

Introduction

“[W]hen we contingently but authentically make things and reshape ourselves through time, we are not estranged from the eternal, but enter further into its recesses by what for us is the only possible route.”¹

JOHN MILBANK

THE CONCEPT OF CULTURE aims to explain in some way human living, yet it seems strangely disconnected from such a goal when explored in the context of theological discussions. This is to say, the term is seldom linked in a *structural* way with distinctively theological doctrines it might otherwise seem intimately connected, such as creation, (theological) anthropology, ecclesiology, and the incarnation. Of course, these doctrines are not absent from theological discussions of culture; on the contrary they are usually closely connected to it. However, it is notable that while in some way coordinated with culture, these doctrines are seldom if ever used to define what culture *is*. In other words, even though these doctrines are often connected to and associated with the term “culture” they are not considered constitutive of it. Culture as a concept, as distinct from how it may be used, notably lacks a distinctively theological foundation.

This becomes clearly evident when considering how the term “culture” enters theological discourses. It will be argued below that in the normal course of such discussions culture enters as an already defined, pre-formed entity. Even before theologians and missiologists begin to work with the concept its contours and content are already established. Much like many commercial builders, theologians and missiologists are working with prefabricated material, formed and shaped elsewhere that are then appropriately

1. Milbank, *Being Reconciled*, ix.

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slotted in. There is some leeway regarding placement, but the builders have limited scope for shaping the pieces, usually only doing so in order to facilitate a good fit.

In one respect this construction analogy can be usefully extended. Each prefabricated piece is, in and of itself, neutral in as much as it is a subsidiary component of a much larger design. Certain bespoke details may have a significant influence on the overall design or express an idiosyncratic feature, but even then most pieces contribute to the finished product in a collective and nondescript manner. Aside then from specifically engineered highlights, each piece is an anonymous contributor to the overall effect. Culture tends to act in a similar way, forming a neutral component of theological projects, usefully contributing to the final goal but in a relatively anonymous sense. At certain times it is a highlight feature, for example when a theologian like H. Richard Niebuhr undertakes a study on “Christ and culture.” Yet upon closer examination, even these examples, as will be shown, conceive the term in its pre-fabricated form.

This is perhaps best revealed by considering how culture is defined. For example, despite culture forming a central theological topic in his discussion, Niebuhr does not ask how culture might be *theologically* constituted and therefore defined. The theological doctrines of most relevance, as noted above, are simply not called upon to assist in the definitional task. Neither does he draw from a theological heritage in which this type of analysis has been important. Instead, as will be seen in chapter 1, he turns to the social sciences for a pre-existing definition of culture, using one of their definitions that he then suitably adapts or nuances for his purposes. There are, of course, a number of good reasons for such a strategy, not least that theologians can take advantage of an existing *lingua franca* that then allows participation in wider discussions and the chance to engage a broader audience.

Nevertheless, while useful for these good purposes such a strategy is always inherently in danger of so identifying with the *lingua franca* that it no longer acts as a vehicle of translation or an instrument for external engagement but becomes instead the standard and constitutive language of the term. Again this might be thought a reasonable proposition if culture were indeed the neutral construct it purports to be. Determining the validity of the claim to neutrality is therefore crucial, a task that necessarily requires an inspection of how culture has been defined prior to its arrival in theological discussions. This in turn requires a careful examination of the underlying foundation giving rise to the various definitions of culture, and in particular an assessment of this foundation’s presumed ability to grant to culture the status of neutrality it is assumed to hold. That culture is usually appropriated

from the social sciences is a critical clue for determining which foundation needs analyzing, indicating that the meaning and status of the term is derived from the secular framework now routinely guiding the social sciences.

Chapter 1 prepares the ground for this task by empirically establishing what has already been argued, namely that theologians and missiologists do indeed treat culture in the way just described. Here sufficient evidence is found to suggest Christian scholars generally accept culture to be a structurally neutral concept available for theological appropriation without the need to engage in a specifically theological, structural analysis of it. As already hinted, these scholars approach their task in this way for a range of positive reasons, but these should be assessed against the possible losses accruing from inattention to theological underpinnings for the term.

