

EVANGELICAL REVIEW OF THEOLOGY

VOLUME 22

Volume 22 • Number 1 • January 1998

Evangelical Review of Theology

*Articles and book reviews original and selected from
publications worldwide for an international
readership for the purpose of discerning the
obedience of faith*

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Published by
PATERNOSTER PERIODICALS



for
WORLD EVANGELICAL FELLOWSHIP
Theological Commission

ISSN: 0144-8153
Vol. 22 No. 1 January 1998

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Editorial

We are living in the midst of a literary, ideological and theological revolution which some predict will be as important as the Copernican revolution of the Middle Ages. The flood of literature on modernity and post-modernity, on secular and religious pluralism, and on religious fundamentalism and New Age movements is overwhelming. Most of us are left confused, yet we dare not ignore these challenges or overreact to them. To do so spells death for evangelicalism and to the cause of world evangelization. From the perspective of faith in Christ and his gospel we are being called to critique and respond to the claims of the neo-paganism and religious inclusiveness of our age.

This issue of ERT is devoted to exploring these challenges to biblical faith and to developing a coherent theology that holds together the transcendent gospel and the cultural reality from below. We are called to a passionate engagement with the spirit of modernity and post-modernity in the world and in the Church, rejecting what is alien to the gospel and transforming what is open, to the glory of God. We are commissioned to build churches as communities of faith offering life which is eternal to all who are seeking a reality which is liberating from suffering, oppression and despair. The symbolism of the Celtic Cross points the way forward.

Mapping Evangelical Theology in a Post-modern World¹

Kevin J. Vanhoozer

This article, given as part of a lecture series at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, is the best analysis I have read of how evangelicals should respond to post-modernity. It is a lucid account of the role of biblical authority and literal meaning in interpreting the Good News in our pluralistic society and modelling it in 'communities of faith'. The author has a passion for a Christocentric faith, tolerance of others, a humble culture-critical spirit and a commitment to joyously practising the truth. A stronger trinitarian emphasis on God as Father, Son and Holy Spirit would have enhanced our task of theological map-reading.
Editor

I INTRODUCTION: MAPPING, MISSION, AND THE MINISTRY OF THE WORD

My choice of topic has been influenced by my recent sojourn among the Scots, a race of intrepid explorers. I find particularly inspiring the example of David Livingstone, the

¹ A revised version of my first and third Kantzer Lectures, delivered at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School on November 15–16, 1994, on the topic 'Mapping the Way: Biblical Authority and Evangelical Theology in the Postmodern World'.

Scottish map-making missionary- explorer, whose great vision was to make a coast-to-coast trek through Africa that would open up the continent to Christianity.²

Africa, indeed the whole planet, has now been meticulously mapped, at least in its physical characteristics. Yet the world's intellectual and cultural contours are rapidly changing. We are approaching the end not only of the twentieth century, but of the modern era. We are in a state of flux; the old maps may no longer be adequate as the church navigates her way into the next millennium. For two centuries now, the church has been *reacting* to modernity. Can we be more *pro-active* when confronted with post-modernity? Livingstone's 'missionary-explorer' is an appropriate paradigm for the theologian trying to navigate a vast uncharted continent: 'postmodernity'.

How shall we 'plot' evangelicalism's position with regard to the modern and postmodern worlds? In what follows, I shall indicate what course I think evangelicals should set, and what provisions they should take. The theologian, as missionary-explorer, is first and foremost a biblical interpreter. For we must interpret both the world and the Word, and we must put our interpretations into practice. *Theology is about reading and following biblical maps into new worlds.*

II TWO FRENCH REVOLUTIONS: FROM DESCARTES TO DERRIDA

A massive intellectual revolution is taking place 'that is perhaps as great as that which marked off the modern world from the Middle Ages'.³ Whatever else it is, it is 'the quest to move beyond modernism'.⁴ But what is, or was, modernity? Two French revolutions—those associated with the names of Descartes and Derrida—may serve as important intellectual landmarks. Each of these revolutions has proven to be 'Copernican' in its effect. Just as Copernicus changed the way we think about ourselves when he suggested that the earth turned round the sun rather than vice versa, so Descartes and Derrida have changed the way we think about our knowledge of the world, and ourselves as knowers. Whereas Copernicus 'decentered' the earth, Descartes decentered God and divine revelation by making the knowing subject and Reason to be the source of truth. Derrida then decentered the knowing subject and reason by arguing that language and rhetoric are more fundamental.

When Descartes sat down at his desk in 1619, he decided 'to embark upon a skeptical voyage of doubting everything'. He promised to leave the homeland behind, 'to chart a new path, and to light upon new lands'.⁵ Descartes's itinerary was the depths of his own subjectivity; his goal, clear ideas and certain knowledge. His was no idle quest, but one that sought to lead a war-torn Europe beyond the rough seas of religious conflict to the cool, calm waters of rationality. With his discovery of a universal method for arriving at clarity and certainty, Descartes fathered modernity. What Descartes discovered was

² Livingstone was particularly intrigued by Africa's waterways: he was convinced that the Zambesi was 'God's highway into the interior' (A. J. Nevins, 'Livingstone, David', *Concise Dictionary of the Christian World Mission* [ed. S. Neill, et al.; London: Lutterworth, 1971] p. 354).

³ D. Allen, *Christian Belief in a Postmodern World* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1989), p. 2.

⁴ S. J. Grenz, 'Postmodernism and the Future of Evangelical Theology: Star Trek and the Next Generation', *Evangelical Review of Theology* 18 (1994), p. 323.

⁵ D. R. Stiver, 'Much Ado About Athens and Jerusalem. The Implications of Postmodernism for Faith', *RevExp* 91 (1994), p. 83.

thought.⁶ The Cartesian *cogito*—the ‘I think’—is the first truth that doubt could not deny. Descartes believed he could ‘peel off’ everything—his previous beliefs, his body, his place in history—and find, in the end, that he is essentially a thinking subject. Modern philosophy is the story of the turn to the subject, to the ‘I think’.

Descartes’ rational subject is like an omniscient narrator. The stories it tells, in so far as they are rational, are always true. Modernity’s goal was a unified explanation, a grand theory that would find a rational place for everything and put everything in its rational place. This universal explanatory scheme is a ‘metanarrative’, a great story that explains all other stories, and formulates a metaphysics, a theory of reality. Most ‘isms’ (e.g., Platonism, rationalism, Marxism, etc.) are metanarratives. ‘Modernity’ names that project in which the mind tries to master the world with a rational map that purports to see the world from a ‘God’s eye point of view’.

If the first French Revolution enshrined the goddess of Reason, the second French revolution may be said to have stormed modernity’s cathedral and cast out the goddess. If we must date the birth of the postmodern era, I suggest 1968. This was the year not only of social unrest but also one that marked Derrida’s arrival on the intellectual scene.⁷ Even Derrida’s critics acknowledge that his works written in the late 1960s ‘are among the most crucial documents of our period’.⁸

How shall I compare Descartes and Derrida? Derrida is the stowaway on Descartes’s voyage to certainty, a hermeneutic hit man. Whereas Descartes believed he had landed and struck bedrock—his own consciousness—Derrida doubts even that.⁹ Derrida doubts Reason’s ability to achieve a ‘totalizing’ discourse, that is, a universal explanation of some aspect of reality. Derrida is an Undoer, a de-constructor; and what he undoes is the covenant between language and reality which characterizes western philosophy’s belief that it can state the truth. Derrida basically wants to undo ‘logocentrism’, the belief that language can be used to map the world, the belief that consciousness can mirror the cosmos.

Derrida, much like Marx and Freud, claims that consciousness is not so pure: it is rather rooted in a body and a particular socio-political context, and influenced by its language, culture, and time. The soul is not its own ground; we should rather say that the soul is ‘soiled’—a result of its being rooted or ‘earthed’. The ‘I think’ is not the foundation Descartes believed it to be. Postmodern thinkers argue that we have no non-linguistic knowledge, even of our own experiences. Language is less the expression than the *environment* of our thinking. Subjectivity is not prior to but rather a function of language.

⁶ ‘Thought; this alone is inseparable from me. . . . I am, then, in the strict sense only a thing that thinks’ (Descartes, *Philosophical Writings*, vol. 22, p. 15).

⁷ Actually, Derrida made his academic debut in 1966 at a seminar at John’s Hopkins University. For a more thorough presentation of Derrida’s works, see my *Is There a Meaning in This Text? The Bible, the Reader, and the Morality of Literary Knowledge* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), chaps. 2–4.

⁸ N. A. Scott, Jr., ‘The New Trahison des Clercs: Reflections on the Present Crisis in Humanistic Studies’, *The Virginia Quarterly Review* 62 (1986), p. 412.

⁹ Modernity has always had its critics, those unbelievers who refused to accept Descartes’s story of the objective knowing subject. Karl Marx undid the privileged place of the individual by suggesting that the individual was the product of the collective. Freud undid the privilege of consciousness by discovering, in his psychoanalytic voyages, the submerged lost continent of Atlantis, the Unconscious. Nietzsche questioned the products of the mind, stating that our truth claims were really rhetorical strategies that hid our will to power. Similarly, Feuerbach questioned theology, arguing that our doctrines were really projections of human desires, and that God was simply man’s best thought about himself. The secret of theology, said Feuerbach, is anthropology. Despite these counter-attacks, however, modernity rolled on.

For the postmodernist, language is, first and foremost, an instrument of ideology and power. Language shapes our perception of reality. The very contents of our minds are not really our own, but rather reflections of the culture we live in. The language we inhabit shapes our innermost thoughts. We can never step outside our language. This despair of language explains why irony has become the privileged mode of postmodern-speak. Irony is a way of saying something that you do not really mean. Irony is therefore the most honest form of speech, since it acknowledges its own artificial nature. The current widespread suspicion of language should give would-be ministers of the Word considerable pause. How can the church represent its 'old, old story' as a truth claim if all metanarratives are merely masks for domination?

According to David Tracy, 'Postmodern thought at its best is an ethics of resistance—resistance, above all, to more of the same.'¹⁰ Postmodernists resist the temptation to think that they speak either with the voice of God or with the voice of reason. What Derrida finally resists is the imperial 'we', as in 'we hold these truths to be self-evident'. This resistance to the imperial 'we' is allied to the postmodern resistance to metanarratives. In its distrust of stories that purport to speak for everyone, postmodernity marks the return of narrative. We may have no overviews, but we still have *views*, views from where we, that is, from where *some* of us, are. In place of comprehensive theories about everything, we have confessions about how things look to us. The return to narrative may herald a new age of discovery, where individuals and communities set out, not on universal voyages of reason, but on pilgrimages of particularity.

How *can* Christians do justice to the various particularities and still make the claim that Jesus is the truth—a claim that is true not just for the Christian community, but for everyone? Biblical criticism—including the vaunted historical-critical approach—is today considered just as ideological as any other approach to Scripture. No reading is innocent, or objective, in the postmodern world; rather, all reading is influenced by social power. With this thought we come to a vital question: is the undoing of the modern knowing subject a new obstacle, or a new opportunity, for the church?

Is postmodernity simply one more chapter in the history of western thought, or does it represent the end of the story of philosophy? The prefix 'post-' is the vital clue. It signifies passage, what comes after. We are indeed living in revolutionary times. To talk about the lay of the contemporary land is to talk about shifting ground and upheaval. Modernity and postmodernity are like two great tectonic plates whose movements and collision uproot and overturn the foundations of earthly institutions: states, universities, churches. Are these violent waves rocking western civilization the quake itself, or only the first tremors? On the one hand, the institutions of modernity—the secular city, liberal democracy, capitalism—are still with us. On the other hand, the ideologies of modernity—Cartesian rationalism, Marxism, theological liberalism—have largely disappeared. The break-up of modernity, like all totalitarian systems, creates both great opportunities and grave risks. Such is the situation at the end of the Cold War between evangelicalism and the modern world.

The best definition of 'postmodern' of which I am aware is 'incredulity towards metanarratives'.¹¹ Translated, this means: distrust any voice that purports to tell you that 'that's the way it is'. We can fill out this definition of 'postmodern' with a number of contrasts: whereas the modern searches for global metanarratives, the postmodern emphasizes local narratives. Where the modern seeks purpose, design, and hierarchy in

¹⁰ D. Tracy, 'Many Faces of Modernity', *Theology Today* 51 (1993), p. 108.

¹¹ F. Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984).

the natural and social worlds, the postmodern expects the rule of chance, desire, and anarchy. Whereas the modern believes in transcendence—of the knowing subject, of reason—the postmodern stresses immanence. Theologically, modernity appears as a substitute for God the Father—with Reason playing the role of transcendent authority—and postmodernity for the Holy Spirit—the more diffuse, horizontal, and non-hierarchical presence of the divine in the world.¹²

Descartes discovered a land that did not really exist. The ‘I think’ is never disembodied, never dislocated, never disinterested, but rather embodied, located, interested. Descartes’s ‘logos’—the voice of reason—is incarnate too. It never attains a perspective outside history, culture, and our bodily condition. Instead of metanarratives, then, we have narratives. Do postmodernists continue to distinguish right from wrong, true from false? Yes they do; most of them are not ‘silly relativists’. However, the standards which they use are no longer universal; they are rather embedded in particular languages, cultures, and practices. ‘Truth’ has become what a community most values. Knowledge and truth alike are always perspectival and provisional, and always incomplete. Truth is community based—no longer universal, but tribal.

III INVENTION OR DISCOVERY? THE CRISIS OF TRUTH AND RATIONALITY

The sixteenth-century was aptly named the ‘Age of Discovery’. The modern mind was just beginning to awaken to its intellectual powers, and to its missionary-explorer task. In the twentieth century, however, the emphasis has moved from discovering to constructing. Postmodernists are busy deconstructing modernity’s maps. Maps are expressions of will to power that tell us more about the map-maker than about reality. Why else, for instance, would medieval cartographers have put Jerusalem at the centre of the world? Map-making—an expression of the will-to-rational-discovery—has thus fallen into disrepute. Today, map-making is merely another kind of fiction that invites demythologizing.

What alternatives do evangelical theologians have, poised as they are between two worlds? One could choose, with certain fundamentalist theologians, to be *repeaters* and simply parrot the biblical text and the Christian tradition. Or one could choose, with many modern liberal theologians, to become *revisers* of text and tradition. Or again, one could, with certain radical postmodernists, become *revilers* of text and tradition, and claim that they serve only ideological interests.¹³

Where should we locate evangelical theology with regard to modernity and postmodernity? The identity and direction of evangelicalism has been the subject of a number of recent books—a sure sign of drift!¹⁴ Is modernity a thorn in evangelicalism’s faith that we are glad to be well rid of? It is not so simple to say. On the one hand, evangelical theology, with its focus on scientific thinking, empiricism, and common sense,

¹² As I. Hassan has suggested in the Postface to his *The Dismemberment of Orpheus: Towards a Postmodern Literature* (2d. ed.; Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1982).

¹³ There is a fourth option, the ‘renewers’, that some associate with postliberal or the ‘new Yale’ theology. This view wants to renew confessional traditions and to resist having to correlate theology with the contemporary context. They are especially suspicious of organic world views and religious pluralism as ideologies that deny the integrity of their particular traditions.

