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Religion, Culture, and Our Worship

Gene Edward Veith

Those who believe that ways of worshiping should change according to the trends of the culture should prepare themselves for the next step, which has already been taken in England. The newspaper *The World* describes the work of a clergyman named Dave Tomlinson, author of a book entitled *The Post-Evangelical*.¹ After complaining about the tendency of traditional evangelicals to be overly strict in doctrine and morality—both of which he describes as untenable in our postmodern age—he describes a more relevant approach to worship being used by his congregation. “Post-evangelicals,” he writes, are “rethinking the traditional notion of church.”

This has led some of us in south London to experiment with a more radical approach by holding meetings on Tuesday nights in a pub. These are invariably conducted in a relaxed atmosphere with people sitting around tables rather than in rows; smoking and drinking are permitted, there are no preachers, sermons or hymns, and the group decides what subjects it would like to discuss.²

Here is the ultimate in culture-friendly worship. People today like to sleep in on Sunday mornings, so why not have service on Tuesday nights? In an age of electronically-reproduced music, few non-professionals sing anymore, so why not eliminate hymns? No one today is used to listening to long speeches, so why not get rid of sermons? The implied hierarchy of a preacher authoritatively pontificating to the passive pew-sitters hardly fits with today’s democratic society, so why not sit in circles, move to a discussion format, and let the whole group decide what it wants to talk about? Many people today do not feel comfortable in a traditional church building, so why not move services to a bar? Certainly the pub has a deep social resonance in English culture, and allowing smoking and drinking in divine

¹London: Triangle, 1995.

²“Culture-friendly Worship,” *The World*, January 11, 1997.

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service helps to get rid of the negative image many Christians have of moral stodginess.

Of course, as most Lutherans know – but perhaps evangelicals and post-evangelicals do not realize – sitting around drinking and talking about whatever one wants to talk about is what goes on in pubs anyway. If going to church is the same as going to a bar, why does one need the Church?

The problem with Rev. Tomlinson's capitulation to the bar culture is that distinctly Christian worship utterly dissolves to the extent that it apes the secular culture. This is because secular culture is, by definition, oblivious to religion. Nothing will be left of the sacred when it succumbs to secularism. Determining worship styles by surveying the preferences of non-Christians and not by theological reflection and study of the Word of God can only result in the loss of the supernatural. This, after all, is what the word "secular" means. Those who advocate jettisoning the historic liturgy in favor of more culture-friendly styles should be asked whether they find anything wrong with Rev. Tomlinson's approach. Does he go too far? If so, in what ways? What are the lines he crosses over and, if there are biblical and theological lines that define Christian worship over and against the demands of secular culture, might they also be applicable in assessing other experiments in contemporary worship?

Church growth worship reformers should also realize that if liturgical worship is culturally out of step, the same could be said of the elements of traditional worship they themselves usually retain – congregational singing (even of "praise songs"), preaching (even of practical tips for successful living), and congregating in large communal groups (even in megachurches). About the only place Americans sing, listen to long, oral exhortations, and gather together every week is in church. If such rituals are still comprehensible to a godless culture, perhaps the other elements of historic Christian worship might likewise continue to be relevant after all.

As today's Church struggles with controversies over worship, the efforts to untangle the various theological and cultural issues involved are hampered – on both sides of the

controversy — by two kinds of misunderstandings. First, there is widespread confusion about what culture actually involves. Second, there is widespread begging-of-the-question about what the relationship between Church and culture is supposed to be. This paper will examine the various dimensions and levels of culture as they relate to worship. It will then explore how the Lutheran doctrine of the two kingdoms establishes a distinct relationship between Church and culture, which ensures that worship is both culturally relevant and supernaturally transcendent.

The Complexities of Culture

Culture is more complex than is often assumed. Sometimes the reach and significance of culture are exaggerated beyond all reason. Sometimes the role of culture is trivialized. There are many different kinds and levels of culture. Discussions about the relationship between worship and culture need first to be clear about their terms.

Today's use of the term "culture," in the sense of an all-encompassing social world view characteristic of a particular group, is extraordinarily recent. It is nowhere to be found in the *Oxford English Dictionary* (1933), which lists raising a crop (as in agriculture) and, by extension, the cultivation of the mind. The *Webster's New Collegiate Dictionary* (1976) finally gives as one of the new meanings of the word, "the customary beliefs, social forms, and material traits of a racial, religious, or social group." What we today refer to as cultures were in the past termed "civilizations," with the different regions of the world developing their characteristic governments, customs, and art forms. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, scholars in the newly developed social sciences, influenced as they were by the primitivism and organicism of the romantic movement, began to minimize "civilization" (referring to a society's tangible accomplishments), in favor of "culture" (referring to the organic, unconscious identity of a people).

