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What Is Culture?

How can we speak about God without assuming that God is nothing but our speaking, nothing but our culture's effort to name what cannot be named? To answer this question we need to pay close attention to what we mean by culture, and how we use this very complex term both in our everyday language and especially in the language of faith. Defining either theology or culture is difficult, and any definition will be inadequate and contested. In fact, Raymond Williams, a pioneer in the sociology of culture, stated, "culture is one of the two or three most complicated words in the English language." Its complexity, he argued, is not only found in its "intricate historical development," which includes a shift from culture as a "noun of process" to a "metaphor" of human development, but also because "culture" has become a significant concept in "distinct and incompatible systems of thought."[1] Any discussion of culture must attend to these two concerns:

> *First*, culture is a metaphor and thus its precise meaning is difficult to discern. *Second*, as a metaphor, culture does not have the same significance

1. Williams, *Keywords*, 87.

> among different disciplines. Nor does it mean only one thing within them. Its meaning is in its use.

We will examine each of these concerns in turn.

Culture as Metaphor

Culture was once a noun similar in meaning to "cultivation." It was the activity and final product of what farmers, gardeners and others did to nature. Early generations could literally point to a "culture" by pointing to a strawberry patch or a field of corn and say "that is what culture means; it is the process that results in that." We still use the term culture in a similar way in biological experiments and medical science. We can point to the material growing in a petri dish and call it a "culture." Such a use of the term "culture" is not metaphorical; it is literal. Culture names the thing growing in the petri dish. But over the years the term "culture" shifted from a noun of a process to a "metaphor." This occurred when culture no longer applied to a discussion of what people did to the soil and other "natural" phenomena and instead applied the term to what happens to people. When this occurred, culture became a metaphor.

What does it mean to argue, as Williams does, that culture shifted from a noun of process to a metaphor? It means that today we often think of "culture" not as the process and product of what people do to "nature," which results in strawberries and growths in petri dish, but what happens to people themselves. Culture is a metaphor for a kind of "cultivation" that occurs to people through their practices, language, communities, doctrines, etc. Where "culture" once meant how one tilled the soil; today it has more to do with how persons

themselves are "tilled." And that is why culture is such a difficult term. I can easily point to a farmer riding on his "cultivator" (an old-style farm implement that would cover weeds by churning up the soil over them) and know what is meant by the term "cultivator," but what culture means when I use it as a metaphor for a process that happens to people is much more difficult to discern.

To understand culture as a metaphor for human cultivation, we must first answer the question, what is a metaphor? A metaphor is a surprising conjunction of terms. For instance if I say "God has the whole world in his hands," I am using the metaphor "God's hands." I do not literally mean God has hands even though I do literally mean God has everything in God's hands. If someone asks me, "How many hands does God have?", then they failed to understand how I am using language. I would respond by saying, "I didn't mean for you to take it literally, it was a metaphor."

Metaphors are notoriously difficult to explain. I can give a definition for each of the words in the expression, "God has the whole world in his hands," but would such definitions really lead to fuller understanding? They could be misleading. This is not because we would mistake the literal for the metaphorical reading; for if we do not understand the literal meaning of "God," "has," "whole," "world," and "hands," the metaphor cannot work. The philosopher Donald Davidson has argued "metaphors mean what the words in their most literal interpretation mean, and nothing more." We cannot substitute some alternative "true" meaning of the words in a metaphor for the literal meaning in order to understand it. A

metaphor is literal. But as Davidson also argues, "metaphor belongs exclusively to the domain of use."[2]

To make sense of a metaphor, we must know its literal meaning. Metaphorical meaning is not some alternative kind of meaning to the literal meaning, as if we somehow always translate the literal words into some other kind of words. Yet we cannot fixate on the literal meaning and think the metaphor seeks a one-to-one correspondence between the words used and that to which they refer. The metaphor used above would not work if someone began a search for God's hands. Instead, as Davidson notes, metaphors "make us attend to some likeness, often a novel or surprising likeness, between two or more things."[3] How does this help us understand culture? The term "culture" is a metaphor that posits a surprising likeness between a process that once applied to working the earth, which we now apply to human beings. We understand it best when we do not seek some "figurative" or "metaphorical" meaning but read it as a literal term now used metaphorically. For instance, if we do not know the literal meaning of the term "culture," we will fail to see its interesting use as a "metaphor" for human cultivation. We will forget that it is a surprising conjunction of terms. Therefore, rather than beginning with a succinct definition of the term "culture," I think more headway will be gained in understanding if we look less to the definition of the term "culture." in order to understand it and more to how we use it.

