

Race and Culture

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 24 April 2018

Preacher: Mark Chew

[0 : 00] Let me just say at the outset that when I was preparing for this series of talks, I realized what a big challenge we were going to have on our hands. And maybe it's just me, not so much challenge for you.

But the race, the topics of race and culture are big topics, aren't they? And they're not only huge topics, they're actually contentious ones as well. You only have to look at what's in the media, whether it's sort of race relationships with indigenous Australians or the controversy around changing the date for Australia Day or migration or asylum seekers or terrorism or Islam. All these are related to race and culture, isn't it? So there's not any shortage of political minefields for me to be stepping on today. At the same time, race and culture is challenging because none of us come to this objectively, do we?

Including myself. Because when we talk about race and culture, we're talking about ourselves. We all belong to a certain race and culture. So it's never an abstract conversation.

And for some of us, talking about these things actually bring back painful memories. And then you add to that the fact that often even people of the same culture don't agree with each other.

[1 : 23] So you might think, those of you who are not Chinese, think that all Chinese are the same. But if you're Chinese, you know we're not. I know someone whose parents were from mainland China and his wife or wife-to-be were Chinese parents from Malaysia.

And they had a disagreement as to what the proper Chinese customs were when it came to planning their marriage. We Chinese do things like this, said one.

And then what do you mean by we Chinese do this? We're Chinese too. And so on they went.

Thankfully, there were no fights during the wedding. But you see, we don't always agree even when we're on the same culture, are we?

The same goes for Australians. It's beyond the ability to say, good day, mate. How do we, and some of us can't even do it. How do we define what the Aussie spirit is?

Do all Australians agree? Is it our love of sport? No. Is it our love of the beach? Not me. We don't all agree, do we?

[2 : 29] It's hard to define and hard to agree. And long gone are the days when your Aussie neighbor is just like Kylie Minogue or Jason Donovan in the TV series Neighbors.

I don't have any neighbors like that, actually. And so I think before we go very far, it's important that we try and define what we're talking about here today. And in particular, what I want to define are the two terms, race and culture.

And so if you turn on to page five, you'll see a couple of definitions there. And surprise, surprise, even defining those things are not straightforward.

But I think we need some working definitions for today. So let me have a go at it. First, I define race to be that aspect of a person which relates to their ethnic heritage or ancestry.

And often you can distinguish those race by their physical features, a person by their physical features. So, for example, you'll never find an Asian with blonde hair.

[3 : 35] Unless you do the Korean K-pop style thing and bleach your hair. Likewise, you don't have a Caucasian with dark complexion. So hair type, skin and eye color and maybe even physical stature are often good indicators of a person's race.

But when you go beyond the major categories of, you know, Caucasian, Asian, African, it's actually quite hard to pin things down even further. So let me put it to you.

Do you think the English and the German are two different races? Yes? Yes? Well, Peter's a bit confused. He's German and English. Yes?

No? Okay. Well, if you think they are, then the Queen is actually German. Because, yeah. Yeah. Trace, her ancestry, you know.

Yeah. Those of you who have just come from Europe, you're... Anyway. Likewise, are the Koreans and Japanese different races? Yes? Yeah. Some...

[4 : 43] They're both Chinese. Yeah. See? Because I think if you probe it, you know, if you talk about DNA, you'd find actually that DNA to be very similar.

Similar with Chinese probably. So how do we define all this? Do we take account of language or political history, you know, who their rulers are and all that? It's hard, isn't it? Well, my aim today is not to try and resolve these things, but rather to say, I think the main point to take away is that race being determined by your ethnic ancestry is not something you have a choice.

You're born with and therefore can't change. So take Harry Baxter, for example. He just revealed that he's got some Scottish blood. Well, he can eat all the Shanghai dumplings that he wants, but that will never make him Chinese.

Even if they're gluten-free. Likewise with me, I aspire to one day master the art of pasta making, but that will never make me Italian.

Instead, I'll always be Chinese and Harry will be Caucasian or Scottish or whatever else he might be. But on the other hand, and we come now to culture, culture is actually a bit more fluid.

[5 : 59] A hundred years ago or more ago, the idea of race and culture were actually very closely aligned. People of the same race shared the same culture.

But with global mobility and migration, all that started to change. There is still an overlap, but increasingly we are seeing race and culture actually not lining up perfectly.

So if I were to define culture, then I'll say it's something like this on the next paragraph. Culture pertains to the set of social behaviours and norms that are practised by a particular society and which give meaning and expression to more deeply held beliefs and values of the people.

