An Unfolding View of Cultural Engagement

By Gerrit Verstraete

Artwork: “Touch Me,” from the Cerulean Dream Cycle, \(^1\) by Gerrit Verstraete

“With the advent of new styles or instruments of perception, the effect of the new environment is to mirror the image of the old one.” Marshall McLuhan. \(^2\)

“In an encountered reality, we found truth and authentic expressiveness as aims of cultural creativity.” Paul Tillich. \(^3\)

Abstract

This paper intends to clarify the issues examined in an unfolding view of cultural engagement. These issues have resulted from an inherent conflict between one view that advocates engaging culture, and a second view that advocates a withdrawal from engaging culture, even rejecting culture. This paper posits a preferred, or third view, namely that of informing culture as the real essence of engagement.

The inquiry into cultural engagement begins with the metaphor of the Petri Dish, that unique place where cultures are grown, hence its pseudonym, the Culture Dish. Among respective contributions by other scholars to the discourse and inquiry, I found a rich aggregate of research to substantiate the growth of my views inside the Culture Dish. By examining such concepts as defining culture, Christ and culture, two views of engaging culture, and a third preferred view of informing culture, the tension between the two is resolved in the third, by asking the question, “how should we then live?”

Defining cultural engagement in a preferred view is to define cultural engagement in a less provocative, non-redemptive way as activities of people, offering a more informed way of
clarifying the issues through a new kind of seeing, where things become new by unfolding the issues. An informed culture is a culture that can think critically about the manner in which that culture has been engaged.

In defining culture, my inquiry submits that it is an ontological and epistemological problem of assumptions about what it is to be Christian, and the basis on which such assumptions are founded, especially in the conventional use of Christian as an adjective, is invalid.

The emergence of a historical development of scripture and tradition became an unfolding strategy of four views: the coincidence view, the supplementary view, the ancillary view, and the unfolding view, presented as a thematic approach in context of an experiential method of qualitative research in the humanities. The thematic approach as experiential expressions, thematic amplifications, and a reflective synthesis, examines the artist’s role in a technological world, as the artician in ministry, enabled to produce a creative surround within culture.

This composite thematic approach finds creative expression in a stylistic approach through a narrative manner, a literary manner, or a mixed-style manner, each meant to enhance the artician’s process of communication and processing of positive information, towards a meaningful cultural engagement of knowledge sharing.

This paper is written in a style that is interspersed with narrative bits and bytes to illustrate the possibilities that exist when culture is engaged with an informative strategy employing the arts as a creative way to tell a story. In this paper, examples of bits and bytes are about the stage production of Toymaker & Son.

Introduction

On a crisp Fall evening, in September 1978, the house lights were dimmed at the Chesworth Middle School in Horsham, England. The auditorium’s spotlights focused on an empty stage. In the wings stood Colin Harbinson, acting headmaster and choreographer of Toymaker & Son, about to be performed for the first time by a group of Chesworth students. When the performing arts debut of this special musical drama took to the stage, it was quickly recognized that Colin Harbinson had found in “Toymaker & Son” a perfect combination: A story worth presenting in a style that moved audiences from tears, to laughter, to resounding applause. He had discovered an unfolding view of cultural engagement that went on to receive international acclaim and has been seen by millions, in over 60 nations, unfolding its story on every continent of the world.

The Petri Dish is that unique place where cultures are grown, hence its pseudonym, the Culture Dish. As long ago as high school, I remember the shallow glass dish with its equal size glass lid, in which a warm liquid containing agar and other ingredients, solidified to become the plate where microbe-laden samples were inoculated. The optical transparency and flat profile of the Petri Dish made them ideal for use to view samples of cultures under a microscope. It is under the inquiring microscope of this essay, where I will undertake to examine the unfolding view of cultural engagement, with as my first task, an inquiry into the words used to define my parameters: culture, engagement, and the unfolding view.

However, when I continued the inquiry to examine my terms, nestled in the metaphorical Petri Dish, it became apparent that agreement among the terms was not a norm. In fact, quite the opposite is the case, as two opposing views of cultural engagement surfaced to create the
dilemma of Niebuhr’s “enduring problem.” 6 To address this enduring problem, my unfolding became an investigation into both views and their inherent tension, as well as the unfolding of my recommended view. Rookmaaker posits that the tension is a result of a lack of clarity between Christianity as a system of belief and Christianity as an aggregate of people – Christians. “The tension is not Christianity’s place within God’s creation or Christianity’s place within culture, but a Christian’s place in God’s creation, and a Christian’s place in culture.” 7 He reflects the age-old understanding of the Christian’s place in this world, as a positioning of the individual in contemporary culture, and the proverbial question of how we can be in this world but not of this world. It’s a tension of being in the kingdom of God, yet incapable of ushering in that kingdom on our own, with our own initiatives and programs, despite all good intentions.

Even though this dilemma, this enduring problem or tension about our place in culture can only be solved in Jesus Christ, any inquiry into a solution must engage the Christ-factor not as a rejection of the world and its cultures. The solution is not a Christian culture, nor is it a matter of simply following the cultures around us, with just a scattering of Christian dogma and doctrines thrown in, as if a Christian’s place in culture is parenthetical, that is, lost or relegated to obscurity in pluralism, where all notions of being bold are diffused to become a general consensus without any bright light for fear of offending others. That tension is further compounded by the position of a contemporary church. Even though speaking about the enculturation of an American church, Brueggemann’s indictment is not exclusive to the United States. “The contemporary American church is so largely enculturated to the American ethos of consumerism, that it has little power to believe or to act,” 8 and it is that powerlessness within a consumer ethos, that has ensnared the church everywhere in a tension that either takes a stand for faith in culture, or resigns to withdrawal from the arena of cultural engagement. However, under the probing eye of the investigator, the Petri Dish reveals a Toymaker & Son that offers a bright example of light on a hill to give light to all.9

