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“Bill Edgar’s *Created and Creating* is the most thorough and the most solidly biblical contribution to the current discussion of Christ and culture. Edgar’s analysis of the historical discussion is wonderfully erudite and nuanced. His treatment of biblical texts and principles is deep and cogent. His conclusion is that God’s cultural mandate to Adam is still in effect and that the Great Commission of Jesus applies that mandate to a world lost in sin. I hope and pray that many will read this book and take its message to heart.”

John Frame, professor of systematic theology and philosophy,
Reformed Theological Seminary

“I have been waiting for this book since I first met Dr. Edgar. I can count on one hand the people who are qualified to write such a work, and Bill Edgar is at the top of the list. He is a Christian theologian who is also an expert in cultural studies. This should be the first volume one reads when questions of Christianity and culture are broached.”

K. Scott Oliphint, professor of apologetics and systematic theology,
Westminster Theological Seminary in Philadelphia

“Christians are often confused or even fearful about cultural trends. The help they need is clearly and accessibly offered in Bill Edgar’s book. It is biblical, gently Reformed, and written with wisdom and grace.”

William Dyrness, professor of theology and culture, Fuller Theological Seminary

“Edgar undertakes the important task of evaluating the concept of culture through a rich biblical-theological lens that diagnoses, affirms, and challenges the contemporary view of cultural dynamics. This work is not only valuable for understanding what Scripture has to say about culture, but also helpful for seeing how Scripture interacts with the constantly evolving concerns of culture in our modern world.”

Stephen T. Um, senior minister of Citylife Presbyterian Church of Boston

CREATED
&
CREATING
A BIBLICAL THEOLOGY
of CULTURE



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For Os and Jenny Guinness

Dear friends, passionate for God and his truth,

models of cultural engagement

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As the reader will discover, this book is somewhat narrow in focus. It is a biblical theology of culture, with a certain amount of consideration for our contemporary context. Its treatment of various hot-button issues facing the church (and the world) today is thus somewhat limited. I do hope nevertheless that the book will help provide a framework for approaching these issues.

Introduction

By culture I mean a repertoire of socially transmitted and intra-generationally generated ideas about how to live and make judgments, both in general terms and in regard to specific domains of life.

ORLANDO PATTERSON

WHAT HAPPENED?

July of 2014 saw the debacle of the Brazilian soccer team at the World Cup semifinal. On their own soil, the Brazilians lost to Germany in a stunning 7–1 upset. The Germans kept on scoring, easily outwitting Brazil’s defense. Even considering the absence of two of their star players from the game, the brilliant striker Neymar (injured) and the team captain Thiago Silva (suspended), the Brazilian team looked like anything but the dazzling artists of “samba football” the world had come to admire. The match was one of the most discussed sports games in history, including some 32.57 million tweets within months of the event. Brazilian fans were escorted by police out of the Mineirão Stadium in Belo Horizonte for safety’s sake.

Lots of blame went around in the days following the defeat. Coach Luiz Felipe Scolari, who resigned, was excoriated by the press. Looking a bit deeper, Brazil’s sports minister Aldo Rebelo said, “I have already denounced this.” What did he mean? He had already seen several problems before the 2014 catastrophe, and he targeted what he saw as the weakening of Brazil’s sports because of the allure of money from the First World. He blamed young players for moving to Europe too early in their lives. “This is a type of football colonialism exercised by rich teams in

Europe,” he quipped. But going even deeper, the most thoughtful critics decided that all of Brazilian soccer needed to be rethought. South American football journalist Tim Vickery expressed the opinion of many when he suggested that Brazilian club football had become smug, complacent, and was in dire need of an overhaul. He saw it as a chance to “recapture parts of its historic identity and reframe them in a modern, global context.”¹ A number of commentators agreed, calling for a change in Brazilian soccer culture. What would that mean? In the World Cup, Brazil never displayed its traditional “Jogo Bonito,” or “Beautiful Game.” How were they to revive it?

“Brazilian football has to evolve in general,” team member Dani Alves said. “We can’t discredit the work that has been done by this team, but we have to find a way to start restructuring our football from the youth levels up.” A consensus is emerging. “We need to think football differently,” said Brazilian coach Paulo Autuori, who led Sao Paulo to the Club World Cup title in 2005. “We need the Brazilian confederation in the hands of people from football. We need people in charge who can think football.”²

A bit of history. After the glorious Brazilian victories of 1970, 1994, and 2002, Europeans redesigned their own soccer culture. They created football academies that were basically talent factories. According to one thoughtful account, Brazil had turned into a boring national team long before the 2014 World Cup. They forgot their attacking, creative roots that turned Brazil into the greatest football nation in the world. Any team can hire huge center backs, good full backs, and energetic midfielders. But Brazil used to be the only place to grow the so-called *fantasists* such as Garrincha, Pelé, Rivaldo, Sócrates, and so many more. It was time to become special again!³ In a word, *cultural change must be on the agenda*. This means working through the grassroots: informal play on the beach, camps for young people, player farm systems, scouting—in short, all the ways soccer is featured throughout Brazil.

¹Tim Vickery, “Brazil Must Learn Lessons from Germany Humiliation,” BBC News, July 9, 2014, www.bbc.com/sport/football/28223138.

²Associated Press. “Brazil Rethinking National Team’s Future After Disastrous Loss, Failure in Home World Cup,” *Kelowna Daily Courier*, July 14, 2014, www.kelownadailycourier.ca/sports/national_sports/article_8d4d5a18-c4e4-563f-b14a-da8aeb9c3fa.html.

³Ouriel Daskal, “Brazil Has Some Rethinking to Do,” *Soccer Issue* (blog), July 8, 2014, www.soccerissue.com/2014/07/08/brazil-has-some-rethinking-to-do/. See Emilio Garofalo Neto, “The Soccer World Cup of 2010 as Sub-creation: An Analysis of Human Play Through a Theological Grid of Creation-Fall-Redemption” (PhD diss., Reformed Theological Seminary, 2012), 167-71.

Culture! Soccer—football—is the world’s most popular sport. Different countries will feature this game in variants according to their own cultural commitments. That is the way culture works. Historically, soccer had been a working-class game. Recently it has appealed more and more to the middle class. Many stadiums are male-dominated, although women are now beginning to populate the grandstands as well, even in the Latin countries. Women’s soccer has taken a giant leap forward, and the United States’ team has become a phenomenon. Many countries have daily soccer journals. The referee plays a crucial role. So do postgame discussions. Various regulations, such as the offside rules, or handballs, could easily be controlled electronically; however, that would eliminate the much-needed postgame debates about umpires, goalkeepers, and player intentions. Many supporters back their teams with football chants, some of them, oddly to the uninitiated, based on hymns such as “Guide Me O Thou Great Jehovah,” or “When the Saints Go Marching In.” In some countries soccer has something of a religious status.

