Public Theology in Cultural Engagement

Editor
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on a theoretical level. It is followed by a series of papers discussing the issue through the lens of particular biblical, theological, or historical data: Holmes again on the Torah; Colin Greene on Christology; Robert Jenson on election; and Colin Gunton on the Reformers. In the second part of the book, the turn is from the theoretical issue to practical examples: Greene again on the concept of religion; Luke Bretherton on drug culture and nationalism, and Brian Horne on art.

A theological account of culture is a pressing need at present: not only are cultural realities changing with great rapidity, and fragmenting, in the Western world; but the postmodern condition seeks to understand all realities in cultural terms. Just as during the Enlightenment, Christian theology was marginalised by an account of reality that assumed explanations based on the natural sciences were adequate to all things, so today it seems as if a similar situation may be arising, but now one based on social and cultural sciences.

There is a need, then, for theological engagement with cultural realities and, to work effectively, this must be public: able to take its place in the ‘marketplace of ideas’, because it is offering a powerful and compelling account of the nature of that ‘marketplace’ and all other cultural realities. As Karl Barth argued, just because theology necessarily talks about human action, no theological construction is complete until it issues in imperative address, and so a theology of culture cannot stop at analysis, but must move on to engagement and to active transformation. We thus began this project with the intention that the theological analyses of cultural realities that the project produced would involve judgements, and call for things to be different. Our intended outcome was missiological. That strand, too, is visible in the papers in this volume.

As editor, I am grateful to Bible Society for their initial sponsorship of, and continued interest in, this project; to David Spriggs for writing the foreword, and to the contributors for their patience in what has been a convoluted and protracted road to publication. I hope this final product is regarded by all as worth the work and the wait.

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Can Theology Engage with Culture?

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Introduction

At least a part of the reason for considering ‘theology of culture’ is an intuition that the cultural sciences – sociology, anthropology, cultural studies and so on – are becoming increasingly central to intellectual debate. An analogy might be drawn with the rise of the natural sciences in the seventeenth century; this was the growth area, where serious and compelling intellectual advances were being made; any work which did not engage with it was marginalised and regarded as old-fashioned, willfully obscure or simply irrelevant.

A similar picture is increasingly true of academic discourse today; the postmodern turn that theorises and deconstructs all claims to knowledge, exposing sociological or hegemonic controls behind what were once considered straightforwardly empirical developments, is reaching the stage where it is becoming difficult for anyone to be taken seriously in the general academy without at least a nod in this direction. This tendency has reached as far as those bastions of naive empiricism, the natural sciences: even in popular level discourse, as perhaps the magazine New Scientist, discussions of how not just the direction, but also the results, of scientific research have been culturally driven are common.

Certain forms of theology have been at the forefront of this move: the rise of local theologies – liberationist, feminist, black, queer and the various combined versions – has alerted all theologians to the potential power claims implicit in their constructions, and a proper concern with the nature of theological language has sometimes served to intensify the suspicions, as when it is all but claimed that God-talk serves no other purpose than the legitimisation of improper hegemonies.
The project which spawned this book was a part of the Bible Society's campaign to restore the place of Scripture in public discourse, and it is, in part, this suspicion, ironically created and fuelled by theologians and biblical scholars, that makes such a task difficult: if the Bible is seen as an ancient document that has been elevated to protect patriarchal, racist or, in other ways, oppressive structures, there will be no reason for its voice to be heard in public conversations, and indeed, every reason to actively work to silence it.

There is also a style of theology that has been impatient with such moves and robust in its assertion that, without ignoring the philosophical difficulties, still language about God may be taken to accurately refer, as God has been pleased to reveal himself, or commandeer our language, and so make such accurate reference possible. In contrast to the picture outlined above, this approach insists that God speaks in Scripture, and that God speaks truth. And so the Scriptures should have not just a place, but a central place, in public discourse. This is the broad historic orthodoxy of Christian faith, upheld by the creedal confession that 'He has spoken through the prophets', and that all that happened in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ was indeed 'according to the Scriptures'. This is what is witnessed to by the liturgies of our churches, whether greeting the Scripture readings with the communal affirmation 'This is the Word of the Lord' and with heartfelt praise, or standing for the entrance of the Bible at the beginning of a traditional free-church service. To believe so does not remove the problems recognised above, but it does perhaps give a hope that, with sufficient work and prayer, they may be more amenable to solution than at first sight they seemed. This paper proceeds on the basis of such a hope.

