**BRICOLEURS-IN-COMMUNITY: REFRAMING THEOLOGIES OF CULTURE**

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**Introduction: Theology, Culture and Politics**

Is the church or seminary a place that asks us to strip at the door—to give up our names, our identities, our language, our cultures?  
(Jane Sapp) 

You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbour as yourself.  

If the revelation of God in Christ has nothing to do with human culture and experience [then] . . . it has nothing to do with anything, whatever, since apart from culture we and our world do not exist.  
(Tom F. Driver) 

We who lie in a disintegrating empire today are summoned at prophetic moments to criticize the patterns of decline within our culture and within ourselves, to contemplate the holiness of God in the midst of these dark times, and to evoke the creative desire in one another for a meaningful alternative for the future.  
(Mary Jo Leddy) 

Across the theological spectrum there is regular disdain for culture and the danger is present in church and seminary. Such pejoration has not served us well in relating theology and culture. As mainstream denominations are decentred by many factors in a post-Christian era, however, there may be fresh opportunity to reframe the form and content of the relationship between gospel and cultures—from a de-historicized one into a dialogical, critical connection that kindles hope for non-coercive, creative community. I join those who find the connection between culture and theology to hinge on immersion in local projects geared to transforming our communities and world. Critical awareness of the role of cultural critique in faith expression and theological reflection is crucial to this task. Like bricolage, we need to build up a new relationship from
diverse and often suppressed or scorned materials within local cultures, scriptures, and traditions, as well as people’s lived experience. An appreciation of the twin contexts of postcolonialism and postmodernism read through a feminist lens is also mandatory if we are to become theological **bricoleurs**-in-community to reconfigure a vital and radical relationship of theology and culture.

For white middle-class Christians, postmodernity means the passing of Western bourgeois culture, with its ideals of individuality, patriarchy, private rights, technical rationality, historical progress, capitalist economy, and the absoluteness of Christianity. So for many, the current sea changes in North America signal only chaos and moral disorder.

The crisis in contemporary religious life is profound and pervasive; it is indicated especially in the loss of prophetic presence. Despair over the future of a particular conjunction of politics, culture, and economics that has controlled most of modern existence is widespread. Two conflicting reactions to this anxiety in church and society are notable: relativism and absolutism. What cultural resources of resistance—to the ready destruction of life—and hope—that things are meant to be different and can be changed—are available for the white middle-class?

Culture has always functioned in theology, although its consequences are not regularly identified. As Leonardo Boff states:

> Cultures, in that they produce feelings of life, in that they have an ethical dimension and, particularly, in that they give expression to religion, are the echo of the voice of God, who always addresses society and every subjective human being within it. Cultures are the conduit of God’s revelation to humanity, in their different times, places, and cultural expressions.

While many yearn for change from the reigning social conditions, the terms remain vague. I will use the metaphor of **bricolage** within a normative stance of justice to frame a gospel-culture discussion in terms of cultural resources available for theologies of life geared to those who, as Cornel West says, will struggle and stay “out there” with partisan passion, intellectual rigour, existential dignity, moral vision, political courage, and soulful style.

**Bricolage** is the art of using what is at hand, odd materials for purposes other than intended, to create something useful and distinct to meet a yearning or need. This is an accessible practice often found where people aim to survive against the odds. Like some popular art, theological **bricolage** dares to revise, recast, and redefine the notions of theology and culture; it is open to change in an era of ecological, political, and cultural crisis; it aims to promote a prophetic and prospective praxis.
Theological *bricolage* is sturdy enough to uphold the bearers of disorder who, like Jesus, disturb false peace. Jesus insisted on creating open spaces for giving to those society makes the least, to the lost and the last more place and purpose than they had ever dared to give themselves. The gospel shows that what is deadly God hates. The gospel is no easy magic. Jesus had to contend with the familiars of his own religion’s tradition, like breaking the sabbath, because he lived according to an unfamiliar eschatological generosity: that the Sabbath was made for human beings and not human beings for the Sabbath. I advocate a theological practice of *bricolage*, a flexible and improvisational approach which, as Karl Barth said of divine grace, is custom made.

