IT’S THE CULTURE, STUPID

Posted: 05 Jan 2015 09:19 AM PST

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Sean Pitman

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Dr. Wesley Kime

– a popular variation on “it’s the economy, stupid,” game-changing motto dreamed up by James Carville, cultural icon and Democratic strategist for the iconic Clinton campaign of 1992. If it sounds peremptory and patronizing, it’s supposed to: it’s the culture. If the following sounds like satire, it is. That’s our new culture, isn’t it?

As we strolled the Air Force Museum in Dayton our small talk had somehow shifted from comparing the agility of WWII fighter planes, like the P40 vs. the Japanese Zero, to an unexpectedly heated systematic review and debunking of all our Adventist doctrines. After an hour or so of this, we sank in unison, a pair of played out 60-year old men, onto a bench under the shade of the drab-colored huge high wing of a WWII Liberator bomber. “You’ve shot down our every last doctrine, why are you still even an Adventist?” I asked, completely fagged out. Unhesitatingly, though sounding more weary than I, Gordon, my bench-mate, had a ready reply. “Because of the culture.” Born, cradled, and educated an Adventist from sandbox through a doctorate, I didn’t even know we had one. Doctrines aplenty, but culture?

Culture, by the definition I grew up with the better part of a century ago, the one held by Adventists and everybody else back then, the first definition I still think of, meant opera and tuxedos and tiaras, harnesses of pearl necklace, facades and affectations, affected nobleness and taste. All of which was suspect by all earnest Christians, even cultured ones, for example CS Lewis. and downright abjured by Adventists. Gordon must have meant something else.

He did. I hadn’t thought of it, there under the Liberator wing, but by another definition, now prevailing everywhere, Adventist included, Adventists have always indeed had a culture, now a burgeoning, one. “Culture is the totality of traits and behavior patterns — not just the artificially noble or refined ones — characteristic of a particular period, class, community, or population.” Or as an anthropologist friend, good friend, of mine puts it: “culture is a matrix which is instrumental in shaping us individually and collectively; a set of symbols (symbolate) defines culture. The symbolate may be analogous to a genome.” As Carville would say, “culture, stupid.” I think he’s saying that culture has been given an extreme makeover so as to be as accommodating as the big tent and the big-banged universe and every nebulae that in it is. In expanding like the big bang, culture is now Independent and disdainful of nobleness and beauty and is openly inclined towards the most decadent. Of the old definition, not much is left, only the affectation and the yearning to be loved and awarded. If once culture was actively cultivated and rare, culture now is passive and inborn in everybody. Thus the Green Berets and Greenpeace have their culture, likewise Adventists. And anthropologists.

By that definition Adventism could be seen as a culture of nots and nos — not dancing, no jazz, no fiction, no fun; no movies, meat, coffee, alcohol, snuff, smoking, female adornment. No fun. And of eccentricity of what we did do – peanut butter, gluten and meat substitutes, Saturday Sabbath instead of Sunday, diamond watches instead of diamond earrings, chaperons until married.
That’s what sustains Gordon when all else, even God, fails?

I wouldn’t have guessed it from all the sarcastic jokes I’d heard Gordon tell at class reunions, about youth chafing under dormitory curfews and deprived of jazz, movies, and Saturday night prows — very like black humor and the vintage masochistic delight in public school caning taken by a former generation of British literati, or night-club shticks or small talk chatter about constipation and getting up all night to micturate.

If dorm life was weird, the rest of our culture was, Gordon informed me, embarrassing, as embarrassing as our theology. Our trademark foreign missions were actually fronts for imperialism, colonialism, and patriarchal condescension, and embarrassingly elitist impositions of our own Eurocentric culture. Our trademark gluten steaks and Postum, the essence of whole grain, once promoted as the essence of our health message, are sickening the global gluten-sensitive community.

As culture, Adventism sounds to me as drained of goodies as a whacked piñata. Hardly the golden cord that binds. As the bride sighed the next morning, or did in olden times, is that all there is? Me, if that’s all there is to Adventism, I’d be outa here. Gordon, you look a little gaunt.

Such a peaked culture would seem to cry out for an extreme makeover. Which it has got, in spades. In the 20 years since Gordon’s Liberator declaration, Gordon and I have descended into Octogenariancy, and I have witnessed our cultural face being lifted as high as our doctrines taken under.

