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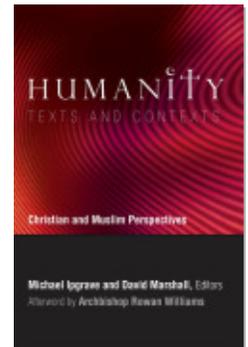
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CHAPTER TWO

Living with Difference

2.1 Affinity, Inclusion, and Mission

Christian Resources for Living with Difference

Michael Ipgrave

How do Christians live with difference? What resources and approaches do they bring to the challenge of diversity? That is the task I have been asked to address, with particular reference to issues of ethnic and cultural diversity, and of gender difference. Perhaps I can begin by pointing out something rather obvious but very important: that, for Christian faith, diversity in creation is an acknowledged and celebrated feature of the universe. “O Lord, how manifold are your works! In wisdom you have created them all; the earth is full of your creatures,” the Psalmist exclaims.⁷¹ In more systematic mode, the Bible’s opening account of Creation provides a map of the range and complexity of the created order, concluding that: “God saw everything that he had made, and indeed, it was very good. . . . Thus the heavens and the earth were finished, and all their multitude.”⁷² The diversity of creation, rightly understood, is a visual language expressing the abundance, richness, and wisdom of the life of the Creator⁷³—what Aref Nayed, in a lecture in an earlier Building Bridges seminar, described as “āyatology,” a divine semiology.⁷⁴ This seems a clear enough position so long as the created order is received as the work of God, but the question before us now is that of the human order. Nayed went on to describe the incursion into āyatology of humanly created technology and the devastating effects on biodiversity that this intervention could have.

These ecological questions are taken up in other contributions to this volume, but the human order also has its own markers of diversity and difference. How are these addressed in Christian understanding and practice? Are the differences of human beings also seen as an expression of the divine fecundity, or at least located within the ambit of the divine providence?

Strands of Difference and Diversity

Although the question of difference and diversity within Christianity is central to our subject, it is not possible to answer it in general without asking what kind of human

differences are being discussed. It is important at the outset to recognize what we might call the diverse diversities, the different differences, with which we are dealing. To avoid cumbersome language of this kind, I shall use the unmemorable expression “strand.” In its legal sense, this is a word with—as far as I am aware—no theological resonance whatever; indeed, it has been only recently coined in the context of human rights discourse. In common with that of other members of the European Union, U.K. equalities law now recognizes six distinct grounds on which discrimination can be recognized and should be combated, and these it refers to as strands: namely, race, gender, sexual orientation, religion or belief, age, and disability. This list is not in fact exhaustive for antidiscrimination provision: in some cases, for example, different languages are also protected by law.

We can note that these strands, first enumerated in a human rights context, are seen as marking differences that could be causes of shortfall from an agreed objective of equality. Although there may be in this secular thinking an implicit space created for the celebration of diversity, the emphasis is on restricting the effects of that diversity insofar as those effects are seen to imperil the project of equalized status. I am not called on to address Christian attitudes to each of these strands today; in particular, we are not in this session focusing on Christian (or Islamic) evaluations of the significance of religious diversity. Nevertheless, it will be immediately obvious that, severally and individually, the different strands raise extensive, deep-seated, and very different challenges for contemporary Christian believing and living. However, these challenges are not without precedent in the life of the Christian community, as can be seen by looking at a rather shorter list of strands embedded in one of the key New Testament texts on “difference.”

In a powerful passage arguing for the freedom of the children of God that is guaranteed for them by their incorporation into the body of Christ, Paul writes to the Galatian Christians: “As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.”⁷⁵ Like many Pauline texts, this verse has had an impact far beyond the immediate context of its setting in the epistle’s argument, and it is of particular resonance for us today because it names three strands of difference among those with which the apostolic church had to engage. That this is not an issue limited to the Galatian community is shown by another catalogue of strands appearing in the letter to the church at Colossae: “There is no longer Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave and free; but Christ is all and in all!”⁷⁶

Although the structure of the two lists is similar, the contents are different; I want to concentrate on the better-known Galatian verse. Here it will be seen that the first and third of the three strands Paul mentions can be broadly aligned with those identified in contemporary European legislation, namely race (Jew or Greek) and gender (male or female), while the second is one that is not mentioned (slave or free); more generally, the first refers to ethnic and cultural diversity, but not—as the baptismal setting makes clear—to differences of religion or belief.

The three Galatian strands of ethnicity or culture, of gender, and of slavery have been handled very differently within the Christian tradition, yet it is striking that Paul

unquestioningly coordinates them in this text. Taking this cue from the apostle, I wish first to look briefly at the development of Christian attitudes to slavery—or, more precisely, attitudes to the difference between enslaved people and free people—before turning to questions of ethnocultural and gender difference. I take this course in the hope that the history of the former can cast some light on the theological processes shaping the latter two. I owe this method to the lead recently given by Richard Burrige in his fine study of New Testament ethics, *Imitating Jesus*.⁷⁷

Living with the Difference between Slave and Free?

The New Testament holds together the practical issues of living in a slave-owning society with the spiritual reality of slaves and free having equal access to God in baptism. At some points the distinction between these two spheres of relationship is carefully maintained—after the exhortation “Let all who are under the yoke of slavery regard their masters as worthy of all honor” follows the warning: “Those who have believing masters must not be disrespectful to them on the ground that they are members of the church.”⁷⁸ By contrast, in Paul’s letter to Philemon, returning the runaway slave Onesimus, the two relationships are brought into a close, paradoxical contrast: Paul says Onesimus is to be received back “no longer as a slave but more than a slave, a beloved brother.”⁷⁹ The tension of these two ways of looking at slave–free relationships held for centuries and was particularly sharp in situations where Christianity was the religion of a dominant slave-owning group, still more when the church itself institutionally possessed slaves. Burrige points out that there were many who were ready and able to defend the distinction between slave and free on the grounds of scriptural texts.⁸⁰

Eventually, however, and after considerable struggle, slavery came to be regarded as indefensible by Christians. Although this judgment was expressed as an absolute moral repugnance, it had its origins in the impossibility of sustaining within the Christian community a tension between baptismal equality and the exigencies of slave owning. This history, of course, is quite different from those of the “ethnic-cultural” and “gender” strands of difference. While living with the slave–free distinction was eventually judged to be incompatible with the Christian commitment to spiritual equality in baptism, in the case of the two other strands Christianity has come variously to accommodate, to affirm, and to celebrate diversity and difference within the life of the church. In terms of the question I posed at the beginning, the distinction between slave and free came to be seen as a merely human difference, and indeed one opposed to the divine will, whereas culture and gender continue to be seen as aspects of diversity within God’s providence. So it may be that understanding the processes leading to the eventual Christian rejection of the slave–free difference can help in discerning how to respond to the other strands of difference.

