Our present offers a rich and complicated opportunity for Christian theology of culture. The experiences of younger generations, trends in academic religious thought, and the beginning of the changing of the pastoral and academic theological guard, beyond the generation formed by the 1960s, all point in this direction. Provocative recent works have placed critical questions and tasks to theologians of culture, leading to new domains for theological practice. My aim is to briefly consider each of these elements, and so to work toward delimiting the intellectual-cultural terrain that a Christian theologian of culture for our present may traverse.

Discussing a theology of culture for the present requires not only intellectual rigor but contextual specificity. Johann Baptist Metz has argued that theology in a sense can be autobiography, and such a claim seems appropriate in a special way for the theologian of culture. How such a theologian comes to be theologically concerned with culture is intrinsically related to what the theologian argues as constitutive of the theological task vis-à-vis culture. Thus, I begin with a brief description of my “how,” which then leads to my sense of “what” might contribute to a theological relationship to culture today.

Theology for the Present

Theology of culture today takes place within certain signs of our times. First is that younger generations are already doing their
own everyday theology of culture. They are already making implicit or explicit judgments about sin and grace in everyday life, about the meaning of everyday events, about the spiritual significance or insignificance of a movie, a relationship, a job, a song, a television show, an Internet conversation, a religious institution. In consumer capitalist culture, the spiritual dimension of our identities is ordered consciously and unconsciously by our relationship to consumer goods, by the way we are opened or closed to know God and free each other by the demands of long hours and nuclear families, divorce and cohabitation, fatherlessness and multi-religious, multi-racial friendships. When young adults practice the everyday art of “making do” with their lives, in quest of and struggle with knowing God in freeing themselves and others, they are doing everyday theology of culture. Encouraging academic theology to take this seriously is one task for those of us post-Vatican II-generation theologians who have committed ourselves to solidarity with the experiences of these generations.

A second sign of our times is contained in an academic trend: academic theology and religious studies have turned toward “popular culture.” Many books have appeared in the last few years alone on this topic, understood both as electronic media culture and as everyday life practices. There is a generational dimension conditioning this output. Younger baby boomers, on the tail end of the first American generation to be significantly formed by media culture, are writing many of these texts. There is also a new generation of theologians from the post-1960s generations coming into influence in church and academy with a different constellation of cultural experiences. Those under 40 years old have, by and large, an even more intimate relationship with and literacy of popular media culture. There is also the interesting work on philosophy and sociology of everyday life put forward by some “postmodern” thinkers such as Michel de Certeau and Pierre Bourdieu, potentially enriching our understanding of what it means to theologize about our everyday experiences in culture without resorting

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2 I have in mind the works of such authors as Anthony Pinn, Catherine Roach, Bruce Forbes, Mary Hess, Lynn Schofield Clark, and Kate McCarthy, among others.

to a prejudgment about the appropriateness of restricting theology to dealing merely “high” culture.

These two important signs of the times, the reality of everyday theology of culture in the lives of young people, and the shift in academic attention toward the significance of the popular and everyday, though challenging in themselves, are part of my own present in relation to some difficulties posed to doing theology of culture today that have achieved a new level of intensity: interpreting the physical and psychological violence of everyday life and popular media cultures; making theological sense of the complexities of sexuality in everyday practice and/as (mediated through) popular media culture; indeed, the rise of popular media cultures itself brings about theological problems for the question of method—it certainly cannot be presumed that one interprets a book and a film in the same way; the elevation of consumer capitalism to the status of a spiritual discipline that insinuates its networks of value, logic, and power to order the imagination in everyday life.

There are also the challenges of professional culture: theologians of culture must work as never before under the dual pressures of demonstrating “relevance” and of having their academic identity celebritized (which are in many cases two sides of the same pressure and temptation). It lies with those committed to the task to distinguish between theology that intervenes helpfully in our present situations, on the one hand, and theology that trades on sexy topics, accepted categories, jargon, and justification or cheap moralizing about the present, in the rush to “have something to say,” on the other—a distinction that in any case is never clear-cut for practical theologies of culture.

In the interest of specifying further my own background to becoming theologically engaged with culture, I shall attempt to describe merely one element of a generational shift happening in terms of the change in the fund of experience for theology of culture.

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4 For an overview of several important theorists, see Ben Highmore, Everyday Life and Cultural Theory: An Introduction (New York: Routledge, 2002).

5 Beaudoin, Consuming Faith: Integrating Who We Are With What We Buy (Lanham, MD: Sheed and Ward, 2003).
The influence of popular media cultures seems to go ever-deeper with the march of generations. My own generation—those born in the mid-1960s to late-1970s—even more deeply than the Baby Boomers, is one for whom popular culture has become a major meaning-making system. It is the amniotic fluid in which many were raised and continues to contribute to the symbol system around which many young adults orient their lives—whether in sympathy or reaction. "Popular" music as a predominant form of popular culture has played an influential—though not exclusive—role. "Pop," or even more specifically, "rock" music, is the genre I know best, as a practicing rock musician and as one who had a middle class white suburban background, and is still trying to break out of the suburbs psychologically and spiritually through my use and enjoyment of the 1970s-1990s rock music of my youth and young adulthood.