As is certainly the case in Brazil, soccer culture in many countries begins with the very young. Children wear jerseys with the names and numbers of their favorite players. Their video games are based on soccer. Whereas in places like the United States or the Dominican Republic kids toss a baseball around, or shoot basketball hoops in parking lots, in most countries they kick the soccer ball and learn very early how to dribble and head it. Variations on soccer styles are developed in each part of the world, ones that children pick up quite early. In South America, ball control is considered most crucial. In Africa, speed is the decisive element. Strength and accuracy are associated with European teams. Because of globalization, players from various countries are hired to play on teams in foreign lands, bringing their traditions with them. In some countries foreign players outnumber the nationals, which creates a certain amount of confusion. Soccer is a major cultural phenomenon.⁴

CULTURE AND EDUCATION

Here is another. I attended a French elementary school in Paris, where our family lived after World War II. In contrast to most American schools, we learned a good deal by rote. By the age of ten I had memorized large portions

⁴See Franklin Foer, *How Soccer Explains the World: An Unlikely Theory of Globalization* (New York: HarperCollins, 2010).

of poetry and prose by the most prominent French authors. I could draw most of the organs of the human body with considerable accuracy, and in color. We learned addition and multiplication by chanting, so that today I still balance my checkbook with sing-song numerical operations. Report cards were short and to the point: “Good student,” “most polite,” or “should work harder.” There were virtually no organized sports. Public humiliation when a student had not grasped something was acceptable.

I was then sent to an American boarding school. Though stricter than most state schools, learning and assessments in this prep school were very different from what I had experienced in France. We needed to know *why* a math problem was solved a certain way. Our critical evaluations of a text from English literature were solicited. Could the American Revolution have gone the other way, and if so, what would the results have been? Reports to the parents were long and rather psychological: “William feels better about himself this year than last.” “Edgar’s grasp of computation is more skilled than his verbal ability.” And so forth. We spent hours on the sports field, especially, for me, the soccer field, which I loved. Parents’ Day allowed my folks a good deal of personal contact with the instructors, whereas back in France I am not sure my parents knew a single one of my teachers. In the United States a teacher could get fired, or even prosecuted, for humiliating a student. The pupil is rarely *wrong*, but just needs another way to look at the problem.

Clearly, educational models fall within realm of culture. While things have no doubt loosened up since my childhood, French schools still operate on the basis of memorization and the ability to reiterate lectures. There is a history to such methods. French education is basically hierarchical. The threefold division, primary, secondary, and higher, goes back to the Constituent Assembly and Napoleon’s rational legislative approach. A great deal is based on competition. *Les concours* (national contests) are found at every level. At the age of eighteen you are expected to take the nationwide exam, called the *baccalauréat*. Passing means admission to higher education and other open doors. Those who don’t survive end up in “technical” education or apprenticeships.

Although the French approach is not altogether negative, it does foster certain attitudes that tend to stay with you the rest of your life. For example, a musician must typically go through the conservatory system to get anywhere. Music schools in France are a pyramid, leading, when the right combination

of what you know and who you know allows, to the top conservatory in Paris. So there is always a pressure to compete. Another attitude fostered is the love-hate relation to authority. With the exception of the kindly teacher who refuses to engage in humiliation, most teachers are considered “managers” who must be obeyed or, in some cases, resisted. Raw defiance is rare, but classes often develop a sense of group solidarity with common antipathy for certain teachers. No doubt this is why Marxist dialectics took deeper root in France than in countries such as the United States.

OTHER EXAMPLES

Sometimes an awareness of culture leads to a clear diagnosis, which can lead to a clear mandate. Anne Snyder, a writer currently working at the Laity Lodge Leadership Initiative, who was previously a research assistant for *New York Times* editorialists David Brooks and Ross Douthat, poignantly recounts a conversation held on an airplane to Houston, her current home, with a man who, based on age and dress, looked fairly similar to her. The man found out that she had gone to college in Chicago and Boston, and had had overseas experience. She told him more of her life story. He volunteered, “You know what makes all of us who we are, what shapes our lens on the world and expands or limits our life possibilities? Culture! Not skin color, not money.”⁵ He was a Mexican American who had lived most of his life in Texas and worked for a small boutique bank. Why did he exclaim as he did? Because, he said, Snyder was able to get out, to explore, to go where she wanted and call it home. Because of his culture, he could not. Her article goes on to plead for the church to get a better handle on culture in order to overcome this kind of divide. To do so the church will have to interact with the thoughtful people who are aware of culture.

The business world offers abundant examples. John Kotter believes that businesses cannot change for the better because they don’t recognize the role of culture. Writing for *Forbes* magazine, he says, “Here is the problem. First, virtually no one clearly defines what they mean by ‘culture,’ and when they do they usually get it wrong. Second, virtually no one has read the original research that shows why culture—when clearly defined—is so important, how it is formed, and how it changes.”⁶ Kotter then ventures his

⁵Anne Snyder, “Inequality in an Acre,” *Comment*, Fall 2014, 39.

⁶John Kotter, “The Key to Changing Organizational Culture,” *Forbes*, September 27, 2012, www.forbes.com/sites/johnkotter/2012/09/27/the-key-to-changing-organizational-culture.

own definition: “Culture consists of group norms of behavior and the underlying shared values that help keep those norms in place. Take your work, for example, a place where almost everyone shows up between 8:55 and 9:05. Why? Not because the CEO has decreed it, or because people are fired if they don’t do it. That’s just the way it is!” If businesses are going to change for the better, they will have to be aware of cultural dynamics.

RECENT AWAKENINGS

In recent times, culture has gotten the attention of commentators and analysts. Part of this recognition has been brought about by the sea change that occurred at the end of the Cold War. Considering the major transformation in the world’s geopolitical configuration since the “miracle year” of 1989, David Brooks, an opinion writer for the *New York Times*, remarks on what he considers to be the principal challenge of the twenty-first century.

Events have forced different questions on us. If the big contest of the 20th century was between planned and free-market economies, the big questions of the next century will be understanding how cultures change and can be changed, how social and cultural capital can be nurtured and developed, how destructive cultural conflict can be turned to healthy cultural competition.⁷

He is not alone. Nassrine Azimi is the senior advisor of the United Nations Institute for Training and Research (UNITAR). She often remarks on the need to recognize the important role of culture in nation-building in the contemporary world.

Usually the roles of the military, the strong role of economics, humanitarian relief, education, governance, and the like, are on top of the agenda. But there is a strange neglect of the one element that matters most: culture. As the sign upon the entrance of the Kabul Museum of Afghanistan reads: “A nation is alive if its culture is alive.”⁸

Several countries today are becoming aware of the importance of culture in their development. For example, in 1990 Ghana established a National Commission on Culture, whose stated purpose is

⁷David Brooks, “Questions of Culture,” *New York Times*, February 21, 2006, 9, <http://query.nytimes.com/gst/fullpage.html?res=9807E4D7103EF93AA25751C0A9609C8B63>.

⁸Nassrine Azimi, “Do Not Neglect Culture,” *New York Times*, May 8, 2007, www.nytimes.com/2007/05/08/opinion/08iht-edazimi.1.5618492.html.

to manage from a holistic perspective, the Cultural life of the country. In the execution of the aforementioned, the National Commission on Culture is enjoined, among other things, to promote the evolution of an integrated National Culture, supervise the implementation of programmes for the preservation, promotion and representation of Ghana tradition and values; and perform such other functions as may be prescribed by government.⁹

Thus culture is being revived at least in part because tried-and-true explanations for world events, particularly economic ones, seem both dated and shallow.