¹⁴ See, *inter alia*, D. Wells, *No Place for Truth: Or Whatever Happened to Evangelical Theology?* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993); R. Lints, *The Fabric of Theology: A Prolegomenon to Evangelical Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993); S. Grenz, *Revisioning Evangelical Theology* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1993).

is a child of early modernity.¹⁵ On the other hand, modernity is what evangelicalism was supposedly *against*. The solution, I believe, is to clarify the role of reason in evangelical thought.

For the past forty or so years, evangelicals have been busy trying to defend the faith against modernity, largely with the tools of modernity. In exegesis, theology, and apologetics alike, many evangelicals accepted a Cartesian view of rationality, at least to the extent that they sought absolute foundations and certain conclusions. In this respect, evangelicals and liberals fought on common ground with similar weapons. Evangelicals like Charles Hodge accepted the modern idea that theology, if it is to be credible, must imitate the natural sciences. Hodge likened theology to an inductive science where the mind conforms to biblical data.¹⁶ To the postmodernist, however, all attempts to parade reasons for one's faith are immediately suspect. People are more ready to acknowledge that all thinkers have convictions and commitments with which they begin.¹⁷ According to Stanley Grenz, evangelical theologians 'ought to find [them]selves in fundamental agreement with the postmodern critique of the modern mind and its underlying Enlightenment epistemology'.¹⁸

I am not for a moment suggesting that we abandon our commitment to rationality. Evangelicalism can only lose ground by abandoning biblical literacy and critical thinking. What I am suggesting is that there are other models of rationality than the Cartesian or foundationalist one that considers beliefs justified and rational only if they rest on sufficient evidence.¹⁹ In my view, reason plays not a magisterial but a ministerial role. Beliefs, like persons, should be presumed innocent. Reason cannot rule them out of court simply because they do not live up to modern standards of evidence. Being rational is no guarantee of having an absolute foundation for knowledge; it is rather the admission that one's beliefs are fallible and thus need to be subjected to critical tests.²⁰

We stand between two worlds, faced with a choice, a choice for truth, or for truths. Our situation is not unlike that of Elijah and the Israelites on Mount Carmel:

The Northern Kingdom was going nowhere; it showed no awareness of a national destiny. Indeed, the eventual intrusion of Baalism suggests that Israel had very little sense of self-

¹⁵ G. Marsden, 'Evangelical, History and Modernity', in *Evangelicalism and Modern America* (ed. G. M. Marsden; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984), p. 98.

¹⁶ See especially C. Hodge, *Systematic Theology* (Reprint, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979), vol. 1, chap. 1, 'On Method'.

¹⁷ 'In a way that has never been possible in modernity, one can find philosophical or rational space for "giving an account for the hope that is in you"' (Stiver, 'Athens and Jerusalem', 94).

¹⁸ Grenz, 'Star Trek', pp. 329–30. Some evangelicals were there already: C. Van Til, for instance, followed A. Kuyper in pointing out the presuppositional, committed, and ultimately religious nature of all thinking.

¹⁹ The philosopher J. Habermas speaks of modernity as an 'incomplete project'. He agrees that modernity erred in making reason subject-centred, but he argues that reason can be relocated. Rationality is rather a feature of intersubjective communication, a matter of coming to agreements not by rhetoric or by coercion, but by validating what one says. A. Plantinga and N. Wolterstorff have offered alternative, non-foundationalist epistemologies, based on a retrieval of the philosophy of T. Reid. See K. Clark, *Return to Reason: A Critique of Enlightenment Evidentialism and Defense of Reason and Belief in God* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990). Critique of Enlightenment Evidentialism and Defense of Reason and Belief in God (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990).

²⁰ See my 'Christ and Concept: Doing Theology and the "Ministry" of Philosophy', in *Doing Theology in Today's World* (ed. J. D. Woodbridge and T. McComiskey; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1990), pp. 99–146.

identity or covenantal calling. Apart from the external religious accouterments that lay on every side, this people's public life had become essentially secular.²¹

The most important similarity is that we, like ancient Israel, are in danger of becoming *indifferent* to religious truth. It is wearying to cut against the cultural grain. Conciliation rather than confrontation is the watchword of the day. With Ahab, our instinct is to call those who raise the question of truth 'troublers of Israel'. It may well be politically incorrect to ask about truth, but it would be theologically incorrect (and ethically irresponsible) not to do so.

A second parallel between our times and Elijah's is religious *pluralism*. The radical pluralist does not simply tolerate or respect different religious options, but considers them equally valid. Elijah begs to differ: easy compromise is incompatible with God's command to have 'no other gods'. 'How long will you waver between two opinions?' asks Elijah. Of course we must give up our prejudices. But are all our convictions about truth merely prejudices? And is truth only a matter of a sincere conscience? 'If the Lord is God, follow him; but if Baal is God, follow him'. But the people said nothing' ([1 Kgs. 18:21](#)).

The church in every generation must face difficult questions about truth, and it must do so with passion, not with despair. Why should the church bother about truth? In order to avoid living a lie. The command to avoid idolatry is essentially a command to respect, rather than repress, reality. For idolatry is the worship or service of that which is not God. The second commandment ([Exod. 20:4](#)) condemning idolatry was unique in the world of its day, and it follows from the first, 'You shall have no other gods before me'. Virtually the whole history of Israel's religion can be told as the struggle between true religion and idolatry.

The idols which today threaten the church are not made of wood or stone, but of images: 'Little children, guard against ideologies'. We can idolize wealth, nation, even religion. Paul Tillich reminds us that: 'Every church should be suspicious of itself, lest it formulate truths only as an expression of its will-to-power.' Fundamentalism and liberalism alike can become ideologies to the extent that human interpretations are elevated over that which they are supposedly about. We must be wary of worshiping human tradition. To this extent, we can appreciate the iconoclasm of deconstruction. Derrida reminds us that there may be idols that need to be cast out even from evangelical shrines.

In a media-driven world where images count more than arguments, people with short attention spans erect, tear down, and seek new idols with frightening speed, because the idol, which is all image and no reality, does not satisfy. What people had previously believed in has let them down. Why bother about truth? Because idols don't deliver: 'O Baal, answer us! . . . but there was no response'.

Augustine long ago made a famous distinction between things to be used and things to be enjoyed. 'To enjoy a thing is to rest with satisfaction in it for its own sake.'²² For all its talk of desire, play, and pleasure, our culture is not characterized by joy, but rather by despair. And little wonder: Augustine goes on to say that the only object which ought to be enjoyed is the triune God, who is our highest good and true happiness. This goal alone, I suggest, orients theology's explorations and represents the true destination of the Christian life.

²¹ S. J. DeVries, *1 Kings* (WBC; Waco, TX: Word, 1985), pp. xxiv-xxv.

²² Augustine, *On Christian Doctrine*, 1.4.4.

IV BIBLICAL LITERACY: WHAT EVERY CHRISTIAN SHOULD KNOW

To minister the Word to the world we need to understand both the world we live in, and the Word we minister. If theology is the process by which the Word of God is brought to bear on the world in an enlightening and liberating manner, then achieving biblical literacy is part and parcel of becoming a competent theologian. My thesis is straightforward: ministers of the Word must be biblically literate.

Postmodernity presents special problems and possibilities for the minister of the Word. Where postmodernity is having an impact on biblical studies is in its insistence that neither the text nor the reader is objective. There is a widespread incredulity towards metanarratives, a disbelief in a God's eye or a universal rational point of view. No reading is innocent; all reading is 'from below'. One of the most important issues for theologians and other ministers of the Word, therefore, is how to read the Bible. The dictionary definition of 'literacy' is 'the ability to read and write'. Literacy refers both to a skill, and to a certain body of background information that a person needs to know in order to follow the text and to function in society. Similarly, biblical literacy is a necessary condition for coherent Christian faith and practice. Biblical interpretation is a matter of following the Word from page to practice. If this is right, then achieving biblical literacy is one of the, if not *the*, single most urgent individual and social tasks of the day. George Lindbeck, a Yale theologian, has observed that biblical illiteracy is a more serious matter than our current ecological or nuclear problems!

Reformations happen when the church recovers biblical authority. Luther's study of the Greek NT enabled him to challenge the previous tradition of biblical interpretation, an appeal to the text that produced tremendous results. Might we be on the verge of a similar recovery, not of biblical language but of biblical literature? Thanks in part to their critique of Reason, postmodern thinkers have rediscovered forms of discourse other than the conceptual. Evangelicals need to seize the day and formulate a view of biblical authority which does justice to *all* the literary forms and aspects of Scripture, and not only the conceptual. Reading verses as isolated propositions is a modern habit, a holdover from a now discredited positivism.

A literary approach makes two vital contributions to understanding the Bible: first, it encourages us to treat texts as certain kinds of wholes, and to see the literary whole as the most important context for interpreting individual verses. Second, it refuses to separate the content of the Bible from its form. The textual form is the only access we have to the textual content. The literary forms of the Bible are our Christian maps of the world. Without a certain map, certain areas of reality would remain uncharted. Each literary form therefore has a distinctive role to play in the task of bringing persons to and establishing persons in the faith. The biblical texts are concerned not only to teach truth by means of logical propositions, but to display the truth to the whole person with a veritable arsenal of imaginative communicative strategies.

V CHARTING THE WAY TO REALITY

My suggestion is that evangelical theology can capitalize on postmodernity's criticism of modernity's elevation of the conceptual form in order to recover the authority of the other biblical literary forms or 'genres'.²³

A literary genre is like a map, a map made of words. There are different kinds of maps—maps of roads, of geological characteristics, of historical incidents, of the stars—

²³ 'Genre' derives from the Latin 'genus', meaning 'kind'.

each with its own 'scale', that is, its own peculiar relation to reality. Knowing the scale makes a difference if one is on foot: does an inch equal one mile or one hundred? Establishing a text's genre is perhaps the most important interpretive move one can make. Only when we know what kind of whole we have before us will we be able to understand the individual parts. Many misunderstandings of the Bible stem from a failure to appreciate its genre. When this happens, we make a category mistake; we read a text as if it were one thing when actually it is something quite different.

Consider the Bible, then, as a collection of verbal maps—a 'word' atlas. Christians plot their location in history not by the stars but by means of biblical texts. 'You are here'—living between the times, between the first and second coming of Christ, just as Paul was. The Bible tells us not only where we are, but where we should be. We can locate ourselves on a moral map; we can determine whether we are in or out of God's will. It is vital, when exploring, to have the right kind of map. Neither an historical atlas nor a map of the stars, for instance, will help one navigate through Chicagoland.

One of the tasks of the systematic theologian is to coordinate the various maps with one another. Another task is to coordinate the biblical maps with the way the world actually is today. We need to avoid two extremes: 'Biblicism may fail to see the literary character of Scripture and treat Scripture like a code book of theological ordinances. Criticism may be so preoccupied with the literary aspects of Scripture that it fails to see the substance of which literature happens to be the vehicle.'²⁴ The Christian church uses its charts rather than those of philosophers, psychotherapists, and so on, to navigate its way. The canon is 'Christography'—a collection of writings that, in various ways, lead to Christ, the wisdom and truth of God. Theology too is Christography: as it addresses various problems in the world, theology takes its bearings from Christ. The Bible is our compass, and Christ is our north, south, east, and west.

Like maps, forms of literature are selective in the features of reality they highlight. What a map represents, and how it represents it, depends on what kind of map it is. Texts do not correspond to reality in a one-to-one fashion. This kind of reductionism serves neither biblical literacy nor theology. Rather, all reference to reality (including pointing with one's finger) is ordered by conventions which are bound to literary forms. One has to understand the literary conventions in order to grasp the nature of the reference to reality.

Two further points of clarification should be made: first, it is important to distinguish what I have said about literary conventions from the view that reality itself is merely a matter of social and literary conventions. That latter view represents postmodernity at its most extreme. Second, do not assume that straightforward history is 'truer' than other types of literature. Such an assumption is a reflex of modernity, with its privileging of the empirical (i.e., what can be sensed). Must one really say that the photograph is truer than the portrait? I do not believe that we must. The portrait may increase our knowledge of a person not by means of mirroring but by deepening or intensifying our awareness of her spiritual rather than physical qualities. Someone has said that the whole Protestant doctrine of man is summed up in Rembrandt's portraits. The same could not be said of my school photographs!

No one form of literature—no one map—exhausts all that can be said about God, humanity, and the world. The Christian who is biblically literate—whose thinking, imagination, language, and life is informed by the biblical texts—will have a faith formed by law, wisdom, song, apocalyptic, prophecy, gospel, and doctrine. These literary forms

²⁴ B. Ramm, *Special Revelation and the Word of God* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1961), p. 68.

together make up Christian faith and identity.²⁵ They shape the way we view the world, the way we view God, the way we view ourselves. If we are contemplating the future, for instance, we must do so following the rules of biblical apocalyptic. We must see the end of history as under divine control. The map of biblical apocalyptic will not permit the humanist's easy belief in the inevitability of human progress. Because of biblical apocalyptic, Christians cannot say things like, 'The human race is getting better and better' or 'If we were only left to ourselves, if we could only get back to nature, everyone would be fine'. Such sentiments go against the grain of biblical literature.

The postmodern world presents both possibilities and problems to those who seek to minister God's Word to the world. Positively, postmodern thinkers have reminded us that there are many voices that deserve to be heard. We must not reduce the many forms of literature in the Bible to the conceptual; not every voice in the Bible is that of the systematic theologian. Negatively, the post-modern 'liberation' of the reader may degenerate into a reign of terror. If we substitute the authority of the reader for that of the text, we cannot help but commit interpretive violence against the text. Those who affirm biblical authority, however, will feel the obligation to listen to the voice of the text instead of forcing their own creative readings upon it.²⁶

Theology is a species of biblical cartography, a study of the ways in which the various verbal maps of the Bible refer to, and render, reality. The Bible shows us the way to and the way of life. Jesus reproached the Jews of his day for their biblical illiteracy: 'You diligently study the Scriptures because you think that by them you possess eternal life. These are the Scriptures that testify about me, yet you refuse to come to me to have life' ([John 5:39-40](#)). Later, on the road to Emmaus, Jesus explained how the law and the prophets all testify to him ([Luke 24:27](#)). The Bible is our guide to Christ. Systematic theology is the process by which the rest of reality is viewed through biblical Christography.

VI 'EVANGELICAL': A BISHOP'S CRITIQUE AND A FLOWER

Being able to understand the charts is one thing—actually following them another. Biblical literacy involves both skills: reading charts and using charts to navigate. For it is one thing to say that Christ is the way, the truth, and the life, and another thing to follow him. In our biblical word atlas, we have a compass which, if we pay attention to it, will keep us oriented, wherever we are in the world, and whichever world—modern or postmodern—we happen to inhabit. The credibility of evangelical theology ultimately depends not only on sound exegesis, but also on sound practice. Indeed, the way we live, the way we *perform* the text, is part and parcel of evangelical interpretation. In the words of our Lord: 'Everyone who hears these words of mine and puts them into practice is like a wise man who built his house on the rock' ([Matt. 7:24](#)). These are sobering words, for evangelicals are not immune to seduction by the spirit of the age. In thought and life, evangelicals are all too often barely distinguishable from their modern and postmodern neighbours.²⁷ If I still answer to the label 'evangelical', however, it is because I believe that, at its best, it is a tradition that encourages self-criticism under the banner of *sola*

²⁵ 'A particular literary style is not only appropriate to, but generative of, a life style' (W. A. Beardslee, *Literary Criticism of the New Testament* [Philadelphia: Fortress, 1970], p. 76).

