

From cultural competency to cultural humility

A means of grace from the world of human services

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The late 1990s marked the beginning of a movement within the human services professions that stressed the importance of *cultural competency*. Psychology and social work were the pioneers; these fields emphasized cultural competency as a critical part of forming professionals for the changing realities of a new century. [Derald Wing Sue defined it](#) as “the process by which individuals and systems respond respectfully and effectively to people of all cultures, languages, classes, races, ethnic backgrounds, religions, and other diversity factors in a manner that recognizes, affirms, and values the worth of individuals, families and communities and protects and preserves the dignity of each.”

As the term gained traction it also evolved. In 2008 the “Cultural Competence and Social Diversity” section of the National Association of Social Workers’ code of ethics demonstrated this evolution: “Social workers should obtain education about and seek to understand the nature of social diversity and oppression with respect to race, ethnicity, national origin, color, sex, sexual orientation, age, marital status, political belief, religion, and mental or physical disability.”

The idea of cultural competency reflects noble intentions: an effort to provide effective care to people from other cultures, and especially from minoritized and marginalized groups. The term itself came out of efforts to find alternative language to another term that was circulating: *cultural sensitivity*. [Miguel Gallardo notes](#) that the main critique of sensitivity language was that it was more abstract and did not provide “a skill component.” This emphasis on a set of concrete skills led to the creation of several cultural competency tools that are still used today. (In my work with church leaders and seminarians, I have used both the Intercultural

Development Inventory and the Cultural Intelligence Assessment.)

Back in 1998, [Melanie Tervalon and Jan Murray-Garcia introduced a third alternative: cultural humility](#). Cultural competency, they said, was becoming a “detached mastery of a theoretically finite body of knowledge,” with an “end point evidenced largely by comparative quantitative assessments.” Cultural competency training often created a “false sense of security” that led to cultural arrogance and stereotyping—at odds with the original intent of cultural competency.

Tervalon and Murray-Garcia sought to move away from cultural competency tools as an end point and away from the goal of becoming a cultural expert. Their idea of cultural humility promotes something different: openness to any opportunity for growth in understanding other cultures. And it goes farther, positing that the only way to authentically open ourselves to the other is by being aware of our own biases, prejudices, internal battles, and unresolved traumas.

I’ve been working on integrating the cultural humility concept into a theological and biblical framework. For John Wesley, the salvific work of Christ is an ongoing process, not a onetime event. Indeed, many Christians believe and trust “that the one who began a good work among [us] will bring it to completion by the day of Jesus Christ” (Phillipians 1:6). However, we also understand that we are expected to respond to such an act of God’s mercy and grace. We are supposed to “work out [our] own salvation with fear and trembling” (2:12–13). The more we respond to God’s mercy and grace, the more we experience God “enabling [us] both to will and to work for his good pleasure.”

It’s helpful to understand cultural humility through the lens of the salvific work of Christ in our lives. Becoming culturally humble does not happen in a onetime event or training, or by reading a book, or by having a friend who is quite different from us—it is an ongoing process. It requires an intentional response to the many opportunities we find to interact with people who are different from us. In the salvific work of Christ, we have the means of grace available to us, through which we experience the work of the Spirit transforming us, restoring the *Imago Dei* within our lives distorted by sin. Likewise, as one strives to become culturally humble, one also has available means of cultural growth—we have cultural competency tools.

And these tools have the potential to be redeemed, because they can become means of grace—opportunities to experience the restoring power of the Spirit in our

lives. A journey toward cultural humility becomes a journey toward Christian perfection as well—toward loving God and neighbor more properly.

Although the cultural humility concept has been around for a couple of decades now in the formation of human services professionals, it remains fairly new in the formation of church leaders. Its emphasis on ongoing learning from our neighbors, constantly examining ourselves, the equalization of power imbalances, and the restoration of dysfunctional systems makes it more than just another conceptual framework. It can be a means of grace available to all Christians in becoming culturally humble—and ultimately, in becoming holy.