The Implications of Culture on Who We Are and How We Understand the Bible and Share the Gospel

“Therefore, go and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Teach these new disciples to obey all the commands I have given you. And be sure of this: I am with you always, even to the end of the age” (Matt 28:19, 20 NLT).

From the beginning, Christianity has been a missionary movement. In response to the command of Jesus, the early disciples carried the gospel to all of the then known world in the first few centuries after Jesus’s resurrection. In our attempt to share the gospel with those who do not know Jesus in our world today, it is prudent to examine the factors that led to the spread of Christianity in those first centuries after the death and resurrection of Jesus. Much may be gained by examining the insights gleaned from the social sciences on the impact of culture on how people understand the Bible and share the gospel.

Rodney Stark is a sociologist of religion from Baylor University who has examined the historical evidence of Christianity’s spread within the Roman Empire, particularly the sociological factors that contributed to the exponential growth of Christianity. In his book The Rise of Christianity: How the Obscure, Marginal Jesus Movement Became the Dominant Religious Force in the Western World in a Few Centuries (1996), Stark illustrates how individual conversions via social networks of family, friends, and colleagues could lead to huge growth within the period of time Christianity became the dominant religion in the Roman Empire. While Stark acknowledges the impact of the Holy Spirit, he is able to illustrate the sociological factors through which God most likely worked which resulted in the sustained and continuous growth of Christianity in the first few centuries after the death of Christ.
In Stark’s book *Cities of God: The Real Story of How Christianity Became an Urban Movement and Conquered Rome* (2006), he draws on both archaeological and historical evidence to provide statistical data on religious life in the Roman Empire. In regards to the spread of Christianity, Stark points out that “the obligation to missionize is always implicit in monotheism” (4) while also mentioning that Judaism required converts to fully embrace Jewish ethnicity. “Rather than letting other ‘nations’ extol God, the Jewish leadership demanded that all ‘nations’ become fully Jewish” (6). Stark points out that the ethnic barrier this presented was likely the reason that the Roman Empire had not embraced the “God of Abraham” prior to the time of Christ. Although there were many “God-fearers” among the Romans, they remained outside Judaism for the most part. According to Stark, Christianity was fundamentally different from Judaism in this respect. Christianity offered the world “monotheism stripped of ethnic encumbrances. People of all nations could embrace the One True God while remaining people of all nations” (7).

If Adventists, as a church and as the body of Christ, are to be successful in presenting Christianity to the world, how can Christianity today be presented “stripped of its ethnic encumbrances?” Since Christians are faced with the task of sharing the gospel with every nation, kindred, tongue and people in the 21st century, it is important to ask what the role of culture is in understanding the Christian message and the church’s mission. How can the gospel be offered to others in such a way that it not only makes sense but meets their deepest needs?

**Implications of Culture**

In the first half of this paper I will examine the implications of culture on how people interpret reality and understand truth. Researchers today recognize that how the human brain develops and functions is inextricably linked to culture. I will begin this section by first defining culture, followed by an examination of the neuropsychological basis of culture, the neuropsychological basis of religious experience, and how culture impacts people’s understanding of both religious truths and religious experiences. Next, I will explore the relationship between language and culture and how the two are linked, each informing and reflecting the other. Then I will examine how culture and our early life experiences lay the foundation for the “basic assumptions” that guide our lives and dictate how we experience reality and interpret truth. This will be following by an examination of some of the research related to the impact of culture on the intuitive brain and the adaptive unconscious and how it influences the decisions people make. To close this first section, I will examine how
various dimensions of culture impact how people live their lives and make decisions. In the second section of this paper the impact of culture on science will be examined, followed by the impact of culture on religion.

Definitions of Culture

In their book, *Psychology and Culture* (1994), Walter Lonner and Roy Malpass point out that one can find more than 175 different definitions of culture in the social scientific literature. The fact that one can find that many different definitions is an indication that the concept of culture is a man-made concept designed to name a set of observations under investigation. For the purpose of examining the role of culture in how individuals and societies understand the Bible, it is useful to define what is meant by culture as it relates to that topic. I have chosen three definitions that I consider relevant to this topic.

The first comes from the Center for Advanced Research on Language Acquisition (CARLA) of the University of Minnesota. Because Christians believe that the Bible is the Word of God, communicated to us through other human beings, understanding culture from a linguistic perspective is important. CARLA is one the US Department of Education’s National Language Resource Centers. Its primary purpose is to understand the nature of language acquisition in order to increase the capacity of the US educational system to teach foreign languages. They sponsor initiatives to explore the connection between language and culture learning based on the premise that “neither culture nor language can be fully understood when taught separately from the other” (Culture and Language Learning 2016). CARLA defines culture as “as the shared patterns of behaviors and interactions, cognitive constructs, and affective understanding that are learned through a process of socialization” (What is Culture 2016).

The second definition of culture comes from the field of cognitive science, which defines culture as “the collective programming of the mind” (Hofstede 1984:51). In line with this second definition, Andy Clark says that the field of cognitive psychology or cognitive science attempts to understand how the mind works and how “mindware” develops (quoted in Clark 1984:3). Cognitive science is rooted in experimental psychology, which attempts to understand human consciousness and its relation to the external environment. Cognitive psychology is an interdisciplinary field, which studies cognitive processes and how they develop.

The third definition of culture suggests that culture is simply “a term invented to characterize the many complex ways in which peoples live, and which they tend to pass along to their offspring” (Lonner and Malpass 1994:7). In other words, to say something is cultural is simply to say that
it is one of the many different ways in which people have learned to live, think, and communicate. Unless one is exposed to ways other than the way one lives, the concept of culture is not really relevant.