²⁶ I argue this point in considerable detail in my *Is There a Meaning in this Text?* chap. 7.

²⁷ M. Noll complains that the scandal of the evangelical mind is its absence. See his *The Scandal of the Evangelical Mind* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994).

gratia and *sola scriptura*, and because it resists the temptation to exchange the gospel of Jesus Christ for another gospel that fits in more easily with contemporary culture.

It was the practice of Thomas Aquinas to begin his discussion of each question in his *Summa Theologica* by stating the three most powerful objections to his own position. In a similar critical spirit, though not pretending to offer a *Summa Theologica Evangelica*, I begin my apology for evangelical theology by considering three objections to it raised by Richard Holloway, the Bishop of Edinburgh.²⁸

Holloway notes, first, that evangelical theology often tends towards a sectarian, them/us, mentality. Like other -isms, so evangelicalism may degenerate into an ideology that demands unthinking acceptance. Second, evangelical theology displays a passion for the single explanation. Not only is this too simplistic, but it runs the risk of intellectual pride. Third, it suffers from a poor aesthetics, by which the Bishop means, I think, that it holds a weak doctrine of creation and displays little evidence of creativity.²⁹ What interests me is that these three criticisms are similar to the ones that postmodernists level against modernity: that it tends to exclusivistic absolutism, to unified explanations, and to demean art as less than rational.

There are many ways, however, to describe phenomena. Bishop Holloway has described some potential weaknesses. I wish to define evangelicalism by what lies at its theological centre, rather than by what one finds on its sociological circumference (one can find any number of sects, incredible ideas, and individuals on the hinterlands of evangelicalism). It might be helpful to have a device with which to focus our thoughts. 'TULIP' is already taken, as a mnemonic for five-point Calvinism. I would therefore like to conscript a new flower into theological service: the humble daisy. A daisy has a yellow centre with white petals that extend like spokes from a hub—an apt analogy, since I wish to define evangelical theology by what lies at the core rather than by what lies at the periphery. Here, then, is my version of five-point evangelicalism:

Divine	initiatives
Amazing	grace
Imputed	righteousness
Scriptural	authority
Yesterday and today	

But this floral summary is only a first approximation.

VII GOOD NEWS: A DEFINITION 'FROM ABOVE'³⁰

The *Oxford English Dictionary* lists as its first entry under 'evangelical' the following definition: 'of or according to the teaching of the gospel'. Karl Barth's definition is similar: ' "Evangelical" means informed by the gospel of Jesus Christ, as heard afresh in the

²⁸ R. Holloway, 'Evangelicalism: An Outsider's Perspective', in *Evangelical Anglicans: Their Role and Influence in the Church Today* (ed. R. T. France and A. E. McGrath; London: S.P.C.K., 1993), pp. 174–83. The Bishop is referring for the most part to Anglican evangelicalism, but similar objections are often levelled against American varieties of evangelicalism too.

²⁹ This seems a fair criticism. Few works of evangelical theology make brilliant new insights. Theirs is rather the voice of persistent witness to a truth that is essentially unchanging.

³⁰ A definition 'from below' might give a socio-historical description of actual evangelicals. Here I wish to describe not how evangelicals actually are but how they *ought* to be.

sixteenth-century Reformation by direct return to Holy Scripture.³¹ Evangelical designates that theology which focuses on the ‘God of the Gospel’, that is, the God who reveals himself in the life of Jesus and in the testimonies about him.

Euangelion means good or gladdening news. Because the gospel is news, theology must not shirk the question of truth. Theology is the sustained reflection on this news which seeks to understand it and to apply its ‘goodness’ to the contemporary situation. What is news? A report of what has happened. There is *news* because there were *events*. The gospel is a Word from God about God acting in the God-man Jesus Christ. The good news concerns what God has *said* about what God has *done*. Why is the news ‘good’? Because there has been what Tolkien calls a ‘eucatastrophe’—a cataclysmic event with a universal beneficial effect (the opposite of catastrophe). At the heart of *euangelion* is the eucatastrophe of Christ—cross, resurrection, his going away ‘for us’. The good news of the gospel thus leads to both the formal principle of the Reformation, biblical authority (the news is *reliable*), and to its material principle, justification by faith (the news is *good*).

An evangelical is one who accepts these divine initiatives—God’s saying and God’s doing—as the two ‘givens’ with which theology begins. These givens are the basis of the gifts of faith and freedom. First, the given of revelation: God’s Word enables *faith*. Second, the given of redemption: God’s Work enables *freedom*. The evangelical accepts, third, the gift of the Spirit of Christ, the power that enables us to appropriate the gifts of faith and freedom. Last, the evangelical accepts the responsibility of being a disciple of Jesus Christ, of using freedom in a way that glorifies God. Evangelical ethics—life in the freedom of the Spirit—can only be a response to God’s grace.

The essence of sin is to refuse these two givens. The sin of unbelief is the refusal to accept divine revelation and the gift of faith. The sin of disobedience is the refusal to accept divine redemption and the gift of freedom. The evangelical, on the other hand, enthusiastically affirms the gospel and the divine initiatives on which it depends, as well as the rationality and freedom that ensues. The evangelical is thus one who accepts the *euangelion*, the good news about the eucatastrophe, with joy and thanks. Finally, an evangelical acknowledgment of God’s grace, his *charis*, should be characterized by gratitude, by *eucharist*. Evangelical theology celebrates ‘God with us’ and ‘God for us’. As such, ‘it can be nothing else but the most thankful and happy science’.³² *Eucatastrophe—euangelion—eucharist*: the word, the event, the response. This is the glorious logic that underlies evangelical identity.

VIII CREDIBILITY AND EVANGELICAL COMPETENCE

‘Credible’, according to the *OED*, means both ‘believable’ and ‘worthy of belief’. To be ‘believable’ is a dubious virtue if it means an easy compliance with culture’s values and beliefs. Evangelicals hold the good news to be *true*, not merely morally uplifting or aesthetically pleasing. The real question, then, is whether the good news, and the evangelical response to it, is *worthy* of belief?

A. The Crucial Theological Question: Has God Acted to Reveal and Redeem?

Evangelical theology is not, of course, alone in its dependence on the notion of divine initiatives. But perhaps more than most, evangelical theology affirms a God who speaks, a God whose act is speech and self-expression, a God who communicates. While such an

³¹ K. Barth, *The Humanity of God* (London: Collins, 1961), p. 11.

³² K. Barth, *Evangelical Theology: An Introduction* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1963).

idea is wholly foreign to some liberal theologians, I believe that it is both defensible and desirable. Something is missing in a theology that affirms God's love of the world but denies that he can communicate with it. How can we even say that God is love unless we have some idea of what God is up to in the world, and how can we know what God is up to in the world—or even in Christ—unless God could communicate his intentions? Without a reliable interpretive word, we could never identify God's activity in the world. Without the Word of God, the alternative is not just carefully qualified guesswork at what God is doing, but radical agnosticism.

B. The Crucial Evangelical Question: Do Evangelicals Hear and Do the Euangelion?

How credible is our evangelical confession of gospel truth? This question has two parts: has evangelical theology correctly *heard* and *understood* gospel truth? does evangelical theology lead to *doing* gospel truth?

To ask whether evangelicals have correctly heard gospel truth is a question for hermeneutics. Popular opinion tends to confuse and conflate the distinction between literal meaning and literalistic interpretation. By 'literal' meaning I mean the sense of the letter, the meaning of the words in their ordinary usage. If the usage is metaphorical or poetic, then the literal sense refers to its metaphorical or poetic sense. 'Literalistic' interpretation, on the other hand, treats all texts as though they referred to the world in some straightforward way (*viz.*, descriptive, historical). Literalistic interpretation rides roughshod over figures of speech, literary genres, and rhetorical devices in a way that a literal reading does not. Such literalism is better described as *unlettered* interpretation. Evangelical interpretation, on the other hand, should be both literal and *literate*: it should seek the sense of the letter through sensitivity to the language and literary form. The prime hermeneutical directive is, therefore, to respect the ordinary use of words in their literary context.

What about the Spirit? Is Christianity a religion of the Book only? This question nicely divides the sheep and the goats, or at any rate, fundamentalists, evangelicals, and liberals. Liberals link religious experience to the Spirit but fail to preserve the objective revelation of the Word which the Spirit's witness presupposes. Fundamentalists are so concerned to defend the reliability of the Scriptures that they overlook the Bible's instrumental character as an inspired witness to Christ.³³ Evangelical theology follows the Reformers in holding Word and Spirit together. Christ is the content of the Scriptures and the object of the Spirit's witness. 'The true knowledge of God is gained with a teacher and a grammar, the Holy Spirit and the Sacred Writings'.³⁴ The Spirit is teacher, Christ is the subject, and Scripture is the schoolroom.

Evangelical theology begins in faith and seeks understanding. Faith is a response to a Word which precedes it. Does this mean that evangelical belief is irrational? Not at all. What makes a belief rational is not its having been proven, but rather its openness to criticism, its ability to survive critical testing. On this view, rationality is not so much a matter of beginning with well-founded beliefs as of subsequent testing. Evangelical theology, to be credible must be willing to submit its truth claims to the critical tests of the broader academic and ecumenical communities. Such a view of rationality is well-

³³ One might say that fundamentalism, in its preoccupation with the letter, considers biblical truth to be a kind of *ex opera operato* of the printed word. Ramm calls this the 'abbreviated Protestant principle', for it neglects the witness of the Spirit.

³⁴ B. Ramm, *Witness of the Spirit* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1959), p. 64.

suited to a tradition that acknowledges its interpretations to be subservient to the Scriptures.

Yet evangelical theology must be bold as well as humble. Its ministry of the Word leads it into conflict with the idols and ideologies of this world. Indeed, evangelical theology is radically *anti*-ideological, and this for two reasons. To begin with, the first commandment states that ‘You shall have no other gods before me’. This effectively prohibits all intellectual and political agendas that claim absoluteness. The cross, too, is a word of judgement on all human attempts to reach God. Theology thus becomes ‘the critique of human pretensions in the light of God’s gracious condescension in Jesus Christ’.³⁵ Indeed, this may be evangelicalism’s special role in contemporary theology: to cleanse the temple and call the church back to the full truth of the gospel.

Is evangelical theology up to this task? To what kind of community does evangelical theology give rise? Evangelicalism must be careful not to succumb to the siren song of modernity. And certain understandings of inerrancy may be more modernist than biblical in their formulations. It would be the height of irony if our formulations of inerrancy turned out to be a mess of modernist pottage. Above all, we must beware the danger of ‘cheap inerrancy’, that is, *the profession of inerrancy without discipleship*.

It is not enough to be able to read maps, or even to believe that they lead to eternal life. We are called to be not only hearers and readers, but ministers and doers of the Word. A map is useful only when it is followed. Take up your book and walk! For we can be disciples of Jesus Christ only if we follow the biblical texts. To be a disciple means to be a follower, one who walks ‘according to the Scriptures’. Costly inerrancy means not only professing biblical truth but doing it; it means living and dying the biblical truth. It is no coincidence that our word ‘martyr’ comes from the Greek word for ‘witness’. The cost of inerrancy is ‘martyrdom’. Inerrancy is not merely a formula to which we pay lip service, but a *mission*.

Measured by this exacting standard, how is the evangelical community doing? Is it flourishing, free, showing the signs of the fruits of the Spirit, known by its love? As we assess the credibility of evangelical theology, I suggest that we focus on the following three areas.

1. Humility. Are evangelicals appropriately self-critical? Intellectual humility means not thinking overmuch of one’s own opinions. There is no contradiction between holding convictions and holding them humbly. In theology, humility is next to godliness. It is the necessary condition of true dialogue with others, as well as being a necessary condition for receiving the truth.
2. Creative fidelity. Our theological formulas must be interpreted ever anew if they are not to ossify. Evangelicals must be always reforming, under the authority of God’s Word and in the power of God’s Spirit.
3. Joyful performance. One of the most powerful pieces of evidence of the credibility of evangelical theology are churches which put such theology into practice. If our theological truth claims are to be intelligible, we must be able to point to a community which embodies them. *Evangelical culture must be eucharistic*: it must celebrate, and consecrate, the gifts of Christian faith and freedom.

IX CREDIBILITY AND CARTOGRAPHICAL COMPETENCE

³⁵ D. Bloesch, *Theology of Word and Spirit: Authority and Method in Theology* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1992), p. 18.

Biblical literacy is as much a way of life as a way of reading, for following this Book entails both a hearing and a doing of its words. The ninetieth question of the *Westminster Shorter Catechism* asks: 'How is the Word to be read and heard, that it may become effectual to salvation?' The answer: 'We must attend thereunto with diligence, preparation, and prayer, receive it with faith and love, lay it up in our hearts, and practise it in our lives.' Receiving the Word with faith and love; practising the Word in our lives. Both are necessary moments in achieving biblical literacy, for the letter must live. When does the letter come alive? When we put it into practice and let it guide our lives. Literacy is 'the ability to understand or follow a text'. We follow arguments or stories when we grasp their point. But 'follow' also means 'to go along after'. To be biblically literate, in the strongest sense of the term, involves both meanings: understanding the Word and putting the Word into practice.

The ancient Israelites had a map—the torah, the law of God that was to govern their walk and lead them to Christ. The tragedy of Israel's history was that, though they had access to maps, they did not follow them. Instead of walking the way, they wandered. In this case, the church should not follow Israel's example but learn from it. All of us, by the way we live, are following some script, some *graphie*. Which map are you using to chart your journey through life? What, on your *mappa mundi*, is the route to the promised land of meaning, joy, and life?

Biblical interpretation involves performance. Think of a pianist who interprets a Beethoven sonata. We speak of Alfred Brendel's interpretation as opposed to Glenn Gould's. Can we really 'perform' texts? Can we put prophecy, wisdom, apocalyptic, narrative into practice? Can we perform doctrine? psalm? Certainly! We do so all the time: the fundamental form of interpretation is the way we live our lives each day. Our behaviour is the true index to what we believe about biblical authority. The Bible lays claim to our whole being: 'Some of . . . [God's] words require our intellectual assent, others our pious submission, others our moral obedience, and others our cultural faithfulness.'³⁶

Christian life and thought alike, then, are interpretations of Scripture. Our doctrine is our theoretical interpretation of the Christian story; our life is our practical interpretation. In the postmodern world, the best way to defend biblical authority may be to create a kind of community life in which the Bible functions as authoritative (and liberating). 'No contemporary theory of the authority of the Bible can assume that a person will be convinced of the Bible's authority apart from participation in the community of faith.'³⁷ To repeat: the fundamental form of Christian biblical interpretation is the corporate life of the Christian church. The church embodies the Word of God—this, at least, is its task, its privilege, and responsibility. In Leslie Newbigin's words: the church must be a 'hermeneutic of the Gospel'. Think of the congregation as a *living commentary*. Biblical literacy—'following' the Word—should lead to Christian discipleship, to practising the letter in our lives.