A curious development occurred in 2014. Merriam-Webster, the largest publisher of dictionaries, declared that “culture” was on top of the list of words most consulted by readers of their online English dictionary.¹⁰ Each year, based on more than 100,000 “lookups” per month, the publisher decides which word or concept most captured people’s interest. *Culture* came out ahead of *nostalgia*, *insidious*, *legacy*, *feminism*, and other terms. Peter Sokolowski, editor at large for the dictionary, explains:

Culture is a word that we seem to be relying on more and more. It allows us to identify and isolate an idea, issue, or group with seriousness. And it’s efficient: we talk about the “culture” of a group rather than saying “the typical habits, attitudes, and behaviors of that group.” So we think that it may be the increased use of this newer sense of the word culture that is catching people’s attention and driving the volume of lookups.

Joshua Rothman from the *New Yorker* elucidates that this phenomenon is not altogether positive. Many people forget that the word used to mean personal, humane enrichment, whereas now at best it refers to “unconscious groupthink.”¹¹

A concern with culture has virtually flooded the academic world. In his foreword to a collection of essays titled *Culture Matters*, Samuel Huntington, the editor, states, “Increasingly social scientists turned [in the years beyond the 1980s] to cultural factors to explain modernization, political democratization, military strategy, the behavior of ethnic groups, and the alignment of antagonisms among countries.” He goes on to explain that most of the scholars

⁹See their website, Ghana National Commission on Culture, www.ghanaculture.gov.gh/index.php.

¹⁰See “2014 Word of the Year,” *Merriam-Webster.com*, December 15, 2014, www.merriam-webster.com/word-of-the-year/2014-word-of-the-year.htm.

¹¹Joshua Rothman, “The Meaning of ‘Culture,’” *The New Yorker*, December 26, 2014, www.newyorker.com/books/joshua-rothman/meaning-culture, quoted in Jay Tolson, “What Is It About Culture?,” *THR* (blog), January 29, 2015, <http://iasc-culture.org/THR/channels/THR/2015/01/what-is-it-about-culture/>.

in the book “played major roles in the renaissance of culture.”¹² Indeed, the authors gathered between the covers represent an impressive group. To name but a few: Jeffrey Sachs, Francis Fukuyama, Barbara Crossette, Orlando Patterson, Nathan Glazer, Tu Wei-Ming, and Lawrence E. Harrison.

RECENT CHRISTIAN VIEWS OF CULTURE

Christians have also gotten into the act. Andy Crouch’s seminal book *Culture Making* is an appeal to improve our recognition of the importance of culture, using the metaphor of passages: we need to move from the innocence of childhood, through the awareness of youth, to the responsibility of adulthood, he argues.¹³ Crouch praises the church for becoming much more aware of the role of culture in proclaiming its message than in the past, but he pleads for still more depth, and for more application.¹⁴

A somewhat different plea, at least on the surface, comes from sociologist James Davison Hunter. Known for his earlier work *Culture Wars*,¹⁵ Hunter’s *To Change the World* represents both a complex approach to the way culture works and a sharp critique of those who reduce culture to “worldview” or “values.”¹⁶ Hunter asserts that “culture, at root, provides the very terms by which life is ordered.” His own vision is for the church to maintain a “faithful presence,” rather than what he considers to be the imperialistic strategy of those who believe in leveraging culture either in politics or other “winner-takes-all” schemes. His alternative to worldview thinking is *formation*, or what one used to call discipleship. “Formation, then, is fundamentally about changing lives. It is the church’s task of teaching, admonishing, and encouraging believers in the course of their lives in order to present them ‘as complete in Christ,’ ‘fit for any calling.’”¹⁷

The list goes on. A fascinating study on how to understand and apply culture is *Everyday Theology*. The book contains chapters on such diverse

¹²Samuel P. Huntington, foreword to *Culture Matters: How Values Shape Human Progress*, ed. Lawrence E. Harrison and Samuel P. Huntington (New York: Basic Books, 2000), xiv.

¹³Andy Crouch, *Culture Making: Recovering Our Creative Calling* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2008), 9.

¹⁴His follow-up book, Andy Crouch, *Playing God: Redeeming the Gift of Power*, Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2013, explores one of the most central aspects of culture, the exercise of authority.

¹⁵James Davison Hunter, *Culture Wars: The Struggle to Define America; Making Sense of the Battles over the Family, Art, Education, Law and Politics* (New York: Basic Books, 1991).

¹⁶James Davison Hunter, *To Change the World: The Irony, Tragedy, and Possibility of Christianity in the Late Modern World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008).

¹⁷*Ibid.*, 236-37.

subjects as checkout lines at Safeway, Eminem's rap music, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the megachurch phenomenon, and several others.¹⁸ The introductory essay, "What Is Everyday Theology?," by Kevin Vanhoozer, one of the three editors of the volume, contains rich insights into the nature and interpretation of culture. He tells us, first, what culture is not. Culture contrasts with both nature and society. He then suggests that culture is

a *world* in the sense that cultural texts create a meaningful environment in which humans dwell both physically and imaginatively. Culture is the lens through which a vision of life and social order is expressed, experienced, and explored; it is a *lived* worldview. . . . Culture is the software that determines how things function and how people relate in a given society.¹⁹

There are quite literally hundreds more such appeals. It would seem patent that Christians are becoming as much aware as any others of the role culture plays. And while there is no more consensus on the nature and function of culture among Christians than there is among scholars in general, what is incontrovertible is the growing recognition of culture's significance.²⁰

THE REALMS OF CULTURE

A family sends its children off to school. A farmer reaps the fall harvest. Gay people march in a parade in Toronto. An exhibit of contemporary art opens in Shanghai. Roger Federer wins another Grand Slam title. The terrorist group Boko Haram kidnaps schoolgirls in northern Nigeria. Fifty new Skoda automobiles are transported by train to the Czech Republic. A retiree sets about reading as much as he can on the history of World War II. Millions of unwanted children are put up for adoption in China. Mourners gather to say

¹⁸Kevin J. Vanhoozer, Charles A. Anderson, and Michael J. Sleasman, eds., *Everyday Theology: How to Read Cultural Texts and Interpret Trends* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007).

¹⁹Kevin Vanhoozer, "What Is Everyday Theology? How and Why Christians Should Read Culture," in Vanhoozer, Anderson, and Sleasman, *Everyday Theology*, 26-27.

²⁰A partial list would include Andrew M. Greeley, *God in Popular Culture* (Chicago: Thomas More, 1988); *Christianity and Culture in the Crossfire*, ed. David Hoekema and Bobby Fong (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997); Charles H. Kraft, *Christianity in Culture: A Study in Dynamic Biblical Theologizing in Cross-Cultural Perspective* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1979); David Lyon, *Sociology and the Human Image* (Leicester, UK: Inter-Varsity Press, 1983); Marvin K. Mayers, *Christianity Confronts Culture: A Strategy for Cross-Cultural Evangelism* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1974); Kenneth A. Myers, *All God's Children and Blue Suede Shoes: Christians and Popular Culture* (Westchester, IL: Crossway, 1989); Albert M. Wolters, *Creation Regained: Biblical Basics for a Reformational Worldview*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005); David J. Bosch, *Believing in the Future* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 1994); Richard Grenier, *Capturing the Culture: Film, Art and Politics* (Washington, DC: Ethics and Public Policy Center, 1990).

farewell to a comedian who took his own life. A government opens up thousands of acres for a nature preserve. Voicemails appear on a mobile telephone. A sex trafficker preys on young girls in Thailand. A jazz ensemble opens at a local nightclub. A divorcée takes a lawyer to protect her property. Local workers see few profits from industries in Africa controlled by outsiders. Drug lords line their pockets by luring addicts into needing more and more. A law firm helps ensure the merger of two great companies. . . .

