"Culture is theological, Theology is cultural"

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Before I receive the ire of the many conservatives and ideologues in the realm of Theological and Cultural studies upon reading this paper, allow me first to express certain concessions that will attenuate and abate any premature criticism on these that I have to say.

First, I conceded that culture is a fact of phenomena, something which I consider to be the skin of the many collective consciousness of societies and communities, which are apparently consist of individuals, who can be individualistic in their ideals and praxes or individuals who value the collective norm and traditions. I also concede that culture is as layered as any consciousness that can be peeled off, hence "skin", depending on the mood swings of forces and factors that affect and shape it. And with these, I mean the politics, arts, and chosen ethics of the times. Therefore, I concede that culture is not and cannot be an ultimate arbiter for what is essential and ultimate, as it concerns itself more on the immediate and the functional. Culture, as it is, is only an indicator, a symptom of what's deeper. However, I equally concede that culture is a powerful shaping force for the other realms and dimensions of life. So powerful it is that not everyone can readily articulate his/her culture in any given place or situation. Having an awareness of culture as a shaping power for an individual requires, as it were, a "miracle", i.e., an extraneous mechanism to make the Subject (i.e., the self) realise and articulate how culture or cultures are inevitable and require a closer look for either intentional perpetuation or radical evaluation. Such is the power of culture that it serves as the base narrative of the swaying and the self-aware Subject. This is why I always find Daniel Bell's definition of culture the most appealing, rationaliseable, compelling, and overarching among the many other attempts at defining culture. To him, "culture is the effort to provide a coherent set of answers to the existential predicaments that confront all human beings in the passage of their lives". No matter how fallen, depraved, glorious, or redemptive ANY culture is, it is always, and is the first, matrix that an individual uses (or mechanises) to confront and/contend the realities, glories, and/or absurdities that this life has to offer. This, I hold to be true and binding in any human affair, no matter how great or

small, aged or nascent, recent or antiquated, individualistic or collective, peculiar or normative. Culture shapes beliefs, behaviours, theses, antitheses, syntheses, and if need be told, other cultures.

Despite these concessions on culture is another concession I have, this time on the limitations of culture: It is always spatio-temporal, predictable, narrativistic, reductionistic, imminent, and thus, desirous to be self-deterministic and closed-systematic. As any human-made institution, or in the words of Nietzsche, antiquarian and monumental (vs. critical), culture always wants to expand what its constituents---authors or puppets alike, to expand what it deems to be fruitful and beneficial. It is in this part that I dare say that "cultural relativism" is a myth, if not a recently invented antidote to the inherent tendency of culture to expand, monumentalise, overpower, territorialise, colonise, and imperialise. Culture, by its own contraptions, is always invasive and self-imposing that it tends to single out the other, competing factors that may either threaten to replace it or modify it. In other words, culture, apart from any transcendent and redemptive sense, always aims at the road of self-existence and superiority, treating what it deems to be as "Other/s" as inferior, exotic, alien, subordinate, and specimen. While culture is inevitable, culture proves itself to be that limited to what the natural human self/Subject can imagine or aspires to achieve. It is at this point that, again, I dare say that culture is that much of a force that it deems to be the sole entity that occupies and preoccupies all. I need not illustrate these intimations anymore, lest I stand redundant to what human history has been demonstrating from the main stream history since the Sumerians up until the emerging narratives from the ethnographic researches in the lives and customs of the historico-sociological existence of the aborigines. Because culture is that effort to provide a coherent set of answers to the realities that are rather random and disfigured as they appear, culture, once settled, is also that factor that wishes to decimate and disintegrate anything or anyone that contends to its narrative as the string that holds all the beads, i.e., the people as its pawn for perpetuation.

At this point, you might have been sensing that I take culture in a very enchanted way. You may even mistake me as a superstitious looney, personifying

culture as if a sinister character in someone else's novel or movie. But unless the way I uphold culture and its definition is what your bone and marrow of contention is, you cannot fault me for presenting culture as a "mind" that occupies both the collective and the individual dimensions of the Subject. Perhaps, you might want to provide a rather compelling alternative for what culture is and looks like from the general and marginal history of humankind and show that culture is that disintegrating factor and that's it. Even Deconstruction does not settle in identifying the point of indeterminacy as it were with Derrida, but Foucault comes in saying that after proving that the traditional and esteemed center of values and knowledge were either false as grounding or that there is actually a plurality of centres, new structuralisation and engineering must be done, lest all human achievements and monuments descend to the abyss of savagery yet again (or so any Darwinistic mind wishes to sustain). It suffices to be an apologetic, therefore, if I say that if culture is an effort to povide coherence, then narrativistic; if narrativistic, then textual; if textual, then behaviourally lending, hence, the plausibility unto personification, despite being "seemingly" disembodied.

And these, my dear readers, are what makes culture theological, i.e., desiring to be "divine", if I may use the sense of Clouser. In it as and its effort to provide coherence, i.e., MEANING and SENSE, culture moves to that direction of determination of what is acceptable or not and ordination of behaviours as rites and norms for utility and longevity. It is not hyperbole now to say that culture is bent towards ruling and overruling all that is there in the state of human affairs. It may take the vices and virtues of power, money, sex, fame, commodity, intellectuality, emotionality, freedom, relationships and anything or anyone that seems to give life meaning and value or any addition to it.

