Chapter 1

Theology and the Neutrality of Culture

H. Richard Niebuhr, perhaps the most influential theological commentator on culture of the latter half of the twentieth century, considered the theological engagement of culture to be "the enduring problem."[1] One way to read David Bosch's magnum opus *Transforming Mission* for example is as an account of how "in each historical epoch of the past two millennia the missionary idea has been profoundly influenced by the overall context in which Christians lived and worked."[2] This notion of missionary idea can be described as the attempt to ensure that Christians "with creative but responsible freedom, prolong the logic of the ministry of Jesus and the early church in an imaginative and creative way to our own time and context."[3] Each of the six epochs he examines work in very different ways to resolve the culture problem, birthing in each case theological paradigms that have currency for the duration of the epoch but which then fade in the face of new circumstances (albeit there are usually elements of continuity).

Niebuhr notes this quality of perpetual irresolution, considering it a reflection of the "irreconcilable tension" at the heart of the relationship between Christ and the world, one perennially confronting humanity as it participates in a strategy it understands only dimly; lieutenants following the orders of a captain in whose mind alone the strategy has final form. Some sense of the difficulties he is attempting to encompass is given by Rudolf Bultmann when he points out the relationship consists of the "paradox of the Christian as an eschatological and historical being . . ." as well as "The paradox of Christ as

1. Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture*, 1–44.
2. Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, 349.
3. Ibid., 181.

the historical Jesus and the ever-present Lord."[4] This nexus of paradoxes is rendered more complex because the role of the church must also be factored in, itself existing paradoxically "as the eschatological entity . . . between the 'no longer' and 'not yet.'"[5] In Bultmann's writings the overarching relationship is therefore examined through several synonymous pairings: faith and history, history and eschatology, theology and cosmology.[6]

While many interesting comparisons could be made between Bultmann and Niebuhr it is the terminological question that is the most striking for the purposes of this discussion. Whereas Bultmann conducts his analysis through overtly theological terms, Niebuhr grants prominence to the relatively new word culture, a word lacking the theological pedigree Bultmann's choices enjoy. Robert Webber, for another example, examines the same relationship Niebuhr is considering but uses "world" (*kosmos*) instead of culture, with all of its rich biblical pedigree. Webber undertakes an exegetical study that discovers two primary biblical meanings for "world."[7] The first is a positive perspective in which creation (and recreation in Christ) is affirmed while the second is a negative one that captures the deleterious effects of the fall throughout creation (spiritual beings included). The term is likewise present throughout Bosch's work where it functions in much the same way.[8] In his analysis the positive element is historically less prevalent, only recently recovered as an emphasis. This implies the historical dominance of the pejorative model.[9]

The question this brief analysis raises is why the word culture is the most appropriate term through which to engage this topic given that it lacks the theological heritage or overt biblical grounding of other terms, such as "world."[10] This is especially relevant given that words embody worlds of meaning, as Raymond Williams argues (for which, refer the next chapter); hence it is worth pausing to carefully consider the implications stemming

4. Bultmann, *History and Eschatology*, 152–55.

5. Bultmann, *Theology II*, 155ff. for the soteriology nexus and p. 203 for the ecclesial statement.

6. History is Bultmann's synonym for culture, hence he describes history as the field of human actions which is distinguishable from nature, refer Bultmann, *History and Eschatology*, 138ff. The theology and cosmology pairing can be found in Bultmann, *Theology II*, 144ff. The faith and history pairing come from the title of his concluding chapter in the book entitled with the other pairing: Bultmann, *History and Eschatology*, see 138ff.

7. Webber, *The Church in the World*, 15–19; Appendix A (ibid., 279–82).

8. Bosch, *Transforming Mission*.

9. Ibid., esp. 376–78, compare use of culture 291–98.

10. The lack of historical heritage is debatable of course. Niebuhr, for example, essentially argues it reaches back and envelops prior terms and hence, by logical extension, it carries forward their respective heritages.

from this seemingly innocuous semantic change. There are of course benefits that accrue, such as the ability to actively engage with external (non-Christian) interlocutors for whom (as will be seen) the term culture is part of normal discourse; as well as for the purposes of internal discussions given that Christians also participate in, because they inhabit, this "normal" discourse. This present chapter is not concerned, however, with elaborating this positive assessment since the prevalence of the term culture in theological discussion already speaks to these constructive possibilities.

In what follows the basic premise is that insufficient attention has been paid to one particular negative implication and to assessing whether this represents an appropriate or unacceptable cost for using the term, or at least for using it as it is currently deployed. It is further argued that it is only through a satisfactory resolution of this issue that the term culture can reasonably be appropriated for theological purposes. The key matter to be placed under the microscope is the reputed neutrality of the concept of culture, a reputation that has led to a widespread, hence general pattern of engagement with the term culture by theologians and missiologists. It is then argued that this general pattern is enacted through three primary modes: explicit, active, and passive deferral.

The "general pattern" refers to a process of deferral whereupon theologians treat the term culture as a neutral construct. In the face of the presumption of neutrality theologians and missiologists defer to the expertise of social scientists as the specialists knowledgeable about culture. As already noted, this inevitably leads to culture becoming a largely unexamined datum inputted into theological projects on the presumption such insertion does not significantly affect their underlying foundations.

This general pattern of deferral is achieved through the three primary modes of engagement noted earlier. The first, active mode, refers to those who select an anthropological or sociological definition of culture after a debate over the respective merits of competing definitions. While rigorous and active, the candidate definitions are nevertheless all selected from the pool of options offered by the social sciences. In the second, direct deferral mode, theologians adopt a definition or definitions drawn directly from the social sciences. In most cases the definition is selected from amongst those offered by socio-cultural anthropologists.[11]

---

11. This brings up a significant delimiter for this study. Some balance needs to be struck between the competing interests of comprehensive coverage and deep engagement in a context of proliferating interest in the concept of culture. In view of all this the remainder of this thesis will focus its attention on cultural anthropology, taking this as a representative discipline of the social sciences.

The final mode is the passive one. Here the term culture is used without further explanation or clarification, amounting thereby to a tacit deferral to social scientific constructs in light of the dominant position these disciplines have in the contemporary intellectual milieu. To commentate on culture today usually means speaking in an anthropological idiom.

The point of distinction between these three approaches amounts to little more than the degree to which the theologian is involved in selecting the specific concept of culture to be relied on. While the differences between these approaches are important, and will be addressed below, for now it is important to note their underlying similarity. When taken together these approaches constitute the general paradigm for theological engagement with the concept of culture: deferral to social scientific explanations. It will be argued against this pattern that the paradigm is actually characterized by two inter-related thrusts: the already noted deferral to social scientific descriptions, and a concomitant, fundamental disengagement from the need for a *theological* definition of culture. This chapter sets out to demonstrate the presence and prevalence of the first thrust, while the question of disengagement forms the subject pursued in the next chapter.

The primary role of this chapter therefore is to establish and document the presence of this general pattern in each of its three modes by way of representative examples. Hopefully the diversity of contexts, theologians, and theological projects surveyed is enough to strongly suggest albeit not exhaustively chronicle the prevalence of this pattern. The first mode to be considered is the active one.

