

Article

# Participating in Cultural Witness

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**Abstract:** The creation of a Centre for Cultural Witness at Lambeth Palace, to serve the Church of England within an ecumenical partnership that already stretches across Europe, offers an opportune time to reflect upon the place—even the meaning—of “culture” in witness of the church. The analysis presented here identifies three senses in which that term might be applied to witness: as that from which the witness comes, that through which it comes, and that to which it comes. At least in theory, a strong cultural emphasis might (or might not) be placed on each of these dimensions independently. However, while this may prove to be a useful distinction, it risks perpetuating an assumption that churches, and Christians, stand outside the culture of those they address, speaking as if from beyond it. In the second half of this paper, I work, instead, from the recognition that the Christian speaks from a position of a shared creaturehood, shared humanity, and—in myriad ways—a shared culture. Approached that way, the mission of the church can fruitfully be seen as witness to a theologically specific understanding of that which is shared. I conclude with the suggestion that this can be ably resourced from the broad tradition of a Platonic “Christian humanism”.

**Keywords:** witness; culture; cultural witness; theology; participation; Christian humanism; Christian Platonism

## 1. Introduction

The occasion for this collection of papers is a significant development in the life of the Church of England—working in partnership with other churches—with the creation of the Centre for Cultural Witness at Lambeth Palace, the London seat of the Archbishop of Canterbury. The role of the Centre is to promote apologetics and public theology, seeking both to bring them to new prominence and to explore and commend a change in approach. Three aspects might serve to set the scene. The first is an emphasis on “showing one’s working” and one’s inspiration, so that the contribution of the church to matters of public concern would come with a stronger articulation of the theological vision that undergirds it. The Centre would certainly wish for such contributions to be accessible, but not for them to be so accommodated to more widely shared patterns of thought as to obscure what is distinctively Christian about perspectives and motivations. A second aspect, more in the area of apologetics, is a shift away from the language of “proofs” towards that of “witness” or “testimony”, with an allied reticence towards supposing that everyone begins from the same—supposedly neutral—categories or convictions. There is also a shift here away from expressing the faith, or making one’s appeal, using the drier forms of reasoning reminiscent of analytic philosophy, towards an embrace of narrative, testimony, and artistic means.<sup>1</sup> Third, there is an emphasis, both for public theology and apologetics, on *doing* rather than *talking about doing*. The flagship initiative, for instance, is an outward-facing magazine website, with articles, podcasts, photo stories, and films, where everything is presented with the non-churchgoer in mind. The project is relatively not so much an exercise in thinking together about the venture of apologetics or public theology among those involved in that sort of exercise, and more one of going about it.



**Citation:** Davison, Andrew P. 2023. Participating in Cultural Witness. *Religions* 14: 440. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel14040440>

Academic Editors: Christine Schliesser, Graham Tomlin, Ralph Kunz and Benjamin Schliesser

Received: 14 February 2023

Revised: 18 March 2023

Accepted: 19 March 2023

Published: 24 March 2023



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## 2. “Culture” and “Cultural”

### 2.1. Some History of Usage

In this paper, I wish to focus on the description of this mission or witness as “cultural”, that being a far from straightforward idea for the framers of this project to have invoked, as the late 20th century literary critic theorist Raymond Williams (2014) made clear.

Culture is one of the two or three most complicated words in the English language. This is so partly because of its intricate historical development, in several European languages, but mainly because it has now come to be used for important concepts in several distinct intellectual disciplines and in several distinct and incompatible systems of thought (pp. 76–77).

What it might mean for the church (or, for that matter, any other community) to engage in “cultural witness” calls for further examination.

Etymology offers some valuable insights, as long as we avoid the “etymological fallacy” of confusing meaning *then* with meaning *now*. The oldest associations come from the Latin *cultura*, with its senses of inhabitation, farming, and protection. Something of even these deep roots remains today, with talk of the “cultivation” of soil and crops, and in thinking of culture as the particular style in which we inhabit a place and time. With “protection” in view, newspaper commentaries may have more to say about the need to protect culture than about the capacity of culture to protect us. Nonetheless, recent political turmoil in the United Kingdom (UK), United States of America (USA), and beyond, has illustrated ways in which certain received practices—which is to say, aspects of a culture—act as a safeguard. Thus, it has often not necessarily been ideas in the abstract that have provided the bulwark against an anti-democratic nationalism, but cultures and practices: for instance, of impartiality in the civil service, or fairness in handling ballots in elections. Similarly, as the mirror image of this, we see how national and political life degrades once those aspects of a culture slip, having to do with civic norms and virtues. A wish to speak about culture, or cultures, and how we guard and nurture them, as they guard and nurture us in turn, has a timely air to it, as do links between culture and inhabitation and tending the earth.