How can we be sure our interpretation of the Bible is really biblical? How can we be sure that we are respecting the text and preserving biblical authority rather than imposing our own voice onto that of the text? This is a most important, and sobering, question. I do not think we should be *too* sure of ourselves. We must be confident but not cocky—sure enough to confront blatant falsity and error, but not so sure as to become presumptuous. One should never be complacent when handling a two-edged sword that can pierce to the marrow.

³⁶ R. Mouw, 'The Bible in Twentieth Century Protestantism', in *The Bible in America* (ed. N. O. Hatch and M. A. Noll; New York: Oxford University Press, 1982), p. 158.

³⁷ D. Jodock, *The Church's bible: Its Contemporary Authority* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1989), p. 74.

Can we speak of an ‘incorrect’ interpretation, or of a bad performance? It is the theologian’s task to judge the fidelity and the efficacy of the church’s discipleship. The theologian is a critic of the church’s performance. Are Christians living according to the intention of the biblical texts? Are they performing gospel, living as though they had died and risen again with Christ? Are they performing parables, living lives oriented to the kingdom of God? Are they performing law, living lives that conform to God’s will?

What does it mean to be biblical? Augustine saw the Bible as a blueprint for individual and social existence. If it were followed to the letter, the church would become the City of God. Being biblical means following the text, continuing along the various itineraries of biblical discourse. Can we ‘perform’ biblical narrative today? Indeed we can: we can ‘read’ our lives in light of the biblical story. We should ‘absorb the world’ into the text.³⁸ Like the apostle Paul, we can read ourselves, and our world, in light of the biblical narrative. Paul reads his life in light of the life of Jesus, and he encourages his readers to do the same: ‘Take up your cross’, ‘Crucify the old man’, live as saints risen with Christ. Here are powerful interpretations of narrative that preserve and perform the gospel narrative in new contexts.

Evangelical faith in the Word of God boils down to this single point: the conviction that in the faithful response to and performance of this good news is *life*—life abundant and eternal. Whether or not we are biblically literate will ultimately be shown by the way we live. In a postmodern age where sundry texts and voices beckon to us from all sides to walk many ways, it is of no little comfort to have a Word that has proven to be a reliable guide to generations of its hearers and doers. To be able to follow the Word in faithful obedience—this is the definition of Christian freedom. Do we really believe that achieving biblical literacy is the most important task of the hour? I hope we do. For achieving biblical literacy, in the sense that I have defined it, is ultimately our only hope for achieving genuine human liberation.

X EVANGELICAL CONVICTIONS: ECUMENICAL CONVERSATIONS

Back to the Bishop. In fairness, I should add that Bishop Holloway also observed some good points about evangelical theology: (1) the conviction that being a Christian ought to make a difference in the way one lives; (2) its missionary energy, a centrifugal force which leads from the Word to the world; (3) its preservation of the ‘otherness’ of the faith (as over against attempts to accommodate it to the prevailing cultural winds). This last point is particularly important. Evangelical theology seeks to preserve the *otherness* of the gospel as opposed to *other gospels*. The gospel of Jesus Christ must not be confused with other words, currently available in the ideological marketplace, that promise freedom but do not deliver it. Where liberal theologians are busy revising the gospel in order to accommodate it to the surrounding culture, evangelical theology preserves the gospel’s integrity and confesses its truth: that God acts definitively to reveal and redeem in, through, and as Jesus Christ. Such a confession does not preclude rational conversation, but begins it by acknowledging one’s prior commitments. Evangelical theology is, therefore, a theology of confession. Yet in order to be credible, its conversation must be seasoned with the following six ingredients.

1. A Christocentric focus. The Word and work of God in Jesus Christ precedes both faith and theology. God’s act in Jesus embodies the divine initiative—the Giver, the

³⁸ The phrase comes from G. A. Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine: Religion and Theology in a Postliberal Age* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1984).

Giving and the Gift (to speak in Trinitarian terms)—to which evangelical theology responds.

2. A canonical scope. As Calvin said, the only Christ we know is the Christ of the Scriptures. That is why evangelicals must be biblically literate. For it is primarily theology that speaks of God *apart* from the written Word of God which today is lacking in credibility. Once speech about God is cut off from the Canon, once theological discourse is deregulated, what is to stop us from saying just about anything about God, and in the name of God? Theology too must guard against taking God's name in vain.
3. A catholic audience. To be sure, neither the gospel nor biblical interpretation is the sole province of evangelical theology. Evangelicals should be theologically literate—conscious of their theological heritage. And they should be ecumenical, in the sense of being in dialogue and communion with all those, yesterday and today, who seek to respond in fidelity to the good news. This is the only way to avoid the dangers of sectarianism and parochialism. What we need today is more people with evangelical convictions who are willing to enter into ecumenical conversation.
4. A self-critical attitude. Evangelicals should not boast. There is nothing sacrosanct about evangelical interpretations and performances. Scripture alone is authoritative.
5. A culture-critical spirit. Evangelicals must be critics of contemporary culture. If theology is the ministry of the Word to the world, one must understand the world in which one ministers. The evangelical theologian should thus be engaged in cultural analysis; 'know thy culture' is a good motto for the theologian. What, for instance, does a top-ten film list tell us about contemporary society, its values, beliefs, and interests? The world must be interpreted in light of the Bible's witness to Christ.
6. A constructive agenda. Evangelicals must 'perform' the biblical 'word view' in culture (and here we have a long way to go). It is only in so far as evangelicals present a viable alternative that it will have something to contribute to contemporary discussions not only about theology, but about society, marriage, and the family, not to mention the nature of human being itself.

Evangelical theology confesses the givens about revelation and redemption in Christ. The Bible is God's Word, Christ is the centre of the Bible, and the Word will only be followed (understood and applied) by those who live in the Spirit. To be an evangelical is to be a humble and joyful Trinitarian interpreter of good news. Confessing gospel truth is the privilege, and responsibility, of evangelical theology. We should not be ashamed of the strangeness of this message. Evangelical theology is essentially the attempt to preserve the 'otherness' of the good news. For the gospel will always be somewhat jarring, if not outright foolish. This is as it should be, because the good news announces the 'impossible possibility' of God made man and the scandal of the cross. Consequently, the day that evangelical theology fails to preserve the otherness of the gospel and becomes *too* credible is the day I give it up.

XI CONCLUSION: THE EVANGELICAL PASSION FOR BIBLICAL TRUTH IN A POSTMODERN WORLD

Is this evangelical passion for biblical truth out of place in the postmodern world? On the contrary, the passion for truth must be a perennial concern. Why bother about truth?

Because only truth can be relied on. And in this as in every age, we find truth by taking our bearings from the Scriptures, our Word atlas.

We need to raise, in conclusion, one further question. What form shall our passion for truth take today? Most of us, I suspect, have trouble with the end of the Elijah story. For after his victory on Mount Carmel he commanded the people, 'Seize the prophets of Baal'. To be sure, the massacre which followed was no slaughter of the innocents. Elijah was only carrying out what the law commanded, namely, death for false prophets who turn the people to worship other gods. In NT times, the passion for truth takes the form of evangelism, with a goal to conversion. During the history of the church, however, this admirable aim was not always admirably carried out. Conversion often took the form of coercion: your confession or your life. The modern reaction to this approach results in an emphasis not on conversion but on conversation. Indeed, one hears it said today that truth claims are always oppressive, always implicitly totalitarian. For if one party thinks it has the truth, will it not be tempted to excommunicate the other?

Religious debate and division is nothing new, of course. After many years of Christian war, the British Parliament passed the Act of Toleration in 1689. Theologians at the time, such as John Owen, believed that tolerance was a virtue, because they were confident that truth could vindicate itself without instruments of state coercion. However, this Puritan view of tolerance was quickly replaced by a secular understanding. John Stuart Mill argued in his treatise *On Liberty* that, since one cannot prove religious truth right or wrong, the only reasonable attitude is to be tolerant of all positions. Mill's understanding of tolerance is a far cry from Owen's. Mill's is the tolerance of Pilate: the tolerance of not caring enough about the truth; the tolerance of indifference.

Can we combine a passion for the truth with a tolerance for others? We can, and we must. A passion for truth need not make us intolerant of others, though it will make us intolerant of falsehood and deceit. To be passionate about truth means doing one's best to expose the lie. But a passion for truth does not justify the oppression of others who do not agree with us. How then can we make truth claims in a pluralistic world, and in a pluralistic church?

First, we must realize that a passion for the truth is not the same as a possession of the truth. The truth of Christ is a gift of God, not a human achievement. Moreover, the Spirit who leads us into all truth is a gift to the whole church, not to certain individuals, nor even to one denomination. Furthermore, humans are finite and fallible interpreters of God's Word. We can misinterpret what it means. This does not imply, however, that one interpretation is as good as another. Christian tolerance is quite different from the tolerance of Pilate. Nor does being tolerant mean being promiscuous with the truth. On the contrary, Christian tolerance reflects the patience of God himself as he waits for people to come to and to acknowledge the truth.

To have a passion for the truth means, simply, being a disciple, one who follows the way of Jesus Christ, come what may. Elijah said: 'If Yahweh is God, follow him; if Baal, follow him'. We behave according to our beliefs. Our daily lives proclaim, in a manner louder than words, what we hold as true. If we are following Christ, then our passion for the truth must take the form of *his* passion. His was not the kind of passion for truth that oppressed others, even when he confronted them, but rather one that suffered for them. To have a 'passion' for the truth means, ultimately, that we must be willing to suffer for it. Christian tolerance is a matter, not of endorsing, but of *enduring* all things. This must be our evangelical strategy for making truth claims in a pluralistic world. Christ himself has shown us how to be both passionate for truth and tolerant; passion and tolerance alike are a matter of enduring. We cannot beat others into the truth, we must be willing to win

others to the truth through peaceful means, or to wait for truth's own vindication. To repeat: a witness to truth endures, but does not endorse, all things.

As Christians, we are commissioned to endure, to persist in our witness to the truth. We practise the passion of Christ when we speak the truth in love. In the final analysis, to make a Christian truth claim is to engage in Christian mission. Genuine truth-tellers and truth-seekers are not oppressors, but neither are they indifferent to the distinction between the true and the false. They are rather witnesses to the one who is alone the way and truth and life. God's Word is true; it does not disappoint, but delivers. Idols and ideologies will pass away, but the Word of the Lord endures—forever.

How can we be sure that our passion for the truth is not pathological, mere zeal without knowledge? In the philosophy of science, a set of theories or 'research programme' is considered successful if it can withstand critical testing and if it shows signs of 'progressing'.³⁹ So it is with Christian faith. Evangelical theology, to be credible, must submit to two important critical tests. The church is a life and research programme, guided by the Word and empowered by the Spirit. Its 'success' is measured by the ability to withstand the greatest test of all—the test of time. The way of life generated by the Scriptures has, after all, survived for two millennia, and has spread throughout the world. The first test for gospel truth, therefore, is an *endurance* test.

The other test for truth in scientific theories is whether they are 'progressing'. What counts as 'progress' in the Christian church is related to growth of corporate knowledge. I am using the term 'knowledge' in its rich biblical sense, which involves not only belief but obedience, holiness, and communion. We test our passion for gospel truth by seeing whether we have become increasingly obedient: are we growing in the 'grace and knowledge' of Jesus Christ? Moreover, it is precisely such growth that best serves the postmodern interest in liberation, for our obedience to the truth is precisely what sets us free. By its fruit shall you know a good theory, and practice, of biblical authority.

The canonical authority of Scripture is the condition of faith and liberty. A faith which does not base itself upon God is not faith; a liberty which does not find its charter in the Word of God is not more than an illusion of the mind, a dupe of social convention, masquerading under the cloak of pretended psychological spontaneity. 'Where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom' ([2 Cor. 3:17](#)) and there only.⁴⁰

The biblical maps are still reliable, true guides to what humanity needs most: wisdom, freedom, life. The postmodern world may be largely uncharted, but the biblical maps will not steer us wrong. We have only to follow them in our theology and our practice. We are called to be 'missionary explorers'. That is certainly the spirit in which I have offered these reflections, comments, and criticisms concerning evangelical theology in the postmodern world.

I began with a Scot; let me end with him too. David Livingstone's greatest achievement was his example. Through his map-making mission, he inspired an army of explorers and missionaries to follow him into Africa. My hope and prayer is that you will have been encouraged by my, more abbreviated, missionary exploration, to go boldly into the postmodern world. The maps we have in the Old and New Testaments are profitable guides, in all places and at all times, to the way of truth and life. As we set out as missionary-explorers to minister the Word in our postmodern world, therefore, let us all

³⁹ I here have in mind the philosophy of science represented by I. Lakatos, ed., *Criticism and the Growth of Knowledge* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970).

⁴⁰ A. Lecerf, *An Introduction to Reformed Dogmatics* (London: Lutterworth, 1949), p. 369.

remember to take our bearings from Scripture. Let us remember, as we journey on, to sound the biblical canon—to the glory of God.

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Circles and the Cross: Reflections on Neo-paganism, Postmodernity, and Celtic Christianity

Loren Wilkinson

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This original and challenging article was first presented to a graduate seminar at King's College, University of London, England in May 1996. The author shows why contemporary paganism offers an alternative worldview and practice to an increasing number of people who are disenchanted with Christianity's perceived inability to relate the human quest to the world of nature. Further, he shows the interconnectedness of the neopagan spirituality to post modernity. The symbol of the Celtic Cross answers the aspirations of the pagan circle, yet transcends it and offers a transforming alternative way.

Editor

... as often as men become Pagans again, the Landlord again sends them pictures and stirs up sweet desire and so leads them back to Mother Kirk even as he led the actual Pagans long ago. There is, indeed, no other way. ... That is the definition of a Pagan—a man so travelling that if all goes well he arrives at Mother Kirk's chair and is carried over this gorge. ...
C.S. Lewis, *Pilgrim's Regress*

I THE POSTMODERN ATTRACTION TO NEO-PAGANISM

Paganism is on the rise. Evidences of this pagan revival are not hard to find. We see it for example, in feminist interest in 'Gaia', the 'great goddess' of the Earth; in renewed interest in a wide range of 'native spiritualities'; and (especially) in pursuit of the spiritual experience of 'nature'. Consider, for example, 'Pacific Spirit Park' in Vancouver, the thousand acres of dripping ferns, firs and cedars which surround UBC—and Regent College—and which are described at nearly every approach with a sign announcing the entrance to 'a ground for our becoming one with nature'. We see it also behind much of a current wave of fascination with the Celtic—in myth, music and visual art.

Such things are regularly labelled 'pagan' by people who disapprove of them. What is perhaps more significant is the number of persons, publications, and organizations who proudly and approvingly apply that name 'pagan'—or more commonly, *neo-pagan*, to themselves. There are regions in North America (Vancouver is one) where more people would call themselves 'neo-pagan' than Christian. Nor is the phenomenon limited to North

America. A recent Internet listing turned up 115 Neo-pagan publications in Britain and Ireland alone.

'Neo-pagan' is a curious term, for it combines the prefix for 'new' with a word which can hardly be heard apart from its echoes of the old: 'paganism' is from the past. How then can there be a new paganism? The same paradox of old and new occurs, with a different spin, in another recently-coined word, 'postmodern'. And in fact, a consideration of 'postmodernity' sheds considerable light on 'neo-paganism'.

