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**THEOLOGY  
AND  
CULTURE  
IN  
CANONICAL-  
HISTORICAL  
DIALOGUE**

By

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I think it is a truism that both culture and theology are as old as humankind. If theology is defined as reasoned reflection on things divine, and if culture is the way we shape our environment<sup>1</sup>, then our first parents were indeed theologians of a sort and environmentalists of a kind. Theologically speaking humanity is primarily *Homo sapiens* (wise people), and culturally *Homo faber* (working people) — creatively shaping and re-shaping the world around<sup>2</sup>. Looking at wo/man holistically, we can begin to see the integral (missing) link between culture and theology: right thinking about God cultivates rich manufacturing. It therefore follows that the more “atheological” we become, the less culture will reflect our dignity. Whether we view the past from the perspective of sacred history (*Heilsgeschichte*) or not, the baneful influence of unorthodox theologising on culture is clear to see (Williams 2002, 2-25).

This is richly illustrated in Scripture and other literature (e.g. Rom 1:18ff; Boring 1995, 339-342), and firmly substantiated by experience (9/11? “Burning Bush”?). In the light of the above, this essay seeks to survey some of the cultures of antiquity, as well as our own, with a view to addressing, once again, the prevailing human condition. It examines these ancient (and not so ancient) civilisations to ascertain the dynamic inter-play between their cultural advancement and their theology (fig.1), and closes with a brief word concerning our cultural

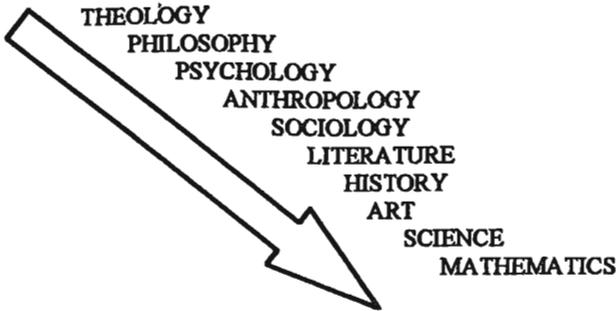
<sup>1</sup> Another of the 99 or so definitions is: “Culture refers to the net work or system of shared meaning in a society, a conceptual collection of ideals, beliefs and values...attitudes and assumptions about life that is woven together over time and is widely shared among a people. It is a kind of invisible blueprint—a map of reality that people use to interpret their experience and guide their behavior” (Turnau 2002, 272). See also Vanhoozer (1993).

<sup>2</sup> But not a few useful definitions of culture are “conceptual” (like the above), rendering the neat distinction between thinking man and tinkering man virtually useless. Both theology and culture are in a sense humanly generated (Tanner 63).

engagement.

**FIG 1**

**Arrangement of areas of knowledge in relation to their distortion because of sin<sup>3</sup>**



Decreasing distortion means less necessity for integration (Gangel, 1978:105)

Little over a decade ago New Testament scholar, N. T. Wright, published his first book of an ambitious five-volume project which will re-assess the full gamut of Christian origins. In the first volume, Wright carefully sets out his methodology, which sought to avoid radical post-modern approaches on the one hand, and naive modernistic historical reconstructions on the other. Wright opts for what he calls a "critical realism" which investigates the theological posture of a group by way of its dominant story, praxis, symbols and questions that form its world-view. World-views, he says,

are like the foundations of a house: vital, but invisible. They are that *through* which, a society or an individual normally looks; they form the grid according to which humans organise reality... (Wright 1992, 125)

Armed with this approach, Wright later turns his attention to Judaism and Christianity. Both groups, according him, share a common set of beliefs in terms of what he describes as creational, providential, and covenantal monotheism. Where Christianity differs from Judaism, Wright believes, is in

<sup>3</sup> This illustrates the relationship of the "queen of sciences" and other disciplines. I submit that sin and Satan have corrupted the "queen," the only "person" who can guarantee high quality cultural sustainability (cf. Prov. 9). Elsewhere Gangel (1980:156) dubs the influence of evil on culture as "The law of *theo*-dynamics" (emphasis added).

its radical assertion that Jesus is the climax of this monotheistic covenant. I will now proceed to employ Wright's methodology and appraisal of the Judeo-Christian nexus as the yard stick against which to measure the cultural progress of ancient peoples, as well as our own.