What, if anything, binds all these actualities, and many more, together? Culture. At least, that is the contention of the present volume. It might indeed be simpler to ask, what is *not* culture? There do exist pundits who would answer that nothing is outside of culture. Our preliminary reaction to that approach is to say that while everything we think and do has a cultural dimension, certain areas of existence are not reducible to culture. For example, being made after the image of God is not a cultural phenomenon. Worship is not simply a part of culture, although the way we worship is characterized by culture. Nor, of course, is God himself a cultural being, although in his communications with us he accommodates to human culture.

Culture characterizes our calling here on earth. It distinguishes our common humanity, but also our differences. Culture can be positive, leading to human flourishing, or negative, bringing corruption and abuse. Components of culture are numerous and varied, making generalizations difficult. And although value judgments should be made cautiously, they are surely appropriate.

CLUES FROM THE WORD

Before going directly to the Bible for our understanding of culture, can we find any clues in the word *culture* itself? And, indeed, one place to consider, though it only has limited value, is the meaning and history of the word in European languages. What exactly is meant by *culture*? Studies of the word are quite revealing. Raymond Williams, pioneer of British cultural studies in the postwar years, tells us: “Culture is one of the two or three most complicated words in the English language. This is so partly because of its intricate historical development, in several European languages, but mainly because it has now come to be used for several distinct and incompatible systems of thought.”²¹ A large and unmanageable body of literature exists

²¹Raymond Williams, *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society*, rev. ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983), 87.

with the word *culture* in the title. As of this writing, a Google search on the word alone reports 375,000,000 entries.

Williams has spent a good part of his career tracking down words and their historical meanings. According to him, at least three denotations of the word *culture* have evolved over the centuries.²² In its earlier uses the word signified the process of tending something, most often crops or animals. The Old English *coulter* and its variants (*culter*, *colter*) literally meant the cutting edge of the plow. Thus to cultivate was just that, an agricultural activity. Moving on from this earlier stage, since the eighteenth century, the term *culture* became a metaphor for developing the mind, and improving the human race. An amusing extension of the word is used by Francis Bacon, who referred to “the culture and manurance of the mind.”²³ John Milton used the term interchangeably with *civility* or *government*.²⁴ By the nineteenth century an evolutionary model was common, whereby culture referred to the development of human civilization from the so-called primitive societies. Jane Fairfax, in Jane Austen’s *Emma*, for example, is said to have possessed “every advantage of discipline and culture.”²⁵

A second cluster comes from the related term *colonus*, from which we derive our notion of colonization. While the history of the colonial movements in the modern world is complex, and often negative, the basic meaning of the term is simply “to inhabit.” Ideally, this could mean filling the earth with people who can bring their gifts and talents to another place, for mutual benefit. In medieval times *colonus* involved the protection and honor of those being colonized. In our day we are more apt to think of colonial powers, followed by decolonization. Yet technically, the idea of partnership, rather than possessions by a motherland, is imbedded in the term itself.

Finally, the derivative term *cultus*, or simply, *cult*, carries the idea of “honor with worship.” This may refer to worshipping a divinity, as it often does. But it may also refer to holding someone in great esteem. The complexity of

²²Ibid., 87-88.

²³Francis Bacon, *The Two Books of Francis Bacon: Of the Proficiency and Advancement of Learning Divine and Humane* (London: Henry Tome, 1605), 2.19.2 (pp. 315-16).

²⁴John Milton, *The Readie and Easie Way to Establish a Free Commonwealth* (1660), in *The Complete Poetry and Essential Prose of John Milton*, ed. William Kerrigan, John Rumrich, and Stephen M. Fallon (New York: Modern Library, 2007), 1134. The German word *Kultur* has always meant “civilization.”

²⁵Jane Austen, *Emma* (London: Penguin, 2002), vol. 2, chap. 2.

meanings embedded in *culture* is not primarily a feature of the word or words, but of the issues and practices they represent.²⁶

Williams warns us against choosing one true, proper, or scientific sense, and forgetting that all of these meanings overlap. One's preference can be influenced by the place one lives. For example, Williams chides the pioneers of culture studies Alfred Kroeber and Clyde Kluckhohn for favoring a "North American anthropological usage as being the norm."²⁷ Another reason for one's preferences is determined by his chosen field of study. Thus, whereas anthropologists typically look at material production, historians and cultural students look at "signifying" or "symbolic" systems. Williams pleads for the validity of both sensibilities, not by contrast, but in relationship. As we shall see, these complementarities fit nicely with the biblical picture of culture.

CLUES FROM USAGE

Word meanings and word histories can tell us a few things. Yet usage is almost always a better guide to meaning than bare etymology. When we turn to the ways the term *culture* is used, we may be bewildered by their apparent variety. Consider for starters the vast number of book titles. There are, literally, thousands of them. *The Culture Code*, *Culture Wars*, *Culture Matters*, *Culture Making*, *Culture, Health and Illness* . . . the list is nearly endless. Yet almost no consensus arises from these and other books. Almost! The subtitle of Clotaire Rapaille's book *The Culture Code* is *An Ingenious Way to Understand Why People Around the World Live and Buy as They Do*. It is meant to be a guide for decoding such diverse subjects as adolescent behavior, beauty and weight, table traditions, money, foreign perceptions of America, and so forth. Hunter's *Culture Wars* describes two opposing camps in the United States, conservative and progressive. *Culture Matters* is meant to study the different ways values shape human progress. Andy Crouch's *Culture Making* is a practical and theological guide to making a difference in human life. And *Culture, Health and Illness* is a guide into medical anthropology, including doctor-patient relations, pain as perceived in different cultures, globalization and health, and the like. Thus for these authors culture is something like a key to the beliefs and customs of a particular society, with a view to changing them.

²⁶Williams, *Keywords*, 92.

²⁷*Ibid.*, 91.

Quite often the term is used to refer to the measure of human achievement (or, sometimes, human failure). For example, The Academy of Motion Pictures Arts and Sciences was created in 1927. Its stated purpose was “to raise the cultural, educational, and scientific standards” in film. We identify negative shared values as cultural bias. When discussing celebrities or even monuments, we talk of cultural icons. Christian essayist Rodney Clapp relates culture to worship, broadly taken. He describes his column “American Soundings” in *The Christian Century* this way: “I’m fascinated by culture—the things people make and are made by, whether it’s music, television shows, sports, consumerism or technology.” He adds, “I try to look at these realities from the perspective of Eucharistic worship, which centers all of life and creates its own culture.”²⁸

Sometimes, though, the word *culture* is used to identify a particular trait or characteristic of a particular group. For example, we talk of youth culture, of Jewish culture, the culture of poverty, hip-hop culture, NASCAR culture, surfing culture. We refer to “popular culture” as opposed to “highbrow culture.” In the 1980s the expression “corporate culture” made its way into common parlance. The *American Heritage Dictionary* provides the following statement referring to General Electric’s approach to management as an example of its usage: “The new management style is a reversal of GE’s traditional corporate culture, in which virtually everything the company does is measured in some form and filed away somewhere.”²⁹

Historians often make use of the term to signify a characteristic of a particular society. They might refer to “Edwardian culture” or “the culture of colonial India.” In their history of Quebec, authors Peter Gossage and J. I. Little describe warfare as practiced by the Iroquoian people in terms of culture: “Warfare played an important cultural role among the Iroquois by easing the mourning process through the capture of warriors who were either integrated physically by being tortured to death and cannibalized or socially by being adopted to replace a recently killed warrior.”³⁰

²⁸Rodney Clapp, “American Soundings,” *The Christian Century*, July 12, 2013, 32. As we will see, James K. A. Smith rather more fully develops the theme of culture as worship in *Desiring the Kingdom*, Cultural Liturgies I (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2009).