The childhood of my cohort witnessed the birth of the boombox, the portable stereo system that carried rock music with a great many of us to the basketball court, the mall, the school, and that most sacred sanctuary of middle-class popular music consumption, the adolescent bedroom—where American middle class adolescence gave a premonition of what would eventually happen to the culture of popular music: It would become in many ways a culture experienced in solitude. This solitary enjoyment and consumption of rock music was aided by many facets of youth, and then young adult, culture. Access to significantly more disposable income than the Baby Boomers allowed us to purchase boomboxes for our rooms, and thus to acquire and personalize our own musical culture. And this consumption of popular music has continued into my own generation's extended adolescence, as pop music continues to fragment into fireworks of different genres and styles.

But we heard our music not only through the boombox; it was piped directly into our heads. The "Walkman" became available for us just as we were able to start exercising some monetary authority in the marketplace. Today, it is difficult to find any from my cohort without a Walkman-style cassette or CD player in their possession. Like some audio intravenous tube, these private stereo systems allow us to place a jack into a musical device and into our ear, conducting music directly into our bodies. And I would be remiss in recounting our experience of media culture without noting the extraordinary influence of MTV
on the middle classes, at least, in marketing music to my generation, helping to fuse an image with a sound to become, for many of us, the video-sound-track for formative periods of our lives. Very few rock acts of my generation have been able to "make it" without MTV. But of course rock and roll has not just been something sampled in private. It has also offered a memorable communal experience, through the venue of the rock concert, for the Baby Boomers, for my own generation, and beyond. Yet is the communal use of music oriented to private consumption, or is it the other way around? With few exceptions, the private is the typical form of pop culture music appreciation.

Many within the younger American generations reside, then, within a complex and widespread economy of pop music, from the boombox to the Walkman to cable channels to magazines to concerts to rock radio to the Internet. My Catholic Christian tradition has known for a long time that liturgy is able to communicate theologically because, at its best, it immerses the participant bodily in a multisensory symbol system, which then is taken out more or less by the participant to reinterpret the wider world. Theologically, what we have in the lived experiences of many young adults today is a bodily participation in a multisensory musical symbol system which is a motley admixture of sin and grace—an ambiguous liturgy not of the word but of the world.

Pop music in its broadest sense is central to the lingua franca for many in the younger American generations, an important language through which we imagine and interpret our lives, including our spiritual lives. This music is being engaged religiously both explicitly and implicitly, in both thematic and unthematic ways. It has been both formative and expressive of younger American generations' spiritual quests. That is to say, it has formed us to desire certain satiations, to organize our relationships and emotions and even politics around certain music groups, memorable moments in a song, or concert experiences, and to be certain types of consumers. At the same time, this music is also somehow expressive of the needs, questions, and quests of the spiritual lives of those who purchase it. As does all "high" or "classical" art, so even the popular art of music can at times succeed—or fail—because it has so expansively spoken to and embodied the signs of the times. I see this in a basic exercise I sometimes do with young adults: asking them to name a scene from a movie or lyric from a song that encapsulates or has inspired one of their fundamental commitments, or helped
them reorder their world. Few young adults, upon reflection, come up empty.

This aspect of the life of some young adults today already proposes a partial agenda for theology of culture. The more we attend to the relationship between everyday spirituality and popular music, the greater the possibility that we will divine spiritual clues about the thirsts, questions, needs, and answers that a particular cohort is finding on its spiritual quest. Must this engagement choose between being celebratory or negatively critical? This question leads us directly to the issue of how to interpret culture, of the hermeneutical task proper to theology of culture. Here we must set aside more biographical concerns and attend to some important movements in theology of culture today.

*Theology Through Culture: Kathryn Tanner*

For myself, the work of Kathryn Tanner represents the most sophisticated formulation of the contemporary problematic of academic theology of culture. In her recent book *Theories of Culture*,\(^6\) Tanner has argued for the virtues of a postmodern understanding of theological work. For her, this means taking postmodern developments in anthropological theories of culture seriously as aids to theological inquiry, not only letting them constructively inform theology but also letting them criticize the inadequacies of modern anthropological theories of culture that surreptitiously inform much contemporary theology.