Cultural engagement affords the researcher and the cultural practitioner an opportunity to be that bright light, yet without conflict, in a manner of appreciative inquiry that celebrates diversity. There remains therefore a need to determine a preferred positioning within cultural engagement, a positioning that resolves the enduring problem of tension between engagement and non-engagement. Within the positive construct of a creative world, a cultural position can be grown that recognizes as its foundation the understanding of the kingdom of God, and an overarching concept of divine rule or Codex Rex, as a law of the heart and of the Spirit, by which we live within culture and the communities that embrace the diversity of such cultures. And therein lies the paradox. Whereas the inclination is to resolve the obsessio of conflicting and variegated cultures “with an impulse that points towards an epiphania” 10 of engagement or lack thereof, alternative rhythms point towards a preferred position that embraces “a resolution of reunion, which entails a relinquishing of separation, a letting go, a willingness to emptied” 11 through the process of communicating a Christological perspective that aims to serve culture rather than conquer it. For servanthood is the essence of the kingdom of God, with a reunion between self and the divine that willingly receives the spiritual rule of Christ, at the expense of one’s own opinions and positioning strategies.

Clarifying the Issues
As such, scholarly research into the issues, with an appreciative inquiry into an efficient and effective form of engagement, must aim towards informed leadership and not engaged leadership, that is an engaged leadership whose mandate is adversarial or even controversial, often disguised in the warrior image of the soldier of Christ dressed in the armor of God. Such is not the criterion for the leader who engages culture with an informed mandate. Toymaker & Son provided a performing arts platform that chose to tell a story, not as a means to conversion, but as an artistic tool for informing.

Toymaker & Son is the epic account of the most powerful rebellion in history, the greatest love story in the universe, and the most daring rescue plan ever conceived. The unique fusion of movement, drama and mime, combined with colorful costumes, and a dynamic original soundtrack by Vince Corozine, and choreography by Colin Harbinson, made this allegory an unforgettable experience.

The issue of a preferred strategy of informing culture, comprises the unfolding view of cultural engagement as a means to introduce others to the lives we live, whether by allegory, metaphor, narrative, didactic, dialectical engagement, or in a broad context the expressive arts. Our communication mandate is not one of persuasion or conviction based on the promise of an unforgettable experience, but on the testimony that we ourselves have an account of our unforgettable experience.

The question of whether we engage culture or reject it, is answered by the clarion call of an unfolding view that proposes to inform culture, and that informing culture is as personal as a one-on-one encounter between fellow human beings, or as diverse in outreach through the use of information technology, including the visual and performing arts.

Inside the Culture Dish

What do I mean when I say culture, and engagement, and what precisely is the unfolding view? Needless to say, what I hold to be my views are in and of themselves a hybrid of the views of others such as Niebuhr, Rookmaaker, Jones, Berlin, Edlin, Schaeffer, Lane, and others, where among their respective contributions to the scholarly discourse and inquiry, I found a rich aggregate of research to substantiate the growth of my views inside the Culture Dish. The aggregate will remain an incomplete and unfolding view as culture continues to evolve and technology continues to affect culture’s evolution. “Culture inevitably responds to new stimuli.” Nevertheless, I posit that a third and preferred view of cultural engagement, in light of the other two opposing views, is an original perspective, and yet I look forward as I continue in my research to discover I am not alone in my preferred perspective, and that in fact others have posited the same, and I in turn am being continually informed.

From the first performance in Italy, with an adult cast in 1979, Toymaker & Son went on to be given wide exposure all over Western Europe. In Greece, the Prime Minister watched a special performance, and in Spain, Toymaker & Son was sponsored as part of the official festivities in the World Cup Soccer Games. North America first experienced Toymaker & Son at the 1980, Winter Olympics at Lake Placid, where it was described by a theatre critic as “an excellent performance in modern dance, and significant for the message it is relaying.” Since that time, Toymaker & Son has continued to tour extensively in Canada and the United States, drawing audiences of up to 10,000 people in a single performance.
What is Culture?

Culture says Jacob Burkhardt, “is distinguished from the other two powers (religion and state) by its non-authoritarian character. Culture is the sum of all that has spontaneously arisen for the advancement of material life, and as an expression of spiritual and moral life - all social intercourse, technologies, arts, literature and sciences; the foremost expressions of its spirit are found in the arts.” 15 But, when this definition of culture is framed in a context of Niebuhr’s *Christ and Culture*, it becomes evident that any definition of culture must remain a layman’s definition, not subject to theological interpretation, the very source of conflicting views in cultural engagement. “The theologian cannot presume to enter the issues raised by professional anthropologists and must define the phenomenon (called culture) without theological interpretation.” 14

However, if culture’s spirit is indeed found in the arts, as an artist, I am confident my interpretation of culture can unfold both from a theological or kingdom perspective and an artistic perspective, with a narrative that is grounded in theory, theology, and experience. Culture therefore, becomes a unique characteristic of a particular society, with a generous overlap as cultural synthesis and societal integration are the inevitable fruit of history. To embrace this synthesis and integration must not be viewed as a threat to culture. The embrace must be accepted as a fulfillment of all creative possibilities among people as diverse in their expression and celebration, as they are unique in their individual forms of cultural heritage and cultural capital. Rather than burying culture in canons of ethnic and religious orders, the unique characteristics of every culture can flourish in the Culture Dish of the arts, be they Greco-Roman, Medieval, Western or Eastern, traditional or modern.