²⁹*The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2000), s.v. “corporate culture.”

³⁰Peter Gossage and J. I. Little, *An Illustrated History of Quebec: Tradition and Modernity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 4.

Some uses are quite thoughtful and even elegant: “Time is a fluid medium for the culture of metaphors” (Vladimir Nabokov).³¹ “What really binds men together is their culture” (Ruth Benedict).³² “[Culture] is a set of exclusions” (Michel Foucault).³³ Albert Camus once said, “Without culture and the relative freedom it implies, society, even when perfect, is but a jungle. This is why *authentic creation* is a gift for the future.”³⁴ For Claude Lévi-Strauss, “Culture is neither simply juxtaposed to nor simply superposed over life. Culture uses and transforms life to realize a synthesis of a higher order.”³⁵

The idea of culture is often put to the service of an agenda. Conservation groups will decry the threats to various cultures. For example, UNESCO’s Endangered Languages Programme issued the following statement: “It is estimated that, if nothing is done, half of 6000 plus languages spoken today will disappear by the end of this century. With the disappearance of un-written and undocumented languages, humanity would lose not only a cultural wealth but also important ancestral knowledge embedded, in particular, in indigenous languages.”³⁶ American anthropologist Robert Redfield studied the Meso-Amerindians in the Yucatan village of Tepoztlán with a view to identifying the threats and challenges of modernization to a people still living at a level of folk culture rather than urban culture.³⁷

THE DARK SIDE

The term *culture* does not always refer to positive features. The phenomena of poverty and hunger in the world are nothing short of astonishing. The African continent is not the only place where such blights occur, but they do occur there in dramatic fashion. Think only of the desperate condition of South Sudan. According to the relief organization World Vision, South Sudan is now the world’s number-one “fragile state.”³⁸ It is a place where 1.5

³¹Vladimir Nabokov, *Ada or Ardor: A Family Chronicle* (New York: Penguin, 1990), part 4.

³²Ruth Benedict, *Patterns of Culture* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1959), 14.

³³Michel Foucault, quoted in *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices*, ed. Stuart Hall (London: Sage, 1997), 44.

³⁴Albert Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus and Other Essays* (New York: Vintage, 1991), 212 (emphasis added).

³⁵Claude Lévi-Strauss, *The Elementary Structures of Kinship* (Boston: Beacon, 1969), 4.

³⁶See “Endangered Languages,” UNESCO, www.unesco.org/new/en/culture/themes/endangered-languages (accessed May 25, 2016).

³⁷See Clifford Wilcox, *Robert Redfield and the Development of American Anthropology* (Lanham, MD: Lexington, 2006), 14.

³⁸For a definition of a fragile state, see Sevil Omer, “Fragile Contexts,” *World Vision Magazine*, April 2015, <https://magazine.worldvision.org/stories/fragile-states>.

million people have been displaced since independence in 2013, and where over 10,000 children suffer from malnutrition.³⁹ The primary causes of this nearly hopeless state of affairs is not natural catastrophe, but cultural dysfunction: broken public institutions, privation of resources, power struggles, tribalism, and the like.

A number of conservative commentators in the United States believe that the American middle class is being dissolved, not because of threats to capitalism, but because of enormous cultural shifts. R. R. Reno, editor of the conservative religious periodical *First Things*, compares the days of Friedrich Hayek's pleas during World War II and what one ought to plead today. Whereas according to Hayek's *The Road to Serfdom* (1944) the threat was against individual freedom and radical socialism, today, says Reno, the threat is economic and cultural. By cultural, he is referring to such matters as lack of jobs because of outsourcing, and radical redefinitions of the family. He refers to them as a "moral deregulation . . . epoch-defining change in our society" whereby we stand on "increasingly unstable economic and cultural ground."⁴⁰ On a less dramatic scale, though no less important in the long run, negative cultural factors can certainly be cited in realms such as education and business. Consider this sentence from an education manual: "Schools with a negative or toxic culture are places where teachers are unwilling to change."⁴¹ Chris Potts, following Peter Drucker, believes that "bad culture defeats good strategy" in business and beyond. Bad culture comes from those hired to implement a good idea, but who, in the process, forget the need to keep the company's ideals and its need to keep profits going in their purview.⁴²

Then there are those for whom the very concept of culture is negative. We might remember the famous declaration (often wrongly attributed to Hermann Göring or even to Hitler) by the character Friedrich Thieman in Hans Johst's play *Schlageter*. Commenting on those who want to *think* too much (like the French) and refuse to *act* (like the German Freikorps—the

³⁹See Brian P. Duss, "More Than 10,000 Children Face Malnutrition as Aid Agencies Forced to Withdraw Staff in South Sudan," World Vision, May 11, 2015, www.worldvision.org/press-release/more-10000-children-face-malnutrition-aid-agencies-forced-withdraw-staff-south-sudan.

⁴⁰R. R. Reno, "Crisis of Solidarity," *First Things*, November 2015, 3-4.

⁴¹From Terrence Deal and Kent Peterson, *Shaping School Culture: The Heart of Leadership* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1998).

⁴²Chris Potts, "Innovation Stalled? Bad Culture Defeats Good Strategy," *InformationWeek* (blog), October 30, 2013, www.informationweek.com/it-leadership/innovation-stalled-bad-culture-defeats-good-strategy/d/d-id/1112125?

paramilitary anti-Communist troops), he says, “Whenever I hear the word ‘culture’ I reach for my gun.”⁴³ Other skeptics use the word *culture* to signify something less than significant, possibly a distraction. We may hear someone say, “it’s only a cultural thing,” meaning it is unimportant relative to a deeper issue. Sometimes the word is formalized as some inauthentic practice. Consider the way some Christians use the term. A group called Kjos Ministries, for example, erects a sharp contrast between *biblical* versus *cultural* Christianity. Every time the Bible tells us to trust Christ, and not ourselves, cultural Christianity tells us to rely on the self, to feel good about ourselves, and so forth.⁴⁴ Biblical theologian Meredith Kline contrasts “culture” to “cult,” the former being temporary, the latter being unending.⁴⁵

Considering the great variety of these usages, we might be tempted to agree with the French philosopher Rémi Brague, who believes that the concept of culture is dangerously insatiable.⁴⁶ The “word culture,” he complains, has acceded to the rank of a “supreme explanatory principle of the human.” This has occurred because culture has “transgressed” two borders. The first is “vertical,” that is, dragging it down from the (proper) elite sense of interests and behavior to popular expressions such as cooking, folklore, and so forth. The second is “horizontal,” meaning there is no longer a single ideal of culture or “civilization,” but a plurality of “cultures.” We might as well say it: culture has usurped religion.