If the comparison of the postmodern rise of the cultural sciences with the modern rise of the natural sciences that I hinted at above is at all just however, the espousal of such a position carries a great risk. To ignore or refuse the challenge of the cultural sciences creates the danger of removing oneself from the mainstream of public discourse, of speaking in such a way that only those who already agree will listen, whilst others will simply laugh or mock, not quite believing that anyone can have failed so thoroughly to keep in touch with the modern questions. The term that often describes such a risk in theology is 'sectarian'.

Now, let me immediately say two things about this risk. The first is that to suggest that a position be abandoned solely because it carries a risk of being 'out of touch' is simply a failure of logic. If there ever was a period when most people were convinced that the earth was flat, that did not stop it from being round. The argument, if I may dignify
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to so many – women, non-Europeans and so on – and, on the other hand, to engage with the fashionable postmodern practices of deconstruction and to deconstruct them, to insist that we have been graciously given truth, and so that language about God, and in consequence all other language, may yet adequately refer and communicate. The latter task will require epistemological work, based finally, I suspect, on a robust pneumatology; it will also, if it is indeed the social and cultural sciences that are driving the (post)modern critiques, require us to find a robustly theological way of speaking of culture. Hence, finally, the question posed by my title: can theology engage with culture?

The stages of my argument in seeking to give an affirmative answer to this question are as follows: This introduction will end with a brief definition of culture. Then I will suggest that whilst theology can speak meaningfully about most realities on the basis of a doctrine of creation, there are in fact certain clear limits. Third, I will observe that cultural realities have often been located beyond those limits, but suggest that this location is incorrect. This will be the major part of the paper. Finally, I will offer some suggestions as to how theology might engage with culture.

There is one more piece of introductory material that is necessary: a definition of ‘culture’. This is a notoriously difficult task. Nonetheless, we need a working definition, and so let me offer one, not my own, which at least brings out those aspects of the concept which I presently regard as most intellectually interesting, ‘a culture is a particular collection of socially learned ways of living found in human societies.’

The key implication here is that a culture is, to use a good postmodern phrase, a constructed reality. Just as the world we inhabit is composed of physical limits, aspects of its being which are and which we cannot escape, so each of us lives in a context in which there are certain cultural limits, ways in which we relate together and interpret the world that comes to us from without and are non-negotiable. To take a trivial example, the discomfort of my train journey each morning, when I used to work in central London, was partly a result of the physical shape of that city, such that no more trains could run into Waterloo station than presently do, and partly a result of a cultural assumption that 9:00am is the right time to start work in the morning, leading to those trains that arrive at Waterloo just prior to nine carrying several times as many people than trains even thirty minutes later, despite significantly cheaper fares on the later trains.

These cultural givens are humanly constructed, but equally they construct us: the attitudes and assumptions we imbibe from the contexts in which we grow up are a part of who we are: they shape our relationships; determine in large part our attitudes; and so affect our lives in any number of ways. We can work to change cultural givens, but then we can work to change our physical environment as well, and the Scriptures do not encourage us to believe that telling a mountain to throw itself into the sea is any harder than calling a people to repent and believe. We inhabit cultural givens just as fully and just as necessarily as we inhabit the physical universe.

The Limits of Theological Reference

In my early, and (thankfully ...) unpublished, attempts to get at this theme, I began by asserting robustly that Christian theology must claim to be able to speak truthfully about all realities, but I now want to acknowledge that this may not be true, and certainly cannot be asserted as swiftly as once I did. My previous argument had been based on a doctrine of creation, on the assertion that if God created all things ex nihilo, then there was nothing that was not best understood by reference to God. It now seems to me that this argument stopped too early – before the realities described in the third chapter of Genesis, to be precise. Let me be clear what I mean by this; it is certainly the case that the fact and essence of sin can best, indeed only, be described theologically; sin is fundamentally rebellion against God, however described, and so the essence of sin is a theological reality. It may also be the case that the nature and effects of human sinfulness are best described through reference to God, but this is not immediately obvious. The division of sin into various categories, and the accounting for the various ways the world has been affected by sin, and the various human attempts to limit those effects might be considered to be straightforwardly opaque to theological description: those things that God does not will are unlikely to be illuminated by investigation into the nature of God.

