

A Theology of Culture: Desecularizing Anthropology

The presupposition of this paper is that the boundary between cultural anthropology and theology is artificial, constructed by modern thinking, and not founded upon biblical theology nor reality as a whole. The disciplines of theology and anthropology must merge, intermingle, and unify. This will produce a theology of culture that world missions desperately needs in order to evangelize the nations and finish the task.

by Gailyn Van Rheenen

Anthropology as a social science developed into a discipline during the modern era and assumed many of the presuppositions of enlightenment thinking. The rationalism and dichotomy of this era, perhaps beginning with the work of Descartes in the first half of the seventeenth century and extending into the twentieth century, have significantly shaped anthropology as a discipline.

According to the modern worldview, reality is divided into two large cognitive domains, the natural and the supernatural. Humans, guided by human reason and the laws of nature, operate within the natural realm and live largely independent of the spiritual. The academic discipline of anthropology studies human beings within in the natural realm, while theology deliberates on the supernatural. Even most *Christian* anthropologists become uncomfortable when the boundaries between anthropology and theology disintegrate.

The modern era, however, is coming to an end. Some conjecture that rejection of the modern worldview began during the third quarter of the twentieth century when science and human reason could not adequately respond to fears of nuclear holocaust, urban overcrowding, unresolvable military conflicts based on ethnic and religious differences, famine, and epidemics (Oden, 1990, 46-49). The psychological weight of the Jewish holocaust during the Second World War (Kung 1992, 443-45), the American defeat in Vietnam, and the pluralistic options of the informa-

tional age have amplified this disintegration. As the influence of the modern era wanes, the undergirding presuppositions and dichotomies of anthropology are being questioned. People have begun to ask spiritual questions concerning what modern man had called the natural realm.

In the post modern age people are beginning to think much more holistically and dichotomies in academic disciplines are fading. As a scholar of missions I welcome this integration, for the spiritual world could only artificially be segmented from the natural.

The presupposition of this paper is that the boundary between social or cultural anthropology and theology is artificial, constructed by modern thinking, and not founded upon biblical theology nor reality as a whole. The disciplines of theology and anthropology must merge, intermingle, and unify. If the dichotomies of modern thought are used, a missiologist must become both a Christian anthropologist and a culturally aware theologian. Anthropology cannot become Christian, nor be truly useful without the merging of these two disciplines.

To show the integration of anthropology and theology four influences which shape culture will be described from biblical revelation. God will be shown to be the Creator and Sustainer of culture, Satan is the contorter of culture, *Christis* God's anointed transformer of culture, and *humans* are God's designated rulers over culture and innovators within culture. Anthropology cannot

merely be viewed as a study of human culture, which exists autonomously outside of the spiritual realm. In this article a description of each influence shaping culture is given, along with their role in a *theologized anthropology*.

The Creator and Sustainer of Human Culture

Scripture portrays God not only as the creator of physical culture but also as originator of social culture. He instituted the foundations of marriage, work, and government. God realized that it was "not good for man to be alone so he made a helper suitable for him" (Gen. 2:18, 20b-24), thereby instituting the marriage relationship. He gave man responsibility to care for the garden (Gen. 2:15), and even after the fall, man was commanded to work by the sweat of his brow (Gen.3:19), thereby laying the foundations for work. God created man to rule over the fish of the sea, the birds of the air, all livestock, and all the earth (Gen. 1:26 27), thus establishing government. God must, therefore, be pictured as the creator of human culture.

Because God is Creator, He must be acknowledged as sovereign over every aspect of culture. This is the implied meaning of the Psalmist when he declared, "The earth is the Lord's and everything in it, the world, and all who live in it; for He founded it upon the seas, and established it upon the waters" (Psalm 24:1-2). Humans living without God, therefore, are "without excuse" because, "since the creation of the world, God's invisible quali-

ties—his eternal power and divine nature—have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made” (Rom. 1:20)

God is incomparable; no gods are like Him. After He delivered the Israelites from Egyptian captivity, Moses praised Him, saying, “Who among the gods is like you, O Lord? Who is like you—majestic in holiness, awesome in glory, working wonders?” (Exod. 15:11). God the Creator reigns as sovereign Lord over the universe.