### **The Ancient Near East (ANE)**

For though they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their senseless minds were darkened (Rom. 1:21. NRSV).

We begin our panoramic sketch of ancient cultures by looking at the Sumerian civilisation (southern Iraq), that flourished between the 4<sup>th</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> millennia. The world-view of the Sumerians can be sketched by an examination of the rich archaeological and literary sources we have at our disposal. Unlike the Israelites, at no stage of their religious history could the Sumerians be classified as creational/covenantal monotheists.

On the contrary, a good percentage of the available records shows various kinds of polytheism. Because the Sumerians "were the first people to place inscriptions on the cornerstones or foundation stones of temples, palaces and other structures," (Harrison 1970, 8) it is relatively easy to trace some of their significant religious symbols and praxis. For example, inscriptions were found on sacrificial altars related to certain deities (Harrison 1970, 8) and each of these deities was more or less in charge of a city-state. In the city-states were to be found great temple edifices around which all of life was organised. According to Harrison (1970, 42), "great importance was attached to religious activities, and a considerable amount of time was devoted to the formation of theological concepts and cultic traditions". This is not surprising, since humankind is not only *Homo faber* but also *Homo religiosus* (worshipping people) (Tillich 1959, 3-9; Smith 1986). In respect of the Sumerians and the other cultures influenced by them, there are abundant artifacts illustrating this point. The literary evidence is even clearer (in its broad outline), and, from its sheer abundance, complex. Part of this clarity is in the stark contrast between, say, the Judeo-Christian account(s) of creation (cosmogony) recorded in Genesis and elsewhere in the Tanak-NT versus the account(s) of the *Enuma elish*. It is true that in both the book of Genesis and the *Enuma elish* we find matters like a watery chaos, but what stands out most of all is that in the former the supreme Deity is generating everything, while in the latter a successive "pantheon" of deities comes to birth.

According to E. A. Speiser, "The struggle between cosmic order and chaos was to the ancient Mesopotamians a fateful drama that was renewed at the turn of every year. The epic that deals with these events was, therefore, the most significant expression of the religious literature of Mesopotamia (Speiser 1954, 31; Thomas 1958, 3-16). This creation epic, *Enuma elish*, was solemnly recited at the beginning of every year. The following excerpt, a tribute to Marduk, quite likely formed a part of the recitation:

Thou art the most honored of the great gods,  
Thy decree is unrivalled...  
From this day unchangeable shall be thy pronouncement  
To raise or to bring low—these shall be (in) thy hand  
Thy utterance shall be true, thy command shall be unpeachable,  
No one among the gods shall transgress thy bounds!...  
O Marduk, thou art indeed our avenger.  
We have granted thee kingship over the universe entire.

The text later goes on to describe in graphic detail the battle between primordial Tiamat, from whom sprang all the other gods (except Apsu) and the younger and stronger Marduk:

They strove in single combat, locked in battle.  
The lord spread out his net to enfold her,  
The Evil Wind, which followed behind, he let loose in her face.  
When Tiamat opened her mouth to consume him,  
He drove in the Evil Wind that she close not her lips.  
As the fierce winds charged her belly,  
Her body was distended and her mouth was open wide open.  
He released the arrow, it tore her belly,  
It cut through her insides, splitting the heart.  
Having thus subdued her, he extinguished her life.  
He cast down her carcass to stand upon it.

The carcass of Tiamat became the basic raw material from which the world was manufactured:

The lord trod on the legs of Tiamat whom,  
With his unsparing mace he crushed her skull.  
When the arteries of her blood he had severed,  
The North Wind bore (it) to places undisclosed....  
Then the lord paused to view her dead body,  
That he might divide the monster and do artful works.  
He split her like a shellfish into two parts:

Half of her he set up and ceiled as sky....

Later we read about the fashioning of a very familiar creature.

When Marduk hears the words of the gods,  
 His heart prompts (him) to fashion artful works.  
 Opening his mouth, he addressed Ea  
 To impart the plan he had conceived in his heart:  
 "Blood I will mass and cause bones to be.  
 I will establish a savage...  
 Verily, savage man I will create.  
 He shall be charged with the service of the gods  
 That they might be at ease!...

