

5. Cities and Culture: A Theological Perspective

Tim Gorringe has recently authored *Furthering Humanity: A Theology of Culture* published in 2005. He is St Luke's Professor of Theological Studies at Exeter University. His keynote address has been summarized by Chris Baker.

Tim Gorringe started a wide-ranging discussion by linking an understanding of faithful capital (see *Faithful Cities* report) with those platoons of faith-based affiliation (in the 'social capital' sense) who punch above their weight. In his opinion, 'faithful capital' is a slippery and elusive, but not entirely vacuous concept.

5.1 What is culture?

Terry Eagleton once said there are 116 definitions of culture, ranging from *identity* through to the *art pages* of a newspaper. Therefore on the question of identity – what is the difference between living in India, China, Exeter? To find out the answer, you need to ask the question, 'What is different about these places?' Ask that question and you begin to get at the idea of culture as identity. Identity is linked to spirituality – places have spiritualities, for example Dundee, Exeter, Devon. Arts pages of a newspaper – if you look in the arts pages of the newspaper you'll have high culture, pop culture, and folk culture. But if you go back to identity, then identity is 'that most complex whole'.

5.2 High culture and popular culture

High culture tends to be equated with theatre, opera, classical music, arthouse cinemas. 'Be ye perfect ... Human beings need to be pushed and educated' is a resume of the thesis put forward by Matthew Arnold in his book *Culture and Anarchy*, which critiqued the money culture of 1860s Victorian society. Capitalists were going to chapel/church and thus allowing for a moral reading of Christianity whereby the work ethic was interpreted as using time profitably. Arnold argued for an opposite stance - what culture is about is the pursuit of the best that human beings are capable of, what he called 'sweetness and light'.

High culture was also part of the Reithian revolution at the BBC, and the evolution of the Third Programme. Lord Reith, the first chairman of the BBC said, 'I want people to come and be able to listen to philosophers'. (See also the role of the Workers Education Association). However, the persistent problem with high culture is that it is elitist: 'In any period it is upon a very small minority that the discerning appreciation of art and literature depends'.¹

The cultural dominant, however, is now *popular* culture: Radios 1 and 2, not Radio 3. Popular culture is addicted to the body and its pleasures and is egalitarian and relativistic in its perspectives. For example, a popular culture approach would say that Bob Dylan is as good a poet as Keats.

But questionable comparisons like this aside, it is important that we don't lose sight of the theological importance of the multitude or the *ochlos*. Jesus preached compassion on the multitude. The multitude has energy and vigour and contributes to city life. For example, the people of Leipzig paid Bach to compose music for them. Similarly, the people of Birmingham have paid for a new symphony hall and attracted Simon Rattle to their city, thus helping to consolidate the rebranding of Birmingham.

However, there is also a problem that culture is too caught up in the promotion and manipulation of the media. Neil Postman (New York University) identifies two dystopias of

¹ Frank R Leavis, *Mass Civilization and Minority Culture* (Cambridge: Minority Press, 1930), pp.1-2

the twentieth century: George Orwell's *1984* and Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World*. Huxley's is more congruent for this discussion in its discussion of the impact of advanced technology when deployed in the service of popular culture – i.e. 'Spiritual devastation comes from the smiling face'. Is this all that popular culture has to offer? Ironically, we now watch Big Brother rather than the other way round.

5.3 Folk Culture

(German origin – das Volk = the people). Other cultures don't distinguish between folk and popular culture but in England we do - something to do with losing its peasantry and the way of life associated with it, therefore the word 'folk' relates to that lost rural past, perhaps.

Folk culture and multiculturalism – do we abandon this and go back to the Tebbit test? Humans are nomads, always moving, but their rates of movement have varied during the course of human history. In England from 400 to 1000AD the main flow of immigration was from Angles, due to the activities of the Danes. See also the role of Vikings before the Norman conquest of 1066. Between 1100 – 1600AD, there was less movement, therefore culture became more stable and you see the emergence of dialects and cuisines.

At the present moment we live in a period of intense renewed migration. In the light of the Human Rights Act we ought to respect difference. Culturally, populations assimilate. Muslim communities in the South East and North of England for example are different because of the impact of local populations on their lives. Every cultural expression is an expression of value. It implicitly represents a set of values. What are good values to live by?