God not only created culture but also actively works to sustain it. His sustaining of human social culture is seen in raising up judges to deliver the Israelites (Judge. 2:10-19), instituting *priests* to intercede for the people of Israel (Exod. 28-29; Lev. 8-9), sending *prophets* to proclaim his message to kings and the people (Jer. 1:54; 15:19; Amos 7:16; Ezek. 8:17), and giving His Son *Jesus Christ*, the Messiah to die for humankind (John 3:16).

God’s actions consistently reflect His desire to sustain His relationship with humankind. When Adam and Eve sinned against God, He walked in the garden searching for them, calling “Where are you?” (Gen. 3:10). After delivering the Israelites from Egyptian captivity, God defined his mission as bearing the Israelites “on eagles’ wings” and bringing them to Himself (Exod. 19:4). Because of human alienation, He established a covenant with Israel to be His priests to the nations (Exod. 19:5) and His light to the Gentiles (Isa. 42:6; 49:6).

Through Christ, God also upholds physical culture. Paul writes that in Christ “all things hold together” (Col. 1:17). The Hebrew letter describes Christ as “sustaining all things by his powerful word” (Heb. 1:3). While Satan and the resulting power of sin contorts culture, God seeks to sustain His personal relationship with humanity. God is, therefore, both the creator as well as the sustainer of culture.

God’s actions in sustaining culture result from the interaction of His two predominant attributes, love and holiness. In the Old Testament God is characterized by “steadfast love” (*hesed*). He is “compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness” (Exod. 34:6-7, cf. Num. 14:18; Neh. 9:17; Psa. 86:15; 103:8; 145:8; Joel 2:18; Jonah 4:2). In the New Testament this attribute is attested in the sending of God’s Son to become flesh and die for sinful humankind (Rom. 5:8). God’s eternal nature is love (1 John 4:7-8).

God, who is love, is also holy. The heavenly host reflects this quality by proclaiming, “Holy, holy, holy is the Lord God Almighty” (Isa. 6:3; Rev. 4:8). The sacrificial system described in Leviticus is based on a holy God desiring to unite sinful people with Himself. Therefore, God identifies Himself as “the Lord, who makes you holy” (Lev. 20:8).

God’s love and holiness define both why and how God relates to humankind. He did not merely create culture and leave it. He loved those He created and desires to live in a relationship to them. Yet He desires that human culture reflect His nature (1 Pet. 1:16; Lev. 11:44, 46). God, therefore, as a *holy God* feels our sins. He is like a father who tenderly loves his disobedient son (Hos. 11:1-11), a faithful husband who devotedly loves his unfaithful wife (Hos. 1-3), a husbandman who lovingly shapes and cultivates his unproductive vineyard (Isa. 5:1-7), and a physician who compassionately cares for the sick (Isa. 1:5-6; Matt. 9:12). God loves the world despite unholiness. God does not disengage from culture but works for spiritual revitalization of culture from within.

Some missiologists have expressed the view that God is “supracultural”—“beyond and above culture.” There is some truth in this description because God is not bound by culture; however. He has not separated Himself from culture; He continually interacts with His

creation in and through culture. Some theologians have also expressed the view that God “intervenes” in human history. The view acknowledges God’s active work in the world but implies that He is a cultural outsider who must enter human cultures.

If Christian ministers and missionaries only perceive God working in culture, without the concurrent working of Satan, they will conclude that humankind, as well as the culture in which they live, is intrinsically good. Christian ministry will, therefore, affirm the value of culture, rather than work in opposition to it