Additionally, allied to notions of culture, is a sense of honouring with worship (Williams 2014, p. 77). For many readers, the idea of “cult” will have only negative associations, to do with secretive and repressive religious movements. Those familiar with Romance languages, however, might think of some common words or phrases for worship, not least as a Christian activity: *rendre un culte* in French, *rendir culto* in Spanish, and *cultuar* in Portuguese. Indeed, in Roman Catholic theology, “cult” refers to the practices and responsibilities associated with worship, as with the idea that the reception of certain sacraments (baptism, confirmation, marriage, and ordination) bestows an identity that is inextricably linked to worship: “the imposition of character is a delegation to cult”, as the saying goes. In these ways, notions of worship are not far from the word “culture”, either etymologically or in contemporary usage, at least in some languages and settings. Moreover, some of the most significant recent theological explorations of culture have addressed it in terms of what we “worship”, applying that category broadly, to mean that to which we ascribe particular worth, or to which we sacrifice our resources and attention (Smith 2009; Cavanaugh 2008).

The most recent roots of the word “culture” lie with cultivation and care, as still seen in expressions such as “horticulture” or “viniculture.” The most prominent sense of “culture” today, in Williams’ (2014) estimation, arose by extrapolation from tending crops or animals to tending and developing (to “culturing”) minds and understanding (p. 77). He offers, for instance, Francis Bacon’s striking description (in 1605) of the “culture and manurance of minds” (ibid.) The word “culture” here is still a verb. From the mid-nineteenth century, it came also to be used as a noun, to refer to what this verb seeks or produces, while the adjective “cultural” is later still, appearing in the 1870s.

Alongside the biological references (e.g., microbial culture), Williams (2014, p. 80) homes in on three meanings of first importance today:

(i) a general process of intellectual, spiritual and aesthetic development... (ii) ... a particular way of life, whether of a people, a period, a group, or humanity in general... (iii)... the works and practices of intellectual and especially artistic activity.

Although, in his view, the third use is now the dominant one—"culture is music, literature, painting and sculpture, theatre and film" (p. 80)—all three bear upon the "cultural witness" project. That third sense invites us to look at "artistic", "high", and "popular" culture as part of the church's witness, and as a barometer for other senses of what constitutes a culture. Sense (ii) addresses what, if anything, embodies a shared way of life, at larger and smaller scales of community. This seems to be particularly close to the interests of public and political theology. Sense (i) may spring less readily to mind, but it also offers a vista on what we might mean by "cultural witness." The suggestion would be that the Christian can invite others into conversation about what most deeply constitutes our humanity, and about how that can be developed, with the church sharing some of its "intellectual, spiritual and aesthetic" resources from its traditions. Of course, what "intellectual" or "spiritual" role might be played by culture in the third sense—as "music, literature, painting and sculpture, theatre and film"—has been a point of dispute for some time. Part of what may be witnessed to in "cultural witness" is the capacity of culture in that sense to have a vocation that bears upon "intellectual, spiritual and aesthetic development" at all.

Additionally, contested will be *whose* culture or cultures are meant. Williams diagnoses that "virtually all the hostility [toward the category of culture]... has been connected with uses involving claims to superior knowledge, refinement (*culchah*) and distinctions between 'high' art (culture) and popular art and entertainment" (*ibid.*, p. 82). The Lambeth-based Centre is poised to respond to that concern by a certain deliberate pluralism in its vision, as to what culture is in view, with a range of contributors speaking from the perspectives they best understand and inhabit.

## 2.2. Witness as "Cultural"

Williams' discussion offers any number of leads for thinking about "cultural witness", but my inquiry in the rest of the first half of this paper will not so much be around what "culture" means as around how it is applied. The "cultural" in "cultural witness" is an adjective: what, however, do we take that adjective to qualify? Having adopted a broad definition of what we might mean by "cultural", based on discussions in the founding documents of the Centre, any complexity that might then emerge in analysis will come from charting ways in which the word "cultural" might be applied: what noun it qualifies. My working definition is that in talking about "cultural witness" we are highlighting ways in which the history, beliefs, commitments, and communities of Christianity are shaped and offered in ways that are deeply woven into patterns of human speech, practice, and creativity.

