

More Notes Towards the Definition of Culture

Mark A. Snoeberger

Assistant Professor of Systematic Theology
Detroit Baptist Theological Seminary

Introduction

In 1949, T. S. Eliot published a small tome entitled *Notes Towards the Definition of Culture*, a book that he deemed a necessary response to the disturbing trend in the literature of his day to redefine the term *culture*.¹ The book failed, and the term *culture* has been almost completely redefined away from Eliot's conception of the term. The evolution of language cannot, of course, be stopped or reversed, and this presentation has no intention of doing so; however, as an opening premise, I'd like to suggest that something important was lost when the term *culture* was redefined.

The reason this is important, of course, is that the contextualization with which this conference is concerned often takes the form of an *acculturation* of the church to a localized expression of the world of unbelievers. Believers need to intersect with unbelievers in order for evangelism to occur, and some sort of platform must be built whereupon the believer can meet the world without becoming a part of it. The resulting tension of being in but not of the world is fraught with perils. We are rightly fearful that acculturation, if conducted too loosely, might render us friends of the world and, as such, enemies of God (Jas 4:4; 1 John 2:15). Nonetheless, the necessity of penetrating the world and reconciling it to God demands more than merely lobbing Bible verses over the wall of separation between believers and unbelievers. We must be in the world, but must take necessary precautions to protect ourselves and our churches from the evil one who seeks to use our well-intentioned proximity to the world to destroy us (John 17:11–12; 15–19).

Unfortunately the demands of the “how to” of acculturation so press us that we sometimes fail to reflect carefully on the “what” and “why” of acculturation. By exploring the concept of culture, this presentation seeks to address this need. Specifically, it seeks to define the term *culture* and to identify some of the apologetical implications that this definition has for a healthy theology of contextualization.

Etymological Considerations

Etymology is typically one of the least productive of all vehicles for determining the meaning of a word. Sometimes it tells us what a given word meant in some bygone era, or perhaps exposes some long-forgotten association of that word, but quite frequently it tells us nothing at all.² In the case of culture we do find, however, some intriguing details about the term that linger today—and others, perhaps, that should be resurrected. The English word *culture* is a participial form of the Latin verb *colere*, which means, variously, to “till,” “foster,” “care for,” “pay attention to,” “honor,” or “worship.” From this root come various English words such as *cultivate*, *culture*, and

¹T. S. Eliot, *Notes Towards the Definition of Culture* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, and Co., 1949), pp. 11.

²Who would guess, from etymology alone, that a “pineapple” grows on a palm tree and is about ten times the size of an apple? And what prescriptionist etymologist would ever go out of his way to eat a piece of “decadent” chocolate cake, or fail to be puzzled when told to “dial” a phone number on a cell phone?

*cult.*³ These seemingly unrelated English terms find commonality in the concept of shared ideals: what a society values most highly and views to be most “divine” it nurtures or cultivates most fully—even iconically. As such, to “be cultured” was to have “divine” values and to reflect one’s faith as fully as possible in every sphere of life.

Culture as Sacred Cultivation: T. S. Eliot

In view of the etymology so briefly detailed above, the meaning of *culture* that dominated usage from the seventeenth to the early twentieth centuries (and the definition that Eliot sought to defend) centered around the development of the highest and most “sacred” elements of society. As a reflection of man’s success in carrying out the dominion mandate, appreciation of higher forms of science, education, art, music, literature, etc., epitomized not only the apex of human civilization, but also the apex of Christianization. Note the following representative definitions:

- Matthew Arnold: Culture is the “study of perfection” whereby one may “make reason and the will of God prevail.”⁴
- Henry Van Til: Culture is “the total human effort of subduing the earth together with its total achievement in fulfilling the creative will of God.”⁵

Failure by the image-bearer to add refinement and godly creativity to his world, whether in the arts, the sciences, industry, etc., was viewed not as “low” culture or even “popular” culture, but as non-culture—that which is natural, unrefined, uncivilized, irreligious, or even heathen—and ultimately results, as Arnold’s title suggests, in anarchy.