The Neuropsychological Basis of Culture

Whether through the Bible or the still small voice that speaks within the silence of our own hearts, God communicates with us by way of the human brain. The brain is the organ of thought—a physical organ made of flesh and blood, neurons and synapses. The mind is the product of the brain and neuroscientists tell us that the mind is shaped by experience. Rhawn Joseph is one of the founders in the field of human developmental neuropsychology. His research on early environmental influences on the brain has demonstrated the profound impact of the environment on the development of the brain. He was one of the first researchers to demonstrate what is known as the neural plasticity of the brain, or the ability of the brain to physically change and adapt to environmental stimuli. He found that immature brain cells are "experience-expectant." They require "considerable social, emotional, perceptual, and cognitive stimulation during the first several months and years of life in order to develop normally" (1999:187-203).

The brain of a human infant weighs approximately 400g at the time of birth. The cerebral cortex, or the thinking and decision-making part of the brain—the part of the brain that distinguishes humans from other mammals—is the least developed at the time of birth. In the first year of life a human infant’s brain grows to approximately 1,000g. Neuroscientists tell us that important emotional and interpersonal learning occurs during that early period of time when the brain stem and limbic system, which are the emotional brain, are in control. Louis Cozolino, professor of psychology at Pepperdine University, notes that the brain is particularly impacted by the emotional experiences that take place between an infant and its mother during this critical period of time. He says that the “quality and nature of our relationships are translated into codes within neural networks that serve as the infrastructure for both brain and mind” (2002:16). These early experiences physically shape the brain.

Ellen White uses similar language when she says that “what the child sees and hears is drawing deep lines upon the tender mind, which no after circumstances in life can entirely efface” (1954:199). In the book, The Interpersonal World of the Infant: A View from Psychoanalysis and Developmental Psychology, psychiatrist Daniel Stern discusses how the human infant organizes and integrates these early experiences in such a way that mental structures begin to be developed. Although these mental
structures continue to be refined and modified over time, he says that between the ages of two and seven months these mental structures form what he calls a “core self.” This early sense of a core self serves as the foundation upon which later experiences are interpreted.

Perhaps the first psychologist to promote the idea that “culture fundamentally shapes thought” was the early twentieth century Russian psychologist Lev Vygotsky. In other words, the unique ways in which people live shapes how they think. At a time when psychologists in the West neglected the impact of the social environment on thought, Vygotsky proposed that “cognitive processes emerge from practical activity that is culturally constrained and historically developing” (Nisbett and Norenzayan 2002:10). Vygotsky developed a theory of human cultural and bio-social development that is the foundation of what is known today as cultural-historical psychology.

Neurologists view thinking as a neurologic function and focus their attention on the “the neural mechanisms necessary for thought” (Benson 1994:v). Neuropsychologists take a broader view and examine how “differences in values and social milieus sculpt the brain’s structure and function” (Park and Huang 2010:10). Through the use of neuro-imagining technology, Denise C. Park and Chih-Mao Huang have investigated how culture, or the way that different people live their lives, impacts both the structure and the function of the brain. They indicate that numerous studies point to the fact that “culture may affect neural function” (1). Neuroscientists now recognize that cognition is shaped by the various social and cultural experiences that human beings are exposed to in ways that are beyond conscious awareness.

In his book Mindware: An introduction to the Philosophy of Cognitive Neuroscience Andy Clark says that human beings develop what is called “nonbiological wideware,” consisting of things like writing, symbols, and various technologies to complement the activity of their brains. This “symbiosis of brain and technology” actually creates “extended cognitive systems” that are qualitatively different from those of the biological brain (2001:150). According to Clark, “the biological brain literally grows a cortical cognitive architecture suited to the specific technological environment in which it learns and matures” (153). The concept of neuroplasticity helps us see that the human brain is able to build cognitive systems and structures in response to many types of environmental input: biological, social, or technological. In the West today, the field of experimental psychology uses the term “extended cognition” when studying the impact of culture and social practices on people’s cognitive processes (Fessler and Machery n.d.:8).
Religious and Culture

Religious beliefs would fall into the category of extended cognition. Our beliefs and values are shaped by the intellectual and moral climate in which we live, even our concept of God. Gordon Kaufman says that “no individual human mind constructs the idea of God from scratch. All thinking about God and all devotion to God take place within a cultural and linguistic context in which the notion of God has already been highly developed” (1981:23). John Polkinghorne says that one’s conception of God symbolizes one’s “highest individual ideals” (1998:19). Those ideals are shaped by the culture in which people live and the communities and families into which they are born and raised. In his book Attachment, Evolution, and the Psychology of Religion Lee Kirkpatrick notes the strong relationship between societal values and societal conceptions of God (2005).

Neuroscientists also recognize that religious experiences and people’s understanding of spiritual truths are impacted by the culture in which they live. Rhawn Joseph is also a leading researcher in the area of “neurotheology.” Neurotheology uses the tools of psychology and neuroscience to try to understand the neural underpinnings of religious experience. Through the use of brain imagining technology, neuroscientists have been able to identify the specific brain structures that are activated when an individual has a spiritual experience. In fact, they say that when these brain structures are hyperactivated, “‘religious’ experiences are not uncommon” (2003:9). Because of the involvement of the limbic system in religious and spiritual experiences, Joseph has referred to it as the “transmitter to God” and has written a book by that title which was published in 2001. He says that it has been known for thousands of years that certain spiritual practices can increase one’s spiritual acuity. This is because spiritual practices such as fasting and meditation activate these systems “such that what is normally filtered out is perceived” (2003:9). From a purely religious perspective, we are well aware that the distractions of life often blind us to spiritual realities. Fasting and other spiritual disciplines give us a clearer focus on the things that really matter in life. Self-denial, sacrifice, and suffering all have a similar impact and have been a part of traditional Catholic spirituality for centuries.