Contrary to what John Kenneth Galbraith suggests, these unique characteristics are more than the collective stamp of industry that defines culture. It is not “the great industrial enterprise that stamps its culture – its hours, discipline, work attitudes and air pollution – on its community, developing a case for a broad convergence in the industrial systems of the socialist and non-socialist worlds.” 15 Galbraith’s collective stamp is no more than a quantitative measurement of gross national product, which is not the sole measure of culture or not even a measure at all. Culture is not defined by market-driven art, but by artist-driven art, of which quantity is but a byproduct of quality, in the same manner as consumerism is not a culture, but a behavioral trait within a particular and increasingly global marketplace disguised as a global society.

“We should consider the qualitative as well as the quantitative side of life – the whole reward from existence rather than the simple increase in the output of goods.” 16

It is within a qualitative matrix where culture is defined by individual expression and by synthesis and integration to form a platform from which to view Rookmaaker’s perspective of the Christian in culture, as either unified or separated, or a false dichotomy that proposes Christianity as culture instead of Christians in culture. And it is in understanding our role or position as Christians in culture that defines the methodology of our engagement, a methodology that has historically been a conflict between opposing views as they debate the issues inherent in their methodologies and strategies for engagement. The key to understanding whatever role Christians may play in the kingdom of God and in culture, is how they relate to their position in God’s eternal plan, a plan that is understood foremost as a position of individual being. 17

There is a great deal of tension between Christ and Western culture, and as a result, clarifying the issues has become cloudy, because for the Westerner, Jesus Christ has become an integrated member of a Western cultural society, much like an American Jesus. But, for Christians in the East, especially those who are looking forward to the kingdom of God as an
emergence of a new civilization, or at least a new age of freedom, they are not concerned with merely the Western version of Christ, but with a Christ who is distinguished from Western faith, and who is relevant to life in their cultures. Nor can we define culture narrowly by taking into view some special phase of human social organization and achievement, such as the institutional church. When the problem of defining culture is stated in terms of Christ’s relationship or the Christian’s relationship to science and philosophy, or in the Christian’s relationship to political organizations, such as in the question of church and state, the tension increases as opposing views cannot find the epiphania of union or reunion.

Spanish speaking audiences have been deeply moved by Toymaker & Son, when performed live and on national television in Central and South American countries including Mexico, Guatemala, Chile, Colombia, Brazil Honduras, and Belize. In Asia, the unique fusion of dance, drama and mime has captivated the imagination of many cultures, as troupes have performed in nations including China, Japan, Korea, Indonesia, Philippines, Taiwan, Malaysia and Singapore. In the Indonesian country of Bali, one of the leaders of the Balinese Dance Theatre, after seeing a performance of Toymaker & Son said, “We have much to learn from Western choreography ... your production has meaning and life.”

In defining culture I inevitably encounter the notion of a Christian culture, if indeed there is such a notion. My inquiry leads me to conclude that it is an ontological and epistemological problem of assumptions about what it is to be Christian, and the basis on which such assumptions are founded. Is the conventional use of Christian as an adjective valid? Are there Christian plumbers and carpenters, artists and writers, politicians and economists? Can Christian be generalized to encompass cultural characteristics? Is it Christian art and Christian culture? Is reality relevant to one’s occupation or calling, and therefore reliable as a source of valid research and experience to methodologically position Christian as the antithesis of Secular, the sacred and the profane? It is precisely in the use of Christian as an adjective, where the relation of Christ to these elements in civilization, raises special problems because Christian in not an adjective but a noun. Etymologically, I do not create Christian art. I am a Christian and I create art. The difference is not subtle but enormous, because it is in recognizing the enormity of this difference, where I encounter the choice between freedom to create or conform to Niebuhr’s enduring problem of conflicting systems of belief, instead of flowing in the spirit of Jones’ rhythms of alternatives.

Christ and Culture

When I examined Christ and culture as a total process of human activity, and where the total result of such activity is applied in common speech and the arts, I found an artificiality about culture without Christ, an artificiality as profound as futility. Again, speaking positionally as being in Christ, the ontological and epistemological problem of assumptions about what it is to be Christian, are solved when the separation between Christ and culture is eliminated. If culture then is “the artificial secondary environment which people superimpose on the natural, comprising language, habits, ideas, beliefs, customs, social organization, inherited artifacts, technical processes, and values,” we have no more than a socio-cultural heritage of quantity measured in social capital, intellectual capital, financial capital, and spiritual capital, which the New Testament writers spoke of as the world, and “which is represented in many forms but to which Christians, like other people, are inevitably subject.” But, is it sufficient when we speak
of culture simply as the world? Christianity and culture (the world), have remained “alien to each other,” 21 and any attempt to confront the two, the Christian and the world, and to unify them, have perpetuated the divide between the two. Further attempts to relate Christianity and culture (the world) sometimes fail precisely because participants in various communities of faith have mistakenly thought of them as separated from the beginning.

But, how do I reconcile the assumed contradiction between the Christian and culture, as if the two are mutually exclusive? Is it to extrapolate from the contradiction an attitude towards a surrounding non-Christian culture? Is that not exactly the root of the problem in defining Christ and culture as an us and them? It is an inherent flaw of this argument to position culture as being either Christian or non-Christian, based on the etymological misunderstanding of Christian as an adjective and not as a noun, as in Christian world, or a Christian country and Christian culture.

When referring to the secularization of culture, it is better stated as the capitalization and consumerization of human behaviour? Has it turned into a special problem for the Christian living in a world where “Christianity has become a nominally accepted standard,” 22 in an environment of consumer values that affects all people, and not just Christians? Whereas the Christian position may as a result seem difficult, for we are all consumers, we must realize that Christianity is not an ethic to solve the dilemma. Even though Codex Rex and the kingdom of God propose a distinct ethic, they are first and foremost advocates of a spiritual position in relation to Christ. From that position we stand in contrast to an other-spirits position, including the proverbial spirit of the age, that is, of the world.