A traditional way of talking about the nature of evil that has been influential in Christian history is of relevance here: the description of evil as nothing more than a negation or privation of the good has been used in considering theodicy, precisely to remove evil, and with

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2 Marvin Harris, Theories of Culture in Postmodern Times (London: Altamira Press, 1999), 19.
it human sinfulness, from those things which are properly described as God’s creation. The immediate aim of such a move is to remove responsibility for the existence of sin and evil from the Creator, but, as a side effect, these realities become simply opaque to any properly theological investigation. If, as was robustly asserted by medieval theology in the Latin West, rationality is a part, indeed a key part, of the good ordering of God’s creation, then a consequence of this position is the fundamental absurdity of evil and sin: no rational discourse can identify anything more than the bare fact of the existence of such realities, because they are, in essence, irrational. If this is the case, then theology cannot treat in any interesting way of realities that are essentially sinful. (As an aside, given that we are talking about culture, the magnificence of Dante’s vision of Satan is his ability to imagine what a being stripped of all goods might be like; Milton painted Satan as evil and treacherous, but still enjoying a form, albeit perverted, of such goods as relationship or reason. At the centre of Dante’s Inferno, by contrast, is a figure, three-faced in horrible parody of the Triune Lord, but bereft of any relationship or rationality, and reduced solely to unconsummated hatred and unfulfilled desire. Of all the beings they meet in their travels, here is the only one to whom Virgil and Dante cannot speak: to hear and respond to the address of a fellow-creature is, in some sense, to participate in the goodness of God’s world, and that is forever forfeited by the Evil One.)

Culture as Sinful?

So, I have argued that there is, or at least might be, a real limit to theological reference. If theology is to engage with culture, then we need either to demonstrate that these limits are not, in fact, actual, or to demonstrate that, actual or not, culture nonetheless lies without them. I want to take the latter option, but in doing so I am conscious that there is an argument to be had: most definitions of culture, including the one I have borrowed, refer in some way to human constructions of reality. Somewhere near the heart of a Christian doctrine of creation, however, is the assertion that the world we inhabit is God’s doing and not ours. There is at least a tension here.

If we take seriously the suggestion that the early chapters of Genesis are deliberate rewritings of ancient Near Eastern creation myths, then this point is made all the more strongly. A comparison of the Flood narratives with the Atrahasis myth, for instance, suggests both that the Genesis author(s) knew the earlier story, and that they deliberately adjusted it for reasons of theological polemic. In Atrahasis, humanity is created to resolve a dispute between the senior deities and the junior deities over who should do all the work (on this account Marx was right: history is all about class conflict); the flood comes because the gods have lost control of humanity, and need to rescue the situation; and Atrahasis escapes through his own low cunning and the help of a rebel deity. In contrast, the Genesis authors urge the sheer goodness of God as the reason for creation; the sinfulness of humanity as the reason for the flood; and God’s graciousness and Noah’s righteousness as the reason for his escape—or, better, ‘salvation’. This God never loses control, is never capricious, but is marked by omnipotence and righteousness. All of life is in his hand, and human activity, whether low cunning or devout sacrifice, can only produce results if he so wills. There is little room here for an account of humanly-constructed realities. Such an idea would seem to be the height of pride and rebellion, the sin of Babel.

If we read on in Scripture in the light of this intuition, it might appear as if culture is indeed a wholly bad thing. Salvation from sin will come, after all, only through Abram leaving Ur and going to the wilderness, and even the proto-cultures of the wilderness tribes are to be avoided: Lot’s choice to dwell among the cities of the plain leads only to disaster, and Abraham’s children must return to their own family to find marriage partners. Although they live for four centuries in Egypt, it is always as aliens and strangers, and when God finally gives them the promised land, they must eradicate every trace of the cultures that lived there previously, not even leaving one stone on top of another, before it is pure enough to be the dwelling place of Israel. God’s people have always been aliens and strangers in this world, and any attempt to be otherwise, so often identified with the name of Constantine, will only and inevitably lead to disaster.

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5 ‘The toil of the gods was great/The work was heavy, the distress was much/The Seven great Anunnaki/We were making the Igigi suffer the work.’ Atrahasis, i.2–6 (p. 43 of edition cited). After discussion of the problem, Ea says ‘Let the birth-goddess create offspring/and let man bear the toil of the gods.’ Atrahasis, i.190–1; p. 57).

