Articles

A Lutheran View of Culture

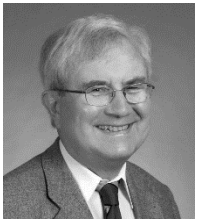
Robert Kolb

God breathed into the dust of the earth and fashioned His human creature for life on this earth. Time and place formed an integral element of the product of His creative breath. He gave Adam and Eve dominion of the kind He exercises, dominion of service and care, in His world to those whom He had created in His own image. He created them to manage and serve His creation in certain places at certain times.

The Creator had an appointment at a specific time—in the cool of the evening—in a specific place—somewhere in the Garden. The failure of Adam and Eve to be *there then* induced God to make the first evangelism call: "Where are you?" Ever since then, throughout the God-designed and God-governed passage of time and in every place in His creation, God has accompanied His human creatures, seeking them, calling them back to Himself. He has related to them in wrath and judgment as well as in the re-creative expression of His mercy and lovingkindness in the incarnation, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. In every historical circumstance, the unchanging God is present, governing and guiding the ever-changing course of human history as it unfolds the blessings that the Creator designs for the people whom He seeks out in their own cultures throughout time around the globe. He gathers them from all nations into His family, the Church. Throughout, He continues to provide for His creation and protect His human creatures in the face of all evil.

The Biblical Origins of Cultures

As history moved east of Eden, God responded to human need with the development of specific cultural gifts in specific times and specific places. Some people, such as Jabal, were called to practice agriculture (Gen 4:20); others, Jubal for instance, developed musical arts (Gen 4:21); and Tubal-cain made tools, the machinery of that time (Gen 4:22). God had developed human culture before Babel



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added the further dimension of different languages as punishment for sin. These elements of culture formed part of the phenomenon "culture." We may define "culture" as the organic (that is, composed of mutually related elements) whole of human activities and relationships which define the meaning and significance of life for a specific group of people, who are linked by these elements in a common identity and in common endeavors. "Culture" presumes shared assumptions, values, and allegiances, and it involves systems, institutions, individuals. Cultures embrace a number of aspects: language and literature; social structures and relationships; economic relationships; political institutions; sports, leisure, recreation; music and the graphic arts; natural sciences and technology; health care; media; military service; educational systems; festivals, including public and individual rites of passage; practices regarding death, burial, and interactions with the dead; humor; transportation; and others. The judgment upon human presumptuousness that the tower of Babel brought upon humankind determined an important element of human cultures, but the multiple aspects of culture also reflect the ultimate variety of the ultimately simple nature of our Creator.

Differing cultures developed as time moved along and human beings spread across the earth. In each culture, holding the culture together for the benefit of at least some of the population became an ultimate goal, edging the Creator to the side. In one or perhaps more cultures, the idea of building a tower to express human power, a false use of the dominion God had given for interaction with the rest of creation, aroused God's wrath. Languages divided the one human race even though language remains the prime tool for praising God and praying to Him. God separated cultures from each other through language barriers. But He provided possibilities for translation. And His desire to restore and renew the conversations of Eden remained. Even under the curse, the variety of cultures illustrates the richness of the image of God, in whose image human beings were fashioned.

H. Richard Niebuhr's "Christ and Culture in Paradox"

In 1950, Yale professor H. Richard Niebuhr delivered five lectures on the relationship of "Christ and culture," in which he sketched five different approaches to the relationship between the Church and the cultures in which it has lived. Both Reformation-era Anabaptists and medieval monastics typify the attitude of "Christ against culture," the withdrawal from culture practiced by many who find it difficult to cope with living in cultures that do not promote the Church or make its life easy. It stands in contrast to the "Christ of culture" motif, which describes the subjection of the Church's message to cultural values. Examples range from the Liberal Protestantism of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries through the "German Christians" and other ecclesiastical expressions of culture in modern dictatorships, to the "American Christianity" that integrates a wide spectrum of political views, all of

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them valuing "personal freedom" of one kind or another over genuine biblical expressions of love for God and others. Between these two lie "Christ above culture" and "Christ transforming culture." Those who embrace the "Christ above culture" view embrace the goodness of culture but believe that the Church brings the fulfillment of its values to their highest level. Niebuhr preferred the "Christ transforming culture" motif and argued for the Christian's obligation to permeate the culture with Christian values. Finally, he labeled the view of Saint Paul, Marcion, Martin Luther, and Niebuhr's brother Reinhold, as "Christ and culture in paradox."[1]