To map out an agenda, I adhere to a feminist faith-and-perspective which seeks, as Beverly Harrison says:

... a complex, interstructural account of human suffering and a “praxis” [a reflective theory and strategy of action] that understands human-divine, human-human, and human-cosmic relationships holistically and critically. Such a theological ethic assumes that human life is embedded in cultural, social, political-economic, and cosmic relationships. All basic theological and moral questions are about power-in-relationship. [Feminists] question what existing power-in-relationship is, how existing power distorts and alienates relationship and community, and how persons can act together to transform social life into genuine (non-alienated) community.\(^9\)

White middle-class Canada might be characterized as a culture of denial—of our own pain and alienation, of our historical roots, of our displacements, of our privilege and power.\(^1\) To counteract the delusion, numbness, and social amnesia of denial, faith must acquire the quality of struggle Juan Luis Segundo calls “deutero-learning, [or] learning how to learn, how to respect our feelings and to recognize alienation and injustice.”\(^12\) “Critical consciousness” or awareness of subjugation and domination begins with our own experience-in-relation. For many middle class people this is tremendously difficult given the mystification of pervasive class dynamics, white racism and ethnocentricity, Christian religious imperialism, Eurocentric cultural hegemony, and compulsory heterosexism.

Some of us in the middle strata have an entry point into the sort of critical consciousness required for active resistance to oppression of people and nature—white feminist women and racial and ethnically marginalized women and men. But white mainstream men, and the women who identify with them, do not have such an entry point. In the absence of critical social theories of class and culture, those growing more powerless are susceptible to manipulation.
and to projection of their fears onto those still more powerless. In the face of such enervation, I cite the importance of alternative cultural/theological work that lives from compassionate concern for others and the common good. Cultural critic bell hooks underscores moral agency by stating that feminists and others committed to this strange mandate of disrupting the status quo choose to create spaces of radical openness and possibility.\[13\]

Theoretically, *bricolage* invites a mixed-theory approach, seeking out unlikely intersections, connecting various theories and practices committed to and yearning for freedom.\[14\] In addition to materialist feminisms, including religious, I will draw on postcolonial and other critical cultural theories to suggest how we might become theological *bricoleurs-in-community* to reconfigure a vital and radical relationship of theology in a culture of denial.

As I focus on the current World Council of Churches’ gospel-culture arena, theatre of parables, and ritual, I will work with a notion of meeting God on “thresholds of difference” or the divine as Other and yet intimate.\[15\] Against totalizing liberal assumptions of uniformity and harmony and in keeping with a motif of fragments and life, change and struggle, *bricolage* becomes an analogy of God’s relation to the world and hence a key to salvation.

To situate historically the current gospel-culture debate, I will turn first to the 1991 World Council of Churches seventh assembly held in Canberra where intense conflict erupted.\[16\]

**Gospel and Cultures: Ecumenical Struggle**

Most will know of the evocative presentation given by Korean theologian Chung Hyun Kyung.\[17\] In her address on the assembly’s theme, “Come Holy Spirit, Renew The Whole Creation,” she incorporated Australian aboriginal dancers, aspects of her Korean cultural heritage, and the living faith of people throughout the world to express the theological conviction that the Holy Spirit is indeed the God of Life. While the Gulf War raged on, the gospel-culture debate became the hottest controversy at the Canberra assembly. Some experienced hope and the witness of biblical ancestors; some found the cultural mode shocking and alienating. Hence, the conflicting responses of affirmation and charges of syncretism.

The current mandate of the World Council of Churches on the relation between gospel and culture stems from the deep contestation over two decades which surfaced at Canberra’s seventh assembly in 1991.\[18\] When Christian faith is expressed in conventional or familiar forms it is called *incarnating* the faith. When the cultural modes are unfamiliar, we often speak of this embodiment of the faith as *syncretism*. Incarnation or syncretism, we are reliving earlier stages of our Christian history. One of the earliest heresies was the one proposed by Marcion (c. 180). He asked in effect, “how can one be Christian and yet Jewish?” The church rejected the suggestion implied and answered with another question, “how can we be Christian without being
Jewish?” Thus the church chose, for example, to retain the Hebrew Bible. Similarly today others ask how to be Christian and yet feminist, lesbian or gay, socialist or aboriginal.

While respecting the right of all Christians to seek and understand and embody the gospel in their own contexts, some raise the issue of “the limits of diversity.” Some aim to reinscribe the authority of the ecclesial formation based on apostolic succession and orthodoxy. Others challenge the very idea of “limits,” believing that while the Christian faith had only one centre, Jesus Christ, there can be no boundaries to interpretations of what God has done in Christ. While both poles are dedicated to a contextualizing of the gospel, I do not find adequate either way of relating gospel to culture and vice versa in the age of globalization.

