

CULTURAL ANTHROPOLOGY: ITS MEANING FOR CHRISTIAN THEOLOGY

BY CHARLES H. KRAFT

Whether it is in the application of one or another of the approaches of metaphysical philosophy, or in the use of historical perspectives infected with social evolutionism, or in the dependence upon philological perspectives that take little, if any, note of the plethora of insights into language that have come to us from the study of thousands of non-Western languages, from an anthropologist's perspective the discipline of theology seems not to have grown with the world.

THE ACADEMIC discipline we know as Christian theology is a part of culture. It is amenable, therefore, to analysis from an anthropological or cross-cultural point of view. It is, furthermore, a discipline that has frequently incorporated the insights and perspectives of other disciplines. Though cultural anthropology, like theology, is but a human discipline and can claim no corner on truth, it is not unlikely that some of the insights developed by anthropologists might be found helpful for theologians.

The intent of this article, in a far too brief and largely undocumented manner, to survey the kinds of issues that come to the mind of at least one anthropologist with a Christian commitment as he ponders this topic.

The essay is in two parts: (1) How Christian theology looks to an anthropologist, and (2) help that might be available to theologians from anthropology. Though the total discipline called "anthropology" also

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includes physical anthropology, archeology and linguistics (in addition to cultural anthropology), the cross-cultural perspective on the basis of which the following comments are made is so pervasive within the discipline as a whole that I have taken the liberty of employing the general designators "anthropology" and "anthropologist," rather than the more specific forms "cultural anthropology/anthropologist."

I

Anthropologists attempt to analyze human behavior with a particular focus on the cultural influences on and cultural results of that behavior. Theologians are human beings influenced by and influencing other humans, all within cultural matrices. Both the history of theology and theologians and their current status and influence are of interest to at least some of us. From an anthropological perspective, several observations about theology may be offered.

(1) There seems to be an inappropriate degree of culture-boundness about Christian theology as it has been developed and is taught. An anthropologist would expect a certain amount of this from a discipline that has been produced within Western cultures and for Western audiences. Yet the scriptural data that theologians work with are not Western and the claims made by those documents embrace the two-thirds or more of the world that lies outside of the West. It would seem, therefore, that an approach less hampered by Western ethnocentrism would be indicated.

Though one could hardly fault early theologians who only did the best they could with approaches available to them, there are now sharper tools for dealing with the cultural and linguistic materials with which theologians spend their time. Whether it is in the application of one or another of the approaches of metaphysical philosophy, or in the use of historical perspectives infected with social evolutionism, or in the dependence upon philological perspectives that take little, if any, note of the plethora of insights into language that have come to us from the study of thousands of non-Western, non-literary languages, from an anthropologist's perspective the discipline seems not to have grown with the world.

Such a judgment is not, of course, entirely fair, since it results from holding one discipline accountable for expertise in the area of the other's primary interest. However, to the extent that this judgment is accurate, it is serious. For not only do the biblical and historical data with which theologians work come from other cultures, the world at our doorstep is increasingly multicultural in its makeup. And the problems it generates—problems to which theologians are expected to speak—are increasingly the result of relationships between peoples with differing cultural maps and agendas in their heads.

In addition, those outside the field of theology—even many committed Christians—are often finding what seem to them to be better

answers to problems to which theologians have traditionally spoken from the application of the perspectives of anthropology and the other behavioral sciences (for example, psychology and sociology) than they are from theology.

(2) Part of the problem may, of course, lie in the overly academic nature of much theological thinking, writing, and teaching. Though academic anthropology is just as guilty of obfuscation as any discipline, a student of American culture easily recognizes that academic efforts that apparently bear such a tangential relationship to the life of the world around them are not being taken seriously by most people. Would such disciplines (including academic anthropology) even survive if our nations were not so wealthy? Or if schooling for its own sake had not become the religion of middleclass Western society? And given the constant claim of seminary graduates that theological study is largely irrelevant to any ministry other than the teaching of theology, would the teaching of theology survive in its present form if it were required to serve the needs of the marketplace?

An anthropologist studying contemporary Christian groupings would quickly point out that there are among ordinary people other types of theology—popular or “folk” theologies. These are the theologies that people actually live by. They tend not to be written (at least not by specialists writing in the academic jargon of the discipline) and seldom are systematized. They are, however, often more influential than academic theologies, tend to relate more obviously to “life issues,” and proliferate most when Christian faith is most vigorous. They also tend to be more lived than analyzed (in contrast, often, to academic theologies). They thus deserve study and serious discussion in theological training institutions (if for no other reason than to help students to find correctives).

