

# Book Review Essay

Karl Allen Kuhn, *Insights from Cultural Anthropology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2018), 128 pp. \$29.00

Review by Dan Liroy

## 1.0 Introduction

**K**ARL ALLEN KUHN's *Insights from Cultural Anthropology* transcends a simple methodological guide. It is an engaging theological invitation. Though concise at 128 pages, the book ventures into significant interpretive territory, urging readers not only toward wiser Scripture reading but also toward more faithful shepherding of Christian communities within their culturally complex world.

For Lutherans—grounded in the centrality of the Gospel proclaimed through Word and Sacrament, shaped by the Law-Gospel dialectic, and lived out in vocation—Kuhn offers an approach that resonates with and potentially deepens these core commitments. His presentation of cultural anthropology promises to enrich Gospel proclamation by anchoring it within tangible historical contexts, safeguarding it from cooption by transient modern ideologies. Crucially, Kuhn's method fosters interpretive humility, heightened communal awareness, prophetic witness, and pastoral sensitivity—qualities deeply aligned with Lutheran identity and practice.

## 2.0. Overview and Foundational Methodology

### 2.1 Position within Scholarship

AS PART OF FORTRESS PRESS'S ACCESSIBLE *Insights* series, Kuhn's volume follows a clear, practical format: tracing the method's development, examining its contemporary questions, highlighting enduring insights, and exploring future possibilities. This structure is intentionally pedagogical, making it a useful resource for pastors, students, and lay leaders seeking both foundational understanding and practical application within a single, manageable text.

### 2.2 Core Definitions: Cultural Anthropology and Social-Scientific Criticism

Kuhn defines cultural anthropology broadly as the study of culture, primarily through ethnography (a detailed examination of specific groups) and ethnology (a comparative analysis of cultural patterns). He explicitly links this discipline to

social-scientific criticism within biblical studies. This exegetical approach utilizes specific models (heuristics) to rigorously evaluate the social and cultural dimensions embedded within biblical texts and their worlds.

### 2.3 Methodological Heritage

Kuhn's method builds upon a well-established tradition in biblical scholarship, notably the work of John H. Elliott and Hebrew Bible specialists like Bruce Malina, Jerome Neyrey, and John Pilch. These scholars pioneered efforts to reconstruct the social realities—honor-shame codes, kinship structures, patronage networks, purity dynamics—that shaped the world of the biblical authors and original audiences.

Kuhn situates his contribution within this lineage, offering both theoretical grounding and practical case studies. He insists that context is not merely supplemental information but is essential for meaning-making. His central analogy—comparing exegesis to archery—illustrates that without proper “form” (interpretive context), the interpreter's “arrow” (understanding) will inevitably miss its mark.

### 2.4 Context: The Indispensable Framework

Chapter 1 establishes Kuhn's core hermeneutical principle: faithful interpretation demands attention to three interconnected contexts:

1. The Original Context: The social-historical world of the biblical authors and their initial audiences.
2. The Interpreter's Context: The cultural milieu, assumptions, and biases of the modern reader.
3. The Interpretive Context: The chosen methods and presuppositions brought to the text.

This threefold awareness cultivates interpretive humility and clarity. It is particularly vital for helping Lutheran readers distinguish between the text's original meaning within its ancient setting and its potential significance for contemporary faith and life, always guided by the Gospel's central light.

### 2.5 The Archery Analogy: Precision and Practice

Kuhn's opening metaphor effectively equates sound biblical interpretation with skilled archery. Precision requires correct form; a single flawed assumption can send the interpretation wildly off course. He emphasizes that humility, consistent practice, and a disciplined return to the interpretive “mantra”—especially the imperative of context—are essential. For Lutherans, steeped in a tradition of disciplined, Gospel-centered reading sustained by the Spirit, this analogy holds particular resonance, underscoring the need for careful, prayerful engagement with Scripture.

## 2.6 Structure: The Four-Axis Design

The book's organization mirrors the *Insights* series template:

1. Origination and Development: The historical emergence of the method.
2. Contemporary Questions: Current challenges and debates.
3. Enduring Insights: The abiding contributions of anthropology.
4. Future Considerations: Potential future directions for scholarship.

This clear structure enhances the book's practicality for classroom use, seminary education, or parish study groups, providing a logical pathway from foundational concepts to concrete application.

## 2.7 Theological Stakes for Lutheran Readers

For Lutherans, Kuhn's emphasis on layered context connects readily with the Law-Gospel dynamic. Recognizing the economic pressures of the Roman Empire, Israel's intricate purity systems, or early Christian struggles over inclusion, helps readers discern where God's Word confronts and critiques human structures (Law) and where it upholds and orders communal life (Gospel). Cultural anthropology, therefore, holds significant potential to enhance Gospel proclamation by grounding it more firmly within the very world where God's redemptive act in Christ originally unfolded.