If I examine the relationship between the Christian and culture from a perspective of what such a relationship produces, I can no more support the view that Christians produce a Christian culture, than I can support that Christians can produce the kingdom of God by moral and ethical conduct.

This narrow interpretation rose out of the inherent dualism of our culture. On the one hand are strong forces of science and technology, which many today do not think of as culture, but simply as life and reality, expressed in consumerism. On the other hand is religion.

Religion has been rendered of little consequence against the tide of consumerism. Culture then risks becoming and in many ways already is, only an embellishment of life, like an ornament. Consequently in some fields of endeavor, such as in science and technology, and in scholarship and aesthetics, Christianity has relinquished almost all influence, as for example in the visual arts, where non-Christian ideas have found an almost undisputed freedom of expression, to the extent that people have begun to speak of a post-Christian era.

The outcome of this narrow interpretation of Christ and culture, or the Christian and culture, is a persisting opinion that the influence of Christianity has waned. And it is in this corner of the Culture Dish, where I see the exponential growth of this attitude towards engagement of culture. As a result, Christians often think they must engage the enemy, whoever that the enemy may be, especially if that enemy is a secular, post-modern world, or that peculiar era of post-Christianity. This then becomes the argument for cultural engagement as a sort of militant form of spiritual warfare, or for many the alternative of an absence of such warfare, to resolve Niebuhr’s enduring problem and Rookmaaker’s Christians in their culture.

To conclude, culture is life as one. “Culture is simply the creation of life's forms, customs, and institutions, as well as our utilization of nature and its resources.” 23 All culture is therefore the result of human activity, when people are driven by motives deep in their hearts, in their efforts to shape life on the basis of the best way to understand life. Therefore involvement in culture is unavoidable regardless of one’s theological or doctrinal position. However, for the
Christian, the means of critical thought are to be applied not in confronting culture but in engaging culture. Christian activity of a daily experience is the antidote to an impoverished cultural existence that “denies God's sovereignty over the largest part of one's life and creates a dichotomy that is dangerous to our spirituality.”

That leads me to ask the burning question of “how should we then live?”

Engaging Culture

How should we then live?

Christians should always be open towards the world around them, and maintain contact with their contemporaries. The church should never be a closed community, removed from the world, and in fear of infiltration and contamination. Insulated, yes; isolated, no. After all, the mark of the world will always be in our midst, as we are continually tempted to take upon ourselves the things we need to let go of, with an unwillingness to be emptied of self instead of being filled with the Spirit.

"Toymaker & Son is an excellent performance in modern dance, entertaining in itself, and significant for the message it is relaying." New York Press.

"We don't see plays of this caliber every day." French Press.

"The most effective Gospel presentation I've ever seen. Toymaker & Son drew some of the largest crowds to hear the Gospel in the history of Greece. Our Prime Minister, together with many other dignitaries, saw Toymaker & Son privately and said they had never seen the gospel so clearly presented." Costas Makrise, National Christian leader, Greece.

The Christian in his or her culture is on an individual journey that is led by the Spirit of God, affirmed in a community of practice of faith, and wherever and whenever that individual is led to involve him or herself in culture. As such there is also no such thing as Christianity being a subculture. Christianity is an integral part of the culture itself. But, how can we creatively express what we believe in a manner of engagement that is appreciative and unique, affirmative of our solidarity with surrounding culture, and yet distinctive in our unforgettable experience?

The history of Christianity has perpetuated two attitudes towards engagement of culture. One proposes a synthetic attitude as a yes to engaging culture and affirming our place in that culture. The other proposes an antithetic attitude as a no to condemn the influences of philosophy, the arts, and the whole of other cultures. However, do those who say yes to culture, risk becoming biased in their understanding of the scriptures by philosophical insights of others, or is the risk minimal in light of a deeper understanding and appreciation of what we believe? Those who say no and who oppose classical culture, risk becoming cynical.

“As the attitude of early Christian Church fathers has produced a strongly influenced Christian thought through the ages, it is not surprising to see the antithetic and anti-cultural tendencies persisting throughout the history of the church. They are still not dead. We must realize that this anti-cultural attitude is not biblical.”

“Yet,” continues Rookmaaker, “we cannot live just as those who surround us. Certainly, so far as we achieve insight into the thoughts and ways of our times, we must beware of accepting them when they are incompatible with scripture. To be a child of God certainly implies that we can scarcely ever be at ease with the world around us.”

The real antithesis is not between culture and Christianity, but between
two kingdoms, the kingdom of God and the kingdom of this world, or from a political perspective, a tension as a result of conflict between church and state. “Diverse as they may seem, these tensions arise from one basic cause; confusion and conflict over the respective spheres of the religious and the political. What Augustine called the *City of God* and the city of man, are locked in a worldwide, frequently bitter struggle for influence and power.” 28

But if what Burkhardt said earlier in my paper holds to be true, then being locked in this worldwide bitter struggle, constitutes fighting the wrong battle. It is a misguided engagement of culture. “Culture,” he said, “is distinguished from the other two powers of religion and state, by its non-authoritarian character.” 29 If we are to engage culture we must do so by “working towards the realization of its concrete possibilities in the customs we follow, our thought-forms, the lifestyle we adopt, our use of natural resources, and our discovery and treatment of beauty,” 30 without authoritarianism. Working towards such a realization of culture’s possibilities does not necessitate taking actions against culture with a self-proclaimed, religiously sanctioned authority to overthrow destruction, corruption, and the lust for power and self-satisfaction, personified in the image of Babel. Nor is it a cultural engagement that gloats over the world’s lostness, proposing we withdraw our concern for those who still suffer in the kingdoms of this world. Over decades of observation, I have come to see this as the predicament of the contemporary church, when it sees itself as agents of God's justice, and agents of God’s retribution, or even agents of God's redemption.

