Introduction

Kathryn Tanner, Professor of Theology at the University of Chicago Divinity School, notes in her recent book *Theories of Culture* that "although less than one hundred years old, the modern anthropological meaning of 'culture' now enjoys a remarkable influence within the humanistic disciplines of the academy and within commonsense discussions of daily life."[1]

She continues, citing the observations of anthropologists Alfred A. Kroeber and Klyde Kluckhohn: "In explanatory importance and in generality of application it [the concept of culture] is comparable to such categories as gravity in physics, disease in medicine, evolution in biology."[2]

The pervasiveness of the concept, and its explanatory power, are due in no small part to the broad range of meanings associated with the term. To speak of culture is to speak also, in some sense, of "context," "community," "ideology," and "tradition." The breadth of semantic reference the term carries is a plus, for it can be used to explain just about anything, from beliefs, to products, to social movements. In fact, the term "culture" has been so qualified by the adjectives placed in front of it (institutional culture, world culture, personal culture, sports culture, etc.) that one can no longer be certain about exactly what it refers to. I have often found that my endeavors to use the term with a precision beyond the popular or generic are met with confusion, resistance, and numerous requests for clarification. On the rare occasion I am able to qualify the term to the satisfaction of my audience, I am frequently asked why, in light of all the fuss, the term is even used at all. James Clifford explains both the popularity and predicament of the term when he observes that "culture is a deeply compromised idea I cannot yet do without."[3] Sociologist Robert Wuthnow makes the same point when he

1. Tanner, *Theories of Culture*, ix.
2. Kroeber and Kluckhohn, *Culture*, 3.
3. Clifford, *Predicament of Culture*, 10.

notes that culture is a concept "which remains subject to ambiguities of treatment but which retains value as a sensitizing concept for investigations into the symbolic-expressive dimensions of social life."[4]

Two things in particular seem clear from Clifford's pithy observation: the term "culture" *is* a deeply compromised idea that seems to have no clear center of meaning. Like Sisyphus and his stone, our renewed efforts to give concrete shape to the term consistently fall back on us at the point when we seem closest to success. It would seem the most reasonable thing to do, after relentlessly qualifying the idea, would be to give up. And yet, again in agreement with Clifford, this term is one we cannot do without, for it refers to a reality that plays a decisive role in the sustenance and subversion of human life. For whatever reason we simply cannot walk away from the stone.

This project is an attempt to clarify the meaning of the term further in my own mind. As one whose life has been fundamentally reoriented by the triune God of Jesus Christ, and immeasurably enriched through cross-cultural experience, it is an attempt to bring the two realms of experience and thought together into a coherent and integrated whole. The point of focus for this task is the thought of the Scottish Reformed theologian Thomas F. Torrance

"Following the Line"

In an interview given in March of 1999 Pat Metheny, guitarist, composer, and founder of The Pat Metheny Group, one of the most successful and innovative jazz groups of the past thirty years, was asked to comment upon his musical philosophy and improvisational method.

4. Wuthnow et al., *Cultural Analysis*, viii. Wuthnow goes on to note that "the social sciences are in danger of abandoning culture entirely as a field of inquiry" due largely in part to the fact that the stuff of which culture is made: feelings, beliefs and values, cannot be empirically examined without a great deal of difficulty and expense (3). I imagine Torrance would say that here we have a case where the method of inquiry has been defined before the object of study has been engaged. Consequently, the object of study (culture) is either abandoned or turned into something else that is more conducive to the method of investigation we wish to employ. Conceptual tools that may be appropriate to another field of inquiry or other scientific goals will not suffice here. New conceptual tools must be developed to accommodate a different object of inquiry. We offer here some conceptual tools drawn from Torrance's thought that may grant us further insight into the reality we ambiguously refer to as "culture."

Metheny described his improvisational technique as linear and narrative. When improvising he is focused upon telling a story that has a beginning, middle, and end. Consequently, his improvisational technique is not based upon the random selection of individual notes but rather upon the progressive development of a single idea—whether that idea is melodic, harmonic, or rhythmic. Metheny's objective is to let that single idea be itself and to follow it to its natural conclusion, weaving it in and out of his improvisation, using it as a touchstone or organizing motif, with the goal of telling a story where that single idea holds center stage and impacts every other note he plays. Metheny calls this "following the line."

We find the same dynamic present in Torrance's thought when he refers to the Trinity as "the ground and grammar of theology."[5] "Following the line" seems an accurate and accessible way of describing the origin and goal of all theological reflection that seeks to be determined by the reality of God as triune. In order to gather the resources necessary for the development of a trinitarian theology of culture we will follow this line through three areas of Torrance's thought. Torrance suggests those areas himself when he notes the essential boundaries and dynamics of what he calls "theological science": "So far as theological science is concerned it is imperative that we operate with a *triadic relation* between God, man and world, or God, world and man: for it is this world unfolding its mysteries to our scientific questioning which is the medium of God's revelation and of man's responsible knowledge of him."[6]

Torrance refers to this "triadic relation" throughout his writings.[7] It provides the anchor that both grounds and integrates Torrance's theological project. The theological content of each pole, and how they are related, is essential to the integrity of the theological reflection based upon them. Torrance's thought is rigorously and consistently trinitarian. The work he has done integrating these three poles and filling them with content will be an asset to the project we are about to develop. The line we will follow will touch upon each of these areas and then

5. Torrance, *Ground and Grammar of Theology*.

6. Torrance, *Reality and Scientific Theology*, 69.

7. The most explicit and extended development of this "triadic relation" may be found in Torrance, *Reality and Evangelical Theology*, 21–30.

conclude by exploring a concept in Torrance's thought that assumes and incorporates his thinking in each of these areas.[8]

We begin this study with a consideration of Torrance's doctrine of God as triune Creator in chapter 1. Here we will specifically note how God's activity as Creator is conditioned and determined by his Being as triune. We will then follow the line originating in Torrance's doctrine of God through his doctrine of creation, noting its influence on this aspect of his thought. We will develop this particular area of his thought in two chapters. Chapter 2 will consider the created order specifically as "contingent," while chapter 3 will consider that same order as both fallen and redeemed. Chapter 4 will take us into a consideration of Torrance's theological anthropology and his understanding of human persons as "priests of creation" and "mediators of order", created in continuity with the contingent order, but also in distinction from it, as creatures given a unique constitution and identity and entrusted with a cultural task that is doxologically motivated. Our final task, in chapter 5, will be to "improvise" a theology of culture, something Torrance did not explicitly develop, that continues the trajectory of this line by rooting the origin, *telos,* and transformation of human culture in the triune being of God. We will be helped toward this final destination through a consideration of Torrance's concept of "the social coefficient of knowledge", a concept that is different from the components that have led us to it, but also profoundly integrated with, and founded upon, them. The argument of the final chapter will be to suggest the following: 1) This concept continues the trinitarian logic and line we have been following through Torrance's thought; 2) This concept, and the dynamics it seeks to describe, are based upon, and integrated with, Torrance's doctrines of God, creation, and humanity as developed in the preceding chapters; and 3) This concept may thus serve as a heuristic basis for the development of a theology of culture that is trinitarian in nature and congruent with Torrance's overall theological project.

8. The three areas mentioned by Torrance, and their interrelationships, are not unique to his thought. Many authors employ the doctrines of God, creation, and humanity to frame their reflections on the nature and goals of human cultural activity, even if the content of each area, and the dynamics between them, are variously defined.