The modern anthropological interpreters of culture privilege a constellation of metaphors that stress the unity and relative autonomy of self-contained cultures. Cultures are seen as more or less well-bounded wholes, as enforcing strong and uniform determinants on human behavior, organically structured as intrinsically rationalized mechanisms, located in the context of a particular geographic space, and interpretable in terms of one moment in time, with change coming from outside the culture. This interpretation of culture allowed theorization of the social construction of cultures, the beginnings

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\(^6\) Kathryn Tanner, *Theories of Culture: A New Agenda for Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1997).
of a "nonevaluative alternative to ethnocentrism," and provided a critical lever by which one culture's practices could relativize those of another—usually a matter of the (Western) anthropologist invoking another culture's meanings to undermine the naturalness of his or her own. What culture seems to mean, in this interpretation, is the "meaning" of social practices, that is to say, a culture is comprised of a "characteristic set of norms, values, beliefs, concepts, dispositions, or preoccupations." The primary metaphors are culture as text, organism, work of art.

But in the last few decades, a different type of interpretation is emerging. Postmodern anthropological perspectives interpret culture with greater historical sensitivity and more attention to the actual dynamics of culture on the ground. They criticize the ethics of the modern interpretations, as too closely bound to an intellectualist, colonializing bent, in which the western interpreter becomes the privileged interpreter of the ideational aspects of "other" cultures. For the postmodern understanding, culture is viewed not as a shared ideational substance, like a "value" or "belief," but as a shifting, unstable, and ambiguous set of "common stakes," as a force field of materials whose meaning is essentially contested. The meaning of these materials is manifest as much in their "use" as in their ideational "value." In this view, "all parties at least agree on the importance of the cultural items that they struggle to define and connect up with one another."

What these postmodern interpretations privilege is the diversity internal to cultures, the way in which a common set of cultural materials is used, interpreted, manipulated, changed, appropriated, by various persons and groups—and in doing so, recovering a sense of human agency over against deterministic socialization, foregrounding the constantly renegotiated lines of power in culture that the modern interpretations underplayed. An appropriate metaphor for this interpretation of culture becomes the octopus, its "tentacles...in large part separately integrated, [and] neurally quite poorly connected with one another...[but] who nevertheless manages...to get around and to

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7 Ibid., p. 36.
8 Ibid., p. 30.
9 Ibid., p. 57.
preserve himself for a while any way, as a viable if ungainly entity.”

In the shift from modern to postmodern understandings of culture, we see a shift in hermeneutical keys: from the importance of fixing the right social-geographical context in which to understand certain ideas, to displaying the power-laden and historically specific context over cultural materials that are heterogeneous, inherently shifting and unstable, and susceptible of multiple interpretations. There are no “pure” cultures on this model. Boundaries are always porous. The attempt to fix them merely reveals their contingency and serves one set of interests in a culture over against others.

Tanner draws from these postmodern theories of culture to argue for a more adequate rendering of theology’s “internal” processes. She construes theology as a postmodern cultural practice. What this means is that theology is always dealing with cultural materials, never with something purely “Christian.” Academic Christian theology, like any other cultural practice, indeed surprisingly like the operations of nonacademic popular culture, takes in materials at play in the larger culture and “uses” them for certain ends. Nothing comes from a purely “internal” Christian autonomous culture for our interpretation. And so Christian theologians “make do” with cultural materials by reorganizing them to do “Christian” work. Theology takes concepts, ideas, practices, values, language, musics, assumptions, texts, symbols, gestures that are at stake in the various cultures in which Christians find themselves, and “trope” them, that is, make use of them in order to advance a particular claim, put them to work in order to make a tactical advance against other theologians or popular cultural pressure points. Whether for systematic, foundational, or practical theology, theologians take cultural materials and “use” them in ways that will appeal to those who care about the argument, using the contemporary accepted standards for good argument—which academic or popular—while fashioning those materials to their own advantage within those standards. So cultural materials will be spun, their valence shifted, their meaning decentered/recentered, their relationship to other cultural materials reordered, their force projected in a particular direction in the multifarious contests of theology. “Physis and

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hypostasis, for example, are common Greek words; it is only their use that is unusual in the early Christian creeds.”11 Thus, as Tanner points out, doing theology is a matter of

artistic taste, good gamesmanship, practical craftiness, and military tactics. The theologian senses the faultlines in the past and present theological productions with which it competes, vulnerabilities it hopes either to patch or to capitalize upon. It knows how to seize the moment, or better to create the moment in which a given theology is brought to crisis by a new historical or social development...Angling for change, the theologian determines which theological materials do the most work in a particular theological configuration and how much interpretive leeway already surrounds them.12

What makes materials Christian is not anything internal to the materials themselves, but the engagement of theology over their deployment for purposes of discipleship argued in the community of those who consider something to be at stake in these debates.

Moreover, for Tanner, once these cultural materials are put to use in academic theology, they are not immune from further contest by non-Christians. There is no pure Christian culture into which such materials are deposited after Christian interpretation. To argue such would be anthropologically unsustainable, insofar as it would presuppose a self-contained Christian culture whose materials were pure, free of influence from other cultures. It would be theologically unsustainable, as it presumes to control God’s Spirit by confining that Spirit to one community of interpreters.13 Interpretations that do not seem presently Christian can nonetheless be productive for Christian self-understanding. To make a hard rule otherwise is to tempt a particular tradition of Christianity to make an idol of itself by co-identifying its human standards with divine will.