If we once winced at jazz, we now jerk and twitch to first-service (“1st Serv”) gospel rock. We once marched children to the front of the congregation to recite Bible memory verses; now, their lines in skits. Our young girls came to church dressed; now they pose in the foyer for selfies in Lady Gaga body sheaths and briefs. Sermons were once built upon homilies and punctuated by amens, now jokes and movie snippets and applause and guffaws. Once we cherished the prophetic image from Daniel 2 possessing only a gold head; now the totally gold Oscar. Money spent for mass distribution of evangelical literature is better spent on costumes and props, or the poor, and anyway evangelism is our crowning embarrassment. If once being a pastor or bible student were the highest callings, now being a scholar, producer, stand-up comedian, and filmmaker are. Once our ministers ministered and served, but now our senior pastors are doctorates and thought leaders, and their thoughts come more from the Fuller Seminary than the SDA Theological Seminary, and from the Tazzla Institute of Cultural Diversity, and Willow Creek Megachurch Association and Leadership Seminars, with whiffs or Buddha and Plato. If we once shied from theaters, we now hold film festivals, in church, and feature church drama instead of sermons, and give our own Oscars.

We are chagrined, Gordon is anyway, that we once simple-mindedly received prophecy, and closed-mindedly and literally bought Genesis 1, and mindlessly proscribed hermeneutics, settling for simple-minded “Bible study.” If we once went only to the scripture and God and prayer for guidance, we now bookmark moveOn.org and hold protests and seminars and opinion polls and engage consultants and coaches, and give awards. If once we tearfully repented of sin, now we cheerfully deny there is such a thing. If once we denounced homosexuality as sin in need of healing, we now damn those who denounce it, notably St. Paul, as hate criminals, or at least culturally challenged. If once we were “born again,” now we are born “that way.” If once our priority and obsession was Christ’s soon coming, now it is women’s ordination, and social justice. If once doctrine-besot and dreary, we are now even more doctrinaire and airy. If once our solid foundation was the scriptures and communing with God, now it is, for many of us, “spiritual foundations” and repeating incantations, to achieve blankness of brain, nirvana, incapable of communicating with anybody except maybe Satan.

If once we were message-centered and faith-based, we are now culture-centric and rock-solid in disbelief. If we had a peculiar message for the world, redemption, now we are panting for the message the world has for us, salvation through culture. If our message was once prophecy, now it’s politics. If once we promoted eternal life, now we brag about living ten years longer than other cultures. Now we’re more hellbent on getting into the 21st century, gay marriages and global warming and that sort of self-validating new eternal verity, than eternity. If once we yearned to save the world, now we are, like the world, obsessed with saving the planet. Formerly, the gospel was our cause, now...
it’s the Daily Kos (dailykos.Org).

If once we unquestioningly obeyed the ten commandments, and were accused of legalism, now we give witless obeisance to arbitrary political correctitude. If once like Pharisees we got entangled in the Ten Thousand Commandments, now we spin in dizzy circles around our ethics. If once our catechistic check list included things we knew God didn’t want us to do, those very things are now de rigueur. Likewise our check list of foundational “peculiar” Biblical doctrines have been extirpated and replaced by the newest ex cathedra list copy-pasted from talkingpointsmemo.com/. At bottom we remain as subservient and conformist, as legalistic, as ever; on balance worse, I think.

Red-faced at the idea that Mrs. E.G. White was inspired and a prophetess, we dismissed her as a Victorian relic, and our academics pretended she didn’t exist, but now our scholarly research reveals that she’s an underrated historic and cultural figure, a protofeminist icon who stamped out orthodoxy, and celebrates her in documentaries and doctoral theses and art bronze.

If once we were seen as a cult, now we see ourselves as a culture.

The P40s and the Liberator have stayed fixed in concrete in the museum for the last 20 years since they silently lobomed over Greg and me, and will forever, but our culture has revved up and, loaded with smart bombs, roared into the wild blue thin-aired yonder.

An altogether new species, today’s Adventist, spotted, striped or piebald, born again of hermeneutics and humanism, once skulked in the tall grass, but now is stomping the ground and snorting, cavorting and bellowing mating calls and trumpeting that he and she are king of the pews.

This evolution has been, looking back at it, smooth (Darwin should be so lucky), except for one thing – what to call the new creature. Time was when the only adjective Adventists needed was “Seventh-day,” but with the emergent species a new taxonomic designation is required. “Progressive,” “liberal,” “enlightened,” “scholarly,” “open minded,” “liberated,” “postmodernist” or just simply “postAdventist,” “Adventoid,” (my term), have been tried on for size but seemed, well, too constrictive. Concocting the right adjective has taken longer than disassembling our theology.