According to this understanding, religion and culture cannot exist apart from one another: “No culture has appeared or developed except together with a religion: according to the point of view of the observer, the culture will appear to be the product of the religion”: culture is “the incarnation of the religion of a people.”⁶ Since culture is a shared phenomenon, however, its underlying religion is not monolithic—the contributions of the multiplied religions of individuals from the whole community converge to create it. As such, the idea of culture is enormously complex. Its practices, patterns, and habits are always formed by a collage of religious worldviews: some Christian, some non-Christian, and some, by virtue of God’s common grace, unwittingly “borrowed” from the Christian worldview by self-preservationist non-Christians.⁷

We would be remiss to omit some brief description of the religion that produced the “Western”

³See, e.g., *OED*, s.v. “cult,” “culture,” “cultivate,” etc., pp. 119–22, *passim*.

⁴*Culture and Anarchy* (London : Smith, Elder & Co., 1869), p. 8.

⁵*The Calvinistic Concept of Culture* (reprint of 1972 ed., Grand Rapids: Baker, 2001), pp. 28–29.

⁶*Notes Towards the Definition of Culture*, pp. 13, 26.

⁷Cornelius Van Til and Greg Bahnsen are perhaps the most cogent proponents of this idea of “borrowed capital,” a descriptive term they use to delineate their particular understanding of common grace. All cultures necessarily follow some of the dictates of the law written upon their hearts and borrow from the Christian worldview for their own subsistence, welfare, and convenience. Exposing this use of borrowed capital and demonstrating the impossibility of doing otherwise, for Bahnsen and Van Til, is the only “common ground” that can be legitimately employed in personal witness.

culture that prevailed during the era of the classic definition of culture. Western culture has never been purely “Christian” (indeed, no culture can be); in fact, the dominant religion that stands behind much of “high” Western culture is really a form of semi-Christian humanism—more a celebration of the successes of man than a celebration of the glory of God. One is unnerved, for instance, by Matthew Arnold’s dual emphasis on both the will of God *and reason* as the sum of his religion, and also his goal of religion as “help and beneficence, the desire for stopping error, clearing of human confusion, and diminishing the sum of human misery, the noble aspiration to leave the world better and happier than we found it.”⁸ One wonders whether human reason and the will of God can be so easily associated, or whether Arnold’s utopian-Pelagian views of human achievement can pass the muster of biblical scrutiny. One also wonders whether his form of religion does not lend to the perception of culture as vain and exclusive, and as perpetuating class distinctions and snobbery—an “elitist” label that Arnold dislikes but cannot escape.⁹ Still, for better or for worse, Arnold recognized that religion always lurks behind culture.

The symbiosis of religion and culture is central to this definition of *culture*, and once lost, Eliot contends, produces the false notion that an irreligious (i.e., purely secular) culture can exist, apart from the sacred, as a neutral, innocuous, and even benign phenomenon.¹⁰ This troubling notion about culture has disastrous effects: after (1) denying that secularism is a religion, (2) it banishes Christianity to an ever-shrinking, explicitly “sacred” realm, and argues implicitly for a vast, neutral, “secular” realm within which the Bible is silent, then (3) allows worldliness to flood that realm unimpeded. The Christian living in that secular realm with the world acculturates to the world until virtually nothing distinguishes him from the world. In a short time the Christian voice in society is lost, and Christianity itself loses all significance and ground for appeal.

While the idea of culture as sacred cultivation has been largely forgotten and Eliot’s eerily prophetic voice largely ignored, echoes of Eliot’s concern for this more traditional understanding of *culture* have been heard from time to time since his passing off of the intellectual scene. One of the more outstanding expressions that I have found is Roy Clouser’s *The Myth of Religious Neutrality*. In it he argues persuasively that “religious belief [is] influential over the entire range of human experience,” and as his “central claim” that no experience of life “can fail to be regulated and guided by some religious belief or other.”¹¹ Of course, he recognizes that most human activities such as “speaking and counting usually take place at a level of experience where our activity in, and acquaintance with, the world around us is remarkably the same for all people. But there is a deeper level of understanding which humans have always sought, a level at which the nature of our world and ourselves is interpreted and explained”—a level where we “construct explanations of all that we experience.”¹² And it is at this level, which the world

⁸Arnold, *Culture and Anarchy*, p. 8.