Whereas some would encourage cultural engagement in a less political manner, others position themselves as co-redeemers (of culture) with Christ, as a result of a mistaken understanding of the essence of the kingdom of God. To many “the intrinsic values of the kingdom of God are the value of people, social responsibility, faithful stewardship, authentic spirituality, incarnational discipleship, and biblical theology and literacy, and most Christians have a very limited understanding of what Jesus meant when he talked about the kingdom of God.” 31 However, such a limited understanding of the kingdom of God is rooted in the church’s misunderstanding of its identity. “If the church is to recover from its present identity crisis, it must be re-converted to this biblical understanding of its mission within the kingdom of God.” 32 But, it is precisely this identity crisis that has birthed the notion of co-redeemership with God, as if “from the beginning of creation, it was God’s eschatological plan to redeem the world and he has invited the church, his people, to participate in this mission of redemption.” 33 However, that mission was completed in Christ, and the church is not in the business of redeeming people, nations, societies, or cultures. Co-redeemership is a mistaken identity.

God has not given us a cultural mandate to change culture into a Christian culture through engagement, but a kingdom mandate to live to be led by the Spirit of God as His people. And the two are distinctly different. One is leadership, the other is servanthood. Yet, the paradox is a peculiar kingdom characteristic. To be a leader one must be a servant. To engage culture is to serve culture. If however, one insists on using the words *cultural mandate*, then its meaning can only be applied to the fact that we are social beings, and our mandate is to be social beings in culture. That is, to be cultural being as salt and light, 34 one to preserve, the other to inform. But the scriptures present no such concept of a Christian culture. Hence, the position that “humanistic elements have distorted culture with marks of a clear alternative to what we would otherwise call a Christian or biblical culture,” 35 is unfounded. The question is not whether humanistic elements have distorted our intellectual ideas and our cultural and political lives. They have, as elements that have infiltrated philosophy, science, religion and the arts.
In my formative years as a young artist, I was told by the church that my art must have redeeming value. Redeeming value needed to be expressed in religious symbolism, either blatantly obvious or discreetly visible, but present nevertheless. When I inquired as to a possible example of such redeeming art, the person recommended that every landscape or seascape must have a visible source of light, like the sun shining up in the clouds. I asked how that would apply to drawing the nude form. A halo over their heads? Needless to say my creative endeavors would have been severely censored had I stayed. I left, and to this day, God’s words to Peter echo through my consciousness. “What God has cleansed, no longer consider unholy.”

There is no room for a pretense that we can change history or culture, or even save ourselves; our involvement in culture must not be some co-redeemer idea of a God who needs the assistance of our great accomplishments. If we are indeed to engage an enemy, it is not culture, but the enemy within, our very own thoughts and attitudes towards culture.

To define cultural engagement in a less provocative, non-redemptive way as activities of people, offers a more informed way of clarifying the issue. Cultural engagement is therefore “the activities of people that both respond to and influence the shape and direction of the world in which we live. Cultural engagement is inescapable. Whatever the activity of life: work, behavior, activities, discussing politics, sports, entertainment, community, interaction, social networking, hanging out, and the list goes on. As we participate in these common human activities, we unavoidably affirm some cultural practices and repudiate others. However, cultural engagement must also mean more than just carrying out the many duties of life.”

There is an aspect of cultural engagement that is informative, that is, by positing a context of a Christianity that can refer to these activities as “the deliberate, thought-out, philosophically consistent activity of vocational and societal living, that is proactively designed to reflect a biblical perspective of the world.”

But do we leave society fragmented as it is, or do we engage in activities such as healing to put the pieces back together again? Both sides have ample claims from scripture to support either position, but are both wrong? Questions abound unanswered.

Does the bible speak with clarity on the matter of how to live in a 21st century society of technological prowess? Is it right for Christians today to spend significant time and sustained energy on deliberately seeking to shape how they and other people live and relate together, and use this environment in response to a perceived biblical mandate of conviction and conversion? Or is such an activity a dangerous diversion from the true biblical (ministry) position of doing what is necessary to sustain life, while focusing on the only truly worthwhile purpose of helping individuals to become (live as) Christians?

Is Christian cultural engagement biblical or not?

Some will argue that the answers lie in both positions of yes and no to cultural engagement, and take a pluralist position that both are right. Others will warn of the dangers of “acculturating” the gospel to make it fit into our contemporary confines.

Somehow it is not enough to simply spin the wheel of fortune, and let everyone decide for themselves. Nor is it a time to resort to the dispensational view that indeed there is a distinction between us and them, between culture and Christianity, church and state, God’s plan for one and for all. Christianity is more than a relationship with Jesus, as expressed in personal piety, church attendance, Bible study, and works of charity. “Genuine Christianity is a way of seeing and comprehending all reality. In every topic we investigate, from ethics to economics to ecology, the truth is found only in relationship to God and his revelation.”
Providentially, I found my *epiphania* in Jones’ primary condition of longing for resolution. “Resolution coalesces around *revelation* as self-authenticating experience. Such illumination is the ‘still point of the turning wheel’ (not of fortune but of faith), serving as the center of a new perspective. Through this new kind of seeing, things become new.”

And this new kind of seeing is the unfolding view of cultural engagement.