'Modern' has for over a century meant that which is newest and most up-to-date. (The Latin root of the word means 'just now'.) Implicit in the word has been the notion of progress: the assumption that we have emerged from the darkness of ignorance and superstition into the increasing light of reason. Thus the apparent perversity of the term 'postmodern': why would anyone want to go beyond (hence the 'post-') this sunlit world of rational understanding and control?

An answer lies in one of the corollaries of modernity. Almost inseparable from its assumptions about rationality and control has been its consequence of increasing secularization: the conviction that one of the 'superstitions' which the modern era must abandon is any notion of a real, personal, Creator God—and along with it, any sense of transcendent purpose or meaning to human life, individual or collective. So, despite the fact that—ironically—much of the original impetus for modernity came from Protestant Christianity, its result has been a kind of practical atheism. Increasingly we live our lives as though there were no God: meaning and purpose are up to us.

The personal result has been a kind of inner *Angst*. As the scope of human possibilities has broadened (at least in the technologically and economically wealthy western world) its depth of meaning has thinned almost to vanishing. Like a revolving sign, seen end-on, meaning disappears. Such 'depthlessness' is the consequence of modern life, and it has also become the reluctant premise of the postmodern search for alternatives to the Modern. And it is in such a search that 'neo-paganism' has surfaced for many as an attractive alternative.

For many centuries the word 'pagan' has had, in the Christian world, a double connotation. Because it has always been used to describe those who were not Christian, it has carried a distinct taint of wickedness and idolatry. More subtly, because the pagans were, in the European world, those who followed the 'old' gods before their conversion, the word has an archaic ring. To be pagan was to be old-fashioned, behind the times. And in that hint of archaism something of the original meaning—and the current attraction—of paganism can be seen. A pagan was literally a peasant and a 'rustic': a country-dweller in the urban Roman world. And, as history developed, the two meanings were connected. For good strategic reasons, Christianity first grew largely in the urban centres. Paul (unlike Jesus) rarely preached in the country. The New Testament was written mainly to city-dwellers. The peasants in the countryside were seldom the first to become Christians; the old folk and 'pagan' religions hung on longer there than in the city, so country-dwellers were 'pagan' in both senses of the word: peasants and idolaters.

It is not so surprising, then, that in the contemporary longing for an escape from the modern (which is manifested most dramatically in the cities), many are turning to the ancient religions of the countryside, and arguing that Christianity has little to offer those concerned with the cycles of nature. Thus the word 'pagan' is being used positively for the first time in many centuries—not by Christian 'post-pagans' who see paganism as an evil darkness, but by pagan 'post-Christians' who see the Christian era itself as destructive and futile. That is why many people regard paganism as a source of hope and healing and proudly call themselves 'neo-pagans'.

The Celtic revival draws on this post-modern fascination with the pagan. It is the British equivalent of North American fascination with 'native spirituality' (and, perhaps, of Australian interest in the aboriginal), for it seems to offer a possibility of going back behind the whole nightmare to a world which is not only pre-modern but pre-Christian, and which offers promise of personal, societal, and environmental wholeness. While being cautious about its faddishness, Christians need to take this Celtic revival seriously—if only because (ironically) the greatest flowering of Celtic culture was under the influence of Christianity. More important is the fact that in the remnants of Celtic Christian culture retrieved from the fringes of Britain we still glimpse possibilities of a trinitarian transformation of culture which are perhaps unique in Christian history, and which hold great promise for our own postmodern times. That transformation can be summed up by reflecting on some of the rich meaning of the 'Celtic cross': the Christian cross providing both a centre and a context for a circle. And the circle is a prime pagan—and neo-pagan—symbol. To see why this is so, we need to look in greater detail at the current resurgence of interest in paganism.

II THE CONTENT OF CONTEMPORARY NEO-PAGANISM

Today we can hear the voice of neo-paganism in hundreds of little publications. But a central clearing house and meeting place for the movement is the Internet. On one level this neo-pagan flourishing on the high-tech Internet is ironic, given the anti-modern stance of neo-paganism (it is not the first of the ironies of neo-paganism—nor of the Internet). However, at another level—given the genuinely pluralist, and anarchic nature of the Internet—it is not surprising. The very language surrounding 'The Net' ('world-wide web', 'web-weaving', 'sites', and 'nodes') is eerily suggestive of some neo-pagan themes, not the least of which is the central image of weaving, as in the ancient phrase 'weaving a spell' or, more suggestively, in the connection between 'wicca', the preferred word for magic, and 'wicker' (another kind of 'web'). But perhaps a greater congruence between neo-pagan themes and the Internet is that it contributes powerfully to a deep neo-pagan and postmodern theme: the idea that we can 'create our own reality'. And the reality so created is ghostly and gnostic in its subjectivity and in its ultimate denial of the inconvenience of a reality outside the self. At the computer terminal (or inside one's 'sacred circle') it is far easier to sustain the illusion that 'I am divine' than in a world of physically present Others.

The well-designed Neo-Paganism 'Home Page' on the 'World-Wide-Web' introduces itself in these words:

For the benefit of our new readers, it is worthwhile repeating our definition of the term 'neo-pagan'. A neo-pagan is an individual whose interest in the religious sphere lies in patterns of belief which are non-orthodox and non-traditional in Western society and which more specifically pre-date Western society's dominant belief systems as represented, for example, by Christianity or Judaism.¹

Several things are worth noting in this self-definition. The first is the deliberate appropriation of the term 'neo-pagan'. And though some in the movement argue for dropping the 'neo-', it is an honest, and necessary, prefix. For the central defining element in neo-paganism is (as this definition makes very clear) the fact that it is 'non-orthodox' and 'non-traditional'—that it 'predate[s] Western society's dominant belief systems'.

¹ Unless otherwise indicated, all quotations from neo-pagan sources are taken from Internet searches under 'Neo-Paganism' in March and April of 1996.

Oddly, nothing in this definition gives any content to neo-paganism beyond what it is not. And the most specific thing which it is 'not' is Jewish or Christian.

There is, of course, a positive content to neo-paganism, though it can hardly be expounded today apart from the Christianity against which it is defined. Selena Fox, who describes herself as 'a practising pagan priestess' provides a remarkably lucid and irenic statement of neo-pagan belief in a carefully-written apologia (also on the Internet) called, 'I am a Pagan'. It is too long to reproduce here, but I will attempt to give its flavour with some quotes and commentary. Fox begins:

I am Pagan. I celebrate the changing seasons, the turning of the Wheel of the Year. I celebrate with singing, dancing, feasting, rituals, and in Other ways. I celebrate each turn of the Wheel with personal spiritual practices and by taking part in community festivals.

Fox then lists these principle Pagan festivals, all with northern European roots: *Samhain* (Halloween), a time for honouring the dead, and 'the Wiccan and Celtic spiritual New Year'; *Yule*, the Winter Solstice . . . a festival of peace and a celebration of waxing solar light'; *Candlemas*, or (in America, 'Groundhog's Day') . . . a 'preparation for spring and new growth'; the *Spring Equinox* corresponding roughly with Easter, and the celebration of new life; *Beltane*, Mayday, "a festival of fertility and pleasure"; *Summer Solstice* "a time to celebrate Pagan culture"; *Lammas*, in early August, a festival of the first fruits; *Fall Equinox*, "the time of thanksgiving for all the harvests . . . reaped during the growing time. . . And at *Samhain*, this wheel of the year starts again."

For each of these festivals, Fox lists appropriate activities, most having to do with growth, planting and harvest. But she follows this list of the annual festivals by pointing out that the vegetation cycles of the outer year have an inner counterpart:

I am Pagan. I also honor the seasons of life within my life's journey's: beginnings, growth, fruition, harvest, endings, rest, and beginnings again. Life is a Circle with many cycles. With every Ending comes a new Beginning. Within Death there is the promise of Rebirth . . . I see circles of change and renewal not only within my own life's journey, but in my heritage. I see my life as a circle that connects with the life circles of my ancestors. They are part of me and of my life.

Fox describes magic as "part of my spirituality," and defines it as an "essential consciousness change." In her words: "I create my own reality with my thoughts, feelings, and actions." She describes also, in a much-repeated pagan maxim a kind of Wiccan "golden rule"; "I seek to abide by the Wiccan Rede: 'And it Harm None, Do What You Will.'"

She goes on to explain that the "Triple Goddess of the Moon" is particularly important for her magic: "I activate beginnings in the Waxing, energize manifestations at the Full, and I know that my Circles are part of a great web of Circles that meet at these times around Planet Earth."

She then explains her understanding of "the divine":

I embrace Pantheism, acknowledging that the Divine is everywhere and in everything. I honor the Divine that is within the oak trees in the forest, in the herbs in the garden, in the wild birds singing in the trees, in the rock outcroppings on the hillside, in myself, and yes, even in "things" such as my car, cameras, and computers. I understand that everything with a physical body has a spiritual body, too. The physical and spiritual are deeply intertwined, not separate, in this world of form. I honor the interconnectedness of Creator and Creation. . . . I know that Divinity has many facets and I experience this through a variety of Goddesses, Gods, and other spiritual forms. I also honor Divine Oneness, the Unity of All.

Worship, for Pagans, says Fox, “takes the form of Divine communion with Nature . . . worship and rituals can be anywhere since my sacred circle is portable.”

She affirms the ancient idea of the unity of the universe (macrocosm) and the personal (microcosm):

I am Pagan, I attune myself to the four elements of Nature, Earth, Air, Fire, Water, and to the fifth element, Spirit, which is the spiritual force that connects all. I see these Elements in Nature, the Earth in the soil and rocks; the oceans, rain, and other waters on the planet; and the Spirit as Divine Unity. I also see these Elements as aspects of Self; my physical body and physiology is my Earth; my intellect and thoughts my Air, my will and actions my Fire; my emotions and feelings my Water, and my Inner Self, my Soul, is my Spirit. I endeavor to keep myself healthy and in balance in all these parts of Self. I work toward a restoring of balance of the Elements in the environment.

Having declared her belief in the correlation between her “elements” and those in nature, she concludes with an eloquent statement of concern for the way those elements, inner and outer, are being polluted:

I am Pagan. I hear the cries of Mother Earth who is upset with the harm being done to the environment by humankind. I am dismayed by the pollution of the air, the soil, and the waters, and by the domination games being played by nations with the fire of nuclear missiles and other weapons of mass destruction. I also am concerned about spiritual pollution of the Planet, selfishness, hatred, greed for money and power, addiction, violence, despair. Yet as I perceive these problems, I also perceive cleansing and healing happening on Planet Earth at this time. I know that I can help in at least a small way to bring the Planet into greater balance by seeking balance in my own life, by being a catalyst for restoring balance in the lives of others, and by working for a better environment. I know that my attitudes and my way of living can make a difference. I endeavor to be a channel for healing and balance. I make the practice of environmental responsibility a personal part of my daily life. I endeavor to live in harmony with the other members of the family of nature.

III CIRCLES IN PAGANISM

The main features of neo-paganism—as it is described here, and in many similar statements—can be summed up in terms of the three different meanings of its most prominent metaphor, the circle. The circle, a universal symbol, is intended as a kind of corrective to the linearity, of modern (and Christian) thinking.

Corrective to Linearity

Most obviously, the circle is an image of the cycle, and it is used widely to express our experience of the connectedness of things. Consider, for example, the widely used ‘recycling’ logo: three arrows curving into a circle. Nature works in cycles. The sun rises and sets; the moon waxes and wanes; tides rise and fall and the seasons return, year after year, with seedtime and harvest, wet and dry, thus providing the progression of solar, harvest, and fertility festivals which (as neo-pagans are quick to point out) provide some of the original framework for the Christian year. The study of ecology shows that the systems of living things on the earth form a sort of complex fountain through which the elements are lifted, broken down and re-used in an inexhaustible cycle.

Primitive and pagan peoples, it is argued, were aware of these cycles and lived within them. Modern civilization however, increasingly stepped outside the cycles of nature, or bent them into its own ideas of linear progress. Fruit and fibre from the wild cycles of natural abundance have become nothing but raw material to feed the engines of the

human economy. In place of a cycling system, modernity has established a one-way process of extraction, production, and waste, in which the natural world is regarded as a storehouse of raw materials and a sink for wastes. Modernity has largely detached itself from nature, creating an increasingly artificial environment in which one can live with little concern for location in place or time.

The ultimate source of this cycle-denying modernity, in which everything is involved with everything else, is, it is often argued, Judaeo-Christian theism's notion of a transcendent, patriarchal God who created the universe for his own purposes, created 'man' in his image, and regards the whole of creation as nothing but a backdrop to the unfolding human story. Nature recycles, and is connected; Christianity and modernity don't. Therefore, the reasoning goes, we ought to live in harmony with nature: which, for many people fed up with secular modernity, means turning back not to Christianity, with its linear story—but further back, to paganism and its endless circles.

Oneness in Identity

The second thing suggested by the circle in neo-pagan usage is oneness: inclusiveness, unity. Neo-paganism clearly draws on what Aldous Huxley called 'the perennial philosophy' of monism. To quote Fox: 'I honor Divine Oneness, the Unity of All.' All is one, and all is divine. The individual person also is a manifestation of the divine, so one of the goals of personal life is to tune one's self to the divinity in things and in the self. Modernity, following Christianity (so the pagan criticism goes) sees only human beings as related to the divine 'made in God's image' and thus elevates the human and regards the rest of nature as mere instrument or raw material for human ends.

Self at the Centre

The third significance of the circle in neo-pagan thought comes from the magical practice of drawing a 'sacred circle', with the self at the centre. In a sense, of course, all persons are the centre of circles carried with them always. Spatially, that personal circle is the horizon; more metaphorically, it is the fact that each of us lives (to some degree) in a private world. We never have direct access to another mind. The radical nature of that individuality has surfaced in the postmodern affirmation of pluralism, and the value of each person's story, as opposed to an overarching 'meta-narrative', which is always seen to be restrictive.

But the 'magic circle' in neo-paganism is always for the purposes of using power. And ultimately in neo-paganism (as elsewhere in modernity) this affirmation of individual autonomy works against the attempts to recover a sense of wholeness and interconnection, for it contradicts the affirmation of the independent nature of the complex other to which the self is connected. This failure is particularly obvious when we look at the *practice* of neo-paganism.

The darker possibilities of neo-pagan practice are illustrated very well in an interview (also on the Internet) with Hadrian, an Australian practitioner of magic who calls himself a hybrid 'Yogi, Magus, and Pagan'. When the interviewer points out that Hadrian seems to like the 'dark side' of paganism he replies:

I don't like the dark side of Paganism, I love it. . . . I love power. Possibly, for many Pagans, including myself, power is more easily felt when it manifests negatively. . . . I believe people intuitively know there is power in the dark side of Paganism. If they like or love power, they will be drawn to it.

And later, when Hadrian is asked about his preferred 'path' of yoga he, answers that he prefers 'the way of devotion'—which he defines as 'the eternal relationship between a

human and divinity or, put in another way, *the discovery of one's own divinity*' (emphasis mine).

Here two meanings of the circle are casually merged: the pantheist/monist circle, which says that all is one and divine, and the private, pragmatic circle which says that I am divine, creator of the only reality I need live by.

