

# CULTURE AND SPIRIT: THE ROLE OF CULTURAL CONTEXT IN THEOLOGICAL REFLECTION

—♦♦♦—  
STANLEY J. GRENZ

To be human means to be embedded in culture. The cultural-embeddedness of human existence has sparked an interest among theologians in every era in engaging with the cultural context in which they found themselves living. Yet, theologians have never been of one mind as to the role culture ought to play in theology. In fact, the perennial debate between the successors of Clement of Alexandria, who suggested that Greek philosophy served as a “schoolmaster” bringing the Greeks to Christ,<sup>1</sup> and the followers of Tertullian, who voiced the rhetorical question, “What does Athens have to do with Jerusalem?,”<sup>2</sup> might be viewed as an aspect of the larger issue as to what place consideration of cultural context ought to occupy in theological construction. The goal of this essay is to sketch an understanding of the relationship between culture and theology that takes seriously postmodern perspectives on the nature of culture.

## CULTURE FROM A POSTMODERN PERSPECTIVE

The pursuit of this goal necessarily begins with the question of culture itself. Although the term is widely used and the concept boasts a long historical pedigree, over the centuries the idea of culture has undergone dramatic shifts in meaning.

## CHANGING UNDERSTANDINGS OF CULTURE

The word *culture* is derived from the Latin *cultivare* (“to till the soil”). This etymological connection led to the original meaning of *culture*, namely, “the care and tending of crops or animals,”<sup>3</sup> especially as this activity is aimed at improving or perfecting its object. The idea of a specifically *human* culture was likely a metaphorical extension of this “tending” process to the human person, so that culture came to be connected with the “development” or “refinement” of the person, especially through

---

*Stanley J. Grenz is the Pioneer McDonald Professor of Theology and Ethics at Carey Theological College and Regent College.*

THE ASBURY THEOLOGICAL JOURNAL

FALL 2000 • VOL. 55 • NO. 2

teaching.<sup>4</sup> This perspective became especially prevalent in the wake of the Enlightenment, as culture—understood as “high culture”—was connected to the process of educating and refining the individual, as well as to the artistic and intellectual products (such as art and literature) deemed to fit with the “refined” person.

In the 1920s, however, the idea of “high culture” associated with the focus on *Bildung* gave way to the idea of culture as consisting of the customs and rituals of a particular social group. In keeping with this shift in understanding, researchers in the fledgling new field of cultural anthropology explored the specific pattern of behaviors that distinguishes any given society from all others,<sup>5</sup> while focusing on the unified and unifying character of culture.<sup>6</sup>

Beginning in the 1980s modern cultural anthropology itself came under attack. What has emerged since then is a “chastened,” postmodern understanding of culture that takes seriously the historical contingency of human personal and social life. At the heart of the newer perspective is a rejection of the “integrated” focus found in modernist definitions of culture. Postmodern anthropologists have discarded the older assumption that culture is a preexisting social-ordering force that is transmitted externally to members of a cultural group who in turn passively internalize it.<sup>7</sup> Further, the older focus on the integrative role of culture has become suspect; culture is now seen “as that which *aggregates* people and processes, rather than *integrates* them.”<sup>8</sup> In addition, postmodern thinkers view culture as the outcome and product of social interaction, with humans as active creators, rather than passive receivers, of culture.<sup>9</sup> What binds people together is not so much a general framework of social relations, a clearly understood body of beliefs and values, or a dominant ideology, as much as—in the words of Alain Touraine—“a set of resources and models that social actors seek to manage, to control, and which they appropriate or whose transformation into social organization they negotiate among themselves.”<sup>10</sup>

Of greatest importance, however, is the postmodern movement away from the focus on common human behaviors as comprising the essence of culture in favor of a greater concern for the connection between culture and meaning. Contemporary “cognitive anthropologists” understand culture as denoting “the framework of meaning, of concepts and ideas, within which different aspects of a person’s life can be related to each other without imposing arbitrary categorical boundaries between them,” to cite Cohen’s description.<sup>11</sup> In other words, culture consists of “shared knowledge.” It includes what people need to know so as to behave as functioning members of their society, that is, to act the way they do, to make the things they make, and to interpret their experience in the distinctive way they do. In short, culture resides in a set of meaningful forms and symbols that from the point of view of any particular individual are largely given,<sup>12</sup> but are only meaningful because human minds have the ability to interpret them.<sup>13</sup>

#### THE FUNCTION OF CULTURE

Postmodern anthropologists view *culture* as a shorthand way of talking about the shared dimension of meaning-making, an understanding that is closely connected to social-constructionist views of the world and of personal identity within that world. One pioneer in social-constructionist thinking is Peter Berger, who argues that rather than inhabiting a prefabricated, given world, humans live in a social-cultural world of their own creation,<sup>14</sup> a task to which society supplies the necessary cultural tools.<sup>15</sup> Although initially

composed over three decades ago, Berger's work continues to provide the foundation for contemporary thinking about culture,<sup>16</sup> even though postmodern anthropologists speak less about grand, overarching cultural forms than about the smaller and seemingly simpler cultural units, together with the connections among them.<sup>17</sup>

Viewed from this perspective, people may be said to share a culture to the extent that they have similar experiences (i.e., experiences that follow the same general patterns as those of other members of the society)<sup>18</sup> mediated by shared humanly created products and learned practices, which lead them to develop a set of similar meaning-creating cultural schemas. These schemas provide the tools for ongoing identity formation, in that they comprise the framework for reconstructing memories of past events, for imparting meaning to ongoing experience and for devising expectations for the future.<sup>19</sup> Taken together, the cultural schemas constitute the world a person inhabits.

