INTERPRETING YOUR WORLD

Five Lenses for Engaging Theology and Culture

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Justin Ariel Bailey

Foreword by Kevin J. Vanhoozer

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FOREWORD

Why should theology, the science of God and of the sacred page, consort with something as "secular" as contemporary culture? And why should seminarians, prospective pastors and preachers, or for that matter, everyday Christians spend time learning how to interpret popular culture and critical race theory in addition to the Bible? Biblical interpretation we know, but who, cultural interpretation, are you, and why have you come to church?

In the 1980s, when I began my seminary teaching, few people talked about culture, and when it was mentioned, it was always *foreign*: something *they* had, over *there*. Much has changed since then. However, if anyone still questions the need for theology to engage culture, let them ponder Jesus's words: "Why do you see the speck that is in your brother's eye, but do not notice the log that is in your own eye?" (Matt. 7:3 ESV). The truth is that we are all creatures of culture, people who form and have been formed by (mentally, morally, even spiritually) everything in the world that is not a product of nature.

I introduced Justin Ariel Bailey to cultural hermeneutics almost twenty years ago. (You can read his account of this experience in the introduction.) I am happy to acknowledge that thanks to the present book, the student has now surpassed his teacher. I talked in class about the importance of giving thick descriptions of cultural objects and practices, but I am now learning from Justin how better to do this, thanks to his penta-focal glasses (the five lenses) that enable him to give even thicker

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descriptions of the cultural world, of the dialogue between theology and culture, than the ones I presented in class.

Yet why bother interpreting the world if, as Karl Marx stated, the point is to change it? This is a fair question. Many Christians want to transform culture by proclaiming the gospel, but this requires discernment. The title of John Stott's book on the topic accurately describes the challenge of preaching: *Between Two Worlds*. To be sure, a pastor is first and foremost a minister of God's Word, yet in order to bring the Word to bear upon the world, preachers need to know something about the people to whom and the contexts in which they are ministering. Knowing culture matters because culture, like religion, is in the business of shaping hearts: appealing to the imagination's need for meaningful stories and creating and satisfying desires.

Culture invariably informs our lived theology or, as Justin puts it in this book, "our sense of what is most real and what really matters." I sincerely believe that culture is the most powerful means of spiritual formation on earth—apart from the Holy Spirit, that is. Culture forms even the way we think about and read the Bible, which raises the question, Who is interpreting whom? It so happens that both the Bible and contemporary culture offer interpretations of our world, of everything that matters to us.

To preach or communicate the Word of God effectively in the present world, then, pastors need to know something about the biblical text *and* our contemporary context. To become what Jesus calls "fishers" of human beings (Matt. 4:19)—the kind of disciples who can make other disciples—it helps to know something about the water in which they live and move and have their being. For example, do they live in salt water or fresh water?

Justin offers five lenses on culture, five perspectives on the water in which we human-fish live and swim and have our being. The five lenses allow us not simply to stay on the surface of the water but to plumb its depths. Justin gives us tools to help us understand *why* people speak, act, and live as they do. And though he has moved beyond the culture as a meaningful text model, his book still contributes to the important goal of cultural literacy. For it is only when we are able to make sense of culture, and to understand its nature, function, and power, that we can begin to engage it theologically. The purpose of engaging culture is

to gain cultural literacy, a prerequisite for cultural agency: the ability to make a difference, to inhabit one's culture in ways that befit followers of the Way of Jesus Christ. What is at stake in the dialogue between theology and culture that Justin here engages is nothing less than the shape of our discipleship.

If we rename Justin's first lens (the meaning dimension) the *semantic* dimension, then his five dimensions (semantic, power, ethical, religious, aesthetic) give rise to a handy mnemonic, the acronym SPERA, from the Latin for "hope." That is only fitting, for his overall approach to the relation of theology and culture is not replacement but fulfillment. The conversation between theology and culture that Justin conducts is not a zero-sum game with one winner and one loser. It is rather the warp and woof of the Christian life, and a must for every Christian who is serious about doing everything—especially eating and drinking at the table, in conversation with others—to the glory of God.

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Introduction

Is There Anything to Say?

In the early aughts, I was working as a youth pastor in a small church on the north side of Chicago. The whole group could fit in one fifteen-passenger van, and yet it was quite diverse. My students were mostly non-white, ethnically Filipino, Puerto Rican, and Indian Americans. Some attended Chicago Public Schools, others were at private evangelical schools in the suburbs, still others went to private Catholic institutions. Led by me, a Filipino American raised in suburban Kansas City and educated in a predominantly white public school, one dynamic was always present: the complexity of culture.

I was raised in an independent Baptist church with a strong sense of countercultural purpose. If we used the word "culture," we prefaced it with a definite article: the culture. The culture was broadly synonymous with "the world," which was one part of the unholy trio—the world, the flesh, and the devil—with which we were at war. This youth group, however, defied such easy categorization. Rather than being the product of a definite monoculture (the culture), this youth group testified to a diverse mingling of ethnic and educational culture*s*.

But there was also another distinct world that the students shared: popular culture. Given the group's diversity, I began to see pop culture as common ground on which I could build. Developing pop culture literacy became a ministerial necessity as I worked to connect with the students. So

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I took up breakdancing (I was not very good), listened to their music (the emo rock band Dashboard Confessional stands out in my memory), and joined them online in the emerging (pre-Facebook) social media world. I also endeavored to include pop culture references in my teaching. My analysis was clumsy, of the compare-and-contrast variety (this is what the culture says; this is what the Bible says). Most of the time, my forays into pop culture were met with embarrassed silence. If my critiques altered my students' habits of consumption, they rarely let me know.

An exception to this stands out. One student, upon giving his life to Christ, informed me that he wanted to destroy all his "secular" CDs. I am not sure where he got this idea, but it was not that surprising. There is a well-attested tradition of evangelicals destroying their "devil music," after the pattern of converted sorcerers who burned their magic books in the early church (Acts 19:19). When I was in high school, a Pentecostal friend of mine shattered his CDs using a sliding glass door. I had never advocated for such an act of cultural iconoclasm. But when my youth group student shared with me his desire to make a decisive break with his "past," I wanted to honor that desire. So I drove him to a bridge and watched him fling his rap and R&B CDs into the river below. Even then, I remember feeling conflicted about the action, for reasons beyond the act of littering we had just committed. I was happy that he wanted to follow the Lord. But did discipleship mean the *replacement* of everything he had previously loved? Is that how Christians are meant to relate to culture?