Burrige points out that the decisive change in Christian attitudes to slavery was effected by extending the community of interpretation that addressed the scriptural witness to include those who had direct experience of both sides of the slave–free polarity:

“If there was biblical study driving the abolitionists, it was a result of reading and re-reading their Bibles in the light of that listening to the experience of former slaves and slave-traders.”⁸¹ He also stresses that the process of interpretation involved not only reading off ethical teachings from the text of the scriptures but also seeking to follow the way of life of Jesus, who reached out to the poor and oppressed: “To imitate Jesus, it is not enough simply to extract his ethical teaching from the Sermon on the Mount; we must also imitate his loving acceptance of others, especially the marginalised, within an open and inclusive community.”⁸² Indeed, once they are welcomed, the marginalized are no longer on the margins. Central both to the widening of the interpretative circle and to the project of shared discipleship is then the sense of the community of Christ’s body, which is open to all, and in which all have an equally honored place. In one sense, the very injunctions addressed to slaves in the New Testament point to the security of the place they enjoy in the community because they would not otherwise be counted as recipients of the exhortatory messages. But in another sense Christian abolitionism implies a rejection of an overaccommodating worldly view of the church through a renewed emphasis on its spiritual reality as a community of the baptised with equal access to God.

Two other points must be factored into this brief account of the development of Christian attitudes to slavery. First, the decisive movement to abolition came after a period in which slave owning had been justified by many precisely to the extent to which it did not extend to the ownership of Christian slaves. Slaves should not be baptized, some argued, because it would then be necessary to grant them freedom. This argument was applied in contexts where slave owners were of different ethnic and cultural groups from their slaves, so it was possible to draw a distinction, supported by some forms of Calvinist theology, between historically “Christian” nations and “heathens.” Against this, however, as European Christians established themselves in different parts of the world as dominant groups, the religion that they took with them demonstrated in many cases that it had a surprising missionary impulse to it: not content with restricting their ministrations to expatriates and their descendants, chaplains and other clergy brought the Gospel to those who were enslaved. Conversely, for many slaves, Christian faith—although seen by many as the religion of the oppressor—was received by others as a message of liberation and hope, able to transform their lives. There is therefore a missiological transformation lying behind Burridge’s “widening the community of interpretation.”

Second, in the debate among Christians about the status of slaves in relation to free people, the most telling argument was a simple appeal to a sense of shared humanity—or, more strongly, of kinship. The mass-produced medallions of Josiah Wedgwood visually encapsulated this with a picture of a slave with the slogan: “Am I not a man and a brother?” It is important to note here that an even more fundamental affinity is being claimed than that of shared baptism: whether Christian or not, the slave shown in the medallion is seen as a human being with an equal entitlement to recognition as one made, like the purchaser of the medallion, in the image of God. In the order of creation as of redemption, there is to be no distinction between slave and free. Like the baptismal

regeneration that guarantees access to the Father through sharing in the death and resurrection of the Son, the image of God is an intrinsically relational marker of human identity, affirming both slave and free as the sons or daughters of God.

Within the developing history of Christian attitudes to slavery, then, it is possible to identify three related and mutually reinforcing factors: the opening to true inclusion of the Eucharistic community, gathered around the imitation of Jesus and the interpretation of his words; the provision of that community with new members through the missionary imperative of communicating the Gospel; and the affirmation of the kinship of all humanity marked by bearing the image of God the Father. In the history of this strand of difference, the ultimate outcome of these factors was the denial of any validity to the distinction between slave and free. In the case of the other two strands to which I now turn—ethnicity or culture, and gender—the outcome of the Christian project of living with diversity may be quite different; indeed, these are projects whose histories are still being formed. Nevertheless, I shall argue that these same three factors provide core Christian resources for living with difference here also.

Living with Differences of Ethnicity or Culture and of Gender

There are evidently fundamental dissimilarities in the ways in which the two strands of “ethnicity or culture,” on the one hand, and “gender,” on the other hand, mark the ordering of humanity. Most obviously, the former is multiply diverse while the latter is only dual: the nations of the world are many while male and female are only two. For this reason, it is possible to speak of diversity in relation to ethnicity or culture but of difference with regard to gender. Moreover, in some respects at least the former seems to admit of a more obvious human contribution to its formation compared to the latter. In accordance with the terminology of this seminar, I have used the rather wide term “ethnic or cultural” for the first strand, which in reality represents a spectrum of markers of human identity; the “cultural” end point of this spectrum certainly is created by human production even if the “ethnic” end has a greater sense of givenness. Contrasted with this, “gender” may appear as much more of a naturally provided category—although even here as well modern gender studies point to the part played by socialization in learned gendering as distinct from biological sex. A further dissimilarity between the two strands is that there are very few communities in which gender difference can be ignored, and those that there are have a certain artificiality about them; gender difference is indeed the foundation of the intimacy that forms social bonding. There have been and continue to be communities, however, in which ethnic and cultural differences are absent or can be safely ignored; where they are obvious, they may well be pressed into service as lines to divide people from one another rather than to bond them together.

It is perhaps not surprising, considering these differences, that Christian tradition has generally been more theologically appreciative of gender difference than of cultural diversity; the tendency has been to see the former as more immediately God-given while the latter has often been viewed with some ambiguity, as embodying elements of human

rebelliousness as well as of providential ordering. That said, the resources of scripture and their development and application in Christian thought and practice are many-layered and complex in relation to both strands, moving in contradictory or contending directions, and still open to a wide variety of interpretations. It would be wholly misleading to identify one homogeneous Christian account of living with difference in relation to either strand. However, in relation to both, as in relation to the distinction of slave and free, Christians have sought to work on two different planes simultaneously, holding in tension, on the one hand, the exigencies of practical accommodation to social contexts marked by ethnic or cultural and gender differences with, on the other hand, the spiritual reality of Jew and Greek, man and woman, being called through baptism into a community of equal access to God through Christ.

