

The Vulnerability and Genius of Christianity

by Dale Martin*

Missiologist Andrew Walls points out that as Christianity was disappearing in one place in history (Palestine, North Africa, Europe, etc.) it was crossing cultural boundaries and appearing in other cultures and places. This is the reason that Christianity survived being wiped out. Unlike Islam, Christianity rarely remained strong in its centers of origin. "When it comes to sustaining congregations of the faithful, Christianity does not appear to possess the same resilience as Islam. It decays and withers in its very heartlands, in the areas where it appears to have had the profoundest cultural effects. Crossing cultural boundaries, it then takes root anew on the margins of those areas, and beyond. Islamic expansion is progressive; Christian expansion is serial."¹ Walls alludes to an inherent vulnerability in Christianity which appears to predispose it to being eclipsed without continual interaction with culture. "Christian faith must go on being translated, must continuously enter into vernacular culture and interact with it, or it withers and fades. Islamic absolutes are fixed in a particular language, and in the conditions of a particular period of human history."¹ In other words Christianity is vulnerable once it has been established. It withers and fades without continuous interaction with the culture it finds itself in. "It is as though there is some inherent fragility, some built-in vulnerability, in Christianity."¹

What are the characteristics responsible for Christianity being so vulnerable? I believe there are five factors responsible. However, these same characteristics are also part of Christianity's ability to translate itself into new cultural situations at any place and in any time in history. These aspects of Christianity's vulnerability are also part of its strength, resilience, and genius. ***The first characteristic is that being Christian is independent of national identity.*** There is no Christian national identity to reinforce or require adherence to the religion as there is in Islam. The picture of Christianity in Revelation 7:9 is that there are people from many nations together who worship the one true God. All national identities stand as equals in the Christian faith. Christianity is thus forced to define its own existence and reinforce itself independently of any one group identity.

Over the past several years the fact that there are Christian Moroccans and Algerians has appeared in the national press in those countries. In Morocco it began with an article in the Political Weekly Arabic newspaper which described the arrest of a family in Marrakech because they had become Christians. Letters to the editor came in over the following weeks stating that once a person had converted they ceased to be Moroccans. A Moroccan Christian began writing in under the title, "I am a Moroccan Christian." He

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asserted that he was still a loyal citizen, a loyal family member, and ethnically proud to be an Arab Moroccan. His position clearly showed that he was not rejecting his identity or commitment to his people and culture since conversion. He was only rejecting the religion. This is an example of Christianity's ability to penetrate a culture and ideological system independent of one's ethnic identity, national identity and political position.

The second characteristic is that Christianity is never meant to be a state religion. Ultimate loyalty is to the kingdom of Christ which is not part of this world. There is no biblical political system discernible from the pages of Scripture which one would automatically adopt as a practicing Christian. Biblical principles in the Scriptures, while clear, must be applied to the particular situation in which Christians find themselves. In contrast, Islam comes within a complete ideological package containing the expression of a political system which results in an Islamic political state.

Third, Christianity changes its cultural clothing as it jumps from one culture to the next. It does not bring along with it a standard biblical culture which every Christian must adopt. This often leads to a complicated and confusing process as Christians attempt to discern which elements of their culture are positive, neutral or evil. The Bible contains principles, beliefs and values which can be the basis of any culture. However, these principles, values and beliefs are supra cultural. They are not tied into or limited to any one culture.

These same beliefs, values and principles could be adopted simultaneously in a myriad of places, and each culture would develop unique characteristics according to the time, place and people group.

Fourth, unlike the Qur'an, the Bible is intended to be translated into the vernacular language of the people where it will speak to the hearts of people. Since the Bible was given within cultural contexts, it must first be translated out from its contexts before it can be translated into the new linguistic and cultural situation. This requires a knowledge of the original languages as well as the new receptor's language. This process is vulnerable to multiple interpretations and unclear meanings in the new translation. The Qur'an, always in the Arabic it was revealed in, is safe from all the potential ambiguities and problems of translation and interpretation.

Fifth, the failure of Christians to recognize the radical nature of Christianity and its demand on us as disciples can also account for its disappearance.

After an idea or behavior becomes fixed in a culture, it gradually leaves our daily view and becomes a background assumption, hidden from conscious view. Where Christianity became the official or established religion, this provided the opportunity for people to gradually ignore the radical claims of the Gospel. This also leads to the fading and eclipse of the Church in a culture, time and place. Walls refers to the necessity of the process of continual interaction of the Gospel with vernacular culture. Each generation must

rethink the Gospel within its own cultural context, bringing the application and understanding progressively deeper. Islam, like other totalitarian ideologies, relies upon enforced conformity of the people it dominates to maintain everyone in their place. Christianity calls for radical departure from conformity. Christians must at times live in radical opposition to their communities and cultures.

