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CULT AND CULTURE

Given the tension found in the godhead between transcendence and immanence, between almightiness and total vulnerability, between the God who stands apart from his creation and the God who is at the heart of that creation, even when it sins and rebels against its Creator, it is not surprising to find a similar tension in the life of the Church. Consider two judgments. J. L. Adams of Harvard writes, 'Prophetic religion is theocentric rather than anthropocentric. For prophetic religion the chief end is to know God, to serve Him and enjoy Him - what Hosea meant by the knowledge of God; and culture including its ostensibly religious elements is under judgment from beyond culture . . . It is the role of prophetic Christianity in humility and audacity to witness to and respond to that which lies at the depth of both culture and cultural religion and which is never in their possession: the creative and formative power of God and Christ in relation to which the cultural 'good for man' is always at best proximate, ambiguous good, unreliable as the ultimate object of faith.' By contrast, Stephen Neill observes that, 'Living as it does by the principle of incarnation, the Christian Society cannot affect the world around it except by entering into it and undergoing its influence.'

That tension has always been there: to Tertullian's great question, 'What has Athens to do with Jerusalem, what concord is there between the Academy and the

Church?', Origen replies, according to the *Panegyric* of his convert, Gregory Thaumaturgus, that 'we should philosophise and collate with all our powers every one of the writings of the ancients, whether philosophers or poets, excepting and rejecting nothing, save the writings of the atheists, but giving a fair hearing to all'.

Herein we discover the difference between faith and cult and ideology. Faith represents the fragile norm of divine grace which has become rooted and incarnate in the tangible experience of the people of God in any given situation. From this crucial centre there is, on the one hand, the heretical deviation of the pietistic and unanchored concern for the supernatural that fails to see both nature and human nature as the arena in which God's spirit wrestles with all the waywardness of a rebellious creation. This I call cult. On the other side there is that cultural domination that manipulates out of revelation any external illumination, and when that happens belief has become mere ideology.

The history of the early Christian centuries well illustrates the problem of threatened equilibrium, as successively the Church had to demonstrate that it could not be bound by either Jewish religion or Greek thought. Later the question was to be raised whether the 'pale Galilean' had conquered the Roman Empire or whether the Christian Church had succumbed to imperial thinking, so that centuries later the legacy of that empire could be seen within the institutions of the Roman church: was this the legacy of the carpenter of Nazareth or the heritage of the Caesars? Of a different period Christopher Dawson was to observe, 'The vital problem of the tenth century was whether this feudal barbarism was to capture and absorb the peace society of the church or vice versa'. Swords were now to be blessed in a tradition which becomes continuous down to the blessing of Polaris submarines, which one might argue demonstrates most vividly the extent and durability of western syncretism.

And still the debate continues. 'The suburban captivity of the church' leads us into ideology, even if the terms are not clearly spelt out, but 'contextualization', by contrast, supposedly saves us from the danger of cultic irrelevance. Orthodoxy and syncretism stand in holy combat over the inheritance of apostolic faith: the stakes are high and the perils of producing the wrong answers grave. All cultures must stand under the judgment of the Gospel, but at the same time that Gospel has to become real within those cultures. M. M. Thomas's language of a discipleship which is 'Christ-centred' and 'world-orientated' seems nicely to hold the balance.

This is a theme in which nonconformists should have a special interest and should rigorously exercise all the disciplines of self-criticism, constantly asking whether nonconformity has turned conformist, in David Staple's words, 'Has Dissent become Consent' in an age which, ecclesiastically ecumenical, is moving, we are told, towards becoming a one-class society, for arguably at its best nonconformity offered a complete counter-culture, 'but second-hand and weary of its own history, it feebly sanctifies the here and now.

For all these reasons the current 'Gospel and Culture' debate is very much to be welcomed. Two volumes are of special importance. Lesslie Newbigin's *Truth to Tell: The Gospel as Public Truth* [SPCK, 90pp, £5.99, 1991] stresses the need for an unapologetic emphasis upon the truth claims of the Christian revelation, at the same time stressing the radical response that they demand. Taking stock of the impact of Descartes, Locke and the thinkers of the Enlightenment upon our approaches to truth, Newbigin affirms that, on the one hand, Christian truth is not to be equated with personal belief but is part of knowledge, and, on the other, is clear-sighted in

recognizing that the critical method is bound to destroy itself, for the assertion that all dogma must be questioned is a dogma that must itself come under scrutiny. By contrast he argues that 'the proper answer to the charge of subjectivity is world mission, but it is world mission not as proselytism but as exegesis', because Christ's Lordship must extend over the world and not just the Church, over all life and not just the religious life. The gospel cannot just be 'true for us' but must be true for all, hence 'the missionary action of the church' has to be 'the exegesis of the gospel'.

Offering a critique of both liberalism and fundamentalism, he argues that public exegesis has to be done by the Christian community, not privately, to the whole community in which its witness is set. Arguing that nostalgia for Christendom is understandable but futile, Newbigin nevertheless criticises the notion of the church as merely a complex of voluntary associations: 'The freedom of the Church from control in spiritual matters by the state is an empty freedom if it is simply the freedom of individuals to follow their inclinations, and not the freedom which is given by the word of God to speak in the name of God to the state as to every human institution.' In this context the critical task for the church has to be the unmasking of ideologies. Undertaking that task historically is not too difficult; more difficult is identifying the ideologies of the present day, but that is the crucial task, for, 'if Christ's sovereignty is not recognized in the world of economics, then demonic powers take control'.

The Gospel and Contemporary Culture [Mowbray, 190pp, £11.95], a volume of essays on History, Economics, Science, Education, the Arts, Health and Healing, Epistemology and the Media, is one of the outcomes of 'The Gospel and Our Culture' programme set up by the British Council of Churches and itself a fruit of Lesslie Newbigin's fertile mind. Edited by Hugh Montefiore, the various essays reflect upon inculturation, testing the fundamental assumptions of society by the yardstick of the gospel, and the message preached by the church by its relevance to the needs of that society. Neither the Newbigin book nor these essays make for easy reading but the task attempted is of critical importance. Colin Gunton puts the focus like this:

We cannot climb out of our bodies into some purely conceptual reason. Our human condition is inescapably material, particular, fallible, and finite; and knowledge which seeks to evade this ceases to be human knowledge and so is not knowledge at all. That is the negative note that we must sound in face of all continuing attempts, derived from both Greek and Enlightenment rationalism, to be like God. The positive note, the contribution the Gospel can give to culture, is the articulation of the promise inherent in our createdness: that creation embodies the rationalism given to it by its maker and redeemer, whose Spirit liberates the human mind to discover what is, and what is to be.

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E. A. PAYNE MEMORIAL ESSAY COMPETITION

The winner was Mr David Roberts of Tyndale Baptist Church, Bristol, for his essay on 'Richard Glover of Bristol'. The prize was presented at the Annual Meeting, and the essay will appear in the *Quarterly* before long.