Chapter 2 then examines the viability of the neutrality thesis by determining the legitimacy of the underlying secular claim. Contrary to expectations this claim is found wanting because it does not issue from any intrinsic or inherent basis. The secular perspective certainly offers *an* account or description of the world, but this turns out to be only one particular account of reality, one grounded in a decision to accept an immanent rather than transcendent perspective as the objective basis for all of reality. This decision is based in an exercise of sheer preference since it springs from only one *possible* objective basis for reality (and is therefore not simply *the* objective basis). There exists at least one alternative paradigm offering a different measure of what counts as objective, one that must be, in some way, accounted for. The claim to neutrality is therefore revealed as a biased rather than objective claim.

The rest of the book is concerned with considering the potential inherent in one particular alternative paradigm, and hence can be characterized as exploring post-secular possibilities. More specifically it seeks to tease out the contours of a Christian theological perspective on culture. In this constructive mode the discussions of culture undertaken by John Milbank, Karl Barth, and Kwame Bediako are carefully considered. The first two in particular might seem unusual choices given that they are more usually categorized as exponents of counter-cultural analysis. Milbank's Augustinian emphasis on the sinfulness of *Civitas terrena* (City of Man) does not seem a promising basis on which to secure a positive account of culture. Barth seems an even more difficult proposition given that his antagonistic attitude towards culture is a regularly rehearsed feature of discussions on his theology, his love of Mozart registering a seemingly minimal affirmation in the shadow of his determined advocacy of divine sovereignty and *Diastasis* (separation).

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On closer inspection however, these portrayals turn out to be inadequate caricatures that have failed to grasp the sophistication and complexity of the understandings of culture they supposedly represent. This is, of course, in part at least, a reflection of the widespread lack of attention paid to specifically theological ways of defining the concept of culture. These theologians have been read in one way and not another precisely because of an implicit bias, one this book seeks to overcome. A full response to this issue is therefore a product of the whole book hence this must simply remain a bald assertion for now, one awaiting vindication in the course of discussion.

Milbank's argument in *Theology and Social Theory* provides important grounds for initiating the constructive element of this book, laying out one possibility for what a Christian post-secular description might look like. The third chapter therefore pays careful attention to the writings of Milbank, though its focus is less on the more popular elements of his corpus than on his earlier agenda-setting doctoral dissertation and post-doctoral work. In the two publications arising from these studies Milbank sets out a description of a Baroque cultural theology as (pre-eminently) expressed by Giambattista Vico. This is explored before considering how this has subtly but pervasively influenced Milbank's later writing. What emerges is the suggestion that Milbank in his more popular works is slowly outlining something like a contemporary Vichian cultural theology, or what amounts to a theological description of culture.

The fourth chapter then engages this Milbankian framework critically, carefully considering the efficacy of his proposals given the numerous critiques it has attracted. The initial treatment is broad, investigating the various ways others have interacted with his ideas as a whole. The larger portion of the chapter then narrows the focus, concentrating in particular on his ecclesial suggestions for it is here that Milbank's primary resources for pragmatically addressing culture are located. Of considerable interest in this regard are the many critiques the supposed idealized character of his ecclesiology has attracted, a nexus of considerations that can be representatively treated through careful attention to Gillian Rose's substantial critique. She engages Milbank across several levels, most notably on the practical aspects that a theological description of culture needs to be attentive to.

While the second half of this chapter recognizes some validity in this critique, it argues that Milbank offers important resources that, with further development and refinement, could successfully counter the charge. His notion of "judicious narratives," coupled with his arguments regarding Gothic and complex space and his description of Christian Socialism would seem to provide the required "space" for a Christian understanding of culture that

is more than the amorphous escape or overly theoretic idealization with which he is usually charged. Milbank, seen through this lens, is instead proposing, in admittedly idealized terms, a practical engagement that is already found in diverse situations around the world.