11 Tanner, Theories of Culture, p. 113.
12 Ibid., p. 90.
13 “The test for proper use of borrowed materials is not whether those materials seem to threaten the established character of Christianity. What counts is whether that use distorts that to which Christians are trying to witness, and there is no easy test for that” (ibid., p. 150).
It seems to me that there are far-reaching implications of this approach for theology of culture. I would like to appeal to the ruse of "developing implications" in order to move "beyond" her work. Her book has thrown down the gauntlet on the question of method in theology of culture. She finds that both correlationist and postliberal accounts of the theological task are seriously hampered by their tendency to privilege a notion of a pure Christian tradition, text or culture that is interpreted "from within" and then in a discrete subsequent stage set in opposition to or dialogue with "the culture." She describes Christian theology as a profoundly cultural exercise, in which cultural materials are troped, reinterpreted, broken and reassembled, and struggled over, in a constantly shifting attempt to satisfy prevailing canons of argument while making a tactical advance within and so shifting the standards of good argument itself. In pressing these methodological questions, she has implicitly pressed the question of models of truth and models of epistemology for theology in general and theology of culture in particular. Theology is neither strictly "confessional" nor "scientific." No longer able to turn to "standards" of pure piety or pure scientificity, when she describes how theology as postmodern cultural practice operates, she continually turns to aesthetic metaphors. Despite the pretensions of modern theology to consistency, internal coherence, and conceptual clarity, she observes what happens in practice:

Judgments between competing theological proposals are rarely cinched by outright evidence of fallacious inferences, inconsistency, or unclarity on some party's part. Instead the issue of whose theological position is most compelling is decided by judgments of an aesthetic sort, ones like those used to determine, say, the best interpretation of a poem...Christianity is one big poem in that the meanings of its elements are subtle and ambiguous, and the connections among them elusive and associative, as matters of practice always are.\(^{14}\)

Theological arguments typically start where the audience is and through the manipulations of their use of those starting points, they work to seduce, captivate or invert the position of the addressee.\(^{15}\)

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\(^{14}\) Ibid., p. 91.

\(^{15}\) Ibid., p. 117.
It is the weave of the practices themselves that does the work when figuring out whether a disputed Christian practice can be included in it.\textsuperscript{16}

I propose that what would satisfy this postmodern formulation of theological work is what we might call an aesthetic model for theology; we could refer to this as a postmodern truth model, epistemological model, or perhaps most adequately, an aesthetic epistemological tactic. I propose this not as a new totalizing model but as one that should be considered in the diversity of models of truth proper to Christian theology in postmodernity. Indeed, I find evidence for an aesthetic epistemological tactic for theology of culture not just in Tanner's work but in the New Testament.

*Truth in Theological Interpretation of Culture*

Christian literature is full of "exegetic fantasies,"\textsuperscript{17} examples of interpretation of other cultures and of Christian culture that conform neatly to no contemporary model of truth, and yet are taken to be truth-bearing today. To take just one example, consider Paul in Romans 9, which I will interpret briefly through the recent commentary of the venerable Catholic scholar Joseph Fitzmyer. His is a commentary that no one would accuse of being a postmodern interpretation, and yet it seems to offer a window to some defamiliarizing tactics of truth in Paul.

Fitzmyer translates Paul's claim in Romans 9:33, "As it stands written, 'Look, I am setting in Zion a stone to stumble against, a rock to trip over; and no one who believes in him shall be put to shame.'" Fitzmyer comments that "Paul begins to quote Isa[iah] 128:16, but not exactly according to the LXX [Septuagint], and then introduces phrases from the LXX of Isa[iah] 8:14. The result is a conflation that disregards the contexts of the original and makes the OT [Old Testament] say almost the opposite of what it actually does say. Paul

\textsuperscript{16} Ibid., p. 147.

\textsuperscript{17} Michel Foucault, "Sexuality and Solitude," in Jeremy Carrette (ed.), *Religion and Culture by Michel Foucault* (New York: Routledge, 1999), p. 186.
thus accommodates Isaiah’s meaning to his own literary purpose.”

Earlier in the commentary, and in accord with truth practices in modern biblical interpretation, Fitzmyer had declared his own aim to “resist the temptation to read later problems into [Paul’s] text.”

And yet Fitzmyer observes in Rom 9:33 that Paul enacts what Fitzmyer himself (along with many modern biblical commentators) attempts to suppress, reading later Jesus-related problems into Isaiah’s text. An interpretive tension, usually unnamed, emerges: Without explanation, modern biblical commentators commonly hold modern scholarship to a standard that our founding religious texts themselves often cannot meet. The natural priority of a modern understanding of truth-criteria for interpreting scripture is simply presumed and rarely unsettled by the texts under study. Fitzmyer unintentionally exposes the extent to which anxiety about “read[ing] later problems into [the] text” is not an objective concern for truth but is itself a “later,” modern problem.