Ferdinand de Saussure (1986), the father of structural linguistics, suggested that to understand what is meant by a given word, we do well to also ask what is not meant by it: to ask what contrast is being made, and what stands on the other side of that contrast. What we mean by the word "meat", for instance, is quite different when we are contrasting it with inedible things ("thou givest them their meat in due season") from when we use it to contrast with food of non-animal provenance ("meat and vegetables"). Following a line that runs through the project of the Centre for Cultural Witness (and, indeed, though my own previous writing on this topic), I will take Christianity and its witness to be cultural in the sense that it is inextricably bound up with stories, figures of speech, ways of life, habits of body, forms of community and of artistic expression, practices, and exemplary figures (to begin a list that could easily be expanded). To return to de Saussure's point, that understanding of witness as "cultural" might contrast, for instance, with an understanding of Christianity and its witness that puts the emphasis on isolated individuals making acts of ascent to propositional statements expressed in univocal terms. Any such contrast, I should say, is offered to clarify what I have in mind when I call something "cultural", not

to suggest that either extreme is commonly encountered in its starkest form, or that either pole is without its insights.

### 2.3. *Witness by, to, and through: What Are We Qualifying with the Adjective “Cultural”?*

Taking that as our definition of witness as “cultural”, we can begin to analyse a diversity of approaches to “cultural witness” by turning to a simple account of the structure of action. The simplest description might distinguish only between the agent and the patient: between the one who acts, and that which is acted upon. We can then expand that slightly, to a tripartite analysis, according to which we have an agent, a patient, and something in-between: a medium, means, or instrument. An action—here the act of witness—could be approached according to that by which, that through which, and that to which it comes. My suggestion is that we might make progress in asking what it means for witness to be “cultural” by considering that this adjective can apply in at least three ways: to that which is witnessing, that by which it witnesses, and that to which it witnesses, and—indeed—to a combination of those three aspects. The first angle would lay the emphasis on the witness coming from Christianity as a culture (or not), or from the Christianness of a culture. The second angle would lay the emphasis on witness by means of something cultural (again, or not). It would not necessarily hold that what is witnessing should primarily be understood as cultural in form (although it may), nor need it suppose that whatever this witness comes to is emphasised as something cultural, or that any effect this witness has will be manifest in a cultural way. Finally, as our third angle, we can think about witness as cultural in the sense of characterising that to which the witness comes, or that where the effect of the witness is shown.

That offers three angles to pursue. In doing so, we need not suppose that any dimension applies in only a strict yes-or-no fashion: all-or-nothing, purely cultural, or absolutely not. We may, for instance, find it difficult to imagine any of these angles as entirely lacking any cultural dimension (as I would). The question, instead, in each case, would be one of exploring what it means for the “cultural” dimension of any of these angles on witness to be emphasised or not, to be seen as more or less important. In theory, one could stress or downplay the cultural angle to each of these three dimensions independently. If one’s position on any of them does not foreclose what positions might be taken on the other two, that presents us with eight options to consider.<sup>2</sup> In practice, however, some combinations will seem more plausible than others, and I will not discuss all eight combinations individually.

To affirm that the church’s witness is cultural in the first sense (with respect to the agent) would be to affirm that quality, not only of that witness, but also of the church itself, and of its faith: the one witnessing, and its understanding of that to which it wants to witness, will be understood to be inextricably bound up with history, practices, and so on. Asked “what is Christianity?”, “What is the Christian faith?”, or “What is the Church?”, one would point not only to texts and propositions but also to communities, practices, disciplines, ways of life, alongside not only systematic or dogmatic texts but also narratives, including biographies, poems, sermons, law codes, and so on. While it is possible to hold to this “cultural” emphasis but then deny a significant cultural dimension to either of the other angles (medium or recipient), those are not likely to be commonly encountered combinations. A stress on the cultural nature of the first of the three angles is likely to propagate “downstream” to the other two. On the other hand, it would be possible to conceive of this first dimension (the faith and the agents of witness) in rather non-cultural terms—to downplay the communal and analogical, and stress the individual and univocal, for instance—and still see a role for culture later on: in one or both of the other two dimensions. One might, for instance, see the faith as somehow standing above culture but still suppose that cultural forms play a pragmatic role, simply as means in bearing witness. Similarly, one might wish for witness to be cultural in the third sense, even if it were not particularly thought to be in the first sense: one might see the faith as somehow above culture and yet still wish it to come to bear upon a prevailing culture so as to change it.