⁹Ibid., p. 5. Note that Carson describes this understanding as the “elitist” view of culture (*Christ and Culture Revisited* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008], p. 1 *et passim*). In view of how Western “high culture” has regularly comported itself as a humanist elitism, it is hard to fault him for this.

¹⁰Ibid., p. 28.

¹¹*The Myth of Religious Neutrality*, rev. ed. (Notre Dame, IN: Notre Dame University Press, 2005), p. 2.

¹²Ibid. See my chart on p. 10 that develops this idea.

describes as *philosophy*, that Christians should recognize what is fundamentally the stuff of *theology*—unifying theories of being, knowledge, origins, and causation that govern every discipline and activity in which mankind participates.¹³ And in reading this work, we are reminded vividly that if we ask the basic questions of philosophy (Who am I? Why am I here?) and construct a corresponding culture apart from reference to God, we will always answer and build amiss.

Culture as Neutral Mutuality: Edward Tylor

The encroaching definition(s) of culture that so exercised Eliot and others of his ilk came from the field of secular anthropology. Thoroughly convinced of the evolutionary theory of human origins and development, most anthropologists viewed religion as a part of culture (and generally as a primitive or even aberrant element), and not culture as a product of religion. Since culture was the more primary concept and religion a mere part of it, the definitions of culture that began to dominate the intellectual landscape were devoid of religious reference. Edward Tylor is widely regarded as the seminal voice in this redefinition of culture, so we will begin with his definition and note several others that follow this understanding:¹⁴

- Edward B. Tylor: Culture is “that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society.”¹⁵
- Clyde Kluckhohn: “By culture we mean all those historically created designs for living, explicit and implicit, rational, irrational, and nonrational, which exist at any given time as potential guides for the behavior of men.”¹⁶
- Louise Damen: “Culture: learned and shared human patterns or models for living; day-to-day living patterns. These patterns and models pervade all aspects of human social interaction. Culture is mankind’s primary adaptive mechanism.”¹⁷
- Clifford Geertz: “The culture concept...denotes an historically transmitted pattern of meanings embodied in symbols, a system of inherited conceptions expressed in symbolic form by means of which men communicate, perpetuate, and develop their knowledge about and attitudes toward life.”¹⁸

¹³Clouser devotes whole chapters to the disciplines of mathematics, physics, psychology, politics, and “society,” all of which may be argued as part of culture, but for our discussion, chiefly the last.

¹⁴Secular/Anthropological definitions for *culture* are legion. Perhaps the most comprehensive (though dated) compilation of these is A. L. Kroeber and Clyde Kluckhohn, *Culture: A Critical Review of Concepts and Definitions*, Papers of the Peabody Museum of American Archaeology and Ethnology, Harvard University, 47.1 (Cambridge, MA: by the Museum, 1952). Though this study offers some 164 nuanced definitions, it still seems to me that two classes of definitions emerge—those that see religion as a part of culture and those that see culture as a product of religion.

¹⁵*Primitive Culture* (London: J. Murray, 1871), p. 1.

¹⁶“The Concept of Culture,” in *The Science of Man in the World Crisis*, ed. Ralph Linton (New York: Columbia University Press, 1945), p. 97.

¹⁷ *Culture Learning: The Fifth Dimension on the Language Classroom* (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1987), p. 367.

¹⁸*The Interpretation of Culture* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), p. 89.

The definitions above are not so much wrong as they are incomplete. They focus on cultural practices and patterns in a way that implicitly divorces them from their religious underpinnings. This then feeds the idea that many if not most of these activities are morally/religiously neutral and, as such, unprejudiced and impervious to ethical analysis. To suggest the superiority of the cultural practices of one culture over those of another¹⁹ is in this model impossible at best and prejudiced and immoral at worst. Cultures are certainly *different* from one another, but there is no universal standard by which superiority may be measured or even proposed on cultural issues. Certainly we cannot posit a religious standard, because religion is now a product of culture, not its foundation.