Although the constructed world gives the semblance of being a given, universal, and objective reality, it is actually—to use Morgan's picture—"an unstable edifice that generations constantly labor to build, raze, rebuild, and redesign."<sup>20</sup> The goal of the meaning-making task is the formation of personal identity within the context of the social group, i.e., the socially constructed self. But this task, like that of the construction of culture itself, is a never-completed, and hence an ongoing process.<sup>21</sup>

At the heart of this ongoing, dynamic process are what sociologists call "symbols," the language, material objects, images, and rituals that transmit the shared meanings by means of which a people understand themselves, pinpoint their deepest aspirations and longings, and construct the world they inhabit. Moreover, through the symbols they share, members of a group express and communicate to each other their understandings of the central aspects of life, while struggling together to determine the meaning of the very symbols they employ in this process. Despite the human tendency to confuse symbols with their meanings, there is no necessary connection between a symbol and what it symbolizes; the assigning of meanings to symbols is arbitrary. At the same time, symbols are generally a public, rather than merely a private, matter. It is this public aspect of symbols that leads to their importance as purveyors of cultural meaning and that facilitates participation in social groups.<sup>22</sup>

Drawing from the famous line of Shakespeare, then, we might say that all the world's a stage, albeit a stage of our own construction. By participating in the making of meaning, we contribute to the creation of the context in which we act out our socially designed roles and gain our sense of identity. Rather than being fixed and stable, this socially constructed stage is in constant flux—sometimes imperceptible to us, sometimes obvious to all, but changing nonetheless. Over the course of our life narratives, our sense of personal identity (and hence the parts we play) shifts along with the changes in our constructed world.

## **CULTURE AND RELIGION**

Crucial to the contemporary understanding of culture is the connection between culture and religion. One way of understanding the relationship is to see religious artifacts as a dimension of a broader phenomenon called *culture*, which artifacts provide a vehicle for the expression of the deeper sensitivities endemic to a particular people.<sup>23</sup> The connection could conceivably move in the opposite direction as well, viewing cultural artifacts as giving expression to the underlying religious ethos of a particular society.<sup>24</sup>

While not rejecting either of these approaches, cultural anthropologists tend to develop a sociological connection between culture and religion. Berger, for example, highlights the decisive role religion plays in the socially constructed worlds humans inhabit.<sup>25</sup> Religion's role is to legitimate the world endemic to any particular society by locating it and its institutions within a sacred, cosmic frame of reference, by bestowing on its members a sense of being connected to ultimate reality, and by giving cosmic status to its interpretative framework.<sup>26</sup> Insofar as cultural expressions speak about what a society believes to be ultimate, Berger adds, they are religious. More recently, other thinkers have pushed Berger's seminal idea into the realm of personal identity formation, theorizing about the role of religion in safeguarding the identity of the self within the socially constructed world.<sup>27</sup>

The sociological understanding of the connection between religion and culture provides an insightful window into developments in Western society. The modern era witnessed the retreat of Christianity (or the church) under the onslaught of secularization from its position as the central force defining Western "culture." The postmodern situation, however, is marked by what might be termed the "respiritualization" of cultural expression. Yet for many people today, this spiritualization draws from the symbols provided by pop culture, rather than institutional Christianity. Writing specifically about the so-called Generation X, Tom Beaudoin declares, "we are nurtured by the amniotic fluid of popular culture with the media as a primary source of meaning... We express our religious interests, dreams, fears, hopes, and desires through popular culture."<sup>28</sup> In addition, Beaudoin notes that the shared set of cultural referents that shape the meaning systems and values of his generation consists largely of certain pop culture "events."<sup>29</sup>

The findings of Beaudoin and others reaffirm the presence of a integral connection between culture and religion. Many of the cultural symbols by means of which people construct their world and form their identity are fundamentally religious or take on a religious character. This phenomenon raises the crucial question as to the place of culture in theological reflection.