These five characteristics make Christianity particularly vulnerable between generations. The failure of a generation to pass along its faith can account for the disappearance of Christianity at any moment in history. There is no state requirement to be a Christian, no cultural reinforcement, and no national identity which can make up for the failure of the fathers to pass their faith down to their sons. This danger is multiplied when states pass laws against the practice of Christianity and outlaw Christian conversion, meetings for worship and the sale of Bibles. Cultural alternatives and worldly temptations also provide continual competition for the minds and hearts of people. Film industries present sophisticated images of alternative lifestyles clothed in an ideology of pluralism and tolerance. Christianity must continually compete on its own in the world against philosophies, world views and other religious beliefs. One begins to see just how stacked the odds against Christianity's survival really are.

Andrew Walls is careful to describe Christianity's 'eclipse' in its centers of origin rather than referring to its

'disappearance.' Christianity did not disappear completely from Palestine and North Africa as the surviving communities of Ethiopian, Coptic, Syriac and Orthodox communities would attest. Thus, while various forces converged in history to extinguish Christianity, it was never completely or permanently suppressed in most places even when Communist or Islamic forces sought its complete demise. Often it reappeared immediately and more strongly than it had existed beforehand. In Russia, 70 years of communist rule was not able to destroy the Church. Despite its weakened state, the Church survives as a remnant through which the nation is rediscovering itself, being regenerated and making a new beginning. History demonstrates that Christianity can only be temporarily suppressed, repressed or excluded but that it cannot be completely or permanently extinguished in any given place or culture. It will reappear. Jesus pointed to this characteristic of the Kingdom in the parable of the mustard seed (Matthew 13:31) and yeast (Matthew 13:33). It starts small, it is unseen, it continues growing and it cannot be stopped. Once the yeast has been put into the lump of dough, it will continue to divide and spread until the whole lump of dough has been leavened. Like the image of the rock in Daniel 2:35 which grows to fill the whole earth, the advance of God's kingdom can not be stopped.

The good news is that the factors which make Christianity vulnerable are also part of its genius and strength.

Whereas Islam is a complete ideological system of community (*Umma*), politics/state (*Watan*), group identity (*Mujama*) and religion (*Deen*), Christianity is not tied or limited to any of these in the same way. Christianity is able to penetrate independently of state systems, political parties, ethnic communities, cultures and organized religions (denominations). Islam as a religion is dependent upon the Islamic State and its fixed revelation and Islamic culture for its survival while Christianity is not. Identity as a Muslim is synonymous with membership and loyalty to the Islamic State. Islam is thus limited in ways the Christian faith is not. Christianity can diffuse across cultural boundaries without bringing with it a complete package of culture, politics and national identity from the outside.

The Gospel has been remarkably adaptable in being able to penetrate cultures and find meaningful ways of expressing itself without losing its identity or changing its essential values. If this were merely a story repeated from one culture into another, we would expect distortion at each step of the way until the tenth culture in the chain would have a meaningless and distorted version. However, each time Christianity crosses into a new culture, new questions are asked and our picture of the Gospel is built up, resulting in a more complete understanding. This creative interaction between the Gospel and new cultures demonstrates that the Spirit of God is

able to find new points of contact and meaning in cultures previously unexposed to Christianity. Unlike Islam, Christianity requires translation and is able to find the ways to express itself within the new points of reference, resulting in many different expressions of Christian faith. Islam is still wearing the same clothes it had on in the seventh century. Christianity has changed its cultural clothing each time it has diffused into a new culture.

The factors which were responsible for the eclipse of Christianity even in its centers of origin are also the very characteristics which allow it to move into new places, ethnic groups and cultures. That it does so independently of reinforcement from a cultural or national identity and without the protection of a political state make Christianity unstoppable. These characteristics are part of its genius and its vibrancy. They are the reasons why Christianity, unique among religions, is so able to translate across cultural, linguistic, national, geographic and religious boundaries as no other religion ever has. God has chosen what appears to be a weak and vulnerable process to advance his kingdom into the whole world. This should not surprise us however, as God often chooses the 'weak' things of this world to confound the wise.

Footnotes:

1. Walls, *The Cross-Cultural Process in Christian History*, page 13.
2. *ibid*, page 29. 3. *ibid*, page 29.