In relation to these two strands as in relation to slavery, the same three factors provide basic Christian resources for dealing with difference: namely, the recognition of affinity provided by a common marking with the image of God; the widening of the community of interpretation and discipleship through the inclusiveness of the Eucharistic gathering; and the missionary impulse to communicate with the other in order to commend ultimate truth. As it has perhaps been less intensively discussed in Christian theology, in what follows I shall in each case focus mainly on ethnic and cultural diversity with rather more glancing references to issues of gender difference.

Affinity through the Image of God

In the first place, there is the sense of affinity across difference produced by sharing the image of God. It must be recognized that the idea of “image” in the “Priestly” account of humanity within the overall account of Creation, whatever its original signification may have been as the Hebrew *selem*, has been developed in Christian thinking into a richly relational, even communitarian symbol of the way in which human diversity can mirror the richness of God’s life. Taking their cue from the plural form of the divine speech announcing the creation of humanity, “Then God said, ‘Let *us* make humankind in our image, according to *our* likeness,’” some Christian commentators have seen here a reference to the ensemble of Father, Son, and Spirit acting together to create the *imago Dei*, from that concluding that the divine image in humanity has itself a Trinitarian reference, whether the referent be taken as the relation of humans in community or as traceable within the human individual.⁸³

With more textual plausibility, others have drawn attention to the shift in the object in the verse of creation, involving both a change of number and the inclusion of a new gender: “So God created man (*hā ādām*) in his own image, in the image of God he created him (*ōthō*); male and female created he them (*ōthām*).”⁸⁴ This, it is argued, shows that the *imago Dei* implies gendered relationship as constitutive of humanity. In the following chapter of Genesis, indeed the man is created first, and the woman is subsequently formed from his rib, giving rise to an exegetical tradition, found even in the New Testament, that accords primacy to one gender over the other.⁸⁵ Yet in the Priestly text

that speaks of creation in the image of God, the narrative is rather of simultaneous creation with implications of mutuality, codependence, and equality of esteem. *Imago Dei* here seems to function as a marker that affirms gender parity in the context of relationship to one another and to God, and that conversely points to the possibility of interpersonal relationships subsisting within the very life of the God whom humans image.

In relation to ethnic and cultural diversity, the theme of the *imago* is not explicitly developed, but the same line of thinking about affinity can be traced in the motif of *syngenesia*, the belief—shared with much of the Greek philosophical tradition—that the diversity of human races and cultures all derive from and can be traced back to one parental source. This is of course implicit in the ancestral narratives of Genesis, which in fact present two origin stories for cultural and ethnic diversity. The first, concerning the sons of Adam and Eve, identifies Cain and Abel as types of the two key cultural patterns of Ancient Near Eastern society, respectively agrarianism and pastoralism.⁸⁶ It is true that the story appears to privilege one culture over the other because Abel's offering is accepted by God and Cain's is declined, yet even here there is ambiguity, for God puts his protective mark on Cain.

The second account of ancestral genesis follows the narrative of the flood, when the earth is repopulated through three distinct ethnicities descended from the three sons of Noah: Shem, Ham, and Japheth.⁸⁷ Here too a partisan and discriminatory interpretation is possible, building on the account of Noah's curse of Ham.⁸⁸ The story of the curse, extended by imaginative interpretation to apply to contemporary Negro people, was indeed used by biblical defenders of the institution of slavery. However, the following chapters of Genesis, showing the work of the Priestly compiler, use the account simply to chart the peopling of the known earth.

It is this nonpartisan, universalistic account of *syngenesia* that is taken up in the New Testament in Luke's account of Paul's speech on the Areopagus: "From one ancestor he [God] made all nations to inhabit the whole earth, and he allotted the times of their existence and the boundaries of the places where they would live."⁸⁹ Note that Paul's literal words are not gender specific: the text reads, according to different variants, either "from one" (*ex henos*) or "from one blood" (*ex henos haimatos*). The emphasis is on unity of origination, not on a biological prioritization of one gender over the other. More significantly, as in other parts of the biblical witness, here the teaching of a common descent from one human ancestor leads naturally to an affirmation of a shared spiritual parenthood in the person of God the Father—Paul quotes the words of the pagan Greek poet Aratus: "For we too are his offspring."⁹⁰

In the case of both gender and culture or ethnicity, then, there is a cluster of biblical teachings around *imago Dei*, *syngenesia*, and the universal Fatherhood of God, which together emphasize an affinity of humans grounded in their relationship to God and one another. While they are expressed in narrative forms that can lend themselves to subordinating or partisan interpretations, these affinity teachings have also provided rich resources for those wishing to affirm a basic equality between humans that crosses divisions without in any sense seeking to abolish the significance of the underlying differences. Affinity is compatible with a continuing recognition of the reality of diversity or

difference within both ethnicity or culture and gender. In this respect, its effect is different in these two strands from the case of slavery, where the affirmation of a common humanity eventually resulted in the refusal to countenance a continued distinction between enslaved people and free people. Whereas the slave-free distinction could only be read as the priority of one and the subjugation of the other, cultural and gender differences could be interpreted as complementary expressions of a fundamentally equal status in relation to God, and so, in light of “image” teaching, as providential ordering, not merely human construct.

Widening the Community of Interpretation and Discipleship

While *imago* and *syngenesia* are motifs applicable to the whole human race, whatever its members’ religious affiliation, the second factor I identified as changing attitudes to slavery is by definition limited to the Christian community: namely, the opening up of the Eucharistic assembly of interpretation and discipleship to all those who seek to follow Jesus. While the church has always included people of both genders, and throughout history has subsisted in different cultures and among people of different ethnicities, the present age has seen an unprecedented awareness of the importance of explicitly attending to these strands of diversity within the body of Christ.