A Mediating Position: Culture as Expressed Values/Worldviews

Standing between these two polar definitions of culture is a cluster of mediating definitions that recognize more overtly the role of values, beliefs, and even worldviews in determining culture.²⁰ Note the following:

- Geert Hofstede: “Culture is the collective programming of the human mind that distinguishes the members of one human group from those of another. Culture in this sense is a system of *collectively held values*.”²¹
- A. L. Kroeber and Clyde Kluckhohn: “Culture consists of patterns, explicit and implicit, of and for behavior acquired and transmitted by symbols, constituting the distinctive achievements of human groups, including their embodiments in artifacts; the essential core of culture consists of traditional (i.e. historically derived and selected) ideas *and especially their attached values*; culture systems may, on the one hand, be considered as products of action, and on the other as conditioning elements of further action.”²²
- Edgar Schein: “Culture is the deeper level of basic assumptions and *beliefs* that are shared by members of an organization, that operate unconsciously and define in a basic ‘taken for granted’ fashion an organization's view of its self and its environment.”²³

These definitions represent something of a retreat from the neutral/anthropological definitions cited in the second set of definitions given above. They concede the influence of worldviews, but nonetheless exhibit reluctance to (1) explicitly describe these worldviews as religious or to (2) expressly identify these religious underpinnings as morally right or wrong.²⁴ Thus they do not represent a full return to the first set of definitions given above.

¹⁹Say, that dresses are superior as women’s clothing to loincloths, that surgery is a superior treatment of cancer than exorcism, or that one of Beethoven symphonies is superior to a spontaneous primitive tribal chant.

²⁰Kroeber and Kluckhohn identify this as an emerging trend among sociologists in the 1920s that was being grudgingly conceded by anthropologists in the 1940s and 1950s, but complain that anthropologists have been “backward” in accepting this development, noting that “the degree to which even lip-service to values has been avoided ... especially by anthropologists, is striking” (*Culture: A Critical Review of Concepts and Definitions*, p. 156).

²¹“National Cultures and Corporate Cultures,” in *Communication Between Cultures*, ed. Larry A. Samovar and Richard E. Porter (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth, 1991), p. 51, italics added.

²²*Culture: A Critical Review of Concepts and Definitions*, p. 181, italics added.

²³*Organizational Culture and Leadership* (New York: Basic, 1973), p. 6, italics added.

²⁴Kroeber and Kluckhohn note that in the judgment of values one is “on most shaky ground to infer

Missiological Contributions

Since modern missiology (both its evangelical and non-evangelical forms) has very deep roots in Protestant liberalism it is not surprising that Niebuhr's "Christ of culture" model has dominated much of the discussion. Cultural "authority" does not submit and adapt to Christ's authority; rather, Christ submits to culture. Culture is merely a vessel for Christ and Christians to communicate to the world, and we must adapt the gospel accordingly to fit culture.

- Charles Kraft, for instance, after adopting Kroeber and Kluckhohn's definition of culture, argues for the substantial acceptance of the doctrines of cultural validity and relativity. Arguing from "the mass of anthropological data coming to us concerning the six thousand or more other cultures of the world," Kraft affirms that suggestions of cultural superiority are both "completely unwarranted" and "untenable."²⁵ Cultural progress cannot be objectively measured, and cultures are to be regarded as "both as good as each other and as bad as each other" and "none...is to be considered invalid, inadequate, or unusable by God and humankind."²⁶ Culture, for Kraft, "consists of forms, functions, meanings, and usage.... These forms and the functions they are intended to serve are seen, with few exceptions, as neutral with respect to the interaction between God and man.... They are not inherently evil or good in themselves."²⁷ He goes on to suggest that "the relationship between God and culture is the same as that of one who uses a vehicle to the vehicle that he uses."²⁸
- Eugene Nida eschews "absolute relativism," admitting that many of the moral excesses in various cultures are not to be emulated. Nonetheless, he is a proponent of "relative relativism" in cultural analysis, a label he coins to describe God's practice of accommodating rather than condemning what elsewhere he describes as moral vices (e.g., slavery, divorce, polygamy, the invocation of curses, etc.). As such, like God, we must be prepared to tolerate, accommodate, even embrace what we erroneously perceive as cultural "immoralities" for the sake of the Gospel (a la 1 Cor 9:20–21).²⁹

The result of this emphasis was variously reflected in attempts at "holistic evangelism" and "incarnational missions," in which the Gospel "takes on the flesh" (thus incarnation) of the culture to which it is being presented, purged almost completely of all values judgment.