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These questions still drive me, now two decades later. I find myself leading Christian college students in conversations about the relationship between faith and culture. In one class, I begin with a two-minute writing exercise using the following prompt: "What do you believe, and what difference does it make in your life?" Student responses to this question are occasionally provocative, but largely predictable. I have also consistently found something that fascinates me. Although students can speak eloquently about music, entertainment, sports, and politics, when it comes to matters of faith—their theology—many of them have difficulty articulating either the substance or the significance of their beliefs.

I do not share this to belittle my students, who have taught me so much. I share it to note the surplus of time, energy, and attention they

have for discussing *culture*, especially when compared with their deficit of language for describing their *faith*. When reading through student responses to this question, I sometimes recall a summary statement from researchers who spent seven years studying the religious lives of American teenagers: "I believe there is a God and stuff."[1]

Perhaps it is not fair to expect fluency from my students when it comes to describing their faith. Vagueness hardly afflicts only the young and the restless. All of us know more, believe more, and sense more than we can say. Faith is a framework of meaning before it is a collection of discrete, easy-to-articulate beliefs. Even when we begin to speak, we find that our words fail us. We have a *felt* sense of the way the world is, which we are only sometimes able to describe clearly and coherently.

Our inability to describe our beliefs also reflects a coyness in our culture toward God-talk. The first time I met one of my neighbors, he learned that I taught theology at the local university. That's all I had to say before he interrupted: "I don't really know too much about religion and all that." I can certainly respect his reticence to speak about controversial topics, particularly with a "specialist." But I, who think and speak about theology for a living, share something of his shyness. Most of us do, for multiple reasons. The sheer diversity of religious perspectives in our culture makes faith feel fragile. In our polarized times, we don't want to offend anyone unnecessarily. And how can we know for sure that *our* religious vision gets reality right?

Some, like my neighbor, may respect theology but file it alongside other arcane disciplines, like theoretical physics. Still others feel more agnostic. God may be there, a metaphysical reality along with other unseen forces. But as long as you are kind to others and don't hurt anyone, do specific ideas about God really make a difference? This attitude is expressed a bit more eloquently by the poet A. C. Swinburne:

> From too much love of living,
>   From hope and fear set free,
> We thank with brief thanksgiving
>   Whatever gods may be.[2]

Our religious uncertainty breeds indifference, or at least indecision. Like the poet, we may be willing to tip our hats to a higher power, but we are less willing to reorient our lives in response to "whatever gods may

be." It seems safer to think of God generically, to take a more laid-back approach: "I believe there is a God and stuff."

And yet.

And yet, like my students, we feel deeply and can speak lucidly about any number of topics that we care about: whether the Chicago Bears should replace their quarterback, whether the latest Christopher Nolan film was any good, or why the other political party is ruining the country. Religious questions remain; we still yearn for identity, seek relational connection, and strive for some purpose larger than ourselves. But now, pop culture is the primary space where these questions are publicly explored. We believe there is a God and stuff, and while the "stuff" of theology feels vaguely irrelevant, we are quite content with allowing the "stuff" of culture to be spelled out in staggering detail.

Perhaps younger generations simply lack the sophistication or the desire to mask what really matters to them. And regardless of how they were raised, theology doesn't really seem like it matters that much. What matters is figuring out who you are (identity), where you fit (belonging), and what you are supposed to do (purpose). Whom can I trust? When things are bad, can I expect tomorrow to be better? To what will I give my life? These questions, of course, all point to topics about which theology has much to say: faith, hope, and love (1 Cor. 13:13). And yet even those who self-identify as "religious" don't seem all that interested in theology's contribution to the questions that matter most (to say nothing of the irreligious).

Nevertheless, these conversations continue, and pop culture visionaries often have the loudest voices. To return to my class prompt: after asking the initial question about what they believe, I ask students to share a piece of popular culture that has been meaningful, that has changed their mind about something important, or that has brought relief in a time of difficulty. At first, students express themselves cautiously, expecting to be judged for their entertainment choices. But once they feel that their favorite bits of culture will be treated charitably, they begin to speak glowingly about the ways pop culture helps them cope, the ways it creates connections with friends and family, and the ways it offers them stories to make sense of a confusing world.[3]

It is this last part that consistently impresses me: the way that bits of culture offer unexpected anchors of meaning, identity, and belong-

ing. One student identifies characters from her favorite shows as her "friends." Another student struggles to pass his classes but could tell you every first-round draft pick in the NBA lottery for the last thirty years. Others boast near-encyclopedic knowledge of various fantasy universes (whether manga, Marvel, or Middle-earth). Popular musicians are their poets, offering mantras in which they live and move and have their being. Whole worlds of meaning exist that matter so much to them, yet they do not expect their spiritual mentors to share space within these worlds, much less appreciation.

But the truth is that all of us are deeply shaped by our culture's conversations about the things that matter most. It is likely that when it comes to our working theology—broadly, our sense of what is most real and what really matters—we get more of it from culture than from Scripture or church tradition. Perhaps this is not surprising. Culture is all-encompassing, and it reaches us before theology does. Yet the goal of every follower of Christ is to reorient our lives in response to God's self-revelation. We want to allow the God who raised Jesus from the dead, who brought Israel out of Egypt, whose voice we hear in Holy Scripture, to reshape our sense of what is most real and what really matters, and with it the way we live in the world.

Who Speaks First? Getting a Grip on the Conversation

This is a noble goal: discipling our cultural imagination. But it is easier said than done. When my student threw his CDs into the river, and when I dissected Dashboard Confessional lyrics for my embarrassed youth group, we were both attempting cultural discipleship. Although my method was a bit more sophisticated, it basically amounted to the same thing: rejection and replacement. Indeed, many similar approaches to "cultural engagement" assume that the conversation between culture and theology is relatively straightforward. We compare what culture "says" with what theology "says" and proceed based on theology's superior perspective. In this picture, culture's contribution is only valuable insofar as it supplies the *wrong* answer, to be contrasted with or corrected by theology.