Active Deferral

In this mode the theologian, rather than expecting readers will simply accept their use of any one particular definition for culture, makes public some of the arguments behind their choice of definition. This is ordinarily achieved by bringing competing articulations of culture into direct and apparently competitive debate over the merits of two or more differing definitions so as to determine the ideal one.

Kathryn Tanner's work exemplifies this category, engaging the task of definition by competitively considering two core social scientific models that constitute perhaps the most prevalent set of social scientific definitions. Kevin Vanhoozer's variation is also well worth noting, hence some attention will be paid to his work. This analysis of Tanner and Vanhoozer is very useful not only for understanding the active group of approaches but also the content the passive modes (outlined below) tend to gravitate towards.

Kathryn Tanner

The first third of her book *Theories of Culture* is concerned with describing Tanner's understanding of culture whereupon she effectively reduces almost two centuries of discussions to three core movements that are then trimmed to two central models. The three movements essentially describe consecutive historical developments that at a broad level also describe the maturation of cultural anthropology. By describing it in this way Tanner is able to map these movements to wider philosophical changes, the two final models constituting a contemporary anthropological dialogue between modern and postmodern sensibilities.

Tanner begins with an introduction to the modern, or perhaps "traditional," anthropological understanding of culture. She argues the contemporary term is rooted in distinctive German, French, and English notions of *Kultur*, civilization and culture respectively, as developed under the influence of various eighteenth- and nineteenth-century intellectual movements. In the late nineteenth century aspects of these developments were woven together under the auspices of a burgeoning interest in what is now called cultural difference, an interest stimulated by colonial and missionary impulses.[12] The rise under modernity of the traditional understanding is briefly recounted; brevity that sacrifices nuance in order to describe a broadly consensual synthesis she considers more useful for theological purposes.[13] Against a complex and variegated background of interweaving social theories Tanner sets out a concise definition,[14] one delineated through a nine-point description, presented here with slight variation for stylistic reasons:

1. A human universal

2. of diverse patterns

3. that vary between social groups

---

12. This description picks up one of two emphases for the early roots also represented a countervailing sensibility to the modern construct developed under anthropology and based in *Kultur*. Culture as an evolutionary paradigm, somewhat *la civilisation* but particularly as developed under the English romantic tradition (though its interest in combating what the Germans described as *Zivilisation*, the industrial revolution, masked this somewhat) continues to influence.

13. For a similar discussion but one giving primacy to roots in Cicero's use of *cultura animi*, an agricultural metaphor picked up in the Renaissance by Thomas More and Francis Bacon, amongst others, see Gorringe, *Furthering Humanity*, 3–9.

14. Against this must be weighed Kroeber and Kluckhohn's eschewing of a similar approach—Fox and King, *Anthropology Beyond Culture*, Foreword, xvi.

4. for whom it describes an entire way of life

5. that has been built upon consensus

6. and which acts to constitute or build human nature

7. and is therefore a form of social determinism

8. but which is also a human construct

9. and is therefore contingent (could have been otherwise)

As this shows, cultures are generally considered incommensurate wholes, their unifying cores "often identified in ideational or mental terms, for instance, as a characteristic set of norms, values, beliefs, concepts, dispositions, or preoccupations . . . the informing spirit of a whole way of life . . ."[15] Culture is therefore understood to be "*the meaning dimension of social life . . .*"[16] and is consequently distinguishable from social behaviors in that it is the "ordering principle" of such behaviors, and therefore of society generally. It is the blueprint or control mechanism that guides social actions.[17] This controlling and integrating function imposes a sense of societal coherence, in turn implying a similar coherence within the concept of "culture" itself. Identifying a single unifying factor behind this coherence has been very difficult prompting a wide variety of possibilities to be suggested.[18]

Further, behaviors are understood to be comprehensible mainly with reference to surrounding context, especially to the specific environment it is situated within but also to the wider societal context that condones and supports it. Deriving the "imaginative universe" such behaviors emanate from has led to a highly localized approach. This emphasis on particularity has also contributed to a truncated notion of time, to a temporal particularity in which the focus is on synchronic rather than diachronic analysis. The genealogy of a specific behavior is therefore not as important as the contemporary justifications for its continued existence.

15. Tanner, *Theories of Culture*, 30–31. Refer also to p. 35 for discussion of how cultures are distinguishable by their offset from other cultures.

16. Ibid., 31.

17. In 1958 there was a landmark agreement reached between Kroeber and Parsons regarding the appropriate partitioning of anthropology and sociology. Effectively the meaning dimension was assigned to anthropology while social behaviors became the purview of sociology. Such neat demarcations are finally arbitrary and empirical work is never so clean cut. Refer for some discussion on this to Fox and King, *Anthropology Beyond Culture*, Foreword, xvi.

18. The most common notions include central motifs, semantic logic, integrating beliefs, structural logic and/or function, the choice usually depending on the specific epistemological sub-foundation being brought to bear.

Tanner then moves on to examine elements of recent critical engagements with this modernist understanding, from which she derives a reconstructed postmodern cultural framework that then deeply informs her new agenda for theology. This postmodern critique is not a monolithic engagement, stemming instead from a series of interrelated though independently sourced critiques drawing from historical, literary, and social scientific roots, amongst many others. Again Tanner engages them concisely, noting the presence of six major impacts upon the traditional definition and explanation given above.

First, members of an individual culture do not engage life from within a holistic understanding of their culture; rather life is pragmatically encountered, with cultural understandings only being "partially applied." Although an encompassing view of the culture may exist, it does so only from the privileged perspective of the anthropologist. The "whole" is only achieved by the anthropologists using three key distortions: hypostasizing individuals; allowing the part to representatively stand in for the whole; and by dehistoricizing social behaviors.[19]

Second, the existence of cultural coherence is queried because social behaviors are only seen as integrated by the application of a peculiarly Western aesthetical need for such integration. The resulting interpretive framework, it is argued, does not exist in reality. Too often cultural informants are induced into theoretically oriented responses that belie the pragmatics of their lives. In practice the neat dividing lines of theoretical constructs are rent asunder when confronted by the complex economy of interrelationships present in daily social discourse.[20]

Third, and in part derivatively from the preceding two points, it is difficult to sustain the notion of consensus so prevalent in the modern definitions. The Western anthropologist, aesthetically inclined towards integration, tends to look for commonalities. Three mechanisms in particular serve to reinforce this: the already mentioned tendency to hypostasize individuals; the use of generalized, statistically common features; and reliance on powerful informants. Taken together these operate to suppress divergent perspectives and stories. Further, deep cultural values often have a vague quality to them, a characteristic that can tend to foster the appearance of consensual support.

Against this appearance of broad consensus must be noted the existence of sometimes deep divisions bespeaking widely varying degrees of

---

19. Refer for example to the challenge offered by biological metaphors to individualism, Kallenberg, *Live to Tell*, 17–20.