What do you get when you combine the excitement of a live Broadway-style stage show, the intensity of over a quarter million dollars in lighting and special effects, and the passion and zeal of 30 multitalented performers and technicians with a vision to reach a sight and sound generation for Jesus Christ? None other than the masterpiece – Toymaker & Son. The message of this masterpiece is unmistakable. The medium is fresh and high-tech. Cloaked in a fantasy world of toys and their toymaker, the redemption story from creation to resurrection is retold in a unique fusion of drama, dance and mime. The hour and a half production combines the skill and precision of a host of artists with some of today's most advanced technology designed to create an unforgettable experience for the entire family.

**The Unfolding View**

This new kind of seeing as an unfolding view of cultural engagement is positioned as a new nomenclature for resolving the enduring problem of a synthesis of Christ and culture, or the Christian in culture. Unfolding in this paper has been both an investigation into two opposing views of cultural engagement, and the call for a preferred view. That preferred view is based on my distinction between engagement as a cultural mandate for change, and engagement as a communications mandate or strategy for informing culture. It is essential that we break the chain of religious nomenclature and symbolism, especially in the use of the term *engaging* culture. It is the Spirit of God who does the engaging and the convicting, not the church, or people. It is my position that use of the words *informing culture*, best describe the concept of engaging culture. An informed culture is a culture that can think critically, including critical thought about the manner in which that culture has been engaged, whether truthfully or with false promises.

It is the task or mandate of ministry to inform culture through communication, community, and communion (not as the sacrament of communion, but as a sacred act of sharing life). Communion as a sacred act of sharing life is the influence on culture and society, the salt and light that comprise a positive construct, including the beauty of life and living creation, and to offer individuals and groups informed biblical concepts of discipleship in caring, comforting, counseling, correcting, critiquing, and creating. These acts seek the welfare of the city and country in which we live, and the people we encounter along the way at the crossroads of life and faith. But despite the challenges provided by a postmodern paradigm, popular belief even among Christians continues to assert that religion is an important but private affair, which has no place in the public arena of education, politics, or business. However, these challenges cannot be met with engagement, but with information out of respect for others, who have a free will in making choices for themselves, unencumbered by religious posturing so often prevalent in what is commonly called outreach.

It is at the crossroads (*cross*-roads) of life and faith where I have discovered unique intersections of my passion for the arts, the thirst for critical thought, and my understanding of the kingdom of God. These intersections are not a launch pad for crusades, but the opportunity to peer into the *Culture Dish* and look for an organic growth that is Spirit-fed and Spirit-led, as well
as an organic growth nourished by the stylistic manners of various artists who I have met at the
crossroads, whether in real time or in the archives of times past.

To unfold a view is to lay it open. Although one may not dare to speak of scripture as
insufficient, it is only by revelation that this insufficiency is overcome by unfolding the
application of scriptures to life itself. But, this view is not new. This view dates back to the
emergence of scripture and tradition in the church as four distinct views: the coincidence view,
the supplementary view, the ancillary view, and the unfolding view. Briefly, these four views
developed along a historical timeline.

The Coincidence View is a remarkable occurrence of events and ideas embodied in the
Apostolic message, and decided by the church to be based on universality, antiquity, and
consensus.

The Supplementary View is the ability to make additions to or provide for what is
lacking, as promoted by the Catholic Reformation. It held the view that scripture was materially
sufficient, and it contained all that was necessary. But it was formally deemed insufficient,
because it needed an interpreter to supplement scripture with the church’s views on liturgy and
tradition. The teaching of the church then became equated with that of scripture and
supplemented where necessary by tradition.

The Ancillary View served as an aid to teaching the traditions promoted by
Protestantism. The church viewed tradition as a tool to be used to help the church to understand.
Sola Scriptura did not involve the unqualified acceptance of any tradition or the teaching of any
church. Scripture remained, formally as well as materially, the ultimate criterion and norm.

The Unfolding View grew with the development of doctrine as it laid scripture open to
view in order to expand its meaning. The insufficiency of scripture necessitated the
supplementary view, as this awareness of the insufficiency of the early tradition gave birth to the
unfolding view, a view that supports the idea of tradition as continually unfolding. Whether from
fragments to fluency or from negative to a positive construct, the unfolding view of, for example,
Creative Worlds, is an environment where the need to build a positive construct for intellectual
and spiritual growth is paramount, should an individual endeavour to pursue a call to ministry,
regardless of theological paradigms, and the description of such ministry. As such, the continual
appreciative inquiry into the nature of this unfolding view of an informed culture, posits a
thematic approach.

A Thematic Approach

As an artist, the thematic approach requires my positioning through experiential
expressions of the artist in a technological world, namely the artist as creator and artician. This
positioning has become, “a new fusion of artist and engineer, artist and technician, be they
interfacers, cyberpunks, or webmasters, charged with epic task of representing our digital
machines (engaging the experience of informing culture), and making sense of information in its
raw form,” as articians. “The quest for new fusion of artist and engineer, artist and
technician, (the artist as minister in a technological age, or artician), will require striking a
balance among technical explanations, historical narratives, and cultural analogies,” in the
examination of the phenomena of cultural growth and cultural engagement, as the artician
efforts to inform culture in meaningful ways.

The thematic approach also includes thematic amplifications; when the artician in a
process of informing culture may for example, amplify the issue of beauty as relevant to cultural
phenomena by informing participants about value judgments in relation to beauty. In his writings
about the recognizability of beauty, Wooddell states that, “beauty can be recognized by our emotional response. Emotions therefore include value judgments, as part of a positive construct, in which beauty is experienced outside of the norm of canonical boundaries of art criticism. Such emotions or value judgments are often automatic, instinctive, and immediate. “But that is not to say people need to have training or instruction in such matters.” 54 People can be informed about beauty simply by the experience of such beauty in a creative surround.