But there are problems with such a simplistic approach. To continue with the metaphor, a conversation between two or more parties is always

more than the exchange of information. The *content* of a conversation (what is said) is embedded in a *context* (how it is said) and is energized by our sense of *connection* to our conversation partners (who is speaking). Let us take these in reverse order.

Connection. Communicators work hard to create a connection with their listeners. They do this because they know that our sense of *who* is speaking situates the way we process what is said. If I am criticized or praised, it will make a difference whether the words come from my wife, my father, a student, or a stranger. Similarly, a conversation with someone I want to impress—say, someone with the power to fire me—will proceed differently than a conversation where there is little "skin in the game." To put it plainly, when desire is engaged, the conversation matters more. When we treat ideas as though they are processed on a flat plane rather than through the filter of desire, we miss why cultural narratives captivate us. Most people think of theology as primarily a matter of the head. But we all feel instinctively that culture is a matter of the heart. It aims at our imagination. It plays to our hopes and our fears. It awakens our loves, identifies our anxieties, and names our intuitions. When culture "speaks," we encounter something to which we are deeply connected. It is not just a voice from "out there" but one that resonates with the voice "in here," representative of cultural stories that we have internalized and made our own.

Context. When it comes to communication, how you say it is as important as what you say. There is a difference between getting the message "I love you" via text, by owl, or in person. The method of delivery is full of meaning, and the way content is communicated—verbally or virtually, for example—shapes the communication, regardless of what the communicator wants to say.[4] Both culture and theology do more than "say"; that is, they do more than make assertions or state propositions. They comfort and console; they charm and convince. The voices speaking for either side come to us in forms that shape us; their force is felt, and their effects are evident long before we can extract any content. When culture speaks, it is doing more than just expressing ideas; it is impressing on us a way of being in the world ("This is the way"). We can resist the way; we can even subvert it. But we cannot easily ignore it.

Content. The full content of a conversation, embedded as it is in context and connection, can be difficult to discern. But it is even more

difficult when multiple voices are speaking, especially if they are speaking at the same time, and at different volumes. The content of the conversation between theology and culture is difficult to discern because neither speaks in a single, unambiguous voice. Scripture is multivocal in its unity, requiring attentive literacy; traditions of biblical interpretation are deep and wide. In culture there can be a cacophony of voices. Some are loud; others are subtle. Some are constructive; others are critical. Some have large platforms and wield significant power. Some are distinguished by their dissent. They do not always agree among themselves. These voices are in conversation with each other, not just the person who is trying to listen in.

This complexity can become incredibly confusing, and so, living well begins with listening well. To borrow an image from Proverbs, many voices cry out to those who pass by: "Let all who are simple come to my house!" (Prov. 9:4). But as the Wisdom books show, rightly discerning between the voices requires us to become a particular kind of person. The challenge of discipleship is not just to distinguish who is speaking, what is being said, and how it matters. It is to contribute to the cultural conversation in ways that connect with those we are called to love and that cohere with God's redemptive vision for creation.

We are on God's stage, answerable for the lines we speak and the lives we lead. We may be tempted to recite familiar formulas, either from culture or from theology. But recitation rarely results in an illuminating exchange. What the world needs are faithful and creative conversationalists, rooted in the wisdom of theology yet hospitable to the wisdom of culture, wherever it is found.[5] For if we know that we are safe, "hidden with Christ in God" (Col. 3:3), we can engage the complexity of the conversation without fear.

Who Is Speaking? Distinguishing the Partners

It may be helpful to situate these two conversation partners with reference to a third party: religion. Indeed, much of the academic discussion takes religion rather than theology as culture's preferred partner.[6] Part of this preference is due to the desire to make descriptive rather than normative claims, to name *what is* rather than judging *what should be*. Thus, the academic study of religion has tended to narrow its focus to

the human side of things. Its interest is in the social construction of religious meaning, in what can be accounted for without needing to invoke transcendent reality (like the existence of divine beings).[7] This does not exclude the possibility that there are real presences to which religion is responding. But religious studies as a discipline is methodologically agnostic. It wants to describe religious features regardless of whether a group's religious claims are true. Thus, religion is usually characterized in terms of rituals, beliefs, and sensibilities that capture a community's "reflections on the struggles of life."[8]

I will return to this method of investigation in chapter 4: religion and culture as ways of coping with matters of life and death. But I raise the religious studies perspective here to distinguish it from the project that I am pursuing. My primary interest remains in the dialogue between culture and theology. Theology—at least Christian theology—begins with revelation. It acknowledges as its fundamental principle a transcendent reality, one that is personal and accessible, supremely because God speaks. As the writer of Hebrews reminds us, "God spoke to our ancestors through the prophets at many times and in various ways, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son" (Heb. 1:1–2). Theology represents the effort to discern the divine voice and to answer back appropriately, in speech and action. It seeks to respond to a voice that comes to us from the outside, "good news from a far country" (Prov. 25:25 ESV), a message that we could not have discovered on our own, one that is genuinely, transformatively new.

Nevertheless, this word also makes itself intelligible for every new audience it encounters. Jesus's kingdom is "not of this world," and yet every time he describes it, he explains it in terms that are already familiar to his audience. The kingdom of God is like a mustard seed, like yeast, like a treasure hidden in a field. Theology responds to a voice that comes from the "outside," but it must always be expressed in terms that make sense on the "inside." This creates a tension: we feel, on the one hand, the claim of the gospel to distinguish ourselves from surrounding society. If Jesus is Lord, then we are called to create a biblically informed counterculture. But although the gospel brings a new creation (2 Cor. 5:17), this does not erase our prior context: our geographical location, our relational networks, our ethnic history. We are invited to respond to the gospel with respect to this particular cultural setting, allowing the

leaven of the gospel to work its way through our world. The struggle to resolve the tension between these two poles—what missiologist Andrew Walls called the "pilgrim principle" and the "indigenizing principle"— has resulted in a "wild profusion" of diversity in expressions of Christian faith across time and space.[9]

All of this is to say that although the claim of the gospel is clear—that the world belongs to God, its Creator, Redeemer, and Renewer—our efforts to work this out in various cultural contexts can go astray. Cultural theology is slippery, both because theology is always already entangled in culture and because we are always in danger of domesticating God as a local deity. We are prone to overidentify cultural forms with authentic faith, assuming that our own forms are faithful and that all other forms are flawed. This is called "syncretism," and it is always easier to see in someone else's faith than in our own. And yet theology still must proceed, on the conviction that God speaks and that grounded in Scripture, guided by the Spirit, and in conversation with global Christianity[10] we can respond to the claims God makes on our cultural life.