Labeling Luther's approach to culture a "paradox" indicates a failure to understand the reformer's distinction of the two realms into which God has placed human beings: their horizontal relationships with this world and their vertical relationship with their Creator or some substitute that they have designed for Him. The label also fails to recognize his perception that believers, as they participate in the cultures to which God has called them, are sinful and righteous at the same time. Luther's robust doctrines of creation and providence, illustrated in his explanation of the first article of the Creed and the fourth petition of the Lord's Prayer,[2] lead his followers to a high appreciation of God's gifts in and through their cultures. That high appreciation integrates easily with a calling to criticize cultural diversions from God's will whenever cultural values contradict or undermine the practice of true human living as revealed in conscience (Rom 2:14) and Scripture. It is natural for human beings to criticize the flaws in those they love, with sympathy and hope for change. It is natural for human beings to love those whom they criticize because God favors our treating all those within our spheres with respect for each person's inherent dignity and worth—the same kind of respect that we would like to enjoy ourselves.[3]

Martin Luther's Appreciation and Critique of His Culture

Luther himself demonstrated an appreciation for his own culture based on his belief that God gives good gifts in and through culture. His gratitude for technological advances revealed itself above all in his use of the printing press.[4] The careful cultivation of rhetorical theory and skills of his colleague Philip Melanchthon aided Luther's own production of both powerful oral testimony in lectures and sermons as well as written works in several genres that spread his message across German-speaking lands and beyond.[5] His colleagues in the arts faculty of the University of Wittenberg made a wide range of contributions to their respective disciplines, including astronomy, botany, history, and Late Greek and Latin poetry. This reflected the understanding of the "dominion" that God gave his human creatures in Genesis 1:28 as a lordship of care and cultivation that promoted human knowledge and welfare and thus gave glory to God.[6] Luther's active use of and gratitude for the musical arts[7] and the graphic arts[8] cultivated important aspects of civil society as well as the life of the church.

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At the same time, Luther criticized elements of his cultural surroundings when they departed from God's will. His criticism of distant princes, such as Duke Heinrich the Younger of Braunschweig-Wolfenbüttel, Duke Georg of Saxony, or King Henry VIII of England, may seem safe enough since he enjoyed the protection of his own princes.[9] But his calling Saxon courtiers in his Wittenberg congregation to repentance for social injustices that they visited upon the peasants and townsmen[10] and his telling his students that even his good friend Elector Johann Friedrich should change practices in specific instances reveal his critical stance against injustice and wastefulness that he witnessed in his own government.[11] His *Open Letter to the German Nobility* of 1520 concluded with a critique of German civic life. Luther called for an end to "extravagant and costly dress," the spice traffic, usury, excessive eating and drinking, and brothels.[12] In the preface of the Smalcald Articles, composed in 1538, he expressed his vexation over several elements of his culture:

> There is disunity among the princes and the estates. Greed and usury have burst in like a great flood and have attained a semblance of legality. Wantonness, lewdness, extravagant dress, gluttony, gambling, conspicuous consumption with all kinds of vice and wickedness, disobedience—of subjects, servants, laborers—extortion by all the artisans and the peasants (who can list everything!) have so gained the upper hand that a person could not set things right again with ten councils and twenty imperial diets.[13]

Not at all paradoxical, Luther's appreciation of God's gift of the German and wider European culture into which he had been born included his critique of its failure to be godly.

Lutheran Appreciation of and Contributions to Culture through the Ages

Luther's followers in his own time and subsequently have participated in their cultures, both enjoying the blessings that each culture provides, contributing to these cultures, and criticizing abuses of God's order and will for human society and individual action. Contributions to music by Johann Sebastian Bach, Heinrich Schütz, and others reflected their faith in music for both ecclesiastical and secular settings. Danish theologian Nikolaus Grundtvig introduced important innovations in popular education and other social measures. The German-Russian pastor Heinrich Wilhelm Dieckhoff campaigned for basic education of the blind and the deaf in Tsarist Russia, with the aid of the imperial court. The Lutheran pastor Josef Miloslav Hurban (1817–1888) and the Lutheran layman L'udovit Štur (1815–1856) built upon their secondary education in Lutheran schools as they led the movement to organize analysis and structuring of modern Slovak.[14] William Foege (b.1936), medical missionary for the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod before he went to the United States Center for Disease Control, led efforts to eradicate smallpox in Africa. Many other examples

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demonstrate that Lutherans have actively participated in the public arenas of their cultures and contributed their gifts to these cultures.