6 See Atrahasis, vii–viii, pp. 73–85.
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Such a telling of the story is familiar enough to anyone schooled in Anabaptist or Pietistic spiritualities. Somewhere there is a suggestion that the world might be good, as God's creation, but no human construction of it ever can be, and the church should exist as a counter-culture, with its own set of cultural principles and practices, utterly separate from the cultures around. To join the church is to leave the surrounding cultures behind as they are simply and straightforwardly sinful and so utterly impervious to theological analysis. Every human culture is no more than the City of Destruction from which any true Christian can and will only flee, even leaving behind wife and children if necessary, unless and until they decide to follow—because, however counter-cultural Bunyan may have been, he knew the value of writing a sequel to a bestseller.

In identifying such an attitude with Pietistic spirituality, I am not intending to suggest that it is in any way intellectually inadequate: it is, indeed, represented even in central theological texts. Consider, for example, Augustine's account of the progress of the earthly city in The City of God. He acknowledges the great variety of human cultures, but considers them all to be no more than varieties of idolatry:

... though there are very many and great nations all over the earth, whose rites and customs, speech, arms, and dress, are distinguished by marked differences, yet there are no more than two kinds of human society, which we may justly call two cities, according to the language of Scripture. The one consists of those who wish to live after the flesh, the other of those who wish to live after the spirit; and when they severally achieve what they wish, they live in peace, each after their kind. (XIV.1)

All human cultures and civilisations may be lumped together as 'the earthly city', which sets up a 'social contract' ('a kind of compromise

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7 Not to deny for a moment that Pilgrim's Progress is a theological text, of course, although it is perhaps not so 'central' theologically as it is in the fields of literature or spirituality.


9 ... cum tota tantaeque gentes per tenarum orbem diueris ritibus moribusque uientes multiplici linguarum armorum usitium sint variatiae distinctae, non tamen amplius quam duo quaedam genera humanae societatis existerent, quas ciuitates duas secundum scripturas nostras merito appellare possemus. Vna quisque est hominum secundum carnem, altera secundum spiritum uiuere in sui culuisq generis pace uolontium et, cum id quod expetunt adsequuntur, in sui adhuc genera pac pacificationem.

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10 'Ita etiam terrena ciuitas, quae non uiiuit ex fide, terrenam pacem appetit in coequo defigit imperandique concordiam ciuitum, ut sit eis de rebus ad mortalem uiam pertinentibus humanarum quaesam compositio, voluntatam.'

11 De Gen. ad lit. 7.28, 40.

12 c. Manichees 1.23.

13 Conf. XIII.
nothing that comes after the initial creation is necessary to or proper to the perfection of creation that God brought into being in the beginning. Augustine is so committed to this idea that he posits the creation at the beginning of the rationes seminales, 'seeds' that contain within them what will be, and come to fruition at the appropriate time (just as the whole of humanity, according to Augustine's account of the imputation of Adam's sin, are seminally present in him). All the creatures that will ever exist have always existed, from the beginning, 'invisibly, potentially, causally, as future things which have not been made are made'.

There is no real change in the world, only the actualising of already present potencies; human beings can create nothing, but only bring to fruition, as second causes, that which God has already created and determined will be. In this account, there can be no place for culture, no created openness which permits the creatures genuinely to construct the world, albeit under God's good providence. Bluntly, there is no room. For Augustine, culture is a temporary, worldy remedy to cope with the effects of sin until Christ shall come, and sin and death and human culture shall be no more.

This is not just in Augustine, however. Even what might be the most robust assertion of genuine human construction of reality in recent theological writing, Robert Jenson's account of the eschatological role of the saints, arguably suffers from a similar flaw. Says Jenson,

> When the redeemed are ... themselves a communal agent in the triune life, they will themselves think the movements of matter and energy ... with God as he thinks and just so determines them ... we may enjoy the material universe as [God] does, because we will not merely follow along in the triune music and delight but be improvisers and instigators within it. What the saints will do with continuously generating star clusters and black holes ... will ... be to play with them.\(^{15}\)

Here, in contrast to Augustine, the saints will indeed construct the world – playing billiards with black holes and so on – but notice the condition for this ability: the saints have become 'a communal agent in the triune life', 'enjoy[ing] the material universe as [God] does'. They have not, to be sure, ceased to be human, but, in Jenson's account of God's economy, they have become divine. Human beings, qua human beings, cannot construct the world still – Augustine's assumption remains in place – but, by our gracious incorporation into the divine life, this limitation will be transcended.