20 James, Hockey, and Dawson, "Introduction".

consent. Anthropologists often miss an important element of this because of their tendency to intellectualize and objectify social behaviors, missing in the process "the power dimension of meaning."[21] They have a consequent inattention to the power struggles present in the post-structuralist gap between cultural forms and their meanings.

Fourth, and again partially derived from the preceding, the notion of culture as a key to social order is queried. The presence of deep fissures in cultural coherence, as outlined above, coupled with the existence of various forms and degrees of coercive legitimation raise significant doubts about the locus of societal order. Instead of being found in the consensual community of meaning advocated by the modern view, postmoderns point to the power wielded by elites as the substantive factor in societal order. Allied to this, there is a sense in which culture is divorced from human agency in the modern view. Culture becomes "an already constituted force for social order simply waiting to be imposed upon or transmitted externally to human beings who passively internalize it or mechanistically reproduce it."[22] Problematically the factors and agencies that gave rise to this force are still active, continuing to alter the cultural edifice, and consequently the cultural adherents. Strong notions of social determinism are therefore highly questionable.

Fifth, the idea of an assumed cultural stability is questioned. Culture is a flow rather than a given; it exists in a constant state of flux. The factors that historically contributed to the present structures still play a significant role. External factors certainly contribute to this; however the main changes tend to come from internal forces. This may happen by way of previously suppressed perspectives reasserting themselves, or through cultural innovation. Further, there is a natural sense of instability in the human agency driving cultural forms. These forms are constantly subject to reinterpretation and to being reapplied, often differently, within the ever-changing milieu of daily life. Culture is therefore a complex and variable phenomena subject to all the foibles inherent in human social interactions.

Sixthly, Tanner argues that understanding cultures as sharply defined, spatially determined bounded sets is no longer tenable or necessary. Cultural boundaries are fluid and permeable, as evidenced by the increasing impact of globalization. Anthropology is now conducted in the context of global processes that militate against the hypostasizing or reifying effects of the modern approach. Further, consideration must also be given to the historical processes that have always been at play, and which continue to influence cultures. In other words, there is a need to pay far more attention

21. Tanner, *Theories of Culture*, 47.
22. Ibid., 50.

18

to diachronic analysis. Ultimately however, the presentation of cultures as discrete, equal entities is unmasked as a tacitly complicit force in the continuing disparities of global power and economics, a subtle tool for glossing inequalities. For postmoderns it is also revealed as an inherently ethnocentric mechanism, albeit a more subtle and complacent form than the evolutionary model that previously held sway. The very act of "defining" a culture assumes the advantage of a superior perspective.

In conclusion, Tanner argues that while much has substantively changed, little has structurally changed. The modern definition still stands, though now as a considerably chastened and humbled conversation partner. The modern definition has "been decentered or reinscribed within a more primary attention to historical processes."[23] Attention to these processes leads to the breakdown of culture as a static, synchronic object and the emergence of culture as a deeply historic process of tension-filled negotiations; an ongoing process that demands a much more provisional and minimalist descriptive approach. In summary, cultural identity is a more fluid, relational concept than previously thought, perhaps better depicted through the metaphor of "style" than the biological metaphors of a previous generation.

As the preceding demonstrates, Tanner specifically defers to anthropology for definitions of culture. While she does outline a debate between competing definitions there are two important aspects of this worth commenting on. First, the debate is engaged entirely *within* the overarching frame of anthropological discussions. There is no specific attempt to subject the notion of culture to structural theological critique or engagement. Second, the debate is a staged one that operates as a legitimating device for the preferred option she was always already pursuing; the debate was always in the service of presenting a specifically postmodern anthropological articulation of culture.

At this point it is worth noting intrinsic difficulties with her project from an intra-anthropological perspective. Christoph Brumann, for example, has castigated culture critics for their tendency to erect essentialist, reifying, "straw cultures" as the classical model they then rally against for its tendency towards "boundedness, homogeneity, coherence, stability, and structure whereas social reality is characterized by variability, inconsistencies, conflict, change and individual agency . . ."[24] He argues instead that most definitions in the classical mould are agnostic on these points, rendering them investigative avenues rather than settled conclusions.[25] Some of

---

23. Ibid., 56.
24. Brumann, "Writing for Culture," 1.
25. Ibid., 4.

the implications flowing from this critique will be charted in more detail in the next chapter, however for now it can ironically be noted that Tanner is susceptible to the very critique that in the first place motivated her identification with the postmodern position.

Kevin Vanhoozer

In 2005 Kevin Vanhoozer wrote *The Drama of Doctrine: A Canonical-Linguistic Approach to Christian Theology* in which he sought to both critique and extend George Lindbeck's postliberal cultural-linguistic theology, taking it in a different, dramatic direction.[26] At the heart of his proposal is the Canonical-Linguistic approach expressed in two parts. The first is *scientia*, a process of biblical exegesis in which the emphasis is placed on the polyphonic dramatic quality of Scripture rather than on just its cognitive propositional characteristics. This poetic proposal is then supported by the second part, *sapientia*. Here the aim is to understand the bible as "*prosaic wisdom*: practical reasoning incarnated in ordinary communicative practices. The challenge of prosaic theology is to move from the prose of Scripture to the prose of contemporary culture."[27] It is this practical wisdom that then forms his understanding of contextualization, the movement between text and context he calls dramaturgy.

Vanhoozer asserts elsewhere in the *Drama of Doctrine* that it is culture that "sets the stage, arranges the scenery, and provides the props that supply the setting for theology's work."[28] Culture, a term he uses interchangeably with "context," is defined at two points in his book. The first time it is referred to as "the beliefs, values, and practices that characterize human life together at a particular place and time."[29] The second is an affirmation of Lindbeck's proposal that culture is "the sum total of ways of living that is handed on from generation to generation."[30] Perhaps unwittingly these two definitions provide both a synchronic and diachronic "take" on the term that is defined in an anthropological manner.[31]

---

26. Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine;* Vanhoozer, *The Drama of Doctrine*.

27. Vanhoozer, *The Drama of Doctrine*, 310. Emphasis original.

28. Ibid., 129.

29. Ibid.

30. Ibid., 309.

31. Refer for example to the categories catalogued in Kroeber and Kluckhohn, *Culture*. See also the typologies offered by Bodley, *Cultural Anthropology*, Winthrop, *Dictionary*. In each case something strikingly similar to Vanhoozer's proposals are central to the anthropological definitions canvassed.

Vanhoozer is attentive however to the possibility that there may be problems with this construction of the concept. In one of his early footnotes he comments "Lindbeck is particularly indebted to Ludwig Wittgenstein's philosophy of language and to Clifford Geertz's cultural anthropology, an indebtedness that prompts one again to wonder whether, and to what extent, theological prolegomena should be properly theological."[32]

By 2007 it is quite possible to see the suspicion guiding this comment beginning to bear fruit in his work. It was during this year that he put together a collection of essays prepared by some of his students to theologically address the topic of culture. This anthology was headed by Vanhoozer's introduction, entitled "What is Everyday Theology? How and Why Christians Should Read Culture."[33] This is an impressive treatment of the subject that may come to represent something quite seminal for its kind. He essentially outlines a contemporary restatement of Tanner's discussion, though attempts to ground it in a more distinctively theological prolegomena.