The second dimension is that of the means or medium. Again, at least in theory, a cultural emphasis here may or may not be taken to line up with one elsewhere. As we have just considered, cultural means might be seen as important, but still as purely instrumental or pragmatic, as not really how the agent understands Christianity or its message, but valuable in evangelism nonetheless. Christianity in itself might be seen primarily as a matter of abstract beliefs and individual assent, but one might choose to go about witness using cultural forms—on this view—for the sake of efficacy.

Finally, our third avenue for analysis places its emphasis on that to which witness comes, and on what it is that might respond, or be changed by it. Without necessarily saying that the faith is cultural in itself, or even that the means of witness is a cultural one, this angle would be asking about the object or recipient.

This three-fold analysis has the capacity to tease apart some of the senses in which one might suppose that the witness of the church is (or is not) cultural, with the caveat that this is not necessarily an all-in or all-out matter, but about whether one places an emphasis on culture at one or more of these points. The value of this three-fold distinction would be in aiding those involved in conversations about witness—in the work of the Lambeth Centre, and beyond, for example—to give a more nuanced account of what they have in mind in speaking of witness as cultural, and in provoking those listening to ask more nuanced questions. What had, perhaps, been obscured by a more general invocation of the idea of “cultural witness” can rise to greater clarity, and varied articulation.

### 3. Witness Within

#### 3.1. *“He Came to His Own”*

The analysis so far has presented the church as the communicator of the gospel, and has approached that communication from three angles that might be said to be “cultural”. The direction of travel has been from the “church” to the “world”: from the church as agent to a recipient or recipients outside the church, with questions of means also in view. This suggests a picture of the church, and of the Christian, as casting a light into an otherwise dark world, providing medicine to the sick, and teaching the ignorant. It may also tend to see the church and the Christian as addressing, from the outside, a culture that is fundamentally alien to it. In now wishing to expand upon that, and criticise such an interpretation, I am not suggesting that the church should be ashamed of understanding itself as the body of Christ, entrusted with a deposit of faith and the means of grace, nor that it should abandon its sense that the human world has estranged itself from God in various significant ways, and stands in need of remedies. Nonetheless, it is also true that Christians and the churches find themselves within a world that they confess to be God’s creation. They address others who are created in the image of God: others for whom and to whom the Word came in Christ, in such a way that the fourth evangelist writes “he came to his own” (Jn 1:11). While the reference there is perhaps first of all to Christ in his Jewishness, it would be legitimate to expand that interpretation in light of the comment, only a few verses earlier, that “all things came into being through him” (Jn 1:3). Moreover, there would be a serious theological failing in supposing that God, or the divine work, is absent beyond the bounds of the church.

Self-awareness is also at stake here. Speaking now simply more empirically or ethnographically, Christians and the churches stand alongside non-Christians—alongside those outside the church—in a variety of ways, sharing the same culture, or cultures. I have written elsewhere that if a Christian claims that her theology stands above any need of attention to philosophy, because the faith comes directly from a divine source, it is precisely then that her thinking most likely to be shaped by philosophical assumptions, of a sort that she is now ill-equipped to examine, or even to notice (Davison 2013, pp. ix–x; Kerr 1997, p. 1). As a parallel to that, the Christian who does not recognise herself as standing culturally alongside the non-Christian, indeed in innumerable ways, is most likely also to fail to recognise the ways in which her “Christian culture” is shaped by forces and



suppositions that lie rather far from what the Christian tradition may often have wished to teach.

### 3.2. Witness and Doctrine

My suggestion for exploring modes of “cultural witness” from an awareness of one’s place within a culture or cultures, dwelling there alongside those to whom the church speaks, is part doctrinal and part philosophical. Doctrinally, it is the proposal that witness and apologetics, can and should draw on the full range of themes in systematic theology, beyond the typical concentration on sin and redemption, and on the “existence of God”, not least in also drawing on the doctrines of creation and theological anthropology. Part of a Christian “cultural witness” is the articulation of a positive Christian account of culture and humanity as cultural. The philosophical angle is to commend traditions of Christian theology that have been most explicitly worked out with an eye to Platonic themes—“Christian Platonism”—as in a particularly strong position to provide inspiration.<sup>3</sup> These are particularly capable of accounting for to all that we share as coming from God (indeed, as a form of sharing from God).