But just last week it all came together. While visiting one of those chaperoned discussion Sabbath Schools, we saw a middle-aged gentleman stand up and introduce himself, unhesitatingly and powerfully, as a “cultural Adventist.”

So there he stands, perfected, evolved, fully fledged and plumed, agile as a Zero fighter, rich and in need of nothing, certainly not doctrine; well rounded and well fed, ready for prime time, sporting a J. Peterman message t-shirt, “It’s the culture, stupid!”

And here I stand in my bespoken t-shirt: “wheat and tares growing together — the new multicultural diversity”.

Wearily, Christ is replying, “man shall not live by culture alone”. – Variation on Matthew 4:4. If that sounds doctrinal, it’s supposed to.

More of Dr. Kime’s Essays can be found on his blog at: I esSay There…
I’m not sure why anyone would want to take on …

Comment on IT’S THE CULTURE, STUPID by Sean Pitman.

I’m not sure why anyone would want to take on the title of Christian, much less Seventh-day Adventist, for social reasons alone? – unless for social or political advantages in certain circles. However, such social Christians would melt like the snow given a little bit of hardship because of the Christian title. I bet, for example, that the Yazidi Christians who are dying for their faith in Iraq right now are not just “social Christians”. I bet that they really believe that the empirical claims of Christianity are literally true… that it’s not just some good “moral fable”.

Recent Comments by Sean Pitman

Believing the Disproven – An Adventure in Science
Again, the basic ability to recognize love and exhibit love does not “have to be taught” by parents. A child will also naturally feel guilty for doing harm to another – without the need to be taught about feeling guilty for doing wrong. On the other hand, if you were correct, those who did not have good parents, or had no parents at all, would have an perfect excuse before God for why they didn’t choose to act lovingly toward their neighbors. They would feel no guilt or remorse for anything wrong that they did. After all, according to your argument, no one is born with a conscience – or an inherent knowledge of any kind of moral right or wrong to any degree. You claim that the conscience does not exist at all before one is taught, by one’s parents. You claim that there is no way to know right from wrong unless one is taught by some outside source of information. However, in reality, no one has such an excuse because all are in
fact born with an internally-derived conscience regardless of the goodness or training, or lack thereof, of one’s parents.

It is a studied fact that a very young child naturally knows what is right regarding the Royal Law of Love on at least a very basic level… and is naturally attracted to it. This knowledge is hardwired – by God. That is why, yet again, Paul described this ability among the heathen as “natural” – not something that they had to learn from their parents, but understood by having the Law written on their hearts by God (Romans 2:13-15). This Biblical claim is actually backed up by modern research that shows that very young babies do in fact have an innate sense of right and wrong (Link).

And, Ellen White also speaks of children having a God-given conscience that must be considered in their training. They are not like animals that are born without a conscience:

The training of children must be conducted on a different principle from that which governs the training of irrational animals. The brute has only to be accustomed to submit to its master; but the child must be taught to control himself. The will must be trained to obey the dictates of reason and conscience. – Ellen White, January 10, 1882

So, here we have a child being born with inherent God-given gifts of both reason and conscience. Such gifts are created as internally-derived gifts by God. Call it “hocus pocus” of you want, but God is in fact a Divine creator who is well able to create such gifts with no less ability than He is able to create the universe or the complexities of the living human body. Therefore, it is not the parents who create the original ability for “enmity” against evil within their children. Parents do not get the credit for this basic ability to judge right from wrong. After all, it is God who said that He is the one who would create this enmity against sin within the human race (Genesis 3:15). He did not leave this up to us to create within our children. It is God and only God who creates the conscience in each one of us. Our responsibility toward our children is to train them on how to apply, maintain, grow, and guard their God-given gifts of reason and conscience. We nurture the plant that God has made, so to speak, but we did not create the original seed from which the plant was made able to grow.

Believing the Disproven – An Adventure in Science

You’re confusing different concepts. I’ve already pointed out that it is a miraculous act on the part of God that we are able to recognize the beauty of holiness and be truly free moral agents – despite being born with fallen sinful natures. Your problem is that you believe that this information, the knowledge of the goodness of love, is taught and must be learned over time. This just isn’t true. It is given by God as internally-derived information that is indeed “written on the hearts” of all mankind – from birth.