#### **PROPOSALS FOR A CULTURE-SENSITIVE THEOLOGY**

Although theologians have debated the question of the relationship between culture and theology since the New Testament times, beginning in the late nineteenth century the issue gained a new sense of urgency occasioned by the advent of the liberal theological project. Following in the footsteps of Schleiermacher, liberals were committed to the task of reconstructing Christian belief in the light of modern knowledge,<sup>30</sup> and to this end they sought to give place to culture in their theological reflections. But their work triggered a reaction among conservative theologians who were concerned that the liberal project was leading to blatant cultural accommodation. In response, some conservatives argued that theology involves the discovery of transcultural truth<sup>31</sup> and consequently that theologians need give little, if any, thought to culture.<sup>32</sup>

Today, however, there is broad agreement that the quest for a culture-free theology is both ill-founded and theologically and biblically unwarranted. Although a chorus of voices is calling for cultural relevance, theologians display a variety of understandings as to what this actually means. Among the various suggestions, two proposals initially came to the forefront: correlation and contextualization.

### THE METHOD OF CORRELATION

One twentieth-century theologian who sought to negotiate a position between the liberal and conservative options was Paul Tillich. Tillich argued that the “supernaturalistic” method of conservatives, whether of the fundamentalist or the neo-orthodox variety, is inadequate in that it ignores the questions and concerns (the “situation”) of humans who are to receive the message. By assuming that the Word of God itself creates the possibility for its acceptance,<sup>33</sup> this approach fails to realize that humans cannot receive answers to questions they have never asked.<sup>34</sup> Tillich found the liberal “naturalistic” or “humanistic” method, which attempts to derive theological answers from the natural human state, equally suspect, in that it overlooks the estrangement of human existence and the fact that revelation (which contains the answers) is something spoken *to* humans, not *by* them to themselves.<sup>35</sup>

As an alternative, Tillich proposed his well-known method of correlation, which, in his words, “explains the contents of the Christian faith through existential questions and theological answers in mutual interdependence.”<sup>36</sup> Because the questions are raised by philosophy through careful examination of human existence, the theologian must first function as a philosopher. Then in a second step, the theologian draws on the symbols of divine revelation to formulate answers to the questions implied in human existence, which questions philosophy can discover but not answer. The theologian’s task is to interpret the answers of revelation so that they remain faithful to the original Christian message while being relevant to the questions asked by secular people.

Already during his lifetime, Tillich’s method of correlation was met with mixed reviews. Critics chided him for giving autonomous philosophy too much independence from, and authority over revelation. More specifically, they wondered how the philosophical discipline, which is disrupted by the tensions inherent in finite reason, can be trusted to formulate the right questions in the right manner. Critics worried that the substance and form of the questions set forth by a philosophy that had not been fully “converted” to the Christian faith would lead to a distortion of the Christian “answers.”<sup>37</sup>

More recently the whole correlationist approach has come under fire for its inability to take seriously the emphasis of contemporary cultural anthropology in the specificity and plurality of cultures. Rather than searching for the characteristics of some universal culture-in-general, postmodern anthropologists are interested in particular cultures. This development in anthropology would seem to disallow the attempt to engage in a method of correlation that formulates human universals as the context into which theological constructions are subsequently fitted. Instead, contemporary cultural anthropology encourages theologians to focus on the particular and to see theology as a part of a concrete, specific, communally shaped way of life.<sup>38</sup>

This appraisal suggests that the chief difficulty with any method of correlation is its inherent foundationalism. The correlating enterprise assumes some discoverable universal human reality—some structure of human existence or some essential human characteristic—upon which the theological edifice can be constructed. In a day when the foundationalist project has become highly suspect, theologians do well to be wary of any attempt to correlate Christian faith with supposed human universals.

### CONTEXTUALIZATION

The second widely held proposal as to how to craft a culturally relevant theology in the wake of liberal-conservative debate has its genesis not in theology itself but in missiology, more particularly in the missiological question of “gospel and culture.” In response to the changing global situation of the church and developments in the missionary movement, missiologists have called for the inculturation or, more preferably, the contextualization<sup>39</sup> of the gospel. A reoccurring theme among missiologists is the importance of engaging in the inculturation process with a view toward culture, rather than from a perspective that assumes that the gospel (which in the end is merely a particular understanding of the gospel) is a transcultural given.

Arguably the most seminal statement of the contextualization program is that articulated by Robert Schreiter.<sup>40</sup> Schreiter rejects the model of contextualization that pictures the process as merely that of the gospel encountering culture. According to this model, the gospel seeks to “purify” the culture by affirming what is good and true in it, while challenging and correcting what it deems evil or sinful. This approach assumes that although the gospel can become inculturated in any context, it in fact transcends every culture. While not denying “the transcending character of the gospel or the power of faith to criticize and transform culture,”<sup>41</sup> Schreiter nevertheless questions whether the model of the gospel encountering culture can indeed bring about true contextualization. In his estimation, such an approach harbors a misunderstanding as to how intercultural communication takes place, for it “assumes that a message communicated by someone from one culture will be received and understood by someone in another culture precisely in the way that its sender intended.”<sup>42</sup> Schreiter, in contrast, is convinced that “the gospel never enters a culture in pure form” but “is always already inculturated—embedded in the culture of the evangelizer,” so that the “already inculturated faith” will naturally “emphasize some features of the message and necessarily de-emphasize others.”<sup>43</sup> For this reason, Schreiter advocates looking to the dynamics of culture as the starting point. Genuine inculturation, he declares, requires that we

begin with the culture to be evangelized, and imagine a more dialectical approach to the relation between gospel and culture in which the presentation of the gospel is gradually disengaged from its previous cultural embeddedness and is allowed to take on new forms consonant with the new cultural setting.<sup>44</sup>