# 3.0 Chapter Summaries and Key Lutheran Resonances

## 3.1 Chapter 1: A Socially Sensitive Reading

KUHN OPENS WITH THE ARCHERY ANALOGY, warning about interpretive instability when Scripture's original context is ignored. He establishes the "mantra" of the three contexts as essential for faithful interpretation. This model strongly supports a Lutheran approach to disciplined *lectio divina*, reading Scripture corporately through the lens of the received Gospel, the Lutheran confessional heritage, and the specific contexts of local congregations, always seeking the Holy Spirit's guidance.

## 3.2 Chapter 2: Political and Economic Realities

Kuhn argues that ancient life integrated religion, politics, and economics, starkly contrasting with modern compartmentalization. Understanding the weight of the Roman imperial economy, he contends, is crucial for interpreting Jesus' teachings on wealth, taxes, and power. This analysis offers fresh grounding for Lutheran theology regarding vocation, stewardship, and the Christian's relationship to governing authorities (e.g., *Augsburg Confession*, Article XVI), highlighting how faith engages all spheres of life under God's governance.

### 3.3 Chapter 3: Social Structures and Dynamics

This chapter unpacks kinship systems, class divisions, patronage networks, and honor-shame codes as fundamental social forces shaping biblical texts and communities. Applying these anthropological lenses can yield richer insights into Jesus' parables, the prophets' social critiques, and the complex social tensions within the Pauline churches, illuminating the embedded nature of the Gospel within concrete human relationships.

### 3.4 Chapter 4: Resistance and Conformity

Kuhn observes that Scripture is not monolithic in its stance toward dominant cultures. Some texts oppose imperial mandates (e.g., prophetic critiques, Revelation), while others promote conformity to social norms as a means of stability (e.g., household codes, Romans 13). This dialectic—prophets confronting kings, Christians negotiating Roman rule, purity codes preserving identity—resonates with the Lutheran understanding of the “two kingdoms” and the necessary tension between the prophetic voice calling for justice and the pastoral concern for communal order and witness.

### 3.5 Chapter 5: Purity as Boundary Maintenance

Kuhn discusses purity codes as systems that define insiders/outside, as well as clean/unclean, and community boundaries. This lens is invaluable for interpreting Jesus' confrontations over purity laws (e.g., Mark 7) and the early church's struggle to include Gentiles. For Lutherans, this anthropological perspective sheds light on the radical boundary-breaking enacted in Baptism (Gal 3:28; Col 3:11), the inclusive hospitality of the Lord's Supper, and the ongoing challenge and grace of forming diverse communities centered in Christ alone.

## 4.0 Lutheran Theological Evaluation: Strengths and Refinements

### 4.1 Noteworthy Strengths

- *Deepening Contextual Humility*: Lutherans confess that the Gospel must be proclaimed within context. Kuhn's method rigorously requires pastors and readers to recognize and critically examine their own cultural assumptions, setting aside ethnocentric filters. This aligns powerfully with Luther's insistence that Scripture must interrogate us, challenging our preconceptions and calling us to repentance and faith.
- *Equipping Prophetic Discipleship*: Luther's reform addressed both spiritual and social abuses. Kuhn's focus on political-economic structures helps pastors discern where the Gospel demands prophetic resistance (e.g., against systemic injustice, idolatrous power structures) and where faithfulness

calls for honoring God-given order and authority (e.g., Rom 13:1–7, 1 Pet 2:13–17). Preaching informed by this awareness can foster justice, form Christian conscience, and sustain the oppressed, embodying the Law’s critical function and the Gospel’s liberating power.

- *Reintegrating Vocation and Daily Life*: Luther’s doctrine of vocation emphasizes that Christian faith permeates all of life. Kuhn’s method helps pastors and laity recognize how every sphere—work, citizenship, family—is embedded within social structures. The task is not to escape society for a purely “spiritual” realm, but to bring the Gospel’s transformative witness into workplaces, homes, and economies as tangible signs of God’s coming Kingdom, lived out in daily callings.
- *Accessible Formation for Diverse Audiences*: Kuhn writes with commendable clarity and pastoral warmth, making complex anthropological concepts accessible without oversimplification. This approach effectively engages students and laypersons, often reframing familiar biblical texts in illuminating ways. The book also offers constructive frameworks for addressing issues such as oppression, diversity, and inequality within the church and society.
- *Enriching Worship and Preaching Praxis*: Kuhn’s lens has concrete implications for liturgy. Prayers can engage economic realities; sermon illustrations can resonate across social strata; corporate confession can address communal sins and patterns; the Eucharist becomes a tangible enactment of boundary-breaking unity in Christ. Anthropology thus nurtures preaching and worship that truly meets people within the complexities of their lived experience.