Two other researchers in the field of neurotheology are Eugene d’Aquili and Andrew Newberg, authors of The Mystical Mind. Their research has led them to believe that there are certain core elements of the spiritual experience, which appear to be universal (1999:5). While it appears that God uses our mental processes to “break through to us,” d’Aquili and Newberg say that our minds have been preconditioned or preprogrammed in such a way that how we interpret those experiences varies a great
deal depending on our backgrounds and how those within our culture interpret these types of experiences. Thus, our neurobiological ability to perceive spiritual realities is impacted by the culture in which we live.

In 1917, Rudolph Otto coined the term “numinous” to describe what people today call religious experiences or sacred encounters (Sperry and Shafranske 2005:54, 55). According to Sperry and Shafranske, numinous or spiritual experiences may happen to anyone at any time. They have found, however, that the content of the experience is typically tailored to the psychological structures of the individual having the experience, and may only be understood or make sense to that person (55). How the experience is interpreted is highly individual and strongly influenced by the mental filters through which an individual views life.

On a similar note, it is reasonable to conclude that when individuals read the Bible, how they interpret it is also highly individualistic and strongly influenced by the mental programming through which they view life. This helps us understand why there are so many Christian denominations in existence today, all based on the same sacred Scriptures. It also helps to explain why God-fearing and committed individuals within the same denomination often disagree on various points of Scripture. Based on neuropsychological research, they are constrained by the mental filters through which they view life. This understanding should give us a much greater understanding of our need of the Holy Spirit to accurately interpret the Bible. It should also help us see the importance of studying the Scriptures and allowing them to shape how we view our world and our understanding of who God is.

Language and Culture

God can and does communicate with people in ways that do not involve language—through nature, through relationships, through symbols and rituals, through the ordering or timing of events. God’s most powerful communication was through the incarnation of his son, Jesus—through his life, his death, and his resurrection. Although some would argue that God primarily communicates with people non-verbally, he definitely communicates in language through his written word in the Bible. God also speaks through his still small voice in the silence of our own hearts.

According to Nisbett and Norenzayan, one of the most famous and earliest notions that culture influences thought and therefore language is in the linguistic relativity hypothesis or the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis (2002:6). In the 1950s anthropologist Edward Sapir and linguist Benjamin Whorf recognized the relationship between the vocabulary and structure of a language with patterns of thought and the cognitive constructs
inherent within culture. The premise of the linguistic relativity hypothesis is that language does not simply reflect reality but rather shapes and guides people’s perceptions of reality. The particular language spoken actually affects how one thinks (6). This can be seen in the fact that some cultures have many words to describe certain things while other cultures have few or perhaps no words at all to describe those things. For example, one culture has dozens of names for rice, another has over a hundred words for snow, and another has dozens of names for shades of brown to describe the color of cows. The ability to make these fine distinctions is an indication of what people within these cultures believe to be important.

John Walton of Wheaton College says that while the Bible was written for us, it was not written to us. It was written to ancient Israel in the language of ancient Israel. It must be translated in order for us to understand the message. Walton suggests that when we translate a language it is not only the words that need to be translated. “Language assumes a culture, operates in a culture, serves a culture, and is designed to communicate into the framework of a culture” (Walton 2009:7). Therefore, in order to understand the message of Scripture, we must attempt to understand it in its cultural context.

The Bible teaches that people are incapable of understanding the Scriptures apart from the Holy Spirit opening their minds to the truths contained within them (1 Cor 2:14). The Bible is clearly more than a written document presenting simple irrefutable truths. It is the voice of God speaking through various men at various times and in different cultures throughout history. Language, thought, and culture are all interrelated, not only in the mind of the one to whom God spoke, but in the mind of those of us who read the Scriptures. They are the means through which God has communicated his thoughts to us. When guided by the Holy Spirit, it seems reasonable to conclude that we can learn a great deal not only from the field of theology but the fields of linguistics, neurology, anthropology, and related disciplines when it comes to understanding the Scriptures and how to communicate them most effectively.

Our “Basic Assumptions”

The research of neuropsychologists and cognitive scientists has shown that the external environment shapes our brains and impacts how people view not only the Scriptures but their personal experiences of God as well as the world around them. This begins with the early development of the brain as it is exposed to environmental stimuli, through the nature and structure of the language or languages that people are exposed to, as well as the programming of the mind which is impacted by the culture in which a person lives.
Ronnie Janoff-Bulman, professor in the Department of Psychological and Brain Sciences at the University of Massachusetts has developed a theory of mind that she calls our “basic assumptions” which reflects this neuropsychological and cognitive scientific perspective. According to her theory “At the core of our internal world, we hold basic views of ourselves and our external world” (1992:4). These basic assumptions refer to a “conceptual system, developed over time that provides us with expectations about the world and ourselves” (5). She proposes that because these assumptions form the bedrock of our conceptual system, we are often unaware of them. As a result they are rarely challenged and are resistant to change.

Psychologists use the concept of a “schema” to describe core beliefs that shape how we perceive and interpret reality. “A ‘schema’ is a mental structure that represents organized knowledge about a given concept or type of stimulus. The use of schemas implies an active construction of reality” (Goleman 1985:28). Daniel Goleman says that our perceptions are actually interactive and therefore reflect constructed realities.

It is not enough for information to flow through the senses; to make sense of the senses requires a context that organizes the information they convey, that lends it the proper meaning. . . . Schemas embody the rules and categories that order raw experiences into coherent meaning. All knowledge and experience is packaged in schemas. Schemas are the ghost in the machine, the intelligence that guides information as it flows through the mind. (28)

Christian parents who want their children to incorporate the biblical view of our world and of God enculturate their children with Christian teachings and practices.