It is only because of this that Paul argues that the heathen “naturally know” right from wrong (Romans 2:13-15). Paul specifically claims here that God has made this knowledge part of everyone’s inherent nature – an internally derived truth that is completely natural or internally derived and need not be learned over time. And, this “natural” gift of God isn’t “hocus pocus” any more than any other miraculous act of God. Your argument that the heathen are taught various truths that have been handed down over time (such as the truth of marriage for example) doesn’t hold water. For example, there are many non-Biblical forms of marriage observed by various heathen cultures. What the heathen do naturally recognize, however, is the goodness of the Golden Rule to do unto others as you would have them do unto you… the Royal Law of selfless love for one’s fellow man.

Consider, in summary, that it would be impossible to even recognize “objective truth” without a pre-existing internal moral compass by which to determine truth from error. How do you know “the truth” when you see it? How do you know how to judge right from wrong? You only know because you’re given a conscience from birth that guides you toward the moral truth when you see it. It is this compass, this enmity against Satan, that has been supernaturally implanted by God, from birth, in every single human being.
Believing the Disproven – An Adventure in Science

Again, that’s not true since even the heathen can know and express love without ever reading or hearing about the life of Christ. Also, as originally noted, children do not need to be taught about love before they can recognize it and respond to it as good. Everyone is born with a conscience that allows a person to make moral decisions and recognize moral truths and be a free moral agent. This ability is indeed “written on the heart” from birth as an internally-derived truth. The heathen and even very young children are in fact free moral agents. In other words even the heathen and very young children can do “by nature” the things required by the Royal Law even though they’ve never had the Scriptures or any other training regarding the Law of Love (Romans 2:13-15).

Among the heathen are those who worship God ignorantly, those to whom the light is never brought by human instrumentality, yet they will not perish. Though ignorant of the written law of God, they have heard His voice speaking to them in nature, and have done the things that the law required. Their works are evidence that the Holy Spirit has touched their hearts, and they are recognized as the children of God.

How surprised and gladdened will be the lowly among the nations, and among the heathen, to hear from the lips of the Saviour, “Inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these My brethren, ye have done it unto Me!” How glad will be the heart of Infinite Love as His followers look up with surprise and joy at His words of approval!

Ellen White, DA, p. 638

Also, God creating something within us from birth is no more “hocus-pocus” than any other miraculous creative act of God. Teaching children various “civil niceties”, such as how to say please and thank-you, has nothing to do with the fact that children are born with the ability to recognize acts of love as “good”. This ability is a gift of God’s grace to all humanity. “It is the grace that Christ implants in the soul that creates the enmity against Satan. Without this grace, man would continue the captive of Satan, a servant ever ready to do his bidding. The new principle in the soul creates conflict where hitherto had been peace. The power which Christ imparts, enables man to resist the tyrant and usurper.” (EGW, R&H, 1882). And, this “conflict” within the soul exists within everyone – Christian or heathen, small child or adult. Everyone is given a conscience where the “still small voice” of the Holy Spirit speaks to the mind and informs us of the basic moral Law, the Golden Rule, to “Do unto others as we would have them do unto us.”

Remember too that without knowledge of the Moral Law on at least some level, there is no basis for judgment or condemnation nor is it possible to be accused of rebellion against something that is not already known. Yet, no one will have this excuse before God because they all knew the law – since it was written on their hearts from birth.

Wall Street Journal Article: Science making the case for God?
Sure – by intelligent design. The argument here is that such planetary systems capable of supporting complex life would be extremely unlikely to be realized without the outside input of intelligent design and creative power.

Believing the Disproven – An Adventure in Science

I can’t believe you would even try to support this idea, Sean. In other words, they knew what tree was forbidden, and God didn’t need to tell them?

No. What they didn’t need to be told is that it’s wrong to disobey a God who has already demonstrated His love and personal care for them nor did they need to be told that it’s wrong to act out of selfishness at the expense of another.
This is the “truth” that was already given to them as inherent moral knowledge. This is what made Adam and Eve free moral agents as soon as they were created.

| And what baby born into this world inherently knows the 7th day is the Sabbath? |

As I said, a baby is only born with inherent knowledge of the Royal Law of Love. That’s it. A baby is not born with inherent knowledge of the Sabbath or any other such knowledge which must be learned over time – obviously. Within the Ten Commandments the last six commandments are what are based on inherent knowledge – as far as what one will automatically do when one loves one’s neighbor as one’s self (which is inherently recognizable as “good”). The first four commandments as to how we should relate with God are not, ironically, based on inherent knowledge, but must be learned over time.