The question is not whether diversity occurs because it has occurred—back through Christian tradition and into scriptural roots. Theologically, the Triune God can be interpreted as “the uncoerced communion of being” where differentiation allows the particularity of each to be real. For ecclesiology, as Elizabeth Templeton puts it, “the key question is whether the churches can only view that diversity with dismay, and retreat from it behind battlements of impregnable authority. Or whether they can find, in the very wrestling for truth and meaning, an inviting God who calls us to explore further with zest.”

To be open to that God is not culture-relativism. It is eschatological invitation. Ecumenists are fond of saying that God’s love in Jesus Christ frees and unites, strengthens identity, and builds community. But they also know in Christian mission history the opposite has regularly happened. Certain understandings of the gospel may have contributed to this—be it as immutable (where the host culture is used as empty vessel), as uncontaminated (which mystifies the contradictions of race, gender, class, and religion/culture in scripture and tradition), or as unique and final (which assumes God is absent from peoples prior to Christianity, e.g., Asia and aboriginal cultures which cuts them off from wisdom of their cultures).

Elsa Tamez in the context of Latin America helpfully addresses Christians who live out their faith under rigidly set boundaries and who undervalue or deny or suppress other living faith expressions. Using the Pauline notion of justification by “faith working through love” (Gal. 5:6), Tamez offers a theological criterion—the God of life—where one may either be righteous, that is, just, before the law by faith in the God of life, or by faith in the God who raises the dead and brings life out of nothingness (Rom. 4:17). She pursues this logic further to show how God’s purposes of liberation/salvation include all people and creation. She writes, “[a]ccess, to God, or its flip side, God’s solidarity with the human person, is made possible by the primacy of faith over the Jewish law or Christian dogma.

In response to this theology of God’s grace in history extending far beyond Christian circles and indeed to all creation, some of the more critical questions
currently raised in the ecumenical movement are what does it mean to witness authentically in our own context, what is the role of the gospel in strengthening the identity and selfhood of cultures, particularly those crushed by injustice by dominant cultures, including ecclesial, what is the challenge of the gospel to the mega-culture of the market and capital, and how do certain cultural expressions counter the spirit of Christ?

Amidst “the lies, secrets and silences,” we need “a hermeneutic of suspicion” to give concerted attention to concrete neighbours, cultural work, and margined voices which disorder and resist unquestioned norms, habits, and symbols. "Without a radical politics of renewal, without genuine options for struggle against dehumanization, people cannot learn to value their own lives or respect themselves for their efforts at survival." Support for and creation of alternative cultures is at the heart of this call for a radical theology of cultures.

Culture, Liberation, and Theology

Roy Sano’s argument for the importance of cultural resources in liberation theology is instructive on this point. He articulates how a people’s consciousness is created by stories, myths, plays, histories, and biographies. Sano insists on the sociality and particularity of experience, and he asserts that culture can function both as critique of and the source of new paradigms. He analyses the interaction between what he calls “mythwriters” and their audiences. He finds that some only reflect people’s experiences, or alternatively, some may shape the consciousness of the people. The first task in an analysis is descriptive: poets, dramatists, novelists, historians, musicians, and painters make visible the stories by which a culture lives. He distinguishes this moment from what I take to be the more critical moment of myth-making: the prescriptive task of creating new stories involving visions that function to move a society towards a different future.

In Sano’s schema, both kinds of culture, descriptive and prescriptive, are necessary for social consciousness, dignity, and respect. Sano demonstrates how the reciprocal relationship between the telling of a people’s story and participation in the struggle of that people for liberation makes personal identity possible. From this perspective, the history of a people is mirrored in the life-story of each community member, and persons know themselves through a common culture and society within uneven and shifting relations of power.

Culture, Theology and Postcolonial Theory

And what is critical consciousness at bottom if not an unstoppable predilection for alternatives? A postcolonial critique of theology and culture offers some clues to resistance and survival for those on the edge or outside the gate. In recent
global history, “subaltern voices”\textsuperscript{31} of margined groups have been breaking the silences of colonization, insisting on self-determination and the politics of difference. Canada is implicated as both a colonized and imperialist nation. Its status as a cultural satellite of the United States makes us dependent and subordinate to American political, economic, and cultural interests. And at the same time, for instance in relation to Latin America or aboriginal peoples, the Canadian state is imperialist, attempting to create false unity among classes and cultures at the expense of different and diverse cultures.\textsuperscript{32} Culturally, Canadian identities and values are often blind to the legacy of colonialism and imperialism that makes the cultural—and ecclesial—body of Canada unwell.