Perhaps more influential in evangelical Protestant circles has been the approach to contextualization developed by Charles Kraft. Kraft begins with the anthropological principle that meanings can be conveyed to humans only through cultural forms or symbols. Humans, in turn, develop and perpetuate cultural forms within a cultural system, because these forms serve as conveyers of meaning from and to those who use them. According to Kraft, the forms are essentially neutral, in contrast to the “non-neutral, subjective use that human beings make of their cultural patterns.”<sup>45</sup> This distinction provides Kraft with the basis for contextualization, in that it allows him to conclude that Christian meanings can be communicated through human cultural forms. Hence, he asserts that “relative cultural forms” are able to serve as the vehicles for expressing “absolute supracultural meanings,” for

the divine message, "while appropriately expressed in terms of those forms, transcends both the forms themselves and the meanings previously attached to those forms."<sup>46</sup>

The missiologists' call for contextualization has sounded a resounding chord among theologians across the theological spectrum.<sup>47</sup> Evangelicals have been especially interested in this approach,<sup>48</sup> welcoming it as a way of overcoming the ahistorical nature of the older conservative theologies that by focusing on the transcultural nature of doctrinal construction fail to take seriously the social context of the theological task and the historicity of all theological reflection.<sup>49</sup> "Mainline" theologians, in contrast, have tended to pursue the contextualization of theology through the pattern of correlation articulated so well by Tillich but which has its roots in liberalism,<sup>50</sup> while seeking to avoid the cultural accommodation that beset the older theologies of correlation.

Douglas John Hall provides a lucid example. He advocates a theological method that, reminiscent of Tillich, begins squarely with the contemporary cultural context. Hall writes,

contextuality in theology means that the *form* of faith's self-understanding is always determined by the historical configuration in which the community of belief finds itself. It is this world which initiated the questions, the concerns, the frustrations and alternatives, the possibilities and impossibilities by which the *content* of the faith must be shaped and reshaped, and finally confessed.<sup>51</sup>

At the same time, Hall cautions against acquiescing to dominant cultural values. Appealing to the example of the biblical prophets, he calls for a theology that is "inherently suspicious of dominant values and trends," is characterized by "neither a priori approval nor a priori disapproval of society," and seeks engagement or dialogue with society.<sup>52</sup> Thereby, Hall echoes the fear that the tendency toward radical cultural accommodation which so readily derails the program of correlation threatens to undermine efforts toward contextualization as well.

Of equal importance is another criticism Hall voices. He worries that taking seriously the contextual dimension will lead theology to become narrowly focused upon its own social setting. In an insightful statement, he explains what this unwholesome process might look like:

Wishing to be witnesses to the Eternal within its own time and place, the disciple community may find itself the captive of currents and ever-changing trends within its host society. Because it seeks to respond concretely to these currents and trends, it may lose sight of long-range questions to which its greater tradition tried to speak. A tendency to permit the issues of the historical moment to determine its witness may emerge. Then the theological community ceases to recognize, not only that these issues may be transient, but that matters of greater magnitude may be hidden by the surface concerns with which it has busied itself. Perhaps it will even go so far as to let its context, rather glibly conceptualized, become the touchstone for any kind of theological 'relevance,' so that it retains out of the long tradition only what seems pertinent to the moment, and disposes of the rest as being *passé*.<sup>53</sup>

Hall also fears that the construction of local theologies could fragment the church into “theological provinces which are no longer capable of communicating with one another meaningfully, being so thoroughly identified with the problematic of their separate cultures.” If this were to occur, the church would forfeit its ecumenical character and its potential for “worldwide witness” at the very time in the history of the planet when “both analysis and cure must be *global*.”<sup>54</sup>

#### BEYOND CORRELATION AND CONTEXTUALIZATION

Warnings such as Hall’s are important. Yet they do not pinpoint the most detrimental potential difficulty that besets contextualization. Similar to correlation with which it shares certain common features, contextualization generally functions in a foundationalist manner. Yet the foundationalist character it evidences moves in a direction opposite from what the method of correlation displays. Rather than acknowledging the particularity of every human culture, correlationists are prone to universalize the culture pole and fit theological construction into it. Contextualizers, in contrast, all-too-readily overlook the particularity of every understanding of the Christian message. Despite their heroic attempts to the contrary (and some notable exceptions<sup>55</sup>), contextualizers are tempted to assume a Christian universal, which in turn functions as the foundation for the construction of the theological superstructure, even though its architects articulate this superstructure in the language of the culture to whom they are seeking to speak. This is especially evident in Kraft’s model, based as it is in a distinction between the transcultural gospel and its expression through neutral cultural forms. Yet even Schreier moves in this direction, in that his model likewise seems to assume the existence of some pure, Platonic gospel that can boast a “transcending character.”