Turning first to doctrine, the Christian understands his/her faith as unified and whole, yet worked out in many parts, and under various theological headings (creation, Christology, redemption, eschatology, the doctrine of God, and so on). In thinking about what it means to be engaged in “cultural witness”, the church may do well to draw upon the full breadth of that theological tradition, not least the doctrine of creation and, alongside it, theological anthropology. That is because the church’s witness can be, in part, a matter of showing what the faith says about our shared humanity and creaturehood, and about humanity as intrinsically cultural and creative. It can address that which is shared—our humanity, creaturehood, moral aspirations and failings, and aspects of our cultural location—and yet do that in a way that witnesses to what Christianity brings in particular through its theological interpretation and elucidation of all of that.

That same inextricable connection between doctrinal topics means that, even in respect to that which theology most celebrates about our common humanity, that is combined with elements of judgment, even of lament. The doctrine of sin is never far away, but neither is the notion of promise, since redemption lies at the heart of the faith, and is bound up with everything else. Doctrines are related, co-implicated, even co-constituting.<sup>4</sup>

If the first part of this paper concentrated on what it might mean for “cultural witness” to be “cultural”, we have here an angle on what it means for it to be “witness.” Part, though not the whole, of the churches’ witness is to what it means to be a creature, to be a human being, to be a cultural animal, and—of course—to be those things in a way that falls short of that to which we are called, and as those addressed by a message of forgiveness and reconciliation. This witness is to what we share, but it does not betray the revealedness of the gospel, since the interpretation that is offered of what we share is shaped, even determined, by special revelation.

The world, humanity, and culture into which, and within which, we speak, is not alien to God. A comment by the Methodist theologian Christopher Morse is helpful here.

[T]he world into which the apostles are sent is confessed to be one where Jesus Christ has already gone and is expecting them. Christian faith in God’s sending of Jesus Christ into the world refuses to believe that there is any ‘world’ of time and space and social circumstances into which the church is commissioned to go that Jesus Christ has not already gone. In this sense there are no ‘foreign missions’. ‘The true light, which enlightens everyone. . . was in the world’ is one way the Gospel of John testifies to this faith; through this Word ‘the world came into being’ so that the Word’s coming in flesh in Jesus is a coming ‘to what was his own’ (John 1.9–11). Resurrection testimonies in Matthew and Mark speak, from another angle of vision, of Jesus Christ as ‘ahead of’ the apostles and already at the very place to which the witnesses are sent. The message to the women at the tomb is, ‘Go quickly and tell his disciples, “He has been raised from the

dead, and indeed he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him: ...” (Morse 2009, p. 310, quoting Matt 28:7, with further reference to Mk 16:7).

The Centre for Cultural Witness has a web magazine (*Seen and Unseen*) with the strap line “Christian perspectives on just about everything”. In that “just about everything” we can see a confidence, but also an openheartedness, and an enthusiasm for all that is good, beautiful or true (we might think of Phil. 4.8 here), alongside a willingness to look the sorrows of the world in the face. This represents an attempt at embodying the principle that ‘He came to his own’ in a literary form. As Jacques Maritain put it, a Christian humanism is not disposed to write anything off, and seeks for value even in that with which it disagrees. It ‘is able to accept all, since it knows that God has no opposite’ (Maritain 1946, p. 84). Ben Quash’s comment is also relevant, that tradition and revelation (that which is ‘given’) need not be threatened by subsequent encounters or the dynamism of history (that which is ‘found’), but rather find that in this encounter it ‘comes alive’:

the perfection of God’s revelation in Christ is not compromised—indeed, precisely implies—an ongoing historical dynamic whereby, in God, human beings are constantly invited to *related to given to the found* [and, I would add, the *found* to the *given*]. . . The God who has ‘stocked our backpack for the journey’, so to speak, also ‘places things in our path’, up ahead of us (Quash 2013, p. xiv; and see Leith 2023).

### 3.3. *The Humanism of a Christian Platonism*

At this point, I turn to draw upon, and make explicit, the ecclesial setting in which I work, and which I currently know best, namely that of a college or university chapel. In my case, that chapel is part of an institution with deep Christian roots (as the name ‘College of Corpus Christi and the Blessed Virgin Mary’ indicates). Today, that Christian history and dedication rarely impinges, to any great extent, on the majority of its members, and yet neither is there any great hostility to that heritage, and the chapel plays a prominent part, although optional, in the college yearly calendar and weekly cycle. Nonetheless, any hearing that the Chapel (or Chaplain, or Dean of Chapel) receives has to be earned respectfully. That is a rather particular and distinctive setting, but one that I think provides a concrete example of something that would be more generally applicable.