It is believed that schemas operate at all levels of knowledge. “Our fundamental assumptions about the world are essentially our grandest schemas, our most abstract, generalized knowledge structures” (29). They are the ones most resistant to change because they serve as the foundation which defines our core self. Notice the following: “These commandments that I give you today are to be on your hearts. Impress them on your children. Talk about them when you sit at home and when you talk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up. Tie them as symbols on your hands and bind them on your foreheads. Write them on the doorframes of your houses and on your gates” (Deut 6:6-9). God’s plan was for his laws to permeate our grandest schemas so that they influence our lives on the deepest level.

“A central premise of modern cognitive anthropology is that culture profoundly influences the contents of thought through shared knowledge
structures” (Nisbett and Norenzayan 2002:5). Cultural schemas are “patterns of basic schemas that make up the meaning system of a cultural group” (5). God’s law was the foundation of the ancient Hebrew culture. Cultural schemas guide the way people interpret their experiences. They provide a lens that enables a person to interpret and make sense of their world. Lee Kirkpatrick notes the relationship between societal values and societal conceptions of God (Kirkpatrick 2005). These societal conceptions are so deeply rooted and so fundamental that they are invisible to those within the society. The Gospels teach that it is God’s love as manifested through the life and death of Jesus that is to be the lens through which a Christian views the world.

Social psychological research has demonstrated that our minds are designed to maintain what is described as cognitive consistency. Human beings have a need for stability and coherence in what they believe. As a result, they hold onto the beliefs that are formed early in life and are naturally resistant to changing them. These early cognitions “provide the lenses through which we perceive and interpret new information” (Janoff-Bulman 1992:27). These early cognitions actually guide what we perceive and the new information that we gather (27).

The Bible as well as the Spirit of Prophecy teaches this same principle. Prov 22:6 says, “Train up a child in the way he should go, and when he is old he will not depart from it.” In Child Guidance Ellen White says, “Too much emphasis cannot be placed on the early training of children. The lessons that the child learns during the first seven years of life have more to do with forming his character than all that it learns in future years” (1954:193). She goes on to say that virtues are to be instilled into “his opening mind” and that parents are to “begin work with the child in its infancy” (193). Studies show that people interpret both new information and the information that comes from their memories in ways that are consistent with their pre-existing schemas. “In other words, our schemas guide our perceptions, memories, and inferences” (Janoff-Bulman 1992:30). As a result, when people are confronted with contradictory information the research shows that they minimize, discount, or isolate to such an extent that their preexisting schemas remain intact. “Cognitively, we are conservative. We tend to maintain our theories rather than change them; we interpret information so as to be schema-consistent” (37). Ellen White talks about “the bias which is given to a child in its earliest years” which “shapes the destiny either for eternal life or eternal death!” (1954:198).

Culture, the Intuitive Brain, and the Adaptive Unconscious

With increasing globalization, the business world, in particular, is
coming to recognize the role of culture in the values people hold and the choices they make. Although much of the cross-cultural marketing literature focuses on differences in observed behaviors within cultures, Kastanakis and Voyer (2014) address the root causes of these differences by examining cross-cultural differences in pre-behavioral processes. They note that as long as a person’s thinking remains “culturally bound” their effectiveness in reaching people of other cultures will be limited (3). Using the research that has just been presented, they attempt to understand the conditioning effect of culture on how people perceive the world in order to “explain cross-cultural consumer behavior” and “to improve marketing research and practice” (4). They recognize that in the business world, failure to understand the impact of culture can lead to recurring market failures.

Daniel Kahneman is an Israeli-American psychologist who is considered by many to be one of the most influential psychologists in the world. Kahneman was awarded the Nobel Memorial Prize in Economic Sciences in 2002 as the result of his ground-breaking research in the psychology of judgment and decision-making. Although Kahneman is not an economist, he is credited with creating the field of behavioral economics. He and Amos Tversky reported findings that brought into question the assumption that “human beings are intrinsically rational animals” (in Samuels, Stich, and Tremoulet 1999:74). Their findings, along with those of other psychologists “sparked the growth of a major research tradition whose impact has been felt in economics, political theory, medicine, and other areas far removed from cognitive science” (74).

In his best-selling book, Thinking, Fast and Slow (2011), Kahneman uses the metaphor of System 1 and System 2 to illustrate both the “marvels as well as the flaws of intuitive thought” (10). Associative memory is at the core of System 1 and runs automatically and outside of conscious awareness. System 1 is fast whereas System 2 is slow and deliberate. System 2 involves logical thought and is “mobilized when a question arises for which System 1 does not offer an answer” (24). “System 2 believes that it is in charge and that it knows the reasons for its choices” (56). Kahneman’s research has focused primarily on the flaws of intuitive thinking, the systematic errors that occur within System 1.

According to Kahneman, our emotions and our actions are primed by events that we are not even aware of (53). He says the impact of priming, on how we think and the decisions we make, threatens our “self-image as conscious and autonomous authors of our judgments and our choices” (55). Often people are unaware of why they have made certain decisions and will attribute their decisions to unrelated but seemingly logical factors. In fact, much of the knowledge and experience that informs our intuitions is stored outside conscious awareness.
In his best-selling book *Blink, the Power of Thinking without Thinking* (2005) Malcolm Gladwell uses the concept of two different mental strategies rather than the metaphor of two systems. The first is a conscious strategy, which is logical and definitive—like Kahneman’s System 2. The second operates below the level of consciousness and is equivalent to Kahneman’s System 1. “It’s a system in which our brain reaches conclusions without immediately telling us that it’s reaching conclusions” (Gladwell 2005: loc 105) In fact, with this system, the body seems to know and respond before the mind knows. This idea supports the premise proposed by Candace Pert in her book *Molecules of Emotion* (1997) that the mind is spread throughout the body. Our senses are the body’s window to the world and are the avenue through which we are impacted by our environment. Antonio Damasio says in his book *Descartes’ Error* that his research shows support for “the idea that mental activity, from its simplest aspects to its most sublime, requires both brain and body proper” (1994:xvii). He goes on to say that the body “may constitute the indispensable frame of reference for the neural processes that we experience as the mind” (xvi).