The fifth chapter then shifts focus. Having established the case for a theological description of culture it then asks if it is also necessary to assert that Milbank's version or model of Christian reason is the only possibility. Is there really only one Christian account of reality offering resources for describing culture in a specifically theological way? In contradistinction to Milbank's supposed captivity of Christian reason a case is made that Karl Barth offers a plausible alternative. Barth gives a sometimes similar, yet importantly and strikingly different account of culture that is rooted in an alternative conception of the Christian framework.

The chapter paints the broad panorama of Barth's project, describing the key elements of his writings pertinent to the question of culture. In this discussion both his negative and positive views on culture are described. The negative perception represents the way Barth's views have traditionally been presented, embodying and perpetuating his emphasis on *Diastasis*. This is clearly seen, for example, in his critical assessment of the idea of worldview. By contrast to this popularized understanding of Barth, the positive locus is not well known, having only recently received any explicit recognition. A few scholars have begun to deconstruct the negative cultural prejudices to discover within Barth a vibrant, positive and deeply theological account of culture. This perspective will be described and then integrated with his critical proposals in order to propose a theological alternative to Milbank's model.

The final chapter pursues a similar but expanded line of inquiry to the preceding one by asking whether models of Christian reason and reality are the sole domain of any one cultural sensibility. It asks, therefore, whether the Western focus characterizing the approaches presented by Milbank and Barth offer the only resources for conceiving a specifically Christian description of culture. The African theology promulgated by the late Kwame Bediako suggests otherwise, offering an important series of insights that not only align at critical junctures with those generated by both Milbank and Barth but which move beyond them in certain ways. This presents a description of culture in its international guise, by way of an African proposal that situates the discussion within the church catholic.

At this point it is worth taking a little time to explain the rationale behind the selection of these specific theologians over others and, because this is in turn a function of the overall aims of this book, to explain the rationale behind the shape of the book as a whole. This book is shaped by four key questions, with the first and second being closely related. First, is

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the concept of culture theologically neutral? This question is a challenge to the normativity of secular conceptions of neutrality; a challenge taken up by increasing numbers of contemporary scholars. From amongst these scholars two in particular stand out as candidates for engagement given the importance of their respective projects—Charles Taylor and John Milbank.

Both propose a primarily negative view of secularity and both build their cases in similar ways. Taylor, for example, explicitly aligns himself with Milbank at several points.² Taylor's own interest, as he goes on to argue, is not to disrupt the Milbankian and associated genealogies but to complement them by noting Milbank's inattention to the processes by which secularization became a mass phenomenon. Milbank, he argues, rightly notes shifts within the elites but not those within the broader population and neither is he sufficiently attentive to some of the counter movements and resistances. What both Milbank and Taylor also voice is the view that secularity could be understood otherwise. This is where Karl Barth becomes particularly helpful as this expresses a central plank of his understanding of culture. Barth is arguing for humanity to be recognized as inherently secular, though he conceives secularity very differently from how it is normally understood. He suggests that being a creature, living and flourishing within creaturely confines, is what defines secularity. True secularity is merely the recognition that we are just creatures and nothing more. The secular, for Barth, is therefore that space in which we are what we were always intended to be—creatures under God.

The problem with Taylor's proposals is that he fails to offer a comprehensive theological alternative in the way both Milbank and Barth do. For this reason this book focuses on Milbank rather than Taylor. Also, although Barth is strong in terms of his constructive proposals, he is weaker for critical purposes hence Milbank becomes the prime instrument for critiquing traditional cultural understandings. His constructive proposal then becomes the initial answer to the second question animating this book: determining whether viable Christian theological alternatives exist that could replace the current secular models of culture. Milbank's project is one such possibility hence the book moves on to outline and then describe his proposals. At this stage Milbank has become the central character, offering the primary deconstructive move and the corresponding reconstructive possibility. The book could easily have remained here and explored at considerable length

2. He explicitly aligns himself with Milbank, Hauerwas, and so on in tracing the emergence of the secular as a negative from late scholasticism forwards, see Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 295, 773ff. At p. 774 he explicitly acknowledges Milbank's account of Duns Scotus as the fount of the anthropocentric shift.

the Milbankian proposal, however it is at least equally important to demonstrate that Christian theological alternatives exist.

