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## **Embracing the Harmony: Exploring the Complementarity of Faith and Culture in the Context of Luke 10:38-42**

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### **Abstract**

This study explores the intricate relationship between faith and culture, arguing that they are complementary rather than mutually exclusive. The narrative in Luke 10: 38-42 reveals how Jesus' teachings and actions embody both spiritual and cultural significance. The study used hermeneutics and historical methods to analyze the cultural context of hospitality in the Jewish understanding of welcoming guests in their homes while highlighting how Jesus' presence in the home of Martha and Mary exemplifies the integration of faith and culture. The work revealed that Martha's hospitality and Mary's receptivity to Jesus' teachings are not mutually exclusive, rather complementary aspects of their faith. The study explores how Jesus' acceptance of Martha's hospitality and his teaching on the importance of listening to God's word (Luke 10: 38-42) affirm the interconnectedness of faith and culture. This study's findings suggest that faith and culture are not in tension but rather enrich each other, leading to a more profound understanding of God's work in the world. The paper concluded that embracing the complementarity of faith and culture enables believers to live out their faith in a more authentic and meaningful way, engaging with their cultural context in a manner that honours God. This paper, by exploring the complementarity of faith and culture, fosters a deeper understanding of how faith can nurture and shape the culture and how, in turn, culture



can enrich the faith, thereby leading to a more nuanced and compassionate expression of Christian living. This research contributes to the ongoing conversation on the interaction of faith and culture, encouraging believers to embrace the complementarity of these two aspects of human experience.

**Keywords:** Complementary, Culture, Faith, Harmony, Hospitality

## **Introduction**

In human society, religion, faith and culture play important roles. For some, there is a dichotomy between religion and culture while for others the two are inseparable. In the Western world, civilization or modernity has grown to the point that sharp distinction is created between the two phenomena. In the Ancient Near East or the ancient Mesopotamia world, there is no much difference between religion and culture. This extends to the Arabian world where their culture is strictly their religion and vice –versa. Man has always lived through the age of his religion and faith, yet good and sincere examinations shows that the religion of man constitutes in the majority what has become his culture. His culture is always reflected in his religion or faith even in the case of a borrowed religion as we have in the case of Africa. It is obvious today that these two religions have influenced or became in a strict sense the culture of the people. The discuss in the episode of the encounter of Mary and Martha the two sisters, and Jesus is one that brings out a rumination on the issue of the interplay of faith and culture, while culture harbours faith, faith on the other hand prunes and complement culture.

Humanity directly or indirectly cannot do without these two phenomenal. This comes to play as Christ visited his people who welcomed him and him giving them a gift of faith. The interplay of culture and faith when properly handled works for an enrichment and completeness of humanity. This works, rather than confirming the erroneous interpretation of many preachers or some scholars being negative on their actions of one who projects the value of courtesy in the



beauty of culture, is confirming the positive aspect of the interplay of the gift of Jesus and the gift of his host.

## **Conceptual Clarification**

### **What is Faith?**

According to scholars, defining faith is nearly impossible because it means something different to each person. According to Hellwig, (1990) the term “faith” ranges in meaning from a general religious attitude on the one hand to personal acceptance of a specific set of beliefs on the other hand." However, considering the spiritual meaning of faith, it is considered to be believing in God, and in what Christ has done for mankind to make salvation possible, and then committing ourselves to Him. In the New World Encyclopedia Dictionary, faith is said to be from Greek- *pistis* and latin *fides*, and it connotes confidence, trust, and hope in God, a person, a community, tradition or locus of inspiration. It also simply means the strong belief in the doctrines of a religion based on spiritual conviction rather than proof. Meanwhile for this study, the working definition that will be adopted is, “faith being as allegiance to duty or a person.

In addition to what faith stand for, we have the following as various characteristics of faith;

- Faith is a grace, a supernatural gift of God,
- Faith is certain
- Faith seeks understanding
- Faith is not opposed to science
- Faith is necessary for salvation
- Grace enables faith
- Its faith is the beginning of eternal life.

From the above, it is important to mention that item 3 is cogent to the main issue under discussion: Faith seeks understanding; Mary sought for understanding through her allegiance to Jesus while Martha place emphasis on the cultural norms of hospitality. The question then is



which is more important? This will be addressed in the latter part of this work.

## **What is Culture?**

It has been observed that culture has many definitions, and it affects everything people do in their society because of their ideas, values, attitudes, and normative or expected patterns of behavior. According to Hall (1976), culture is not genetically inherited, and cannot exist on its own, but is always shared by members of a society. Also, Hofstede (1980) defines culture as “the collective programming of the mind which distinguishes the members of one group from another, which is passed from generation to generation, it is described as the changing all the time because each generation adds something of its own before passing it on. He went further to say that, it is usual that one’s culture is taken for granted and assumed to be correct because it is the only one, or at least the first, to be learned.