According to Gladwell, the capacity to know on a physical or intuitive level without yet knowing is called “the adaptive unconscious” (2005: loc 114). The brain operates most efficiently on that level. In his book *Strangers to Ourselves* Timothy D. Wilson writes that we “possess a powerful, sophisticated, adaptive unconscious that is crucial for survival in our world” (2002: loc 38). He says that its efficiency is due in large part to the fact that it is out of view. This means however, that much of who we are is inaccessible to us directly.

Our adaptive unconscious is shaped by life experiences and the culture and environment that surround us. Cozolino points out that because a great deal of learning takes place before we have the “necessary cortical systems for conscious awareness and memory . . . many of the most important aspects of our lives are controlled by reflexes, behaviors, and emotions learned and organized outside our awareness” (2002:12). As noted earlier, these early emotional experiences are deeply embedded into “neural networks that serve as the infrastructure for both brain and mind” (16).

Research has shown that emotions are indispensable to reason. In fact, a great deal of research leads us to conclude that as human beings we are first and foremost emotional beings. The decisions we make and the preferences we develop are influenced by emotion far more than most of us are willing or able to acknowledge. Benson says that our emotional responses occur at “a rapid and unconscious level, best recognized in retrospect” (1994:117). They involve many interrelated neural structures such that the impact of cultural and social relationships on emotional behavior
is “remarkably stable and resistant to change” (117). As a result, when it comes to understanding the Bible as well as interpreting our own personal religious experiences, it is crucial that we understand that our ability to interpret either correctly is impacted by the culture we are a part of as well as the early emotional experiences which are deeply embedded within the mind and brain. What is the implication of understanding the impact of culture when it comes to sharing the gospel with those of another culture? How do we avoid a “recurring market failure” when it comes to sharing the gospel?

Dimensions of Culture

While the research presented up to this point shows that there is an inextricable link between the culture in which we live and who we are as individuals, the following research shows how we are impacted by the culture in which we live. Working as a management trainer for IBM at a time when very little was written or known on the impact of culture, Geert Hofstede founded and managed the IBM Personnel Research Department. Hofstede was interested in understanding the impact of culture on work performance and collected data from more than 100,000 employee opinion surveys in order to understand this.

In his analysis of the data, Hofstede found four empirically based dimensions of culture, which define the mental software of individuals within a culture (1984: loc 746). These four dimensions formed the basis of his theory of cultural dimensions and describe how culture impacts the values of individuals within a society as well as the society as a whole. His theory also describes the relationship between values and behavior. The four empirically-based dimensions of culture that emerged were (1) power distance or strength of the social hierarchy, (2) collectivism verses individualism, (3) masculinity verses femininity or task orientation verses person-orientation, and (4) uncertainty avoidance (G. Hofstede, G. J. Hofstede, and Minkov 2010). Later he added a fifth dimension—long-term orientation, and in 2010 he added a sixth dimension—indulgence versus self-restraint. In 1984 Hofstede published his findings in a book entitled Culture’s Consequences. Hofstede’s theory of cultural dimensions has been foundational in establishing a major research tradition in the field of cross-cultural psychology.

A third edition to his book was published in 2010 and was coauthored by his son, Gert Jan Hofstede and a researcher from Bulgaria named Michael Minkov. This book is entitled Cultures and Organizations: Software of the Mind. In it, culture is described as mental programming or software of the mind. In line with the research of cognitive psychologists, the
authors say that “every person carries within him- or herself patterns of thinking, feeling, and potential acting that were learned throughout the person’s lifetime” (loc 303). The origin of these mental programs are “the social environments in which one grew up and collected one’s life experiences” (loc 312). Similar to what Ellen White says, Hofstede et al. recognized that the social environment with the most profound impact on mental programing is the family. This is followed by the wider community of friends, neighbors, school, and eventually the workplace. He points out that these programs do not dictate behavior but rather indicate “what reactions are likely and understandable, given one’s past” (loc 312).

A person’s mental programs develop as shared rules that enable the community or group to thrive. Because the community values those things that enable it to survive, Hofstede et al. proposes that values are at the core of culture. As a result, values are the stable element in culture, much more so than behavior or practices. Because of this, comparative research on culture should start with the measurement of values (Hofstede et al. 2010: loc 694).

The first cultural dimension identified by Hofstede is the power distance dimension. This dimension deals with how inequality between groups of people is handled. The researchers noted that “founders of religions have dealt explicitly with questions of power and inequality” (loc 1476). In 2500 BC Confucius “maintained that the stability of society was based on unequal relationships between people” (loc 1476). Confucius taught that these “relationships contain mutual and complementary obligations” (loc 1480), and to this day “Confucius’s ideas have survived as guidelines for proper behavior for Chinese people” (loc 1480). “People in these countries accept and appreciate inequality but feel that the use of power should be moderated by a sense of obligation” (loc 1485). Most Asian countries today are high power distance countries.