If theology was the queen of the sciences in the premodern era and the physical sciences wielded the scepter in the modern era,

the social sciences rule all other fields in these postmodern times. Consequently, the concept of culture has been extended to include every facet of human knowledge and behavior. For many postmodernists, even scientific and mathematical knowledge is nothing more than a cultural creation. So-called objective knowledge is actually nothing more than the penchant of Western culture to dominate, control, analyze, and exploit, applied to nature as to everyone else. Tribal societies, they say, exist in greater harmony with nature, and who are we to say that we understand the universe better than they do? Religion is understood solely as a cultural phenomenon and is defined by many contemporary cultural anthropologists as nothing more than a means of exerting social control by giving cultural norms a sacred status.

Modernists tended to reject supernatural religions such as Christianity on the assumption that the material universe constitutes the only kind of existence; since the only permissible knowledge was what is measurable by the methodology of the natural sciences, theology was excluded on principle, unless theology adopted the quasi-scientific methodology of, for example, the historical-critical approach to the Bible. Postmodernists tend to reject supernatural religions such as Christianity that claim to represent absolute, transcendent truth. (They also reject the natural sciences on the same grounds.) Religions that are overtly cultural, such as Islam, Hinduism, and tribal nature religions, or that are purely inward looking and private, such as New Age mysticism, fare better than Christianity, which teaches that Christ is the only way to salvation and whose founder sent his followers into all the world to spread the Gospel to every tribe and nation. Since postmodernists tend to reduce all other disciplines to the social sciences, as modernists did for the physical sciences, traditional disciplines must adopt their methodology and philosophical assumptions. Thus the reliance on surveys, opinion polls, and other sociological instruments even in addressing theological issues.

Thus, for much of contemporary thought, culture is all-inclusive, all-determining, and inescapable. A corollary, of

course, is cultural relativism, the idea that since every culture has its own construction of reality, one is just as valid as another. Not just customs and governments, but morality and truth become relative.

If these postmodernists are correct, if culture does embrace everything, then any kind of orthodox Christianity, strictly speaking, is ruled out of consideration. A discussion of the relationship between religion and culture is out of the question; there is only culture. On the other hand, though popular postmodernists might urge us to change the way we worship and the way we believe to correspond with our culture, the more thoughtful postmodernists know this too is impossible. If we are culturally determined, our worship and beliefs are already culturally determined. Culture is not a malleable force that can be accommodated or changed. We do not manipulate culture; culture manipulates us.

My contention is that this postmodernist apotheosis of culture is grossly exaggerated. God transcends culture, and so do morality, science, and art. Culture is not all there is. The diverse cultures of the world do not in fact teach different moralities; rather, all are descended from Adam, giving us all a common humanity, a common sin, and a common Savior. We are not slaves to our culture; human beings shape their cultures through their own deliberations and creativity.

If it is wrong to exalt culture out of all measure, however, it is also a mistake to minimize culture. It is not necessary to adopt the totalitarian definition of culture to recognize that cultural issues can be very important. It is certainly true that every group, large and small, has an identity – the customs, history, language, and symbols by which it defines itself. These together can be said to constitute the group's culture. Culture in this sense does not determine everything, but it does define a sense of community and belonging. Human beings are social creatures, existing in families and communities, and are not simply autonomous individuals. Nations, regions, and other populations with a common history will have their culture, though culture should not be confused with ethnicity or race. A

black man from America, a French-speaking black Haitian, an Hispanic black Cuban, an Ibo from Nigeria, and a Hutu from Rwanda all have extremely different cultures – and the African-American, though having a cultural identity of his own, will still be culturally an American. On a smaller scale, every group – a family, a school, a workplace, even a congregation – thus develops its own culture, its own group identity.

Sociologists point out that such group cultures are defined largely by their rituals. Americans have their sports; a workplace has its formalized ways of doing things; a family has its particular Thanksgiving menus and procedures for opening Christmas presents. Setting theology aside for the moment, local congregations have their customs, theological traditions have their defining signs, and the Christian Church through the ages has always had its ceremonial observances. A Church defines itself and expresses its deepest beliefs in its rituals, in the way it worships, and this is just as true for Baptists and charismatics as it is for Lutherans. Blithely throwing out a time honored liturgy or adopting someone else's rituals instead of one's own can be devastating to a Church's identity, amounting to an act of cultural suicide.