The third question driving this book therefore was whether other Christian traditions offered potentially compelling alternatives to that set out by Milbank. One notable dialogue partner here could have been Roman Catholicism however the Anglo-Catholic nature of Milbank's theological sensibility meant much of this material was already engaged at some level. What was a much more interesting possibility came in the Reformed outlook of Karl Barth. While received opinion would seem to preclude the viability of this suggestion, careful examination of his project reveals an intriguing insight—Barth had at various stages articulated a sophisticated theological understanding of the concept of culture. When these various statements are taken in concert with aspects of the architecture of his thought, it is clear that he offers a viable alternative to the Milbankian proposal hence Barth becomes an important conversation partner.

One fair question the reader might raise concerns why Barth is not allocated the same space granted Milbank in this book? Some might even ask why Barth did not form the sole character within it given his extensive theological output and his seminal influence on Protestant theology in the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. These are entirely fair questions to which there is not a finally satisfying response other than authorial predilections of two kinds. First, Milbank deals consistently and directly with the *contemporary* secular framework in a way Barth does not (Schleiermacher and those following in his footsteps being his primary target). The aim of this book is to deal with the contemporary situation and given that Milbank is writing directly into the current context, his project is the more proximate.

This objection is not insurmountable as Barth necessarily deals with secular constructions of reality in his writings, however a full enough analysis of his work to render it suitable for both the critical and reconstructive purposes of this book would render it almost exclusively a study of Barth's view of culture. Such a task would then preclude pursuit of the third and fourth questions set out in this section, both expressing one of the key goals this book sets out to achieve: do multiple, distinctively theological, models of culture exist?

The third question in turn suggested the desirability of a related, fourth question. If theological alternatives existed within the Western tradition then might not other possibilities be present within the broader ambit of global theologies? In some respects this is the most difficult question to answer since the focus is not only on the theological proposals being offered but also on underlying differences in context that might impinge on the suggestions being put forward. While not fully encompassing of the range of

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differences, there is a need to address not only the theological proposals but also the philosophical underpinnings guiding them. Kwame Bediako offers an exciting possibility in this respect, not only because he is an alternative to Milbank and Barth but also because his Western education eased the contextual difficulties a little, allowing for a more direct comparison than might otherwise have been the case.

One of the very interesting aspects of reading scholars from outside of the Western framework is the way Western assumptions become questions rather than assertions. Bediako's proposal is in some ways just as much a response from the particularities of the African philosophical context as it is the result of his Christian theological reflection. The chapter on Bediako therefore attempts to refract something of this "peculiarity" of the contextual framework he is writing within and the chapter should therefore be read with this in mind. The assumption of neutrality is here rendered contextual rather than objective as a matter of normal engagement, an insight that strengthens the basic case being presented by this book.

Having briefly outlined what the book intends to cover it is also necessary to explain a little about what it does not seek to do. Certain readers will note the lack of attention paid to the resurgent field of Natural Theology. In some ways this might seem a significant oversight given what might at first appear to be a degree of affinity between the interests of theologians writing on culture and theologians writing on Natural Theology. It is perhaps fair to admit that Natural Theology offers a way into the question that is quite suggestive. For example, working from the doctrine of creation through to culture seems on the face of it to resonate with aspects of the argument being outlined here. However, there are a number of reasons why this topic is not and could not be pursued here.