Lutheran Critique of the Ills of Society

On the other hand, beginning with Luther himself, Lutherans have practiced sharp critique of societal abuse and social injustice. As the threats of Emperor Charles V to eradicate the Wittenberg reform grew more menacing, Luther developed a justification of resistance to governmental authorities by those with responsibilities for public order and welfare under them, based on his understanding of God's calling for rulers to execute God's will and not seek their own benefit. When the imperial armies defeated the leaders of the Lutheran movement in the Smalcald War, a band of Luther's most devoted disciples published a "Confession" in Magdeburg that reaffirmed allegiance to the Augsburg Confession and justified the right of their city to resist the imperial religious law, the "Augsburg Interim." Paul Gerhardt's defiance of the efforts to unite Lutheran and Reformed churches in the seventeenth century and also later Lutheran leaders' resistance to religious and political tyranny counter the many instances of Lutherans submitting to or even supporting exploitation and oppression in various forms. For instance, an active Lutheran layman, Louis Kossuth, led the Hungarian rebellion against the House of Habsburg in 1848–1850 and spent subsequent years in exile. Among the first to argue that one could not be Christian and embrace either the positive racism of National Socialism or its negative racism against the Jews and others, was Hermann Sasse, a stalwart defender of the integrity of Luther's theology. Along with his friend Dietrich Bonhoeffer and others, Sasse continued his resistance to the National Socialist regime. In Norway, Bishop Einar Berggrav voiced the same opposition to the occupation of his land by forces of the Third Reich. In Communist lands, Hungarian bishop Lajos Ordass earned imprisonment with his rejection of the Soviet-sponsored government in the 1950s. These examples and many others demonstrate two connected Lutheran principles: a high appreciation for the gifts their Creator gives them through the cultures into which He calls them and the importance of critiquing offenses against God's will in both the vertical and the horizontal dimensions of life.[15]

Called to Translate God's Word at Home and Abroad

Christian theology has always taken God's Word as His means to continue the Edenic conversation in Scripture. The Holy Spirit brings this Word to expression in cultures around the world and throughout time. The Christian message is not an abstract philosophy but a concrete communication from the God of conversation and

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community. He seeks to enter into an exchange with every human. Jesus sent His church to every nation and people, to every culture. The Yale missiologist Lamin Sanneh, a convert in his youth from Islam, has pointed out that the Christian faith, in contrast to the religion of the Qur'an, translates by its very nature.[16] The Lord who translated Himself into human flesh and blood has given us His words not in His native Aramaic but in a Greek translation. When believers bring the message of Christ to those outside the faith, they begin by learning the language. They listen to the rhythms, tones, and melodies of those with whom they are trying to communicate, whether it be their own children who need instruction in the faith or strangers with whom they are enjoying their first encounter. God has always made His presence felt in one way or another in every cultural setting. Such cultural conversations always leave some impact—set some waves in motion—in the culture to which it comes. But in the translation of the message into a different culture, believers face the challenge of bowing to certain native concepts or modes of thought that contradict the biblical way of perceiving reality. Therefore, believers couple their high appreciation for God's gifts in their culture with a sharply critical stance toward the culture's divergences from God's plan for His human creatures and His call for justice and mercy among all people.

In the context of both appreciation and critique, Lutherans recognize the necessity of confessing their faith and their insights into God's Word by translating its message into the local place and time into which God has called them. Lamin Sanneh's insight into the nature of the biblical faith as a translatable faith—in contrast to Islam—is extended in reports from a workshop led by Michael DeJong, University of South Florida, and Christian Tietz, University of Zurich. They note that God's revelation in Scripture compels all followers of Christ, from Paul on Mars Hill to the twenty-first century witnesses of the crucified and risen Jesus, to translate the message of the prophets and apostles into their own languages and cultural settings. DeJonge and Tietz argue that common human experiences among uniquely cultural-bound situations are sufficiently similar, making translation possible. They further argue that the way God operates in history and respects the cultures that He governs makes translation necessary. The Gospel of Jesus Christ makes itself a refuge for people across the globe; God sent His Son as Savior for all. God's designs and works throughout history make "linguistic-historical contextualization" both doable and obligatory for believers. Ultimate authority for the followers of Christ lies in what God has done historically and as reported in Holy Scripture. The Holy Spirit calls Christians to render the promise of Christ from one field of meaning to another. They do so even within their own languages, as time and events give words new shades of meaning. Historically distinct situations can find a linking bridge in the "historical transplantation of ideas and experiences" (which are always related).[17] DeJonge and Tietz note that, as linguist George Steiner has argued, something is generally lost in

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translation, but they further note that something is usually gained as well. The gain comes not by changing the content of God's message but by making the promises of Scripture clear in different situations than those of ancient Palestine and the Hellenistic world. For in God's economy, He has placed in Scripture words of Law and Gospel that address lives in settings far different from those of Isaiah or Luke.