As a consequence of thematic amplifications, the thematic approach posits a reflective synthesis, when culture is informed about phenomena both as empirically sensible and experientially relevant. “The sharp logical skills of conceptual analysis required in the criticism of ideas, the rich stores of assimilated learning, the vast powers of sympathetic, reconstructive imagination akin to those of the creative artist, the capacity to ‘enter into’ and ‘understand from inside,’ forms of life wholly different from his one’s own, are the almost magical power of intuitive divination.” 55

I spent a year under the tutelage of Canadian drawing master, Eric Freifeld, 56 learning how to draw on location, reflecting on the run-down, decrepit, and sagging old houses of downtown Toronto. Michelangelo struggled with his desires to “free his soul from the restraints and failings of the body,” 57 reflecting on the “greatest obstacle to his transcendent goal, the conflict between earthly love and the call to heavenly piety.” 58 He found expression in a synthesis of the Platonic idea of concetto, as an ideal and pre-existing form (especially in marble), and the ability to realize the ideal by a process of levare, a taking away of the excess to reveal the ideal form, held captive in a block of stone. The concetto metaphor is obvious. Whether reflecting on the beauty of decrepit buildings, or the struggles of the soul, the thematic approach enabled me to examine a reflective synthesis, by informing culture about the phenomena of creating art as sensible and relevant, and applicable to the practice of ministry.

Both concetto and levare reflect the process of spiritual growth within a cultural environment, where realizing the ideal (of beauty, of self) is a synthesis of being what is necessary, and of stripping away or to be emptied of what is not necessary. Eric Gill’s priesthood of craftsmanship is such a reflective synthesis of the holiness of beauty and the beauty of holiness. 59 Wassily Kandinsky’s theosophical exploration of establishing a direct relation between the human soul and the divine through contemplation and speculation, enabled him to reflect that “beauty is produced by an inner need, which springs from the soul,” 60 as a servant of a higher purpose called freedom. How provocative is the resulting reflective synthesis for an informed culture, that “spiritual freedom is as necessary in art as it is in life.” 61 What consolation for an informed culture where, like the artist, people can experience the phenomenon of freedom without the constraints of dogma, doctrine, and isms, because the choice is theirs, and being informed becomes a dialectical movement between insight and experienced meaning towards a concrete existence, the very reasons for which culture needs to be informed.

The composite thematic approach of experiential expressions, thematic amplifications, and reflective synthesis, also finds creative expression in a stylistic approach through a narrative manner, a literary manner, or a mixed-style manner, each meant to enhance the artician’s process of communicating and processing of positive information, towards a meaningful cultural engagement in knowledge sharing.

The narrative finds a holistic approach to sharing by preserving the resonance, tone, and mood of descriptive modes of storytelling, allowing for subtleties and nuances of expression. The literary style employs methods of extracting themes within themes, in order to emerge from the informational findings in a dialectical movement of fluency of expression, or cognitive
fluency. A mixed style of narrative and literary manners amplifies and explores the meaning of a narrative through an intensified effort of attention to cultural variety and diversity of experience, such as the Silverpoint Metaphor.

The fine art of silverpoint drawing bore a striking resemblance to my process of graduate research in its inherent characteristics of discipline as an orderly procedure of drawing and research, the concept of looking back to look ahead by finding inspiration in artistic disciplines and traditions of the past, as well as inquiry and discovery among my scholarly predecessors. The metaphor extended to include innovation as a means of experimenting with new techniques in silverpoint drawing, or creating new knowledge from processes of knowledge acquisition and knowledge management. The metaphor concludes with a sense of maturing, as I continue to explore the atmospheric and chemical properties of oxidation in a silverpoint drawing, over time, in the same manner as I anticipate the maturing process of my academic pursuits.

Another example of creative expression in a stylistic approach is fellow Canadian drawing master, John Gould, who kept a journal for years “simply as a way to recall a tone of voice.” 62 Much like Rahab’s scarlet thread (Joshua 2:18), Gould said, “there is a line running through my life and I’ve traced it with varying degrees of success and misadventure since 1948.” 63 That line turned out to be the experiences of an informed culture, including Canada, Spain and Mexico, to fuel his concetto, his ideal for a perfect drawing. “It’s like an anthology of your knowledge, looking back to the past to sift out faces, places, and ideas.” 64

The literary style of a thematic approach has found a voice in the experience of writing an epic poem, when I began writing Cerulean Odyssey 65 in 2004. Exploring themes of emotions and will, times and epochs, in context of the physical surroundings of Vancouver Island as a metaphor to describe a personal quest for the city of God, I have discovered a cognitive fluency that has enabled me to express freely the thoughts and motives of my heart, even though the style of writing is conceptual and experimental. Nevertheless, it is my prayer that Cerulean’s voice will be heard and culture will be enriched by it.

The mixed style of narrative and literary manners are amplified and expressed in all its variety of cultural symbolism and diversity of religious experience, in the performance of Toymaker & Son.

In Toymaker's magical world, the apprentices anxiously await the unveiling of the masterpiece designed by the Toymaker and his Son. Abruptly, the dream is shattered when the jealous chief apprentice attempts to steal the design and build the masterpiece himself. Banished from the presence of the Toymaker, the evil apprentice plots revenge, even if it means destroying the beloved masterpiece. The Toymaker and his Son conceive a rescue plan in which the Toymaker's own son will become a toy. The rest, as they say, is history.

Recommendations

As a result of my inquiry into the unfolding view of cultural engagement, my recommendations are best positioned in an educational context. This context will enrich the resources from which those in ministry, or anyone else seeking a deeper understanding of her or his place in culture and society, at the intersection of art, critical thought and the kingdom of God, may be better informed and provide an active role to assist those who are in need of healing, reconciliation, encouragement, enlightenment, and discipleship. Therefore, my recommendations are fourfold.
1. That all initiatives to inform culture through the use of the creative arts, be encouraged, nourished and funded by communities of practice of faith, including the church.

