a big fan of but he also distinguished between pathos and ethos and they both refer to that emotional, psychological dimension of persuasion but pathos was more what the commercials were doing. Making you feel warm fuzzies towards the thing and Aristotle said, "yeah look we've got to be honest with ourselves we are all psychological beings and we are drawn to arguments we just find more pleasurable and that's why humor should be used in speeches." And he lays all this out in his book on rhetoric but then he has this section on ethos and he says this is the most important part of persuasion.

So when Aristotle says this is it ready, you all listen. And he boils it down to this. We believe those with, I'll call it a humanitarian spirit, he uses the word, epikeia. Which you find in Paul's letters translated as gentleness but it really means that humanitarian regard, that moderate, fair, just character. We trust that person. The fair minded, the good-hearted person more than anyone else on all topics. He said the key to persuasion is if you are someone who is trustworthy in the eyes of the persuaded, that moves belief. So he said this is a beauty that's bound up with goodness it isn't just beauty in the sense of emotional appeal, this is goodness. And he said this ethos is the primary part of persuasion because we believe the fair minded - those who we perceive to be credible and fair minded far more easily than we do anyone else.
And so if we can convey the goodness of Christianity to people, that it's credible, morally credible, loving, generous, compassionate, humble; all these things just flow out of the gospel, then I think what happens is people long for that goodness even if they're not 100 percent convinced it's rational. It's got the logos, who know if it's got the logos but it's beautiful. That's the beauty, the goodness what I think - what you call apologetics, what I call public Christianity, ought to be trying to convey in addition to truth.

Darrell Bock
Now there's another discussion that we had about Albert Camus that I think fits in here nicely as well. A well-known French atheist who in the midst of his battles with Christianity also interestingly had an appreciation for what its message was. Most people probably aren't even aware of this. And I think it fits in here. Here's the critic talking about Christianity.

John Dickson
Well he was the great atheist who said we live an abyss of no hope, we scream out to the universe and it's utterly silent. That was his philosophy.

Darrell Bock
A real lament Psalm.

John Dickson
He was 100 percent lament in the sense of - you know Nietzsche for all of his atheism had a rather chipper view of where we'll all go when we've got Christianity because the higher man is on the way, once we get rid of that Christianity stuff and it holds everyone back. What will emerge? Natural selection will take over, the higher man will emerge and brilliant. Well Albert Camus couldn't buy that after two world wars. So Camus was a really interesting character but he wrote an essay that wasn't published until after his death in 1960. And in this essay he basically says - I don't have the quote off the top of my head - but he basically says, the cross of Jesus Christ is the answer to the cry of the soul in this despairing universe if it were true.
And he says Golgotha changed the west forever because what it did is it transformed the normal divine prerogative he said so that God himself entered into the pain. Now he died in January 1960. No one knows how far he took it but there was more than a rumor that he had been meeting with a Parisian pastor to read the gospels. The pastor was sworn to secrecy but it came out a decade or more later that he'd been reading the gospels for his own trying to understand the figure of Jesus. So here is a man who was intellectually an atheist but his heart seemed to be drawn to the answer that the cross gives.

The beauty of the cross not just the truthfulness of it but the beauty of it. I want to spend the remainder of our time on this beauty and truth thing because I think it's something that you talk about that actually is important and it's one of these translatable categories that I think, truth has fallen on hard times in a postmodern world. People are trying to blow it to smithereens in one way or another and basically say there's your truth and my truth and as long as it works for you and all those kinds of things but let's not think about some view from above kind of truth that doesn't exist anymore but there is something that I don't think anyone can deny and that is that there are places of beauty in the world. There are places where the orderliness of the world screams out and draws wonder. And there's a sense in which I think a key in explaining what Christianity is to show not only that it's true but that in one sense it's beautiful. Develop that because I think this is an idea that you talk about that really resonates for me.

Well yes. We have intuitions as you say that something beautiful, good, wonder. And even the atheist have spotted that their worldview is giving the impression that it was just a cold rationale world view without any wonder. And so just very recently they've all started talking about the wonder that science gives you because they know that human beings are wonder seekers in the sense that we long for the luminous, for the beautiful, for the good. So they're going there but the problem that they're going to have is what's it based on? Is it really just an instinct? Am I just a mammal who's chemicals act in a certain way when I see a sunset? Because in the end that's what they have to say, "Yes that's right." "Oh but it's wonder." I want to say it's not wonder. It's no more wonder than if I fall over and hurt myself. That is also a chemical reaction of the same status.
Atheist have a real problem with beauty and incidentally Ian Wilson, who was an atheist, a British intellectual atheist wrote, a terrible book on C.S. Lewis, terrible book on Jesus, highly skeptical, recently became a Christian. And in his published account in the New Statesman I believe, it was this problem of beauty that convinced him Christianity must be true because he was listening he said it was music, he was listening to the order in music and he wondered does he really believe the incredible experience he has when he listens to a great Mozart piece or whatever is simply a chemical reaction? Because he has to believe that if he believes it's not grounded in anything other than chemicals. And he had this kind of epiphany, I mean his conversion wasn't entirely because of this, but he had this sense that I can't ground my wonder unless this is an echo of an inherent imposed goodness.

**Darrell Bock**

A real desire.

**John Dickson**

That has come from the purposeful actions of the artist. Only if the creation is good because it's come from someone who is good can our sense of wonder be more than an instinct but actually be true and beautiful at the same time.

