Down to the Roots of the Word "Culture"

Massimo Angelini[1]

Translated by Etain Addey

I would like to reflect on the word "culture", a word which suffers nowadays from a certain ambiguity; its shades of meaning appear nebulous and the term is used in many, sometimes contradictory, senses. This is in the way of things: words may emerge initially with great power to guide our steps in specific directions but the very favour they find inevitably erodes their meanings until they are reduced to mere suggestions. Can we recover a less ambiguous meaning for the word "culture", one that might offer more precise guidance? If the nature of things lies in the depths of the words which express them, might we not usefully delve into the etymology of this word in a search for its roots, its origins? In doing so, I am aware that I am not saying anything new: the origin of the word "culture" can be found in any etymological dictionary, but sometimes it is a good idea to talk about what we already know - if it seems useful, indeed necessary, to repeat it.

1. Like many words which share the same ending, such as "venture", "future", and, for example, the Italian words *nascituro* (baby about to be born), *iattura* (bad luck in arrival), and also the word "nature", culture is derived from a future participle, a form which exists in Latin but not in Italian. The future participle indicates something that is about to be, something that is imminent, that does not yet exist and yet at the same time participates in existence, something that is coming into being, of which we glimpse the mere shape, an outline, a prefigurement. A tree is the "future participle" of the seed, from which it derives life and form. A finished house is the "future participle" of the newly laid foundations. Each manifest form is the "future participle" of the plans drawn up for it.

The matrix which gives birth to the word culture is the Latin verb *còlere*, which means, first of all, "to cultivate", and so metaphorically "to take care", "to treat with care and attention", and therefore "to honour"; by extension, since in order to cultivate, one has to be in a place and therefore in some sense settled, it also means "to inhabit", "to dwell". *Còlere* gives birth to some important contemporary words: "agriculture", "colony", "colonize", the Italian words *culto* ("worship" and so English "cult"), *inquilino* ("tenant")…as well as "agriculture" and "culture". And what is it that is hiding behind the word còlere? It is an ancient root, *kwel*, meaning "wheel", "turn", "walk in a circle" and there are shoots budding from this root into words found in the Indoeuropean languages, words with similar meanings: Sanskrit *cakram* (wheel, circle), Greek *kyklos* (circle, cycle), the afore-mentioned Latin *còlere* (to cultivate), English "wheel". By looking through the root word *kwel*, we understand the original significances of

cultivation contained in còlere: "turning the earth", "ploughing round". Over time, because of the intimate nature of agricultural activity, the meaning extended to include the idea of "taking care", making grow", and in some southern Italian dialects still extant, produced the idea of to be useful", "to help". But from the kwel root "move in a circle", we also have the meanings of "to honour" and "to venerate", an intensification of the idea of "taking care" and also connected to the circularity of the religious procession, sacred perambulation, turning in a circle, inside or around the temple or sacred space or the place where foundations are laid out for building, the closing of the circle, completion. [2]

The neutral nominative plural form, *colturus*, the future participle of *còlere*, gives rise to the word culture. The future participle has a final sense but it also signifies something ongoing, something in action. Thus, just as venture refers to something that is about to go ahead, and Italian *nascituro* refers to a baby about to come into the world, so culture refers to what is about to be cultivated, what is going to be grown and "honoured", "cherished". Whereas the future participle of *còlere*, *colturus*, gives us "culture", the past participle, *coltus*, gives us "cult", the sacred space made ready, the land ploughed and prepared, the veneration made visible and defined by the sacred rites, in Sanskrit *ta*, hence through the Latin we have Italian *ruota* ("wheel"), straight, right, erect, and rite, ritual. The rite defines the cult.