Luc Ferry in his book *A Brief History of Thought* points out that “the Greek world was fundamentally an aristocratic world, a universe organized as a hierarchy in which those endowed by nature should in principle be ‘at the top’, while the less endowed saw themselves occupying inferior ranks” (2011:72). The Greek city-state was founded on the belief that human beings were not created equal. Greek thought was that there existed “a natural hierarchy” of plants, animals and of men. One can see this reflected on the island of Cyprus to this day. Oscar Osindo, a colleague of mine from Kenya, spent several years working on the island of Cyprus, between 2007 and 2009. Before going to Cyprus there was some discussion as to whether or not it would be wise for Oscar to take his family there because of the prejudice of the people of Cyprus toward black Africans. Oscar is Kenyan and as a Kenyan he is not threatened by
the prejudice of other people. According to Oscar, Kenyans are a resilient people who survive even in difficult places. Nonetheless, living on the island of Cyprus was challenging. Cyprus is a very stratified society, with the local Greek people, the Cypriots, being at the top of the social order. According to Oscar, the British and other white inhabitants of the island were next. Following them were Filipino and other Asians workers who served as domestic help. Black Africans, not all Africans are black, were at the very bottom of the social order. According to Oscar, black Africans did not even qualify as domestic workers but had to work in the fields or the forests in the interior of the island. As repulsive as this sounds to Americans or others from low PDI countries, this is a lived reality on the island of Cyprus in the 21st century. According to Oscar and his friend Beryl Esembe, a Cameroonian sociologist and anthropologist active in the global fight against human trafficking movement who was trained and is currently living in Cyprus, Africans are nonetheless able to win the respect of Cypriots if they seem wealthy or “chieflly” or are holding a prestigious position or travels internationally. My friend Oscar is a gifted and culturally sensitive man who was able to establish a place of respect and honor for himself and his family on the island of Cyprus. He and his family met many good people and were able to enjoy their time there and would be willing to live there again. Oscar understands culture and understands how to connect with people whose culture and values are different from his own. He also has the ability to find areas of commonality that allow him to enter their world.

According to Ferry, Christianity introduced the “notion that humanity was fundamentally identical, that people were equal in dignity—an unprecedented idea at the time, and one to which our world owes its entire democratic inheritance.” While the Greek world embraced a natural order of being—one in which it was clear that all men were not created equal and that talents and abilities are, indeed, unequally distributed, this belief in a natural hierarchy had no legitimacy at all for Christians and had no bearing whatsoever on an individual’s inherent value (2011:73). Christianity proposed that how one uses the abilities one has is more important than the abilities themselves. According to Ferry, Christian thought abandoned the concept of the natural order of inequality and embraced the concept of the equality of all human beings. “Human dignity is the same for everyone, whatever their actual inequalities, because it is connected to our freedom to choose how to act, not upon our innate endowments” (73). According to Ferry, “for the first time in human history, liberty rather than nature had become the foundation of morality” (74).

Holstede et al. noted a relationship between language and present-day mental software regarding power-distance. European countries that
speak Latin-based languages such as France, Italy, Romania, Portugal, and Spain; are all rooted in the common history of once being a part of the Roman Empire. The same patterns was carried to Latin-American countries colonized by these European countries. All these countries score from medium to high on the power-distance scale.

Germanic languages are spoken throughout the rest of Europe—in countries that were considered barbaric in Roman days. The people within these areas of Europe were independent and for the most part free from the control of Rome. Christianity emerged during this time in history. Christ taught by word and example the equality of all people and the virtue of poverty. He abolished the religious hierarchy of his day and taught the priesthood of all believers. It is conceivable to at least partially attribute the Protestant Reformation to the mental software of the independent-thinking Luther whose German culture predisposed him to challenge authority. Perhaps this can help us understand why Protestantism took root in the Germanic and English-speaking countries of Europe but was accepted by only a small proportion of people in the countries of Europe speaking Latin or Romantic languages. Catholicism maintained a strong hold in France, Italy, Romania, Portugal, and Spain throughout the reformation and is the dominate religion in much of Latin America. According to Holstede and his fellow researchers, “The Roman Catholic Church has maintained the hierarchical order of the Roman Empire; the same holds for the Eastern Orthodox churches, whereas Protestant denominations to various degrees are nonhierarchical. Traditionally Protestant nations tend to score lower on PDI than Catholic or Orthodox nations” (2010: loc 1494).

The Impact of Culture

It is easy to fail to recognize the impact of culture in how reality is perceived. This is true in both science and religion, where both attempt to understand reality—one the physical reality in which people live day to day and the other ultimate reality. Hofstede says that living within one’s own culture is “like the air we breathe, while another culture is like water—and it takes special skills to be able to survive in both elements” (2010: loc 616). Developing the skills to survive in the environment that one was born and raised in is like breathing air; the skill needed is hardly recognized at all. Understanding how the intuitive brain and the adaptive unconscious work helps us understand precisely why culture is like breathing—much of it is outside of conscious awareness. It is only under unique circumstances that one’s own culture becomes visible. In this section I will examine the impact of culture on how both scientific and religious truth are perceived. Each creates a unique culture of its own, influenced by the larger culture that surrounds it.
Many people see science as the objective and unbiased pursuit of knowledge and truth. Because of the success of science in medicine, technology, engineering, physics, chemistry and other areas that have brought practical benefits to people’s everyday lives, people have come to trust science and the scientific method. In fact, William James wrote in 1902 that “science in many minds is genuinely taking the place of a religion” (2002:136). However, in his book, Science and Theology, John Polkinghorne points out that science is practiced within the cultural context by a community of scientists and that scientific inquiry takes place within the cultural context of that community. He says that as in every society, “this implies that there are communal expectations and ways of thinking” which are both implicit and explicit (1998:12). Such implicit and often unrecognized cultural and social expectations have a much stronger impact on scientific discovery for the very fact that they are unrecognized. Polkinghorne points out that scientific discovery is always socially molded. While most scientists fail to recognize the strong role that social forces play in how data is both gathered and interpreted “sociologists of knowledge” propose that “the invisible college of scientists reaches certain conclusions, less because nature actually takes this particular form, but because the college has unconsciously decided to describe nature in this way” (12). Science is very much impacted by society and culture.