There is some similarity here with the Genesis account with respect to (1) inter/intra-divine dialogue (2) the purpose of man's creation for service, (3) the creator's "rest," and (4) the corresponding chiasmic structures:

		A	I will
	B	establish	
C	<u>a savage</u>		
C'	<u>savage man</u>		
	B'	create	
		A'	I will
		(Enuma elish, 6.10)	

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A.	God <sup>4</sup>	
	B.	created
	C.	humankind
		D. in his image
	C'	humankind <sup>5</sup>
	B'	created
A'	He	
(Genesis 1:27a, b)		

But there is no *ex nihilo* phase of Marduk's creative engagement, and interestingly, Marduk's "man" is a savage from day one. Notice too that although there is no explicit doctrine of an *imago dei*, it is difficult to miss the

<sup>4</sup> Wenham (1987, 28) understands the plural *elohim* to somehow include angels, while Waltke (2001, 58) opts for the more traditional "majestic" or "honorific" (Waltke/O Connor 1990, 122) view.

<sup>5</sup> "Whereas v 26 used the anarthrous אָדָם [*adam*] here in v 27 the definite הָאָדָם [*haadam*] is used, and clearly mankind in general, 'male and female,' not an individual is meant" (Wenham 1987, 32).

savagery of Marduk in creating the sky from the monster's remains and his expressed desire: "I will establish a savage ... savage man I will create."

Drawing on a work of the late SDA scholar, Gerhard Hasel, Wenham (1987, 10) cites "five areas in which Gen 1 appears to be attacking rival cosmologies [Babylonian, Egyptian, Canaanite (BEC)]."

<u>Genesis 1 account</u>	<u>ANE accounts</u>
Sea creatures	Sea monsters as divine rivals
Separation of waters by divine fiat	Separation of waters by divine fight (BEC)
Sun and moon created	Sun and Moon worshipped
God provides food for Humankind	Mankind provides food for the gods (Babylonian)
Creation through mandatory fiat	Creation through magical formula (Egyptian)

Wenham further points out that the ANE creation stories are usually poetic but the Genesis account is by and large prosaic. What emerges from an examination of these early civilisations, whether we are looking at their cosmogonies or later historical records, is what may be called a pattern of polytheistic idolatry which forms the core of their world-views. There is nothing in them that closely approximates the creational/covenantal monotheism that Wright speaks about relative to Israel's system of belief—a system that can be traced right throughout the nation's history. This belief system is almost identical with and squarely based upon the Torah. Torah, then, becomes for us the fundamental frame of reference against which to analyse the various cultures of the ANE, including even that of Israel herself.

But why Torah? Why not the celebrated code of Hammurabi that preceded it? In fact there are those who argue that the Mosaic code borrowed heavily from this Mesopotamian code, and indeed a comparison between the two shows many striking parallels, perhaps most important of which is that both lay claim to divine revelation. The larger than life difference between the two for me, though, has to do with their stance toward what I have called above the pattern of polytheistic idolatry (PPI): the Mesopotamian code assumes the reality and even propriety of the PPI, while its Mosaic equivalent inveighs

against it. The latter also claims inspiration from the only Deity that knows the end from the beginning (Isa 46:9-10), while the former is received from the sun god, Shamash.

As was said above even Israel herself stands under the judgement of her own Torah, especially when it comes to PPI. Consider the following piece from the sixth century:

- 1 The word of the LORD came to me, saying,
- 2 "Go and proclaim in the hearing of Jerusalem, Thus says the LORD, I remember the devotion of your youth, your love as a bride, how you followed me in the wilderness, in a land not sown.
- 3 Israel was holy to the LORD, the first fruits of his harvest. All who ate of it became guilty; evil came upon them, says the LORD."
- 4 Hear the word of the LORD, O house of Jacob, and all the families of the house of Israel.
- 5 Thus says the LORD: "What wrong did your fathers find in me that they went far from me, and went after worthlessness, and became worthless?
- 6 They did not say, 'Where is the LORD who brought us up from the land of Egypt, who led us in the wilderness, in a land of deserts and pits, in a land of drought and deep darkness, in a land that none passes through, where no man dwells?'
- 7 And I brought you into a plentiful land to enjoy its fruits and its good things. But when you came in you defiled my land, and made my heritage an abomination.
- 8 The priests did not say, 'Where is the LORD?' Those who handle the law did not know me; the rulers transgressed against me; the prophets prophesied by Baal, and went after things that do not profit.
- 9 "Therefore I still contend with you, says the LORD, and with your children's children I will contend.
- 10 For cross to the coasts of Cyprus and see, or send to Kedar and examine with care; see if there has been such a thing.
- 11 Has a nation changed its gods, even though they are no gods? But my people have changed their glory for that which does not profit.
- 12 Be appalled, O heavens, at this, be shocked, be utterly desolate, says the LORD,
- 13 for my people have committed two evils: they have forsaken me, the fountain of living waters, and hewed out cistern for themselves, broken cisterns, that can hold no water. (Jer. 2 RSV).