Hadrian's blunt admission that he is drawn to paganism because of the power it promises focuses on an irreconcilable problem in neo-paganism—one which extends across a wide range of 'postmodern' approaches to life. That problem is the impossibility of reconciling, on the one hand, the affirmation that the path of health is to live in harmony with the divine cycles manifest in nature, with, on the other hand, the idea that I can 'create my own reality'. Either there is a reality *outside the self* to which one must be conformed—or there is not, and the world is simply an extension of myself, waiting to be brought under the influence of my power.

This tendency in neo-paganism for the circle of the self to cancel out the circles of interconnectedness and oneness reflects the fact of a long, modern development of 'the self' outside any relationship to a personal God. In a pre-Cartesian era it was perhaps possible that reflection on the cycles of nature would point to a God who was other than those cycles. But nearly four centuries of an explicitly secular culture, based on the assumption 'I think, therefore I am' has precluded that possibility. Cartesians make poor pagans. It is all but impossible to go back through the Cartesian door, to become *less* of a thinking self. Instead, the self-as-divine becomes its own lonely and voracious world.

This deep flaw in neo-pagan thought—its tendency for the circle of the self to be expanded in such a way as to threaten the circles of wholeness and relationship—is the surfacing of a human reality never mentioned in neo-pagan thought: the reality of sin. Not far beneath Hadrian's fascination with power, his concern to 'discover his own divinity' is the ancient lie, 'you shall be like God'. Nor is it far beneath Selena Fox's concern to create her own reality in accordance with the rule, 'and it harm none, do what you will'. The sad commentary of history is that when the self is at the centre of the circle, and the only rule is 'what I will', a kind of hell on earth will result. It is time, therefore, to bring the neo-pagan picture into the light of Christian revelation.

IV THE CROSS AND THE CIRCLE: A CHRISTIAN RESPONSE TO NEO-PAGANISM

From a Christian standpoint we can neither completely accept, nor completely reject, these neo-pagan meanings of the circle.

Responses in Scripture

Let us consider first the biblical treatment of the circle as an image of the cyclic interconnectedness of things. On the one hand, the biblical writers had a deep sense of the relationship and interdependence of all creatures and their environment. The cyclic nature of that interdependence is given striking affirmation in the Noah story, in God's words following the flood: 'While the earth remains, seedtime and harvest, cold and heat, summer and winter, day and night, shall not cease' ([Gen. 8:22](#)). The interdependence of things is described with great power, in [Psalm 104](#), which recasts the [Genesis 1](#) seven-day creation story into the present tense, picturing a wide variety of living things—grass, cedars, storks, conies, mountain goats, lions, and human beings—each in relationship with other creatures which support them. But in both of these accounts there is a crucial difference from the pagan understanding of inter-relationship. In the Hebrew understanding, the cycles of the earth are sustained by a God who, though deeply involved

with creation, is *other* than creation. Indeed here lies the chief difference between ‘nature’, a pagan concept, and the biblical idea of ‘creation’. Ultimately ‘nature’ in the pagan view is self-contained and self-perpetuating, an endless round. Creation, on the other hand, is inexhaustible because it is sustained by a relationship with a giver who is beyond it. ‘You send forth your spirit, they are created. . . .’

Some sort of life-giving relationship to the divine is assumed as common knowledge in the biblical world. Paul’s sermons to the world of old paganism take it as a starting point. The Book of Acts records only two such sermons—at Lystra in Lycaonia in Asia minor ([Acts 14:14–18](#)), and the better-known Areopagus address at Athens ([Acts 17:22–31](#)). In both cases the listeners were familiar with the world of Greek polytheism, but only in the Lycaonian milieu is it likely that the gods retained much of their older association with natural cycles. (The paganism of Athens seems largely to have become philosophy.) But in Asia Minor, around Lystra and Derbe, the writer of Acts records that for some time Paul and Barnabas had been preaching in ‘the country’, and thus to ‘pagans’ in both senses of the word—i.e., to peasants, farmers, country folk. And though the words recorded for us were delivered in the city of Lystra, they bear evidence of Paul’s recent experience in the countryside. He recalls the people to ‘the living God who made heaven and earth’, and assures them that they already know something of this God, who ‘. . . has not left himself without testimony. He has shown kindness by giving you rain from heavens and crops in their seasons; he provides you with plenty of food and fills your hearts with joy’ ([Acts 14:17](#)).

Thus Paul is quick to root the Christian gospel in the same knowledge of the earth’s cyclic fruitfulness which contemporary neo-pagans call divine (assuming this, however, to be a non-Christian insight).

Paul’s audience in cosmopolitan and world-weary Athens was probably much further removed from direct experience of agriculture than it was at Lystra (though probably much nearer to it than most moderns!). And his words about the divine bounty are correspondingly more generalized. It is God who ‘gives all men life and breath and everything else’ ([Acts 17:25](#)). As a result of these gifts, Paul says, people ought to ‘. . . seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him, though he is not far from each of us’ (v. [27](#)). Paul sums up this affirmation of God’s closeness by citing, approvingly, a Stoic text: ‘In him we live and move and have our being’ (v. [28](#)).

It is clear from these passages that Paul wishes to see the Christian message not as a complete negation of pagan religion, but as a fulfilment of the best of it, the decisive answer to the questions which it asks. Such a strategy is evident in his use of the altar inscription ‘To an Unknown God’: ‘. . . what you worship as something unknown I am going to proclaim to you’ (v. [23](#)).

On the other hand, Paul is clear that worshipping the divine in the cycles of nature is a great mistake. At Lystra, Paul begs the people to ‘turn from these worthless things’—i.e., the attempt through sacrifice to live in harmony with a divine nature—to the God who made them. In [Romans 8:20](#) Paul refers to the ‘futility’ of creation, perhaps referring to its endless repetition. That futility is evoked very well in another Old Testament picture of the cycles of nature, in [Ecclesiastes 1](#):

The	sun	rises	and	the	sun	sets	and
hurries		back	to	where		it	rises.
The	wind		blows	to	the		south
and	turns		to	the			north;
round	and	round	it	goes.	.	.	.
All	streams		flow	into	the		sea,
yet	the	sea	is	never			full.

To the place the streams come from,
there they return again.

These are admirable insights into the operation of 'nature'. But when it is viewed simply as 'nature'—that is, without reference to a Creator, the preacher concludes: 'All things are wearisome', and sums up the appreciation of nature with the judgement 'Meaningless, meaningless. . . . Everything is meaningless'.

This is also the conclusion of the monist religions: Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism. If the cycles of nature are all there is, then they are ultimately a weariness, and the path of wisdom is to seek to escape them: Hence both the belief in reincarnation (which makes human spiritual life part of that same endless cycling) and the desire for salvation as escape from the futility of life's endless circles. It is no accident that the circle is also the image for zero, nothing.

And yet, though the cycles of nature are ultimately empty, they are still the physical source of our life and sustenance. Therefore we cannot afford to ignore, degrade, or replace them, as modernity tends to do. But how can we affirm both our enmeshment in the cycles of nature *and* the closeness of the Creator God, without lapsing into a sub-Christian neo-paganism?

Responses to the Cycles of Nature

One response, represented by Process theology and 'creation spirituality' is sometimes called 'panentheism'. And though that term *can* be used in an orthodox and fully Christian way (for there is a sense in which all things are 'in God') most of those who use it of themselves—like Matthew Fox and Thomas Berry—seem to intend a more Hegelian sense of an incomplete, wholly immanent God, emerging from the process into human consciousness.

The church's attempt to come to terms with the cycles of nature is met much more commonly by links between the Christian year and the pagan year, at Christmas and (especially) at Easter, in an analogy between the return of vegetative life and the resurrection of Jesus. Such links cannot be ignored—but the analogy between the death and resurrection of nature and the death and resurrection of Jesus must be affirmed very carefully. It is easy to understand why many thoughtful Christians avoid it at all cost.

Thomas Torrance, for example, in *Space, Time and Resurrection* repudiates this analogy in the strongest terms. He acknowledges that:

an idea of resurrection is certainly found very widely in Semitic and Hellenic thought, as is the notion of a dying and rising god, or the divinity immanent in the processes of nature who is reborn with every seasonal change from winter to spring and whose divine life becomes manifest in the resurrection of nature.²

However, he continues:

Against all this the Scriptures, and not least the Old Testament, are sharply opposed. Resurrection has nothing at all to do with any dying or rising god and his cosmic rebirth. It must be admitted, however, that this heathen notion has invaded the Christian Church, probably through the syncretistic ideas that developed in early Mediterranean Christianity and is still constantly reflected in hymns and sermons about the springing up of new life. . . .³

² Thomas Torrance, *Space, Time and Resurrection* (Edinburgh: Handsel Press, 1976), p. 27.

³ Torrance, *Space, Time and Resurrection*, p. 27.

He quotes one verse from a hymn to illustrate these pagan incursions; I quote from another, ‘Now the Green Blade Riseth’ quite popular today, powerful in both its tune and its words:

Now	the	green	blade	riseth,	from	the
buried						grain;
Wheat	that	in	the	dark	earth	many
days			hath			lain.
Love	lives	again,	that	with	the	dead
has						been,
Love	is	come	again,	like	wheat	that
springeth						green.

Forth	he	came	at	Easter,	like	the	risen
grain.							
He	that	for	three	days	in	the	grave
has							lain.
Quick	from	the	dead	my	risen	Lord	is
seen;							
Love	is	come	again	like	wheat	that	
springeth							green.

One way to sing this hymn is to think of the resurrection of Jesus as (at most) an instance of the power of a good example, a kind of ‘resurrection in our hearts’. (Thus it is commonplace today for many clergy to affirm their belief in ‘the Risen Lord’, but to make plain that this was not a ‘resuscitated corpse’, and express unconcern if bones found in a box in Palestine were indeed the bones of Jesus.) In contrast to this kind of reduction of the meaning of the resurrection, Torrance goes on to develop the central thesis of his book. In his words, the resurrection of Jesus

is a creative event within the creation, an abruptly divine act within history, a decisive deed completely setting at nought all cyclic processes, putting an end to the futility to which they are shut up but opening and straightening them out in a movement towards consummation.⁴

If the only way to relate the cycles of nature and the resurrection is to see the latter as a symbolic instance of the former, then Torrance’s judgement on all such hymns is correct. By contrast, he relates the cycles and the cross by assuming that the cross and resurrection break and cancel the cycles which are such an important part of pagan (and neo-pagan) awareness—for a circle ‘opened and straightened’ is no longer a circle.

Such a way, however, seems inadequate. On the most obvious level, we are still supported by the cycles of death, decay, birth and nourishment. Biblically, we still rest in the promise of [Genesis 8](#): ‘While the earth remains, seedtime and harvest, cold and heat, summer and winter, day and night, shall not cease.’ Attempts to shortcut or ignore those cycles only diminish the earth’s fruitfulness and our understanding of it. And the glimpses of *shalom* that we are given in Scripture give no sense that those cycles are to be abrogated. It is, however, a mistake to see the resurrection of Jesus according to the pattern of the risen grain: ‘Love is come again like wheat that springeth green.’ Torrance is right to reject such a reduction of the heart of the gospel as a special case in a natural process.

⁴ Torrance, *Space, Time and Resurrection*, p. 27.

But there is another possibility: what if the springing of the seed from death is an instance in the created world of the divine gift which underlies all creation, 'the word without which nothing was made'?

We must recognize that the analogy between the death and resurrection of the seed, and the death and resurrection of Jesus, is not fanciful or arbitrary: it is given to us by Jesus himself. At a key passage in John's gospel, Jesus says of his coming death and resurrection 'unless a grain of wheat falls into the ground and dies, it remains only a single seed, but if it dies, it produces many seeds. The man who loves his life will lose it, while the man who hates his life in this world will keep it for eternal life.' The words are spoken in answer to 'some Greeks . . . who went up to worship at the feast'. It is the only time Scripture records Jesus' words to Greeks, a fact of considerable importance in this discussion of paganism.

Orthodox theologian John Zizioulas, in his King's College, London lectures on ecology, points out that the Hebrews rested their confidence in the God who was faithful in history, the God who spoke through the prophets. The Greeks, on the other hand, rested their confidence in a kind of developed paganism: 'Nature offered to the Greek the sense of security he needed, through the regular movement of the stars, the cyclical repetition of the seasons. . . .'⁵

It is thus highly significant for our understanding of the *meaning* of the cycles of nature that Jesus speaks these words about his own death and resurrection—as a seed dying, decaying, bearing fruit—to *representatives of the Greek world*. It is as though he were saying (as Paul said later in Lycaonia and Athens): here and only here, can the God whom you ignorantly worship be seen and known. This becomes even clearer if one understands Jesus' words here in light of the great prologue of the Gospel, where the one who now speaks to the Greeks is described, in the technical terminology of Greek philosophy, as the source, the *logos*, of all those cycling regularities in nature which had so intrigued the Greek mind: 'Without him nothing was made that has been made.'

When we consider these two passages together we can make a somewhat different assessment of the relationship of the Christian gospel to the cycles of nature. It is not so much that they are 'straightened out' and broken; rather, their endless repetition is given a particular centre (the incarnation of Jesus) and a transcendent reference in God. It is not so much that the death and resurrection of Jesus is one more example of the vegetative cycles of nature; it is rather that this cyclical abundance in nature is itself an example, a hint, of the costly divine gift at the heart of creation, 'the lamb slain before the foundation of the world. . . .' Seen in this way, hymns like 'Now the Green Blade Riseth' can be sung with a tremendous meaning: it is the crucified and risen Jesus who helps us understand the risen grain, not the other way round. As Kallistos Ware put it in his introduction to Orthodox theology: 'It has been truly said that there was a cross in the heart of God before there was one planted outside Jerusalem.'⁶

The Circle as Pantheism

With this as background, we can deal more briefly with the second neo-pagan meaning of the circle: that is, as an icon of wholeness, oneness, pantheism. On the one hand Scripture is clear that creation is not divine: the worship of Creator instead of Creation is never presented as anything other than a great mistake. On the other, as we have seen, Scripture

⁵ John Zizioulas, 'Preserving God's Creation: Three Lectures on Theology and Ecology I', *King's Theological Review* (1989), p. 2.

⁶ Bishop Kallistos Ware, *The Orthodox Way* (Oxford: Mowbray, 1979), p. 83.

is equally clear, that (in Paul's words at Athens) 'he is not far from each one of us'. The confident attempt (which we saw in the Selena Fox neo-pagan credo) to honour the divine in the self, in others, and in the cycles of nature is doomed, as we saw, by the tendency simply to regard the self as God. It is *relationship* with God (not identity with God) which he offers to men and women, and into which, through Christ and in the Spirit, we are invited.

Nevertheless, the pagan confusion of Creator and Creation is a response (much deeper than that of most moderns) to the *message character* of creation, which speaks of the closeness of God. For example, in [Psalm 19](#) and [Romans 1](#), creation is portrayed as full of information (though it is wordless) about the Creator. If the modern mistake is to ignore both the message in creation, and the God of which the message speaks, the pagan mistake is to hear the message (in this respect neo-pagans are closer to the truth than most moderns, including many Christians) but to confuse creation with Creator. Thus they miss the possibility of full relationship with both, in the futile quest for 'oneness' with nature and the divine.