Hofstede et al. recognized that for any “given period certain assumptions called paradigms dominate a scientific field and constrain the thinking of the scientists in that field” (2010: loc 692). While science has provided a reliable way to understand the natural world and has enabled human beings to gain control over many of the invisible and unconquerable enemies of the past, Edward Golub says in his book The Limits of Medicine, that “a common misconception about science is that it is value free” (1994:144). He goes on to say that “nothing could be further from the truth: The facts that come from scientific experiments are always understood within the context of the assumptions the experimenter made when designing the experiment” (145). “Science is really a value-laden intellectual exercise in which the participants are constantly striving to turn the ‘facts’ into ‘truth’” (145). As can be seen from history, science is always a part of its time. “Things are only understood in the context of what is already known” (151). What are referred to as “scientific facts” must therefore be understood within the context of the prevailing beliefs and values of the time.
David Hay is an empirical scientist and the former director of the Religious Experience Research Centre at Oxford University who has studied the religious experiences of ordinary people. Hay reports in his 2005 book entitled *Something There: The Biology of the Human Spirit* that religious experiences are common. He points out that the Bible teaches us to listen to the voice of God in our lives, to place ourselves in his presence, and to wait upon him (Hay 2005:33). However, our Western culture fails to acknowledge the reality of our spiritual natures along with the spiritual experiences of ordinary people. We live in a culture that holds to the scientific worldview in which the spiritual life is viewed as either nonexistent or pathological (Goleman 1988:160). It is no wonder that those from Western cultures struggle with anything related to the supernatural world since Western worldviews simply filter the supernatural out.

The cultural and social climate today can certainly blind people to the truths that God is trying to communicate to them. In his study of the spiritual experiences of ordinary people in the British population, Hay found that 79% reported having some experience that led them to believe that there was something more than the material world that they lived in. Hay refers to the work of the French sociologist Yves Lambert who has described the development in Europe of what he calls an “autonomous, diffused religiosity, detached from Christianity” (Hay 2005:24). Hay believes this trend is the result of the failure of the Christian Church to provide a cognitive framework for ordinary people to interpret their religious experiences.

Colleen Ward says that culture influences both the experience and interpretation of various altered states of consciousness. She says that altered states of consciousness “are extremely common on a cross-cultural basis” (1994:60). In one anthropological study conducted (Bourguignon and Evascu) in 1977 of 488 societies, 437 or 90% “displayed naturally occurring trance or possession states” (in Ward 1994:60). Yet Western societies typically see these as pathological or evil. Culture definitely impacts how these experiences are interpreted. Goleman, Sperry, Hay, and others have noted that Western people are often reluctant to share their experiences of God with even spiritual leaders because of their fear of being seen as mentally unstable or worse yet, demonically influenced. The Western or scientific worldview filters out supernatural or miraculous events reported in the New Testament and also in their own experience. When the average Western Christian encounters spirit possession either in the Bible or in real life they do not have the “cognitive schemas” to allow them to understand the experience. Their “internalized schemas guide the
processing of information” making it difficult to actually see the realities that are taught in Scripture—realities that other cultures are able to see (Pérez-Arce 1999:584).

Both the Scriptures and the writings of Ellen White testify to the truths that are now coming to be understood from the social sciences related to how the human mind perceives reality and understands truth as well as how the mind clings to beliefs and is resistant to changing them. The cultural and social climate that the disciples lived in blinded them to the truths that Jesus tried to communicate to them prior to his death. This can be seen in the third chapter of Acts of the Apostles where Ellen White describes the discouragement of the disciples after the death of their beloved Master. She says that Jesus had “several times attempted to open the future to His disciples” yet they had failed to grasp what he was saying (1911:25). While Jesus had stated plainly that he was to rise on the third day, “they were perplexed to know what He meant. . . . All seemed vague and mysterious to them” (26, emphasis mine). After his resurrection Jesus remained on earth for forty days to prepare his disciples for the work that he had committed to them and to explain “that which heretofore they had been unable to comprehend” (26, emphasis mine). Note that the text says that they were previously unable to understand what he was saying. It does not say that they were unwilling. It was only in light of what had happened that Jesus was able to talk to his disciples about “the prophecies concerning His advent, His rejection by the Jews, and His death, showing that every specification of these prophecies had been fulfilled” (26). The Scriptures tell us that Jesus opened their understanding “that they might understand the scriptures” (Luke 24:45, emphasis mine).

Although the Jewish nation possessed the clearest revelation of God’s plan of salvation for mankind, they had interpreted the Scriptures in such a way that they expected the Messiah to sit on the earthly throne of David. The Jewish nation had been conquered by foreign powers and the throne of David had been lost due to their disobedience and infidelity. As a result, the culture of the Jewish people revolved around the meticulous keeping of the law and the maintenance of a wall of separation between themselves and people of other nations. Dr. Janoff-Bulman examined the basic assumptions that people held in light of traumatic events in their lives. She found that when human beings experience trauma, their basic assumptions were challenged (1992:51). The crucifixion of Jesus induced an “intense psychological crisis” in the minds of the disciples. According to Janoff-Bulman, it is in situations such as this that basic assumptions are not only challenged but are shattered. It was only when the disciple’s basic assumptions had been shattered that they were able to reevaluate the life and death of Jesus, enabling them to understand his words and the meaning of his sacrifice.
Summary and Conclusion

The purpose of this article has been to understand the impact of culture on who we are and how we understand the Bible with the goal of being able to present the truths contained within the Bible to people of cultures different from our own. We began our attempt to understand the impact of culture by first looking at three different definitions of culture. In order to understand how we have developed the necessary skills to live within our own particular culture, I presented the neuropsychological basis of culture, and how the mind develops around experience. Early environmental influences are actually built into the cognitive structures that define our minds. In examining the relationship between language, thought, and culture, it is evident that culture permeates not only our thought processes but is reflected in the very structure of the language we speak. The programming of the mind occurs as we absorb the world around us and it becomes a part of who we are.