Verse 8 is particularly sad. Both the priests and the prophets, those constituting the highest form of spiritual leadership in the land, had forsaken Torah. What naturally follows is the appalling condition described in verses 10-13. Notice how the PPI of the surrounding nations (10) is taken for granted in verse 11a (especially the contrast between the singular "nation" and

“gods”). This has been the story of the human race as far back as recorded history takes us — a dogged determination to stick to its gods. Ironically, this was the story of Israel in the Promised Land, although divine righteousness was always available to her (Oliver, 1997). Over a hundred years after the ten northern tribes had been taken captive by the Assyrians for their repeated breach of Torah, Judah and Benjamin suffered a similar fate at the hands of the Babylonians. Seventy years after, the Chronicler sums up the whole situation in these solemn words:

14 All the leading priests and the people also were exceedingly unfaithful, following all the abominations of the nations; and they polluted the house of the LORD that he had consecrated in Jerusalem.

15 The LORD, the God of their ancestors, sent persistently to them by his messengers, because he had compassion on his people and on his dwelling place; 16 but they kept mocking the messengers of God, despising his words, and scoffing at his prophets, until the wrath of the LORD against his people became so great that there was no remedy.

17 Therefore he brought up against them the king of the Chaldeans, who killed their youths with the sword in the house of their sanctuary, and had no compassion on young man or young woman, the aged or the feeble; he gave them all into his hand. (2 Chron. 36)

This, I submit, is an important key to understanding ancient cultures or any culture for that matter, (see note 6), that is, to inquire after their theological system to see whether or not it is consistent with the ideals of Torah.

Is it not ironic that one of the greatest gifts given to us (the ability to think) is employed so often to construct a theology of which our Maker disapproves? In an insightful piece entitled “Aiming the Mind” Zemek (1984, 207) points out that the biblical record “is a persistent witness to the fact that behaviour flows from a noetic wellspring... necessitat[ing] a redirection of man's faculties”. While “Repentance establishes an initial reorientation... the Scriptures stress that the key to a godly life-style is a sustained spiritual mindset. This is the focal point of Biblical ethics” (Zemek 1984, 207), and, we might add, the foundation of cultural sustainability. In fact the ante-Sumerian civilisation fell prey to its evil machinations to the extent that a New World order was necessitated. In examining one of the Hebrew equivalents for “mind”, Zemek further points out that humanity is proud in heart, stubborn in heart, hard in heart, perverse in heart, and evil in heart. He says that there is one OT passage that adequately summarises man's heart condition and intellectual bankruptcy. That passage is Genesis chapter 6.

Zemek writes "Of all the passages in which *lev* [heart] is associated with *hashav* [think]... in a negative sense Gen 6:5 is especially critical."

Then the Lord saw that the wickedness of man was great on the earth, and that every intent of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually. (Gen 6:5)

"Every word in the predicate," declares Zemek (1984, 207), "is crucial". To him, one can hardly find a more emphatic statement of the wickedness of the human mind. The distinguished professor of homiletics at Cornerstone University likes to put it this way: The heart of the human problem is the problem of the human heart. That is the core of cultural and theological inertia as well.

All the cultures mentioned so far were quite advanced as far as technology was concerned. The Sumerians had their ziggurats, the Egyptians had their pyramids, the neo-Babylonian empire its hanging gardens, and even Israel her magnificent temple built by the wisest man in the ANE. But there was something sinister in and similar to all these civilisations: all were sadly committed to the PPI, and this, in the final analysis, spelled the death of their cultures. They carried within them the idolatrous seeds of their own destruction. For example, in Mark 13, our Lord's theological students were quite impressed with the magnificent architecture of Herod's temple, "the product of human creativity and ingenuity" (Carson 1998, 2/10). But their Master was thinking on another level. "He evaluates the patterns of evil in this world, the false religious pretensions ... the judgement that will fall" (Carson 1998 2/10). Mark 13, Carson believes, is reminiscent of Acts 17:16ff where Paul is found in Athens. The Apostle's reaction to the city is striking. He too was not impressed with its spectacular cultural expressions, "[its] Architecture...history of sheer learning...literature ... produced or ... glory of her heritage." (Carson 1998 2/10) Here neither the Master's estimate of the holy city nor his student's evaluation of Athens is superficial.