Rituals are not to be taken lightly, as sociologists will testify. A culturally-defining ritual is a product of a community, a history, and an ideology, and is not something that can be made-up and revised at will. If church growth advocates sometimes put too great an emphasis on culture (that is, in adjusting to the culture of the unchurched), they also sometimes take culture much too lightly (that is, the culture of the Church). The notion that a group should change its culture in an attempt to make it appeal more to those outside of the group, is sociologically naive. Destroying a group's identity does not make it more attractive; it makes it cease to exist.

New members do need to be assimilated into the group, initiated into its ways and accepted into the community – a process often neglected by closed, self-contained groups and congregations. Thus, the true focus for church growth should be

assimilating outsiders into the congregation, not assimilating the congregation to outsiders.

The Levels of Culture

Another aspect of culture that needs to be understood more clearly in today's controversies is that culture exists on several levels. The more or less unconscious, traditional, and historical traits and norms of a group constitute its folk culture. (This is the sense of the term that I have just been using.) Another level of culture refers to the achievements of people in that culture, the contributions of artists, inventors, and constitution writers. This is the high culture, what older writers meant by "civilization."

Certainly the folk culture, in the guise of family life and social expectations, shapes individuals. It is also true that individuals shape culture, contributing to their society as a whole. Children's songs and fairy tales emerge out of the folk culture—they were not written by one author but have a communal authorship, as they were passed down orally from parent to child. The high culture is forged, to a large measure, by education. Knowledge, talent, and sophistication are marks of the high culture, which is the realm of expertise, specialization, and creativity. A Beethoven symphony and a novel by Dostoevsky are creations of the high culture. It took individual genius to write them and it takes a fair amount of education and knowledge on the part of the audience to understand and enjoy them.

Most societies have both a folk and a high culture, but today's technologies of mass production, mass communication, and mass consumption make possible a third level of culture: the mass culture, also known as popular or pop culture. Artifacts are made neither by craftsmen or artists, but by machines. Music is approached not through home instruments or concert halls, but by electronic recordings. Products are designed not primarily to meet a need or attain a level of excellence but to sell vast quantities. Mass communication—such as the great engine of pop culture, television—erases regional distinctions, with their distinct local cultures, so that everyone in the nation

watches the same programs, listens to the same music, and buys the same products. The pop culture is grounded in the entertainment industry, which, like the accompanying consumer economy, gives instant gratification. A tale from the folk culture seeks to instruct. A work of literature from the high culture seeks to challenge and explore. A television show seeks only to get good ratings, and its makers will give the audience anything it wants.

We can see the three levels of culture in, for example, food. Folk culture would be a family's Thanksgiving dinner; high culture would be dinner in a gourmet restaurant; pop culture would be fast food, a hamburger wrapped in paper, mass produced, tasty enough, and produced instantly. In African-American music, the folk culture would be expressed in traditional forms such as spirituals and the blues; high culture would be the sophistication and technical virtuosity of jazz; the pop culture of the moment would be rap. In politics, folk culture encourages love of country and civic responsibility; high culture, problem solving and party platforms; pop culture, the sixty-second sound bite and image consultants. Other triads might be a Sunday School Christmas Pageant, a play by Shakespeare, and "Married with Children"; the fairy tale, Dostoevsky, and Stephen King; the national anthem, Mozart, and Heavy Metal.

Pop culture, by its very nature, must appeal to the lowest common denominator, otherwise it cannot attain its mass audience; therefore it values simplicity, shallowness, and accessibility. The high culture is intellectual and demands effort on the part of its audience. The pop culture, on the other hand, must be instantaneously accessible and is thus received passively, requiring neither the communal context of the folk culture, nor the creative perception of the high culture. The only real ideology of pop culture is commercialism—the need to sell products by indulging consumers—and thus, while market-driven, it cares little for ideas or morality. While the folk culture tends to be conservative and the high culture is inter-generational, the pop culture is governed by the dynamics of fashion, and so must be in a state of constant change.

Perhaps this sounds too critical of pop culture. To be sure, it is a real blessing to live in an age of such prosperity that, instead of working all day in the fields and reading by candlelight, we can spend six hours a day watching television and buy everything we could imaginably want at a shopping mall. I am neither a snob nor a Puritan. I enjoy Hollywood movies, cable TV, and my CD-player as much as anyone.

The problem, as many observers have pointed out, is that the pop culture is now pushing out and taking the place of the folk culture and the high culture. Many children today cannot recite the old nursery rhymes or fairy tales; instead, they sing jingles from TV commercials and karate-kick like characters on Saturday morning cartoons. Artists no longer paint landscapes; they paint Brillo Boxes. Folk culture games such as baseball mutate into the big-bucks star-worship of show biz. Education, the foundation of the high culture, is held captive by the pop culture, so that the priority becomes entertaining children, with the help of VCR's and computer games. The consumer mind set of instant gratification, running roughshod over both the folk and the high culture, destroys sexual ethics, the stability of families, and the self-control that every society in the history of humankind has found essential.