Despite the debilitating difficulty they share from their foundationalist roots, taken together correlation and contextualization point the way forward. Held in tandem, the two models suggest that theology must employ an interactive<sup>56</sup> process that is both correlative and contextual. In this model, theology emerges through an ongoing conversation involving both “gospel” and “culture.”

While drawing in this manner from both methods, in one vital way the process of theologizing must stand apart from both. Unlike either correlation or contextualization, a theology that takes seriously postmodern understandings of culture can presuppose neither gospel nor culture—much less both gospel and culture—as preexisting, given realities that subsequently enter into conversation. Rather, in the interactive process both gospel (that is, our *understanding* of the gospel) and culture (that is, our *portrayal* of the meaning structure, shared sense of personal identity and socially constructed world in which we see ourselves living and ministering) are dynamic realities that inform and are informed by the conversation itself. By following this approach, theology becomes a truly nonfoundationalist, interactionist program.

#### CULTURE AND SPIRIT

Apart from a few noteworthy exceptions, a near consensus has emerged among theologians that theology must take culture seriously. Colin Gunton states the point succinctly: “we must acknowledge the fact that all theologies belong in a particular context, and



so are, to a degree, limited by the constraints of that context. To that extent, the context is one of the authorities to which the theologian must listen.<sup>57</sup> Yet any suggestion that theology is in some sense indebted to cultural context inevitably raises red flags. Christians in general and Protestants in particular are a “people of the book.” How, then, can theology take culture seriously without imperiling the commitment to Scripture as theology’s norming norm? In other words, does not the call for a culture-sensitive theology undermine the classic Protestant focus on Word and Spirit? The answer to this question lies in pneumatology, more particularly, in the construction of a theological link between culture and Spirit. The connection between culture and Spirit, in turn, lies in an understanding of culture as the Spirit’s voice.

Being a “people of the book,” Christians view the Bible as the location of the Spirit’s primary speaking. Yet the Spirit’s speaking through Scripture is always a contextual speaking; it always comes to its hearers within a specific historical-cultural context. Of course, throughout church history the Spirit’s ongoing provision of guidance has always come, and now continues to come to the community of Christ as a specific people in a specific setting hears the Spirit’s voice speaking in the particularity of its historical-cultural context. Actually, the same principle was operative even during the biblical era, for the canon itself was the product of the faith communities hearing the Spirit speaking within their changing contexts.

The specificity of the Spirit’s speaking means that the conversation with culture and cultural context is crucial to the hermeneutical task. Christians seek to listen to the voice of the Spirit through Scripture, who speaks in the particularity of the historical-cultural context in which they live. Hence, Douglas John Hall, borrowing from an approach informed by correlation, rightly argues that because theology must be in touch with life in the here and now, the questions and concerns it brings to the Scriptures are not necessarily identical with those of the exegetes. Instead, “[w]hat theology needs from its ongoing discourse with the biblical text is determined in large measure by its worldly context,” so that it might “address its world from the perspective of faith in the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, the God whom Jesus addressed as ‘Abba.’”<sup>58</sup>

Yet, the correlation task must be taken a step further. The hermeneutical process occurs in part as contemporary “knowledge”—the discoveries and insights of the various disciplines of human learning—inform theological construction. For example, theories about addictions and addictive behaviour can provide insight into the biblical teaching about sin. Likewise, current discoveries about the process of human identity formation assist in the task of becoming aware of the many dimensions entailed in the new identity the Spirit seeks to create in believers through their union with Christ. Theologians can draw from the so-called “secular” sciences, because ultimately no discipline is in fact purely secular. More important, because God is the ground of truth, as Wolfhart Pannenberg so persistently argues, all truth ultimately comes together in God. As theological construction incorporates into its purview all human knowledge, it demonstrates the unity of truth in God.<sup>59</sup>

These considerations, however, have not yet led to the heart of the purely theological—or more particularly pneumatological—basis for hearing the Spirit’s voice in culture. Much of Western theology has focused on the church as the *sole* repository of all truth and the *only* location in which the Holy Spirit is operative. The biblical writers, however, display a much wider understanding of the Spirit’s presence, a presence connected to the

Spirit's role as the life-giver. Indeed, the pneumatology of the biblical faith communities arose out of the connection of "spirit" with "breath" and consequently with "life." The ancient Hebrew writers speak of the Spirit as the divine power creating (Gen. 1:2; 2:7) and sustaining life (Ps. 104:29-30; Isa. 32:15; cf. Job 27:3; 34:14-15), and hence causing creaturely life to flourish.

Because the life-giving Creator Spirit is present wherever life flourishes, the Spirit's voice can conceivably resound through many media, including the media of human culture. Because Spirit-induced human flourishing evokes cultural expression, Christians can anticipate finding in such expressions traces of the Creator Spirit's presence. Consequently, they should listen intently for the voice of the Spirit—who is present in all life—bubbling to the surface through the artifacts and symbols humans construct.