How Shall We Proceed? Distinguishing Prepositions

Having set these terms, what will it take to become more skillful participants in the conversation between theology and culture? Let us distinguish possible directions in terms of three prepositions: "of," "from," and "for." We might engage in theology *of* culture, seeking to justify, orient, or evaluate our culture making in light of the biblical account of reality. Alternatively, we might listen for theology *from* culture, seeking to identify, discern, and resist the implicit theological visions that emerge from cultural artifacts. Finally, we might leverage theology *for* culture, drawing from theological resources to create, cultivate, and care for the communities in which we have been placed. The categories are far from clean, but we might say that "theology of" sees culture as a *work* we do, "theology from" sees culture as a *world* we discern, and "theology for" takes culture as a *web* we weave, one we share with significant others.

Culture as work: theology of *culture*. Up until this point, I have been speaking about culture as if all my readers know exactly what I mean. Yet defining culture is nearly impossible, not least because of how all-encompassing it seems. Consider the following definition from Clive

Marsh: "In its most general sense, it means the whole web of interpretive strategies by which human beings make sense of their experience. . . . Culture is thus a complex field of enquiry, because it potentially includes all forms of human creativity—whether consciously meaning-making or not: art, music, TV, film, poetry, fiction, drama, sculpture, sport, religion, gambling."[11] All forms of human creativity? That creates quite a range of subjects for us to theologize about! Where do we begin?

Here some historical context may help. The concept of culture emerged as a way of speaking about the refinement of the human spirit. The idea was that just as we can cultivate nature, we can also cultivate ourselves to be more attuned to the things that make life worth living, especially literature, art, and music. Just as extensive and enduring cultures can become civilizations,[12] humans can become civilized, elevated to a higher plane. The problem with this definition was that it too often assumed a hierarchy in which Europe was considered the pinnacle of what it meant to be refined. This recognition led to a more "modern" conception of culture, distinguishing *cultures* in the plural and treating them as separate but equal. This proved, however, to be incoherent (because it assumes a view from nowhere), impotent (because relativism cannot condemn unethical practices, like slavery), and illusory (because cultures rarely have clear external boundaries or broad internal consensus).[13]

The failure of the modern conception of culture, however, should not keep us from treating culture as a meaningful category. But it does complexify culture: it requires us to remember that culture is messy and that cultural meanings are contested from without and within. We can still acknowledge that there is *something* called culture, *something* that cultivates us, even if it is a *something* held together less by common concepts than by common concerns (e.g., what does it mean to be a good citizen, a good Christian, a good human?).

Another way of saying this is that culture is a *verb*, something we can't not do, part and parcel of being human. Culture, in the biblical story, represents the creative human vocation to unfold creation's intricacies and to image God in bringing order to chaos.[14] Culture making is an act of obedience to the divine mandate to take the good start given to us and to make it even better (Gen. 1:26–28). As the human response to God's creative action, our investment in culture is a deeply theological

project. It may suppress or deny awareness of God (Rom. 1:18), but it cannot ignore the mandate to make something of the world.[15]

The messiness of culture is, in many ways, a beautiful mess. It is a testimony to God's love of diversity and "manyness."[16] To engage in theology *of* culture is to evaluate our cultural activity (culture as work) in light of the theological vision we find in Scripture and traditions of interpretation. These sources do not "hover above" culture. God's revelatory action accommodates human culture, elevating it as a vehicle for revelation, without thereby canonizing its cultural forms.[17] One reason why theological reflection must be renewed in every generation is because the church seeks to discern God's will for the concrete time and place in which it finds itself. This process of discernment requires continuity with the past, careful listening in the present, and confidence that God will continue to meet us in the future. It also means that we need not fear culture as if its cacophonous noise could somehow silence the voice of God.

Culture as world: theology from *culture*. Whereas theology *of* culture tends to move from theology toward culture, my next preposition moves in the opposite direction. It seeks to discern the imaginative universe implicit in various cultural artifacts. When I am teaching my students to examine their favorite bits of pop culture, I begin with the basic categories of storytelling:

- What is the story (or stories) at the simplest level?
- What role does the medium (method of delivery) play in making the story work?
- Why does the larger culture resonate with this story?
- Why do I resonate with this story?

You will notice that none of these questions evaluate the stories of culture for their compatibility with the Christian worldview. That comes later. I should say that my students are quite ready to engage in worldview critique, at least at a basic level. They can tell me countless ways that their beloved shows, songs, and video games miss the mark (usually due to profanity, sex, and violence). Since I am a theology professor, that must be what I want to hear. But I find that their ability to engage in worldview critique does not often diminish their love for the artifacts

they are criticizing, nor does it alter their ritual habits of watching, listening, or playing.

This is because our habits go deeper than our critical intellect. They are rooted in our cultural imagination. We consume culture in ways that fit our narrative identities, the stories we tell ourselves about ourselves. We are drawn to cultural artifacts that resonate with who we imagine ourselves to be and our sense of where we fit in the world. Cultural critique is necessary. But the first movement in engagement must be one of understanding: not just understanding why others resonate with this piece of culture, but why *I* resonate with it (or why I resist it).

Culture is not something "out there" that we can easily evaluate and selectively appropriate in accordance with untainted tenets of faith. What we call our worldview is already deeply enculturated, cast in terms of language, metaphors, and world-pictures with which we resonate. This is not a bad thing; it is a human thing. It is remarkable that God's Word can be translated into every cultural setting, becoming intelligible for us even as it brings a critique of our cultural idolatries. But since we are so deeply embedded in culture, it means that the work of discernment is a work that happens first in our own hearts, and our own communities, as we seek to understand the things that move us and matter most to us.

Theology and culture, after all, share many of the same concerns. They are the big questions that most humans ask:

- What kind of a place is this world?
- Which is the deeper reality: beauty or brutality?
- What is really worth living for?
- Who will help me make my way in the world?
- How do we live together amid deep differences?
- Where is this all going? Anywhere? What happens in the end?