**Culture within the Bounds of Creation**

Is there the possibility that there may be a role for human agency in 'the movements of matter and energy' that does not depend on the people in question being 'a communal agent in the triune life'? That is, can we find a way of talking about a real human construction of reality, room for human culture, which is not either an appropriation of, or a participation in, work proper to the Creator? Let me first attempt a theological argument which will open up room for such talk, and so room for a theological engagement with human culture, before returning to the scriptural witness.

As I hinted, there is an erroneous argument implicit in those aspects of Augustine's doctrine of creation that I sketched earlier. The teaching that God did create instantaneously was based on a belief, accurate enough, that God, being omnipotent, could create instantaneously, and a belief that not so to do when he could would be somehow unworthy of God. However, whatever we are to make of the six days of Genesis 1, they surely suggest, as Colin Gunton has argued in connection with precisely this point about Augustine,\(^{16}\) that God, in fact, chose to take his time over creating, and given that God so chose, we cannot suppose that it was unworthy of him. *Contra* Augustine, God's omnipotence, on the biblical account, is also an assertion that he is able to act in apparently limited and weak ways – a fact supremely demonstrated in the incarnation.

At the far end of the patristic development of dogmas relating to the incarnation is the monothelite controversy. I have written elsewhere about the issues and problems here\(^{17}\) suffice to say now that it seems to me that, whatever the conceptual difficulties associated with the orthodox, dyothelite position, it preserves at least one important and useful theologumenon. The monothelite argument turned on the intuitive position that it was only one will that active in the life of Christ, since one person can only have one will. However, the rigours

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14 'Invisibilibet, potentialiter, causaliter, quomodo fiunt futura non facta' *De Gen. ad lit.* VI.6, 10.


17 See my 'Scripture, Christology, Divine Action and Hermeneutics,' in *Christology and Scripture: Interdisciplinary Perspectives* (eds, Lincoln, Andrew T. and Angus Pattison; London: T&T Clark, 2007), 156–70.
of Chalcedonian orthodoxy then came into play: to be truly divine, *homoousios* with the Father, it is necessary that the Jewish man Jesus Christ possessed the divine will, whatever that phrase might mean; to be truly human, *homoousios* with us, it was necessary that the incarnate Son possessed a human will, whatever that might mean. For these two natures to be united ‘without confusion’ and so on, it was necessary that these two divine and human properties were not intermingled, or combined into a *tertium quid*. Therefore, there must be two wills operative in the one person of Christ, the divine will, and a properly human will.

Now, the caveats above were intended to indicate that I have some sympathy with the suggestion that the underlying psychology here was problematic, and that talking about ‘a will’ as something with discrete and actual existence is bordering on the incoherent. But what the dyothelite argument protects, or so it seems to me, is the central place of genuinely human action in the basic divine action, the mission of Jesus Christ. Revisions such as suggesting that two wills were operative, but that they were the will of the Father and the will of the Son, are in danger of conceding this important point – as, incidentally, are certain versions of the radical, Lutheran, form of the *communicatio idiomatum* which allow the human actions of the Jewish man Jesus Christ to be genuinely effective only because his human nature has been granted divine attributes. Hence the Reformed polemic which began with rather scholastic attempts to distinguish between different versions of the *communicatio*, and finally led to strong assertions of the real humanity of Christ in Owen, Edwards and Irving could be read as an attempt to defend the same point.18

If, then, we take seriously this christological tradition, we can, and indeed must, assert that God chooses to work through genuinely human action. Now, I am aware that thus far this argument relies only on the doctrine of the incarnation, and one could evade the claims I am making by first insisting that the incarnation is not central to God’s action, but instead a ‘plan B’ developed to combat the entrance of sin into the world, and then offering an argument similar to Anselm’s to the effect that God could only deal with sin by becoming incarnate. On this reading, God does not choose to work through human action, but rather is forced into so doing by a combination of unfortunate circumstances. There is not room here to decide between these two positions, but I would certainly want to see the humanward orientation of the triune God that is expressed in the incarnation as basic to who God has chosen to be, and so resist this move. I would also want, I think, to align myself with the position of Irenaeus and Duns Scotus, and suggest that even had sin not entered the world, still the Son would have become incarnate, because that happening was always going to be the centre and crown of human history, the final and full revelation of all that it means to be human.