A cautionary note is in order here, however. Whatever speaking that occurs through other media does not come as a speaking against the text. To pit the Spirit's voice in culture against the Spirit speaking through Scripture would be to fall prey to the foundationalist trap. It would require the elevation of some dimension of contemporary thought or experience to the position of being a human universal that forms the criterion for determining what in the Bible is or is not acceptable. Darrell Jodock pinpoints the difficulty:

The problem here is not that one's world view or experience influences one's reading of the text, because that is inescapable. The problem is instead that the text is made to conform to the world view or codified experience and thereby loses its integrity and its ability to challenge and confront our present priorities, including even our most noble aspirations.<sup>60</sup>

For this reason, while being ready to acknowledge the Spirit's voice wherever it may be found, Christian theologians must continue to uphold the primacy of the text. Even though no one can hear the Spirit speaking through the text except by listening within a particular historical-cultural context, hearing the Spirit in the text provides the only sure canon for hearing the Spirit in culture, because the Spirit's speaking everywhere and anywhere is always in concert with this primary speaking through the text. In this sense, culture and text do not comprise two different moments of communication; they are but one speaking. And consequently today's hearers do not engage in two different "listening," but one. They listen for the voice of the Spirit who speaks the Word through the word within the particularity of the hearers' context, and who thereby can speak in all things.

#### **THE COMMUNITY OF CHRIST AS A CULTURE**

The discussion of the relationship of theology to culture leads naturally to the issue of the connection between Christian theology and one particular culture—the Christian community. And central to this issue is that question as to whether, or in what sense, it is appropriate to use the language of culture to refer to the Church.

#### **THE CHURCH AS A CULTURE**

Although the point ought not to be stretched too far, several considerations suggest that the church is a distinctive social group with its own particular culture. According to

contemporary sociologists, a group consists of two or more people who are related to or oriented toward each other, who share “unit awareness” (i.e., the persons consider themselves a distinct entity), between whom there is interaction or communication in the form of observable behavior, which takes on significance in relation to symbolic objects that carry meaning within the social setting.<sup>61</sup> Measured according to this criterion, the church in both its universal and local expressions is a group. Further, as a community or society, the church seeks to perpetuate itself institutionally as well as propagate a particular vision of meaning-making and world-construction.<sup>62</sup>

More importantly, however, the “unit awareness” that participants in the church share is theological and ethical in scope. Hence, the church is made up of a people who share, albeit in varying degrees, a particular set of values, beliefs and loyalties, all of which arise out of a fundamental commitment to the God revealed in Christ. Consequently, the church forms a people committed—at least in principle—to order all their relationships according to these beliefs and values, and to do so in the light of a pattern they find embodied in the biblical narrative of God acting in, and being in relationship with, creation. Although they may disagree on the practicalities connected to the outworking of this pattern, Christians are nevertheless united by this shared concern.

As this particular group the church forms a particular culture, for participants share a set of symbols that serve as both building-blocks and conveyers of meaning. These symbols cover the range indicative of all cultures: a particular language (such as words like *sin* and *grace*), as well as specific images (e.g., the crucifixion and the empty tomb), material things (e.g., the chalice) and rituals (especially baptism and the Lord’s supper). While they share many symbols in common, Christians do not necessarily agree about the meanings these symbols are to convey. On the contrary, meaning-making is an ongoing task in the church, one that involves lively conversation, intense discussion and often even heated debate among participants.

Finally, the church is a social group in that participants share a common sense of mission. Although the nature of this mission is likewise a topic of debate, perhaps nearly all Christians would agree that their common mandate includes worship, edification and outreach, even as they differ on the definition and outworking of the three.

While united by a sense of mission, Christians are not called to be a group that exists over against the rest of humankind. In fact, they are not called to be anything but truly human. Consequently, in engaging in the cultural task of meaning-making, throughout its history the church has readily appropriated elements from the social contexts—the cultures—in which it has found itself. In this manner, Christians become co-participants with people around them in an ongoing conversation about what it means to be human, and this conversation occurs within a specific cultural context. What makes Christians as a group unique—that is, what makes the Christian fellowship uniquely “Christian”—is the participants’ desire to engage in the cultural process of meaning-making from a particular vantage point, namely, that of viewing all things in connection to the God of the Bible who they believe is revealed supremely in Jesus Christ. This, in turn, marks the connection between the Christian communal culture and the theological enterprise.

### THEOLOGY AS A CULTURAL PRACTICE

Karl Barth begins his monumental *Church Dogmatics* by declaring, "theology is a function of the Church."<sup>63</sup> Insofar as the church is a social group, Barth's statement might be altered to read, "theology, as a function of the church, is linked to Christian cultural practice." The developments in cultural anthropology outlined in these pages warn against understanding *theology* in this context as primarily constituting the "high culture" of the church.<sup>64</sup> Rather, theology is linked to the meaning-making activity of the people who comprise the community of Christ. Hence, theology is related to the various Christian symbols and activities in their function as purveyors—as building-blocks and conveyers—of what we might call "Christian cultural meaning."