Neo-paganism grasps at the mysterious closeness-in-difference of Creator and creation. The challenge for the Christian is, in God's Spirit, to see this closeness through Christ. And the New Testament gives much guidance here, in a variety of passages which link Christ and creation. Of all these 'cosmic Christology passages', the longest and richest is in [Colossians 1:17](#): 'By him all things were created . . . in him all things hold together. . . . God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross' ([Col 1:17-20](#)).

The passage, like the whole gospel, places the cross at the very centre of 'all things' (a phrase which is repeated five times in the passage). It clearly is cosmic and creational in its scope, and includes the cycling of nature, the rhythm of the seasons and the year which neo-pagans try to honour. All of those things 'hold together' in Christ. What can this mean? Certainly not that 'all things' are a kind of veil for the divine, a sort of mask of God, as in paganism. God *is* present in the 'all things' of creation: not because they are divine, but because it is the nature of the triune God to be always giving, always loving, always expending himself in what he has made. Without God the giver nothing would *be*. In this sense there is a cross at the centre of the circle of creation, and of each created thing.

Something like this was intended by Irenaeus, very early in the history of Christian theology, when he wrote, against a heresy which bore many similarities to contemporary neo-paganism:

For the Creator of the world is truly the Word of God . . . who in an invisible manner contains all things created, and is inherent in the entire creation . . . and therefore He came to His own in a visible manner, and was made flesh, and hung upon the tree, that He might sum up all things in Himself. . . .⁷

Hans Urs von Balthasar describing Irenaeus' understanding of the atonement, explicitly evokes the image of the cross and the circle when he writes: 'The cross-beams are the world's center', defining 'any kind of existence in the world'⁸.

⁷ Irenaeus, *Against Heresies, the Ante-Nicene Father, Volume I, (The Apostolic Fathers; Justin Martyr; Irenaeus)* Translations of *The Writings of the Fathers down to A.D. 325*, ed. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson, 1867 (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co.), V. xviii. 3, pp. 546-547.

⁸ In *The Scandal of the Incarnation: Irenaeus Against the Heresies*, selected and with an introduction by Hans Urs von Balthasar (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1990), p. 13.

Thus a Christian understanding must reject not God's *closeness* to creation—but his *identity* with creation. Things are maintained in their created distinctness at the cost of God's love, a love evident in the intimacy of the Incarnation, and the suffering of the cross.

Redemption thus does not, as in so many theologies of the atonement, leave creation behind. This tendency to limit the work of Christ to an inward human experience which leaves creation untouched is a distinctly modern mistake. It is that distancing of God from creation (an effective forgetting of the triune nature of God) which lies behind these various late modern attempts to bring 'the spiritual', the 'sacred', and 'the divine' into daily experience. Of such attempts, neo-paganism is a prime example.

The Circle as the Self

We turn now to that third pagan understanding of the circle, in which the conscious human self is placed at the centre of his or her small universe. We have already seen how, in neo-paganism, this is all too likely to expand into a kind of solipsism which excludes the other, making the self into a little god.

On the other hand this neo-pagan belief takes seriously the unique human place in creation. In the Christian understanding, the uniqueness of humanity is the ability to *choose* to respond to God—that is, to be a *person* in relationship. Gerard Manley Hopkins expressed this idea powerfully in a meditation on the *Spiritual Exercises* of Ignatius Loyola. He recognizes that all things, in their very creatureliness, speak of the creator, and thus have the 'message character' described in [Psalm 19](#):

The creation does praise God. . . . The sun and the stars shining glorify God. . . . They glorify God, *but they do not know it*. . . . This then is poor praise. . . . Nevertheless what they can *they always do*. But AMIDST THEM ALL IS MAN. . . . Man was created, like the rest then, to praise, reverence and serve God; to give him glory. He does so, even by his being, beyond all visible creatures. . . . But man can know God, *can mean to give him glory*. This then was why he was made, to give God glory and to mean to give it.⁹

John Zizioulas, in his lectures on 'The Preservation of Creation', comes to a similar conclusion which, like Hopkins, he expresses in terms of the idea of freedom. Of all creatures, human beings are unique in their desire and ability not simply to discover things about creation, but to go beyond it, in the making of their own little world. This ability to make our own world is a very dangerous one. yet no alternative scheme for human action (whether it is in the idea of 'stewardship' in the environmental movement—or the egocentric love of power we saw emerging in neo-paganism) can simply ignore this distinctive of free human self-hood. Our place in creation lies *through* our human freedom and creativity, not denial of it. Zizioulas develops this truth in terms of the long Eastern Orthodox tradition of man as a priest of creation. In his words:

By taking the world into his hands and creatively integrating it and by referring it to God, Man liberates creation from its limitations and lets it truly be. Thus, in being the Priest of creation man is also a creator, and perhaps we may say that in all of his truly creative activities there is hidden a para-priestly character.¹⁰

Zizioulas develops this idea in terms of the sacraments, echoing Alexander Schmemmann who, in his profound meditation on the Lord's Supper, *For the Life of the*

⁹ Gerard Manley Hopkins, *The Sermons and Devotional Writings of Gerard Manley Hopkins*, ed. Christopher Devlin, S.J. (London: Oxford University Press, 1959), p. 239.

¹⁰ John Zizioulas, 'Preserving God's Creation: Three Lectures on Theology and Ecology III', *King's Theological Review* (1990), p. 5.

World, put it succinctly: 'Man is the priest of a cosmic sacrament, receiving the world from God and, offering it back to God in thankfulness.' Kallistos Ware expands on the same idea:

Made in the divine image, microcosm and mediator, man is priest and king of the creation. Consciously and with deliberate purpose, he can do two things that the animals can do only unconsciously and instinctively. First, *Man is able to bless and praise God for the world*. . . . Secondly, besides blessing and praising God for the world, man is also able to *reshape and alter the world*.

The Symbol of the Celtic Cross

I have organized this essay around a sort of theological geometry: that is, the various meanings given to the figure of the circle by neo-paganism, and the way a Christian understanding both affirms and counters those meanings. I have suggested that the image of the cross intersecting the circle is a good visual way of seeing the relationship of Christianity and paganism. There is a danger here in this kind of discussion of the cross as a symbol. Emil Brunner observed that any one who uses the cross as an aesthetic device has not understood it. I am not forgetting that the cross is an instrument of torture, defeat and death, so much as I am reflecting on the fact that the one so tortured, defeated and killed is also the *logos* of God, the creator in whom all things consist. It is enormously illuminating to consider the circles of creation within the larger framework of the incarnation, death and resurrection of Christ.

First, with regard to the circle as an image of cyclic interconnectedness: The Christian gospel does not so much negate the cycles of creation as it gives them a centre and a purpose, connecting them with that which is beyond and before creation. In the pagan form of the crossed circle, the mandala, a cross is always contained by the circle. (It is sobering to recall here also that symbol which was used as a dark attempt to reduce Christianity to paganism: the broken cross of the Nazi swastika is a cross cut off from transcendence, turning into a circle.)

Here it will be good to return to a consideration of what has come to be called the 'Celtic cross'. In that familiar symbol there is indeed a circle—but the arms extend outside it gesturing outward beyond creation and history—while at the same time being centred in creation and history. Thus John's prologue sketches the relationship of the incarnate Christ, specific in place and time (like the cross-hairs of a target) to the eternal purposes of God. Put another way, the cross reveals the centre of the new creation: which is new not in that it cancels and undoes the old, but that it restores meaning and purpose to those cycles of creation which would be futile without the self-giving love of God.

Second, with regard to the circle as an image of the oneness of God, creation, and humanity, and thus an emblem of pantheism, all as God: The Christian understanding says that God is near to each thing; all things hold together in God, they have their full meaning and completion in God—yet they are preserved in their distinct separateness. God's willingness to allow a thing to *be*, totally dependent for its being on him, yet free and separate from God, is love. God is indeed close to each thing: not in the homogenized pantheistic sense, but in his willingness to hold each thing in being despite the evil which that thing may do at ultimate cost to the Creator himself. The cross, the suffering of God for and in creation thus is in a sense at the core and centre of each created thing.

Third, with regard to the *circle* as a picture of the freedom and creativity of human 'worldmaking': The circle of our selfhood has for sinful human beings been not only the arena of our freedom, creativity, and uniqueness; it has also become a voracious and devouring circle, a kind of inner 'black hole' with Hell at its centre. The only place we see proper human selfhood is in Christ. The pattern is drawn by Paul in [Philippians 2](#): 'Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit . . . look not only to your own interests but

to the interests of others.’ This is impossible for us; we see it only in Christ, equal with God beyond all worlds, but known in the self-emptying death on a cross. Again, the cross is at the centre of the circle: in this case the circle of our selfhood. In this pattern of empathy and relationship, centred on the gift and suffering of Christ the Creator, we are able to be, through Christ, a ‘priest of creation’: bringing all things into the circle of our world, but not leaving them there: giving them back, rather, in praise, thanks and fulfilment, to their creator.

V THE SIGNIFICANCE FOR NEO-PAGANISM OF CELTIC CHRISTIANITY

As I have already suggested, a great deal of theological insight is captured in the symbol of the ‘Celtic cross’: the Christian cross giving both a centre and a context to the circle which represents the pagan perception of the wholeness and interconnectedness of creation. The early and abiding prominence of that symbol on the fringes of Britain (especially in Ireland) is alone enough to encourage closer study of the tradition it represents. Such a study cannot even be summarized here: the origins, nature, history and influence of Celtic Christianity have become a contentious arena. Nevertheless, I close with several reasons Christians in these postmodern, neo-pagan times might well pay cautious but humble attention to the traditions of Celtic Christianity.

1. Celtic Christianity took root, flourished, and reached its greatest vigour in the same period in which Roman civilization (which certainly brought the Christian seed to Britain in the first place) was in decline. Thus, whereas the rest of western Christendom (Augustine is the best example) laid the foundations of European civilization on a kind of Roman-Christian aggregate, Celtic Christianity, while no less Christian, was subtly but significantly different. (The same point can be made, of course, about the development of Eastern Orthodox Christianity, with which Celtic Christianity shares intriguing similarities—and differences.) In particular, the pagan Celtic culture was not so much replaced as transformed. The historian James Bulloch, in a series of lectures on Celtic Christianity given many years ago at Iona, sums up the point very well.

. . . elsewhere the advance of the Church was almost invariably accompanied by the adoption, however imperfectly, by the converted nation of that Romanised culture which accompanied the faith of the Church. In the Celtic west, on the contrary, the culture which took shape . . . was not an imperfect inheritance from the dying empire so much as a development of that already existing among the Celts. Strengthened and transformed, it was yet a straightforward growth from native roots rather than a graft.¹¹

If it is the case that modernity has its roots particularly in Roman Christianity (via its Protestant transformations), these differences of emphasis in the Celtic tradition are worth pursuing in the current search for alternatives to the modern.

2. Celtic Christianity seems to have been much more open to affirm the goodness of the created world as a gift of God, and to respect plants, animals, rocks and sea as fellow creatures. This is evident in countless saints’ tales—but also in the rich tradition of Celtic prayer and blessing. Consider for example this magnificent stanza from what is probably the most familiar piece of ‘Celtic Christianity’ the hymn ‘St. Patrick’s Breastplate’ (probably not indeed by St. Patrick, but certainly from the early Celtic Christian tradition):

I	bind	unto	myself	today
The	virtues	of	the starlit	heaven,
The	glorious	sun’s	life-giving	ray,

¹¹ James Bulloch, *The Life of the Celtic Church* (Edinburgh: St. Andrew Press, 1963), pp. 235–6.

The whiteness of the moon at even,
The flashing of the lightning free,
The whirling wind's tempestuous
shocks
The stable earth, the deep salt sea,
Around the old eternal rocks.

Oliver Davies and Fiona Bowie, in their introduction to a new anthology called *Celtic Christian Spirituality*, speak of:

... a persistent emphasis ... upon the place of nature within the Christian revelation. ... The Celtic Christian recognition of the place of nature, and refusal to set up sharp oppositions between the worlds of grace and humanity and the natural realm, is undoubtedly of great importance to those who seek to restore a more positive and responsible relation between human beings and the environment in our own day.¹²

3. A third point—and one which in fact may underlie all the others—is that Celtic Christianity is deeply, centrally Trinitarian. This is perhaps the most important of the ‘subtle’ differences from the rest of Christendom, and one of the resemblances to Eastern Orthodoxy. Unlike Augustine (who tended to treat the Trinity as a problem to be solved about a God whose most obvious characteristic was a kind of neo-platonic unity), Celtic Christianity was exuberant in its affirmation of ‘the sacred three’. Consider the opening of St. Patrick’s Breastplate. ‘I bind unto myself today the strong name of the Trinity.’ Ian Bradley puts this emphasis well, in the context of a reflection on other aspects of Celtic culture:

The interweaving of the themes of intimacy and mystery in the Celtic Christian consciousness of God produced a strong stress on the doctrine of the Trinity. Much contemporary Western Christianity has become at best binitarian, worshipping Father and Son without any real sense of the Holy Spirit, if not almost unitarian. The Celts, like Eastern Orthodox Christians, had a real sense of the three persons within the Godhead and of their relationship with each other without falling into the heresy of tritheism which proclaims the existence of three separate gods. Their pagan past almost certainly helped them to grasp the idea of the Trinity and the mystery of God who is both one in three and three in one.¹³

Bradley goes on to relate this trinitarian insight both to the Celtic understanding of the family, and to the remarkable flowering of Celtic Christian visual art:

The Celts saw the Trinity as a family ... for them it showed the love that lay at the very heart of the Godhead and the sanctity of family and community ties. Each social unit, be it family, clan, or tribe, was seen as an icon of the Trinity, just as the hearth-stone in each home was seen as an altar. The intertwining ribbons of the celtic knot represented in simple and graphic terms the doctrine of *perichoresis*—the mutual interpenetration of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.¹⁴

4. Another reason for taking Celtic Christianity seriously today is that it contains a large, rich amount of material in which the values we listed above—a closeness of God and creation, an emphasis on community, on personality, on interrelationship, and above

¹² Oliver Davies and Fiona Bowie, *Celtic Christian Spirituality: An Anthology of Medieval and Modern Sources* (New York: Continuum, 1995), p. 20. *Medieval and Modern Sources* (New York: Continuum, 1995), p. 20.

¹³ Ian Bradley, *The Celtic Way* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd Ltd., 1993), p. 43.

¹⁴ Bradley, *The Celtic Way*, p. 44.

all, on the Trinity—is central. Some of these seem to be part of an unbroken Celtic Christian tradition—most notably Alexander Carmichael’s *Carmina Gadelica*, consisting of prayers and blessings collected from the outer Hebrides a century ago. Many others are a contemporary mining of the same rich vein: for example, the prayers and devotional writings of David Adams, and, most recently the devotional guides prepared by the Northumbrian community, published as *Celtic Daily Prayer* and *Celtic Nightly Prayer*.