The Contortor of Human Culture

Despite disclaimers of the modern mind that the malevolent realm cannot exist, Satan (as well as God) is active in shaping human culture. The Bible shows Satan as a distinct, malevolent personality who has opposed the work of God “from the beginning” (1 John 3:8). The terms *Satan* (the adversary) and *devil* (the slanderer) are used interchangeably to describe the pernicious being who was hurled from heaven with his angels and now “leads the whole world astray” (Rev. 12:9). In his control over the unbelieving world he is described as *the ruler of this world*. Because of his control over contemporary culture, he is called “the god of this age” (2 Cor. 4:4), who blinds the unbelievers so that they cannot see the light of the gospel; “the ruler of the kingdom of the air” (Eph. 2:2), who works in the disobedient; and “the tempter” (I Thess. 3:5), who causes new Christians to fall away from their relationship with God. He is a real being, not a mere projection of evil upon a spiritual personality and thus a creation of the human mind (Wink 1986,26-30). He is the great usurper who attempts to stand in the place of God

While culture had its origins in God, Satan tempted humankind to fall away from God. In doing so, he fractured the harmony of the universe, intro-

duced an allegiance alien to God's design, and disrupted the unity and relation of humanity and divinity.

Kent Smith describes four alienations which occurred in the Fall (1989, 18- 21). First, there was an alienation from self. Humans felt shame. No longer were Adam and Eve comfortable with themselves as they were created. They felt compelled to cover themselves (Gen. 2:25; 3:7, 10). There was also an alienation between humans. Adam blamed Eve for his disobedience (Gen. 2:12), Cain killed Abel (Gen. 4), and before the flood the hearts of people were "only evil all the time" (Gen. 6:5). Also there was an alienation from creation. The ground was cursed and began to produce thorns and thistles. God said to Adam, "Cursed is the ground because of you... It will produce thorns and thistles for you... By the sweat of your brow you will eat your food until you return to the ground" (Gen. 8:17). An element of hostility was introduced in man's relationship with the physical universe.

Most significantly however, there was an alienation from God. The intimate, personal relationship that Adam and Eve had with God suddenly became a terrifying prospect. Adam and Eve, perceiving this rupture, hid from God. Ultimately, they were forced out of the garden, separated from God's presence, and barred from reentry. Sin alienated Cain from God so completely that "He went out from the Lord's presence" (Gen. 4:16b), estranged the world from God during the days of Noah (Gen. 8:5-6); and gave those building the tower of Babel an identity apart from God (Gen. 11:4). Thus the ultimate consequence of the fall was alienation (of self, of others, of the creation, and above all of God). Sin had separated humanity and divinity, a breach running through the entire creation, spanned only by God's acts of reconciliation.

The fall projected a false authority—Satan, the archenemy of God ruling over humankind. While God created culture, the fall allowed Satan to reign where God, by virtue of creation, should rightfully rule. The fall opened the door to the rule of Satan. However, even in the fall humankind did not totally lose "the image of God" (Gen. 5:1; 9:6; James 3:9). Humans were not to kill (Gen. 9:6) or curse (James 3:9) because

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they were made in the image of God.

Because Satan has usurped God's rightful reign, Christians are today engaged in spiritual warfare. Paul describes this confrontation in terms of a military metaphor because of the reality and intensity of the confrontation:

Put on the full armor of God so that you can take your stand against the devil's schemes. For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms. (Eph. 6:11-12)

Satan has indeed become "the god of this world" (2 Cor. 4:4) for those who do not believe (Eph. 1:19)!

How then should Christians view the relationship between Satan and culture? Christians may correctly perceive that the world is the domain of Satan, the arena where satanic influence has displaced that of God. "The whole world is under the control of the evil one" (1 John 5:19). Missionaries will need to conclude that humankind is basically evil, contorted by satanic influences and will, consequently, oppose cultural standards.

Using Niebuhr classifications, they will view Christ as *against culture*, rather than of *culture* (Niebuhr 1951). The

praxis of Christianity will involve models of action in opposition to or rejection of culture: spiritual warfare by those believing spiritual are real and active; liberation theology by those who perceive Satan's malevolence in the social structure; or ascetic withdrawal by those who desire to retreat from the midst of a sinful world to recreate the kingdom of God.