It might be questioned from an anthropologist’s view of Western culture if academic theological teaching and writing (or that of other disciplines, including anthropology) are really of much value to any but those elite for whom they provide employment.

(3) It looks like many engaged in theological discussion and teaching have too great a tendency to equate their own perspective on the reality or truth they study with that reality itself. And this criticism does not only apply to the more conservative among us. Both conservative and liberal camps have their share of members who are closed to any views but their own and who insist that only their understandings are valid.

Anthropologists have learned that though reality may ultimately be one, there are likely to be many equally valid understandings of that reality (with each understanding probably also at least partly invalid). They would observe that it is especially important in conceptual areas such as those primarily in focus in theological discussion that we lose our longstanding cultural and academic ties to positivism. Though our Christian convictions ordinarily lead us to assert that there is a Reality

and that we actually see that Reality when we do theological study, we should also be careful to assert that we never see that Reality absolutely. God is always greater than our ability to understand.

If we believe in the sacredness of at least part of the data that we study, we should not allow ourselves or others to believe that the human understandings that we generate concerning that data are similarly sacred or inspired (even though we may believe them to be God-led). Again, this criticism would apply to many other disciplines as well. A good dose of Kuhn, Barbour, and others writing on the philosophy of science would help us all.¹

(4) Anthropologists (and others) have recently become much more aware than formerly of the processes that are crucial to cultural behavior. It was once in vogue, even within anthropology, to describe cultures as a still photograph pictures life. Human life, however, is not reducible to still photograph representations, except at the expense of severe distortion. Theological discussion, as most of us have experienced it, however, seems to reflect this same tendency. Theologies are usually presented and passed on as final products to be adhered to or criticized as if they were timeless formulations, relevant once and for all for all peoples in all cultural contexts. The uniqueness of the cultural context, including such variables as the political, economic, social, and personal factors involved in the producing of the theology, while of great historical interest, is seldom analyzed with a view to learning what we need to know to engage in that same process today. Yet, as von Allmen helps us to understand, this would be a better aim of theological instruction than simply the passing on of ancient theological products.²

To illustrate, I have several times been involved in discussions designed to discover just who should be considered a “good” Lutheran (or Calvinist or theological heir of Thomas Aquinas or Paul or Jesus Christ). Should we consider one a good Lutheran who has studied well and subscribed to the theological “product” that Luther produced? Or should that label be applied to those who attempt to live and think in their cultural context in as equivalent a fashion as possible to the way Luther might live and think if alive today? Would Luther want his followers simply to accept his *product*, or would he want them to follow his example by imitating in their times and contexts the *process* by means of which he attempted to interact with and speak to the issues of his day?

A discipline that seeks to speak relevantly to its own day (if that is what theology seeks) will need to give primary attention to the process by means of which theological products have come into existence in the

¹Thomas S. Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1970). Ian G. Barbour, *Myths, Models and Paradigms* (New York: Harper and Row, 1974).

²Daniel von Allmen, “The Birth of Theology,” *International Review of Mission* 44(1975):37-55.

part from a view to understanding and teaching the implications of that process for contemporary theological efforts.

II

If the above observations are of any merit, an anthropological perspective could be of help to theology in further analyzing and discovering answers to the problems, as well as in identifying them. Indeed, since most of the things I have said above are likely to be well known even to those not anthropologically trained, the analytical and problem-solving capabilities of anthropology in these areas are likely to be of more interest to theologians than the fact that an anthropological perspective can help identify them.

(1) The first area in which anthropological insight could be of help to theology would be where anthropology is strongest—the understanding of culture. Any discipline that seeks to deal with human beings needs the sharpest insights possible into the nature and workings of that within which humans “live and move and have their being”—culture. Theologians need to know as much as possible about such things as the patterning, integrating, and channelling influence of culture on every aspect of human thinking and behavior. The wide differences in peoples’ perceptions of and responses to those perceptions of reality caused by their cultures (including subcultures) and worldviews should be of particular interest and profit to theologians.

Such insight can be helpful to theologians in at least three important areas: (a) by enabling them to understand better the biblical and other documents written in other cultural matrices, (b) by enabling them to apply theological insights to contemporary peoples within their cultural and subcultural matrices, and (c) by enabling them to understand and compensate for the kinds of influence that their own culture has on their perceptual and interpretational efforts. My reading of theologians shows them better at treating ancient documents in their cultural contexts than at recognizing and compensating for their own culturally-conditioned interpretational reflexes.