And worship, the cult, according to Raimon Pannikar, a theologian who has cultivated a meeting place for the dialogue between Hinduism and Christianity,

> […] is that act through which Man cooperates actively with the rest of Creation (Gods and other beings) in the generation (and maintenance) of his life and the life of the cosmos…… Not all actions are worship: only those which are considered to be the end result or expression of a belief, that is to say, of a religion – if we agree that religion is the "place" of belief. Worship is a symbolic act, not a purely private act expressing the psychological or subjective intention of the worshipper, nor an exclusively objective act which just expresses its content poetically.[3]

Worship, the cult, is a symbolic act because, like a symbol (from the Greek *syn-ballo* "to put together"), it unites the different planes of existence, creating a bridge between them, connecting the physical world with the metaphysical world, the visible with the invisible and, like every symbol, it is the key to a deep engagement with the nature of things. Every act and every epiphany which connects – or rather reconnects (the original meaning of "religion", to bind together again) – humanity to the world around it is a grounding of that engagement, that union, expressed ritually by worship, the cult.

And what of culture? Since the future participle points towards something that, once it has come into being, can be expressed by a past participle, we can journey to the wellsprings of the word and deduce that culture points to the cult, to worship. Culture comes before worship, chronologically speaking, just as the announcement of an event precedes its occurrence, or as pregnancy precedes the birth of a newborn baby.

However, if we look at things from another point of view, not from their order of appearance in time but from the point of view of their ends, in other words from a teleological standpoint, the criterion of precedence is reversed. If what is brought to completion is the result of what was announced or foretold, then we see that worship – the cult – is the final cause of culture; thus we can say that, not in a chronological sense but in a teleological sense, it is worship which gives birth to culture, worship which provides the bearings for culture. Thus, in the same way, it is our destination which gives origin to our journey and what follows the moment of death which gives origin and direction to this present life.

Every completed act is the "future participle" of its plan at the moment of conception, and yet, from a teleological standpoint, it is also what gives origin and direction to the plan. In the same way, culture, understood in this sense, finds its

completion in worship (the "finished" form of culture) and yet is, at the same time, rooted in worship.

The Russian philosopher Pavel A. Florenskij, approaching this subject from the field of ethnography and the history of religions, in a note dated 1921, observes:

> According to the most recent scientific theories of the sacred, culture has its origins in worship, in the cult, and derives from the acts of worship. All philosophical and scientific concepts derive from worship. And so too does myth. The original reality of religion is not dogma or myth, but worship - that is to say, a concrete reality.[4]

Florenskij is certainly not alone in focusing on the generative relationship between worship and culture; the same focus appears in the work of other thinkers during the flowering of Russian philosophical and theological thought in the early decades of the twentieth century: I am thinking of Nikolaj A. Berdiaev and Sergej N. Bulgakov, among others. Closer to our day, Pavel N. Evdokimov writes in 1972, "When it is sound, culture, born of worship, recovers its liturgical origins".[5]

2. From *kwel* to *còlere*: perhaps this is how a sense of the rhythms of time was born, with the cultivation of the land and a new awareness of the patterns of the seasons. While the word "culture" is tied to agriculture, and the sedentary form of society – known as civilization – that emerged from it, culture as a concept may be associated with any intentional form of management or cultivation of the land (where in some indigenous contexts management or cultivation may involve the use of fire, for example, rather than tilling). Whatever the form of land management involved, the close relationship with the rhythms of time and the regularities or patterns of concrete reality that it entails produce a sense of cosmic order, and acceptance of our active role in re-inscribing this order. Such a sense of cosmic order, and acceptance of our active role in re-inscribing it, underlies culture. Today however our loss of this relationship, together with our loss of a sense of the rhythms of time and patterns of reality, is pushing us back towards a pre-cultural, original chaos, the chaos in which our prehistoric ancestors, depending passively on nature's bounty, must have dwelt.