Rather than write about myself, I will jump off from the observation that among those who embody the approach I want to discuss, few have illustrated it better than the late Dean of Chapel at Jesus College, Cambridge, John Hughes, theologian and priest of the Church of England, so wrenchingly taken from us by a car accident in 2014. The approach he lived by, and that I will commend as a way of both living within a culture and speaking to it, was a form of Christian Platonism. I also choose Hughes as my example because we have the benefit of an analysis of what this approach looked like in his case, practically and theologically, from one of the foremost voices in philosophical theology today, Janet Soskice, also a fellow of Jesus College, in the address she delivered at his memorial service (Great Saint Mary’s, Cambridge, 11 October 2014). His was a “cultural witness” and a highly successful one. The location of his funeral Mass had to be moved to Ely Cathedral once it became clear that no church in Cambridge would be large enough. A thousand people attended, including hundreds of students, past and present, whose lives bore the imprint of his witness and ministry.

While there was ample attention on evil and human sin in Hughes’ work and preaching too, his approach was more characteristically to hold out the allure of the good and excellent, than to use the stick of threat or condemnation. Soskice (2014) remarked that

In John’s Anglo-Catholicism, this recovery of work [a theme central to his academic writing] had to go hand in hand with love of beauty and life ordered to the Good, that is, to God... Human beings, as Aquinas marvelously said, are naturally oriented to the Good, and because of this, even in our work, naturally at home in the world. And, this is why they are also attuned to Beauty, since the human mind is not ‘going against the grain of the Universe but in harmony with

it'. And, this is because, in John's Christian understanding, this world is creation, rather than chaos—a loving gift.

Such celebration of creation, of gift, and of human capacities, need not be rose-tinted. Much is wrong with the world, recognised by Hughes' witness as one "profoundly interested in social justice, [and] embedded in [the] tradition of Anglican social thought". As Soskice recounts, in writing, preaching, and his wider ministry in the college, he urged everyone to "consider, deeply and with urgency in our time" the question "what are our lives ordered to?" The ultimate answer to that question (our orientation to God) and the proximate answer (our orientation to one another, and to the common good) are both vital parts of any "cultural witness".

In a context where human lives are reduced to units of production, or dismissed by reductive neuroscience as epiphenomena, a Christian humanism is on view here, which offers a potent witness of its own. Its motto might be *Homo sum, humani nihil a me alienum puto* ("I am a human being, and nothing human is alien to me"): a line from one of the plays of Terence (2001, my translation, act 1, scene 1, line 77, p. 186). Commenting on something close to this outlook, Soskice (2014) jumped off from a seemingly innocuous remark from the college nurse, that "Nothing was too much trouble [for Hughes] and he always seemed really interested".

I think John seemed really interested because he was really interested, and this went right to the heart of his guiding theology and of how he understood the office of a priest in the College community. He would never have conceived this as a matter of 'bringing the Gospel' to dark corners, as though the Gospel were a large lardy cake to be deposited on the desks of unwitting and unwilling recipients. John did not need to bring God to people because according to his Anglican Thomism God was already there. His job was to make us glad and help us rejoice as we worked, whether as students, Fellows, or in one of the Colleges many other departments for, as he wrote in *The End of Work*, 'labour whose only end is efficiency and functionality, labour free of responsibility, intellect and delight', is not worthy of human beings (ibid.).

Thinking of the point about deploying a wide doctrinal range, there is a doctrine of God, creation, and providence here, and a broad sense of sin and redemption. This is cultural in the sense of enjoying an organic relationship to its place, and to its institution, with its history and aspirations. It is also cultural in its infusion with music, in attention to architecture, in preaching with attention to rhetoric and style, and in awareness that the Scriptures and the liturgy (especially as conducted according to the Book of Common Prayer) are themselves part of a cultural inheritance that belong to those beyond the bounds of active church going. (The recent witness of the funeral of Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II, again largely drawn from the Book of Common Prayer, serves as a further example of this point.) Hughes' interest in political theology and philosophy ran to Hegel and Marx, to Weber, Adorno, and Arendt, but his favoured resources for thinking about human lives, work, and community—as ultimately lying in God—were to be found chiefly among those whose social criticism was as deeply "cultural" in all of William's senses, not least in the production of works of art and architecture: in John Ruskin, William Morris, Eric Gill, and David Jones, most of all.

