

Preface

CHRISTIAN THEOLOGIANS AND MISSIOLOGISTS frequently refer to the concept of culture but do not usually generate definitions for it, relying instead on those offered by the social sciences. Underpinning this reliance is the assumption that culture is a theologically neutral concept. Recent critiques of the secular paradigm from scholars like Charles Taylor, John Milbank, and Jacques Derrida indicate this assumption might be problematic, a suggestion that throws doubt on the tactic theologians and missiologists are using. Implied in these recent critiques is the possibility that definitions of culture participate in and embody dispositions potentially antithetical to the Christian framework. If this is indeed the case then the process of reliance just described should perhaps be re-examined and the relevance of these borrowed definitions for Christian theological purposes carefully assessed. In particular, such critiques suggest the need for generating specifically Christian understandings of culture to guide theological scholarship.

The bulk of this book pursues this goal. While resources for this are admittedly slim, which is perhaps not surprising given how prevalent the borrowing strategy is, there are nevertheless good if somewhat surprising possibilities available. For example, John Milbank's critical engagement of the secular is accompanied by an alternative constructive proposal that relies in part on a tradition in which the theological nature of culture is stressed. The work of Giambattisto Vico proves to be an important moment in the development of this perspective, one that strongly influences Milbank. Other possibilities also exist. For example, the Reformed tradition has a long history of engagement with culture under the guise of Dutch neo-Calvinism, although it is suggested that the richest engagement comes in the work of Karl Barth. Despite apparently strong contra-indications, Barth develops a rigorous description of culture that rivals Milbank's for theological depth, sophistication, and applicability.

If left here it would seem that culture is an exclusively Western concept, yet it is a discussion involving a global constituency, hence insights generated from the non-Western world also need to be examined. One particularly apt example comes from Africa, where the Ghanaian theologian Kwame Bediako has undertaken an analysis of the African context that relies in part on a specifically theological understanding of culture. This understanding is grounded in a more general African emphasis on the inherent religiosity of humanity, a core element of much African Christian anthropology. Culture, as a refraction of this underlying anthropology, is therefore largely understood in theological terms.

If the critical and constructive proposals outlined above can be sustained then it is suggested that theological and missiological references to “culture” should no longer take their lead so strongly from the social sciences. What is required instead is a specifically theological engagement with the notion of culture that seeks to properly recognize and account for the religious character of this world. Milbank, Barth, and Bediako outline three ways this might be achieved, and provide in the process three models for ongoing appropriation and development by the Christian community.