Primary amongst them is the way it would fundamentally alter the contours of this discussion, resulting in the pursuit of an entirely different set of questions through an altogether different framework of analysis. Milbank and Barth are usually understood as contesting the legitimacy of Natural Theology hence the book would have centered at some stage on resolving or explaining this tension. At root, this would entail engaging the question of underlying assumptions. This book takes its lead from scholars such as Gadamer, MacIntyre, Wittgenstein, Milbank, and Barth, all of whom operate with a broadly non-foundational framework. By contrast, Natural Theology usually involves some form of broadly foundationalist philosophical paradigm expressed in some version of critical or scientific realism. This is not to say Natural Theology is still in the comparatively naïve Enlightenment forms Barth was encountering, however it is to say that the framework guiding this book is not compatible with the roots of Natural Theology.

One further factor to be taken into account is the lack of a major Natural Theologian dealing extensively with the question of culture as it presents itself in contemporary discourse. In fact, Alister McGrath, one such significant theologian, readily admits at one point that this represents one of the three key aspects distinguishing his project from Milbank's—that Milbank had decided to follow the cultural route rather than the natural science one. Natural Theology therefore represents perhaps a second or third phase of the project initiated through this book rather than a core element of the present book.

One last aspect of this should also be mentioned. In Milbank it is arguable that resources exist for thinking through the relationship with Natural Theology differently, perhaps even for rethinking some central elements of Natural theology. Milbank is not actually dismissing modernity *per se* but is sharply contesting the form it currently takes. His critical project is arguing that "modernity" could have been very different, that it could have taken an alternative, Christ-centered form. He is essentially suggesting that an alternative modernity can be envisaged and is still available for appropriation. It is not that science as currently conceived and pursued is "wrong," but that it has been shaped and molded by a narrative privileging a certain, highly rational form of thinking to the exclusion of any other. There are intriguing possibilities associated with his attempts to redress the balance here, particularly for Natural Theology; however such an exploration would wander very far from the considerably more limited aims of this present work.

To conclude this particular discussion, a word must be said about the role of the social sciences in all of this. As the immediately preceding comments intimate, Milbank is often misread, and this book could potentially be misunderstood for similar reasons, as contending against and therefore as seeking to displace the social sciences. In a sense this is accurate, however everything hinges on the sense in which this is understood. This book does not dispute, in presumed accord with Milbank's own perspective, the validity of much of the empirical work undertaken by the social sciences. Instead, it argues the need to rethink the formative assumptions guiding the empirical process, not just in terms of the interpretation of empirical data, but perhaps even more so relative to the data initially collected.

Neither anthropological nor sociological insights, for example, should be dismissed out of hand or otherwise ignored. However presented, and irrespective of the agenda they may be temporarily attached to, there lurk within these insights an empirical component that requires explanation and appropriation in some shape or form. Social scientific research is legitimate, and continues to be so even under the critical agenda presented at various stages within this book. This correlates closely with Milbank's own desire, expressed most cogently when he argues in *Being Reconciled* (BR) "In this

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sense, my sequence on gift constitutes also a sequel to *Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason*. Compared with the latter volume, the engagement is much more positive in character: however, nothing here is being retracted—rather I am concerned to learn from social theory in its more historical, ethnographic and less ideological aspects.”³

What is not admitted, however, is that contemporary social scientific explanations with roots in versions of rationalism *necessarily* provide the *best* explanatory framework for analyzing and understanding the underlying data. This does not in itself mean social scientific explanations are excluded since at times they may well offer the best possible way to conceive the situation under discussion. Rationality is here being opened up to a larger field of possibilities, and to an alternative frame of reference, rather than being dismissed or circumvented.

Throughout this book all forms of rationality privileging contemporary modernist or post-modernist forms of empiricist or philosophically positivist foundations are contested. They are held accountable for their presumption of exclusivity, for seeking to assert the primacy of critical engagement over any other form of encounter. It is suggested that far from this kind of perspective, what is needed is an encompassing understanding of rationality. Some, for example Milbank and Pope Benedict, argue for an understanding that covers “faith and reason.” Only in this expanded view of rationality, they suggest, can be found a plausible, comprehensive explanation of reality or of its various aspects.

3. Milbank, *Being Reconciled*, xi.