Looking at social psychological research it has been suggested that all people develop basic assumptions early in life, which then guide their perspective on life. Social scientific research tells us that these early basic assumptions are resistant to change. Ellen White agrees and says that “those of mature age are generally as insensible to new impressions as is the hardened rock, but youth is impressionable” (1954:199).

With the increasing globalization of the world, it is not only Christians who are concerned with the impact of culture. Hofstede, Hofstede, and Minkov’s thorough examination of cross-cultural differences and how they are reflected in the values people hold and the decisions they make is extremely relevant to Christians, particularly since Christianity is about values and making a decision for Christ. Hofstede and his fellow researchers were able to delineate various dimensions of culture and how they impact the ways people think and relate to one another. Understanding each of these dimensions will further our understanding of how people of various cultures will understand and value the stories presented in the Bible. In presenting the historical development of the power distance dimension of culture, Hofstede et al. showed how strong culture is and how core values are extremely resistant to change. Since culture is a concept created to reflect the various ways in which human beings live their lives then one may conclude from the research presented in this section that the various ways that people around the world live their lives and view the world is a part of their neurobiological makeup. In other words, culture is deeply etched into every person’s soul.

In conclusion, I presented the impact of culture on people’s understanding of scientific and religious truth. Although the birth of the
scientific era has contributed significantly to our understanding of the natural world and has dramatically improved the quality of our lives, Polkinghorne says that science should not be perceived “as dealing with clear and indubitable facts” but should rather be seen as “the attainment of increasingly closer approximations to the truth about physical process” (1998:16, 17). Polkinghorne sees science and theology as “partners in the great human quest to understand reality” (20). For science, that reality is the physical world, a reality that people transcend and can put to experimental tests. With theology, that reality is God, a reality that transcends human beings and can only be known as God chooses to reveal himself to us. In his book Science and Theology Polkinghorne says that the Bible is the record to God’s unveiling of himself to humanity (18). Nonetheless, every person interprets the Bible in light of their own personal and cultural framework.

The cultural knowledge and social experience an individual carries provide the interpretive frames that guide their reasoning and problem-solving processes. Because these internalized schemas guide the processing of information, both scientific and religious, the more entrenched a belief, value, or social role, the more difficult it is to change that schema, even when new and convincing information is provided. This happens in the scientific world as well as in the religious world.

Because culture is usually invisible to those living within it and only becomes visible in relation to other cultures, it is easy to ignore culture or write it off. No one ever recognizes their own accent. Floyd W. Rudwim says that if “you want to study human psychology, you must study cultures. Humans always come enculturated. There is no such thing as a ‘natural’ person” (1994:56). He likens culture to “the smallest roots of trees, fragile yet capable of splitting bedrock, trivial yet necessary for sustaining towering, mature individuals and whole forests. It is ubiquitous yet invisible” (55). In writing about the cultural impact of racism James Jones says that the struggle against racism has been embedded in the African American soul and that it “lurks constantly as a force” that provides meaning for who they are and who they can and will become (1994:21). Unless people see culture contrasted against another different culture they often fail to recognize it, yet it is an extremely powerful force in how all people perceive reality and live in the world.

As we examine the impact of culture in light of our goal of sharing the gospel with people of other cultures, we can see that the role of culture in the values people hold and the choices they make is even more relevant in a religious sense than it is in a business sense. While culture impacts values, much of the cross-cultural marketing literature has focused on differences in observed behaviors within cultures. Unfortunately, this has often been true in missions as well. According to Hofstede, individuals
and societies may change the outer superficial levels of culture—the visible part of cultures. Yet change on the level of values is very slow (2010: loc 559). Hofstede goes as far as to say that national values “should be considered given facts, as hard as a country’s geographical position or its weather” (loc 564). They are extremely resistant to change. And for many societies, particularly Muslim societies, national and religious values are one and the same.

Kastanakis and Voyer found that as long as a person’s thinking remains “culturally bound” their effectiveness in reaching people of other cultures will be limited (2014:3). Failure to recognize and understand the impact of culture on religious beliefs and values can lead to “recurring market failures” just as surely in missions as it does in business.

Understanding the values that guide how people spend their money is far simpler than understanding the values that define their relationship with God or the values that impact their interpretation of Scripture. Whether through mission work or soul winning or interpreting a biblical passage, when people are confronted with an idea that goes against their cultural norms they are confronted with the rules that govern their society making it very difficult for them to go against what they have learned and been taught.

Works Cited


---

L. Ann Hamel, PhD, DMin is a licensed psychologist in the state of Michigan with a private practice at the University Medical Center in Berrien Springs. Ann has worked with Adventist Frontier Missions since 1994 and is currently working with the General Conference and the Institute of World Mission. Ann has a PhD in Counseling Psychology from Andrews University and a DMin in Formational Counseling from Ashland Theological Seminary. She is a Board Certified Expert in Traumatic Stress and a Fellow with the American Academy of Experts in Traumatic Stress.