In terms of defining culture he adopts a broadly chronological schema though his emphasis is really on a thematic presentation. He begins with Tylor's seminal definition (to be addressed in the next chapter) before turning to Tanner's "modern" construct, which in turn gives way to Clifford Geertz's formative analysis, itself challenged by a semiotic position whose innate tendency towards holism is then suitably challenged by Tanner's postmodern posture.[34] Culture, against this background, finally emerges as that which is "*made up of 'works' and 'worlds' of meaning*."[35] As a work culture is what humanity does with the raw material of nature, namely the production of cultural texts—and these are worlds. Worlds are "lived worldviews," active engagements that both inculcate and express a "meaningful environment." In short, "Cultural texts project worlds of meaning that invite us in and encourage us to make our home there."[36]

In what he develops from this Vanhoozer makes striking advances in something like the direction this thesis is advocating. The constructive moment giving rise to this suggestion can be found in his taking up the notion of culture as spiritual formation, reading culture as "projecting ideal forms for our spirits."[37] This almost Platonic note expresses both a creative

---

32. Vanhoozer, *The Drama of Doctrine*, 10 n. 10.

33. Vanhoozer, "What Is Everyday Theology?"

34. Ibid., Refer pp. 24–26 for this and regarding Tanner see esp. notes 24 and 33 on pp. 255 and 256 respectively

35. Ibid., 26, emphasis original.

36. Ibid., 27.

37. Ibid., 31.

and teleological understanding of culture. Something of this mood is also evident during his discussion of Tillich's mantra, religion as the "substance of culture" and culture as the "form of religion," in which he asserts the inherently transcendent nature of culture.[38] In these and other ways Vanhoozer considerably advances the discussion, providing important hints towards thinking more carefully about culture as a structurally theological phenomenon.

Yet despite these important hints Vanhoozer is not yet presenting or necessarily heading directly towards a fully theological analysis of culture. The suggestions he promulgates may be birthed in theological considerations but are grafted onto a foundation built in the social sciences. Hence, for example, he espouses the virtues of an Augustinian system of signification but places it under the tutelage of modern semiotics.[39] In the next section of his discussion he dissects the "modern" commitment to signifying "system" (tacitly embracing Augustine thereby) by the same postmodern analysis Tanner used.[40] His point of origination and therefore his overall orientation towards culture (and this alone) is not ultimately theology and its attributes, but anthropology and its empirical evidence. His definition of culture does not emerge from an ultimately theological analysis but a social scientific one in which the basic competitive structure encountered in Tanner is re-presented, though now with a distinctly hermeneutical twist that shifts the emphasis towards a third preferred model—a broadly semiotic one.[41]

Direct Deferral

This form of the general pattern is similar to the active one in that it involves an explicit deferral to the social scientific framework. It differs in that it does not debate which definition should be deferred to. Instead the theologian concerned has previously selected their preferred understanding from the range of options offered by anthropology, sometimes explaining the choice but more often not, before presenting it in their work with an accompanying description. Implicit in this approach is a perhaps unrealized autonomy from both anthropological and theological debate. The definition is presented as if culture were in all actuality constituted in specifically this way and no other. It acts as a totalizing narrative. This is of course a common occurrence for innumerable words across discourses of all kinds.

38. Ibid., 33.
39. Ibid., 25.
40. Ibid., 26.
41. Ibid.

However, in view of what has already been said about culture this approach now seems to warrant more careful consideration.

The following sets of examples are split between systematic theologians and missiologists. This becomes an important distinction here only because the character of their engagements is quite different. As will be shown, missiologists exhibit a more ambiguous and interactive relationship with the social sciences than systematic theologians. One could suggest various reasons for this, ranging from the effects of specialization through to culture's ostensibly ethnographic and therefore empirical character. However explained, it is nevertheless clear that distinctive attitudes have developed.

Theological Examples

A particularly interesting example occurs in a recent series of articles in *The International Journal of Systematic Theology* by Robert Jenson, broadly entitled Christ as Culture. It is the first one, "Christ as Culture 1: Christ as Polity," that deals in particular with the question of culture, or more specifically with how it relates to the title "Christ."[42] The other two articles investigate distinctive aspects of the overall argument but do not directly address culture again, or at least do not offer treatments that diverge from the central point established in the first article.

In his initial article Jenson begins by commenting

> Let me adduce two standard definitions of culture, from different branches of social theory. We may say that a culture is the mutual behavior of a group in so far as this behavior is sustained by teaching and not only by genetics and physical ecology. Or we can say that a culture is the mutual behavior of a group of persons in so far as this can be abstracted from those doing the behaving, as in itself a coherent system of mutually determining signs.[43]

Here Jenson unequivocally places his project within the broad ambit of social theory so perhaps unsurprisingly he goes on to describe the church as itself a culture, one that "like any community, is responsible to cultivate her culture, and can lose her identity if she does not."[44] This ecclesiological anchoring of his understanding of culture is but a platform for he then notes

---

42. Jenson, "Christ as Culture 1."

43. Ibid., 323–24.

44. Ibid., 324.

> Now—coming at last to the matter of these essays—if the church is the body of Christ, that is, if the church is the availability of Christ in and for the world, and if this body of Christ, the church, is a culture, it follows that Christ is a culture. And the sense of the "is" in "Christ is a culture" will be the sense in which each of us must say that he or she "is" his or her body.[45]

The argument that follows is sophisticated but what is important is the central place accorded a social scientific definition of culture, and the consequences that flow from this, especially for Christology. While having sympathy for his intent, the result is to imbue the heart of the Christian enterprise with a social scientific gloss that then flows through into the rest of his theological project. For example, he goes on to suggest "Augustine's 'polity of God' is not a polity only in heaven; it is—however imperfectly—a polity now, and just so in conflict with other polities, with what Augustine called the 'earthly polity', the polities of this age as a class. Which is of course simply to say again that it is itself a polity, also in this age."[46]

It is doubtful that Augustine would fully recognize the nature of the polity being adduced here, however this comment is particularly interesting for another reason. So far it has been suggested that Jenson is building on social scientific understandings of culture that are predicated on the essential neutrality of the social scientific understandings. This means that not only all instances of distinctive community and polity but the church and Christ himself, precisely as *totus Christus*, are all together *equally* arrayed as cultures. Here the full effects of the last sentence of the previous quote become evident. Just as each polity participates equally in being a "polity," taking on every aspect of what being a polity is, then so also every culture participates in what being a culture is, as this concept has been defined by social theory. Each of the cultures just described are therefore all equally subsumed within the objectifying gaze of the social sciences. If all are equally cultures then so too are they all equally examinable in cultural, hence social scientific terms.