#### 4.2 Considerations and Necessary Refinements for Lutheran Practice

- *Divine Agency Requires Explicit Integration*: Anthropology, by nature, focuses on human social realities. While not denied, Kuhn’s work largely keeps God’s redemptive action and the Holy Spirit’s work implicit. Lutheran theology must intentionally supplement this method, anchoring contextual awareness firmly within the narrative of God’s initiative in Christ. The interpreter’s ultimate task is not merely sociological analysis but to proclaim where and how Christ intersects, judges, and transforms human structures through Word and Sacrament.
- *Doctrinal Connections Need Articulation*: Kuhn does not systematically connect anthropological insights to core Lutheran doctrines. Lutherans must actively undertake this integration. For instance, interpreting purity laws demands clear Law/Gospel differentiation: the Law exposes sin and boundaries, while the Gospel announces forgiveness and inclusion in Christ. Kinship models should be viewed through the lens of the sacramental

community formed by Baptism. Anthropology provides the cultural “map”; Lutheran doctrine provides the theological “compass” oriented to Christ.

- *Guarding Against Relativism*: Anthropology’s necessary focus on cultural particularity carries a risk of obscuring the Gospel’s universal claim. Lutherans affirm the Gospel’s power within specific cultures and its cosmic scope—Christ died for all (John 3:16, 1 John 2:2). Interpreters must balance deep cultural insight with unwavering conviction in the Gospel’s transcultural truth and its call to all peoples. The particularity of the Incarnation serves the universality of redemption.
- *Brevity Necessitates Further Exploration*: The book’s introductory scope (128 pages) limits the depth on specific biblical books or extended pastoral scenarios. This is not a flaw but an invitation. Pastors and students will need to supplement Kuhn’s work with deeper exegetical studies, resources such as his *The Kingdom According to Luke and Acts*, focused seminary courses, or sermon workshops that apply these insights to specific texts and contexts.

## 5.0 Kuhn as a Catalyst for Renewed Lutheran Ministry

### 5.1 Expanding Cultural Imagination

LUTHERAN PREACHING CAN SOMETIMES FOCUS predominantly on textual meaning in isolation. Kuhn’s anthropology provocatively asks: “What unseen social forces shaped this text? What hidden cultural scripts shape us?” This questioning can lead to richer preaching, more resonant liturgy, and greater mutual understanding within diverse congregations, breaking open monocultural assumptions.

### 5.2 Challenging Homogeneity, Reclaiming Lutheran Adaptability

Cultural anthropology challenges the notion of a “hidden,” culturally neutral Christianity. If church practice becomes uniform (e.g., reflecting only a dominant middle-class culture in the Global North), the Gospel’s inherent power to adapt and transform diverse cultures is diminished. Kuhn’s method actively helps reclaim cultural plurality and the Gospel’s remarkable adaptability—a historic strength of the Lutheran tradition in its worldwide spread.

### 5.3 Toward a Confessional Cultural Hermeneutic

The Lutheran tradition, with its Christocentric focus, Law/Gospel hermeneutic, and Sacramental theology, provides essential correctives to potential anthropological relativism. It offers the framework for a confessional cultural hermeneutic. Kuhn provides invaluable cultural tools; Lutheran doctrine provides the definitive redemptive contour centered on justification by grace through faith in Christ.

## 5.4 Formation for a Globalized Church

Kuhn implicitly calls readers to break free from monocultural bubbles. The experiences of immigrant, indigenous, and global majority churches become vital lenses through which predominantly Western congregations can recognize their own cultural limitations and learn to read Scripture with broader, more empathetic, and theologically grounded perspectives.

## 6.0 Conclusion

KARL ALLEN KUHN'S *Insights from Cultural Anthropology* offers fertile ground for renewing Lutheran ministry. He presents an accessible, disciplined method that restores crucial contextual awareness to biblical interpretation, honors cultural particularity without idolizing it, and equips pastors to proclaim Christ faithfully within the complex webs of power, purity, economics, and identity that define human societies.

The book's noteworthy strengths—its cultivation of interpretive humility, its potential for prophetic clarity, its focus on faith embedded in social realities, and its contribution to theological formation—compel Lutherans to embody the Gospel more authentically within their specific contexts. This embodiment, however, must always occur without surrendering the historic, Christ-centered doctrinal emphases that define Lutheran identity. The volume's limitations—the implicit treatment of divine agency and the need for explicit doctrinal integration—are not roadblocks but rather invitations. They call the church to enrich Kuhn's anthropological tools with the deep resources of confessional Lutheran theology and the power of Spirit-led proclamation grounded in Word and Sacrament.

Ultimately, Kuhn's anthropology can help refine our vision when it comes to worship, preaching, and pastoral care. It helps us see Scripture not merely as an individual spiritual text, but as a divine communication deeply embedded within and speaking to human social existence—a social gospel firmly anchored in the tangible realities of Word and Sacrament. Kuhn aims to lift readers beyond mere cultural critique. He strives to foster Gospel creativity, empowering the church to see how Christ actively reshapes every cultural form for purposes of divine mercy, justice, and abundant life. The goal is clear: for pastors, students, and leaders to interpret not only ancient texts with greater depth, but also to engage their present world with Gospel clarity, contextual wisdom, and unwavering hope in the transforming power of Christ.

**Dan Lioy** is Professor of Biblical Studies at ILT Christ School of Theology. He holds the Ph.D. from North-West University (South Africa) and is a teaching pastor at Our Savior's Lutheran Church (NALC) in Salem, Oregon.

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