And when I talk about beliefs and values, I'm not just talking about religion. Rather, I'm talking about the way each culture looks at the world, the way they value certain things, the way they prioritise certain aspects of life over another.

And after morning tea, we'll look a bit more closely on page eight where there's a series of tables which show contrasting values. I'll run through just a few on the slides quickly just to give you an idea of what I'm talking about.

[7 : 11] So, for example, firstly, next slide, Ryan. We have cultures that are individualistic, that is, they value self more than or of more importance than the group versus the other end, collectivism or the collective, where the group takes priority over the individual.

The second one is where you have equality versus hierarchy, that is, where someone is treated equally regardless of their status versus hierarchy, where people of higher standing are given more honour and special treatment.

Third one, a bit technical, it's called polychronic and monochronic. Polychronic cultures see time as an unlimited good. So it doesn't matter whether meetings start and end on time, it's as long as people come and once they all get here, we'll start, that kind of concept, versus monochronic time, where time is seen as a precious commodity.

So if we say church starts at 5, we start at 4.59pm. That wasn't a specific instruction or anything, but anyway.

Fourthly, there's meritocracy, cultures which measures achievement by what we do versus ascription, where achievements are measured by who you are. Now, how do we observe aspects of values of the culture?

[8 : 35] Well, mainly through interaction, mainly through the customs and ceremonies of that culture. How people greet each other, how people communicate. And often these values and beliefs are not spoken.

Those who belong to that culture just know about it. So, for example, standing up and offering a seat to the elderly, that's part of a hierarchical structure, isn't it?

And so if you're not part of that culture, you can often come into that culture and appear to be rude because you don't understand that particular value. Now, on the next slide, we have the others.

But we wouldn't worry about them too much. We'll come back to that, as I said, in the discussion later. But culture is actually pervasive in any society.

It's everywhere. Everything we do is sort of touched by culture. And so often we describe it as the air we breathe. Or to use a fish in the ocean analogy, it's the water within which we swim.

[9 : 35] And because it's everywhere, we're not normally conscious of it. And we don't stop to think about it because they're just unspoken assumptions we live by. But when someone from another culture comes into it, that's when it sort of brings it to light, becomes obvious, because they don't understand what's going on.

That's when they experience what we call culture shock, if it's overwhelming. It's like putting a freshwater fish into saltwater.

And when that happens, one of two things occurs. Either they adapt to the new culture in light of what they see and modify their values, or else they reject that culture and insulate themselves from it.

And this happens not just with societies. It happens at church. It happens, let's say, at school even, or a club or a company that you join as part of your employment.

But one way or another, when you come into a new culture, you are required to respond to it. You're either going to respond positively and accept it, conform to it, or you're going to reject it and withdraw from it.

[10 : 48] And the converse is also true, that when you become part of a new culture, then whether you like it or not, without even knowing it, and sometimes this is only in a small way, you start to impact the culture itself as well.

And so what we get is that if there's a large group that joins a culture, like with mass migration, let's say, then the impact on the culture, the existing culture, will be significant.

So you just need to look at Box Hill and Doncaster, right? Just the very presence of Asians have influenced these suburbs. There can't be help. And even someone like Eric, who's a Caucasian living in Doncaster for many years, he's impacted by it, whether he likes it or not.

Right, Eric? Yeah. He even tells me nowadays that he eats more rice than bread. So there you go. Now, so can you see? It works both ways.

You're impacted by it, and you impact it as well. Okay. Having defined race and culture, what I want to reflect on now is the next question after the definitions, is why is it important to distinguish race and culture?

[12 : 00] Why have I sort of made those two definitions? I do that because I fear that there's a tendency, particularly with the media and in public conversation, that these two things are being confused.

And when they're confused, it leads to, I think, misunderstandings and unhelpful discussions. You see, as I said earlier, race is part of your ancestry. That's something you can't change.

Whereas culture, although it's related, relate to beliefs and values which you can actually change. In fact, the culture of societies are changing all the time.

And, you know, politics, for instance, is all about shaping culture. They're changing laws, they're trying to influence public opinion. hopefully in the long run to change culture or to respond to culture because it's been changing.

So the vote on the same-sex marriage, that is actually a major change to our culture. Both in that it's a result of a shift in the values of our society, but also I think, now that it's happened, the likely change it will continue to have to our culture in the way people think about marriage, in the way people think about male and females.