Kenneth Myers, in his brilliant book *All God's Children and Blue Suede Shoes: The Christian and Popular Culture*—to which the preceding discussion is indebted—has observed that Christianity can be supported by the folk culture (the rich family and community associations of going to church) and by the high culture (the Church's cultivation of education, theology, and the arts).³ It cannot, however, according to Myers, be supported by the pop culture. Self-gratification is incompatible with God-centeredness. Pop culture enthrones our sinful flesh. Myers believes that contemporary Christians can enjoy the artifacts of the pop culture, but they must do so carefully and with the realization that the Word of God calls them to a life of grace and service that far transcends the television mind set. But just as pop culture has been invading and taking over other spheres in

³Wheaton, Illinois: Crossway Books, 1989.

both the folk and the high culture, it is also attempting to absorb the Church.

Strictly speaking, today's controversies over worship are not actually about the relationship between Christianity and culture. No one is arguing that our worship adjust itself to today's high culture—that our music should experiment with Schönberg's tonal structures or that sermons should take into account contemporary literary theory. Nor is anyone arguing that worship adjust itself to the folk culture, employing more early-American hymns or reestablishing the old custom of church raisings. The controversies are actually about the desire for worship to accommodate the pop culture.

The church growth movement is all about pop Christianity. Every one of the marks of pop culture are evident in the theory and practice of the church growth movement: consumerism, instant gratification, large scale mass appeals, anti-intellectualism, permissiveness, entertainment focused, technology dependence, fashion consciousness, novelty seeking, purposeful superficiality, and the like. Church growth advocates favor pop music and pop psychology over folk culture hymns and high culture theology. It stresses convenience, music synthesizers, and impersonal social-scientist-designed programs. Church buildings are designed on the model of theme parks or shopping malls. The critic used an extremely accurate cultural metaphor when he called the new mega-church mentality "McChurch."

The cultural genius of liturgical worship—again, to set aside for a moment its theological significance—is that it satisfies and brings together both the folk culture and the high culture. The liturgy establishes continuity between generations and between eras, with its roots deep into the history of Christian Church. To say that the divine service comes out of German culture is absurd. Its roots go back to Rome and Greece, North Africa and the Middle East, but its very text is drawn from the Word of God. The liturgy, in its history and use, is of no culture and of every culture—to use a technical term, it is "metacultural"; that is, it offers a framework that both transcends and accords with

all cultures. Liturgical worship carries a profound psychological and cultural resonance, comprised of memories, time tested truths, feelings of continuity, and a sense of belonging—hallmarks of the folk culture.

But liturgical worship also satisfies the demands of the high culture in its substantive content, its challenging theological nuances, the beauty of its language, its settings in fine music, and its aesthetic richness and use of the other arts. Liturgies, while keeping their roots in church history, are certainly subject to translation, updating, and theological revisions. Designing a liturgy, however, is no light or easy undertaking. It demands the best and most careful work of high culture scholars, theologians, and musicians. Those who worked on *Lutheran Worship* spent years scrutinizing theological minutiae, with Missouri Synod Lutherans, eventually falling out with their now-ELCA collaborators, disputing over the wordings of hymns and debating the fine points of sacramental theology. “It Came upon a Midnight Clear” had impeccable folk culture credentials as a beloved Christmas song, but its Unitarianism and millennialism make it unsuitable for Lutheran worship. This kind of specialized, sophisticated theological analysis is eminently high culture and is extraordinarily important. The next book of worship, recently announced by the LCMS’s Commission on Worship, will take ten years to develop—a far cry from simply throwing together an order of worship in time to get it in the bulletin for next Sunday.

Those who wish to reform worship along church growth lines are likely to ridicule such efforts, because the pop culture tends to dismiss the high culture. Critics of the liturgy emphasize the need to update our music. The fact is, the musical settings in *Lutheran Worship*, composed in the 1980s, are actually more contemporary than most of the “praise songs” which date from the Peter, Paul, and Mary styles of the 1960s. Critics stress the importance of using contemporary language. But a “praise song” is almost as likely to use “Thee’s” and “Thou’s” as a hymn. Again, the issue is not being contemporary but being pop.