These are questions that our cultural priests and poets are invested in exploring. Popular culture is already having this conversation, a conversation that is deeply theological, even if only implicitly. But if we follow these questions far enough, we will be confronted by more explicitly theological questions:

- Is there a God?
- What is God like?
- How does God matter?
- How would we get to know this God?
- What claims does this God make on my life?

To do theology *from* culture means to pay attention to the ways that cultural artifacts wrestle with these questions, offering challenges and connections for theology's more traditional sources. These challenges also require some sort of response. This leads to our third preposition.

Culture as web: theology for *culture.* It is easy for us to assume that the conversation between theology and culture mainly concerns our evaluation of someone else's work, someone else's worldview. But neither theology nor culture are affairs for detached analysis. Remember my earlier definition: theology is about what is most real and what really matters. Theology and culture win us to their vision of the world by aiming at our imagination (the "eyes of the heart"). Applied to cultural agency, this leads us to ask questions that set cultural artifacts in a larger context:

- Where do we see glimmers of beauty, goodness, and truth? How can we place this cultural artifact in the biblical story, manifesting created goodness, fallenness, or hope of redemption?
- Where do we see a cultural idolatry—a good thing that has been made into the ultimate thing?
- What challenge, critique, or completion might the gospel bring? How might the gospel offer fuller meaning?
- What will I make of this? How will this be woven into my life?

This last question is perhaps the most important one. Ultimately, our interpretation of culture is not just the judgments we make about it (theology of culture) but how we take it up (theology from culture) and how we steward it in our life together (theology for culture).

Another way to say this is, "Your interpretation is your life." I will return to this idea in the conclusion, but for now it is enough to say that we are all cultural interpreters. We are already engaged in countless acts of interpretation as we navigate the world. The best way to know my

interpretation of a biblical text or cultural trend is to watch how I live with it, how I live it out in my daily life with others. To return to the opening example, after my youth group student threw his music into the river, life continued, and with it, countless daily decisions needed to be made. Should he listen to the radio while he gets ready for school? Should he purchase new, explicitly "Christian" music? When his friend shares a song with him, what should he do? When he writes music of his own, what should it sound like? These decisions are unavoidable, presenting themselves to us in concrete forms, the presence of significant others with whom we make our way, the ones that make us who we are: our family, community, and people.

And while everyday life requires us to take these significant others into account, theology's special burden is to remind us that God is the first significant other before whom, with whom, and for whom we live (Rom. 11:36). Living before God's face prepares us to live with integrity and skill in our cultural settings. In this sense, theology directs us to care for culture: serving others, planting seeds, offering our work to the Lord, anticipating that God will meet us in surprising ways. As Japanese American artist Makoto Fujimura reminds us, this is long and slow work, requiring generational faithfulness: "Theology must grow and be sown into the soils of culture, be fed by spring rains of love to be cultivated in multiple generations."[18] Theology is meant to orient us for our cultural task by providing us with a comprehensive vision, the story of the world in three movements: creation, fall, and redemption.[19] It aims to help us feel Christian meaning, see Christian truth, and practice Christian virtue. The goal is that we would weave webs of vitality, ways of life that are beautiful and nourishing, in which vulnerable members are knit into our communities of care. Becoming the sort of people who can do this means becoming more skillful in our lived interpretations. We must both train our intuitions and integrate a slower, more deliberate approach, distinguished by the theological virtues of faith, hope, and love (1 Cor. 13:13).

We begin with faith: faith that God has not abandoned the creation he loves, faith that God still speaks through Word and Spirit, that God still shows up in unexpected places, and that no matter what happens, the world belongs to God. We continue with hope, the conviction that God is turning the world right-side up and making all things new. This

hope, grounded as it is on the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, gives us confidence that things can change and that what we do matters (1 Cor. 15:58). Finally, we proceed with love, directed toward the neighbors who bear the divine image, neighbors in whom we can discern sparks of glory even amid our shared depravity. To engage in theology *for* culture is to bring the resources of theology to bear on our cultural task: to take whatever inkling of good we can find at the outset and seek to nudge it in the direction of God's good future, with the hope that only the gospel can offer.

Culture as Literary Text: An Orienting Metaphor

My own orientation to the theological interpretation of culture came in the form of a class I took during my first semester of seminary: Cultural Hermeneutics. I didn't know what it meant, but I was intrigued by a class that included the word "culture" in its title. On the first day of class, it became clear that I was out of my depth. I had never even heard the term "cultural mandate," and I had never imagined that studying culture could be so sophisticated. And yet I was hooked. The class gave me categories, language, and methods to direct and discipline my ministry intuitions.

The professor, Kevin Vanhoozer, taught us to approach culture in the same way one might approach a literary text: "a world and work of meaning." Hermeneutics, he taught us, was the art of understanding; it required careful listening. This meant that rather than moving immediately to critique, we first had to understand culture on its own terms, to grasp the worlds of meaning contained in cultural texts and the way they work their way into our imagination. Cultural literacy opened the door to responsible cultural agency. For Christians to be faithful disciples, he told us, it was not enough for us to be wise interpreters of Scripture; we also needed to become wise interpreters of culture. The content of the class formed the basis of an important essay by Vanhoozer, which was published along with a collection of student essays (including one of my own) in a volume called *Everyday Theology*. In it, he frames the project's aim as transformative: "Everyday theology is nothing less than the attempt to understand everyday life: to see it as God sees it and, with God's help, to be an agent of redemptive change."[20]

To say that the class altered the course of my life is an understatement. Indeed, it is doubtful that I would have become a professor without it. Almost two decades later, I continue to find myself entranced by the conversation. And yet, I have also come to feel the limitations of the literary metaphor. The value of approaching culture as a text is that it leads us to look for meaning. But the drawback of this approach to "reading culture" is that it could produce an illusion of critical distance that we do not have—as William Dyrness puts it, "an isolated scholar sitting alone in her/his office grappling with a written text, or, in this case, an isolated cultural product."[21] In this picture, we wrestle with the text, deciding what it means, what ideas we can accept, and what ideas we should reject. But the reality is that culture is not just *communicative* but also *communicable*. It is caught before it is taught, and we investigate its meaning as those already in its grip.

