

Week 1

Thompson argues that theology "has not only shaped practices and institutions, but molded the dominant outlook of cultures and civilizations." Do you agree? Why or why not?

I absolutely agree, but in the United States, even though theology is often the root, the cultural practice of our civilization looks very different.

For example, Thanksgiving clearly has religious roots. Popular history tells us the Pilgrims came searching for isolation to practice (and enforce) their own beliefs. The harsh environment they encountered led to a feast of thanksgiving in 1621 which they apparently repeated in succeeding years. Others (the Puritans, Quakers, Catholics) came for the same reason; Thanksgiving festivals and religious services became common in several parts of the colonies. The idea setting aside a time to be thankful after harvest persisted and spread. After Independence, numerous states governments declared a specific date, but it varied by state. Abraham Lincoln proclaimed it a national holiday in 1863.

In the case of Christmas, theology underlies cultural practices, but the practices don't exactly reflect theology. Many American religious Christmas traditions have been skewed to satisfy culture. Somewhere near December 14 businesses and radio stations start counting down the 12 days of Christmas, totally oblivious to the fact that December 25 is the first day of Christmas. On December 26, the Christmas merchandise goes on sale and the music stops. It's also common to see creches where the magi are crowded in with shepherds as if they were present in the moments after the Christ child's birth. And like many Episcopalians, I wait until at least mid-Advent to decorate my tree, then leave it lit until January 6 (or later). Some always asks why it's still up after New Years.

I've heard a number of *non* Episcopalians say, "This is a Christian nation." Aside from the fact that it shows a lack of knowledge and/or understanding of the First Amendment to the United States Constitution, it seems issue from some kind of theological zeal, a misguided desire to infuse Christian beliefs into every aspect of living. Contrary to my understanding of the First Amendment, it also reflects an assumption that everyone holds or should hold the same theology as the speaker. So even in a country with freedom of religion we have a Pledge of Allegiance with "under God" edited into it, a large and vocal group of people who advocate for "Prayer in public schools," and "In God we trust" stamped on most of our money.

Perhaps you shouldn't be too harsh on Christian denominations who are less tradition inclusive than we Episcopalians. Many of them were born without benefit of the great body of church history. I grew up in the Christian (Disciples of Christ) church. It was founded in the early 19th century on what was then the American frontier. The founders had little or no access to knowledge of the church traditions that came to be after the Bible was written. (I suspect those founders would have been quite amazed at the deliberations that went into formulating the it.) Never-the-less, using reason and relying on Scripture, they created a denomination that has always considered regular communion and baptism the most important practices in the same way we count them as primary sacraments.

Week 2

Question 1 What aspects of Hooker's theology seem familiar to you? What seems unfamiliar? How does his theology reflect his own context?

Hooker lived post-Reformation. Certainly, this time was within the many centuries (post-Constantine and onward) during which church, state, and lifestyle were quite inseparable. Not hard to see how the corruption in the Roman Church was driving new religions. Hooker wasn't going as far conservative as the Puritans. He examined Scripture and reasoned through his own knowledge to arrive at a more normative approach, Anglicanism. Hooker has set down how Scripture and Reason combine to establish societal norms. This is his theology of how God is manifest in the world.

Actually, Barbara, my historical understanding of Henry VIII's break with Rome was far more political and secular than any need to reform the church. He wanted to get his hands on the vast church-held properties that produced no income for him and he needed an heir. He wasn't real concerned about theology as long as Rome didn't dictate it. In the eleven years after his death and Elizabeth I's ascension the throne, her sister, Mary, tried to restore Catholicism and the Puritans were hoping to instill their principals. Anglicanism was "a fine mess." It was a blessing for Hooker to come along and create a structure for the Church of England.

Question 2 Do you agree with Hooker that *order* is the basis of God's relationship with the world? Why or why not?

I can't completely agree. Order is the basis of God's relationship with the the church. In this century I find the orderliness of my relationship with God to be a base or grounding on which to stand and deal with a disorderly world. It is a mission of the church to bring order to that world.