Different cultural groups think, feel, and act differently. Culture is also refers to as the cumulative deposit of knowledge, experience, beliefs, values, attitudes, meanings, hierarchies, religion, notions of time, roles, spatial relations, concepts of the universe, and material objects and possessions acquired by a group of people in the course of generations through individual This is indicated, as Geertz (2000) notes, by Clyde Kluckhohn’s account of culture as (1) “the total way of life of a people”; (2) “the social legacy the individual acquires from his group”; (3) “a way of thinking, feeling, and believing”; (4) “an abstraction from behaviour”; (5) a theory on the part of the anthropologist about the way in which a group of people in fact behave; (6) a “storehouse of pooled learning”; (7) “a set of standardized orientations to recurrent problems”; (8) “learned behaviour”; (9) a mechanism for the normative regulation of behaviour; (10) “a set of techniques for adjusting both the external environment and to other men.



## **Connection between Faith and Culture**

Having given conceptual clarifications of faith and culture within the context of this paper, the question one may ask is what is the connection between culture and faith? Faith, according to Paul Cardinal, has a triple role vis-a-vis culture. Its first task is to acknowledge and admit as well as to accept and appreciate the values that are embodied in culture. There is something good in the worst of us, just as there is something bad in the best of us, for we have the strengths of our weaknesses and the weaknesses of our strengths.

Every culture has a deposit of values. Every culture has its own treasury of traditions. Every culture has riches and values that need to be cherished and cradled for growth. Such values could be for example the recognition of a Supreme Being, reverence for life, and respect for the environment. Faith, according to Poupard (1996), needs to acknowledge and admit the good that is in every culture, for all good, like truth, has but one Source, God Himself. But faith also needs to accept and appreciate the good that is embedded in culture. In fact, no faith is ever born in a void or in a vacuum. It is always conceived in the womb of culture; there it is born and there too it is nourished and grows. In other words, both culture and faith are inextricably connected and viewed from the lens of the passage chosen as a case study, if we do not give the present generation the fruits of the tree of cultural tradition of hospitality as exemplified by Martha, we will leave them malnourished and unable to bear faithful and fruitful witness, and unable to sustain the life of faith within their culture – starved spirit.

## **The Passage: Luke 10:38-42**

It is a gospel story about two sisters from Bethany and who are they? Mary and Martha are two models of Christian devotion. Martha means 'lady of the house' while Mary means 'wise woman' or 'lady'. It is a Greek form of the Hebrew Miriam or Mariam. It was a popular name at the time of Jesus, perhaps because of the beautiful young Jewish princess Mariamme, married to King Herod the Great. They are pair of missionary but certainly as leaders, we know little about the background



of Martha, Mary and Lazarus. They may have been well-to-do orphans who had the management of their own lives, since there is no mention of their parents. Moreover, the eldest of the three, Martha, appeared to be in control of the household. They seemed to be not too affluent but comfortable enough. They had a house large enough to accommodate many people, as their hospitality to Jesus and his group of friends shows. The passage reads:

As Jesus and his disciples were on their way, he came to a village where a woman named Martha opened her home to him. She had a sister called Mary, who sat at the Lord's feet listening to what he said. But Martha was distracted by all the preparations that had to be made. She came to him and asked, "Lord, don't you care that my sister has left me to do the work by myself? Tell her to help me!" "Martha, Martha," the Lord answered, "you are worried and upset about many things, but few things are needed—or indeed only one. Mary has chosen what is better, and it will not be taken away from her."

### **Then what can one deduced from the passage?**

This story as shown by different biblical writers is fraught with a tension that Christians have struggled with for years. It has been observed that that there are many voices in our culture trying to pit these two against each other. In short, we need to note that this story has often suffered from different interpretations with Mary becoming a character of all that is wrong with the life of busyness and distraction or what the medieval church called the active or working life of Martha, which was permitted but seen as inferior to the perfect life of contemplation. But the story must be read against the backdrop of Luke's gospel as a whole, where we have the work of hospitality, a vital form of cultural values.

Mary and Martha in that context are not enemies but sisters. Two sisters squabbling about household duties cannot reasonably be construed as a battle of incompatible modes of life. Martha's generous service is not minimized by Jesus but her worries show that her service needs to be grounded in Mary's kind of love for him. Together, the sisters embody the truth that faith and culture are intertwined realities.



Jesus points toward Mary, not as a rebuke to Martha but as a gentle reminder that leadership demands both the ability to listen and to act. Both are not at odds but form two parts of a whole. The point is not that activity like Martha's is bad. The choice Jesus discusses with Martha is between something that is good and something that is better. Life is full of tough choices, and Jesus is stressing the relative merits of good activities here.