Postcolonial writing is marked by the necessity of a sustained effort to identify and criticize globalizing relations of power and knowledge.\textsuperscript{33} These dynamics function to make people who are deemed outside circles of power and significance into the “Other.” The absence of respect for the “Other” is of prime theological significance: to disvalue people of non-dominant class, colour, religion, region, gender, culture, and sexual orientation is to break faith in God, the power (shared and communal) to live one’s life fully with joy and possibility.\textsuperscript{34} This fact of cultural life in Canada must be foregrounded as a part of a self-critical venture of reshaping both theology, as one sort of cultural practice, and the cultural work a radical position aims to foster. Because I advocate attention to reclaiming and revitalizing cultures—aboriginal workers’, prairie co-operators’, women’s—that have been submerged by market values as one avenue to live with respect in creation, I appreciate efforts to valorize the hybrid rather than the unified subject identities which belie multiple and often conflictual subject and theological positions.

Postcolonial writings also alert us to a desire for ontological justice, for recognition as human beings, and an affirmation of the complexities and positive contributions of an indigenous culture.\textsuperscript{35} Migrants’ double vision and dissonant even dissident histories and voices offer what Homi Bhabha calls “interstitial perspectives” which open up the possibility of a cultural hybridity that entertains difference without an assumed or imposed hierarchy.\textsuperscript{36}

One theological example of hybridity is “God is Rice.”\textsuperscript{37} As Maseo Takenaka explains, this concept does not mean to worship rice but to symbolize God’s gift of life. By sharing an image of life, he wants to resist deifying nature while moving into a parabolic form of doing theology consonant with the dissonance of Jesus’ announcement of the Kingdom of God. Sallie McFague’s metaphor “The World as God’s Body” functions in a way to decentre, that is, make unfamiliar, dominant notions of the divine as separate, totally other, and abstract. In both examples, culture is related to theology in a reciprocal and respectful manner suggested by hybridity: “Hybridity is the perplexity of the living as it interrupts the representation of the fullness of life.”\textsuperscript{38} Such metaphors intervene below our rational surface to work out different logics of desire, multiplicity and “structures of feeling.”\textsuperscript{39}
Theology, Culture and Image

Somewhere between the facts of our Canadian society, and our theological reflection on them, we need the mediating metaphors and images of the poets and artists in our culture[s] to give us a decisive insight into our reality.⁴⁰

Searching critically for resources appropriate to our context that deem culture an essential theological source, I discovered that the Canadian preacher, Salem Bland, a radical social gospel Christian, understood culture as an enlargement of experience. He said, “[culture] is power gained to enter into other lives and modes of thought foreign to our own . . . . God’s truth comes to us in fragments and people need to share these fragments with each other.”⁴¹

In 1913, Bland believed that the church was still the hope for the world—but that novelists, not preachers, were stating the new standards of an age. While I think the church has a long and arduous road ahead for it to offer the kind of hope and healing needed in this bleak age, the time is ripe to take seriously Bland’s position.

Culture is an inherent dimension of all social life, the realm of symbolic-expressive activity that is interwoven into the fabric of our everyday lives. In the process of knowing anything, including God, we use artistic elements to appropriate and open up the meaning of that which we seek to understand. Culture, then, is viewed as a way of life and how this way of life is experienced, understood, and interpreted. In this reading, both theology and culture are ambiguous and dynamic—capable of oppressing and of liberating.⁴²

Because we rely upon the cultural resources available in our lives to express our lived experience theologically, culture—critically appropriated—is a crucial avenue of investigation in liberative theological construction. Whereas dominant theologies appeal to our rational faculties and dogmatic formulations, feminist and other liberationist theologies and spiritualities place importance, not only on discursive communication, but also on the function of images, myths, and rituals in the continuing process of conversion.⁴³

Indeed, the primary feminist protest against the underlying dualism of the mind/body split in the western theological tradition is to be found in its challenge to the notion that the basic category of theological envisagement is the concept. As Beverly Harrison puts it, “Concepts function to explain reality ... the primal and irreplaceable mode of theological discourse is the image and relatedly, the metaphor, ... those fundamental images that put us in touch with life through vision.”⁴⁴

