

Culture

Why Churches Develop Unique Stories

by Graeme Sansome

Culture is an indispensable ingredient of theology and it is churches that do theology whether they realise it or not. Churches are always developing their stories in the midst of culture. This is why culture so important to theology and also to understanding the unique stories of Christian churches in the world today.

Is 'culture' a new, somewhat, fashionable concept, or has it always been there as a significant factor in church life? Is theology an indispensable ingredient of culture? These are questions and concerns that, at the very least, need to be considered in Christian communities as they inevitably develop their own unique stories. But firstly, what do we mean by these terms 'culture' and 'theology'?

'Culture' is a word that can conjure up a variety of different thoughts and ideas, depending on the context in which it is used. Culture is unavoidable. It permeates all levels of society and manifests itself in the customs, traditions, ideas and behaviour of people either in a conscious or a sub-conscious manner. Culture, therefore, encompasses a large range of different areas such as language, arts, customs, sport and social behaviour, to name but a few. From this brief explanation, one could possibly perceive that culture has always permeated human life and development since the beginning of existence, all be it at different levels of awareness. However, culture is continually evolving and does not stay the same for long periods of time.

The word 'theology' can also be interpreted and understood in a multitude of ways. Broken down into its most basic form, theology can be expressed as speaking about God, or 'faith seeking understanding'. It is important to note that theology is not indelibly linked to the Christian faith only. Other religions also participate in theology, congruent with their own belief systems. Christian theology can be engaged in various ways, depending on one's faith stance. Throughout history, some of these different branches, or perspectives, on theology have included systematic, biblical, liberation, feminist, black and pastoral theologies. All of these views, and many more, despite their different methodologies, can come under the umbrella of Christian theology. There are many resources that are available to theologians as they endeavour to gain a greater understanding of God.

Having made some basic definitions of these two terms, the next question to consider is at what point do culture and theology intersect? Firstly, two resources that theologians and Christian communities use, the Bible and Christian tradition, originate from totally different settings, times and cultures than today's context of 'doing theology'. This chasm of time and culture, despite the best efforts, will never be completely bridged. Secondly, as theologians seek to interpret and reflect on God's activity in the world, they always do so from a specific culture. Therefore, the conclusions or interpretations that any faith community draw from a certain activity, or event, may be completely different to another faith community in a different culture. Thirdly, as Christians attempt to communicate their message from within or outside a culture, they must do so in a way that is understood by and relevant to that particular culture.

While Christian communities may be limited in their ability to bridge the chasm between time and culture, recognising the culturally bound nature of reflection and the communication of Gospel is possible. These will influence a church's development and the story it tells. The discussion concerning the relationship between theology and culture has been a point of debate and conjecture over a long period of time for many faithful people.

In the twentieth century, one theologian, Paul Tillich significantly developed what is known as the 'correlative approach' to theology and culture. Tillich suggested that culture constantly raised ultimate matters of concern within communities. These concerns included questions of purpose, suffering and existence for human life, which could be addressed quite differently from one culture to another. Tillich reasoned that for Christianity to remain plausible, the Gospel message and its symbols must *correlate*, or connect with these cultural concerns and provide answers. To accomplish this, Tillich concluded that a thorough analysis of culture would be an invaluable and necessary task for doing integral theology that had meaning for contemporary life.¹

Some felt that Tillich did not go far enough.² While dialogue with other disciplines, such as philosophy and theology, improved through Tillich's influence, it seemed the critical discussion did not entail self examination in terms of theology. True correlation surely involves dialogue, with questions and answers from both sides, otherwise it becomes an interrogation, or at the very least, a one-sided discussion. In addition, if Tillich's theory was to uncover the living, vital questions a culture was asking, surely religion, being a part of that culture, would also come under close scrutiny and analysis. Today, we might enter into dialogue over the nature of human life in medical ethics, the contemporary applications of which are neither spelt out in Scripture, nor engaged with in Christian tradition. This requires a process of correlative engagement by Christians in the world, and will occur in different ways every time.

Dialogue and self-examination are central issues raised and re-thought in regard to Tillich's work. These reflections highlight the need for true dialogue which incorporates effective listening from both sides. Correlation has to be a time of learning, not a time for proselytism. It is also important for Christian communities not to be arrogant and to be aware that God is active in the entire world, not just in the religious context. Another vital point is that all cultures are different and people should not condemn another culture just because it is not familiar to them. It is important to note that there are various models of correlative theology.

A classic example of correlative theology in action can be seen in Reinhold Niebuhr's re-evaluation of Augustine's doctrine of 'original sin'. Augustine of Hippo (354–430) proposed that because of the sin of Adam, each generation physically inherited sin. Despite this condition being inevitable for the whole of humanity, Augustine believed that each individual was still responsible for their own actions.³

Some fifteen hundred years after Augustine, Niebuhr demonstrated that Augustine's theory of original sin appeared to contradict itself. He questioned how a supposedly unavoidable, inherited, sinful condition, could possibly be linked with an individual's responsibility and yet be underpinned by freedom of choice. Instead, Niebuhr proposed a universal anxiety experienced by humans. This anxiety, coupled with freedom, consequently produces sinful decisions in an effort to reduce or eliminate the anxiety. In this way, human sin is pervasive and universal, but individuals are also responsible. Niebuhr was addressing the awesome issue of sin and human responsibility in the context of World War II. Niebuhr's insights have since been critiqued by contemporary Feminist and Liberation theologians, as new challenges surface for the Christian church in its correlation of theology and culture.

Culture and theology can never be separated in their affects on one another. A question I raised at the beginning asked if the reverse were true, that is, 'is theology a vital ingredient of culture?' Certainly, if we reflect on religious involvement in different periods of history, we might feel quite justified to answer with a resounding no. The eras of bloody crusades, colonialisation, oppression and holy wars have definitely not been beneficial, nor have they been anything for religion to boast about or cherish. No one can deny these atrocities. However these negatives, which people tend to remember rather than the many positive accomplishments of religious involvement in history, somewhat ironically serve in one sense to remind us of the need for a precise theology, to be done with truth and integrity, in order to prevent similar things happening again.

I previously asked whether it is important for theology to be open to scrutiny from other disciplines, and therefore to be accountable to other forms of human inquiry. Theology seeks to hold other disciplines and governments, as well as other social groups accountable for the things they are saying and doing.

Church communities and theologians must also be involved with the critique and removal of social injustice, including their own, even where these are not religiously motivated. Certainly, liberation theology demonstrates this admirably with an emphasis on praxis. Christian theology provides the basis and grounding for a solid biblical faith, which enables the proclamation of gospel giving hope and purpose to human lives – and it often does so, alongside others in society, in a praxis that endorses human dignity.

There are so many issues in life where there is opportunity for correlating theology and culture. Culture effects every human person in some form. Therefore, if culture is an integral part of life, churches communities and the theologies they articulate can ill afford to ignore the ever-changing nature of culture. They must move with it. This is not an easy task but it is a necessary one. If they don't take up the challenge, church communities are in danger of becoming incomplete, narrow, 'religious ghettos', with minimum impact in the world. They will have no living story, through which to engage 'with the world'.

Theology and culture must be kept in a dialogical relationship. They are vital to each other. For churches, culture is, and must continue to be, an indispensable ingredient, if they are to develop and own their stories. This entails being a credible, relevant and important witness to God's salvific participation in the world. In this way too Churches will always be in a process of developing their own unique stories *for the sake of the world.* **reo**

Endnotes

- McGrath, A.E. Christian Theology: An Introduction, 369–375
D. Tracy and L.Gilkey.
McGrath, A.E. Christian Theology: An Introduction, 369–375