I should say that Vanhoozer's account is nuanced, aware of the limitations of the metaphor, with resources for avoiding the "isolationist" approach that Dyrness fears.[22] All metaphors have limitations, and it is for this reason that I have sought not to *replace* the literary metaphor but to *emplace* it among other metaphors and methods of cultural engagement. In this understanding, cultural interpretation requires a kaleidoscope, and in the chapters that follow, I explore cultural life through five lenses:

1. The Meaning Dimension: *Culture as Immune System*
2. The Power Dimension: *Culture as Power Play*
3. The Ethical Dimension: *Culture as Moral Boundary*
4. The Religious Dimension: *Culture as Sacred Experience*
5. The Aesthetic Dimension: *Culture as Poetic Project*

Each of these approaches has something significant to offer, and none of them can be reduced to the others. Culture is how we make meaning in the world, but culture is not just a matter of meaning; it is also about power. On the other hand, culture is not reducible to power. There is also more to culture making than coping or moralizing. The burden of this book is to show how each discipline needs the others, and how they all need theology. In each chapter, theology is brought to bear as an integrative discipline, a host who opens space for others, while also

keeping any one voice from dominating the conversation. To that end, I will highlight a distinctive practice corresponding to each cultural dimension: hospitality, iconoclasm, servanthood, discernment, and making.

This book offers a non-anxious approach to cultural engagement, one that is attentive to the hunger for meaning, beauty, and justice and is governed by gospel virtues of faith, love, and hope. It invites readers to join ongoing conversations between theology and culture by listening, learning, and speaking with a distinctively Christian voice. It offers a multilayered approach, attending not just to what culture says but also to what it does and what we do with it: how it forms us as political actors, how it moves us aesthetically, how it shapes the rhythms of our lives, and how it connects us with the God and neighbor we have been called to love. For, to borrow from the apostle, the end of our cultural interpretation is not just understanding but "love, which comes from a pure heart and a good conscience and a sincere faith" (1 Tim. 1:5).

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION

1. How do you locate yourself culturally? What are the communities of which you consider yourself a member? What are the different layers of cultural identity that have formed who you are?

2. This chapter opened with stories about engaging the culture of youth group students, including one student who threw all his secular CDs in the river. Do you have any memorable stories about the interaction of theology and culture in your own life?

3. This chapter distinguishes three prepositions for describing the conversation between theology and culture: "of," "from," and "for." What has been your basic preposition or posture in relating theology and culture? What other prepositions could be added (e.g., "against," "with"), and what posture results from each preposition?

4. What are the strengths and weaknesses of thinking about cultural artifacts as a "text"? Are there other metaphors for culture that would be worth exploring?

The Meaning Dimension

Culture as Immune System

As I write this sentence, the world reels from the novel coronavirus (SARS-CoV-2) and its variants, which cause the disease popularly known as COVID-19. It is impossible to quantify all the ways that COVID has changed our world. It is also impossible to avoid it at the beginning of this book about culture. Discussions of culture tend to focus on human agency and our arts of making: the way we make places, artifacts, and institutions as part of the larger project of making meaning. I will follow this trajectory. But the coronavirus is a reminder that culture making always takes place within concrete, creaturely limitations.

We are beings with bodies, embedded in communities, living in a particular time and place. These particularities both enable what we make and limit what we can do. Chief among our limits are certain biological realities. We must eat, we need to rest, and we are susceptible to illness. Even as we marshal our best efforts to cope with, contain, and cure disease, its power often exceeds our collective resources. Viruses humble us. They remind us that despite our best attempts to manage our fragility, there are some things that remain beyond our capacity to control. Death is the finite horizon against which all culture making is

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set. Whatever meaning we make, whatever innovations we achieve, we do so in the knowledge that our bodies will eventually break down and our experience of the world—with all its meaning—will end. Theology speaks of a hope beyond that end, and of a human vocation before that end. But the end itself is not in doubt.

How do we make our way in this brutal, beautiful world? And how do we account for its beauty and brutality? In this chapter I will reflect on the meaning dimension of culture using a biological analogy: culture as virus and immune system. This analogy seeks to capture both the virality and vitality of culture. Bits of culture may spread like viruses, but when many bits of culture come together as a complex whole,[1] culture works more like an immune system, a dynamic system of discernment. I will argue that our resonance with particular cultural strains (and our resistance to others) has to do with the experience of meaning, which offers us security and stability in an uncertain world. I will then situate the discussion within three theological frames: (1) ecosystem and exile, (2) purity and pollution, and (3) Spirit and community. My goal in this chapter will be to explore the way that culture works both like a virus and like an immune system, and how the "good infection" of the gospel seeks to heal the human community.

Going Viral: The Virality and Vitality of Culture

Let us begin with the virality of culture. Although we have good reason for thinking of viruses as vicious, this is not always true; viruses can regulate bacterial populations or carry genes that are beneficial to their hosts.[2] In any case, the point of speaking about culture's virality is not that culture is a harmful *contagion*, but that culture is *contagious*, caught before it is taught.[3] Our everyday use of this metaphor (e.g., "the post went viral") captures an intuition about how culture reproduces and spreads. Indeed, there is a tradition within sociobiology that describes human culture using biotic categories. For these thinkers, virality is more than a metaphor; it is an attempt to ground culture in the basic struggle of organisms to survive in complex environments.[4] Using these categories, cognitive scientist Merlin Donald describes culture as something that "invades us and sets our agendas."[5] Although this perspective may minimize human agency—what we do with culture—the potency of

thinking about culture as a virus is precisely the way that it refuses to grant us critical distance. Just as those who study a virus are susceptible to infection, so too those who study culture are already exposed, inhabiting environments rich with viral strains.

Here a brief foray into virology may be instructive. Viruses are microscopic pieces of genetic information that worm their way into living cells, like lines of rogue computer code. The coronavirus belongs to a group of viruses identifiable by the crown-like spikes on their surface. Each spike is a key of sorts, in search of a lock. When it finds an opening, it can gain entry to the cell, and once inside it instructs the cell to reproduce the viral code. As the cell replicates the virus, there are sometimes transcription errors in the code, and this produces new strains. These variants make some viruses extremely difficult to eradicate, often with devastating effects for their hosts.