Does this mean that culture cannot be manipulated or even weaponised? I did not assume that. What I am saying is that once an idea, borne to or by an individual as a seed of thought or an inception is fully grown, such is what becomes that evident culture that surpasses the individual who initially or seemingly birthed it. It its tendency to escalate itself, making itself ubiquitous and inevitable, and yes... semi-

transcendent or semi-omnipresent, the vessel, i.e., the Subject, now simply becomes a host to a virus that is aimed at total consumption and absolute ownership. The Subject becomes a both an object and subject. Am I vilifying culture that much? No. It is not a case of vilification, any more than an assessment and a description and a conceptualisation of what has been going on to a system that, in the beginning, without culture that wishes to be autonomous, a.k.a. self-existent, self-determining, i.e., "divine". No culture is theologically neutral. Culture is a self-theologising force as it were, wanting to be that "divine" Subject whence all other Subjects must measure themselves with. It is at this point that I shall say: Culture, with all its machinations and mechanism, wants to be "god". Culture is theological or to be etymological precise: theo-phillic and theo-thellic, not as in a "one who loves or desires God", but that "one that desires or loves to become" God.

Thence goes with the second major concession with "Theology is cultural". In light of the foregoing intimation on the idolatrous tendencies of an unexamined culture, many religious and theological thinkers hold an initial contempt against culture. Because of the either shallowness or profound fallenness of culture, the adjective "cultural" holds a pejorative connotation. Particularly in the Judæo-Christian frame of thought, to be described as a "cultural Christian" means to be either a false believer or a counterfeit, having no doxastic roots and convictions at all. A cultural Christian is one who identifies with Christianity in terms of imposed family traditions, social background, or accustomed mentalities and lingos, but the so-called genuine and vital relationship to Yahweh through Jesus Christ is not there. S/He is just a "Christian" by social group, not as a being, whose totality is made alive in God. In all respects, I hold the same, for there was once upon a time that I was, as an insight through hindsight, a cultural Christian, because I talked and I behaved like a Christian, I had Christian friends, I went to Christian gatherings, and I read what Christians read. And yes, there are such kinds of people, and I dare say that they are not (yet) "Christians", i.e., a disciple of the Lord Jesus Christ, who's been regenerated by grace through faith; though I dare not say that it is their end point. They need to know Christ, which follows that they must not just think that they are His followers just because they heard and found what they heard fascinating (Cf. the neighbours

of the woman at the well in John 4). Christianity, i.e., orthodox, historic, biblical Christianity is far more than being fascinated. It is fascinating, of course, but there is more to it than moments of fascination. Excuse my tones of catechism, but it is what the "cultural Christian" needs to hear (or read) in this section of this text. That sense of being "cultural" is not what I mean by "Theology is cultural".

So, what do I mean by "Theology is cultural"? First, theology, regardless of its denominations, traditions, and sects, is a force that forms, informs, transforms, and/or deforms culture and its reception by its S-/subjects. Anyone who is initiated in this kind of topic knows what this assertion means. Second, theology, regardless of its denominations, traditions, and sects, can become a culture in itself. This is the reason that there are those who are "nominal" in their faith, regardless of the deity or divinity they summon in their prayers and rites. Whilst this sense reads similarly to the previous section, I wish to note that theology, as in any system of thoughts or sciences, is prone to algebraisation that callouses the inner sensibilities of its allies. Assuming, rather than analysing, its propositions is what deadens the once potent features of such a theology. That is why, theology may fall into the slippery slope of either oblivion or a mere given of culture. It is at this point that theology gets to be swallowed, unwittingly, by culture. So, when I say "Theology is cultural", I mean it not to be derogatory, but a reminder that theology can be that contending, if not superseding force that can define and redefine culture. India's golden age was that one which was prevailed by the Vedas in all its forms; the polytheistic/finite godistic explanations of natural phenomena of the Greco-Roman empire, with Alexander the Great as its portal, was the Hellenisation of the West and a considerable part of the East; "Tian ming" is that very dictum that sustained the Confucian teachings and traditions, thus the sustaining of dynasties; and the looming of the Kami over households and natures is what allowed Shintoism to inform even the theatrical performances and hence propagation of its teachings as customs in traditional and sub-urban Japan. These theologies are what dictate/-d the culture that made such cultures unique and distinct. The same is true in the Judeo-Christian frame, if the case was not yet made clear.

So, what's the point of all of these intimations now? We dare say that because culture is not theologically neutral and theology is not culturally unhinged, we never leave one subject matter unchecked with one another. Because culture tends to be theological (or overruling the totality of human affairs), we have to check it constantly with the grids and cores of the theology we say we hold dear. Whereas I don't advocate for religious pluralism as the main operating system of a society, I say that because there are a plurality of beliefs and of sects and denominations within a belief, those who say to be the vanguards of the irreducible minimum of such a theology, e.g., Christianity, should never sleep and slack even for a moment. Because theology is cultural, and rightly it should be, its frontliners must always be in the business of protecting what has been proven to be its "pillars", better yet, standing on those "pillars" and watching out from those "pillars" in order to go interrogating what the culture---mainstream or popular, has to offer and counter-offer or how it seeps in and through. Yes. There are things and ideas from culture that must be allowed and permitted, as I am convinced, they can be part of the General Revelation, informing and refining our theological praxes and there are those that should never see the light of day of the mind, imaginations, affections, and language of our theological halls. As the adage goes, culture is not so bad that we cannot learn from it, but it is not so good that it cannot be corrected and redeemed. This dialectics of culture and theology is, what I think, that healthy tension that one must consider if there has to be an effective communication of the contrasts and convergence of these two forces in the overall state of human affairs. As long as theology supervenes the portals for the transcendent, and the culture for immediately coherent, consonance is possible. However, this consonance is the very problem that we all face.

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