In other words, the form of Paul’s strategies of truth (for theologizing about culture) are implicitly categorized as premodern and so denied any claim on modern biblical productions of truth.

But that is not all. The setting of the conclusion of Romans 9 is a discussion about Israel stumbling over the “stumbling stone” (which led to Paul’s playful conflation cited above in Rom 9:33). Fitzmyer shows how Paul transmogrified what had previously been a ground

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19 Ibid., p. 542.
20 It is a common enough practice for commentators to note scribal errors of conflation (and name them as “errors”), but much less common to charge Paul with the same sort of “error,” even while noting the “conflation.”
21 The irony only deepens on p. 593, when Fitzmyer, in response to a proposal from another exegete that verses in Romans 10 should be ordered differently, asks rhetorically “Is that the way Paul would have wanted them read?” Fitzmyer forgets that Paul, the biblical “standard” with whom he is working for almost 800 pages, frequently ignores this criterion, and Fitzmyer offers no reason to account for the difference. That is to say, does Paul read Moses or the prophets in the way in which they would have “wanted” to be read? Fitzmyer’s own reading suggests otherwise. Either Fitzmyer must admit that Paul frequently misreads his received texts, and therefore draw considerably different theological conclusions, or (at the minimum) concede that evidence of “misreading” and preoccupation with “authorial intention” are not necessarily the final word on assessing authoritative interpretation, since they are not the sole method of the Bible itself.
of security (the cornerstone in Zion) into a ground of insecurity (a stumbling stone), and how Paul comes theologically to associate the stone with Christ as the “source both of stumbling and of faith.”

Fitzmyer then offers a stone-faced summary of Romans 9 whose heavy implications mill about the text, threatening to become a millstone around the spine of the book, drowning Romans in postmodern play. Fitzmyer plays a rock song: “In any case, Paul quotes the Hebrew Scriptures, which themselves announce the stumbling stone, which is Christ. So Paul quotes against the Jews the authority of their own Scriptures.” Paul’s text stumbles amid the rocks, and Fitzmyer skips around the implications of his own conclusions, tucking them into a crag out of sight of the reader. But after a conclusion such as this, the reader has no choice but to come to a conclusion as if they were stoned: if Paul quotes against the Jews the authority of their own Scriptures, is Paul stoning the authority of scripture itself?

Paul’s use of Hebrew scripture in Romans is not hermeneutically far from the rabbinic midrashic tradition, wherein the “interpretation of an earlier text becomes embodied in a narrative within a new text.” It could be said of both poststructural interpretation as well as midrash that it occurs “not at the point where literature becomes exegesis but at

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22 Fitzmyer, Romans, p. 580.
23 Ibid., italics mine.
24 My bo(u)ld(er) suggestion, that Paul’s use of scripture in several places in Romans is proto-poststructural (or conversely, that poststructural critics are neo-Pauline), is deserving of further future elaboration. Fitzmyer’s commentary provides a remarkably rock-solid invitation into the issue. Cf. also p. 588, wherein Fitzmyer suggests that Paul in Romans 10:5-13 is allusive, illogical, and a prooftexter; on pp. 561, 574, and 692 (Rom 9:9, 28, 14:11), Paul conflates verses to prove a larger theological point; on p.590 (Rom 10:6) Paul simply (and sublime[stone]ly?) substitutes “Christ” for the “word” of the Torah. The implications of all of this for Christian interpretation strategies today seem to me a quarry of promising theo(geo)logical investigation.
25 As Fitzmyer realizes (p. 376), Paul likely employs a style of interpretation “according to which identical words, occurring in two different places in Scripture, may be used as the basis for mutual interpretation.” The similarities between this rabbinic method and postmodern theories of “intertextuality” are striking, and have been noted by many authors. My suggestion is to bring Paul’s style into the ambit of poststructural consideration.
what might be called its opposite conjunction, where exegesis turns into literature and comes to possess its own language and voice."\(^{27}\) Indeed, the rich heritage of rabbinic midrash that continued for centuries after Paul illustrates the playful productivity of theological interpretation. As Terry Veling suggests, the "Talmud speaks of the great delight God takes in the interpretive play of the rabbis."\(^{28}\) According to one passage in the Talmud, "It was taught in the School of Rabbi Yishmael: 'Behold, My word is like fire—declares the Lord—and like a hammer that shatters rock (Jeremiah 23:29). Just as this hammer produces many sparks [when it strikes the rock], so a single verse has several meanings."\(^{29}\)

