

CHRIST AND CULTURE REVISITED

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D. A. CARSON

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*This one is gratefully dedicated
to
Scott and Cathy*

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Preface



Four considerations impelled me to write this book.

First, ever since Pentecost Christians have had to think through the nature of their relationships with others. Christians soon multiplied in number and across an amazing number of racial and social barriers, constituting a church, a fellowship, a body, that transcended the established categories of empire, ethnicity, language, and social status. Even within the pages of the New Testament, Christians are told both to view government as something ordained by God and to view at least one particular government as representative of antichrist. The earliest reported squabbles *within* the church turned in part on cultural differences, on perceived injustices in the distribution of services to different language groups. Beyond the pages of the New Testament, even a casual knowledge of the history of the church discloses an incredible diversity of situations in which Christians have found themselves: persecuted and reigning, isolated and dominant, ignorant and well educated, highly distinguishable from the surrounding culture and virtually indistinguishable from it, impoverished and wealthy, evangelistically zealous and evangelistically dormant, social reformers and supportive of the social *status quo*, hungry for heaven and hoping it won't arrive too soon. All of these polarized possibilities reflect diverse *cultural* self-understanding. Inevitably, in most generations Christians have pondered what their attitudes *ought* to be. Mine is merely one more voice in this long chain of Christian reflection.

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The second thing that has impelled me to write this book is as contemporary as the first reason is universal. Today's instantaneous communications mean that with only minimum effort Christians become aware of the extraordinarily diverse cultural settings in which other Christians find themselves. We find out about Christians in Sierra Leone, the poorest country on earth; we also find out about Christians in Hong Kong and New York City. We watch the church multiplying in Latin America, out in the open, and watch it multiply in China, in some measure underground. We witness the remarkable loss of Christian consensus almost everywhere in Western Europe, and see the numbers of Christians exploding in the Ukraine and in Romania. We read of Christians being arrested in Iran, beheaded in Saudi Arabia, and butchered by the hundreds of thousands in southern Sudan, while observing the opulence of some Christian surroundings in Dallas and Seoul. We sit with semi-literate brothers and sisters in Christ in a village of Papua New Guinea who are learning to read for the first time, and we cannot forget that their grandparents were headhunters; we sit with presidents of Christian seminaries and universities, responsible for wisely dispensing many tens of millions of dollars every year. In the past, it was easier to speak out of one's own culture without reference to the cultures of others, but essays that are so narrowly focused today either seem out-of-date or they self-consciously target only one culture — they make no pretensions to a wider vision. Many of the most thoughtful essays and books written by Christians in the past to unpack the relationship between believers-living-in-a-broader-culture and unbelievers-within-the-broader-culture reflected the specificity of the author's cultural location. Dietrich Bonhoeffer is not going to sound quite like Bill Bright, and most reasonable people will admit that their own experiences have a fair bit to do with their respective theological emphases, not least those touching on the relationships between Christians and unbelievers. If Abraham Kuyper had grown up under the conditions of the killing fields of Cambodia,¹ one suspects his view of the relationship between Christianity and culture would have been

1. See especially Don Cormack, *Killing Fields, Living Fields* (London: Monarch, 1997).

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significantly modified. Even the sweeping cultural analysis of H. Richard Niebuhr, about which I'll say much more, though it trawls through history to enrich the study, is transparently the stance of a mid-twentieth-century Westerner steeped in the heritage of what liberal Protestantism then was. Today, however, the sheer diversity of Christian experience is forced on our attention as never before. We become so suspicious of glib analyses that seem to be true in one cultural situation and patently irrelevant elsewhere, that we attempt only local analysis. But I shall argue that something important, something transcendent, is lost by this failure of nerve.

The third impetus is the "advisee group" — what some institutions call "small group" or "chaplaincy group" or "formation group" — at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School for which Scott Manetsch and I have shared responsibility during the last few years. This group continues to be one of my constant joys in life, not only for the privilege of working with Scott, but also because of all the relationships that have been formed, and, in measure, shaped, by that group. A couple of years ago, we worked through a short unit on Christians and culture. Inevitably, one of the starting points for the discussion was the classic work by Richard Niebuhr. The discussion that erupted at that time prompted me to do some more work and put down on paper a few things I had been thinking about for some time.

Finally, an invitation from the Faculté libre de théologie évangélique at Vaux-sur-Seine, just outside Paris, to give some lectures at one of their theological colloquia served as the incentive to start writing up my notes. The first two chapters of this book were presented at Vaux. I want to express my profound thanks to Émile Nicole and the other members of the faculty, and not least to my old friend Henri Blocher, for the warmth of their welcome and the acuteness of their interaction. I should add that although I was reared in French and can still speak it pretty fluently, I have lived outside the French-speaking world for so many decades that I do not trust myself to write polished French. I am therefore profoundly grateful to Pierre Constant, a former (and highly gifted) doctoral student at Trinity, for giving the French form of these chapters whatever grace they display.

Even though Niebuhr's *Christ and Culture* is more than fifty years old, it is difficult, at least in the English-speaking world, to ignore him.

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His work, for good and ill, has shaped much of the discussion. Even the celebrated distinctions of earlier scholars — such as Weber’s distinction between “church” and “sect,” in which the church sets itself up as part of the culture while the sect sets itself up as something over against the culture — have been mediated to many people through Niebuhr’s volume. On the other hand, during the last half-century, many debates have raged over the very meaning of “culture.” Disenchanted by the arrogance of some Enlightenment assumptions, many writers have questioned those assumptions, raising a raft of new questions about how Christians — or any other religious group, for that matter — should think of themselves with respect to the surrounding culture, when they themselves cannot escape being part of that culture.

My own effort in this book begins by summarizing Niebuhr, since Niebuhr has become an icon to which everyone refers, though few today still read him closely. Apart from some initial evaluation of Niebuhr on his own terms, I then try to lay out the rudiments of a responsible biblical theology that any Christian will want to acknowledge, and begin to show how these turning points in the history of redemption must shape Christian thinking about the relationships between Christ and culture (chaps. 1 and 2). The structures generated by such biblical theology are robust enough to allow the many differing emphases within Scripture to find their voices, so that to speak of different “models” of the Christ-and-culture relationship begins to look misleading. Such reflection requires more probing, not only with respect to current debates over “culture” and “postmodernism” (chap. 3), but also with respect to some of the dominant cultural forces of our time (chap. 4). One of the dimensions of this ongoing debate is the relation between church and state (chap. 5). Here I have sketched the very different cultural stances associated with the notion of separation of church and state found in France and in the United States, with glances at a few other countries, so that we can more clearly detect the kinds of cultural spectacles we inevitably bring to the task of reading Scripture, and how even the application of the balance of Scripture will almost inevitably shift in different cultures. The final chapter raises a selection of perennial temptations Christians face as they work through these issues. It is a modest attempt to forge a stable and flexible stance that is immune to various siren calls.

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A number of people have read the manuscript and made helpful suggestions. I am indebted to Mark Dever, Tim Keller, Andy Naselli, Bob Priest, Michael Thate, and Sandy Willson. Thanks go as well to Jim Kinney of Baker Book House, who gave me galley copies of two books that were not yet published so I could benefit from them in my own work. Andy Naselli's customary energy and attention to detail were in rich display in the compilation of the indexes. And finally, I am thankful to the folk at Eerdmans for seeing this work safely and efficiently through the press.

Soli Deo gloria.

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