This awareness is evident at the level of biblical and theological study, where scholars may well write avowedly from a feminist perspective, or may expressly reflect on Christian faith from the contexts of their own ethnic or cultural standpoint. It is instructive to reflect on the pace of change here. At a very practical level, for example, in the Church of England women have only been ordained priests since 1993, yet in 2006 for the first time more women than men were ordained priest; overall, more than a quarter of our clergy now are women. Given that one of the priest’s most important responsibilities is to expound the scriptures at the Eucharist, it follows that the community of interpretation has significantly broadened in gender terms. In relation to cultural and ethnic diversity, in 1990 the Indian theologian R. S. Sugirtharajah introduced a volume of studies bearing the significant title *Voices from the Margin* with these words: “It highlights the struggles and exegetical concerns of those who are on the periphery of society. Generally, the dominant biblical scholarship has shied away from the needs of the weak and needy. . . . These essays embody the needs and aspirations of those who are not normally at the forefront of things.”⁹¹ As the pace of globalization has accelerated, it remains true that the weak and the needy are not normally at the forefront of things politically and economically, yet it is remarkable to see the way in which the academic community of interpretation has expanded even since that volume’s publication to include a whole diversity of voices. In theological discourse, it is no longer so easy to identify who is “on the margin” and who is “at the center.”

This in turn applies with increasing effect also to processes of ecclesial decision making, where global communions are all struggling in different ways to adjust both to the rebalancing of the Christian world toward the South and to continuing changes in the

way that men and women understand their relationship toward one another. Despite the pain and confusion of these processes, which Anglicans know only too well, they can be seen as an inevitable corollary of what Burrige calls the opening of the community of interpretation and discipleship into a more inclusive reality.

The effects of globalization, though, are not only seen at a global level; local churches also can be transformed by the impact of migration on communities. London, where I now minister, is a truly microcosmic city, with people who can trace their ancestries or their own earlier lives to all parts of the world and who maintain a strong sense of identification with diverse cultural traditions. We are catching up with the historic diversity of a city such as Singapore. This diversity is not just an external feature providing a context for the mission of the Christian church; it is also internally constitutive of our very life as our congregations regularly include worshippers from across the world, worshippers who are together shaping new expressions of what it means to be a Christian community marked by diversity. While this may seem a new and, in general, a renewing experience for the Church of England, it can also be seen as a recovery of the formative context of the original Christian movement in the cultural and ethnic pluralism of cities such as Corinth: "The new municipalities [of the first century Roman Empire] were to be meeting-places for ethnic and religious diversity, settlers found themselves alongside people who were 'different,' and needed to develop new patterns of community life as they faced pluralistic and social challenges unknown in their countries of origin."⁹²

Wayne Meeks some years ago pointed out that this complex social setting has left its ineradicable mark on the identity of the apostolic church: "Its complexity, its untidiness to the mind, may well have been felt with special acuteness by people who were marginal or transient, either physically, socially or both, as so many identifiable members of the Pauline churches seem to have been. In any case, Paul and the other founders and leaders of those groups engaged aggressively in the creation of a new social reality."⁹³ It follows that local Christian communities today shaping new identities for the *ecclesia* through the negotiation of difference between people of different diasporas are rereading the Bible in a context close to its original; the opening of the community of interpretation to diversity renews its authenticity. In doing that, we are finding that issues of cultural diversity are encoded into the very logic of, for example, Paul's letters. Likewise, perhaps, in relation to the other strand, of gender, the New Testament can also be interpreted as inscribing gendered memory through the witness of "Mary, who treasured all these words in her heart and pondered them."⁹⁴ It is through a widening of the community of interpretation that these textually embedded diversities become once again apparent to us today.

The Missiological Impulse to Communicate

Christians living with difference have as a resource the missiological impulse that motivates the church's life. This might at first seem a perverse element of the Christian faith to identify as a resource in contexts of difference and diversity; surely, it could be

thought, it would be much easier to live with differences if everybody were just to keep their opinions and activities to themselves, and learn to accept that others had their own opinions and activities. Yet this is to misunderstand the nature both of Christian mission and of the things that make for the health of diverse societies. The mission into which the Spirit leads the church is not an exercise in interfering with others' ways of life; it is rather an entering into communication across difference, inspired by the desire to commend truth. And diversity is not best honored through drawing protective lines between different communities but through enabling open, honest exchange between people and groups who differ from one another.

The paradigm for this communicative mission impulse is the Pentecost event, at which the Spirit enables people of different languages to speak to and to hear one another as they tell of the mighty acts of God; this confession of saving truth then necessarily spills over into mission to the surrounding community. To appreciate the import of Pentecost, it is necessary to set it against the background of the Genesis story of the tower of Babel, that highly ambiguous narrative on the origin of human linguistic—and implicitly also of cultural and ethnic—diversity: “The whole earth had one language and the same words. . . . Then they said, ‘Come, let us build ourselves a city, and a tower with its top in the heavens, and let us make a name for ourselves; otherwise we shall be scattered abroad upon the face of the earth.’”⁹⁵

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks describes Babel as “the first global project” and remarks that the significance of God’s decision to bring it to an end by “confusing the language” of humanity is that it is not the divine purpose to create a universal order because “Babel ends with the division of mankind into a multiplicity of languages, cultures, nations and civilisations.”⁹⁶ It would be interesting to know how this sounds from an Islamic perspective; to me, it seems to resonate with the Qur’anic verse “To each among you have we prescribed a law and a way. If God had so willed, He could have made you a single people. But his purpose is to test you in what he has given each of you.”⁹⁷

Sacks insists that this does not imply any questioning of monotheism, but it does require an acknowledgment of the diversity of ways in which the one God addresses people: for Judaism, “The God of Abraham is the God of all mankind, but the faith of Abraham is not the faith of all mankind.”⁹⁸ It seems to me, though, that Christian faith cannot rest content with a pluralism like this but is impelled to say that the truth that has grasped us in Jesus must in some sense be true for all. This missionary conviction leads to the imperative to communicate across differences; the Pentecost event guarantees that such communication is a possibility capable of realization as Spirit-enabled dialogue replaces the cacophony of Babel. Christianity thus engages with diversity not only through accepting its reality but also through seeing it as a context for communication.

When mission is seen in this way, as communication in the service of divine truth, rather than as an attempt to extend institutional hegemony, or to enlist others to our side, or to replace one way of thinking by another, two points become clear. First, mission belongs to God, not to Christians; and God has appointed that it should take place within a context of diversity and difference. The missiological impulse of the Spirit is thus ineluctably linked to living with difference, whether we like it or not.