Culture then, with its deep nature revealed to us by an understanding of its origins, has to do with whatever requires care, cherishing, honouring: in these meanings, the final value of the future participle finds eloquent expression. Culture is whatever leads to this taking care, this cherishing and honouring – and whatever constitutes the focus of such acts. It necessarily entails an uplifting process (an encouraging of growth) and, as befits worship, it connects the planes of being and allows us to become aware of what is above and beyond. Culture thus has to do with making things grow and flourish, raising them, observing the patterns that sustain them. Nowadays however we are unable to use this word in any absolute sense, and use it instead in relation to some particular thing: we talk about specific "cultures" as in the "goldsmithing culture", "socialist culture", "urban culture"… But the recovery of the word's origins shows us how, in making it serve as a prop for specifics, we have lost sight of the absolute nature of culture and severed it from its deep taproot. So now we speak of culture when we mean civilization[6] or we use it as a container for the knowledge, habits and values of one or another social groupings, historical or geographical contexts, leaving the way open for the idea of a plurality of "cultures" and diluting the original meaning with an obscure phenomenology.

3. I would like to draw two observations from this discussion.

(i) Since culture, with its roots in worship, is driven by an intimate desire to nurture growth and flourishing, it should not be confused with the kind of ostentatious scholarship undertaken for its own sake and concerned with the accumulation of facts which characterizes much of our society and academia, a gathering of information

where knowledge is reduced to an empty shell, a mere game of one-upmanship among members of a club. Culture, with its teleological foundations in worship, fosters growth, a reaching out; like the cult from which its roots draw sustenance, culture is expressed in a symbolic act and so creates a bridge between people and between the worlds; culture is not concerned with vanities, with soulless things, it does not play tricks with mirrors because, born of an active verb, it finds its completion in the thing or the being whom it addresses. Those who speak only to confuse, who complicate the things that should be easy to understand (or trivialize what is complex), those who try to render abstract what is concrete, those who use their knowledge or their words to distance themselves from others, to make themselves look big and others look small – instead of using words to share and exchange - cultivate nothing, indeed they create a desert. Instead of fostering growth, they wither, withdrawing honour from all but the narcissistic self, and instead of producing culture, they cut the self off from the human community.

Now that we have discovered the original significance of the word, we can see how lengthy schooling, the possession of a rich vocabulary, a capacity for memorizing names and quotations, a head crammed with ideas - none of this in itself has anything to do with culture.

(ii) In consumer society, the word culture is often used wrongly, almost as a synonym for entertainment and leisure activities. In some newspapers, the page dedicated to culture is in fact all about shows, social events of one kind or another and packaged folklore. We can see this when local authorities organize "cultural" happenings – fairs, all-night city events, the turning of places and communities into shows. Is growth being nurtured here? Is anything being uplifted? Is anything being honoured?

> Nowadays, culture is nothing but a huge machine designed for ostentation and profit, fashion or fraud, but above all for passing the time or for gambling on the winnings of the culture industry.[7]

The confusion of entertainment with culture goes hand in hand with the word's loss of significance and with the confusion rife in the creative world, where every daub is proclaimed art, every sound music, every limerick poetry and all writing, literature.

As we have already suggested, the loss of culture as a guiding light pushes us back into the stage of chaos from which it originally led us forth.

4. In western Europe, in our particular historical moment when chaos prevails in society, it is common to say – as at the end of the Roman empire in the fourth century CE – that the barbarians are at the gates. But now they are not only at the gates - they are at the heart of our times and have been here now for many decades. And it is no longer only the worst of it, the tips of the iceberg, that are visible – Auschwitz, the gulag of Kolyma, war in the Balkans: the barbarians are here in the vulgarity of our everyday language, in the unkindness between people and of people towards their places and their own past. Friedrich W. Nietzsche watched the desert advancing,[8] but nowadays it is hard to see it because the desert sand has blown into every nook and cranny of daily life and, like everything ordinary and banal, it is no longer news.