[13 : 20] And so, if we confuse race and culture, then I think we end up reacting to problems in the wrong way. So, for example, if you attribute a problem such as the youth gangs in Africa to race, let's say, then the way to respond to that, the only way, if you're saying that it's a racial problem, the only way to respond to that, what, is to get rid of the people because you can't change race, can you?

See, if you think it's a racial problem, the solution is to get rid of people. But if you think it's associated with culture, then there's actually a scope for persuasion, education, and changing people.

Do you see where I'm getting? Likewise, I think sometimes people too easily tar others with the racist label when people may simply be asking questions about culture.

When you say, oh, you're racist, basically you say, we can't discuss this. But when you say, no, no, this is a question about culture, then we can actually have an informed debate about how we can

actually change things to lead to a better and more cohesive society.

So, and I'm not a One Nation voter, and I'm not backing them at all, but I think some of what is happening with One Nation voters is that very thing. I don't know, some of them may be racist, and some of them, including Pauline Hanson, might be doing this because they think they're better than others.

[14 : 49] But remember, the definition of a racist is someone who thinks that they're superior by virtue of their race, and they look down on others because of something that, the aspect of them, that racial, that they have no control over.

But if you listen carefully to some of what these people are saying, they're raising questions about culture. They're raising the questions about, for example, the impact of immigration on their way of life, how people coming in are changing the way they live, their culture.

And so that's a question first and foremost about culture. Now, there may be racist motivations. I'm not denying all that behind those questions. But we need to just take that on face value first and ask whether these are valid questions to be asking about culture.

Otherwise, if we don't go down that track, we have to all admit that we're racist, actually. Why? Because whenever we choose to live by a certain set of values and reject another set of values, which is perhaps reflected in another culture, then we're actually saying that we think these values are better than those, aren't we?

When we all decide, no, that's how we want to do life together, we're saying, this is a better way of doing it than this way. And it's okay to make these judgments.

[16 : 13] And we don't do it because we think our race is better or our race has a better culture. No, we do it because we think there's a right way and a wrong way to do life.

So it's okay to critique and evaluate other cultures and the cultures even of ourselves in order to work out what is the kind of society, what is the kind of church that we want to have.

Do we want a society where individual rights are supreme or do we want a society where the individual must always give in to the views of the collective? It's not wrong, is it, to ask what is the right balance?

Which means we may end up rejecting sometimes the cultures of people that have just migrated. Now that's not being racist or bigoted.

but that's just being critical of what we think is good and what is bad. And I have to say that actually if you look at all the political parties they do that all the time as well.

[17 : 22] So the Greens for instance they want us to respect the environment and animals, right? Sometimes to the extent of ranking the rights of animals on par or above humans.

That's a value, isn't it? Do you agree or do you disagree with it? It's not racist or bigoted to reject that value, is it? The Liberal Party on the other hand wants us to value economic progress as the number one goal.

I'm exaggerating a bit but you know, just go with me. Even sometimes to the expense of the well-being of the poor, right? That's sort of typical coalition type thinking.

The Labour Party wants us to value the little guy, the worker above all else even when sometimes it creates a disincentive for businesses to create jobs or to invest.

But all of these are choices with values in them, aren't they? And all of us are making choices all the time to see how our society reflects those values and beliefs that we actually believe in.

[18 : 25] And so if you ask me what's driving the one nation phenomenon, I think it's a fear that migration is eroding their way of life which is based on the Judeo-Christian worldview. Whether their views are legitimate or not or whether they're approaching it the right way, I don't think I agree.

But my point is not so much whether they're right or wrong, but my point is that we mustn't confuse race and culture and we mustn't be too quick to say everything is racist when there's actually an opportunity for proper conversation so that we can come up with helpful solutions in society.

And we lose this chance for conversation or dialogue if we just dismiss people out of hand. the truth is that we're always trying to shape the culture that we live in.

Whether by political means or by the way we act or the choices we make, we just want to, we're always trying to mold things, society, into what we believe is right to reflect who we are.

Now, why is that? So the next question on, why do we seek to shape or preserve the culture we live in? I think there are two aspects of that. First, we want to shape it because it gives us a sense of identity and belonging.

[19 : 46] If the culture we live in shares our beliefs and values, then we feel like we can freely express ourselves. People understand us. We feel like we belong. Otherwise, we sometimes feel like no matter how welcoming people may be of us, we will still be treated like an outsider, not an insider.