Metaphorical images do not set out abstract ideals and doctrines but can generate a world view and infuse our lives with meaning and common nourishment for empowered, fruitful lives. From the standpoint of liberation theologies, moral vision plays a vital role: it aids resistance to the alienation and dehumanization of the current situation.
The fullest approach to moral life, according to philosopher Dorothy Emmet, is a kind of purposive activity where the manner of achieving that goal is an integral part of the end.\textsuperscript{45} Here, vision functions to inspire our vocation of linking the realistic means of our empowerment to the gospel vision of the community of co-equal disciples and more broadly of all-inclusive community. Here we turn, not only to appropriate critically scripture and tradition, but especially artists and creative envisagement for theological insight into our contexts because the visionaries today are mostly in the arts and other marginalised communities.

**Theatre of Parable**

Writing from the margin of the prairie hinterland, Bob Haverluck follows the biblical trajectory of “attending to those who have been dismissed or missed, locating in their experience and their forms good things which, until then, had been unthinkable.”\textsuperscript{46} In the face of metropolis’ imperialism internal to Canada, he takes heart in what he calls Jesus’ Theatre of Parable.\textsuperscript{47} In this, he finds a suggestive precursor of the cultural works and play of many emerging groups—the Chilean arpilleristas, popular theatre groups, aboriginal productions of art, music and theatre, women’s culture. In discussing Jesus’ parables, Haverluck takes us to the heart of the gospel-culture struggle:

The parable, like the story, is respectful of popular speech. Jesus’ use of ordinary speech in his parables showed love in the form, as it was respectful of ordinary ways of speaking and thinking. Ordinary people were enabled to participate in the making and meaning and directions of their own lives. There was also love in the content, the imagery of ordinary life. Those who were debased—women, the poor and jobless—were lifted up as central figures of the parables, and this too served to empower the common people. Others, of course, were amused or annoyed by such vulgarity and “Godlessness.”\textsuperscript{48}

Jesus disrupted his own first century Palestinian Jewish culture; he overturned learned expectations and values. Similarly, in pursuit of theological depth familiarity is a hindrance. As C.S. Song writes, “Familiarity confines us to the ideas, views, and practices to which we are accustomed. It makes us safe and comfortable in religious convention and mental habituation. It limits the sphere of our theological activity. It discourages faith and closes the door of new insights.”\textsuperscript{49} One cultural arena that has potential to counteract such familiarity even with a sustaining element repetition is ritual.
Ritualization

Ritual is a key site of culture and theology in dialogue. Rituals are forms for ceremonies which often involve patterned behaviours. Pamela Carter Joern of the Re-Imagining Co-ordinating Committee recently mused about how ritual in community moves belief into practice: “ritual defines what is wrong; binds us to community through shared images and common meanings; invites our whole selves into participation with an idea; retains the capacity for surprise, links us with history; redeems the ordinary from insignificance; and makes the deeply personal transparent, connecting us to the universal.”

Catherine Bell uses the term ritualization to focus attention on how and why certain human activities attain a particular status. By so doing, she concludes that ritualization is essentially a strategic way of acting—whether for social change or for maintaining existing traditions. Theologians committed to emancipatory praxis actively incorporate cultural resources and theological critique into the regular ritualization and celebration of struggles to transform the world. It is explicitly in the process of creating ritual that we critically transform the world. It is explicitly in the process of creating ritual that we critically appropriate scripture and traditions and celebrate sources of strength and hope. Ritualization for transformation involves deep sharing and is a crucial source of emotional and spiritual power whereby we focus our energies, renew ourselves, forge bonds of community, and find inspiration toward further action. As Tom Driver points out, while the ritual world is a personal one, the social gifts of ritual include order, community, and transformation. In short, ritualization functions as symbolic action which enables us to envision how the world could be different, and to imagine the means of social and personal transformation. Ultimately, ritual has the capacity to name the free grace of God’s loving us in our own and the world’s brokenness, sin and suffering through forgiveness, and restored connectedness to God’s love for us and the world.