The significant implications of this argument can really only be intimated here because it is the overarching purpose of this thesis to argue the contrary view. While Jenson's analysis represents an admirable attempt to articulate an important description of Christ it nonetheless fails to escape its originating foundations and therefore remains captive to them. Jenson does not envisage the possibility that in making culture the controlling category of his analysis he is concurrently subsuming Christ within an alternative paradigm of understanding. If culture is indeed inherently a theologically

---

45. Ibid., 325.
46. Ibid., 329.

directed and shaped construct then his framework requires considerable rethinking.

An important and highly influential theologian also appearing in this category is H. Richard Niebuhr. In 1951 he outlined a series of solutions to what he termed "the enduring problem" or the many-sided and confused debate about how Christ and Culture should relate to each other. These solutions were ostensibly arrayed as a neutral taxonomy although Niebuhr's preference for the transformer option was considered by many an open secret.[47] For a long time his treatment of Christ and culture has been seminal, deeply informing the views of many of his contemporaries and more especially scores of students, and a great many theologians from succeeding generations. He still remains an important figure to engage with despite criticisms that attack core structural issues in his presentation.[48]

Niebuhr begins by observing that neither the cultural nor Christian poles are easily reducible; both exhibit significant variety and can consequently only be defined in tenuous fashion. Yet these supposedly tenuous definitions, despite their inherent reductiveness, are not similarly tenuous in application. They are applied in his work as controlling paradigms that anchor his project, and their specific articulation is therefore critical for his taxonomy. For our purposes two aspects of his description of culture are of particular significance, especially when taken together. First, Niebuhr borrows directly from the anthropologist Bronisław Malinowski when defining culture as "the 'artificial, secondary environment' which man superimposes on the natural."[49] He goes on to suggest, "Though we cannot venture to define the 'essence' of this [concept] culture, we can describe some of its chief characteristics."[50] These characteristics are then listed: it is inherently social; purposeful in terms of human achievement; based in values; which are good for humanity; and which are realized in temporal and material ways; which must therefore be conserved; and, he finally notes, it is pluralistic.[51]

Second, he comments "A theologian's definition of the term must, in the nature of the case, be a layman's definition since he cannot presume

---

47. Refer for example to Peter Gathje's discussion of Yoder's objections, supported by Hauerwas and Willimon and countered by James Gustafson; Gathje, "A Contested Classic," 30.

48. Ibid., rehearses the main contours of the discussion.

49. Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture*, 32. In this he is quoting from the work of Malinowski, refer for example Malinowski, *A Scientific Theory of Culture*.

50. Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture*.

51. Ibid., 32–39.

to enter into the issues raised by professional anthropologists . . ."[52] It is a description "of the phenomenon without theological interpretation . . ."[53] This does not imply for him an elimination of such interpretation but a relegation of it in terms of priority; it is a secondary step. When presented in this manner culture becomes a raw datum or resource that is then available for theological engagement, but an engagement that has one critical circumscription. There is no theological ability to penetrate the notion of culture itself, no means by which a theologian can get beneath or behind the raw material of the definition.

Culture, as anthropologically defined, is in this framework a technically developed resource that must be accepted as presented. For Niebuhr, the professional theologian does not have the technical ability to encroach on the professional arena of anthropology in order to query their technical pronouncements. There is no need to trace the outlines of the heritage this view springs from for the classic modernist approach to enquiry, predicated on the presumed objectivity and neutrality of scientific discourse, has already been well enough rehearsed in postmodern critiques.

For Niebuhr the entire category of culture is therefore controlled by a neutral, anthropologically-defined denotation behind which there is no substantive theological access and in which there is no correlative theological implication. He effectively defers to the then increasingly "scientific" discipline of cultural anthropology for a description of one of his two key terms. Not surprisingly this grants the anthropological definition a pervasive presence in his otherwise theological discussion. Both have influenced mission thinking by asking it to think carefully about culture, hence what follows is an attempt to further this goal.

Missiological Examples

The missiological discussion of this model is separated out for extensive treatment not primarily because it is a significant counterpart to the preceding theological analysis, though it is this, but because it is a considerably more complex frame of reference. Where theologians are largely positive about or affirming of social theory in their engagements, missiologists tend to be more ambivalent in the wake of a strong negative view promulgated by a significant coterie within the discipline.

Cultural anthropology has been in conversation with missiology since its inception, animated from the beginning by shared concerns that often

52. Ibid., 30.
53. Ibid.

gave rise to a context of mutual dialogue.[54] The early, though not always reciprocal, contributions are numerous; Bishop Robert Codrington's study of the Melanesians, especially his analysis of *mana*, is a central example, as is the work of Edwin Smith, missionary to South Africa and former president of the Royal Anthropological Institute. In later Roman Catholicism the mutual nature of the conversation has been particularly fruitful, with the influential *Anthropological Quarterly* representing the interests of Catholic anthropologists while the "Vienna School" of Father Wilhelm Schmidt provided another exceptional platform for discussion, including that based around the journal *Anthropos*.[55]

The influence of linguistic anthropology would become highly significant as a catalyst for dialogue, with the Summer Institute of Linguistics providing a seminal framework and scholarly home. Eugene Nida, for example, bequeathed Dynamic Equivalence theory to missiology while Kenneth Pike's extensive work in tagmemic linguistics has been foundational for much mission work. The influential journal *Practical Anthropology* (which later became absorbed by *Missiology*) was begun and maintained by missiologists trained in linguistics, most notably by successive editors William Smalley and Charles Taber.[56] Not surprisingly then there are a plethora of missiological authors offering positive affirmations of anthropology, approving anthropological definitions of culture and embracing in the process the trialogue between theology, anthropology, and mission.[57]

One very influential figure has been Paul Hiebert. As Darrell Whiteman notes, Paul Hiebert has been seminal in missiological discussions of culture and contextualization.[58] From amongst his most prominent literary outputs it is probably *Anthropological Insights for Missionaries* that has proven most central for readers, scholars and practitioners alike.[59] In this book

54. Hiebert, "Missions and Anthropology," 166.

55. Refer Smalley, "Anthropological Study," 4ff.

56. Hiebert, *Anthropological Reflections*, 9. He is historically inaccurate however in according the work of Gleason, Pike, Nida, et al. the status of first substantial contact between mission and anthropology, refer above for details of earlier contact. It is more accurate to record them as the first substantive linguistic anthropologists. Harvie Conn comments that these early threads all contributed to the emergence of a new cross-disciplinary discipline, missionary anthropology, refer Conn, *Eternal Word and Changing Worlds*, 138ff.

57. Here Paul Hiebert makes use of Harvie Conn, who specifically develops the notion of a trialogue with particular emphasis on the missiological connection, refer Conn, *Eternal Word and Changing Worlds*, 10, 46 and esp. 128, 130, Hiebert, *Anthropological Reflections*, 10–15.

58. Whiteman, "Anthropological Reflections" esp. 54–60.

59. Paul G. Hiebert, *Anthropological Insights*.

he argues the relevancy of anthropological insights for missionaries, suggesting that they can aid the missiological endeavor and associated research both theoretically and practically. In the practical sense he thinks it provides tools important for the process of exegeting contemporary culture, while in the theoretical sense it contributes towards a holistic or comprehensive understanding of people and societies, an advantage he tries to ensure deeply informs his overall approach to the contextualization process.