God's Anointed Transformer of Human Culture

Paul in Ephesians 2 sets forth the roles of God and Satan within human culture and also introduces the role of Christ. He depicts the sinful condition of unbelievers under Satan, summarized by the word

death (vss. 1-3). Satan is described as "the ruler of the kingdom of the air, the spirit who is now at work in those who are disobedient" (vs 2). Contrary to contemporary secular understanding, sin is not merely due to lusts of the flesh but also related to Satan's tempting enticements. Thus the "ruler of the kingdom of the air" (vs 2) is at work within "the cravings of our sinful nature" (vs 3a). Because of satanic-related sin, unbelievers are "by nature objects a wrath" (vs. 3b), "dead in (their) transgressions and sins" (vs. 1). These verses are immensely depressing if read by themselves without their fuller context. However, Paul emphasizes the darkness of satanic servitude and sin as a backdrop to make God's love and mercy shine more brightly.

Although believers were once dead in sin (vss. 1-3), God has, made them *alive in Christ* (vss. 4-6). While the preceding verses depict *death*, this section reflects *life*. God's great love undergirds the entire passage. "God who is rich in mercy" gives life to those "dead in transgressions" (vs. 4), reconciling fallen humankind to Himself in Jesus Christ and seating them "with him in the heavenly realms" (vs.6)!

The apostle Paul then describes the

essence of salvation (vss 7-10). The believer has been saved “by *grace* through faith” (vs 8). The believer, who was once dead in sin, has been made alive with God because of His great love and compassion. These eternal qualities motivate God to enter human culture to provide the gift of salvation in Jesus Christ.

God’s activities in Jesus Christ have healed the alienations brought about by Satan and initiated at the fall (vss. 11-22). Gentiles were once “separate from Christ, excluded from citizenship in Israel and foreigners to the covenants of promise, without hope and without God in the world” (vs. 12). But those alienated from God have been “brought near because of the blood of Christ (vs. 13). Christ has unified both humanity with divinity as well as humanity with humanity. Christ is the “peace” who has, destroyed the barriers between Jew and Gentile and reconciled both in Jesus Christ (vss. 14-18). Believers are, therefore, no longer “foreigners and aliens, but fellow citizens with God’s people and members of God’s household” (vs. 19). The fragmentations initiated at the fall when Satan tempted Adam and Eve are mended in Jesus Christ.

Two passages succinctly define the purpose of Christ’s ministry: “The Son of Man came to seek and to save what was lost” (Luke 19:9b), and “The reason the Son a God appeared was to destroy the devil’s “work” (1 John 3:8b.). Westerners use the first passage to define Jesus’ ministry in terms of individual salvation. However, the metaphor portrays Christ as a shepherd seeking any who are lost. Salvation extends even to tax collectors like Zacchaeus, who were intensely hated by the Jews because of injustices wrought upon them on behalf of an external political power. The second passage portrays Christ’s cosmic battle with the forces of Satan. Westerners find this passage more difficult to interpret

because it is incompatible with their secular cosmologies. While the first metaphor pictures Christ as the saving shepherd, the second portrays Him as a mighty warrior seeking to defeat God’s ultimate opponent. Holding those two metaphors in tension—Christ as loving shepherd yet mighty warrior—helps the Christian to define his perception of Christ.

What, then, is the role of Christ and culture within culture? First, Christ is God’s anointed redeemer and transformer of culture. Culture, in its beliefs, values, and allegiances, has fallen away from God. The gods of this world have replaced God. Sin has become pervasive. Bribery and corruption, rape and murder, sensuality and promiscuity, violence and hatred have become institutionalized and are found on all levels of society and culture. Estranged humankind feels the burden of sin and the tensions of the alienations from self, from other people, from creation, and above all from God.

Anthony Wallace, the anthropologist of religions, describes revitalization movements which occur during times of cultural stress and disillusionment with existing cultural beliefs. He outlines five stages of a revitalization cycle: *the steady stage*, when concepts of birth, life, and death are comprehensible and believable; *the period of increased individual stress*, when tension increases and individual members of a culture have difficulty coping with personal problems; *the period of cultural distortion*, when stress rises to intolerable limits and prophetic voices call the people back to the old ways or to new, distinctive patterns; *the period of revitalization*, when culture is reformulated around a new, distinctive perspective of reality; and *the new steady stage*, when a new worldview has taken root and the resulting beliefs, values, and behaviors have proven themselves viable. Wallace thus gives a paradigm of the process of cultural change (1956).