Bultmann and his followers, for example, were good at the former, but seem to have fallen for the myth of European cultural superiority even while attempting to unmyth the biblical materials. An anthropological perspective would have enabled them to see strengths and weaknesses, truth and error in their own culture as well as in biblical cultures. In spite of the cultural theory concerning the existence of demons and spirits that we Euroamericans have been taught in the learning of our culture, we do *not* know that our theory is superior to that of biblical peoples (and most of the rest of our contemporary world). Even though most anthropologists are at least as naturalistic as most theologians, the cross-cultural nature of the discipline can at least alert us to the fact that *both* understandings are cultural theories developed by people to explain

certain data. Even “scientific” explanations are cultural theories. And our theory is not necessarily better than theirs simply because it is ours.

The appearance of books by Gottwald, Malina, Rogerson, and Wolff is indeed encouraging, at least with respect to the application of anthropological insight to the interpretation of the biblical world.³ Perhaps at last we can get beyond the mere recognition of “something out there” that H. Richard Niebuhr documents for a number of theologians or the naive philosophizing about culture that Tillich pursued.⁴

(2) A related way in which anthropology can be helpful for theology is by providing a broader understanding of language, especially as it relates to culture. Much insight into the workings of language has come from the study of non-Western languages, many of them more similar linguistically and/or culturally to Hebrew than to European languages on which philological understandings of language are based. It is unfortunate that many of the misunderstandings and limitations of the traditional European approach to analyzing languages (that is, philology) are still crippling many, even two decades after Barr.⁵

Language is made up of thoughts, not merely words and syntax. And thoughts are cultural things. Meanings are felt, not simply reasoned. And feelings are both culturally conditioned and seldom derivable with any degree of accuracy from written records. Experience with contemporary cultures and languages more similar than those of Europe to biblical cultures and languages can provide clearer windows into many scriptural meanings than most learned theologians can provide—as many missionaries who have worked in such languages and cultures frequently attest. Learning to “feel with” the biblical authors, as one would do in learning to function in a contemporary language, could be an important enhancement of current exegetical procedures and largely replace the rigorous (and impersonal) “decipherment” approach that is usually taken to materials in ancient languages.

It is anachronistic that many church leaders who have supposedly been trained theologically still perpetuate fallacies such as the following: (a) biblical languages are qualitatively different from other languages; (b) biblical texts should be analyzed as if they were written as technical, scientific treatises; (c) words are the focal points of language; (d) we cannot interpret scriptural language the way we interpret ordinary

³Norman K. Gottwald, *The Tribes of Yahweh* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1979). Bruce J. Malina, *The New Testament World* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1981). J.W. Rogerson, *Anthropology and the Old Testament* (London: Basil Blackwell, 1978). Hans Walter Wolff, *Anthropology of the Old Testament* (London: SCM Press, 1974).

⁴H. Richard Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture* (New York: Harper and Row, 1951). Paul Tillich, *Theology of Culture*, ed. Robert C. Kimball (New York: Oxford University Press, 1959).

⁵James Barr, *The Semantics of Biblical Language* (London: Oxford University Press, 1961).

language, (e) the meanings of biblical words are accurately discovered by tracing their etymologies; and (f) literal translations more faithfully convey the original meanings than other types of translations.⁶

(3) As important as the process of translation is to many aspects of theological practice and teaching, my impression is that theologians tend to be behind the times in their understanding and application of contemporary insight into the translation process. The application of anthropological (including linguistic) insight has brought about a revolution in this field. Theologians, for example, tend to endorse literal Bible translations without recognizing what professional translators recognize, namely that “a literal translation of the words of the Bible can be tragically misleading.”⁷ This is true because the meanings underlying the linguistic forms of the biblical materials are firmly rooted in the cultures in which those peoples participate. A translation that does not make enough of that culture explicit in the receiving language to enable contemporary readers to understand without the necessity of special study of the original cultures is, therefore, only of value to those who have done such study.

Those who do not have the ability to interpret the English words as if they were part of the original cultural context ordinarily assume that words and constructions were intended to convey meanings that come to their minds when they hear them in English. Thus, the reflex interpretation by an English speaker of such a sentence as “the wicked will not stand in the judgment” (Ps. 1:5 RSV) would likely be something like “the wicked will not be judged”—a meaning quite different from what a Hebrew would have gotten from the same construction. The reference to the tax collector “beating his breast” in Lk. 18:13 (RSV) is likewise misinterpreted as indicating self-congratulation. And the frequent phrase in Amos, Chapter 1, “for three transgressions and for four,” is incorrectly understood by speakers of English to refer to three or four transgressions, rather than “repeatedly.” And what English speaker could be expected to guess that “cleanness of teeth” in Amos 4:6 had nothing to do with dental hygiene but, rather, is a Hebrew way of referring to famine? The list of such completely misleading renderings in the literal translations is virtually endless.