Hiebert carefully delineates this approach by first describing what it is not. He eschews popular reductionistic models because they bifurcate the physical and spiritual elements of humanity; and argues against stratigraphic approaches for their lack of full integration and implicit secularizing tendencies. He instead contends for a holistic perspective where "We must learn what theology and the sciences have to teach us about people and weave these insights into a comprehensive understanding of human beings."[60] In such an anthropocentric model anthropology is unsurprisingly the integrating human science that shows "how the various insights each discipline brings relate to each other . . ."[61] It is the primary mediating discipline, providing "us with insights into various structures of empirical reality."[62] This is not to say Hiebert is advocating a purely immanent project for he is decidedly not, rather he reserves for theology the central role of providing "an overall picture of the building, the builder, and key events in its history."[63]

What is of particular interest here is the way culture is then handled. Hiebert moves on to devote the next two chapters to various aspects of the gospel's interactions with culture. When defining culture he frames it in distinctively anthropological terms, defining it as "'the more or less integrated systems of ideas, feelings, and values and their associated patterns of behavior and products shared by a group of people who organize and regulate what they think, feel, and do.'"[64] The effects of this definition can be seen in Hiebert's final depiction of his model, which he suggests consists of a complex interplay between the Evaluative, Affective and Cognitive features that characterize his understanding of World View. These all work together to form a foundation that builds into and therefore heavily

---

60. Ibid., 26, also refer pp. 23–26 for his descriptions of the other models.

61. Ibid.

62. Ibid., 27.

63. Ibid.

64. Ibid., 30. Refer pp. 30–56 for a fuller description and discussion of this definition.

influences all of the various sociocultural aspects, of which religion is one.[65] This is the critical step.

For Hiebert, anthropology reports on the empirical reality of cultural constructs of which religion is just one of the elements *within it*, providing information that then forms a neutral datum for missiological engagement. In this theoretical aspect Hiebert is broadly in line with the various authors described above. Culture is a category defined by social theory that is then used and manipulated by theologians and missiologists for their particular purposes as if it had no bearing upon the theological nature of the underlying project. In this respect the neutrality of culture as a concept defined anthropologically is simply accepted. Hiebert does not envisage in this process the ability to theologically peek behind the anthropological veil in order to discern a specifically theological understanding of what culture is.

Equally important in missiology is the work of Charles Kraft who perhaps best describes his perspective on culture, anthropology, and the social sciences in *Anthropology for Christian Witness*, though his seminal work remains the earlier *Christianity in Culture*.[66] The later work is more interesting however because in it he specifically deals with a critique of the earlier book that provides an interesting set of insights.[67] In his earlier publication Kraft had stated that culture was, in and of itself, a neutral structure that people inhabited, representing a tool or map available for human use, but one that does not predetermine the ethics of use. This bears a striking familiarity with some of the models already encountered, especially Hiebert's.

Sherwood Lingenfelter challenged this view.[68] He suggested culture was in fact deeply implicated in the presence of inequalities, representing a conduit for the pervasive presence of unequal power relations. People are active agents in the construction of culture and construct it in line with their own individual or group interests. Others become entangled in the various "social images" perpetrated by these social constructions, which thereby imprison them in structures deeply antithetical to Christian principles. Lingenfelter argued that Jesus Christ challenges not only these systems but all of the structures that give rise to them. For him the gospel inherently contradicts culture.

To the contrary, Kraft argues, "People are *not* determined by cultural structuring . . ."[69] It is notable that this statement is less emphatic than his

---

65. Ibid.

66. Kraft, *Christianity in Culture*, Kraft, *Anthropology for Christian Witness*.

67. Kraft, *Anthropology for Christian Witness*, 33–36..

68. Lingenfelter, *Transforming Culture*.

69. Kraft, *Anthropology for Christian Witness*, 34.

previous ones because he is aware that, in retrospect, his earlier views may have been too magnanimous; peoples' choices have a greater effect than he had previously thought. Cultural structuring may actually be influenced such as to negatively skew the playing field, leading to a tendency for people to choose inappropriate behaviors. However, "this fact is a comment on the nature of persons, not the nature of the structures within which we function."[70] For him cultural structures are infected by sin but not intrinsically so; they are ultimately influenced by people and it therefore remains a fundamentally people-oriented problem.

Two further points are central to Kraft's proposal. First, he makes a distinction between society and culture, or what he also describes as personal behaving and cultural structuring.[71] In this there is a radical inversion of cultural determinism, the so-called superorganic (structuralist) view.[72] He argues there is no power in cultural structures to impel conformity; people behave as they do because they choose to. Even habitual patterns are founded on initial choices that are then constantly refreshed; each choice or refreshing in equal measure an opportunity to choose otherwise, albeit the conditioning tends to solidify over time.

Second, Kraft takes up the language of worldview as a way of describing "the culturally structured assumptions, values, and commitments/allegiances underlying a people's perception of reality and their responses to those perceptions."[73] He considers worldview a structural element of culture and therefore, in the same way as culture, considers it *not* to be determinative of behavior. Underlying structures are neutral in and of themselves, and are therefore not structurally inclined relative to sin one way or the other; they are instead directed by people towards particular perspectives.

Kraft initially received a lot of critical attention in missiological literature from his target audience, though attitudes have since thawed considerably.[74] Throughout the period of initial suspicion, and at considerable personal cost, Kraft managed to continue articulating a comprehensive vision of a missiology grounded in the appropriation of anthropological insights. In common with Paul Hiebert, Kraft is arguing that culture is a

---

70. Ibid., 35.

71. Ibid., 36–38.

72. Refer Wan, "A Critique of Charles Kraft." He argues Kraft is a functionalist. This commentary represents perhaps the best reflection on Kraft's reception to date, including within it the authors' own journey from a negative perspective to an embracing one, as testified to by some of his later works on ethnohermeneutics.

73. Kraft, *Anthropology for Christian Witness*, 52, refer 51–68 for his discussion of worldviews.

74. Wan, "A Critique of Charles Kraft."

neutral construct whose content is determined by people, and therefore whose direction or shape is not intrinsically related to its underlying conceptualization or articulation.

These two missiologists, Paul Hiebert and Charles Kraft, have considerably advanced the case for accepting the efficacy and value of an anthropological perspective on culture. They both conceive of it as an important input into the theological process of contextualization, providing critical information for understanding the culture side of that engagement. As was most clearly articulated by Kraft, anthropological definitions of culture are considered inherently neutral accounts of underlying human structures and hence as a necessary tool for understanding the various interactions encountered therein.