Through rituals and vision, we are especially reminded of, and invited into, our immediate experience of the divine and our connection with life. As Elizabeth Bettenhausen writes, “Spirituality includes ritual, the communal developing of habits which carry us through the times when neither discipline nor commitment seems strong enough. Ritual is to spirit what reflex is to breathing. If we had to learn how to breathe each time we needed air, life would be short.” Thus, in the process of critical reappropriation of our traditions and cultures, we need to find rituals which help us breathe as well as construct new images and metaphors that give life to our collaboration, diversity, shared struggle, and vision of God.

In light of the foregoing discussion, culture as a liberative theological source must take its bearings from anthropological assumptions which interpret humanity as responsible for the tending and caring of all life as well as doers of evil. It is increasingly clear that we do have the capacity to “create” in a way
that destroys our wider environment. People are responsible for evil, that is, for the destructiveness of our actions; so too we are responsible for shaping our environment, including cultural space, for good or ill. Given this theological anthropology, we need what Gregory Baum calls a theological counter-culture nourished by Canadian painters, poets, and novelists, the artists whose love of truth and courage to be disloyal made them prophets in society.56

If we are to discover the spirit of life afresh, disjunction, unconventionality, and outrageousness may be the marks of not only a reconfigured but a repositioned Christian theology. Jesus shows us a different location of theology—in the places where people live their lives, in the company of those outside the boundaries defined by religious authorities, the undesirables, with whom Jesus developed his theology of God’s kingdom. As Dorothee Soelle asserts, “The criterion for what the church is remains the kingdom of God; the church arises out of its proclamation, and organizes itself in its direction. Participation in the historical liberation of the people of God by God is and remains the criterion by which we can distinguish the church from a mere apparatus of power.”57

Christologies and Cultures

Affirmation of the God of Jesus as the God of Life leads to a brief consideration of some underlying christological problems in the light of religious and cultural pluralism and God’s compassion for all people. Ironically, such inclusiveness does not displace Jesus Christ as key for all Christians. Rather that affirmation, which is rooted in the belief that we have been justified by faith in Jesus Christ and by faith in the One who raises the dead, opens us to the world God so loves. In Jesus Christ, Christians meet the human presence, wisdom, and solidarity of the triune God, not as superior or unique or final revelation but as witness to the God of Life who moves as the energy and Spirit of Life.

In theological terms, sin—separation from God, the created order, neighbour, and self—for example, on the level of culture is the domination of one culture by another or cultural imperialism. We can name two implications for a critical theology of culture. First, that since cultural mediation is a common human task, not a uniquely Christian one, we must reformulate our understanding of the relationship of Christ and culture: Christians must face the reality that many people have also experienced Christ as oppressor, not necessarily as friend or liberator.58 Second, while the transnational culture sponsored by ruling elites is dominated by a manipulative technology which risks annihilating both human and ecological existence, culture does not exist only in this dominant mode. Alternative cultural sources critical of dominant values and lifestyles are always present and can be identified and nourished.
In Christology the influence of alternative cultural critique is evident in reconstructions of the symbol from an Imperial Christ to, for example, images of Jesus as the Black Christ, as the Poor Christ, as Sophia Christ, aboriginal images of Jesus Christ as Healer and Teacher, and as Christa Community. Such renewed expressions of Christian faith link our lives as human beings created in God’s own image, open to and reliant on grace as we continue to engage in emancipatory practice within our communities of accountability.

To encourage staying connected with the praxis and spirit of the original Jesus movement and open to theologies of life, I have been advocating for the intertextuality of discourses, where the polarization of church and world is at odds with the gospel in a suffering world the church exists to love. I locate this approach to cultural theological analysis in continuity with the primary strategy of radical Christianity: the generation of alternative cultures in resistance to the dehumanization of dominating power. The radical faith-and-justice tradition in Canada and elsewhere encourages people to claim responsibility for shaping culture in the interests of justice for all, beginning with the victims of society. A radical theology of culture in Canadian terms will exist because God yearns for the freedom and fulfilment of each person’s humanity, especially those who bear the social costs of the present, and we join in the struggle and that hope.

Conclusion: Searching Cultures for the God of Life

When people are alienated from their own cultures they are deprived of the fruits of that life-sustaining Spirit.

Can we consider the shift in how we do theology, in a world of no guarantees but a world full of possibility, as moving us from Talking Head to Bricoleurs-in-Community? In the voices of those long silenced, in their poems and prayers, music and art, we can conclude with Beverly Harrison that today “Christian hope at least means this: that we are given the power to sustain the struggle, to resist oppression, even when the empirical horizon for human hope is dim and remote, as it surely is now . . . . God’s grace to us, here and now, takes the form of an infinite, unquenchable longing for justice that will not be defeated even by death.”