'rightness' or 'wrongness, 'better' or 'worse.'" They go on to say that such judgments are not impossible, but base them on a "*consensus gentium* and the best scientific evidence as to the nature of raw human nature," such as "cross-cultural evidence as to the universalities in human needs, potentialities, and upon natural science knowledge with which the basic assumptions of any philosophy must be congruent" (ibid., p. 178).

²⁵Charles Kraft, *Christianity in Culture* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1979), p. 52.

²⁶Ibid., p. 49.

²⁷Ibid., p. 113.

²⁸Ibid., p. 115.

²⁹*Customs and Culture: Anthropology for Christian Missions* (reprint of 1954 Harper Bros. ed.; Pasadena, CA: William Carey, 1975), pp. 48–52.

Thankfully, this anthropological view of culture and contextualization has not marked all of evangelical missions (although it took a significant “battle for world evangelism” during the late 1970s to counter this trend).³⁰ Much work has been done to press the fact that culture is a heterogeneous mixture of both good and evil, the former due to the *imago dei* and common grace and the latter due to corruption and even the demonic.³¹ Much work has also been done, particularly in the past ten years, to isolate values and worldviews as the locus of cultural expressions.³² Nonetheless, a nagging preference for elements of neutrality in discussions of worldview and culture still liberally sprinkles the literature:

- Gailyn VanRheenen: “Culture is the integrated system of learned patterns of ideas, values, behavior, products, and institutions characteristic of a society.”³³
- *Evangelical Dictionary of World Missions*, s.v. “Culture,” by Harvie Conn: Culture “refers to the common ideas, feelings, and values that guide community and personal behavior, that organize and regulate what the group thinks, feels, and does about God, the world, and humanity.”
- Michael Horton: “By ‘culture,’ we mean the tastes that rule a particular people, whether the elites (high culture) or the masses (popular culture).”³⁴

Why is this the case? The answer is certainly not monolithic, but the most promising answer is that there is an inadequate emphasis on the extensiveness and intensiveness of human depravity and a correspondingly inflated view either of (1) human ability or (2) the success of common grace. The assumption seems to be that “culture, as a product of human life, is good, but it is also tainted by sin,”³⁵ rather than that “the whole world lies in the power of the evil one” (1 John 5:19). Rather than cultivating a healthy distrust for the world, there is a tendency to assume the best of it, and worse, seek its approval. In the words of Klaas Schilder, there is a certain “servility with which Christian confessors, as soon as they touch the problem of culture, timidly look up to the unbelieving culture-philosophers next door: Would they be so kind as to grant us a nod of approval?”³⁶

³⁰See, e.g., Arthur Johnston, *The Battle for World Evangelism* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House, 1978). The primary purpose of this book was to address the inroads of the social gospel into evangelical missions, but the whole of liberal influence, including its view of culture, is examined herein.

³¹Even the Lausanne Covenant, for all of its significant shortcomings gets this right: “Because men and women are God’s creatures, some of their culture is rich in beauty and goodness. Because they are fallen, all of it is tainted with sin and some of it is demonic.”

³²See, e.g., David K. Naugle, *Worldview: The History of a Concept* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002); Paul J. Hiebert, *Transforming Worldviews* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2008); J. Mark Bertrand, *Rethinking Worldview: Learning to Think, Live, and Speak in This World* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2007); W. Andrew Hoffecker, ed., *Revolutions in Worldview: Understanding the Flow of Western Thought* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R, 2007);

³³*Missions: Biblical Foundations and Contemporary Strategies* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), p. 81.

³⁴*Where in the World Is the Church: A Christian View of Culture and Your Role in It* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R, 2002), p. 40. On p. 12 of the same work Horton offers a second definition, viz., “human activity that is intended for the use, pleasure, or enrichment of society.”

³⁵David J. Hesselgrave, *Contextualization* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1989), p. 53.

³⁶Klaas Schilder, *Christ and Culture* (reprint ed.; Winnipeg: Premier, 1977), p. 11.