All these usages represent a mere sampling, the tip of the iceberg. No wonder Hervé Varenne refers to “the culture of culture.”⁴⁷

THE CONCERNS OF CULTURE

Does anything coherent emerge from this amalgam? Recalling Williams’s warning about incompatible uses, we could ask, should we simply capitulate

⁴³The actual wording is a bit different from this often misquoted and misattributed phrase: “No, let ‘em keep their good distance with their whole ideological kettle of fish. . . . I shoot with live ammunition! When I hear the word culture . . . , I release the safety on my Browning!” Quoted in *Literarische Heldenverehrung Im Nationalsozialismus: Hanns Johsts Drama “Schlageter”* (Norderstadt: GRIN Verlag, 1914).

⁴⁴See Kjos Ministries, “Biblical versus Cultural Christianity,” www.crossroad.to/charts/cultural-Christianity.html (accessed May 25, 2016) for the complete chart of contrasts.

⁴⁵Meredith Kline, *Kingdom Prologue* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2006), 67, 154.

⁴⁶Rémi Brague, *Modérément moderne* (Paris: Flammarion, 2014), 197-99.

⁴⁷“I have collected these definitions to sketch various approaches to the intuition that some aspects of what humanity as constructed over its life as a species requires a concept such as that of ‘culture,’” he says. See Hervé Varenne, “The Culture of Culture,” http://varenne.tc.columbia.edu/hv/clt/and/culture_def.html (accessed May 25, 2016).

to the impossibility of putting these uses into any kind of order? Quite tempting. But just before we give in, we might consider a few challenges that could goad us to soldier on. (And we will engage in a fuller history of culture studies later on in this volume.)

Scholars mostly agree that culture exists in a sort of creative tension with nature. The term *nature* itself has its own cultural history. Whereas in the history of philosophy we would tend to think with Jean-Jacques Rousseau that “nature” is the untouched environment within which human beings may act, for biblically oriented thinkers *nature* refers to the creation, which is the primary environment for human beings, created in order to rule over it.⁴⁸ Still, the contrast between culture and nature is nearly universal.

In his seminal study *Culture and Society, 1780–1950*, Williams argues that the various meanings of culture have been drifting apart: culture as civility, culture as social life, and culture as the arts—each is going its own way. The time has come to reunite them, he says, something that began to happen in the nineteenth century but now needs to go further.

One of the most thoughtful contemporary students of culture is Terry Eagleton. Many of us remember him for his guide through the different approaches to the study of texts, from romanticism to the postmodernism.⁴⁹ We may also know him for his relentless criticism of the claims of doctrinaire postmodernism, and also his attacks on the follies of Richard Dawkins’s so-called new atheism.⁵⁰ Eagleton has also written enlightening material on culture. He published a book-length study of culture that is both brilliant in content and somewhat baroque in its form.⁵¹ He situates culture in the unfolding of humanity’s shift from the rural to the urban, and in the transformation of nature into the artificial. Drawing on Gonzalo’s speech describing Ferdinand swimming from a wrecked ship in Shakespeare’s *The Tempest*, Eagleton sees bathing as a good metaphor for the interplay between nature and culture, “since the swimmer actively creates the current which sustains

⁴⁸See Peter Watson, *The Great Divide: Nature and Human Nature in the Old World and the New* (San Francisco: HarperOne, 2012); Alan H. Goodman, Deborah Heat, and Susan M. Lindee, *Genetic Nature/Culture: Anthropology and Science Beyond the Two-Culture Divide* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003); and Rodney James Giblett, *The Body of Nature and Culture* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008).

⁴⁹Terry Eagleton, *Literary Theory: An Introduction* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2008) (first ed. published in 1983).

⁵⁰See Terry Eagleton, *After Theory* (New York: Basic Books, 2004); and Eagleton, “Lunging, Flailing, Mispunching,” *London Review of Books*, October 19, 2006, 32–34.

⁵¹Terry Eagleton, *The Idea of Culture*, Oxford: Blackwell, 2000.

him, plying the waves so they may return to buoy him up.”⁵² Culture for Eagleton encodes such issues as freedom and determinism, agency and endurance, change and identity. His working definition of *culture* is “the complex of values, customs, beliefs and practices which constitute the way of life of a specific group.”⁵³

Commenting on this same history along with Williams, while using slightly different terms, Eagleton, who studied with Williams, asks, “What is it that connects culture as utopian critique, culture as a way of life and culture as artistic creation?” He goes on to say, “The answer is surely a negative one: all three are in different ways reactions to the failure of culture as actual civilization—the grand narrative of human self-development.” What an interesting insight! The rest of his thoughts ponder where to go from here. Some of it is helpful, some of it less so, but the idea that the fragmentation of meanings of culture derives from a lack of sense of the big picture, of a calling to improve, is significant. Awareness of the separation coupled with the desire to bring things back together is a healthy trend, in my judgment.

Eagleton holds to a very comprehensive view of the purpose of culture: “Culture is not only what we live by. It is also, in great measure, what we live for. Affection, relationship, memory, kinship, place, community, emotional fulfillment, intellectual enjoyment, a sense of ultimate meaning: these are closer to us than charters of human rights or trade treaties.”⁵⁴ This grand claim, as Eagleton admits, means that the idea of culture in the modern age has become a substitute for “a fading sense of divinity and transcendence.”⁵⁵ As we will see, such an overreach is the fruit of secularization. In this sense Rémi Brague agrees: culture has hijacked aspects of life that had formerly been ordered by religion. Yet, as such, it has retained the central theme of human purpose, or calling.

We are not yet here evaluating these different emphases in the light of biblical norms. That is still to come. What we are presently after is to discover what the many approaches among users have in common, and whether they are moving in a certain direction, a trajectory, so that we may at least find out how contemporary people view culture, so that then we might be

⁵²Ibid., 3. Part of the soliloquy declares, “I saw him beat the surges under him, and ride upon their backs.”

⁵³Ibid., 34.

⁵⁴Ibid., 131.

⁵⁵Ibid., 2.

able to evaluate and learn from them in the light of Scripture. Here it is: what almost all these approaches have in common is that culture represents a guide for living that takes into account the deepest and broadest components of human experience. In their classic study, Kluckhohn and Kelly propose a succinct summary of the modern consensus: "By culture we mean all those historically created designs for living, explicit and implicit, rational, irrational, and nonrational, which exist at any given time as potential guides for the behavior of men."⁵⁶ "*Designs for living*" may sound quite general and broad, or even trite, yet it does tell us something significant about culture, something close, in certain ways, to the Bible's articulation.

BACK TO THE FIRST QUESTION

The goal of discovering what the Scriptures have to say about culture is a vast undertaking. Our purpose will be made easier, however, since we will not be exploring the enormous field of cultural studies in any kind of depth. What I propose to do here is to survey the many ways in which the Bible addresses the issues of culture. By no means exhaustive, we will look at some of the principal themes to be found in Holy Writ concerning culture, and draw conclusions from them as appropriate.

At the same time I will try to apply my findings to some of the practicalities of daily life. It is my conviction that the people of God are in great need of solid guidelines in this important realm. After a few reflections on the state of the question, I will go straight to the biblical text, spending the bulk of our time scrutinizing the sacred text in order to emerge with a convincing approach to the nature and concerns of culture.