Burton Visotzky also illustrates the great playfulness in rabbinic interpretation in the forms of parables, allegories, anachronism, and puns.\(^{30}\) Stephen Moore, particularly in *Mark and Luke*, attempts to reclaim puns and jokes in biblical interpretation as productive of meaning. His work corrects the "exclusion of noninferential associations from the Western intellectual tradition—the homonym, homophone, or garden-variety pun. This exclusion can be traced back to such contingencies as Aristotle's strictures against homonyms...and Plato's exclusion of poets from his ideal state."\(^{31}\) Moore wants to resurrect playful interpretation, particularly the pun: "The pun is the trope of our age," running rampant across the surfaces of popular culture. "Its irruption in academic discourse represents a fusion of popular and elite cultural forms."\(^{32}\) Susan Handelman details many of the interpretive strategies of the rabbis in her *Slayers of Moses*. One of the rabbinic tropes included intentional misreadings of the text, such as "read not X, but Y." Joel Marcus has argued that John 7:38 yields evidence of how this rabbinic practice may have found its way into the

\(^{27}\) David Stern, referenced in ibid.


\(^{29}\) Referenced in ibid., p. 150.


New Testament.\textsuperscript{33} If so, then this spiritual misreading is then possibly not only a heritage of Judaism but a canonical Christian practice as well.\textsuperscript{34}

These are not really "methods" in the modern scientific sense but—as Tanner reveals about any theological method itself—they are strategies of truth, games of truth that disrupt our modern understandings of how truth in theology is produced. They would disrupt such judgments as the following regarding scriptural interpretation in the second through fifth centuries:

"Scriptural passages used for doctrinal ends were normally taken out of their original context and considered in isolation, producing results sometimes quite foreign to the sense which they would have had if interpreted within their proper context."\textsuperscript{35}

When considering the truth of theological interpretation today, why are we often quick to separate out Paul's theological conclusions from his theological methods of making truth claims, his way of using his materials, and to ordain only his conclusions as worthy of serious debate or of a claim on theology today? Why does Paul's theological "style" not have as much claim to canonicity as his particular conclusions?

In other words, it appears that the writers of scripture, Christianity's founding theologians, "did" theology in a way analogous to how Tanner describes theology being done today with a postmodern sensitivity. The question remains: If our modern models for theological truth—the


\textsuperscript{34} See also, for a similar problem in regard to the gospel of John, C. Goodwin, "How Did John Treat His Sources?" wherein he suggests that "John has forcibly accommodated everything [including the texts of his tradition] to his own purposes" (in Giuseppe Ruggieri and Miklos Tomka (eds.), *The Church in Fragments: Towards What Kind of Unity?* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1997), p.73). Also relevant are the Bible's own citation of non-canonical texts as "scripture." See Hans Dieter Betz, "Is the New Testament Canon the Basis for a Church in Fragments?" (in Ruggieri and Tomka (eds.), *Church in Fragments*), who notes (p. 39) in this surprising category of the non-scriptural-cited-as-scriptural the following passages: Luke 11:49, John 7:38, 1 Cor 2:9, James 4:5, and Jude 14-15.

objective scientficity of method rendered in conceptual clarity, internal coherence, and consistency, whether "correlational" or otherwise—do not sufficiently represent the way the truth of theological production works, how do we more adequately construe a model of truth or an epistemological tactic for theology of culture that can accommodate both Tanner and Paul?

To answer this question, I shall sketch an epistemological tactic for theology of culture: "imperaition," in the sense of making an imperative, fashioning an urgency, styling a claim to attention, inciting an action. Imperation is a term and model inspired by Luke Anderson's interpretation of the rhetoric of Bernard of Clairvaux in the book Bernardus Magister. Imperation is fundamentally "designed to foster the reader's experience of God."36

Anderson describes imperation as a "rhetorical epistemology." It attempts to attune the reader to their loving desire for God, which it elicits by a "rhetorical theologizing."37 It does so by working over elements familiar to the reader, showing what is "precious" by riffing on the "cheap." The "figures" of the author disclose the "incomprehensible" and "invisible" God.38 In Bernard, it presupposes and enforces certain epistemological commitments: that knowledge is eminently practical, that truth is a function of conformity to right appetite, and that the conditions of truth are never more than probable.39 Truth is something done or performed, as much as held conceptually or intellected speculatively. Indeed, it provides the resources so that the reader will "burn with desire."40

Imperation takes up interrelated tactics with regard to perceptions, judgments, and arguments, from which we can learn today. First, with regard to perceptions, this model concerns itself with an appeal to fantasy, or we might say today, to the imagination as the realm in which the most basic insights are transfigured into claims about the world. It