5.4 What makes a good city?

Cities have always played a major role in a way that is different from villages and towns. Tim quoted Lewis Mumford to the effect that, 'the mission of the city is to further our progression in the cosmic experience' by providing a sense of purpose, colour, love of life and dramatic representation. What are the reasons for cities' continued existence? From a theological perspective, Ireneus of Lyons 180AD referred to the economy of redemption. Cities in particular have a vital role in the economy of redemption because, by and large, cities are the contexts in which first human advancements have been realised – synergy, networking, human interaction etc. Cities are hugely productive of culture: for example 15th century Florence, late 19th century Vienna, pre-World War I Paris. What makes cities culturally creative? No magic formula, but two things appear to be common factors:

1. all culturally creative cities have large numbers of immigrants.
2. however, not all culturally creative cities are nice places to live in. One line of argument suggests that in order to achieve cultural creativity we need to be able to 'stand the heat in the kitchen'. To be fully human is to acknowledge the downside of human behaviour – it has to be able to give free reign to aggressive instincts – does 'good' culture need to reflect these aggressive instincts in some way?

This line of argument critiques the 'namby pamby' welfare state. Societies dominated by the welfare state are effete and drained of cultural life blood. Tim raised the question of whether we need the 'macho spaces' before arguing that cultural creativity takes place not in the face of injustice but in cities where there is a real attempt at justice.

5.5 Cuisine as expression of culture and local identity

Cities have always lived in symbiotic relationships with hinterland and the farmland around them, but the growth of Empire saw (amongst other things) the development of the refrigerated ship in 1874. That event marked the beginning of the loss of the symbiotic relationship between cities and hinterlands, and began to replace it with the supermarket society and its attendant globalisation (for example, the ingredients that go to make a pot of

yoghurt travel 6600 kilometres). It is through this stretching of space and condensing of time that 'the distinctiveness of place is lost' - for example, the ubiquity of Tesco and its impact on the role of community-supported agriculture. However, there is some evidence to suggest that people are fed up with supermarket culture and are trying to put the local connection back into their food.

5.6 Cities and global warming

We can't talk about the culture of cities without thinking about global warming. Things are changing faster than predicted thirty years ago – it will have a massive impact on the culture of cities. At the moment cities are totally oil-dependent therefore everything will stop if the oil stops. Cities are very energy dependent, and therefore they are at the heart of any ecological crisis. The bigger they are the more impact they have on global hinterlands. We need to return to the concept of *compact city*, that is an urban environment where one can walk and cycle to work and where your energy needs and food are obtained locally, therefore going back to a local distinctiveness/identity. This idea is given further credibility by a recent New Economics Foundation survey on towns, which found that Exeter was the most 'cloned' town in Britain. We need to act fast if we are going to arrest the decline of distinctiveness in our local culture.

5.7 Culture

As a Christian, Tim expressed concern when culture is unduly predicated on the pursuit of power, pleasure and profit. We live in a hedonistic culture. But what is wrong with pleasure? Well, one response to that question is, 'if we get it based on systems of injustice'. But Tim does raise the question of himself being a cultural pessimist. After all, the city of Exeter where he lives is a city of 110,000 people and has 670 clubs and associations – that's one for every 150 people. We have a vision of ourselves as a nation of couch potatoes but this is not true to the way life is lived by many people. Tim believes that the contemporary version of folk culture is alive and well – we are perhaps not as interested in 'stars' and the celebrity system that supports them as the media hype would have us believe. One definition of folk culture is that culture which is completely amateur – for example Heavitree versus Clyst St Mary Football Clubs – Tim is a keen supporter of the latter as his local football team. There is no big money involved in football at this level. The Church's view on culture should be influenced by the perspective from John's Gospel (St John 10:10), namely life in all its fullness.

5.8 Education

Education under the current political regime is politically equated with simply 'going to University' for its own sake – a functionalist understanding and an example of 'Blair fatuousness'. For a different 'take' on education, Tim cited the example of the late Alan Ecclestone's ministry in the context of inner city Sheffield, where he established the model of the Parish Meeting: every Wednesday, members of the church met to discuss the wider implications of the culture that they had engaged with as a group or as individuals e.g. films, art, exhibitions, theatre and so on. This was done on the basis of the assumption that the gospel both reflects on and engages with the whole of human life.

5.9 Liturgy

Worship is at the heart of life. We are also engaging in culture within liturgy (but not as a pious group). In worship, we encounter the God revealed in Jesus – we respond in a catholic spirit and incarnate the following principles:

- when we worship on Sunday we are committing ourselves to a vision of the ultimate – other things may be richly rewarding but they are not ultimate – worship gives us a 'detox' by defining what is ultimate;

- we exist to worship God – but we also use a set of texts that call us also into resistance against every hegemony because only Christ is Lord;
- ‘be still and know that I am God’.