We feel like we are a stranger or foreigner in that culture. So if you look back at history, when the Europeans first migrated to Australia, that is after the first settlers, after the Second War, let's say, they were able to integrate quite quickly because they felt like they belonged. They shared a lot of the beliefs and values of the people that were already here. But on the other hand, the more recent converts migrants, they were of a slightly different culture, different values. And so they could not readily identify with Australian values and so held on to their culture for longer. They didn't feel like they could belong and so they held on to their own subculture as a way of retaining a sense of belonging in the land, even when they felt like foreigners in public life, let's say.

Of course, there's a tension there because then the second generation grows up in this culture, and so many of you are ABC, so you understand this, you get the culture of Australia in your schools and then you go home where you still get your parents' culture and you feel that conflict or tension. [21 : 15] culture. We've touched quite a bit on quite quickly, but we've touched on quite a few contours of race and culture, and I just want to wrap up the final session here by talking about story and the place and power of story in understanding and shaping culture.

You see, there are many ways that culture is transmitted. We see it's transmitted through music, language, and customs, but one key way that we see transmitted is through story.

Every culture has some overarching narrative or story by which the values and beliefs of a culture are conveyed. The story communicates how we become the society that we are, and more importantly, how individual members fit within it.

So, for example, the Anzac story is a very powerful one for Australia, and especially for today. It shapes how we see ourselves as Australians.

And every year, and they're all there now, young Australians would travel one day to Gallipoli, a place where otherwise there would be no other connection.

[22 : 32] And when they get there, a lot of them after the service or during the service or just before that, waiting in the dark, they talk about how it's such a deeply spiritual experience for them. And this is like I've talked to my cousin as well, she's like me, Asian, Chinese.

And yet they have this strong connection with the Anzac story in some mysterious or powerful way. Somehow that story helps them to identify themselves as Australians or to explain who they are as Australians.

And they do this even when the family is not connected, there's no one serving, having a history of serving in the army, no uncle or brother doing that. If there were, the story would be even more powerful, wouldn't it?

And up to recently, this Anzac story, if you open up the history books or if you looked on TV, the official version of Australian history, the official Australian history was explained by stories like this, the Anzac story, the story which, if you look on the next slide but also on the next page, it's what I call the story of the establishment.

This is the story of the expansion of the British Empire, of how Australia was civilized by the British. They brought the rule of law, religion and high culture and made Australia the way it is today.

[23 : 59] This has been the dominant story by which Australian culture and values has been conveyed. But recently, I read a blog by a pastor in Brisbane called, by the name of Nathan Campbell, and he actually helpfully suggests that there are other Australian stories as well, up to, well, certainly three more but maybe even more than that.

That the Australian establishment story is not the only one and the Australian story, the big Australian story, is not one single narrative but actually comprised of three other stories interwoven with the establishment story.

And most Australians, depending on their family history, will identify with one of these four stories. Okay, so what are the other three? Well, the second story is that of the convict story, okay, that of getting won over the establishment from back home.

So, you know, they were sent to paradise as a punishment for small crimes and when they got here, life was brutal but they were eventually released into this land of opportunity.

community. So that's a convict story. The third story is that of the indigenous story. This is a story of dispossession and invasion, being subject to annihilation of your culture by those in power, by those in the establishment and of ongoing injustice against you because of your heritage.

[25 : 22] So just think the stolen generation, think indigenous families being forced to assimilate into white Australia. that's the third story. Now, the third story now, I think, is being given more prominence in history textbooks, even in junior school or primary school where they start telling more of these aspects of our history.

But, of course, if you start to think about it, this third story is actually coming into conflict with the establishment story, isn't it? And I'll come back to that a bit after that, a bit more of that after morning tea.

These stories are all interwoven into one Australian story, but not all of them are mutually, well, they're not all coherent or internally consistent, is it? And then, fourthly, we have the story of the settler, or to update it to present times, the migrant story.

Okay, and unlike the convict story, the settler or migrant comes post-establishment out of his own free will to seek out opportunity and prosperity and to make a better life for family and for himself. And there have been multiple waves of this, right? There was the gold rush, post-war European migrants, and then most recently from Asia and other parts of the world. And, of course, you can add to that another variant on this story, which is the story of the asylum seeker, the one who flees persecution, maybe not out of free will, but they come here anyway to seek out opportunity and prosperity.

[26 : 55] Now, I'm sure that even as I relate these to you, you probably identify with one of these. If you're a second or third generation Australian, then you may have more than one story, a amalgam of two, depending on where your parents are from or what their stories are.

Okay, that's probably it from me for now. There's not much Bible now. I'm just setting the scene. The second and the third talks will look very much more into the Bible. So, you're thinking about the old thing that that■■■ people, you're BR d