A radical theology of culture will make available to us criteria that can enable us to identify and to assess in a specific context what can appropriately be regarded as of religious or theological significance and hence where our affinities can grow and alliances be built. What is at stake in such explorations is a faithful articulation of the gospel through a particular cultural development in which the creative and providential, redeeming and hallowing care of God who is brooding over all and in all has been at work. If God is known among us, specified in particular cultures, histories, and places, then God will be strange and surprising, that is to say, like the opacity of any other, not one
whom we will ever fully know. But this does not mean unrelated, just that there are no transparent, unmediated relations—and never in avoidance of the complex realities of social and cultural institutions which shape and mediate all power and knowledge, including of God as people of God.

The fundamental requirement undergirding theologies of life is respect. Janet Silman writes, “Respect involves realizing that we have no superior place from which to view the world; that we need to listen with an openness to being surprised and changed in this process.”64 This could mean out of respect for other people’s religious traditions, not interpreting their images from, in my case, a Christian perspective. The theological norm of respect also means we will seek to get rid of the pejoration of the “syncretic.”65 Urgent questions chart the way ahead. What is the moral content of one’s cultural identity? And what are the political and theological consequences of this moral content and cultural identity?66 Can we, as Chandra Talpade Mohanty articulates it, join in the creation of “imagined communities” where those with divergent histories are woven together by the political threads of opposition to forms of domination?67 To sustain this hope we need to create resistance strategies and survival rituals in communities of diversity.

We are aided by journeys into critical feminist, cultural, and postcolonial theories which can encourage a transformation of theology and faith, politics and culture. As bricoleurs-in-community using eccentric materials and stories, theology, if a dominating, discourse is rightfully challenged to dissolve into more humble and more complex systematic, ecclesial, and communal forms with altogether more modest proposals.

Notes

1 A version of this paper was presented to the 1995 Canadian Theological Society meetings; I am grateful to Beverly Harrison and Anne Gilson for their comments on an earlier draft.


10 Beverly W. Harrison, “The Fate of the Middle ‘Class’ in Late Capitalism,” in *God and Capitalism: A Prophetic Critique of Market Economy*, eds. J. Mark Thomas and Vernon Visick (Madison: AR Editions, 1991), p. 55. For the following discussion and framing of the issue at hand, I am indebted to her analysis of the nature of class privilege and “conscientization.”


Roy Sano makes this point in “Holy Moments’ at Canberra,” Christianity and Crisis, op.cit., 228.


Templeton, p. 111.


Tamez, op.cit., 35.

On the valuing of diverse theological expressions, see the evocative work of Ann Kirkus Wetherilt, That They May Be Many: Voices of Women, Echoes of God, (New York: Continuum, 1994).

Harrison, op.cit., 67-8.

I am partial to one of Tom Driver’s definitions of a theology of culture as a theology deriving not only its form but also its content from culture. That is, a theology regarding culture not only as a conditioning factor affecting the understanding and communication of religious truth but also regarding culture as a source of revelation.


Ibid., p. 39.


See Tom F. Driver, *The Magic of Ritual*, Part III, 131-91. He is clear to show that in its ability to challenge social order with communal love, order is surpassed by the latter gifts (p. 151).


I am grateful to Elizabeth Anderson for reminding me of the potential for slippage into a salvation by works.


Raymond Whitehead states that “Whenever we use Christ to support male, white, Euroamerican bourgeois thought forms, we are involved in oppression and are unfaithful to Christ’s spirit.” See “Christ and Cultural Imperialism,” *Justice as Mission*, eds. J. Brown and C. Lind (Burlington: Trinity Press, 1987), p. 33.

On theology as discursive practice, see Mary McClintock Fulkerson, *Changing the Subject: Women’s Discourses and Feminist Theology* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress Press, 1994).


Janet Silman, “From Object to Subject: Women’s Voices in Religion,” Paper presented to The University of Windsor, Women’s Studies in Religion, February 14, 1994, p. 8. See also her work in *Enough is enough: Aboriginal Women Speak Out*.

I am indebted to Susan Gingell for her insights into the dynamics of suppressing syncretism/diversity.
