

Culture

DOES SCRIPTURE
CLASH WITH CULTURE?



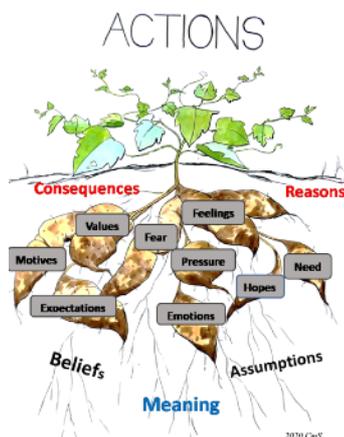
THANKSGIVING



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FAMILY



Culture

noun

- 1 the behaviors and beliefs characteristic of a particular group of people, as a social, ethnic, professional, or age group (usually used in combination)
- 2 the sum total of ways of living built up by a group of human beings and transmitted from one generation to another.

Mission of Christ Network team members are serving in God's mission internationally, which also means "cross-culturally". When we enter a new community, especially one in a foreign country, we experience excitement at the new smells, colors, tastes, language, and activities. There is so much to discover and our curiosity can drive us in forming relationships and encountering new places. We also experience uncertainty as we wonder if we have given an appropriate response to a question, made the correct facial expression, or adequately demonstrated our appreciation of hospitality towards us. As we spend more time in a place we are invited to participate in festivals and rituals. People call us 'friend'. Now people begin to more closely observe how our actions reflect this person, Jesus, that we have spoken of and His love and grace. Now, too, is when we draw deeper from the lessons received in cross-cultural ministry training that go beyond the surface level niceties needed to avoid offense at a first meeting and into relationship for eternity.

The image above is from an excellent and free 8-week evening course I recently joined called "Culture Meets Scripture". The instructors would typically be leading workshops all over the world, but now I've been able to enjoy their expertise from my desk at home. My initial interest was the training tools being used so that I can ensure that Concordia Mission Institute is keeping up with the innovations in online learning during the COVID time. Happily, this course was immediately applicable in the ministry context in Hong Kong. The image is of a yam plant overlaid with aspects of culture. This yam image is interesting in that it highlights that the most visible aspects of culture are the actions that can be seen in traditions and rituals and daily human interaction. Those actions, while the most visible, are growing from a set of tubers in the culture which are the values/pressures/hopes/needs/etc. planted in the soil of consequence and reason of the culture. And, those tubers have roots in meaning through beliefs and assumptions.

Christians often react to the observable rituals of a culture in strong and judgmental ways. In response, community members may adjust their actions to avoid offending the Christian in their midst. However, this does not get to the tubers below the surface, and

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certainly does not reach to the actual underlying meaning which feeds the entire plant.

So, how do we Christians approach witness of God's law and love in a way that connects with the roots rather than the leaves? It is a deeply important question when a person has already come to know that Jesus loves them and now is wondering how their faith influences their daily lives. As missionaries, we need to admit that our own tradition is influenced by culture. Before we start analyzing and deconstructing the traditions of another culture, it is important to recognize the many actions we take in our home communities which have no basis in God's Word. That doesn't mean these activities can not be practiced. And, the same holds true in other places. There are many visible actions which are *different*, but are they wrong? Getting to the heart of this question requires us to approach the question in humility and spend time asking "why" to get all the way down to those beliefs and assumptions in a given culture. Then, we sit with our friends in the culture and examine those beliefs with scripture. We can ask "What are they?" (defined through actions, reasons, consequences related to the practice, beliefs tied to the practice). "What does scripture say about reasons, consequences and beliefs?" "What does scripture say about the associated rituals: can they be continued? modified? rejected?" "How can new Christians support each other in an environment where the community continues in the traditional cultural ways, but new Christians have identified ways that their faith requires them to make different choices?"

This course sent me into some new conversations with members of our community in Hong Kong. Now I am learning deeper things about actions in holiday rituals. For example, many people here pray to a kind of spiritual gate-keeper before going to feed their ancestors during grave-sweeping festival. In my corresponding scriptural study I learned that God, too, assigns angels as gate keepers (for example, Genesis 3, Numbers 22, Revelation 21). These angels are given assignments from God for the purpose of our protection - a very different role and power than the gatekeepers being prayed to at the Hong Kong temples. This changes my conversation with a person in this culture from one of saying simply that there is no reason to believe in this gatekeeper to one that explores the truth of God's power and relationships with other spiritual beings. I plan to continue these conversations with people in the community and I look forward to being invited into the "underlying beliefs"-area of their daily living.

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Prayers

- Talia had a serious finger injury and Eliada contracted COVID. Thankful for excellent surgical care for Talia and for Eliada's mild case and quick recovery.
- That Christians would be slow in judgment of cultural practices and willing to take the time to explore the "why" with native members of the culture and examine those answers next to Scripture.
- That all of us would be gifted with hearts eager to listen and learn and willing to experience God's continuous molding and shaping.
- For protection and justice in the disbursement of COVID vaccinations worldwide, and success in stopping the spread of this disease.