In both cases the evaluation looked at things from God's perspective. Those who are impressed by mighty buildings and spectacular human accomplishments could profitably think through the account of the tower of Babel (Genesis 11). Doubtlessly, there were some then who were impressed by the edifice. But God, looking at the human heart and the reasons for the building, saw it as one more evidence of insufferable hubris.

In much the same way, we too are called to understand and evaluate our culture from God's perspective. Because human beings are made in the image of God, *there is much we can do that is worthy and admirable* [emphasis mine] .... But its possible to be far too impressed by wealth, power, architecture, fame,

learning, physical prowess, and technology, with the result that we do not think through the moral and spiritual dimensions of the world around us. We may see the glory, and overlook the shame; we may detect human accomplishments, and neglect the undergirding idolatry (Carson 1998, 2/10).

The ancient gods, then, may be viewed as the cultural termites that gnawed away at the very fabric of the societies over which they were given control.

Put another way, the presence of the Egyptian Apis (the bull god of the Nile), Heqet (the frog headed goddess), Set (the desert god), Re (the sun god), Hathor (the cow head god), Isis (healing goddess), Osiris (fertility god), Nut (sky goddess; quite a fitting name for a god/ess in English transliteration), and Min (god of reproduction) meant that the One known as *El Elyon* eventually had to judge the super-power of the day, Egypt (Ex 12:12). So effective was this judgement that the ex-slaves soon sang

Who is like you, O LORD, among the gods?  
Who is like you, majestic in holiness,  
awesome in splendour, doing wonders? (Ex 15:11 NRSV)

Later Baal of Canaan, Aserah of Syria, Chemosh of Moab, Molech of Ammon, and Dagon of Philistia all bit the dust, so to speak, before the eyes of the very peoples whose cultures they corrupted. And when the people of God once again flirted with exotic gods, men like Isaiah would then exert all their literary skills to demonstrate the futility, not mention the stupidity of such fatal attraction (Merrill 1987, 3-18; Childs 2001, 294ff).

### The Greco-Roman World

For I am a debtor both to Greeks and to barbarians, both to the wise and to the foolish, hence my eagerness to proclaim the gospel to you also who are in Rome. (Rom. 1:14, 15. NRSV).

Coming to the NT era we meet the equally decadent Greco-Roman culture (Roetzel). On their return from captivity the Jews had apparently learnt their lesson that idolatry was inimical to their spiritual health. When we open the pages of our NT we see Jewish sects like the Sadducees and Pharisees but no adherents of Baal or any of the gods mentioned above. Instead, the Jewish culture was now centred on Torah, perhaps like never before in its history. Ironically, Torah, as they knew it, was being replaced by a new Torah as a result of a genuine "replacement" theology that was taking place quite

unobtrusively (Messianic-- Rom 10:4 etc.; superseding mosaic-- Rom 8:1-4; and mesographic-- Rom 2:14, 15. Cf. Ratzlaff 2003).

In fact certain well known cultural features were paving the way for this: better arterial lines of communication as well as a Pax Romana to go along with it — all courtesy of Imperial sponsorship. There was a common language throughout the empire that facilitated meaningful cultural exchange. This was made possible through the Macedonian conquest of centuries before. But things were quite different in the Greco-Roman world. Religious pluralism was the order of the day. Old deities were being exchanged for new ones (Gaebelein 1979, 494) making the PPI even more complex (Acts 17:22-23). But the cultural enrichment that this dimension of life was supposed to have brought did not materialise. Conversely, large-scale impoverishment — social and cultural — was the order of the day, and the greatest testimony of this is to be found in the profile of Romans 1 (Chisholm 2002, 8-9), written against the background of “a city which had become the greatest and finest ... in the world. Her population neared a million. Ships from all over the known world fed and clothed and beautified her. Her corn came from Africa, Egypt, Sicily, and Sardinia; her pepper from as far as India ...; her tin from Britain and Northern Spain. Silk came from China .... Latin was everywhere the official language of government, and this became the basis of [some] modern languages .... Roman law was enforced over the whole Empire and remains the basis of European law today” (Stanvrianos 1962, 78).