Biblical Considerations

The NT term that most closely embodies the idea of culture in Scripture is the word *world*, and specifically the underlying Greek term κόσμος. The term appears most frequently in the Johannine writings and has more than one nuance. The particular nuance that interests us is the idea of the “system of human existence” that is simultaneously hostile to God and the sphere in which believers live.

The world appears to us as a whole created realm in need of redemption, but particular emphasis is placed on the moral agents in the world who are blameworthy for its condition. The world has been taken over by the evil one (John 12:31; 14:30; 16:11) and rests under his power (1 John 5:19). Friendship with the world is strictly forbidden as enmity with God (1 John 2:15; Jas 4:4). The goal of the believers in the world is to escape its corruption (Jas 1:27; 2 Pet 1:4; 2:20). Rather than seeking the approval of the world we should anticipate that it will hate us (John 15:18–19; 17:14; 1 John 3:13). The Christian has died to the stranglehold of world influence (Gal 6:14; Col 2:20), and his great hope is the overcoming of the world (John 16:33; 1 John 2:17; 5:4; 2 Pet 2:20).

The “world,” however, is rarely considered in terms of evil deeds that can be evaluated strictly on their own criteria. It produces a certain kind of speech (1 John 4:5), deeds (John 7:7; 1 John 2:15–17), and course of life (Eph 2:2), but even these are incidental to a corrupt *standpoint* and *mindset* according to which one walks, speaks, and acts. The world appears primarily as a philosophical viewpoint (Col 2:8, 20) that goes far deeper than the deeds that sometimes appear on the surface (Gal 4:3). It is a worldview that serves as a basic theory of epistemology (John 1:10; 14:17; 17:25; 1 Cor 2:12), a motivation for speech and action (2 Cor 7:10; 1 John 4:5), and a philosophy of values (1 Cor 7:33; 1 John 3:17), all of which stand contrary to the Christian worldview. We are unable to escape the sphere of the world, however, and must learn to survive in it. But more than this, we are agents of divine conviction attempting to convince the world that it is sinful, wholly lacking in righteousness, and immediately threatened by judgment (John 16:8) and pleading with them to abandon their philosophical commitments and to be reconciled with God (2 Cor 5:19–20).

To this end, ironically, we are obliged to make use of the certain resources resident in the world without completely capitulating to them (1 Cor 7:31). Even though man has become wholly evil and incapable of any true good (Rom 3:10–23; Eph 4:17–19; Rom 8:5–8; Jer 17:9), there is still some form of “good” still in the world. Sinners do “good” to those who are good to them (Luke 6:33): unbelievers “do instinctively the things of the Law” (Rom 2:14), and even the Pharisees, in the midst of a blistering condemnation from Christ’s mouth, were commended for doing what they “ought to have done” (Matt 23:23). Such “goodness” is evident (if unevenly) in nearly every sphere of life.³⁷ These “righteousnesses” are never meritorious (Isa 64:6), being a “form” of godliness that denies its rightful philosophical underpinnings (2 Tim 3:5), but they are genuine manifestations of common grace channeled through the image of God still resident within man. Whether or not they intend to, unbelievers advance the dominion mandate on a regular basis.

³⁷For an interesting hierarchy of spheres in which such “goodness” and evidence of common grace is most evident and least evident, see J. M. Spier, *An Introduction to Christian Philosophy* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1954), p. 44.

And it is here that the great tension of contextualization/acclturation enters. How can I discern what features of this world I can use, and at what point do I cross Paul's line by illicitly making "full use" of them (1 Cor 7:31)? Or to revive an old debate in Dutch Reformed theology, how extensive are the effects of common grace?³⁸

The answer to this question is not simple. However, if the weighting of the biblical material presents any sort of meaningful guide, it would seem that the distrust that the NT authors exhibit toward culture overwhelmingly outstrips the few concessions that they make to cultural practice. Using Romans 14 as our guide, particularly, Paul clearly proposes that we curtail legitimate practices to the preservation of orthodoxy rather than engage in those practices to the jeopardy of orthodoxy. To revive yet another forgotten historical debate, Paul preferred a regulative principle to a normative one, not only in worship, but in all of life.