Among Hughes' writings, a frustratingly short paper on 'The Possibility of Christian Culture' is of value, in which he offers a 'defence of the notion of the possibility of a Christian culture or cultural Christianity' (Hughes 2016c, p. 163) in a way that seeks to avoid Christian nationalism, or the capture of the church by power. He makes the Foucauldian point that we are always already too immersed in culture and power to be able to eschew them: 'it is impossible for Christian to renounce the question of power altogether... because... even the most local, small-scale Christian practices, such as communicating the gospel or caring for others or bringing up children, are forms of power' (Hughes 2016c, p. 163). Moreover, to imagine that we can simply be, or ought to be, isolated individuals 'completely free and rational, a blank slate forming [our] own destiny...



downplays the important ways in which *who* we are, including our very capacities for reason and freedom, are not simply inert, self-possessed givens, but are *developed* through *time* and through *relations* with others' (Hughes 2016b, pp. 164–65, emphasis in original).

His other principal exploration on this theme looks at the Christian humanism of two significant French Roman Catholic writers of the twentieth century, Jacques Maritain and Henri de Lubac, as a way of understanding an Anglican perspective of the place of culture in the church, and of the church in culture. The “integral” humanism found here (which we might also call an integrating or expansive humanism) contrasts with a secular naturalistic humanism, which, according to Maritain’s perspective “is truncated or distorted by excluding the spiritual element of human nature and its transcendent goals” (Hughes 2016c, pp. 125–26). In this humanism, nature is no stranger to grace, nor grace to nature (Hughes 2016c, p. 126). It is once both celebratory of the human and yet, as “theocentric”, it displaces of humanity from the centre: “it is all the more human because it does not worship man” (Hughes 2016c, p. 126; Maritain 1946, p. xvi).

### 3.4. *Metaphysics of Participation*

The philosophical foundation for such a vision was a Christian Platonism, as is evident in almost all of Hughes’ writings, as for instance in the collection *The Graced Life* (Hughes 2016a). It was also a Christian humanism, and those facets went together. While today that idea of “humanism” has become associated with atheism, its roots are in a Christian movement of the 15th century, associated with a revival of interest in classical art, literature, and philosophy, and particularly of Plato. That association may seem ironic, if we think of Plato as teaching that all that belongs to the worldly, perishable aspects of human life—the things of nature and culture—are mere shadows of what is fully real (the Forms). Such a vision of Platonism, however, is a partial picture at best. If there have been Platonisms of escape from contingency (some of them Christian), others have painted a much more positive account, by drawing on a Platonic sense of the world as an image of that which grounds it, augmented in some cases by the descent of the divine into the human world (seen particularly in the Neo-Platonists Proclus and Iamblichus). That can, in turn, ground an account of the supreme worth of the human being, and therefore of all things human. In this we have a form of Christian Platonism that I would commend as a foundation for cultural witness. This approach recognises that we are the recipients of being, life, humanity, and culture, alongside everyone else, and has a distinctive message concerning those gifts, with a particularly strong emphasis on pointing to the origin of all things in God, and which will therefore urge us to view the created world as the arena for the encounter with God and things divine.

To ground that intellectually, and to put it to work, it may be helpful to turn to the theologically potent category (as Christian as it is Platonist) of “participation”, which is to say, to dynamics of donation, reception, and partaking. This has been seen as more and more central to a wide variety of theological traditions in recent decades. A rediscovery of the historical place of participation is a vital part of the Thomism of the past half century, for instance (Geiger 1942; Fabro 1961; Clarke 1994; Dunn 1957; te Velde 1995), with parallel stories in patristic historical theology (Boersma 2011; Davis 2008; Portaru 2012; Powers 2002; Balás 1966; Clavier 2014; Normann 1978; Ge 2021; Törönen 2007), and of the Magisterial Reformation and Anglican traditions (Allchin 1988; Billings 2007; Dominiak 2019; Kimbrough 2016; Vainio 2008; Canlis 2010). This history bears witness to such scholarship as an endeavour not only with ecumenical breadth, but even as an exercise itself in ecumenical bridge building, since a shared interest in participation as a theological and metaphysical category represents one of the liveliest areas of theological rapprochement today.