We are vulnerable to viruses, but we are not without protections. Humans have developed complex immune systems to discern and defend their bodies against invaders. The immune system seeks to deny viral entry and to stop viral spread if entry is gained. It accomplishes this second mission by fighting the virus with white blood cells and antibodies that will remember the virus and keep it from wreaking havoc a second time. Some viruses, like the coronavirus, work by turning the immune system against itself, leading to a breakdown of the body's vital functions.

It is not difficult to see why sociobiologists have used this basic paradigm of virality to describe the way that culture multiplies and mutates. Culture, too, is composed of countless bits of "code," embedded in ideas and artifacts, stories and customs, images and institutions. These cultural traces seek willing hosts who will entertain them, take them up, and transcribe them in new ways. It is not for nothing that "going viral" is the longing of every aspiring YouTube star, influencer, or brand ambassador. Virality means that you have found a key that unlocks, at least for a moment, the attention of millions.

Long before he became one of the "four horsemen" of the new atheism, British biologist Richard Dawkins coined the word "meme": an idea or trend that spreads throughout a culture like a virus.[6] Though the field of "memetics" has struggled to win recognition from empirically minded scientists, the internet has taken the meme concept in dizzying

directions, multiplying images, GIFs, and other strains of culture that spread like a wildfire. Memes have become a world of meaning unto themselves. Not long ago I had a student who created a final project in which he used internet memes to retell the story of the Bible. I appreciated the creativity, but the way the rest of the class laughed throughout the presentation made me feel like I was missing something, as if memes were a language I did not speak, a novel way of describing the world in which I had been insufficiently immersed.

But not everything goes viral; we are not merely at the mercy of memes. And here we can turn to the other side of the metaphor: culture as an immune system. To use Kevin Vanhoozer's categories from the introduction, if the virus is an image of culture as a *work* of meaning—communicative and communicable—the immune system is an image of culture as a *world* of meaning, one that forms a community. In the latter case, culture provides us with a dynamic system of discernment, one that allows us to move through an ocean of information and yet maintain a unified identity. We are more likely to entertain bits of culture that fit the narrative of who we've been (our cultural history), who we believe ourselves to be (our cultural identity), and who we want to become (our cultural aspiration).

When I lived in Southern California, one of my favorite places to eat was Grand Central Market in downtown Los Angeles. The market is known for the diversity of its food options, representing many of the cultures that make up LA's metropolitan center. To walk through the market is to experience a feast for the senses: sights, sounds, smells, and tastes. Some of the scents are unfamiliar; others are enticing. Some remind me of the way our kitchen smelled while I was growing up; others remind me of places I've visited; still others remind me of my friends. Smelling is free, but eventually I must choose a place to have a meal. I may choose something based on its novelty or based on its familiarity. But my identity—who I am, where I was raised, where I've been, who I've befriended, how I see myself—privileges certain smells over others, making the possibility of stopping at certain places more likely. This is true for us whether we prefer what is familiar or whether we are more adventurous. I once explored the streets of Hong Kong with a friend. I was in search of noodles; he was in search of McDonald's. I was incredulous, but I will never forget his response: "It makes me feel at home."

Why do some things cling to us while others do not? I want to argue that the strength of the bond we feel to particular cultural strains has to do with the experience of meaning. Like the crowns of a virus, pieces of culture hook into our hearts. Some of culture's viral variants mesh with our cultural immune system. They name, organize, or validate our experience, and when they do, they offer us—even momentarily—a more stable space where we can stand.

Meaning is an elusive concept to define—what does meaning *mean*? I am using it here to refer to the experience of connection, resonance, and recognition that we feel as we move through the world. Sometimes this experience is pleasant and predictable, such as when I find my "place" in a familiar chair. Other times the experience is pleasant but surprising, such as when I recognize the face of a friend in a crowded airport. Other times the experience of meaning is unpleasant, such as when I see flashing lights in the rearview mirror. And sometimes it is difficult for us to explain why we feel so intensely, such as when a song summons unexpected tears. In any case, we let cultural stories take up residence in our bones because it seems to us that these stories capture something important about the world and our place within it.

Culture clings to us because it *means* something to us. And we are fundamentally creatures who need meaning to survive. We constantly seek connections between our outer and inner worlds, and to find this resonance, we develop a poetic ability to unlock the symbolic, meaning-rich quality of the world. We shape light and sound into images, songs, and stories; we shape the raw materials of creation into physical objects; we shape our social environments into communities and movements. Thus, the world of human culture is born: an ecosystem of signification. As anthropologist Clifford Geertz memorably put it, we are suspended in webs of significance that we ourselves have spun. This means (at least for Geertz) that cultural analysis is not "an experimental science in search of law but an interpretive one in search of meaning."[7]

This image of being suspended among many threads of significance is a powerful one. Imagine returning to your hometown after a decade living in another place. Everywhere you go, you feel the threads of meaning connecting you to that place. Perhaps the threads are fraying, no longer as taut as they once were, but the tethers are still there. Familiar faces and places secure your sense of fit, how at home you feel in this corner of

the world. Now imagine traveling to another country and being dropped in a random neighborhood. The place is unfamiliar, and the customs are strange; you do not even speak the language. Here the tethers are few, and your sense of fit is fragile. There is still a human connection to be made and meaning to be shared, perhaps through facial expressions and hand gestures. But the web of meaning is tenuous, leaving you with the feeling that you are floating in space.

We gravitate toward the bits of culture that strengthen our sense of fit, those that enable us to have some degree of stability in the world. Naturally, there will be some cultural strains to which we will develop an allergic reaction, ideas and impressions for which we have built up a powerful resistance because they destabilize our sense that we are safe. Perhaps these pieces of culture come from the rival political party, or from those outside our group. Our cultural discernment apparatus kicks into gear, identifying these strains as a threat, and denying them residence in our imagination. But there are other cultural traces whose keys seem to fit our locks. We feel an immediate sense of resonance, recognition, and connection. And so that viral bit of cultural code enters the cell, becoming a part of our cultural immune system.

We can see the power of an immune system analysis when we consider the way that people process information about contested issues. The modern ideal is that we will draw conclusions based on data, develop positions based on facts, and group ourselves with others who share our apprehension of reality. But social-scientific research indicates that the actual process is almost exactly the reverse. We first identify with a team (it usually chooses us), assume the positions of our team, and then interpret the world in a way that fits the team's predilections.[8] In other words, belonging comes before believing.