One then is not surprised to find the first three chapters of the book of Romans couched in the form of a 1<sup>st</sup> century court drama in which the Heathen (chapter 1) and the Hebrews (chapter 2) are prosecuted in turn, with a summary statement following in chapter 3. Chapter 1:18-32, in particular, “shows that the moral chaos that has entered human society is rooted in human idolatry .... [Consequently], Human unrighteousness most fundamentally consists in a refusal to worship God and a desire to worship that which is in the created order” (Schreiner 1998, 83, 88). The solution to the chaos is delineated in the following chapters in terms of justification (deliverance from the guilt and penalty of sin: 3-5, 9-11) and sanctification (deliverance from the power and grip of sin: 6-8, 12-15. (Palmer 2001, i)).

It is this imperial world that was significantly impacted by the Messianic community, eliciting the response in a particular setting, “These people who have been turning the world upside down have come here also” (Acts 17:6b). Yet even this new and subversive community was itself vulnerable to the PPI

that was wreaking havoc within the very culture(s) it was seeking to change (1 Cor 10:13-14; 1 John 5:21).

Again, all of this is not to deny that there was real cultural progress in the Greco-Roman culture. Custance, for instance, sought to demonstrate how the three streams of humanity flowing from Shem, Ham and Japheth made significant socio-cultural contributions to the world. The chief legacy of the descendants of Japheth is, according to him, philosophy; that of Ham, technology; and the major contribution of Shem, spirituality.

Where Japheth [Greco-Roman et al] has applied his philosophical genius to the technological genius of Ham, *science* has emerged. Where Japheth has applied his philosophical genius to the spiritual insights of Shem [Jewish in particular], *theology* has emerged. Thus human potential reaches its climax when all three brothers (in their descendants) jointly make their contribution. (Custance n.d)

But despite these positives no significant grouping of Noah's posterity has managed to escape the vortex of the PPI. The Sumerians (Hamites), Hebrews (Shemites), as well as the entire Hellenistic and Roman empires were all caught up in a world-wide web ("WWW": will of man, work of Satan, and *wrath* of God) of theological and spiritual catastrophe which marked and marred any cultural achievement about which they might have boasted.

Is it any wonder then that in three crucial chapters in the book of Acts we see the divine initiative to salvage and purify the three streams of humanity through the Gospel: a representative Hamite in chapter 8, a Shemite in chapter 9, and Japhetite in chapter 10? What this suggests to us is that cultural revitalisation is best preceded by new theological thinking, which in turn is totally dependent on special revelation/or intervention. Rightly it is said that we were made by God, and therefore all our problems are theological. Henceforth, all lasting solutions have theological roots as well. This is borne out clearly by even a panoramic sketch of history between the 1<sup>st</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries. Against the sordid background of a global PPI, history testifies to the fact of a divine intervention after divine intervention to stem the tide of cultural decay on all the continents and among those living in much smaller territories (Patterson 1991, 325ff; Davies 1992).

Generally speaking,

The rich theological tradition of Christianity has taken root in virtually every part of global culture, and given rise to some of the most creative and important reflection in the history of human thought ... Christianity has taken root in cultures, and set in motion a rich and dynamic process of interaction between

ideas and values of the gospel, and those already present in the culture.<sup>6</sup>  
(McGrath 1995, xvi)

Today countries like Uganda and Argentina (Johnstone 1993, 96, 549) are experiencing a genuine work of God, although other indices of cultural progress are in reverse. We must never forget that concurrent with the brimful "iniquity of the Amorites" (Genesis 15) was a "land flowing with milk and honey" (Numbers 13, 14) — a land that was soon to experience judgement (Joshua).