Jesus commends the hearing of the word at his feet. To take time out to relate to Jesus is important. Jesus is not so much condemning Martha's activity as commending Mary's. He is saying that Mary's priorities are in order. To disciples Jesus says, "Sit at my feet and devour my teaching. There is no more important meal." But as is often the case when Jesus is asked to settle a dispute, he refuses to side with the one who asks that things be decided in a particular way (compare Lk 12:13; Jn 8:4-7). Yet, he responds tenderly and instructs in the process. The double address "Martha, Martha" indicates the presence of caring emotion; as such an address does elsewhere (6:46; 8:24; 13:34; 22:31). Jesus questions her not because of her activity but because of her attitude about it: "You are worried and upset about many things." By comparing what she is doing to what Mary is doing, she has injected unnecessary anxiety into the visit. "Only one thing is needed." With this remark Jesus sets priorities. "Mary has chosen what is better, and it will not be taken away from her."

Mary knew true hospitality is always in style. It doesn't seem that Martha was too worried. She eagerly invited Jesus in and showed Him the kind of authentic hospitality that throws the door wide and serves the best. Now, if this passage is considered critically, few things can be learnt from Mary and Martha which are:

1. Welcoming people into your home is a gift – a gift worth sharing, whether the place is pristine and decorated to perfection or not.
2. True hospitality wraps a person up in a grace hug and makes them feel special.
3. Our guests are important no matter their status and they often have something to offer too, giving them attention is a virtue.





### **Faith and culture as exemplified in the passage:**

The question is, does the passage has anything to do with faith and culture, the answer is in the affirmative. In the passage one could see Mary as a woman of faith while Martha was more cultural. Both faith and culture needed to be embraced, even though one may think the best practice is to listen to the words as Mary does and not worried about the perishable meal but it should be noted that even though she showed hospitality, she is equally a woman of faith likewise Mary. The two actions in that passage are complementary and it should be upheld because Jesus in that context still needed to be taken care of and someone has to do that and doing that does not make the other person given to hospitality infidel and vice versa.

Also, whenever there is faith, there must be culture and when we see the decay of culture there will equally be decay of faith. Any work of culture which shines forth the goodness, truth and beauty is shining forth the truth of Christ. At the deepest level, we could say, the tree of cultural tradition is not merely a tree but it is the tree of life and faith, which is to say is inseparable from the God who gives life. Faith can improve people's values. Faith permeates our world, providing a moral and ethical compass for the majority of people.

As rightly pointed out by Pope Franscis and with simple elegance, when you pray for the hungry then you feed them, that is how prayer works, just as a body without a spirit is dead, so also faith without works is dead. Jesus emphasizes this connection between faith and action when he declares, amen, I say to you, whatever you did for one of these least brothers of mine, you did for me, Matthew 25: 40. His focus on the spiritual life portrays no interest in otherworldly navel-gazing, but rather a deep interest in doing practical work shown (which is cultural) by Martha of Bethany: feeding hungry people, wiping running nose, taking care of sick people, loving people in simple acts of service which is nothing but an example of faith.

Also, it needs to be noted that there is a call to act too. While having faith and listening to the word is important, our response to that grace is equally crucial. When we act out grace or faith hospitality is equally





germane. In addition, it could be said that the emphasis on faith over cultural values has birthed church full of the corporal and spiritual works of mercy, works of arts, civilization and other wonders that have changed the world. When the church teems with Martha's doing good works and the world is richer, it would not be difficult for people to accept the works of salvation which is faith and main focus of Mary.

To simplify, this is frequently interpreted as spiritual values being more important than material business, such as preparation of food. There are many practical problems with this reading (who is going to move the chairs and tables after the Sunday service?) as well as personal ones (can I really justify my laziness by saying I was listening to Jesus?) and there has been some push back. Moreover, there is good research evidence which shows that Christians both feel they are expressing their faith most clearly when involved in practical action, and that this helps them learn and grow as disciples.

## **Conclusion**

In conclusion, the case studies of Luke 10: 38-42 has revealed the complementary relationship between faith and culture. Through a thorough analysis of the cultural context of hospitality and the Jewish understanding of welcome, we have seen how Jesus' teachings and actions embody both spiritual and cultural significance. The findings of this study suggest that faith and culture are intertwined aspects of human experience, informing and enriching other. The story of Martha and Mary serves as a powerful example of how believers can embrace the complementarity of faith and culture, leading to a more authentic and meaningful expression of Christian living.

The implications of this research are far –reaching, encouraging believers to engage with their cultural context in a manner that honors God. By acknowledging the harmony between faith and culture, we can foster a deeper understanding of God's work, love and grace in our lives and in the world around us.



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