Second, mission as communication involves a two-way flow of ideas, a joint exploration of a truth that has been given in which each party will be enriched by the other. Indeed, this can be seen right at the outset of Christianity, when the first mission proclamation of the church, “He is risen,” is communicated in gendered complementarity, entrusted to the women at the tomb to convey to the apostles—so that these women are hailed in Eastern tradition as *isapostoloi*, “equal to the apostles.” In terms of cultural history, too, the ability of mission to lead to mutual enrichment is no mere ideal but an actual reality, as is shown by the fact that much of the earliest reliable knowledge of other societies and cultures to reach western European Christians was brought to them by missionaries or scholars linked with the missionary enterprise. The subsequent transformation of the Christian community through the incorporation of people of different cultures has given us an ecclesial resource for living with difference in the shape of the glorious and growing diversity of the Body of Christ.

A Trinitarian Contour

The sense of universal affinity through the shared divine image, the establishment of the Eucharistic community as an inclusive site of interpretation and discipleship, and the missiological impulse leading to mutual communication across difference, then, provide three key resources for Christians living with difference and diversity. These are not peripheral to the faith. On the contrary, they can be seen as reflective of an underlying Trinitarian contour that shapes the distinctive patterns of Christian believing: the fatherhood of God provides the ultimate ground in which humanity shares its kinship attested by the divine image; the lordship of Jesus around whom the diverse ecclesial community gathers is expressed through teaching and example; the energy of the Spirit renewing God’s people in mission is that which enables communication across difference. This is not to impose a Trinitarian pattern too neatly on the complexity of Christian attitudes to diversity, but it is to recognize that the core features of Christian faith can be discerned as shaping those attitudes. Living with difference is a theme that leads straight to the heartland of Christian believing.

2.2 Islam and Human Diversity

Vernacular Religion Confronts the Categories of Race and Culture

Vincent Cornell

The first morning that I ever spent in Singapore was in December 2004, exactly on the day of the earthquake and tsunami that devastated the province of Aceh in Indonesia and wreaked havoc throughout the Indian Ocean region. On that day, a group of Muslims from the Abdul Aleem Siddique Mosque took me to the shrine of Habib Nuh al-Habshi, a Sufi saint whose tomb is found just behind a freeway off-ramp in Singapore's port district. My new friends told me that Habib Nuh, along with three other Muslim saints in the Singapore region (one in Malaysia and the other two on nearby islands of Indonesia), protected Singapore from earthquakes and typhoons, which had never occurred in the city's history.

Since that time, I have made it a point to pay my respects to Habib Nuh al-Habshi whenever I visit Singapore. This follows a longstanding Muslim tradition of paying respects to the "Masters of the Land" (*rijāl al-balad*) whenever one visits a new country. For me, Habib Nuh and his tomb represent the religious and cultural diversity that make of Singapore a beacon of cosmopolitanism among the great cities of Asia. Habib Nuh al-Habshi was a sayyid, a descendant of the Prophet Muhammad, who originally came from Hadramawt in South Yemen. Across the street from his shrine is a Taoist temple surrounded by yellow flags. Habib Nuh's shrine is a rectangular structure on a hill, rising many dozens of steps above the ground. The building that houses the grave looks more like a Hindu *chandi* shrine than a typically Muslim building. Overall, the impression that the shrine gives the visitor is more Mayan than Muslim, and it evokes the feeling of climbing the steps of temples in Uxmal or Chichen Itzá in Yucatán, Mexico. The anthropologist Engseung Ho describes Habib Nuh's tomb in the following way:

The tomb is covered by the green cloth of Islam and surrounded by golden yellow drapes, the colour of Malay royalty. Pilgrims and supplicants from all ethnic groups—Malays, Hadrami Arabs, Chinese, and especially Indians—come to visit and sit quietly a while. On the walls are framed genealogies, pointing to Habib Nuh's siblings in Penang, Singapore's predecessor port city at the northern end of the Strait of Melaka, and to ascendants in Hadramawt. The line from Singapore to Penang reaches west to other port cities, which until two generations ago were Crown Colonies of Britain's empire of free trade: Colombo, Bombay, and Aden. Along this old trunk route of world trade, and along the smaller branches that feed into it, are older ports settled by Hadramis, and housing tombs like Habib Nuh's.⁹⁹

One would be hard put to find a better example of the cosmopolitanism that characterizes the culture of Islam than this Muslim tomb in the largely Chinese city of Singapore. The theological basis of this cosmopolitanism can be found in the following two verses of the Qur'ān, which are among the most famous verses in Islamic scripture:

Among [God's] signs are the creation of the heavens and the earth, and the differences of your languages (*alsinatikum*) and colors (*alwānikum*). Herein indeed, are portents for those with knowledge.¹⁰⁰

Oh humankind! We have created you male and female (*min dhakarīn wa unthā'*), and have made you peoples and tribes (*shu'ūban wa qabā'ila*) so that you may know one another. Verily, the noblest of you, in the sight of Allah, is the most God-fearing of you (*atqākum*). Verily, Allah is the All-Knowing and the Aware.¹⁰¹

Muslims often cite these two verses of the Qur'an in interfaith gatherings to demonstrate that Islam is tolerant in spirit and to argue that God encourages Muslims to embrace religious diversity. As a practicing Muslim and scholar, I too believe that the diversity of the world's religions is part of God's plan for humanity. However, I am also aware that when we use these Qur'anic verses to argue for religious pluralism, we overlook the fact that although they are indeed about difference, they say nothing on the surface about *religious* difference. Instead, they speak about differences of language (Ar. *lisān*, pl. *alsina*), color (Ar. *lawān*, pl. *alwān*), gender (Ar. *dhakar wa unthā'*, literally "male and female"), peoples (Ar. *sha'b*, pl. *shu'ūb*), and tribes (Ar. *qabila*, pl. *qabā'il*). When we argue, as we often do, that these verses advocate religious pluralism, we are in fact "pushing the envelope" of Qur'anic exegesis. Literalistic commentators could even argue that such an interpretation has no basis in the text. Although I prefer not to agree with them, I must concede that they have a point. Here, then, I take the opportunity to concede their point and talk about what these verses actually say, instead of what many of us would like them to mean.