Social psychologist Jonathan Haidt argues that human reason behaves less like an impartial judge and more like a defense attorney; when confronted with new information, it seeks to resolve the danger by reinterpreting the data. He cites a study—conducted just prior to an American presidential election—that monitored the brain activity of self-identified "highly partisan" Democrats and Republicans as they were presented with damaging information about their candidate. For subjects on both sides, the conscious-reasoning part of the brain *failed* to activate, while the emotional centers went into overdrive, as if perceiving an attack.

The point is that when we feel threatened, we are nearly unteachable; rather than challenging our biases, we become increasingly rigid. This means, Haidt writes, that we develop the ability to believe almost anything that supports our team.[9] The flourishing of conspiracy theories, which have gone mainstream in American culture, bears this out. When it comes to cultural discernment, we can become immunocompromised too, unable to distinguish between reputable and disreputable sources, between legitimate and fake news, or between ordinary bias and outright propaganda.

Our cultural gullibility is unsurprising if what we are after is not primarily truth but stable *meaning*, centered in the security of our group and personal identities. This stability is caught up in the health of our cultural immune system. Problems occur, of course, when one immune system goes to war with another—when I see the inhabitants of another bubble endangering my own. We often speak of the echo chambers we tend to curate, spaces where everyone affirms and agrees with our basic vision of the world. But casting culture as an immune system captures the way we feel compromised, threatened, and fragile, not so much by the viral bits of culture we instinctively reject, but by the rival immune systems that represent wholly different ways of being in the world. What do we do when it dawns on us that there are others who are allergic to the very things that we hold most dear?

I teach at a Christian university located in a rural community in the midwestern United States. Our student body is more diverse than you might imagine, yet many of my students testify to the experience of living in what they call a "Christian bubble." What they mean by this is that they are aware that their life experiences have been uniquely local, insulated from the larger world. Sometimes students lament what they perceive as a narrowness of vision within the bubble. Other times they express gratitude for the sense that they have solid ground on which to stand. But the awareness of a "bubble" includes the recognition that there are other ways of being in the world that are not only possible but often desirable. In any case, contact with other webs of meaning can make our own web feel much more fragile, endangered, and exposed.

In his three-part magnum opus, *Spheres*, German philosopher Peter Sloterdijk tells a story of humans in search of "immune system bubbles"—which allow us to feel stable and safe in an inhospitable world. He sees

the story of modernity as the effort to create new, industrial-grade immune systems to replace the (theologically inspired) spheres of meaning that we have lost. Having lost the insulating safety that theology once provided, we now find ourselves exposed to the elements, without a shell. He writes, "Modernity is characterized by the technical production of its immunities and the increasing removal of its safety structures from the traditional theological and cosmological narratives. Industrial-scale civilization, the welfare state, the world market and the media sphere: all these large-scale projects aim, in a shelless time, for an imitation of the now impossible, imaginary spheric security. Now networks and insurance policies are meant to replace the celestial domes; telecommunications has to re-enact the all-encompassing. The body of humanity seeks to create a new immune constitution in electronic media skin."[10] In other words, what makes us feel secure? No longer is it religious stories of our place in a meaning-filled cosmos, but instead it is "industrial-scale civilization." Civilization here is a globalizing force, but paradoxically, our overextended connectedness—which sensitizes us to innumerable threats at home and abroad—makes us feel less secure. Mimicking another German philosopher, Karl Marx (whom we will revisit in chap. 2), Sloterdijk retells the story of civilization not as a narrative of class struggle but as "the history of immune system bubbles." Either the bubbles collapse, causing crisis, or the bubbles coalesce into a more poetic "foam": this is his image for the possibility of life amid plurality.

We do not need to agree with Sloterdijk's grand story to appreciate the explanatory force of his metaphor.[11] And we can learn at least two things from him. First, we cannot answer the question "Who are we?" without the question "Where are we?" and its corollary questions, "Where do we fit?" and "Where are we secure?" Second, our sense of certainty in answering these questions is compromised, constantly being called into question through encounters with cultural others. The collision of rival worlds of meaning need not be violent, but violence is always a possibility. In a pluralistic world, it is incumbent on all to mine their tradition in search of resources that will push us toward healthy pluralism and peace.

Christians believe that peace is possible for one reason: God has not abandoned creation to corruption. As Paul preached to the Lycaonians who mistook him for Hermes, the real God has never been "without witness," providing "rain from heaven, and fruitful seasons, filling our hearts

with food and gladness" (Acts 14:17 KJV). For despite the temporary shelter our technological bubbles provide, when it comes to meaning they are a poor substitute for the metaphysical thickness of theology. Modern culture's detachment from the tapestry of transcendence has led to a sense of unease. Hyperaware of the webs we have woven—and the webs others have woven for us—we despair at whether our connection to others or to the world is really meaningful after all.

But the revelation of God in Jesus compels us to claim that we are also caught up in threads of meaning not made by human hands (Heb. 9:11). There are creational structures in which we live, a creaturely vocation that we cannot help but fulfill, and a Creator who pursues us with redeeming love. Grounding human culture in these divine gifts does not rob culture of its human element. Rather it roots our cultural life in a better soil, securing us to something more solid than ourselves, offering a stability that death itself cannot shake. In the next section we will pull on three theological threads that plumb the search for an immune system that will provide security in the face of our vulnerability to viruses, both terrestrial and infernal.

Theological Thread 1: Ecosystem and Exile

Scripture opens with the story of God making a place where humanity can live in God's presence. The result is a world of creaturely meaning, an ecosystem of interdependence. Light and darkness, separated on day one, host the waters above and below, separated on day two. The waters host the dry land, created on day three. The skies, waters, and land act as hosts for living things. As James Skillen shows, each of God's creatures "has a unique, irreducible place of honor, and tied to that honor is the service of hospitality toward other creatures."[12] Human beings, created in God's image and called to cultivate creation, fulfill their vocation through hospitality: first, through hosting the Creator who speaks, and second, by showing honor to all God's creatures (and here light and land are equally God's creatures) in faithful stewardship of creation. To live within this ecosystem of interdependent creatures—all of whom are dependent on the Creator—is to share in God's Sabbath rest. Together the human family is meant to function like a good infection, multiplying and maximizing the joy throughout creation.