Sweeping change to Christianity usually occurs during times of individual stress and cultural distortion. During these times, people are crying for change. They are like the multitudes described by Jesus: “harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd” (Matt 9:36). In such contexts sin has demoralized and alienated people from God. God has anointed Christ to break the chains of such sin and transform culture by reconciling believers to Himself.

Christ is not only the revitalizer of culture, but He is also God’s designated sovereign over culture. In an attempt to negate syncretism in the Colossian church, Paul acknowledges Christ to be “the head over every power and authority” (Col. 2:9). The Colossians were tempted to fall away from Christ and depend upon the basic principles (*stoicheia*) of this world (Col. 2:6-8). *Stoicheia* are literally the rudimentary principles, the ABCs, of culture. These are structures or rules which have been influenced by Satan. Paul challenges the Colossians, “Since you died with Christ to the basic principles (*stoicheia*) of the world, why, as though you still belonged to it, do you submit to *its rules*” (Col. 2:20). The “basic principles” are defined as the “rules” which limit the lordship of Christ since He is not their author. In Colossae the *stoicheia* included legalistic observance of the law, asceticism, the worship of angels, and rituals of handling, touching, and tasting (Col. 2:16-21). By observing these strictures of Satan, the Colossians were losing their “connection with the Head,” Jesus Christ (Col. 2:19).

In other words, the Colossians were allowing the rules laid down by Satan to displace the sovereignty of Christ. Although they considered themselves to be in Christ, they were still controlled by Satan’s rules. Because “fullness of deity lives [in Christ] in bodily form,” He is to be “the head over

every power and authority” (Col. 2:9). Deep biblical revitalization occurs when Christ truly becomes Lord, reigning where the powers once ruled. Christ, therefore, is not only the redeemer and transformer of culture but also God’s designated sovereign over culture!

God’s Appointed Rulers and Innovators Within Culture

The phrase “image of God” (Gen. 1:26-27; 2:8) helps clarify the place of mankind within culture. On the one hand, this phrase elevates humans over all other parts of God’s creation. It demonstrates that God has put the “spark of divinity” in humanity. Humankind is thus not comparable to the animals over whom God has given mankind dominion. (Gen. 1:26). On the other hand, this phrase limits humans. They are made in the “image of God” but are not God. Humans are creatures, not creators; they are finite, not infinite. The perspective of the “image of God” enables one to better understand two significant roles of mankind within culture: humans are God-ordained rulers over culture and innovators within it

Humans were created to rule over God’s creation, including both his physical and social culture. They were to “rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air, over the livestock, over all the earth, and over all the creatures that move along the ground” (Gen. 1:26, 28). David acknowledged human elevation over creation, “You made him ruler over the works of your hands; you put everything under his feet: all flocks and herds...” (Psa. 8:6-7).

Mankind’s “rule” over God’s earth, however, was to reflect the attributes of God. As vice-regents over God’s creation, mankind was to care for it. Thus Adam and Eve were put in the Garden of Eden “to work it and take care of it” (Gen.2:15). Humans were, likewise, to care for social culture. From the beginning God gave social injunctions demonstrating how He desired His people to live in this world. The Ten

Commandments describe both divine-human relationships (Exod. 20:2-11) and human-human relationships (Exod. 20:12-17). Jewish prophets preached against social injustices (Amos 5:21-24, Hos. 6:4-6; Micah 6:6-8, Isa. 1:10-17). Because humans are God’s vice-regents, they must reflect His attributes in their dominion over culture.

Scripture also shows humans to be creative innovators within cultures. Culture was not created to be static but to change as it was ruled by humanity under God’s sovereign hand. Material and social culture both began very simply and expanded as they were developed by God’s vice-regents.

