



DIRK WILLEMS

BACKGROUND

Cultural Relativism is the idea that what seems right and good to any individual depends on their culture. Whatever we have grown up with, and are surrounded by, seems normal, right and good. We may disagree with some of the things that are believed in our society, but overall we should not be surprised if people from different cultures see things differently to us. A cultural relativist believes that not only should we expect these differences but there is no way to settle them: my 'true' or 'right' or 'good' is just a product of my background and so is yours, so there is now way for me to assert my beliefs over yours.

One of the problems with agreeing to cultural relativism is that we can't then say that slavery, or FGM or forced marriage are wrong. That would be to impose our cultural value system on another culture. In modern life, many people take the view that they are tolerant of other cultures up to a point but draw the line at the kind of practices mentioned above. This is not very logical but seems more workable than complete 'anything-goes' tolerance or 'culture imperialism' where we dictate that other people should imitate our culture because it is better.

Apart from considering cultures foreign to us, another way of being more reflective about religion and culture is to look at those things through history - where we might find that 'our' religion in the past is as foreign to us as someone else's is now. Devout believers, when they turn their attention to history, will sometimes find precedents for their own interpretations, and cite these as example of how the flame of true religion was kept alive. Likewise, they dismiss weird or unwelcome versions of their religion as aberrations - mistakes that don't represent the reality of their religion.

This story is about Dirk Willems, a Christian who is persecuted by other Christians. He escapes but is recaptured because he does exactly what a true Christian would do. But then he pays the price. The people who persecuted him believed that he was not a true Christian. Many Christians now would claim that he is the only true Christian in the story. Which invites the question: What is a true Christian? Does our answer to that question depend on the era in which we live, which sect of Christianity we belong to and whether we are Christian at all? Can someone who is not a Christian say what a Christian is?

STIMULUS

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In 1569, in Holland, lived a man called Dirk Willems. Dirk was in jail. His tower was in a castle surrounded by a moat. He had been put there because he didn't agree with other Christians in Holland at that time. He believed that only adults should be baptised. He thought that no-one could become a Christian until they are old enough to understand the promises they make to God, and so baptising a baby is not real baptism at all.

These days some Christians still believe this. But most don't. And back in 1569 it was an idea that other Christians did not tolerate. Anyone - like Dirk - who baptised adults was thrown into jail for trying to change religion by adding new things. And if they didn't go back to the old beliefs they would be killed. Dirk Willems refused to change his mind and was locked in his cell, very cold, and very hungry, waiting to find out what was being planned for him. Finally, the news came that he was going to be killed in a few days' time.

So the next day, Dirk tied all his sheets together to make a long rope. He squeezed out of the window and lowered himself down to the frozen moat below. Lucky for him, he was very thin as he had been given so little to eat while he was in jail. This meant that he was light enough to run across the ice. One of the guards saw him escaping and rushed out to chase. But the guard was fat and heavy, and fell straight through into the freezing water. Dirk heard the guard calling for help. The man couldn't swim; he was drowning. So Dirk ran back and helped the guard out of the water.

By that time, other guards were arriving. Dirk was recaptured and immediately put into another cell with no way of climbing out. A week later he was taken away to be killed.

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Task Questions

- ✓ Was Dirk a real Christian? Why did some people think he wasn't?

✓ Is it important to worship God in the correct way? How do we find out the correct way?