To this end, theology engages with church practices or, more specifically, with that dimension of church practices which transforms them from being mere disjointed physical acts into socially meaningful patterns. In fact, at their core all Christian activities are theological. All such practices are linked to, informed by, or serve as expressions of some underlying theological belief or core value. Theology makes explicit the connection Christian practices have to their underlying meaning and to the particular Christian symbols or carriers of meaning to which they are related.

This kind of reflection on the practices of the community belongs to what is often called the "critical task" of theology. Hans Frei aptly describes this aspect of the theological enterprise as "the Christian community's second-order appraisal of its own language and actions under a norm or norms internal to the community."<sup>65</sup> Such critical reflection on the practices of the community includes the attempt to bring to light the meaning structures which inform them. It involves as well, however, evaluating individual practices on the basis of the extent to which they reflect sound Christian teaching.<sup>66</sup> Of course, in this process the theologian will be influenced by her own conclusions as to the meanings that ought to motivate and come to expression in Christian practices in general and the specific practice under scrutiny in particular.

There is another, more intimate manner in which theology is connected to the Christian community viewed as a culture. Not only do theologians reflect on the practices of the fellowship, they also seek to determine and express Christian communal beliefs and values as well as the meaning of Christian symbols in a more direct manner. That is, the theological enterprise entails not only a critical, but also a constructive task. In its constructive dimension, theology is directly a cultural practice of the church. As Kathryn Tanner states succinctly, "theology... is a material social practice that specializes in meaning production."<sup>67</sup> Connected as it is with this particular social group, such theological construction has as its goal the setting forth of a particular understanding of the particular "web of significance," "matrix of meaning" or "mosaic of beliefs" that lies at the heart of the community of Christ.

One final caution remains to be voiced. Postmodern cultural anthropology suggests that any understanding of theology's constructive task as a cultural practice must avoid a foundationalist approach that starts with some complete whole as a given reality which the theologian in turn simply explicates or upon which she erects the theological knowledge-edifice. Rather, theological construction always involves and emerges out of the process of give and take, as participants in the community converse together about

their shared cultural meanings as connected to the symbols they hold in common as Christians. Only in this manner can theological construction fulfill its true purpose, namely, to serve the church's ongoing, ever-necessary and never-changing calling to listen to the one voice of the Spirit speaking through the biblical text to the contemporary "society" of Christ's disciples within their particular cultural context.

#### NOTES

1. Clement of Alexandria, *The Stromata*, I.5.
2. Tertullian, *The Prescription Against Heretics*, ch. 7. It might be an overstatement to say that Tertullian espoused a radical rejection of classical philosophy and culture *per se*. What he objected to was the heresies that often resulted from the syncretism of pagan philosophy and Christian theology. See Justo L. González, *The Story of Christianity* (San Francisco: Harper, 1984), 1:53-54.
3. For this background, see Michael Warren, *Seeing Through the Media: A Religious View of Communications and Cultural Analysis* (Philadelphia: Trinity Press International, 1997), p. 41.
4. Hence, Cicero writes, "Moreover, to continue the same comparison, just as a field, however good the ground, cannot be productive without cultivation, so the soul cannot be productive without teaching. So true is it that the one without the other is ineffective. Now the cultivation of the soul is philosophy; this pulls out vices by the roots and makes souls fit for the receptions of seed, and commits the soul and as we may say, sows in it seeds a kind to bear the richest fruit when fully grown." Cicero, *Tusculan Disputations*, 2.5.13 in *Cicero in Twenty-eight Volumes*, trans. J. E. King, revised edition (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1971), 18:159.
5. See, for example, John W. Bennett and Melvin M. Tumin, *Social Life* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1948), pp. 208-9.
6. This is evident, for example in Paul G. Hiebert, *Cultural Anthropology*, second edition (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1983), p. 30.
7. Roy G. D'Andrade, *The Development of Cognitive Anthropology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), p. 250.
8. Anthony P. Cohen, *Self Consciousness: An Alternative Anthropology of Identity* (London: Routledge, 1994), pp. 118-19.
9. *Ibid.*, pp. 118-19.
10. Alain Touraine, *Return of the Actor*, trans. Myrna Godzich (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988), pp. 8, 26-27, 54-55.
11. Cohen, *Self Consciousness*, p. 96.
12. Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), p. 45.
13. Ulf Hannerz, *Cultural Complexity: Studies in the Social Organization of Meaning* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1992), pp. 3-4.
14. Peter L. Berger, *The Sacred Canopy: Elements of a Sociological Theory of Religion*, Anchor Books edition (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1969), pp. 3-13.
15. See also, Hiebert, *Cultural Anthropology*, pp. 28-29.
16. See, for example, David Morgan, *Visual Piety: A History and Theory of Popular Images* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), p. 7.
17. Claudia Strauss and Naomi Quinn, *A Cognitive Theory of Cultural Meaning* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), pp. 6-7.
18. Strauss and Quinn, *Cognitive Theory*, p. 48.
19. *Ibid.*, p. 49.
20. Morgan, *Visual Piety*, p. 9.
21. *Ibid.*, pp. 204-5.
22. Hiebert, *Cultural Anthropology*, pp. 118-19.