If this is the case, if at the heart of the way God is pleased to be God is his decision to act with, and not without, genuinely human action, then we may assume and assert that this is true of the work of creation as well, and so claim that there is indeed theological room for human constructions of the world. Culture is not something simply bad, and theology may engage with it.

A second necessary move can be made fairly quickly. Human action takes time, and so there must be time within God’s project of creation for culture to happen. This brings me back to Gunton’s point against Augustine, which I mentioned earlier: the six days of Genesis imply that God does, in fact, take time over his creation. God could have made the world in a fully-ordered state, but he did not have to, and the scriptural witness that he called Adam to name the animals and till the soil is sufficient evidence that in fact he did not. In God’s good ordering of creation, there is space left for human construction of the world. Just so, history can be a good thing, under God’s good providence. The perfection that God has in mind for creation can be a perfection that is to be reached, again under God’s providence, by human action, through cultural activities such as tending the garden, subduing the earth or naming the creatures.

Indeed, I think we need to go further: if we take seriously the pneumatological aspects of the doctrine of creation, it is not just that God did not have to act as Augustine thought he should, but he actually could not; there is not just the possibility, but the need for this cultural aspect of creation. The Spirit is both the one who perfects creation, drawing the world forward to its eschatological fulfilment in Christ, and the one who is immanent in creation, who hovers over the face of the waters in the beginning, gives life to the beasts (Ps. 104:29-30) and blows where he wills through the earth. That these two roles are appropriated to the same divine person in the biblical tradition means that the being-moved towards perfection, the drive towards eschatological fulfilment that is a part of the world’s present being will be (in part, at least) an inner drive, a result of this-worldly activity. The

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18 I have discussed this development in my ‘Reformed Varieties of the Communicatio Idiomatum’, in The Person of Christ (eds, Stephen R. Holmes and Murray Rae; London: T&T Clark, 2005).
Spirit does not come from without and seize the world, but acts within creation, giving life to the earth so that it may bring forth plants in Genesis 1, giving breath to the living creatures in Psalm 104 and so on. Again, the basic instance is the life of Jesus Christ. By the Spirit, the Son is made man, and Jesus acts to redeem the world precisely as the one who is filled with, and led by, the Spirit. The church, the eschatological presence and agent in the world, is brought into being by the coming of the Spirit and has life only in the Spirit.

The work of the Spirit, however, is not restricted to the church’s life (as the Scriptures are eager to tell us in their stories of Job, of Ruth, and of the magi who come to worship Jesus as he is born: all of whom are from without the household of faith). If the Spirit’s work is eschatological in every part, then the world’s movement towards its future redemption is not restricted to the life of the church. The groaning of creation, in which the church shares, is twice explicitly linked to the presence of the Spirit in Romans 8. There is a movement within creation, under God’s providence, towards the future state of the world. The creation, although good, is fallen and warped, just as the church is, and so this movement is just as ambiguous as the life of the church is, and stands just as much in need of eschatological transformation. There can be no straightforward celebration of human culture in general nor of a particular human culture, as there was in some forms of nineteenth century theology in Europe.

Nonetheless, the scriptural story starts in a garden and ends in a city, a city built of gold and precious stones, and so built – we must assume – by goldsmiths and jewellers, using their skills, the gifts that the Spirit has given them, to the praise of his glory, as did Bezalel son of Uri and Aholiab son of Ahisamach in building one of the pre-eschatological types of the holy city, the tabernacle in the wilderness. In the city, it seems God will be praised in the varied languages and by the varied nations which are the results of human cultural diversity. In heaven, there is no return to a lost beginning, but a celebration and affirmation of all that has been good and that has happened on the way, and a redemption of much, and perhaps all, that has not been good. We can even notice the central cultural realities one by one: music clearly has its place in heaven, and the heavenly *polis* must, no doubt, have its heavenly politics. The only cultural realities that we can be sure have no place in the city, given that it lacks a temple, and that there we shall ‘know fully, even as we are fully known’, are preaching and theology, which might thus be the only genuinely mundane and this-worldly activities.