These two examples embrace generally positive views about the relationship between anthropology and theology however others argue for varying amounts of negative correlations Harvie Conn argues that the relationship was never especially friendly. Instead of the mutual dialogue of enrichment the theological proponents of anthropological theory portray he presents an at times warlike relationship, one steeped in an old antipathy, an "angry dialogue" that stems from unresolved (perhaps unresolvable) eighteenth-century tensions.[75] He suggests Enlightenment rationalism confronted and effectively, if not always obviously, dispensed with Christian supernaturalism—to the particular dismay of Evangelical scholars.[76] The shared concerns and consequent dialogue noted in the positive perspective above have therefore always been shadowed by an underlying uncertainty and at times outright rejection of the way the early tensions were apparently resolved. The abiding suspicion has been that the "resolution" was founded in a rationalism that orientated and circumscribed supernaturalism such that it was tacitly, and often explicitly, obviated.[77]

An introduction to the negative view has already been provided through Lingenfelter's objections, but other more extensive treatments exist. In what now seems an irenic analysis Charles Taber, *To Understand the World, to Save the World: The Interface Between Missiology and the Social*

---

75. Paul Hiebert terms it a love/hate relationship born from intimacy and brotherhood, refer Hiebert, "Missions and Anthropology," 165 and 178.

76. Conn, *Eternal Word and Changing Worlds*, 46ff.

77. The following discussion could also have been conducted under the auspices of "contextualization," though space precludes this. This would have seen Shoki Coe and Liberation theologians, for example, arrayed over against David Hesselgrave and other similarly conservative Evangelicals as representatives of a positive and negative view respectively. Harvie Conn, for example, notes the central role of contextualization, see Ibid., 128ff.

Sciences calls for a "penetrating and critical understanding of the social sciences . . ."[78] Amongst other things his work focuses on two aspects of the relationship. First he queries the apparent monopoly anthropological and sociological categories have on the definition of central features of the missiological landscape. Importantly he is not querying the dominance of social science constructs *per se* but of specific social science disciplines as against other disciplines. There is, he argues, a distinct tendency to ignore economics and political science, even when they may afford a better understanding of key cultural elements.

His second concern is more pertinent and prefigures aspects of the critique being offered in this thesis. He notes a tendency for missiologists to naively imbibe the premises of cultural anthropology through an uncritical incorporation of social science theory into missiological theory and practice.[79] He argues that by their very nature, their avowedly scientific disposition, the social sciences are predicated on an enlightenment perspective ideologically centered in rationalism. Overly simplistic recourse to such theories fundamentally impacts the framework of missiological discussions, leading to the potential for competing presuppositions within the bedrock of key missiological premises. Taber argues missiologists need to be more sophisticated in both their awareness of this fundamental distinction and in the way they allow this insight to characterize their interactions with the social sciences.[80]

Whereas Taber draws back from recognizing an explicit disjunction between theology and the social sciences the New Zealander Bruce Nicholls, in *Contextualization: A Theology of Gospel and Culture*, is not always so inhibited.[81] He argues the need to acknowledge the existence and importance of supracultural factors in the contextualizing process. These are factors arising from the reality of the spiritual realm, a realm only perceived through the eyes of faith not science. From this foundation he sounds a similar though more strident and discordant note of caution to that offered by Taber, positing the fundamental inability of secular anthropological and sociological theories to render an intelligible account of these supracultural factors. For Nicholls human culture is not the passive and neutral entity the social scientists depict, the fall and consequent universal degradation

---

78. Taber, *To Understand the World, to Save the World*, 2.

79. Ibid., 30ff for example.

80. Ibid., 48ff.

81. Nicholls, *Contextualization*. Nicholls is admittedly a difficult person to pigeonhole since his negative rhetoric is offset by a much more liberal personal stance, as his ecclesial background testifies to. In what follows attention is paid to the specific outlook presented in his work on contextualization with the proviso that he now adopts a much more ecumenical perspective. My thanks to John Roxborogh for these observations.

precluding any such conclusion. Culture is therefore not the value-free structure envisaged by Kraft. Instead, for Nicholls, every perspective on culture necessarily presupposes a particular view on human nature and the natural/supernatural relationship.

Using Mbiti as his primary interlocutor Nicholls presses his case against the possibility of cultural neutrality. Mbiti, according to Nicholls, calls for African culture to "extend its hospitality to the Gospel as an honored guest that, hopefully, may stay for many centuries and millennia as the case may be."[82] In stark contrast Nicholls delineates the encounter as essentially conflictual in nature, with culture the scene of a supernatural conflict between the kingdoms of God and of Satan. Culture, as a human product, is a structure built on choice but Nicholls understands the operation of choice quite differently to Kraft. He argues culture always contains within its contemporary forms the decisions people have previously made, especially those regarding this supernatural conflict. This renders it inherently, hence structurally, oriented by these decisions. He then argues that the pervasive effects of the fall are determinative. The gospel can never be understood as an honored guest of culture for "it is always its judge and redeemer."[83]

Nicholls consequently distinguishes two levels of contextualization—cultural and theological. The cultural realm refers to the surface levels of culture, or the institutions, traits, artifacts and other observable phenomena that constitute it. This, according to him, is the level at which anthropologists and sociologists can and should operate. By contrast, the theological level refers to the deep structures of cosmology, worldview and values, a level he thinks should be the peculiar domain of the theologian.[84] It is these deeper structures, those which Kraft suggests are neutral, which Nicholls suggests the gospel should, and in fact does target (even if theoreticians fail to acknowledge this).

What is not entirely evident from this discussion of the positive and negative perspectives described above is the relative weight or influence these two respective positions have on missiological discussions. It is perhaps fair to suggest that missiology has grown to embody a predominately positive view of anthropology that in some places borders on a consensus.[85] The voices directly protesting this state of affairs, as opposed to those

---

82. Ibid., 15.

83. Ibid.

84. Ibid., 24.

85. Consider, for example, the constituency of Steve Bevans various models of contextual theologizing, per Bevans, *Models*. This is also perhaps not surprising given that by 1978 Paul Hiebert could suggest "anthropological assumptions now pervade much of modern western thought . . ." Hiebert, "Missions and Anthropology," 165.

uttering cautionary words, are a distinct minority all too easily dismissed because of their rather overt affiliations with fundamentalist theological positions (here understood in a pejorative sense). Scholars like David Hesselgrave, Byang Kato, Don Carson, and so on form this latter, deeply embattled constituency. It is hoped that this thesis may contribute somewhat to an at least partial vindication of their underlying impulse, even if it does so in a way that also critically engages some of their core elements.

So far discussion has concentrated on two modes of engagement that have in common an explicit deferral to social scientific, or more specifically anthropological, definitions of culture. This is not the only way the relationship can be conceived however. A large segment of the theological encounters with the term culture are conducted in a quite different way. It is time now to turn to the passive mode and consider the various manifestations of this approach.

The Passive Mode

This mode is both easily explained and readily recognized so not too much attention will be paid to it *per se*. The analysis of this approach will focus on just two examples, one drawn from theology and one from missiology. Particular attention however will be paid to the notion of passivity and what this entails in terms of how readers are being asked to engage with the idea of culture. The central contention is that in the absence of a specific denotation for the term the currently prevalent models of culture become the *de facto* basis for understanding the term, raising in the process the question of which models this brings to the fore. The argument made here is that social scientific models, and in particular anthropological ones, are the most logical sources to fill the void given their contemporary domination of the field.