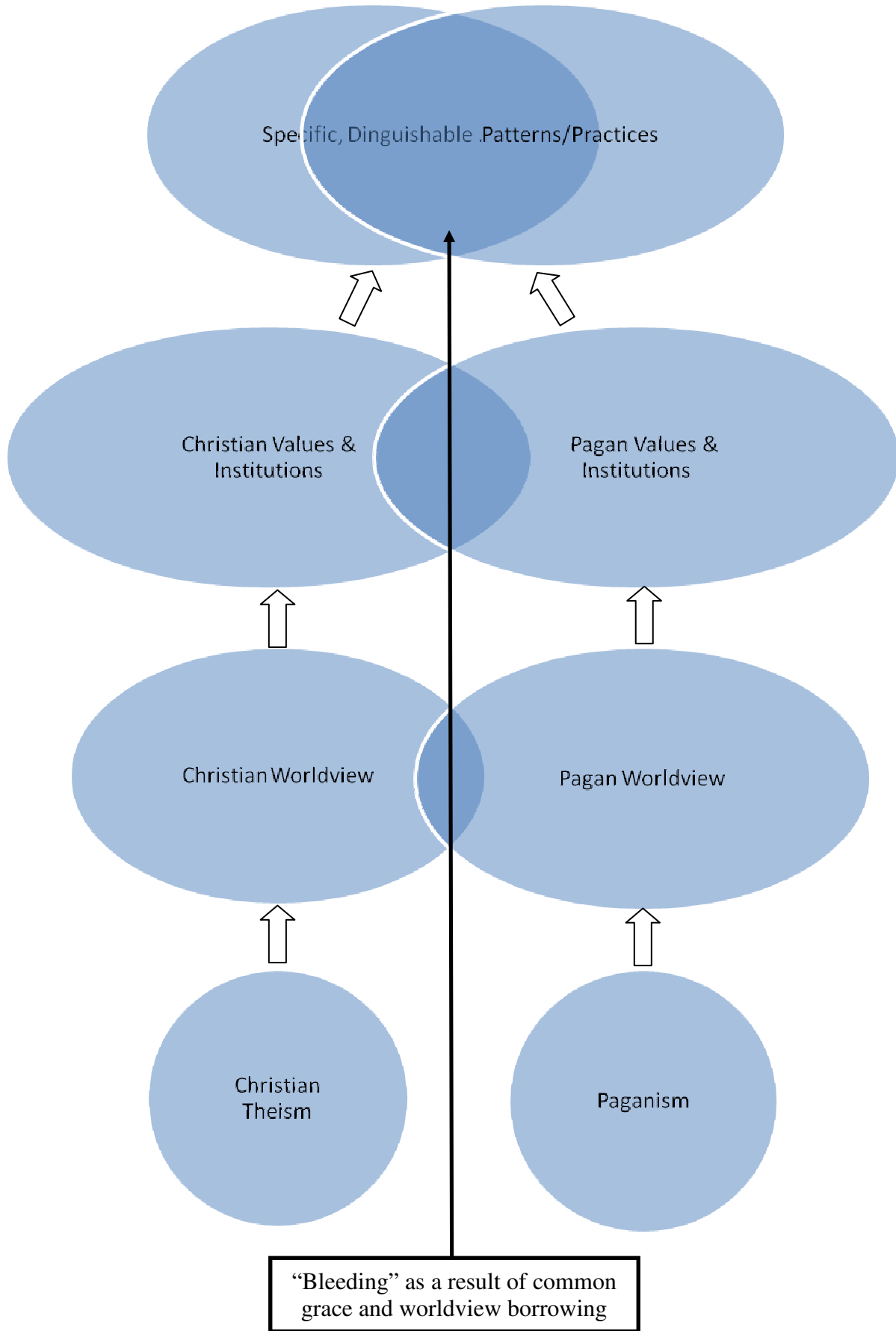
This, then, seems to be the pattern Scripture provides in our interaction with culture or "the world." Much as we would like it to be the case, Scripture seldom supplies detailed answers to govern the specific questions we have about cultural practices. In fact, on the few occasions that Scripture *does* bring specific cultural practices to the fore, a careless reading will raise questions of moral relativism or even internal contradiction among the biblical authors (e.g., God demands that Peter eat meat, but Paul tells us not to eat meat; circumcision is deemed unnecessary at the Jerusalem council led by James, but Paul circumcises Timothy; etc.). But if we recognize that the barometer of ethical "worldliness" and cultural corruption resides at more elemental levels, these concerns disappear. It is not so much specific practices that are the point of concern, but underlying philosophies.³⁹ In Paul's words, the greatest concern in cultural questions is whether engaging culture in any specific matter renders us susceptible to "philosophy and empty deception, according to the tradition of men, according to the elementary principles of the world, rather than according to Christ" (Col 2:8). And the greatest objective for engaging culture is creating antithesis even with our so-called "common ground": "We are destroying speculations and every lofty thing raised up against the knowledge of God, and we are taking every thought captive to the obedience of Christ" (2 Cor 10:5).⁴⁰