### The Modern West

Claiming to be wise, they became fools ... they use their tongues to deceive. Their feet are swift to shed blood; ruin and misery are in their paths, and the way of peace they have not known. There is no fear of God before their eyes.  
(Rom. 1:22; 3:13-18 NRSV)

Now it is time we take a broad look at *our* global village (Klesios 2002, 103-15). So far we have seen that the Torah stood in judgement on all expressions of ANE religion including that of the Israelites. Can we use the same criterion to judge our own culture(s)? We have also insisted that a fundamental malady of all ancient cultures was their PPI. What about our modern world? Taking the last question, I think we will have to agree that the Western Hemisphere, of which we are a part, is also grossly idolatrous. The former Archbishop of Canterbury (Conrad 2001, 84-85) has identified three deities of the modern pantheon in wealth, therapy and education. In his Amsterdam 2000 homily he was careful to point out that all three of these preoccupations have their own legitimate place in life but have been elevated to a status in our lives where they cease to become our servants. For Newbiggin (1986) the central deity of Western civilisation is science, for Ramachandra (1996, 107),<sup>7</sup> it is "Idols of Reason and Unreason," for Colson (1999) it is nature, and the list goes on. For instance, who can doubt that in the Caribbean<sup>8</sup> "Pleasure" (from carnival in the East to dancehall in the West, with Hedonism 1, 2 and 3 in between) is the patron goddess of many? How can we gainsay the fact that she is attractive? Remember, "men shall be lovers of pleasure

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<sup>6</sup> cf. Green (1970), Davey (2002, 116ff)

<sup>7</sup> "For every civilization, for every period of history, it is true to say: 'show me what kinds of gods you have, and I will tell you what kind of humanity you possess'." -- Emil Brunner (Ramachandra, 107).

<sup>8</sup> For the religious influence of African religion(s) on the region, see Warner-Lewis (2003, 138-198) and Pierre-Pierre (2003); for a nuanced definition of "Caribbean culture," see Ferreira (2003).

[φιληθονοι] more than lovers of God" (2 Tim 3:1-4). Like certain members of the Messianic community in the first century we need to hear the voice of the apostle on this matter (1 John 5:21), if we are to become a part of the solution.

In a section of the New Testament which the Rev. John Stott calls "Christian counter-culture" we are told that we are to help to preserve the culture of which we are a part (Mt 5:13; Edmonds 1997, 63-76). This, in one sense, is enlightened self-interest (Mt 5:14). If our culture goes down, we go down with it.

But the perennial question still remains as to how best to be salt and light in a global village whose culture is characterised by neon lights and longevity, on the one hand, and on the other, darkness and decay. Since the middle of the 1<sup>st</sup> century we have been encouraged to think through our own response to the challenges of culture using the typology of Nieburhr (1951). Turning some of Nieburhr's indicatives into interrogatives, we ask ourselves: Should the Messianic community be opposed to culture? Must it accommodate culture? Or should it see itself as an intra-cultural agent of change?

Our answers to these questions must indeed be shaped by a holistic understanding of the church's mandate (Lk 24; Acts 1), filtered through the prism of the Sermon on the Mount (Mt 5-7<sup>9</sup>) and the Great Commandment (Mk 12; contra Armstrong 1993).

Only clear theological thinking<sup>10</sup> squarely based on special revelation can best inform our action. In this regard the Amsterdam 2000 Declaration (Conrad 2001) has at least two affirmations (see Appendix) that are worthy of reflection, as we consider our own socio-cultural engagement for the future.

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<sup>9</sup> See, for example, Roper's (2003) creative application of the Lord's Prayer to the post-modern and North-Atlantic hegemonic challenge. The pluralism of the 21<sup>st</sup> century amply cultivates and encourages the modern PPI.

<sup>10</sup> "So how should Christians press the battle for the mind? What practical solutions are there in combating the ... plague of sin in heart, home, and humanity? [These] suggestions are offered. *Declare war on theological ignorance.* That is what Paul did in Athens when he proclaimed a real God in place of an unknown one (Acts 17:22-23). Nothing is to be gained by ignoring the theological dimensions of the creation conflict. In the final analysis the issue is theological, not scientific. Either God said what He meant and meant what He said, or the entire message of redemption is unreliable. ... *Declare war on theological indifference.* Too many believers are careless about the accuracy of their theology..." (Gangel 1980,168) — as well as the efficacy of their engagement (Noelliste 1987; Dick 2003, 52-67).

### Conclusion

At this concluding juncture we need to hear afresh the words of a CETA presiding officer:

Christian faith is a ferment of transformation. [Contra Mutaburaka 2000]. What it seeks first and foremost is the transformation of reality in accordance with God's ideal for life. Its aim is the removal of what is [cultural impoverishment] and its replacement by what ought to be [cultural enrichment]. (Noelliste 1997, 97)

CETA, then, is not just the acronym we know it to be; it is also *Calling Evangelicals to Action*—for cultural redemption (Rev 1-22).

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