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38 Ibid., p. 96.
39 Ibid., pp. 100, 107.
40 Ibid., p. 108.
traffics in analogies and metaphors, using figures that are “imagistic, directive, effective, and allusive.”41 Indeed Anderson suggests that Bernard’s model of truth works as metaphors work: a metaphor “connects sensory appearances in order to assign them unexpected meanings and...it connects these same sensory appearances to supply answers to human needs.”42 And so for Bernard’s rhetorical theology of the Song of Songs, “spousal love has an unexpected meaning: it images divine love; but it also supplies the answer to our deepest human needs: it answers the human need for divine union.”43 Note the similarity to Tanner’s construal of theology: Anderson argues that the imperating rhetorician deals in “extrinsic and accidental relation[s]” between words and their referents; “the genius of the rhetor ‘discovers’ the relationship of likeness and ‘conveys’ this to his audience.”44

Second, imperation proposes judgments about truth, but these judgments seem more arbitrary than in scientific, dialectical, or strictly logical thought. Their only defense, says Anderson, is the experience of their author. This is simply required of any model of truth that will respond to the “large areas of human life in which the establishment of necessary conditions is not possible.”45 The advantage of this model over dialectic is its fecundity and productivity for human action, its “richness and width.”46

And third, imperation has its own style of argument. The point of argument for an imperating model of truth is not intellectual assent based on logical necessity. It is the approximation of logic, the mimicking of a syllogism, working in such a way as to induce action.

Before we endorse imperation for our task here, however, we may note three seemingly problematic elements in an attempted retrieval of Bernard’s model as our epistemological tactic. First, there is the presumed power of the author and their text to evoke this experience of God; the text is seen to make a claim on the reader out of its own power. This downplays the strong sense in which readers remake texts in their

41 Ibid., p. 116.
42 Ibid., p. 118.
43 Ibid.
44 Ibid., p. 119.
46 Ibid., p. 124.
reception of texts. In appropriating this model, we must shift the terms of imperation here from unidirectional metaphors of direction and influence from author to reader, to multivalent metaphors of use, ruse, manipulation by the reader of the writer’s text. Second, there is a presumption of a universal experience of God that may be evoked by this text. Yet theology of culture today cannot exempt itself from an analysis of (human) power within the rhetorical economy, as in any other model of truth or epistemology. However “natural” an experience of God may be, it is never non-ideological. And third, what cannot be lost in our retrieval of such a model is the possibility of violence in interpretation. One need only think of the history of abusive Christian interpretation of Jewish culture and scripture to justify untold degradations against Jewish people over twenty centuries.

Anderson’s interpretation of Bernard’s model is a possible theological lens on the aesthetic tactic I am trying to develop. Critically retrieving this tactic has several effects: (1) it helps to ensure that our theologies of culture are indeed “theological” and not merely “religious studies” of culture that have as their ends sociological or social-scientific answers; (2) taking a clue from the rhetorical construction of the phrase “designed to foster an experience of God,” it indicates that theology of culture can be rendered as performance, like a sermon, a play, or a musical performance, and not only as a scientific endeavor; (3) it links theology of culture to the history and practice of spirituality by bringing out theology of culture’s spiritual role, usually implicit, that can now be made explicit; (4) it links theology of culture to Christian ministry by bringing out theology of culture’s confessional role, usually implicit, that can now be made explicit; (5) it re-raises the question of what constitutes an experience of God, for whom, and under what circumstances, and makes that question constitutive of doing theology of culture itself. For example, one cannot necessarily exclude “fostering the reader’s transformation of their political situation” from “foster[ing] the reader’s experience of God,” given the inextricable interlinkage of one with another.

47 Bernard will “enlighten” and “root our affection in God.” And yet there are acknowledged limits to Bernard’s efforts to redirect his readers. (See ibid., pp. 96, 110.)
Imperation would make of theology of culture an experiment in discernment of the theologian’s own relation to the cultures of everyday life and his/her attempt to render that discernment intelligible publicly, so as to perform an interpretation in such a way that others may poach it toward a deeper appropriation of their experience of God.

Moreover, imperation may well help us to understand why certain seemingly strange uses of scripture in Christian tradition have had and do retain such deep traction with so many Christians, despite how “wrong” (according to modern epistemological canons) that use is. In other words, spinning out a model of truth with imperation at its heart may help us to more fruitfully interpret the history and present of a Christian antinomianism.

Imperation would suggest that religious experiences in culture are always in part a matter of our interpretation of those experiences, what we (individually and socially) “bounce” off of them, and whether what bounces back, like a sonar, has the “power” (in both good and bad senses: in its ability to penetrate to our soul and in its constrictive/productive control of us) to manifest the infinite mystery bearing each of us. Emmanuel Levinas writes, “The truth illuminates whoever breathes on the flame and coaxes it back to life. More or less. It’s a question of breath.”

48 Imperation is interpretation as religious performance in a “world come of age” without a Deus ex machina in the form of a scientific guarantee to save our interpretation. 49 It is releasing our theology of culture to Foucault’s insight, “If interpretation were the slow exposure of the meaning hidden in an origin, then only metaphysics could interpret the development of humanity. But if interpretation is the violent or surreptitious appropriation of a system of rules, which in itself has no essential meaning, in order to impose a direction, to bend it to a new will, to force its participation in a different game, and to subject it to a secondary rule, then the development of humanity is a series of interpretations.”