The Two Kingdoms

Thus far we have been examining culture. Even if we come to a perfect understanding of cultural dynamics, we will not thereby solve the dilemma of how the Church in a particular culture is to worship. Those who attempt to sort out the issues of culture and worship must also factor in a major theological point, dealing with what the relationship between the Church and the culture—whether folk, high, or pop—is supposed to be.

H. Richard Niebuhr, in his classic book *Christ and Culture*, outlines the different possibilities, each of which has had its advocates in the history of the Church.⁴ One option is to put culture above Christ. In this view, Christianity serves culture, or, in the words of the National Council of Churches slogan, the world sets the agenda for the Church. When the culture changes, Christianity must also change. This is the path of liberal theology.

Certainly few in the church growth movement seem to be liberals as such; they are evangelicals, committed to Scripture and evangelism. But there are different kinds of liberalism according to the time and culture to which they wish the Church to conform. Liberals of the Enlightenment wanted to make Christianity into a religion of reason; liberals of the Romantic era wanted to make Christianity into a religion of feeling. The modernist liberals of the twentieth century wanted to make Christianity relevant to the modern man by demythologizing outdated supernatural doctrines and by applying scientific-critical methods to the Bible.

In our postmodern age, scientific rationalism has lost its authority, and the supernatural is no longer excluded. Thus, postmodern liberals may well admit to supernatural beliefs, but they will adjust them to fit the cultural demands of the moment, whether the nationalism of an ethnic folk culture, the social-constructivist theories of the high culture, or the consumerism of the pop culture. What makes a person a liberal is not any one set of beliefs or unbeliefs; rather, a liberal in theology is defined

⁴New York: Harper, 1951.

by his willingness to make culture authoritative over the Word of God. The church growth movement is thus, in the most technical sense, a manifestation of liberal theology.

Niebuhr discusses other ways Christianity has related to culture. In the Reformed and Roman Catholic traditions, the Church rules the culture. In the Anabaptist and monastic traditions, the Church is to be utterly separate from the culture. Lutherans have the doctrine of the two kingdoms.

God rules both the Church and the world, but he exercises his sovereignty differently in the different realms. God rules in the hearts of believers by the grace and forgiveness communicated in the Gospel of Christ. God rules the world by his creation, his power, and his Law. God's rule extends to both the secular and the sacred spheres. Christians live in both kingdoms, and may serve God in their earthly callings no less than in the Church. His two kingdoms, however, must not be confused with each other—the Law is binding on non-believers, but Christians are freed by the Gospel; Christian forgiveness is not to be used as an argument against capital punishment or just wars.

The doctrine of the two kingdoms is usually discussed in the context of the role of government or the Christian's political duties, but it applies directly to issues of culture. God is sovereign over culture. This means, among other things, that the folk culture, the high culture, and the pop culture are subject to God's moral law. This also means that a Christian may participate in the various levels of culture, in all of their secularity. Christians have the freedom to love their country, become highly educated in technical fields, and watch TV. They will do such things under God's Law, and thus can be expected to get involved in politics, criticize secularist ideologies, and demand that Hollywood clean up its act. They will be full and active members of their culture.

The other part of the doctrine of the two kingdoms is that the Church must be set apart from the culture. The Church, Luther said, is governed solely by God's Word, and its prerogatives are not to be surrendered to the world. In Hitler's Germany, the idolaters of the folk culture sought to take over the Christian

Church and to purge it of its Jewish elements, namely the Old Testament. The confessional Christians opposed such doctrinal compromises with their lives. Throughout the twentieth century, scholars from the high culture have attacked the reliability of the Bible, but orthodox Christians have stood on the truth of God's Word. Today the Church must resist the dictates of the pop culture.

The doctrine of the two kingdoms, when applied to worship and culture, might mean that a Christian might enjoy popular music – but not want it in divine service. A Christian might be a good businessman – but not want to turn the Church into a business. A Christian might love TV, movies, and computer games – but not look to the Church to be entertained. A worship style would be valued because it is not part of the dominant culture of the moment. Ways would be sought to keep the Church different from the world. The Church would seek to counter the ways of the world, not imitate them. The lost would see in the Church an alternative to the vanity, deceit, and futility of the world.

Our family has the custom of inviting people who have no relatives in the area to our house for Thanksgiving dinner. We do not change our time honored, invariable menu according to what our guests are accustomed. Not only would our children never allow it, but the sense of family established by our eating rituals is exactly what our homesick guests crave. Besides, it would be inhospitable to offer those who eat fast food every day a McDonald's hamburger instead of a Thanksgiving dinner. Our family's task is to invite the lonely and those with no place to go, bring them in, and make them welcome at our feast. This is also the task of the Church.