**Darrell Bock**

Yeah. I find that the way I like to think about this is the exceptional fact of the earth if I can say it that way. And think about what we know now versus when the Bible was written. We now know that the universe is far more vast and far more complex and far more fascinating and space filled if I can say it that way then we ever imagined. And yet here's this one spec, I mean spec is generous, one spec in the universe where the atmosphere works, where there's water and air and plant life that generates all kind - that sustains life. And you just look at it and you go the exception that is and maybe one day we'll find that there's life somewhere. The universe is vast but certainly in our near surroundings we're very, very exceptional piece which raises the question of why life?

**John Dickson**

Yeah. Sometimes skeptics raise this as a reason not to believe in good because look, the earth all this space, it's wasted. Wasted time, wasted space. You may have been to the National Museum in Cairo. Five stores beautiful, the Tutankhamun room you walk in it's a vast room with a tiny little box and you realize that the vastness is actually meant to draw your eye to the beautiful box with Tutankhamun and all the gold hoard that they got with him. They don't want it to be a cluttered room the special room.
Darrell Bock  

Here is the one thing.

John Dickson  

Yeah. The space is actually there to bring attention. And to me the earth in a vast space is doing a pretty good job of putting it on display and isn't it fascinating that opening theme of the Bible is the goodness and the orderliness of creation. That seven fold it was good. And that seventh it was very good. This is clearly trying to say against a modern culture that would devalue creation against or ancient cultures that might know that this intuition you have about the goodness and beauty of creation is not an instinct, it's based on the true goodness that is there because of the good God.

Darrell Bock  

Yeah. I mean I think the core starting point for talking about the gospel is the idea that we are creatures who have been created by a creator. There is a purpose and a design and a function in life that is one-hand is mysterious but is there to be discovered and that God has revealed himself. And really the gospel is about reconnecting us to this story of creation and the orderliness with which the world was originally created, to use your word, the beauty with which the world was created. We got done with the creation. We said it was very good. We might as well have said this is beautiful. The wife of Adam, Eve, is said to be, “wow.” It's about beauty, about design. And so that's where the gospel starts and getting people reconnected. I love the Michelangelo portrait of the creation at the top of the Sistine Chapel. I love that picture of the finger of God touching the finger of humanity and there's a - I like to think of it as an electric connection. There's a relational connection that Michelangelo is portraying as designed and intended by the creator. And really the gospel is about putting those two hands back in touch with one another.

John Dickson  

Well and Revelation 21-22 recall the garden image, turn up the volume on it and how much of those last two chapters of the bible are trying to convince you this is beautiful? All that stuff about what the streets are made of and the rivers, its beauty recovered.
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**Darrell Bock**  
It's lush. Yeah. And so there's a power in it that I think is important. One of the things that fascinates me about what you all are doing at CPX is that there is this whole, I would say both relational and emotional, this very human dimension of engagement that you all very much have your hands around and are trying to display and are conscious about thinking about whereas most - and I'm going to use the word apologetics - most apologetics is operating at such a strictly rationale level that it misses that connectedness of what it is that we're actually trying to do if we're not careful.

**John Dickson**  
Yeah. It can happen. And I want to offer the caveat that you know but maybe the audience doesn't know but we still we stand up for truth all the time. And we get people gigs on the topic of hell on national radio right. So we're not avoiding it any of the messiness.

**Darrell Bock**  
That's exactly right. "Yeah let's call that American he can be our hell guy." [Laughs]

**John Dickson**  
And we do gay marriage interviews and we do all the hard stuff as well but you're right it's in this context of trying to convey the truth and the beauty of Christianity.

**Darrell Bock**  
Well I think that again the danger here is that the defense of the faith can sometimes be seen as strictly an intellectual exercise but it's actually a much more profound thing that we're after in terms of engagement and the most important thing that we're after is trying to reflect if you will the character and the engagement of God while engaging a world and if we model what Jesus modeled then I think it's an important step in the right direction. And that means taking the risk that means - I like to ask the question this way. Consider from the worlds standards was Jesus's life a success. The very fact that he ended up on a cross, you would go, "Well if you were doing church growth statistics that probably isn't the way your public relations firm would design what it is that was supposed to happen to Jesus," and yet out of that defeat - you can think of it that way - in fact the scripture calls it a curse comes the very potential for reversal that actually pulls the world back together. It's a profoundly counter intuitive way of thinking about how to fix things. And in that difference with the way the world might go about fixing things is the profundity of what I think Christianity is ultimately all about.
It is and of course when Peter says that you're to give an apologea, he says, but through this with prouteitos kai fobos, gentleness and respect because you can't even defend this Lord that you set a part in your heart always being prepared to give an answer, you can't defend that Lord without gentleness and respect.

And Colossians 4:5 and 6 goes to the same place. It says, "Let your speech with outsides always be gracious." And so there's this interesting combination of moral challenge conviction as you have put it and what I call it - moral challenge and invitation that's part of the way the Christians supposed to function. You talked about it being conviction and compassion together. It's another way of thinking about it and you've got to have both. It can't be one or the other or else it will absolutely fail. Well thank you John for being a part of our conversation about thinking about how to engage in a context of a cultural minority. Actually what we've looked at is thinking about engagement from a biblical background and a biblical rootage and I appreciate you helping us to do that. We thank you for being a part of the table where we discuss issues of God and culture and we hope to see you again soon.