2. That art education, art history, the studio arts, and the applied arts, become integral not only to all educational initiatives, but especially in post-secondary institutions, bible colleges, universities, and seminaries.

3. That such education not be positioned as sacred arts in conflict with secular arts, but as a creative arts program to inform culture, and not engage it in the never-ending and mistaken duality of *us* versus *them*, the sacred versus the secular, and church versus state.

4. That scholarly research continues to be undertaken in areas of the intersection of art, critical thought, and the kingdom of God, to result in ministry initiatives that advocate a deeper understanding of the Christian’s place in culture, and in a broader context, everyone’s place in culture, thus disarming the conflicts that have burdened people for millennia, especially in answer to the question, “How should we then live?”

**Conclusion**

To address the enduring problem of conflicting views between strategies for engaging culture, I have unfolded an investigation into two views, and their inherent tension, as well as the unfolding of my recommended or preferred view. The solution is not a Christian culture, nor is it a matter of simply following the cultures around us, with just a scattering of Christian dogma and doctrines thrown in, as if a Christian’s place in culture is parenthetical,

Clarifying the issues between one view that advocates engaging culture, and a second view that advocates a withdrawal from engaging culture, has brought to light the need for a preferred, or third view, namely that of informing culture as the real essence of engagement.

The issue of such a preferred strategy of informing culture, comprises the unfolding view of cultural engagement as a means to introduce others to the lives we live, whether by allegory, metaphor, narrative, didactic, dialectical engagement, or in a broad context the expressive arts. Our communication mandate is not one of persuasion or conviction based on the promise of an unforgettable experience, but on the testimony that we ourselves have an epic account of *our* unforgettable experience.

By defining culture as the sum of all that has spontaneously arisen for the advancement of material life and as an expression of spiritual and moral life, including all social intercourse, technologies, arts, literature and sciences, culture becomes a unique characteristic of a particular society, with a generous overlap as cultural synthesis and societal integration are the inevitable fruit of history. To embrace this synthesis and integration must not be viewed as a threat to culture, but accepted as a fulfillment of all creative possibilities among people as diverse in their expression and celebration, as they are unique in their individual forms of cultural heritage and cultural capital.

It is within a qualitative matrix, where culture is defined by individual expression and by synthesis and integration, to form a platform from which to examine a perspective of the Christian in culture. It is in understanding our role or position as Christians in culture that defines the methodology of our engagement, a methodology that has historically been one of conflict between opposing views. In defining culture I inevitably encountered the notion of Christian culture. My inquiry lead me to conclude that there is no Christian culture, and that it is an ontological and epistemological problem of assumptions about what it is to be Christian. The basis on which such assumptions are founded, especially in the conventional use of Christian as an adjective, is invalid.
To conclude, all culture is therefore the result of human activity, when people are driven by motives deep in their hearts, and in their efforts, shape life on the basis of the best way to understand life. Therefore involvement in culture is unavoidable regardless of one’s theological or doctrinal position. For the Christian, the means of critical thought are to be applied not in confronting culture but in engaging culture. It is my position, therefore, that informing culture best describes the concept of engaging culture, as an opportunity to peer into the Culture Dish and look for an organic growth that is spirit-fed and spirit-led. This organic growth became an unfolding strategy of four views: the coincidence view, the supplementary view, the ancillary view, and the unfolding view, presented as a thematic approach in context of an experiential method of qualitative research in the humanities.

The Unfolding View grew with the development of doctrine as it laid scripture open to view to expand its meaning. The unfolding view encompasses the construct of Creative Worlds as an environment where the need to build a positive construct for intellectual and spiritual growth is paramount. The Unfolding View also posits a thematic approach.

The thematic approach comprises experiential expressions, thematic amplifications, and a reflective synthesis, by examining the artist’s role in a technological world, and the position of the artician in ministry, as enabled to produce a creative surround. This composite thematic approach has found creative expression in a stylistic manner in this paper, with examples of a narrative, literary, or mixed-style manner, through the contributions of Isaiah Berlin, Eric Freifeld, Michelangelo, Eric Gill, Wassily Kandinsky, John Gould, the writing of my epic poem Cerulean Odyssey, and the silverpoint metaphor.

Throughout the thematic approach, this paper has employed a style of writing that is interspersed with narrative bits and bytes to illustrate the possibilities that exist when culture is engaged with an informative strategy employing the arts as a creative way to tell a story. In this paper, the bits and bytes are a witness to the success of the stage production of Toymaker & Son, as an unfolding view of cultural engagement.
Bibliography


Endnotes

Note: All Scriptural references, unless otherwise stated, are from the NASB Bible, The Lockman Foundation, La Habra, CA: Moody Bible Institute. 1976.


9 Matthew 5:14-16.
11 Ibid. p.113,114.
14 Ibid. p.29. (bracket added).
16 Ibid. p. 358. Arthur Schlesinger during a speech to the (US) Democratic Advisory Council (DAC), 1956. A time when civil rights, inflation, the environment, health, education, and welfare did not “intrude on the discussions” of the DAC. It was a time of exhausted political tradition in domestic policy and a disastrous foreign policy, whether to be hard or soft on Communism – the Cold War.
19 Ibid.
20 Ibid.
22 Ibid. p.40.
23 Ibid. p.42.
24 Ibid. p.43.
27 Ibid. p.47.
32 Ibid.
33 Ibid. p.13
34 Matthew 5:13-16.
36 Acts 11:9
38 Ibid.
39 Ibid. (questions and bracket added).
40 Ibid. p.6.
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