More than fourteen hundred years after these verses were first revealed, we can still recognize two of the categories of which they speak as primary categories of human identity. These are the categories of language and gender—or in the exact words of the verses themselves, of "tongues" and of "men and women." As for the other categories of which these verses speak, they are somewhat alien to us, just as our own ways of speaking about difference would be alien to those who lived in the time of the Prophet Muhammad. Instead of speaking about "colors," we are now likely to speak about "race." Instead of talking about "peoples," we would probably talk about "nations." Instead of referring to "tribes," we would use words such as "societies," "ethnicities," or "cultures." Each of these modern categories—race, nation, society, ethnicity, and culture—is a complex ideological concept that carries with it a particular genealogy and set of meanings. All of these terms are as heavily charged with politics as they are with the categories of social science. As ways of conceptualizing human diversity, they would be as alien to the Prophet Muhammad and his followers as Einstein's general theory of relativity. The idea of difference certainly existed in the Prophet's time and later on in Islamic history, but not in these terms. Unlike us, when premodern Muslims talked about colors, peoples, and tribes, they really meant colors, peoples, and tribes. We moderns are the ones who turn colors into "races" and turn peoples and tribes into "nations."

The truth of this assertion is borne out when one looks carefully at ḥadīth accounts and early commentaries of sacred texts. For example, a ḥadīth transmitted by Bukhārī

and Muslim states, “Verily, my friends and allies are not of the tribe of so-and-so. Rather, my friends and allies are the pious, wherever they may be.” This tradition provides evidence that the world in which the Holy Qur’ān was revealed was a world of tribes and peoples, but not of “cultures.” This conclusion is reinforced further by the influential Qur’ān commentary (*tafsīr*) of Muḥammad ibn Jarīr al-Ṭabarī (d. 923 CE). In this commentary, Ṭabarī does not discuss the “nations and tribes” passage of *al-Hujurāt* 49:13 as a text speaking about cultures or even about peoples. Instead, he thinks only about false notions of genealogical (i.e., tribal) superiority and inferiority: “When the verse says ‘so that you may come to know each other,’ it means, ‘so that you may know each other with respect to genealogy’ . . . not because you have any superiority to others in that respect nor any nearness which will bring you closer to God, but because the most distinguished among you is the most pious among you.”¹⁰²

However, to conclude from Ṭabarī and other sources that early Muslims did not think in terms of race and culture is not to say that prejudice did not exist in premodern Islam or even among the Prophet’s own community. In a recent article on the concept of race in Islam, the African American Muslim scholar Paul Hardy notes that the “nations and tribes” verse was revealed immediately after the Prophet Muhammad’s conquest of Mecca. After granting immunity to the tribes of Mecca that had fought against him, the Prophet asked Bilāl the Ethiopian to call the people to prayer. A group of three recently converted Arabs watched Bilāl make the call to prayer. One of them remarked how happy he was that his parents were not on hand to see such a disgusting sight. Another found it remarkable that the Prophet could find no one other than a black slave to call the Muslims to prayer. The third refrained from making any negative comment at all, lest God send a revelation to the Prophet to deal with what they had said. In modern parlance, we would call the first of these people a racist, the second a snob, and the third, a hypocrite. As the hypocrite expected, God indeed sent the angel Gabriel to inform the Prophet of their discussion. The Prophet asked the three men about what they had said, and they confirmed what Gabriel told him. God then revealed the verse to proclaim that the only criterion He uses to judge between believers is piety, a virtue that Bilāl possessed to a greater degree than his critics did.¹⁰³ This verse of the Qur’ān would not have been revealed if these Arab Muslims had not discriminated between themselves and Bilāl, a black African, based on their color and origin.

Muslims, like most human beings, are not free of prejudice. Thus, one finds repeated reminders in Qur’ān and ḥadīth that God ranks people according to their inner worth, not according to their outer characteristics. The world of late antiquity, including the region where Islam was born, was full of status distinctions in which most people lived at a disadvantage compared with a more privileged minority. Common status distinctions in this period included rich versus poor, owner versus slave, man versus woman, Arab versus non-Arab, cultured (mostly in Greek) versus uncultured, conqueror versus conquered, dominant tribe versus subordinate tribe, and high lineage versus low lineage. Most of these status distinctions continued from the pre-Islamic *Jāhiliyya* period into Islam, with the exception that literacy in Arabic or Farsi replaced literacy in other languages. However, even at its worst, one is hard put to find in the Late Antique world

any prejudice as comprehensive and deeply rooted as the modern concept of race. It would have been unthinkable not only for early Muslims but also for Late Antique Mediterranean people in general to define the worth of human beings solely on the basis of how one looked, as is done in modern racism.

A famous ḥadīth of the Prophet Muhammad in the *Musnad* of Aḥmad ibn Ḥanbal (d. 855 CE) states: “There is no preference for an Arab over a non-Arab, nor for a non-Arab over an Arab; nor for a red man over a black man, nor for a black man over a red man; except through piety.” In another ḥadīth, the Prophet said, “I was sent to the reds and the blacks.” Notice that the phrase “white people” does not appear in these traditions. In traditional Islam, color was a distinction but not a fundamental defining characteristic. To a certain extent, the existence of racism in Western societies is an accident of history and geography. The lack of pale-skinned, blonde-haired people in the Mediterranean world turned color prejudice into what Sigmund Freud called the “fetishism of small differences.” Because people did not differ greatly in appearance, more was made of differences in genealogy, language, and modes of livelihood. It is easier to be a true racist where differences in color, hair, or skin and bone structure are the sharpest. The ideology of racism is an ideology based on perceived differences in outward form, such as color and body structure. This is one reason why racism tended to develop in countries that possessed colonies far from the metropolitan “homeland” or in societies that were based on plantation or slave economies where labor was imported from different continents.

Large-scale agricultural slavery was rare in the premodern Muslim world outside of modern-day Tunisia (in the region of al-Qayrawan) and Iraq (in the al-Sawad agricultural region). It is probably not a coincidence that the only major political movement in Islamic history that reflected what we today would call a strong “racial” component was the revolt of the Zanj, the black agricultural slaves of Iraq, between 869 CE and 883 CE. For the most part, however, color was of limited importance, and the whiteness or even lightness of a person’s skin was not seen as phylogenetically better than the norm. In the premodern Muslim world, color difference was a matter of aesthetics, not of race. To be reminded of this fact, one need only recall the passage in T. E. Lawrence’s *Seven Pillars of Wisdom*, where the famous Lawrence of Arabia frightens a Bedouin child because his blue eyes remind the boy of blue sky shining through the eye sockets of a skull. Similarly, when I lived in Morocco in the 1970s, the Senegalese wife of a wealthy executive from Fes told my Moroccan wife that Fasis chose Senegalese women because they liked the contrast of gold jewelry on black skin.