The school system, which ought to act as the bulwark against the barbarians, is as full of barbarity itself as a wet sponge. When the barbarians reach the heart of the empire, perhaps it is time to rebuild Cassiodoro's monastery Vivarium, Saint Benedict's Order at Montecassino . The barbarians are at the very heart of our world and so, because our day is brief, there is no time to waste on the pleasuresome follies of erudition or on culture as a show or pastime, nor – unless we simply want to console ourselves with an "après moi, le deluge" like those who expect the end of the world any day now – can we allow ourselves to be distracted by the entertainment industry. Our

time needs culture, the culture which cherishes, which reaches out, which helps us to align ourselves with the masterly order of things, which serves to make whole again the cosmos that relativity and indifference (masked as tolerance) have torn apart: here, as its roots have shown us, lies the deep nature of culture.

Notes

1. Massimo Angelini holds a master's degree in Philosophy and Modern History and a doctorate in Urban and Rural History. He is the author of essays on the history of mentalities; the social configuration of local communities between the *ancien régime* and the contemporary era; the rural tradition; and biodiversity cultures. He is currently working on the notion of the sacred and the metaphysics of time and symbol. His book, *Le meraviglie della generazione: Voglie materne, nascite straordinarie e imposture nella storia della cultura e del pensiero medico – secoli XV-XIX*, has just been published by Mimesis, in Milano, Italy.
2. Riccardo Garbini (2007), Che cos'è la cultura, in Autori vari, Contaminazioni. Studi sull'intercultura, a cura di Dario Costantino, Franco Angeli, Milano, pp. 25-36, pp. 26-27 highlights the three meanings of còlere: a. "cultivate", in the sense of acting, cultivating, working on the created world; b. "to cultivate oneself", that is to say, working on one's inner growth, the perfecting of human qualities; c. "to worship", which means to be aware of ones own creaturely nature and ones capacity for seeking wisdom. […] The Latin abstract noun, which derives from the neuter plural of the future participle, can thus be translated as "(that) which can be cultivated, also in oneself and which can be the object of worship". He later links these three meanings to the three dimensions which he suggests lay at the foundations of medieval civilization and coloured its reicentrism (vs later anthropocentrism) and consuetude: the cosmological dimension (the earth), the onto-anthropological dimension (the individual) and the metaphysical dimension.
3. Raimon Panikkar (2008) [1979], Culto y secularizaciòn. Apuntes para una antropologìa liturgica. Ed. cons.: R. Pannikar, Opera omnia, vol. IX, Mito, simbolo, culto, a cura dell'Autore e di Milena Carrara Pavan, Jaca Book, Milano, pp. 329, 364.
4. Pavel A. Florenskij (2011) [1921], Kul'turnoo-istoriceskoe mesti i preposylki christianskogo miroponimanija. Ed. cons.: la concezione cristiana del mondo, trad. e cura di Antonio Maccioni, Pendragon, Bologna, p. 131.
5. Pavel N. Evdokimov (1990) [1972], Théologie de la beauté. Ed. cons.: Teologia della bellezza. L'arte dell'icona, a cura di p. Giuseppe da Vetralla, San Paolo, Cinisello Balsamo (MI), p. 80.
6. On the distinction between culture and civilization, see Sergej N. Bulgakov (2006) [1930], Dogmatičeskoe obosnovanie kul'tury. Ed. cons.: I fondamenti dogmatici della cultura, a cura di Maria Campatelli, Lipa, Roma, pp. 77-84; Nikolaj A. Berdjaev (2007), O kul'ture. Ed. cons.: Sulla cultura, in N. Berdjaev, Pensieri controcorrente, a cura di Adriano Dell'Asta, La casa di Matriona, Milano, pp. 83-97.
7. Elémire Zolla (1971), Che cos'è la tradizione, Bompiani, Milano, p. 202.
8. "The desert is growing. Woe to him who habours deserts!" (Friedrich W. Nietzsche (2007) [1977], Also sprach Zarathustra. Ed. cons.: Così parlò Zarathustra, a cura di Giorgio Colli, trad. di Mazzino Montinari, Adelphi, Milano, part IV, 2).