Bible translators have to deal with cultural, linguistic, and theological (including hermeneutical) issues all at the same time. The theological enterprise would profit greatly (as some theologians have already learned) by drinking deeply at the wells provided by the several hundred practicing Bible translators and translation theorists with doctoral degrees or similar academic credentials. These tend to cluster in organizations like The United Bible Societies (including the American

⁶Eugene A. Nida and Charles R. Taber, *The Theory and Practice of Translation* (Leiden: Brill, 1969).

⁷Eugene A. Nida, *The Book of a Thousand Tongues* (London: United Bible Societies, 1972).

Bible Society) and Wycliffe Bible Translators. They frequently write up their insights in publications such as *The Bible Translat*

(4) Theologians can learn from anthropology how to deal more precisely with the relationships between the surface level forms of culture and the deep level meanings that those forms convey. Cultural forms (such as customs, words, ceremonies, behaviors, material objects, etc.) are important for what they mean to people (that is, how they are interpreted by people), not in and of themselves. Though the distinction between form and content is well known outside of anthropology, it is not uncommon for those without specific input from anthropology or linguistics to regard surface level customs as the essence of culture. They often feel that if these are described, the major portion of the culture (or ritual, ceremony, or other expression of culture) has been adequately treated. This is, however, far from the case. For it is the *meanings*, rooted in the basic assumptions concerning reality called worldview, that form the essence of human culture and the basis for human behavior.

The forms of culture are the vehicles or containers for the expression and transmission of the meanings that lie beneath the surface of culture. Theologians have often correctly seen (and anthropologists have often not made explicit) that most of the meanings expressed via cultural forms have their roots in common human need and experience. Which cultural forms express which deep level meanings, however, differs widely from culture to culture. There is, therefore, much more similarity between Old Testament and New Testament peoples at the deep level than on the surface. For cultural forms are assigned their meanings by the people who use them on the basis of their employment within a specific cultural experience. There are, apparently, no cultural (including linguistic) forms that automatically carry the same meanings in all cultures, or even in any two cultures.

The same form will always change meaning when borrowed from one culture to another, or even when passed on from one generation to the next within the same culture. Thus cultural practices (sacrifices, temple, rituals) endorsed by God in one generation are condemned in a later generation—because the meaning had changed from an acceptable meaning to an unacceptable one. Whether in biblical times or in the present, the way to preserve the original meanings is to discover and employ forms in the new culture or new generation (that is, new generational subculture) that are interpreted by the new group as expressing meanings equivalent to the original meanings. To transmit and preserve deep level meaning, surface level cultural forms need to be changed. This principle is clear in the Scriptures to those who have become aware of it (whether with or without anthropological input).

The application of such a principle makes it possible for those who believe the Bible to be normative to define and apply that normativity in a principled way. With respect to such issues as the role of women in church leadership, for example, this principle enables us to note that at

least certain of the forms that the scriptural authors recommended as meaning properly in their cultural contexts convey in our contexts meanings of suppression and denial of the right to exercise God-given gifts. This being the case, the primary question ceases to be, "How can we maintain the *forms* (for example, the role relationships) that are commanded in the New Testament?" We recognize, rather, that these commands, as all commands in Scripture, are couched in culture-specific forms and that these forms (like all forms in culture) are designed to convey meanings. It is the meanings, then, not (as the Pharisees believed) the forms of Scripture that are normative for today. The questions we are to ask, therefore, are, "What are the meanings that the scriptural authors intended to get across? What cultural forms in our culture will adequately express those meanings?" Such a principle provides an antidote to Pharisaism. It can also enable those theologians who seek to retain a belief in the authority and applicability of biblical teachings in contemporary contexts to embrace many of the insights of liberal and secular scholarship without abandoning a high view of scriptural inspiration.

(5) The question of the contextualization of theology suggests another anthropological perspective that can be helpful. If, as anthropologists contend, no form has the same meaning in two different cultural contexts, no theological system can either. If, therefore, a given theological system is passed from one culture to another or from one generation to another, it can be expected that the meaning to the new group will be different. First of all, it is not likely to be seen as "ours" by the receiving group. Secondly, it is not likely to be seen as speaking to the issues they are concerned with. Since it was developed in a different place, time, and culture (a different context) by people whose experience and problems were different, its relevance will be limited to those issues where there is a convergence of experience and concern between these receivers and the originators of the theological system.