However, as the Zanj revolt in early medieval Iraq indicates, blacks were still likely to have a greater problem with prejudice under Islam than other people were. In twelfth-century North Africa, for example, the Sanhaja Berbers of Morocco prohibited marriage and even concubinage with black women. Marriages between Sanhaja men and black women were so rare that when a Sanhaja disciple of the Andalusian Sufi Abū Madyan (d. 1198 CE) married his master’s former concubine, it was considered a minor miracle. After the marriage, the couple had to move from the Maghrib to Egypt to find a place that would accept such a mixed marriage. Widespread acceptance of what we today

would call “interracial” marriage developed only after the Arabization of Morocco, following the migrations of the Banū Hilal Arabs from Palestine and Egypt and the Banū Maʿqil Arabs from the Yemen.

The famous Arab writer and theologian of Baghdad Abū ʿUthmān al-Jāhīz (d. 869 CE), probably the greatest essayist in the history of Arabic literature, was considered ugly not only because he was short and goggle-eyed (the meaning of *al-jāhīz*) but also because he had black skin. In defense of his condition of birth, he wrote an essay called *The Glory of the Blacks over the Whites* (*Fakhr al-Sūdān ʿalā al-Bīḍān*). This work is interesting partly because it draws one of the first clear distinctions between “black” and “white” in Muslim literature. However, it is even more valuable for what it says—or does not say—about the concept of “race” in premodern Islam. Jāhīz’s work is an apologia for blackness, and he begins by mentioning famous black people in Islamic history. Included in this list is Bilāl the Ethiopian, whom the Caliph ʿUmar ibn al-Khaṭṭāb (d. 644 CE) called a “lord” and “one-third of Islam.”¹⁰⁴ The second part of the work consists of a collection of verses from black poets of the Umayyad period (661–750 CE). Most of these poems are witty and sometimes vulgar responses to Arab poets who insulted their blackness.

The third part of the work makes use of the *faḍāʾil* (exploits) genre of Arabic literature. Here Jāhīz glorifies black heroes from before and after the advent of Islam and recounts the virtues of what we in the United States would call “black culture.” In this section, Jāhīz makes ample use of stereotypes that today would be seen as racist. For example, he asserts that blacks are more generous than others are, they are excellent singers, they have great strength and vigor, they are brave and generous, and they are loquacious speakers. “One of their men will lecture (even) a king from sunrise to sunset,” says Jāhīz, “and will not be content to drop the subject or to be quiet until he has finished what he wanted to say.” He also states, “You will never see a black with anything but the most pleasant disposition, a tongue disposed toward laughter, and the best impression of others.”¹⁰⁵

One of the most revealing passages in this section confirms that blacks were often ridiculed as slaves or former slaves in the generation before the Zanj revolt at the end of the ninth century CE. Jāhīz states, “The Blacks have said to the Arabs, ‘Out of your ignorance you considered us as belonging to you, just as you considered your women your property in the *Jābiliyya* period. When the justice of Islam came, you understood that this was evil, yet we still have no desire to desert you. We have filled the country through intermarriage. We have prevented your destruction and protected you from your enemies.’”¹⁰⁶ Apparently the accusation that Arab men mistreated their women was just as stinging a rebuke in the early ʿAbbāsīd period as it is today.

However, the assumption among some Africans and African Americans that Muslim Arabs were just as racist as some Europeans and Americans is contradicted by Jāhīz’s discussion of color differences.

The number of blacks is greater than the number of whites, because most of those who are counted as whites are comprised of people from Persia (Fars), the mountains, Khurasan, Rome, Slavia, the land of the Franks, and al-Andalus, and anything apart

from these is insignificant. But among the blacks are counted the Zanj, the Ethiopians, the Fezzan, the Berbers, the Copts, the Nubians, the Zaghawa, the Moors, the people of Sind (modern Pakistan), the people of the Indus Valley, the Qamar, the Dabila (South Indians), the Chinese, and those who are beyond them. The islands of the sea between China and the land of the Zanj are full of blacks, just as are Sarandib (Sri Lanka), Kalah, Amal, Zabij, and the islands up to Hindustan and China (modern Indonesia).¹⁰⁷

This passage is clear evidence that the concept of color was a main factor of human difference for Jāḥiẓ. However, this was not racism in any meaningful sense of the term. No modern observer would consider Chinese, South Asians, and Indonesians to be of the same “race” as sub-Saharan Africans. Actually, it would be more accurate to say that Jāḥiẓ considered the lightness or darkness of one’s skin but not one’s color as a marker of “color” difference. In this passage, he ignores both skin color and structural characteristics—two major determinants of the modern concept of race—in defining the parameters of human “blackness.”

In Jāḥiẓ’s time, the Arabic language had no word that would correspond to the semantic range covered by the English word “race.” The word that is usually translated as “race” in medieval and modern Arabic texts is “*jins*.” *Jins* comes from the Latin *genus* and literally means “category.” It is also the Arabic term for “sex,” as in gender. *Jins* is a classificatory term that was taken over from Greco-Roman philosophy and science. It was used in Islamic law, for example, to define the value of commodities. In other words, one *jins* of a commodity would have a different unit value than another *jins* of the same commodity. By contrast, the eleventh-century Central Asian jurist Abū Bakr al-Sarakhsī saw *jins* as a way of characterizing human worth based on status distinctions: “The free person and the slave are of one *jins*. As far as his origin is concerned, every human being is free. Slavery intervenes as an accident. . . . Thus slavery does not bring about a change in one’s *jins*.”¹⁰⁸ Although for Sarakhsī *jins* is a marker of worth, it is clearly not an indicator of “race.”