23. Bernard Eugene Meland, *Faith and Culture* (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 1953), p. 82.
24. Paul Tillich, *Theology of Culture*, ed. Robert C. Kimball (New York: Oxford, 1959), pp. 42-43.
25. Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann, "Sociology of Religion and Sociology of Knowledge," *Sociology and Social Research* 47 (1963): 422.
26. Berger, *Sacred Canopy*, pp. 32-36.
27. Morgan, *Visual Piety*, p. 205.
28. Tom Beaudoin, *Virtual Faith: The Irreverent Spiritual Quest of Generation X* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1998), p. xiv.
29. Beaudoin, *Virtual Faith*, p. 22.
30. Claude Welch, *Protestant Thought in the Nineteenth Century, Volume I, 1799-1870* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1972), p. 142.
31. Hence, Lewis and Demarest alert the reader of their systematic theology that "the study of each basic Christian doctrine begins with a problem of permanent, transcultural significance." Gordon R. Lewis and Bruce A. Demarest, *Integrative Theology*, three volumes (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1987), 1:9. At the same time, Lewis and Demarest favor contextualization in some sense of the term. They assert that in addition to being faithful to revealed truth, theology must also be "clear and significant for the present generation of Christians and the unreached people we serve." *Integrative Theology*, 1:38.
32. Following in the footsteps of the nineteenth century conservative theologian Charles Hodge, Wayne Grudem does not include a section on culture in his systematic theology. Nor does the term appear in the index to the volume. See, Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1994).
33. Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, three volumes (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1951), 1:64-65.
34. *Ibid.*, 1:65.
35. *Ibid.*, 1:65.
36. *Ibid.*, 1:60.
37. George F. Thomas, "The Method and Structure of Tillich's Theology" in Charles W. Kegley, ed., *The Theology of Paul Tillich* (New York, NY: The Pilgrim Press, 1982), pp. 137-38.
38. For this critique and proposal, see Kathryn Tanner, *Theories of Culture: A New Agenda for Theology* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1997), pp. 66-67.
39. For the preference of this term, see Stephen B. Bevans, *Models of Contextual Theology* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1992), p. 22.
40. See, for example, Robert Schreiter, "Inculturation of Faith or Identification with Culture?" in *Christianity and Cultures: A Mutual Enrichment*, ed. Norbert Greinacher and Norbert Mette (London: SCM, 1994).
41. *Ibid.*, p. 16.
42. *Ibid.*
43. *Ibid.*
44. *Ibid.*
45. Charles H. Kraft, *Christianity in Culture: A Study in Dynamic Biblical Theologizing in Cross-Cultural Perspective* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1979), p. 391.
46. *Ibid.*, p. 99.
47. For a helpful summary of the major approaches to contextualization prevalent today, see Bevans, *Models of Contextual Theology*.
48. See, for example, John Jefferson Davis, *Foundations of Evangelical Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1984), pp. 60-72.
49. For an example, see Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology* three volumes (Grand Rapids,

MI: Baker, 1983), 1:21.

50. See, for example, Gordon Kaufman, *In Face of Mystery* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993), pp. 41-42, 47; David Tracy, *The Analogical Imagination: Christian Theology and the Culture of Pluralism* (New York: Crossroad Publishing Company, 1981), p. 405.

51. Douglas John Hall, *Thinking the Faith: Christian Theology in a North American Context* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1991), p. 84.

52. *Ibid.*, pp. 114-15.

53. *Ibid.*, pp. 111-12.

54. *Ibid.*, p. 112.

55. These exceptions include those who engage in what Bevans calls "the synthetic model." See Bevans, *Models of Contextual Theology*, pp. 81-96.

56. For this descriptor we are indebted to William Dyrness, *Learning about Theology from the Third World* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1989), p. 29.

57. Colin Gunton, "Using and Being Used: Scripture and Systematic Theology," *Theology Today* 47/3 (October 1990): 253.

58. Hall, *Thinking the Faith*, p. 263.

59. Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology*, trans. Geoffrey Bromiley, three volumes (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1990), 1:59-60.

60. Darrell Jodock, "The Reciprocity Between Scripture and Theology: The Role of Scripture in Contemporary Theological Reflection," *Interpretation* 44/4 (October 1990): 377.

61. H. F. Taylor, *Balance in Small Groups* (New York: Van Nostrand Reinhold Co., 1970), pp. 1-2.

62. Berger, *Sacred Canopy*, p. 46.

63. Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, I/1, trans. G.W. Bromiley (Edinburgh: T.&T. Clark, 1975), p. 3.

64. Tanner, *Theories of Culture*, p. 70.

65. Hans W. Frei, *Types of Modern Theology*, ed. George Hunsinger and William C. Placher (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992), p. 2.

66. Ronald Thiemann, *Revelation and Theology: The Gospel as Narrated Promise* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1985), p. 75.

67. Tanner, *Theories of Culture*, p. 72.