The passive approach can be quickly dispensed with in its primary form because it is no more than the use of the term culture without definition or explanation. In theological publications this approach is particularly notable in the work of systematic theologians, perhaps especially and surprisingly so in introductory texts. Stanley Grenz in *Theology for the Community of God*, for example, provides a discussion of theological method during which the question of culture is raised, but in which no definition is subsequently provided.[86] In similar fashion Millard Erickson's highly influential *Christian Theology* proceeds by discussing culture under theological method but is equally shy regarding its content; he too fails to define it.[87]

86. Grenz, *Theology for the Community of God*, 14ff.
87. Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 62–84.

Both authors move on to use the term and associated words repeatedly throughout their respective works but provide no further explicit information as to the meaning or content they thereby intend.

This raises the question of where such meaning comes from, of how a reader determines an understanding of the term culture when it is not explicitly defined. This sort of question has been most actively considered by scholars in the field of hermeneutics, especially in the groundbreaking work of Hans Georg Gadamer.[88] He provides a useful analytical tool for beginning to explore how such meaning arises in his application of Martin Heidegger's notion of fore-structured understanding. He describes Heidegger's framework as follows: "a person trying to understand a text is prepared for it to tell him something. That is why a hermeneutically trained consciousness must be, from the start, sensitive to the text's alterity."[89] Sensitivity to the alterity of the text is achieved in the realization that one should be "aware of one's own bias, so that the text can present itself in all its otherness and thus assert its own truth against one's own fore-meaning."[90]

The presentation of "textual otherness" that Gadamer describes has two dimensions. In terms of the text itself it involves the ability of the material being read to arrest the reader, to interrupt their fore-understanding by way of a specific signal that calls into question what Gadamer calls the "tyranny of prejudice." The signal, or what Gadamer terms the "interruption," is a textual indication that there either is or may be an alternative meaning intended from that which the reader may already have in mind. On the side of the reader it requires an attentive openness, a willingness to suspend putative fore-meanings in the presence of such a signal. Given these conditions, a signal such as an explicit definition and attentive openness to it, the reader is alerted to the author's intent that they should follow their lead rather than simply subscribe to their own implicit inclinations. If, as was noted above, there is no such signal or interruption indicating some intra-textual meaning/s for culture, then what definition pertains?

Before considering this further, one more element must be brought into the discussion, namely an understanding of mutual participation, or of how text lacking an interruption is read. Reading for understanding is predicated in part on a reasonable expectation that in the normal

---

88. In the translator's preface to his most important publication Weinsheimer and Marshall offer the following tribute: "Truth and Method is one of the two or three most important works of this [twentieth] century on the philosophy of humanistic studies. The book is powerful, exciting but undeniably difficult . . . it gathers the ripe fruit of a lifetime's reading, teaching and thinking." Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, xi.

89. Ibid., 271.

90. Ibid., 271–72.

course of engagement with a contemporaneous culturally aligned text the reader would be participating in a common frame of understanding with the author. James McClendon, arguing for slightly different purposes but identifying the same underlying attribute, notes that in oral communication "Uttered words are not mere labels changeable at will, but constitutive speech acts that engage their users in networks of practice . . ."[91] In other words the speaker (and hence author) builds a world of understanding in which the hearer (reader) participates, but where there is a high degree of contextual commonality between author and reader then a significant amount of what is spoken or written may be considered self-evident. That is, they do not require explanation because they fall within the boundaries of a common pre-formed understanding.

In a similar vein to McClendon, but more pertinently for textual hermeneutics, Kevin Vanhoozer says much the same thing in his analysis of the role genres play in writing. These he considers analogous to Alasdair MacIntyre's notion of "practice," hence he suggests "a given genre embodies a social expectation, an expectation that the hearer/reader will respond appropriately . . ."[92] Genre is in this view an element of "cultural rationality," a rule-governed "socializing practice" guiding interlocutors into a process of mutual participation. Quoting Carolyn Miller he notes "Form shapes the response of the reader or listener to substance by providing instruction, so to speak, about how to perceive and interpret; this guidance disposes the audience to anticipate, to be gratified, to respond in a certain way."[93] This means that a mutual pre-formed understanding will be determinative for meaning in the absence of any signal or interruption disrupting it.

It is the case therefore that in this absence, of a signal or some interruption indicating a changed context, or a shift from the set of "reasonable expectations," the reader participating in the same cultural environment as the author will assume the author is intending nothing more than the meaning the reader already had in mind before reading. Therefore, in the absence of a signal the text inevitably succumbs to prejudicial fore-meaning, to what is effectively a semi-autonomous reading.[94] It is not entirely autonomous because the shared context of meaning constrains creativity and genre, as a rule-conducted practice, acts to broadly circumscribe the range of acceptable interpretations. This formal description sets out a process that actually

---

91. McClendon and Murphy, *Witness 3*, 297.

92. Vanhoozer, *The Drama of Doctrine*, 215.

93. Ibid., referring to Miller, "Genre as Social Action,": 159.

94. This use of prejudice accords with Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 268ff.

remains hidden since it expresses the largely unconscious attribution by the reader of meaning to the various words used by the author.

As the foregoing demonstrates, this unconscious attribution of meaning does not occur in a vacuum. It happens within the context of an overarching framework or paradigm that forms the theoretical structure guiding and directing the diverse range of social, economic, political, scientific, and so on, networks gathered within it.[95] In the West, as has already been discussed in the introduction, the prevailing paradigm is the secular perspective. It is therefore this secular frame of reference that is the primary producer and maintainer of meaning for late twentieth- or early twenty-first-century Western thinkers. It is from this pool of candidates that all of the examples discussed in this chapter are taken. This is therefore the context from which definitions of culture are likely to be drawn. Even amongst theologians this is highly likely as extraordinarily few of them undertake to *theologically* define culture (which is why a recovery of tradition is so central in the later chapters of this thesis).

At this point some preliminary description of what this paradigm might consist of is important in order to understand the form of meaning production being envisaged. Taylor is useful, summarizing the general shape in a way that closely resembles the account to be given in the chapters to follow.[96] According to him the presiding paradigm is a coalescence of 'closed world structures' (paradigmatic ways of thinking) constructed on two strongly related premises—that the natural world can be separated from the supernatural and then further, that the natural world can be inhabited without recourse to the supernatural, and hence can exist autonomously.[97] From one angle this represents Taylor's modern moral order not only legitimated now but become the normalized state of the West; a hegemony resourced by the powerful normalizing narrative of secularity that has taken upon itself the ability to position all other discourses. In this secular context it is the material, humanistic and rational narratives that hold sway, hence the prominence of the scientific.

95. For a discussion of "paradigms" indicating their usefulness and limitations refer Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, 183–89. Note in particular the constellation of correlates he gathers at p. 185. Something of the sweeping generalization of these broad categories is in mind here.

96. Refer especially Taylor, "What Is Secularity?"

97. The influence of both Wittgenstein and Heidegger are clearly evident throughout Taylor's description hence something like Wittgenstein's language games is at play in the closed world structures, as is Heidegger's sense of such structures having no requirement for transcendence, see Ibid., 57–60.