49 For these themes, see Bonhoeffer, Letters and Papers from Prison, ed. Eberhard Bethge (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1997).
What does imperative do? It is a style of interpretation that proceeds with such a deft use of cultural materials that it becomes the cultural material itself with which the receiver may re-describe their experience of God, may experience themselves as self-transcending, may creatively occupy unclaimed spaces of freedom, may intensify a sensitivity to God’s incomprehensibility by accepting more deeply the mystery of their own or another life, may appropriate their graced participation in God by an act of confession, contrition, political solidarity, or reconciliation, may begin to shift uncomfortably from a self-deceptive slumber, may render a concrete gratitude for an unselfish act, may protest against the domestication of the absolute dignity of the finite mystery of humanity by explicit political intervention. In all these ways, imperative provides the pretext for the next step, for a more mature appropriation, of the incomprehensible nearness of God to human experience. We may interpret imperative as the effective tactic in Christian texts as diverse as St. Paul, St. Bernard, St. Teresa, and St. Bono of U2. And in a definitive way, in Jesus of Nazareth’s interpretations of his own culture and tradition.

Imperative admits the lack of a firm control theology has over its reception, while foregrounding a self-consciousness about its rhetorical power. It resists a nihilistic, coldly calculating, or merely cynical conclusion about the use of this rhetorical power in favor of a respect for serving human flourishing. It does this by an appeal, which it knows that it cannot control, to the “unthematic” experience of God that it believes every human being bears. That means that instead of using a variety of literary forms, tropes, shifts, reversals, and reconfigurations secretly—as is often the case today out of respect for fidelity to a scientific (literary) form—the theologian of culture may consciously creatively employ these in their work and watch for their employment in the work of others.

Imperative raises the question of theological production: How does one render such an interpretation? The theologian must risk immersing herself/himself in the particularities of cultural matrices; it is a matter in a sense of a willingness to undergo spiritual-cultural formation for the sake of one’s theology. One takes up an active engagement in one sector of a culture: learning its language, rules, problematics, symbols, histories, discourses, conflicts, and risking oneself as part of its atmosphere (whether an academic theological culture or a lower
class multiracial urban culture). It something akin to what David Tracy called the "journey of intensification into particularity."\textsuperscript{51} In doing so, one enters deeply and experientially into the symbol system and matrix of practices of a particular group, cohort, culture. One does not merely serve up that journey of intensification as an unassailable confession. Neither does one attempt to cancel its plurality and ambiguity by totalizing descriptions or moralizing judgments about its dynamics. Rather, one learns its problematic—as if from "the inside"—though of course never purely on the "inside." This problematic, which will be renderable as a force field of ruses, will then be correlated with the ruses of one’s own religious "tradition." A correlation of ruses under the ruse of correlation. This correlation of ruses is the style of the postmodern theologian of culture. It is also the style of any theologian. Correlation seems to be an indispensable ruse, in part due to its capability of dealing with many epistemological models—including imperation. Theologians—in the academy and everyday life—are thus always already cultural workers.

**Conclusion: Theses for Being a Theologian of Culture**

I shall conclude by briefly proposing theses for postmodern theology of culture, derived from the foregoing discussion:

First, all theology can be rendered as theology of culture. This means that any theological production is an abstracted borrowing of cultural materials and can be read back down to those materials in order to see the cultural material at stake in the theological production. All theology is indebted to and commentary on the cultures from which it draws its materials.

Second, theology is a form of cultural engagement and intervention, not a cult of disengaged expertise. For one recent example of this sort of intervention among many, consider Bethge’s description of Dietrich Bonhoeffer: "As a Christian theologian of the resistance, [Bonhoeffer] did not simply observe and analyze from an aloof and critical perspective, but shaped viable formulas in the midst of action."\textsuperscript{52}

\textsuperscript{51} See David Tracy, *The Analogical Imagination: Christian Theology and the Culture of Pluralism* (New York: Crossroad, 1981), on the production of the "classic" work.  
Third, theologians of culture in the present may be obligated to help younger generations to understand, interpret, and contest their symbolic order; and to teach a theology of everyday life that will help discern sin and grace in popular media culture and everyday life.

Fourth, theology of culture in postmodernity will construe Jesus not as countercultural, which is after Tanner a hopelessly problematic term today; instead Jesus must be interpreted as critically cultural: that is to say, not standing from a pure point outside of his cultures, but instead using the cultural materials at his disposal in service of knowing God and freeing himself and his neighbors. And in this way, the strangeness of Jesus’ own practice becomes an invitation to defamiliarize our own, for the sake of a theology of culture both more Christian and more contemporary.