Sometimes human innovations were in line with the will of God. God desired that humankind name the animals and birds (Gen. 2:19-20). God drove Cain from the ground because of his disobedience yet protected him while he built the first city (Gen. 4:15-17). His descendants also domesticated animals (Gen. 4:20), developed musical instruments (Gen. 4:21), and invented bronze and iron metalworking (Gen. 4:22). Human innovations, however, were at times overt rebellions against God. For example, humans built a tower to unify themselves so that they might not be scattered over the face of the earth (Gen. 11:4) as God commanded (Gen. 1:28). Rather than obey God, mankind egotistically sought to “make a name” for themselves, seeking their identity apart from God (Gen. 11:1-9).

Human innovation, nor mankind’s rebellion, negate continued divine innovation. God innovated the rainbow as a symbol of his decision not to destroy all living creatures again by rain (Gen. 9:12-16), instituted circumcision as a sign of God’s relationship with Israel (Gen. 17:9-14), and established the Lord’s Supper and baptism as Christian rites. God continues to work despite mankind’s confidence in their own inventiveness and rebellion.

Social scientists, even many who are

Christians, have emphasized the human dimension of culture without fully perceiving the influences of God, Satan, and Christ. One missionary anthropologist, for instance, writes, “Indeed, as far as the behavioral sciences can tell, humans originally created culture” (Kraft 1980, 47). This perspective is blatantly secular. Christian ministers and missionaries must not succumb to the secularism of their age that would ascribe human origins to all phenomena. Our eyes must be opened to see the reality of the working of God, Satan, and Christ within the human arenas of life. Christian ministers and missionaries must understand all four influences which work to shape human culture:

- God forms us.
- Satan deforms us.
- Christ transforms us.
- We reform.

How, then, should missiologists understand the discipline of anthropology. It is not merely a secular enterprise describing humans who act autonomously in the world. Whether explicitly understood or not, the initiatives of God, the disruptions of Satan, and cleansing and redemption of Jesus Christ are spiritual activities within culture.

Such an understandings will also guide missiologists and missionaries to evaluate culture correctly. Generally speaking, culture cannot easily be categorized as *good*, *bad*, or *neutral*. The influences shaping culture are complicated and frequently contradictory, impossible easily categorize. The world is described in a parable of Jesus as a field of intermingled wheat and tares (Matt. 13:24-30, 37-43). Christians are called to patiently wait and “let both grow together until the harvest” (Matt. 13:30). At the harvest angels of God will separate the wheat and tares, gathering the wheat into God’s storehouse and casting the tares into eternal fire. The influences of God, Satan, Christ, and humanity are intertwined in the same culture and even within the same heart.

There is, consequently, no room for human ethnocentrism which ascribes *good* to one's own culture but *bad* to another. Good and bad exist in every culture as a result of the presence of God and Satan, which implies that no culture can be simplistically classified as one or the other. There is no such thing as a *natural* culture since in every culture the influences of God and Satan are vying for human allegiance.

Christians within human culture struggle to be faithful as they engage in spiritual warfare. This spiritual struggle, felt within every human heart and every cultural context, is not optional. It is rooted in the reality that the kingdoms of God and Satan stand opposed to one another. Christian ministers and missionaries, however, cannot reject human culture. Like Christ, who "became flesh and made his dwelling among us" (John 1:14), they must communicate in the languages and thoughts of human cultures. Believers, therefore, are "aliens and strangers" in a foreign world (1 Pet. 2:11); they live in the earthlies but belong to the heavenlies (Eph- 2:6); they are "*in* the world" but not "*of* the world" (John 17:14-16). Their very distinctiveness enables them to call the unbelieving from the kingdom of Satan to the kingdom of God, from the realm of darkness to the realm of light. Christian ministers and missionaries, therefore, enter cultural arenas "like sheep among wolves," who must be "as shrewd as snakes and as innocent as doves" (Matt 10:16) as they perceive what human, divine, and satanic influences shape particular cultural milieu. Ultimately, missions seeks to bring every aspect of culture under the rule of God. Missionaries are God's instruments to bring those ruled by Satan under the sovereignty and love of God.

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