The joys, opportunities, challenges, and dangers of such transcultural conversations offer us today the opening to think about God's calling for us to bring His message to the next generation in our land, to the neighbors in our own vicinity, and to the world beyond through the many ways God makes global communication possible. God brought His message to those far away once through pen pals; today, various technological channels pose their own invitations and challenges for witnessing. Both near and far, sinners need God's Word. His Word addresses the basic human condition through the agricultural society of the ancient Hebrews and the metropolitan cultures of the Hellenistic world. Thus, as Christians, we are called to repeat the Gospel of Christ in the language of every individual place and time in God's cornucopia of human settings. As Luther said, the Holy Spirit needs all believers to serve as His instruments for uttering the Gospel understandably wherever God has placed them—for cultures deliver God's providential care and love in many forms. Among them is the privilege of conveying His will and promise whenever and wherever He has placed us.

Endnotes

[1] H. Richard Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture* (New York: Harper, 1951).
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[3] Robert Kolb, "Niebuhr's 'Christ and Culture in Paradox' Revisited," *Lutheran Quarterly* 10 (1996): 259–79.
[4] Andrew Pettegree, *Brand Luther: 1517, Printing, and the Making of the Reformation* (New York: Penguin, 2015).
[5] William Weaver, introduction to *Philipp Melanchthon. Schriften zur Dialektik und Rhetorik / Principal Writings on Dialectic and Rhetoric: Principal Writings on Rhetoric*, ed. William P. Weaver, Stefan Strohm, and Volkhard Weis, vol 2.2, *Philipp Melanchthon. Opera Omnia. Opera Philosophica* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2017), xxxiii–liv; Brian Cummings, *The Literary Culture of the Reformation. Grammar and Grace* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002).
[6] See the summary in Robert Kolb, "The Wittenberg Impact on University Education and the Christian Liberal Arts," in *My Savior's Guest. A Festschrift in Honor of Erling Teigen*, ed. Thomas Rank (New York: Lulu Press, 2021), 91–108.
[7] Robin Leaver, *Luther's Liturgical Music. Principles and Implications* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007); Mikka E. Antilla, *Luther's Theology of Music: Spiritual Beauty and Pleasure* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2013).

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[8] Steven E. Ozment, *The Serpent & the Lamb: Cranach, Luther, and the Making of the Reformation* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2011); Mark M. Mattes, *Martin Luther's Theology of Beauty, a Reappraisal* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2017).
[9] Scott H. Hendrix, *Martin Luther, Visionary Reformer* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2015), 168–169, 182; Christoph Volkmar, *Catholic Reform in the Age of Luther: Duke George of Saxony and the Church, 1488–1525*, trans. Brian McNeil and Bill Ray, Studies in Medieval and Reformation Traditions 209 (Leiden: Brill, 2017), 453–513.
[10] Martin Luther, *D. Martin Luthers Werke* (Weimar: Böhlau, 1883–1993), 44:665, 3–7, 436, 27–31, hereafter WA; *Luther's Works,* ed. Jaroslav Pelikan (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1955-76; Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1958–86), 8:118, 7:185, hereafter LW.
[11] WA 44:451, 40–452, 5; LW 7:206.
[12] WA 6:465, 25–467, 26; LW 44:212–15.
[13] Kolb and Wengert, *Book of Concord*, 299. Luther's words can be found in the original German and Latin in Dingel, *Bekenntnisschriften*, pp. 722/723.
[14] Robert Kolb, "The Polis in Luther's Theology," in *Theology and Ethics for the Public Church: Mission in the 21st century*, ed. Mary Sue Dreyer and Samuel Deressa (Lanham, MD: Fortress Academic, forthcoming).
[15] Kolb, "The Polis."
[16] Lamin Sennah, *Translating the Message. The Missionary Impact on Culture* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2009).
[17] Michael P. DeJonge and Christiane Tietz, eds. *Translating Religion. What is Lost and Gained?* (New York: Routledge, 2015), 29–44.

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