### Back to the Bible

What, however, of the biblical data I sketched earlier? If the arguments I have presented are correct, then there must be a better reading that does not suggest such an antipathy to human cultural constructs. Let me try an alternative reading of the Scriptures: we might see in Genesis a weaving of the need for human culture into God’s good purposes in creating. Mankind is created, male and female, and the first benediction and the first command we receive is to ‘fill the earth and subdue it’, to ‘have dominion over all’ (Gen. 1:28); in the second creation narrative, this is amplified: Adam is, from the first, given work to do, tending the garden of Eden (Gen. 2:16). Then he is called to give names to the creatures (Gen. 2:19), which is a decisive action demonstrating both his authority over them and, in part, his share in constructing what they are. Here, in the creation narrative, there is room for a genuine human construction of the world. Finally, there is a need for companionship, and God creates Eve, and so institutes of marriage and, with it, community. All these different events are precursors of human culture, and there is no suggestion of any failure in any of them; in fact, quite the reverse. It is a part of God’s good ordering of creation that aspects of it are humanly constructed, that there is room for culture.

Westermann, in his reading of Genesis 1–11, sees human achievement as one of the central themes in these chapters, and finds both P and J affirming human culture, which he says is ‘a section of the primeval story to which exegesis has scarcely given any attention or significance’. P, in Westermann’s estimation, affirms human civilization in the blessing and commission given to humanity in their creation in 1:26, 28. Although he has no further interest in the details, nonetheless, ‘everything else has its basis and legitimation there’. J, by contrast, mentions specific human achievements, and even gives a narrative account in Genesis 11. Although there is careful interweaving of human

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20 So Wenham, *Genesis*, 68.


cultural advances with stories of crime and punishment here and in Genesis 4, in Westermann’s estimation this is not a condemnation of culture so much as a warning that culture, although good, may turn out to be dangerous. Finally, the redactor allows these sections to stand as they are, indicating his acceptance of these accounts of the goodness of culture.

If this reading is correct, and it seems to me that it is, the rest of the narrative may be read differently. Before Cain builds a city, he and his brother start a farm, and there is no suggestion that there is anything inappropriate about this cultural activity. In the account of Cain’s descendants (Gen. 4:17–24), various cultural advances are mentioned (nomadic herding, music and metal-working), and these are not to be lamented. Calvin’s reading of them, supported by Westermann, as examples of God’s common providence, giving good things even when undeserved, is surely right,23 and, given this, the same should be said of Cain’s city.

Again, Abraham’s descendants are to seek their own family because the family bears the promise, not because there is anything intrinsically evil about the surrounding cultures, as Abraham’s peaceful interactions on several occasions demonstrate. God’s people come out of Egypt, but with, not without, the wealth of the Egyptians, in the form of jewellery and clothes, which is to say cultural artefacts, not raw materials. Indeed, the basic instance of idolatry during the exodus is not a result of valuing these reminders of a foreign culture, but it might instead be seen as a result of not valuing them enough: the failure comes when they are treated as raw materials, melted down and formed into a golden calf. The failures of the nations the Israelites are to drive out from the promised land are spelt out and are ethical and avoidable, not necessary aspects of any human culture: trivially, it is possible for people to live together without sacrificing their children.

As the history goes on, the nation experiments with living as a theocracy, living without a culture, a construction of reality, and the experiment is a disaster. God’s good providence raises up leaders from time to time to prevent the utter eradication of his people, but for long years there is anarchy, and the only epitaph fitting is ‘In those days Israel had no king, and everyone did as he saw fit.’ God brings salvation from a foreign culture: Ruth the Moabite comes to live in the land, and her great-grandson David becomes Israel’s second and greatest king. His reign and that of his son Solomon are seen as a golden

23 Westermann, Genesis in loc.

age by the biblical writers, precisely because there was a flowering of culture, a culture that was not distinct from the nations around, but was clearly within the same traditions – most notably traditions of wisdom, characteristically transmitted proverbially. This wisdom tradition was the locally popular way of constructing reality, and in the Old Testament account, the greatest days of God’s people were when they led the world in it.

This, it seems to me, is a reasonable reading of the Old Testament Scriptures. I think the key difference between it and the earlier reading I presented lies in the evaluation of human culture: in the first reading, culture is in itself something wrong and evil, in the second it can be, and often is, perverted and corrupted, but is not necessarily so. It seems to me that the New Testament demands that we assume the latter point.

Firstly, because, as I have indicated, it appears that the eschatological community will be with, and not without, human culture, so the biblical witness implies the existence of forms of culture that are in no way sinful. Secondly, because the Gospel narratives assert that Jesus was culturally located, and that in ways that were totally unnecessary to his mission – indicating surely that there can be nothing inherently sinful about human cultural constructions. Culture cannot, on this evidence, be in itself something bad.