Note the following diagram for explanation of the basis and extent of cultural commonalities at several levels. Its intent is to show that the question of cultural engagement must always be answered by means of discernment, in short, the asking of "Why?" at every level of engagement and on the basis of this answer determining the merit/demerit of a given instance of acculturation.

³⁸See the debate between Abraham Kuyper and Klaas Schilder, continued by Cornelius Van Til and his nephew Henry Van Til, and recently revived by Richard Mouw.

³⁹Certainly there are certain practices that are clearly wrong in any circumstance, and the Bible is fairly comprehensive in identifying these. But there is a vast field of practices that are not demonstrably wrong, and may be embraced in certain circumstances but eschewed in others. These are the issues under review here.

⁴⁰I say "so-called" because there is truly no common ground, in the sense of areas of neutral facts/practices accessible to both believers and unbelievers that serve as a platform for evangelistic engagement. Believers and unbelievers may make seemingly identical claims and engage in seemingly identical practices, but apart from identical warrant, these are never truly "common." Certainly there is no common ground at the most rudimentary levels of philosophy. To suggest this is to minimize, at least to some extent, the unbeliever's plight, and to that same extent weaken the need for and appeal to salvation. For a detailing of this concept consult Cornelius Van Til, *Common Grace and the Gospel* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1972).



Conclusion

Culture, rightly considered, can never be limited to specific practices, tastes, and adaptations. Instead, culture should be regarded as a regional expression of mankind's success (witting or unwitting) in fulfilling the dominion mandate. It is never monolithic, nor should it be. Never is it wholly successful in fulfilling the dominion mandate, but by God's common grace, it is always partly successful. It is the believer's responsibility to winnow out what is destructive to that goal and eschew it, and to glean what is productive to that goal and bring it into captivity to the obedience of Christ. This is accomplished not by casting about for elusive Bible verses that condemn or condone specific practices, but by discerning carefully the values, motives, and worldviews that bring those practices into common use.

The quest for acculturation is not always a laudable goal. While it is true that we must, within acceptable parameters, become like all men in order to win them (1 Cor 9:20–21), we must be willing to admit that much of the prevailing quest to become like all men has little to do with the goal of winning some. And to the extent that this is true, we risk running counter to the much more abundant and urgent call for distinction from the world that permeates Scripture (John 17:14–17). Certainly we must create points of contact that allow us to intersect with the lives of unbelievers, but it is foolish to imagine that becoming persistently like the world at as many points as is possible will make the Christian message more attractive. To cite Charles Spurgeon,

Put your finger on any prosperous page in the Church's history, and I will find a little marginal note reading thus: "In this age men could readily see where the Church began and where the world ended." Never were there good times when the Church and the world were joined in marriage with one another. The more the Church is distinct from the world in her acts and in her maxims, the more true is her testimony for Christ, and more potent is her witness against sin.

adding,

Unless, brothers and sisters, you make it your daily business to see that there is a difference between you and the world, you will do more hurt than you can possibly do good.⁴¹

A glib form of acculturation is accelerating at a frenetic pace in fundamentalism today. It behooves us to give due consideration to the Whats? and Whys? of acculturation to ensure that the clambering pursuit of conformity to the world does not become an end unto itself.

⁴¹“Separating the Precious from the Vile,” sermon #305 at the New Park Street Pulpit, preached 25 March 1860.