⁵⁶Clyde Kluckhohn and William H. Kelly, "The Concept of Culture," in *The Science of Man in the World Crisis*, ed. Ralph Linton (New York: Columbia University Press, 1945), 78-105.

PART ONE



PARAMETERS
of
CULTURE

Cultural Analysis

*The image of God built into every humanist,
no matter how distorted, begins to fear
anthropological abstraction.*

HARVIE M. CONN

Before we go directly to the Bible, in this chapter we will turn our attention to the field of cultural studies. I should make a few comments about cultural studies. I find it encouraging that in our times culture is being increasingly recognized as of first-order significance. We find a host of public intellectuals and commentators stressing the role of culture in order to understand contemporary life.

WHENCE CULTURAL STUDIES?

Modern cultural studies developed in a particular context. Certainly culture in one sense has replaced a theocentric understanding of the world. In the previous chapter we considered the grand claim by Terry Eagleton that culture is not only what we live by but also what we live for.¹ Accordingly, Eagleton admits that the idea of culture in the modern age has become a substitute for “a fading sense of divinity and transcendence.”² As such, the growth of cultural studies parallels the rise of secularization. Whether we understand secularity as the decline of religious practice, or as a shift in mentalities from believing in God to accepting the plurality of philosophical options, cultural studies arose within the vacuum created by the loss of a sense of the presence of God in the West.

¹Terry Eagleton, *The Idea of Culture* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000), 131.

²*Ibid.*, 2.

Establishing a truly coherent history of cultural studies is nearly impossible. Accordingly, as Michael Green asserts, with a degree of plausibility, “Any narrative of the ‘development’ of cultural studies (particularly if it stresses founding ‘fathers’ or places) tends to be misleadingly overcoherent.”³ Still, we want to orient ourselves to some of the bolder strokes that have been taken over the previous two hundred years.

Three overlapping phases in cultural studies may be discerned. The first is the view that culture represents an ideal, often equated with civilization. Culture is improvement, or at least protection from lesser forces. The second looks at the social dynamics involved with culture. Here, the power dimension, be it economic, political, or psychological, is described, or even prescribed. Third, culture is broken down into anthropological entities that convey meaning. Thus symbols articulate the values held by a particular society. My design here is not to render a complete survey of these phases. A number of helpful accounts of cultural studies exist, and the reader may benefit from consulting them.⁴

CIVILIZATION, PROGRESS, AND BEAUTY

The so-called father of anthropology, a strong cultural evolutionist, and a committed developmentalist, Sir Edward Burnett Tylor (1832–1917), taught for much of his life at Oxford. He was greatly influenced by Charles Lyell, the Scottish geologist known for his belief in uniformitarianism, the idea that the processes of the past are the same ones we can observe today (as opposed to the “catastrophic” theories current in the nineteenth century). Tylor’s first publication was a result of his 1856 trip to Mexico with his ethnologist friend and fellow Quaker Henry Christy. His notes on the beliefs and practices of the people he encountered were the basis of his work *Anahuac: Or Mexico and the Mexicans, Ancient and Modern*

³Michael Green, “Cultural Studies,” in *A Dictionary of Cultural and Critical Theory*, ed. Michael Payne and Jessica Rae Barbera, 2nd ed. (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013), 164.

⁴See, for example, Chris Barker, *Making Sense of Cultural Studies: Central Problems and Critical Debates* (London: Sage, 2002); Kathryn Tanner, *Theories of Culture: A New Agenda for Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1997), esp. chaps. 1-2; Eagleton, *The Idea of Culture*; John Hartley, *A Short History of Cultural Studies* (London: Sage, 2003); John Storey, *An Introduction to Cultural Theory and Popular Culture*, 2nd ed. (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1998); John Storey, ed., *What Is Cultural Studies? A Reader* (New York: St. Martin’s, 1996); Raymond Williams, *Culture and Society, 1780–1950*, 2nd ed. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1983); Simon During, ed., *The Cultural Studies Reader*, 2nd ed. (New York: Routledge, 2003); Ziauddin Sardar and Borin Van Loon, *Introducing Cultural Studies* (Lanham, MD: Totem, 1998).

(1861), published after his return to England. From then on Tylor published on the subject of how “primitive” peoples’ traditions continued to hold sway even in much later stages of development.

Tylor’s most influential work is *Primitive Culture* (1871). Here and in subsequent writings he set forth the idea that culture is, as it were, adjectival. A people could strive to be “cultured.” People all passed through various stages in an evolutionary development from the primitive to the scientific. Tylor gave us one of the most famous definitions of culture, one that would be influential for at least thirty years: “Culture, or civilization, taken in its broad, ethnographic sense, is that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society.”⁵ Notice the key word, “acquired,” which means that there is progress and growth. Notice also that it is a person as a member of society, not simply as an individual, that acquires culture.⁶ Education was Tylor’s favored way to look for improvement through the different stages. In this early phase of cultural studies, diversity is minimized, since most believed that the human intellect proceeded in the same way everywhere, and that it aspired to the same ends.

Culture for Tylor moved people upward from tradition and toward something more modern and rational. His distinctive idea was that primitive people were motivated by a belief in *animism*, a vital force present in living organisms. This belief in a vital force, including spiritual beings, was the first phase in the development of religion. Tylor was convinced that such a belief was based on an intellectual error: the confusion of subjective and objective reality. Primitive people wrongly believed the vital force was detachable and capable of independent existence in its own mode. (Dreams, he thought, might be a basis for this error.) This understanding allowed them to believe in a supernatural world. The Christian religion, which Tylor did not much care for, he saw as a later development of this same worldview, perhaps a little more refined, but based on the same error. Science, the third stage, was needed to supersede religion and bring clarity to human history. Having said that, Tylor strongly believed in the equality of all human beings, at least as far as mental capability is concerned. Accordingly, he was an early advocate for racial equality.

⁵E. B. Tylor, *Primitive Culture: Researches into the Development of Mythology, Philosophy, Religion, Art, and Custom* (London: John Murray, 1871), 1:1.

⁶A view that would be developed a great deal more by his French contemporary Émile Durkheim, the so-called father of sociology.

The notion of progress is a reflection of the biblical approach to culture, at least in part. When reading the original commandment to “fill the earth and subdue it” (Gen 1:28), it is hard to miss the subtext of growth and development in the original intention. Indeed, the course of history envisioned at the beginning looks to a future that is better than the present (eschatology). Even with the fall, there are still overtones of the advancement of the human race in the different reiterations of this “cultural mandate,” as we shall see. But, of course, any pure idea of progress is an illusion. As Richard Bauckham puts it, “The modern idea of progress undoubtedly has its roots in the Christian tradition, which first taught Western society to envisage history as a meaningful process orientated to the future.” But he quickly adds that because the element of transcendence has been jettisoned, progress has become secularized. Instead of the history of humanity being guided by providence, the modern version credits human mastery. Thus, all mystery is gone, and evil cannot be rectified by human rational means. Indeed, the only real beneficiaries of progress are its putative creators, not the many victims of malevolence and mortality.⁷

ARNOLDIANISM

No doubt the most influential representative of the civilization model is Matthew Arnold (1822–1888). During the Industrial Revolution a mounting concern about the dangers of reducing the quality of life was felt. Even while material wealth increased, including wages, products, and goods of all kinds, the well-being of workers actually decreased. They would have less leisure time, longer working hours, and less independence.⁸ Anyone familiar with Charles Dickens’s novels can enter into the world of poverty and oppression found in the Victorian era and experience it as if firsthand. His *Bleak House* (1853) uncovers the failures of the British Chancery, a court with jurisdiction over matters of equity, trusts, lands, and the like. The characters in this rather complex novel represent the spectrum of British society, from the wealthy nobility to the homeless (Tom-All-Alones). The plot and subplots involve litigation, murder, disease, poverty, and all of the variances of contemporary life. His *Hard Times* (1854) is a powerful treatment of the industrial working class. Famously, the workers were called “Hands” (appendages, rather than

⁷Richard Bauckham, *The Bible in the Contemporary World: Hermeneutical Ventures* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2015), 32-35.