How Theology Might Engage Culture

In closing, I want to suggest quickly some ways in which we might, and should, engage culture theologically. The first point to be made is that some cultural realities will be largely sinful, and so the arguments I sketched at the beginning will hold in some measure, and certain things will verge on the irrational and be more-or-less opaque to theological analysis. The various refined forms of idolatry that human cultures have developed, for example, can only be named as idolatries – to attempt to categorise or analyse them is beyond the scope of what theology can hope to do.

Second, it might seem dangerous to talk the way I have been doing, to ascribe human cultural achievement to providence and the leading of the Spirit. Eusebius of Caesarea was surely just as wrong in his uncritical celebration of human history in praise of Constantine, as Augustine was in his denial of any proper good in human history. In this century, Barth’s reaction to those who saw the work of God in secular history makes the point: we may read nothing of God’s will
into wars and rumours of wars. They must come to pass, together with signs in the heavens above and on the earth below – but only the voice of the Son of Man has any meaning for theology, or the church which it serves.

There is an important distinction to be made here: to insist that we cannot trace the workings of providence in human history is not to deny their presence. Augustine was surely right to assert both that God works all things for good in his providential ordering of the world, and that this ordering is nonetheless opaque to us. As he says:

...we must ascribe to the true God alone the power to grant kingdoms and empires. He it is who gives happiness in the kingdom of heaven only to the good, but grants earthly kingdoms both to the good and to the evil, in accordance with his pleasure, which can never be unjust ... to examine the secrets of men's hearts and to decide with clear judgement on the varying merits of human kingdoms – this would be a heavy task for us men, a task indeed far beyond our human powers ... It is clear that God, the one true God, rules and guides these events according to his pleasure. If God's reasons are inscrutable, does that mean they are unjust?24

We may, without difficulty, assert the possibility of goodness within human culture, whilst, in the face of the reality of falleness, refusing to identify any particular cultural instantiation – even the music of Mozart – as simply godly.

Third, part of theology's task in engaging with culture will thus be identifying limits beyond which human constructions are improper. There are many ways of building a city, and many things to be done in the building of it: some of each tend towards Jerusalem and others towards Babylon (like what goes on at Waterloo station in London around 8.30 every morning). Theological engagement with culture will involve a simple denial of cultural relativism: the cultural forms we develop are not merely different possible options with nothing to choose between them – trivially, it is better for people to live together without sacrificing their children. Further, it seems to me that these theological limits should not be confined to the moral sphere, although that is important; I suspect that a proper theology of creation has something to say about aesthetics, for example, as well, and will offer some sort of criteria for judging the quality of a morally neutral abstract sculpture, for example.

Finally, if cultural realities are the result of genuine human construction of the world, there must be a contingency about them. There is no single perfection of human culture – in the heavenly city, many tongues, many tribes and many nations will share in the worship – and so there is an openness to ways in which we may chose to construct the world. This is an extension, rather than a denial, of the previous point, in that some choices are, I think, simply ethically or aesthetically neutral – the choice to write music in an octatonic or pentatonic system, for instance. I see a theological account of human culture as finally resulting in a mapping of spaces, rather than a pinpointing of perfection: sport, for example, might be seen as a good thing, but there may well be no theological reason to prefer cricket to baseball, although it pains me to express such an opinion. Theology delineates a space, but no more. This, of course, chimes well with the proper contingency that there is within the doctrine of creation as a result of the assertion of creation out of nothing, but there is no time for a full development of that particular argument.

By way of conclusion

I have sought to argue that theology can, without ceasing to be true to its proper calling, engage with culture, and to suggest some ways in which this might happen. Let me end where I began: the postmodern turn in recent Western cultures has made cultural analysis central to almost all forms of public discourse; to not be engaging with culture is to be cut off from most intellectually serious people in the West. Tertullian's rhetorical demand that theology and philosophy were different disciplines was a timely warning, but the civilisations of the ancient Mediterranean were won for Christ by theology, whilst remaining true to itself, engaging with philosophy. It seems to me that a part of the reason the civilisations of the North Atlantic were lost was a failure of theology to engage properly with natural science; and if they are to be won again then theology must engage with culture. In doing this, it must remain true to its own calling, yes, and not be seduced by the deconstructors; what has Paris to do with Jerusalem, after all? But there must be a genuinely theological engagement. Theologically, this is possible; missiologically, it is urgent. I hope the publication of these papers, like the conversations they were a part of, will be a contribution to the task.