What becomes evident from such considerations is that all theologies are contextualized by those who develop them for the context within which they function. They are, therefore, to a greater or lesser extent, at least partially unsuited for any other context. Theology is not to be seen, then, as a single once-for-all thing, but as a variety of specific, focused theologies, springing from specific needs, incorporating specific insights and speaking to specific situations. There will be a large degree of common concern between Christian theologies based on the Bible, since the primary data are the same for all. But such interpretational things as the underlying assumptions, the matters focused on, which teachings are emphasized, and the ways in which they are derived and related to life may legitimately differ as widely as the cultural contexts and the individual theologians differ.

(6) Theologians need anthropological input concerning the processes

of culture. Understanding of cultural structures (forms) must be balanced with understanding of the processes in which those structures participate and that result in the changing of the structures. Cultural systems channel people by means of processes that result in such things as support, maintenance, communication, education, social control, and adaptation to the new. Christianity is intensely interested in such processes, especially as they relate to communication, conversion, and spiritual growth. Theologians, like most academics, have ordinarily been more concerned with conceptualization than with communication. Their findings are, therefore, widely ignored, not because they are not potentially valuable to others but simply because they are unintelligible. In this and several other areas, insight into the circumstances under which, and the processes by means of which, people change their ideas ought to be known and utilized by theologians with a degree of preciseness not ordinarily available within the discipline.

Concern for crumbling family structures, for example, stimulates many to talk of the need for a "theology of the family." And some have put their minds to developing such—but usually without any but an idealized philosophical understanding of what a healthy family might look like. More concrete understandings are abundantly available from studying the family cross-culturally. Family structuring and dynamics are cultural things, and both the processes that lead to family illness and those that lead to family health are cultural processes that should be studied and understood to inform theological approaches to them.

The church, likewise, is primarily a Christian use of cultural processes of grouping. Other cultural processes lie behind such things as conversion, nurture, education, expressing concern, faithing, even sinning. Theologizing concerning these areas should give more attention to a much greater range of valid cultural and individual expression of the processes involved than is ordinarily true.

Students in my courses on conversion and the church frequently express their amazement and enthusiasm over the valuable difference they experience between a cross-culturally informed treatment of these topics and the more traditional mono-cultural treatments they have been exposed to in traditional theology classes and books. They are often startled to discover that once one has been exposed to what is termed the theology of any of these doctrines, one has come to understand only a very small fraction of even the scriptural treatment of the doctrine. A high percentage of what we need to know about the church, for example, is more susceptible to discovery through anthropological methodology than through theological methodology—though one cannot deny the value of traditional theological insight into the nature of the church.

(7) Anthropology can also be of assistance to theologians by pointing to another way to do research. Though the empiricist approach to dealing with what we perceive as reality has serious pitfalls of its own, a reasonable infusion of people-oriented (not merely statistics-oriented)

WORSHIP AS ANTI-STRUCTURE: THE CONTRIBUTION OF VICTOR TURNER

BY J. RANDALL NICHOLS

Most ministers spend major portions of their professional lives dealing with highly structured ritual behavior they regularly lead but only poorly understand: the Sunday morning worship service. One looks nearly in vain for adequate literature to explore just what it is that happens, both theologically and behaviorally, in the worship experience. We have no lack of information on the history, structure, and even renovation of worship. What is missing are seriously thought-out perspectives on its personal and social dynamics as a form of ritual-mediated interaction for which momentous theological claims are made.

It should not have come as a surprise to discover that some of precisely that kind of thinking was being done not by a theologian but by a cultural anthropologist, the late Victor Turner. Moreover, Turner on more than one occasion applied himself directly to the task of understanding something of contemporary Christian worship, using the theoretical structure he had devised for approaching symbolic and ritual behavior in non-literate societies. His work seems to be somewhat controversial in cultural anthropological circles; it is virtually unknown, though badly needed, in theological ones.

The point of this essay is, then, quite modest: to introduce him to readers who are not aware of the material, and to suggest that when we look at the worship experience through the conceptual lens that Turner provides, some helpful and perhaps controversial things that have been blurry come into focus. Three questions in particular are dealt with here: (1) understanding the relationship of the worship experience to the workaday world; (2) evaluating the appropriateness of "contemporization" in modern worship; and (3) examining our perennial conflict

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