If it is possible to say “race does not matter” about premodern Islam, it is also possible to say much the same about “culture.” Historians have long observed that the shock of European colonialism in the Muslim world was exacerbated by the fact that Muslims traditionally considered Northern Europeans to be uncivilized barbarians. Premodern Muslim terms that designated ethnicities were usually based on regions or modes of livelihood. Europeans were *al-Ifranġ*, a word that stood for “Franks”; a *Hindī* was a person from the Indus Valley. *Al-Sūdān*, the “Land of the Blacks,” was an anomaly in that it was based on skin color. The word ‘*arab*’ for “Arabs” referred to a people, but the term was based not on the modern concept of culture but on the socioeconomic basis of the Arab lifestyle. An ‘*arabī*’ was a pastoralist or a herdsman; thus, the term could be used for any pastoralist, irrespective of whether a person was “Arab” by culture. For example, a thirteenth-century historical work from Morocco describes the so-called Arab tribe of Banū Marin entering the Rif Mountains.¹⁰⁹ We would not call these people Arabs today. Ethnically, they were Amazigh people or Berbers; they spoke the Tamazight language and considered themselves distinct from Arabs. The only thing that made them Arab to this medieval Moroccan historian was their pastoralist way of life.

ʿAjamī, the antonym for *ʿarabī*, in premodern Muslim usage, was not a socioeconomic category but a linguistic category. Originally, it meant someone who did not speak Arabic, in the same way that the word “Berber” comes from the Greek *barbaros*, which meant someone who did not speak Greek. Eventually, *ʿajamī* became a synonym for “Persian” because Persian-speakers were the most significant group of non-Arabic speakers on the borders of the Arabian Peninsula. However, the term did not always have to mean “Persian.” The region of modern Iran that borders southern Iraq—what used to be called *Iraq ʿAjamī*—was only partly a Persian-speaking region. Before Islam, it was ruled by Persians but most of its inhabitants spoke Aramaic, a Semitic language that was more closely related to Arabic than the Indo-European Persian language. In early Islamic times, the Aramaic speakers of Iraq were called *Nabaʿ* (pl. *Anbāt*, “agriculturalists” or “farmers”) by the Arabs. Because they did not speak Arabic, they were also considered *ʿAjamī*.

Now that we have established that our modern concepts of race and culture had no exact parallels in premodern Islam, what does this mean for our current thinking about Islam and human diversity? First, this evidence reminds us that we should not make the mistake of essentializing Muslim attitudes by assuming that the answer to the question “What does Islam say about human diversity?” is entirely scriptural. Although Muslims draw on scripture for inspiration, Muslims are not scriptural automatons who only do what scripture tells them to do. Scriptural texts are not sufficient evidence for generalization about any religious attitude. Muslims, like Christians and Jews, are informed by scripture, but are not governed by scripture.

The second lesson that we can learn from this evidence takes us back to the tomb and shrine of Habib Nuh al-Habshi in modern Singapore. Besides standing as a symbol of the cosmopolitanism of the premodern Islamic world, Habib Nuh also stands as a symbolic gesture of defiance against modernity in the guise of a freeway off-ramp. In fact, the shrine is so close to this off-ramp that one wonders what story might lie behind the freeway’s location. Local Muslims claim that the government of Singapore wanted to demolish the tomb, but the bulldozers broke down every time they approached the sacred precinct. Eventually, we are told, the time-honored Chinese tradition of pragmatism reasserted itself, and the freeway was altered to accommodate the presence of the Muslim saint.

Whether or not this story is true, it provides a wonderful example of the stubbornness of tradition in the face of modernity. Even more, the shrine of Habib Nuh al-Habshi symbolizes the stubbornness of the vernacular in the face of modern religious sensibilities. As an example of vernacular Islam, there is much in this tomb and the rites associated with it to disturb Islamic modernists. Apart from the fact that it is a Sufi saint’s shrine, one can cite its Hindu temple architecture, the lack of religious boundaries observed by its visitors, and the garlands of flowers on the tomb that look more appropriate on a statue of Vishnu than on an Islamic burial site. Anthropologists of religion use the term “vernacular religion” to describe culturally localized responses to scriptural teachings such as those that we have just discussed. Much like vernacular languages, “vernacular” religious discourses are juxtaposed to “standard” or official religious discourses that cut across social or geographical boundaries or locales.¹¹⁰ In effect, vernacular

religious discourses are socially embodied commentaries on sacred scriptures. As embodied exegetical “texts,” they are just as significant in their own right as the teachings of theologians and in fact may even be more influential. One cannot claim that vernacular expressions of Islam are not “real Islam” just because they disagree with official or standard interpretations of scripture. Islamic faith is defined by Islam in practice, whether or not one agrees with the practices in question. Jāhīz, the theologian and litterateur, was just as valuable an interpreter of the Islamic attitude toward human diversity as the exegete Ṭabarī was. Furthermore, by opening a window for us on what Muslims really believed—as opposed to what they are supposed to believe—we are better prepared to counter today’s ideology-bound prejudices with more realistic solutions. Trying to solve real problems by spouting pious ideals is a category mistake of the first order, and it is bound to be ineffective. In many cases, we can find that having recourse to the vernacular traditions of the past can “save the text” of the Qur’an from the imposed categories of modern ideology.

A recourse to vernacular religion also reminds us that any attempt to raise the consciousness of believers, whether of racial or ethnic diversity or of any other subject, can only be successful on the local level. In general, attitudes are reinforced but not changed by ideology. Ideologies of race and culture provide slogans; they do not provide solutions. Whenever Muslims and non-Muslims got along together, and where the problems of human difference were overcome, the solutions were most often vernacular, not ideological. Recent historical studies of Hindu–Muslim relations in South Asia have revealed that the current terms of religious conflict in India were almost entirely set by British colonialism, which imposed ideological categories on relations that were primarily non-ideological. When conflicts occurred in the past, they tended to be framed as Hindu-Turk, not Hindu-Muslim. Hindus drew distinctions between Turks, Arabs (called *Tajiks*), and Ismā’īlī converts, and when the Delhi Sultans raided Hindu kingdoms, these kingdoms were often defended by Arabs and Ismā’īlīs against Turks. Memorials can be found in Gujarat honoring Arab Muslims who martyred themselves fighting against Muslim Turks on behalf of Hindu kingdoms. These same kingdoms endowed mosques on behalf of Arab traders. It is at points such as these that the notions of culture and religion coincide, and they remind us that the solutions to cultural and religious conflicts alike lie in the vernacular.

As theologians, we should never forget that real tradition is always vernacular and that it expresses itself in the plural—not as “Tradition” but as traditions. The acceptance of both human and religious diversity ultimately depends on our ability to hear once again the voices of vernacular human relations. The U.S. politician Thomas “Tip” O’Neill, a former Speaker of the House of Representatives from Boston, famously said, “All politics is local.” The same can be said for the politics of race, culture, and diversity in Islam.