Let me give an example of how this works. Take the term "hammer." What is a hammer? According to the Oxford

2. Davidson, *Inquiries*, 247.
3. Ibid.

English Dictionary it is "an instrument having a hard solid head, usually of metal, set transversely to the handle, used for beating, breaking, driving nails, etc." But of course a moment's reflection shows that such a definition has a limited usefulness. If I am looking for a hammer in my tool shed with someone who did not know what a "hammer" is, could he use such a definition to assist me in finding a hammer? Suppose he asks me, "what are you looking for?" and I say "a hammer." "What is that," he replies, and I say, "An instrument having a hard solid head, usually of metal, set transversely to the handle, used for beating, breaking, driving nails, etc." This definition does help us some. It helps us recognize that a hammer is not a basketball. The information has some usefulness; it narrows down which objects in my tool shed fit the category and can even help us start our quest for the hammer in a general direction, but it would not help him determine what we are looking for. A number of objects might fit this definition—a hoe, hatchet, pickaxe, etc. I can always further clarify the definition until he realizes which object fits it, but even in this case, the definition has a limited usefulness. It only helps us find an object when someone had no idea what it was. This seldom occurs and is a strange way to think about how we normally learn and use language.

We seldom learn language by matching definitions with objects in the world. For the most part, we already "know our way around" in a language long before we learn, or construct, definitions of terms. We learn language through participating in everyday activities that require an understanding of the terms in order for us to know "how to go on." These are acquired habits and skills about which we can become self-

reflexive, but we do not have to be so in order to have them. Think how odd it would be if you were roofing with someone and you call out to her, "give me a hammer," only to get the response, "what exactly do you mean by 'hammer'? Do you mean an instrument having a hard solid head, usually of metal, set transversely to the handle, used for beating, breaking, driving nails, etc.?" How could you make sense of such a strange question in the midst of an activity like roofing? You would think she is crazy, pulling your leg, or showing off her knowledge of dictionary definitions. But you would not assume she is engaging well in the activity of roofing. Her question shows that she does not understand "how to go on" when a roofer calls out to his partner, "give me a hammer."

Language makes sense only within the context of everyday activities that we do not so much invent as inherit. I doubt that many people learned the term "hammer" because someone gave them a definition of it, and yet we know how to use it in a number of diverse contexts even when the term has different meanings. One such meaning is the example just cited above where someone is engaged in an activity and asks for a hammer. But if we are at a football game and watch someone get hit and say "he got hammered," we recognize that the term "hammer" is used similarly, yet with significant differences to how we used it while roofing. When I ask my brother to "give me a hammer" on a roof I am not inviting him to do to me what happened to this player in a football game. Because I know he is able to use language in this flexible manner I can fearlessly cry out to him "give me a hammer." The meaning of the term is defined by its use, and knowing the appropriate uses is as important as knowing what the words themselves

mean. If this is true of an ordinary term like "hammer," how much more is it true of a metaphor like culture.

Many discussions of theology and culture begin with a definition of culture. H. Richard Niebuhr did this in his well known book, *Christ and Culture*, which is one of the most important works on our topic. He stated, Culture is "that total process of human activity and that total result of such activity to which now the name culture, now the name civilization, is applied in common speech. . . It comprises language, habits, ideas, beliefs, customs, social organizations, inherited artifacts, technical process and values."[4] This definition is helpful. Culture is a "human activity." It is similar to the term "civilization." It relates to "language." But how much work does this definition actually do? It does have its uses. It distinguishes culture as a human activity from forms of activity that are other than human. It assumes a clear distinction between nature and culture as well as between human and divine activity. It points us in a general direction. Yet opposing culture to nature still requires more analysis for the term nature is as complex as the term culture. Nature can mean:

1. the essence of a thing which makes it what it is, as in "the nature" of humanity or "the nature" of song;
2. the human participation in God's eternal laws, which was known as the "natural" law and was available to all without the divine law given by the church;
3. the result of God's act of creation;
4. the state of being without grace;

4. Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture*, 32.

5. an uncultivated state, whether in politics or in biological growth as in the expression "a state of nature," or a "natural state"; or
6. fixed laws found in science.

Understanding culture in opposition to nature makes our task more difficult because of these diverse understandings of what we mean by "nature." The line between nature and culture is not easy to draw, which does not mean it cannot be drawn at all. Because the laws of physics or logic are natural and not human developments, they could be exempted from Niebuhr's definition of culture. Likewise theology based on divine activity rather than human activity could be other than culture. In fact, Niebuhr has to distinguish "culture" from "Christ" in order to compare and contrast them. Christ represents something other than culture; he is eternal and exempt from human making. This is what allows him to be related to "culture," which represents temporal, human activities. We will return to a discussion of Niebuhr's *Christ and Culture* below. For now, the key point is that while a definition of the term "culture" is certainly helpful, like a definition of the word "hammer," it only points us in a direction. To understand best what we mean by culture we will need to examine how the term gets used.