Augustine serves as a helpful point of reference, not least because he enjoys ecumenical currency with Protestants as well as Catholics (although Aquinas is gaining ground).<sup>5</sup> Augustine’s participatory outlook was expressed, time and again, in terms of a question taken from St Paul: “What do you have that you did not receive?” (1 Cor 4:7). In its context

in the Epistle, the emphasis is on grace. In the hands of Augustine, the frame of reference is expanded, to trace all that is good and real, of every form, back to God, most fundamentally through the idea of creation, and indeed of creation *ex nihilo*. Alternatively, however, we may do better not to say that we are expanding the register of Paul's question beyond a home register in grace, and suggest instead that grace lies at the root of any answer to questions about where anything comes from, since the creation itself is the first undeserved gift. Such ideas have considerable potency in "cultural witness."

With its lively doctrine of creation, and its conviction that every aspect of everything comes from God—with the exception of evil (which is a failure of reception from God)—the participatory trajectory within theology offers an outlook for the witness of the church that need not neglect either our commonality with those to whom we speak, or the reality of all that is good beyond that bounds of the church, in nature, in culture, wherever. Themes of participation also offer an illuminating way to approach the interwoven nature of doctrine, such that each part casts light on each other (Davison 2019), after the manner commended earlier. Recognition of the breadth of doctrine, so fruitful for a cultural view of witness, is not—of course—the sole preserve of a theology set out with an emphasis on notions of participation. However, with its rich account of the doctrine of creation, with its desire to trace all things back to God, and with the motif of participation treading its way through all the doctrinal topics, a desire to sing the song of Christian belief in a particularly polyphonic way is certainly one of its prominent characteristics.

#### 4. Conclusions

I began this paper with an exploration of what we might understand by the adjective "cultural" in any undertaking of "cultural witness". I suggested that the witness of the church is cultural (although that might be played up or played down) as to agent, means, and recipient. Some Christian traditions will approach questions of culture with a sense of the Christian as occupying a separate culture from that of "the world", and there is much to commend in a critical attitude towards that which is harmful, which seeks patterns of discipleship to engrain better habits.<sup>6</sup> Nonetheless, we are all inevitably embedded in wider cultures, and I have approached that here more as something to embrace, and work with, than to lament. One of the principal set of examples of this in Christian history has been that found in Christian humanism, of one sort or another. In following that model, Christian mission can also be "cultural" in bearing witness to a theological interpretation of that which we share: both as to culture, humanity, and creaturehood, and also as to sin and the offer of redemption. For that, we will need to draw upon a wide range of doctrinal resources, including a doctrine of creation and theological anthropology while, philosophically speaking, there is much to commend the broad tradition of Christian Platonism, with its long history of reflecting upon creation in relation to God, with the confession that "from him and through him and to him are all things" (Rom 11:36).

**Funding:** This research received no external funding.

**Data Availability Statement:** Not applicable.

**Acknowledgments:** The author acknowledges the provision of study leave through the generosity of the Center of Theological Inquiry, Princeton, NJ.

**Conflicts of Interest:** The author declares no conflict of interest.

#### Notes

- <sup>1</sup> I have advocated such an approach along these lines (Davison 2011), as have Elaine Graham (2017) and Holly Ordway (2017). I mention the method of analytic theology here, in as much as it tends towards what can be strictly proved, and it values univocal use of language, and is often at least somewhat disconnected from historical genealogies of thought. We can contrast that to a way of thinking, writing, and speaking that argues (or indeed simply witnesses) in a way that is more sympathetic to analogical uses of language, and is typically approached within a sense of an historical inheritance of textual traditions.

- <sup>2</sup> If we represent what I have called the agent as *A*, the medium as *M*, and the patient as *P*, and if a capital letter represents a position on Christian witness that stresses what I have been calling the cultural dimension of this aspect, and a lower case letter represents one that plays it down, the eight options would be *AMP*, *AMp*, *AmP*, *aMP*, *Amp*, *aMp*, *amP*, and *amp*.
- <sup>3</sup> For an excellent recent study and survey, see Hampton and Kenney (2020).
- <sup>4</sup> For a sense of the centrality of doctrine to witness, and of the place it occupied in the works of one of the principal examples of ‘cultural witness’ in England in the 20th century, Dorothy L. Sayers (1947) offers a good place to begin.
- <sup>5</sup> Among figures central to Eastern Orthodoxy, we could consider Gregory of Nyssa or Maximus the Confessor. (Cf. Balás 1966; Törönen 2007; Portaru 2012).
- <sup>6</sup> Here, we might, for instance, think of Philippians 2:15–16, or James 1:27.

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