⁸E. P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (New York: Pantheon, 1963), 211.

“people”) by the factory owners. Dickens’s stories are never without hope and redemption. He is generally respectful of the Christian religion. Later social critics such as Thomas Hardy and George Gissing were far less optimistic and highly critical of the church.

By all accounts the most important contender for the mission of culture to combat these social conditions was *literature*. English literature (particularly) was seen to be free from extreme political agendas. Good literature was believed to promote universal human values. While it was not in its nature to promote specific programs or agendas for the improvement of social circumstances, it nevertheless could promote a genuine sympathy for the poor, and a real concern for the working class. As Terry Eagleton rather cynically puts it, literature “could serve to place in cosmic perspective the petty demands of working people for decent living conditions or greater control over their own lives, and might even with luck come to render them oblivious of such issues in their high-minded contemplation of eternal truths and beauties” (a role, he adds, that religion had formally played).⁹

Easily the most influential advocate of culture as literature in the Victorian age, one whose authority can still be felt, is Matthew Arnold. Arnold wrote in a world similar to Dickens’s. He was a poet and literary critic with insights into anthropology, and is said to have bridged the gap between romanticism and modernism. Though skeptical about traditional Christian faith, he was drawn to what he saw as the aesthetics of Christianity. He loved church rituals and thought of God as a lovely poetic idea, rather than a supernatural being with definite attributes. Religion for him was “morality touched by emotion.”¹⁰

Even today we use expressions he coined, often without knowing their provenance. Familiar terms include “Philistines” for those who have no culture, and “Hebraism” for the putative dynamic, less ordered thought of the Jews in contrast to the more logical Greeks. He is also remembered for the expression “sweetness and light” (coined by Jonathan Swift but popularized by Arnold) to mean moral righteousness combined with intelligence (though today we tend to use the expression with a tinge of sarcasm). He

⁹Terry Eagleton, *Literary Theory: An Introduction*, 2nd ed. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), 22.

¹⁰Matthew Arnold, *The Complete Prose Works of Matthew Arnold*, vol. 11, *The Last Word*, ed. R. H. Super (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1977), 141.

puts it this way: “Culture looks beyond machinery, culture hates hatred, culture has one great passion, the passion for sweetness and light.”¹¹

Arnold’s most often quoted statement about culture is that it is “the best which has been thought and said.” It comes from the preface to *Culture and Anarchy*, a collection of essays brought together in 1869 (the preface was added in 1875).¹² The full quote is important to cite, since the context gives it a meaning not fully captured in the bare sentence.

The whole scope of the essay is to recommend culture as the great help out of our present difficulties; culture being a pursuit of our total perfection by means of getting to know, on all the matters which most concern us, the best which has been thought and said in the world, and, through this knowledge, turning a stream of fresh and free thought upon our stock notions and habits, which we now follow staunchly but mechanically, vainly imagining that there is a virtue in following them staunchly which makes up for the mischief of following them mechanically.¹³

Culture for Arnold promotes human perfection. When humanity acquires the *best*, then it will be able to begin to achieve moral and intellectual freedom, which will stave off the threat of decadence. The opposite of culture, then, is anarchy. We are in an age, he said, “of spiritual discomfort,” an age “wanting in moral grandeur.”¹⁴ Advocates of culture must constantly educate, even cajole the boorish into a play of the spirit that is truly nonpartisan, above ordinary debate. It must not be sectarian. This is why, for example, Arnold never took a position for or against the question of slavery in the American Civil War.

Arnold was persuaded that developing higher culture cannot be done individually. Indeed, he resented any idea of a cultured elite individual who could not care for society as a whole. Great people of culture, he asserted, had a “passion for diffusing, for making prevail, for carrying from one end of society to the other, the best ideas of their time.”¹⁵ Unlike the purer optimism of the Enlightenment, which averred that the simple task leading to emancipation was to tear down the walls of prejudice (recall the lyrics of the

¹¹Matthew Arnold, *Culture and Anarchy*, ed. Jane Garnett, Oxford World’s Classics (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 30.

¹²Ibid., 3-30.

¹³Ibid., 6.

¹⁴Matthew Arnold, preface to *The Poems of Matthew Arnold* (London: Oxford University Press, 1909), 25.

¹⁵Ibid., 70.

French National Anthem: *Contre nous de la tyrannie, l'étendard sanglant est levé*—"though tyranny is against us the bloody banner is raised"), Arnold and his British colleagues believed certain social institutions were needed to orient public taste.¹⁶

The members of the middle class have the great responsibility of "moulding and assimilating the classes below them." Indeed, the masses arrive "eager to enter into possession of the world, to gain a more vivid sense of their own life and activity." If they are not educated by the middle class, then "society is in danger of falling into anarchy."¹⁷ We might ask, how much real concern did Arnold have for the struggling subaltern classes? And yet, he did preach that literature, especially *English* literature, could save the country from confusion, and restore a proper sense of identity to the English. One of his best-known lectures from the Oxford University chair of poetry is "On Translating Homer" (1861), in which he commends the plainness and nobility of Homer's epics as remedies for the modern world with its "sick hurry and divided aims."¹⁸

For us, so many years later, we balk at such confident claims.¹⁹ However, it helps to consider that Arnold was a complex figure, one capable of deep pessimism as well as the hope of improvement. His poetry is full of romantic regret and nostalgia. In contrast to his public persona, which was rather effete, his poetry, though hardly immortal, showed something of his real self. Consider these lines from "Dover Beach":

The sea of faith
Was once, too, at the full, and round earth's shore
Lay like the folds of a bright girdle furled
But now I only hear
Its melancholy, long, withdrawing roar,

¹⁶His father was Thomas Arnold, headmaster of the Rugby School for thirteen years, who based his education of public-school English boys on the classical languages, with a view to nurturing in them a sense of responsibility for the general public. One may get a good idea of the life at Rugby from the novel by Thomas Hughes, *Tom Brown's School Days* (Cambridge: Macmillan, 1857).

¹⁷Matthew Arnold, "The Popular Education of France," in *Democratic Education*, ed. R. H. Super (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1962), 26.

¹⁸Matthew Arnold, quoted in *English Literature from the Nineteenth Century Through Today*, ed. J. E. Luebering (London: Britannica Educational Publishing, 2011), 58.

¹⁹Henry R. Van Til, *The Calvinistic Concept of Culture* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1959), 25-27, rakes Arnold over the coals for seeing culture as "sweetness and light," the opposite of depravity, and not taking into account the mixed output, for good or for evil, of God's image bearers. Did he miss the ironic note in Arnold's phrase?