Question 3 Do you agree with Rowan Williams that approaching the Bible as "what God wants to say to us" is helpful? Do you see any problems with this approach?

I find the concept of "what God wants to say to us," or as many communities say after the lessons, "Hear what the Spirit is saying to **God's people**," very concise and useful when the key word is **us**. In other words, problems arise when the Bible is read exclusively in isolation (Williams man alone in a room).

Thinking about trying to understand what God wants to say to us reminded me of a groaner joke from church camp of my youth. There was a clergyman who wanted women of his congregation to stop wearing their hair in bun fashion. So he preached on a portion of Matthew 24:17, "Let him which is on the house **top not come down** to take any thing out of his house."

Even when one is sincerely trying to understand (as opposed looking for support or a position), reading and discussing in community always produces a wider understanding. Further, understanding what God wants to say to us is enhanced by listening to multiple translations. When I was a youth in Disciples Church, I occasionally heard grown ups worrying, even arguing, about the most accurate translation of the Bible. How refreshing it was to learn the Episcopalians welcome multiple translations to Bible study.

Question 4 How would beginning our reflection about God with *mission* (understood as "what God is doing in the world") affect our theology?

Week 3

Question 1: In discussing the incarnation, Griffiss speaks of Jesus as "the sacrament of God". How do you understand this statement? Do you find it helpful? Why or why not?

These can only happen if the Spirit of Christ is actively present in our lives. Yes, the church is witness to the events of the life of Jesus. His Resurrection is THE saving event, but the events of Jesus' life are not past tense. Religion would be dead, or at least dying, if no living outcome resulted by Jesus' earthly life. Jesus would be an historical figure, a prophet, who lived long ago. End of story. His message, His mission is still vibrating in the lives of Christians, and that is *sacrament*.

Barbara, Your final statement, "His message, His mission is still vibrating in the lives of Christians, and that is *sacrament*" really resonated with me. I agree that if Jesus is only a historical figure, Christianity would be dead. In fact, it probably would not have made it to Constantine's era. An opposite kind of speculation, I've indulged in, reinforces your conclusion. In the eighties, I began to occasionally wonder what it would mean for Christians if some twentieth century archaeologist found conclusive evidence that Jesus was a hoax, no such human ever existed. (No clue what that would look like, but that was irrelevant.) It would be a major news story, yet nothing changes: his mission still vibrating in our lives and that is the gift, that *is* sacrament!

Question 2: Holmgren considers that alongside the Bible, nature itself reveals truth about the world and our place in it. Do you agree? Why or why not? Do you see any problems with considering nature as a "book" alongside the scriptures?

Question 3: How do you respond to the "Catechism of Creation's" approach to the relationship between science and religious faith?

Question 4: ["A Catechism of Creation"](#) states that "in this evolving universe, God does not dictate the outcome of nature's activities, but allows the world to become what it is able to become in all its diversity; one could say that God has a purpose rather than a fixed plan, a goal rather than a blueprint." Do you agree? Why or why not? What are the implications of this statement?

I really can't remember when I would have disagreed with this statement. Throughout my lifetime, I've seen many examples of humanity mistakenly believing we should dominate our aspects of God's world, then finding it necessary to change course because of God's purpose. Even before I was born, scientists believed that nuclear power was the ultimate triumph of science. The year I was born Hiroshima and Nagasaki happened. Slowly, the utter destruction of those cities, the brutal images of survivors, and the enormous death toll awakened humanity to ban such weapons.

When I was in college, I read about Rachael Carson's *Silent Spring*, which challenged the popular theory that humans could dominate the environment with chemicals. I remember painfully watching robins on the campus grounds struggle to fly because of DDT had weakened their muscles. Her book became wildly popular and led to banning the use of that deadly pesticide.

Our world and American society still has many things we need to do to align ourselves with God's purpose. Reading "A Catechism of Creation" points out the still precarious state of the environment which seems to me at odds with God's purpose.

Accepting the challenge to align with God's purpose and goals implies a need for constant discernment. My two examples show humankind initially assuming they were going a good direction, but subsequently learning there was a very dark side to that direction.