

MULTICULTURAL RELATISM

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by Gene Edward Veith

Multiculturalism leaves many Americans unable to face the fact that some cultures really are uncivilized

In Meerwala, Pakistan, an 11-year-old boy walked unchaperoned with a girl. This was a violation of Islam. A tribal council was called.

The boy's father pleaded that since he was too young to have sex, the girl was safe and no harm was done. The council disagreed. But instead of punishing the boy, it decided to punish his whole family by punishing his 18-year-old sister.

In order to shame the family, the council sentenced the teenage daughter to be gang raped. Four members of the council took turns forcing themselves upon her in a mud hut, as hundreds of villagers laughed and cheered.

"I touched their feet," said the girl to an Associated Press reporter. "I wept. I cried. I said I taught the holy Qur'an to children in the village, therefore don't punish me for a crime which was not committed by me. But they tore my clothes and raped me one by one."

This kind of tribal punishment is not uncommon in Pakistan. A week earlier, another girl received the same treatment, after which she committed suicide. In many Islamic cultures, a rape victim--through no fault of her own--is ostracized and can never be married, so suicide is a common recourse.

Pakistan's central government has been trying to stamp out this kind of village justice and the Pakistani police force promises to try the perpetrators. The incident demonstrates the odd paradox of legalistic religions that the zealous pursuit of moral perfection, apart from Christ, often results instead in gross immorality. Here, the Islamic code of sexual purity--not letting girls and boys be alone together was so important to the tribal elders that they committed a sexual atrocity. By the same token, Islamic militants are so piously moral that they are willing to blow themselves up in order to kill innocent men, women, and children.

So what are Westerners to think of a tribe that punishes boys by raping their sisters? Shall we invoke multicultural diversity by saying, "Well, that's their culture. That's right for them. I don't personally agree with it, but their cultural values are just as valid for them as ours are."

This way of thinking--cultivated in schoolrooms, university curricula, and corporate sensitivity seminars has taken such a hold that many Americans (especially, according to polls, college students) cannot even bring themselves to condemn al-Qaeda.

Today's cultural relativists believe that no culture is superior to any other. They also believe that morality is nothing more than a "cultural value," which varies from society to society, so that no transcendent moral truth is applicable to all cultures.

The word *culture*, in this sense, dates only from the 20th century. Before that, the term of choice was *civilization*. While there were different civilizations--meaning, in the dictionary's words, "social organization of a high order, marked by advances in the arts, sciences, etc."--it was also possible to recognize a society as "uncivilized."

The term *civilization* referred to the accomplishments of a people, to their having attained, to quote the dictionary again, "a high stage of social and cultural development." Cultures that did not were called "uncivilized," or "barbarous," or "savage."

It is certainly true that "primitive" societies have their virtues and that "civilized" countries have their problems. But it is also correct that some societies are plagued by ignorance, superstition, backwardness, and institutionalized sin. This is usually a product of a distinctly pagan worldview, in which nature, the gods, local customs, and the social structures are indistinguishable from each other. Such societies resist change--and perhaps have not changed for millennia--since the status quo is an expression of the gods.

The West, for all of its decadence, was born in the insight that there is a God who transcends both nature and the culture. This meant that nature can be scientifically studied and manipulated, and that the culture must always be open to change, to make it accord more closely with God's transcendent moral law.

Ironically, "advanced nations" have brought back into vogue practices associated with the worst barbarism--sexual license, recreational violence, and infanticide. Civilization requires vigilance against barbarians, both from without and from within.