5. Finally, it is important to recognize the contribution which the Celtic Christian vision has made to twentieth-century artists and writers. Some of these deal with explicitly Celtic material, such as George MacKay Brown, Edwin Muir, R.S. Thomas, and David Jones. I think it likely as well that the rich vein of Christian fantasy in the twentieth century—particularly in the works of C.S. Lewis and J.R.R. Tolkien—has Celtic Christian roots, through a variety of sources, but most notably in the highlander George MacDonald, where it was not quite suppressed by two centuries of John Knox’s Calvinism. We should mention as well the fascination with Celtic visual art. The Celtic cross remains a symbol which cannot be emptied of meaning. More subtly (as Ian Bradley notes above) the fascination with knot-work, interlacing, interconnection, can be seen as a kind of meditation on distinctness-in-relationship, characteristic of the created world but rooted ultimately in the Trinity.

H.J. Massingham was probably claiming too much when he wrote, half a century ago in *The Tree of Life* that, had Celtic Christianity not been so thoroughly assimilated, the ‘fissure between Christianity and nature, widening through the centuries, would not have cracked the unity of western man’s attitude to the universe’. Nevertheless his words point to the value of thinking seriously about these glimpses of a Celtic culture transformed by the Christian gospel. For we live today in the collapsing structure of a modernity built upon that fissured foundation: whence ‘postmodernity’.

Neo-paganism is an ultimately futile attempt to escape that ruin by a return to nature as the pagan Celts are thought to have perceived it. It is an important task for Christians to show that while nature is not divine, there is no ‘fissure between Christianity and nature’¹⁵. For this task a rich resource may be found in Celtic Christianity: that vision summed up by the image of the circles of creation given their true centre and meaning by the cross on which was crucified Jesus, the Word made flesh, ‘in whom all things hold together’.

Only through that cross may contemporary neo-pagans find the centre that they seek.

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In Search of Post-modern Salvation

R. Daniel Shaw

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¹⁵ H.J. Massingham, *The Tree of Life* (London: Chapman and Hall Ltd., 1943), p. 40.

The author compares the distinctives of Hebrew, Greek and modern cosmologies and analyses the nature of the widening ‘excluded middle’ between religion and modern science. In the post modern search for salvation, the author sees the need for a ‘supra culture’ perspective that incorporates God on one hand and his creation on the other. He looks to the church to offer faith answers to the rationalistic questions raised by dichotomistic worldviews, enabling people to live in harmony with God, their neighbour and themselves. Only in Christ does this integration become a reality.
Editor

The original presentation of this material came as the inaugural Clyde Vautier Memorial Lecture at the Wellington campus of the Bible College of New Zealand.¹ It was an honour for me, as an American, to be invited to set the tone for this lecture series.

I seek to delineate the issues as they pertain to what I consider to be a significant moment in world history—the transition to a new century in coincidence with a worldwide shift of what I call a ‘culture type’—a way of thinking and living. This new type has been loosely called ‘post-modern’ (an already abused term that is rapidly losing specific meaning while gaining a broad reputation for representing change) and I will delineate its meaning for the church in society later in this paper. As in the inaugural lecture, this is only a tentative exploration into the issues while seeking to ground the presentation in a theological structure. In the tradition of the one for whom this lecture series is a memorial I seek to exegete Scripture and in so doing allow God’s Word to dwell among us.

THE MESS WE’RE IN

Headlines scream impending doom as they chronicle genocide in Bosnia and Rwanda; earthquakes, floods, and fires impact people around the globe; crime and lawlessness are rampant in the streets; and daily we witness a dying culture to which many still cling. *Newsweek* magazine, while no intellectual resource, is a repository of cultural presentation. Recently² the magazine featured the moral decline impacting so-called ‘modern’ societies. The editor going back to Aristotle (everything in the West begins with the Greeks) noted that core institutions which used to promote ‘virtue’ are increasingly shaky—‘the family has fractured, neighbourhoods have disappeared or turned surly, many schools can barely educate, and even many churches wonder what to teach’. How, he asks, ‘do we get back to basics’—read how do we restore that which we know and are comfortable with? Robert Kaiser, commenting on this same issue notes, ‘We live in an age of moral relativism: since we can’t know truth . . . notions of right and wrong are reduced to matters of personal taste, emotional preference or cultural choice’.³ In other words, everyone does what is right in their own eyes ([Judges 21:25](#)). Hence a recent television news report, discussed ‘recreational murder’ and focused on the difficulty police have in tracking down the perpetrators who engage in such sport. All this, of course, leads to ‘a coarsened, even savage society’ that affects every member no matter what their beliefs and values.

¹ I wish to express my appreciation to Ossie Fountain who set up the programme and took care of all the details. He and the staff at the Wellington Campus of the Bible College of New Zealand are to be commended for all their efforts. For me, it was an enjoyable occasion, for them it was a lot of work—thanks!

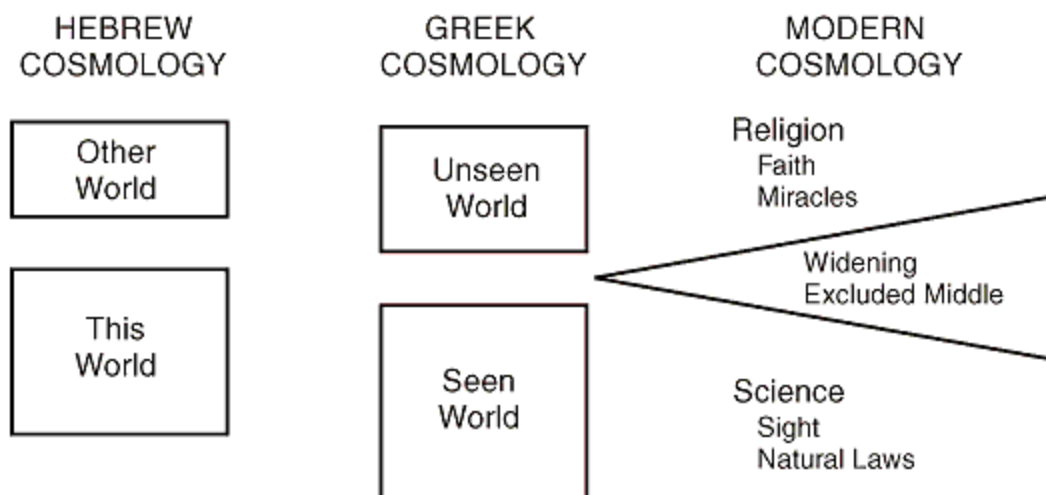
² *Newsweek*, June 13, 1994.

³ Robert Blair Kaiser, *Star-News*, Pasadena, California (June 16, 1994).

A. F. C. Wallace, an anthropologist, addressed issues affecting societal change in a now classic article.⁴ He suggested that all societies go through cyclical stages. In discussing the stage he calls 'cultural distortion' he notes that a society experiences increasing stress and is unable to satisfy the needs of its adherents. Quarrelling, irresponsibility and the rejection of traditional values characterize this stage. People are increasingly demoralized and the cycle continues to exacerbate itself until there seems to be no way out. It is at this point of despair that Wallace suggests a society is more open to the impact of a saviour or prophet who can instigate a revitalization process that will return the society to what he calls a 'new steady state'. I want to suggest that modern industrial culture, drawing heavily on Greco- Roman world view, and impacted by the Reformation and the Age of Enlightenment, has strayed from its moorings to the point of growing exasperation and a recognized need for change. The post-modern paradigm with its globalization, unity in diversity, and desire for individual quality of life in the context of community interaction is seen, by many, as this 'saviour'—a new cultural model that will lead us out of the morass.

HOW WE GOT THIS WAY

In the course of the last three centuries, modernity, encouraged by the Age of Enlightenment, has produced a rationalistic world view increasingly distancing religion from science. Whereas the Hebrews viewed creation as divided on the basis of the creator and the creation, the Greeks shifted their perspective to an emphasis on the heavenly in contrast to the earthly based on perceptive reality. Similarly the Enlightenment went one step further to contrast matters of faith and miracles with issues governed by sight and natural laws.



This contrast of religion and science created a strongly dichotomistic view of the world—matters of faith characterized by religious concern were distinct from scientific laws. Religion, then, was what people turned to when things could not otherwise be explained. In contrast, science provided the explanation for what was considered to be reality. Reality, by this definition, was explainable while the unexplainable was relegated to the cloistered halls of theological institutions where mystical specialists mused about

⁴ A. F. C. Wallace, 'Revitalization Movements', *American Anthropologist*, 58:264–281 (1956).

what could not be known because there was no rational explanation.
The Widening Excluded Middle

Religion

void / excluded middle

Science

This widening gap between reality and irreality (to borrow a linguistic term) created what Paul Hiebert calls the 'excluded middle'.⁵ Things can either be rationalized and scientifically explained as pertaining to matters of this world where that which we can see reigns supreme, or they are sacred and have to do with other worlds where faith must be exercised—there is nothing in between. However, many other societies around the world fill this 'middle zone' with spiritual forces and practices they cannot explain in naturalistic terms. Thus a freak wind storm may be attributed to demons or ghosts prowling around at night, or an illness may be attributed to having upset a local god or goddess. While we may explain the storm as a passing weather front or treat the illness with medicine, others see these as manifestations of a natural imbalance. For us, since the cause can be explained scientifically, the results can be treated—the mess cleaned up (often at great expense) or health restored because the prescription worked.

For many living in the majority world⁶, the issue is not naturalistic and not, therefore, correctable by scientific means. Rather the focus is on the first cause—the reason behind the storm or illness—which is often considered to be nature out of balance with supernature. The supernatural is seen to react to the natural and effect a cause which informs human beings that a correction is necessary. Thus the reason for imbalance is considered the result of human inadequacy—a disruption of relationship with other humans, with the realm of nature or with divinities. Often the supernatural is viewed as responding to attitudes or behaviour patterns which have deviated from the societal values or expectations—its virtues. The way to correct the problem is to engage in some form of restitution, thereby bringing new balance to the universe so that things can work properly again.⁷

⁵ Paul Hiebert, 'The Flaw of the Excluded Middle', *Missiology*, 10:35–47 (1982). Variations of Figures 1 and 2 as well as the concepts on which they are based are detailed in a forthcoming book co-authored by Paul Hiebert and myself, *The Power and the Glory: A Missiological Approach to the Study of Religion*.

⁶ I use this term to draw attention to the overwhelming proportion of the world's non-western people in a non-pejorative manner. It designates those who are emerging as a significant segment in a changing world. It is an attempt to recognize the internationalization present in what Alvin Toffler calls the 'third wave'.

⁷ Lesslie Newbigin in his book, *Honest Religion for Secular Man* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1966) maintains that it is this contrast regarding the nature of reality and control of the universe that has made missionaries the greatest secularizing force in history. The first reaction was to resort to science and only later, almost as an after thought, was God brought in. A perfunctory and powerless prayer prefaced by 'if God wills' was often the result. While this might still be considered spiritual by many (an attempt to recognize God's omnipotence) it is actually an application of a culturally conditioned epistemology which inadequately places God in a position of importance. This incorrectly reflects a god who has nothing to do with the natural workings of the universe.

Without a 'middle zone', we who are the minority population in the world have little or no ritual to establish a relationship between religion and science—they operate independently of each other and the former is invoked only when all efforts of the latter are exhausted. While the majority of the world's people have rituals and ceremonies to connect this world with other worlds and thereby solve many of life's problems, we in the west are left with little recourse when science fails us. Hence all our efforts to reduce the pain of an increasingly sick society for which science cannot provide a panacea leave us with increased stress and a sense of hopelessness. The media report it, as is their duty, but little happens to improve the long term effects of the slippery slide into despair. Governments seek to enact laws that will control individual volition to the stagnation of those who hold to the laws and the liberation of those who ignore them. Justice is not the issue in modern courts, only the letter of the law.

Our cosmology suggests that until things are desperate we cannot bring God in; only when rationalistic efforts have been exhausted can we turn to religious solutions. So we continue to put our hope in economic, social and political solutions, all the while ignoring the religious solutions which God waits for us to implement. Many Christians in this dilemma multiply their efforts to find natural solutions while giving lip service to biblical values. Yet the plausibility of their cultural expectations leads them to ignore the creeds they espouse. These creeds assume the eternal nature of God who created the world and everything in it who is the first and the last, the sustainer, the saviour, the source of power applicable for daily living. We, however, do not really believe it or at least do not act on what we believe.

Many in modern cultural contexts have determined that the rationalistic stance is not working and cannot provide the answers to spanning the 'middle zone'. They are turning to eastern religions for fulfilment of personal self-worth. In some places the current boom in building temples and mosques is the 'salvation' for depressed economies. The essence of the New Age movement is to create an awareness of the value of the individual. Such beliefs feed on modern assumptions as people seek to determine their identity. In contrast to the prevailing world view, increasing numbers of people are seeking to identify the life force that brought them into being. By so doing they attempt to connect with a reality not explained by the merely materialistic, natural world. In this view, each person's reality is different from that of any other, thereby reinforcing modern relativism on the one hand but establishing contact with a life-giving force on the other. May the force be with them; it may be all they have. The emphasis in these New Age-type movements remains on the ritual. It is on what individuals can do to create personal salvation.

Despite maintaining the validity of Scripture, few modern Christians believe most of what is in the Bible because it represents a cosmological view (emerging from a Hebrew or Greek perspective) that is contrary to their own. Most believe that 'God helps those who help themselves' is a quotation from the Bible. Their focus is on what they can do before being forced to turn to God as a last resort rather than determining what God has already done and accepting it by faith, not works. These folk religious beliefs reflect the prevailing culture and impact Christians as much as non-Christians. How then can we as Christians depart from our culturally informed world view and introduce God's view in order to lead our society out of the mess? The answer demands that we take a new look at what God has already said and implement it to fit into the prevailing cultural shift.

THE WAY OUT OF THE MESS

We must recognize afresh that Scripture is a demonstration of God in the human context. This is true of his word—what he said through human authors about the contexts into

which he entered. He did this further in the incarnation where he became embodied as an actual human being in an actual culture. This necessitates that we seek for solutions to ‘the mess’ by appropriating both biblical perspectives (from above) and cultural understanding (from below). The solution to our modern problem is not reversing the focus of rationalism, that would only take us back to the pharisaical focus on the heavenly to the exclusion of the earthly, an approach that greatly frustrated Jesus. Rather, we need a ‘supra-cultural’ perspective that incorporates God on the one hand and his creation on the other. The apostle John does this admirably in his writings.

A biblical attempt to span the middle zone

In his gospel the apostle John deals with both the word and the flesh in order to contrast neatly Hebrew and Greek world views. The first five verses of John closely parallel the first five verses of Genesis. As a Bible translator I have an image of John examining a copy of the Hebrew Torah as he penned his famous prologue in Greek. First listen to John and then note how he paralleled Moses.

Before the world was created, the Word already existed; he was with God, and he was the same as God. From the very beginning the Word was with God. Through him God made all things; not one thing in all creation was made without him. The Word was the source of life, and this life brought light to human-kind. The light shines in the darkness and the darkness has never put it out ([John 1:1-5](#))⁸.

This, to a degree, fills in the prior knowledge of what was before creation. The Hebrews were willing to accept that God created, but the Greeks wanted to know the rationale behind the creation. John tells them that God was there and his Word provided the reason behind reality. In other words, through Christ everything that is came into being—a point the apostle Paul makes so well in [Colossians 1:15-20](#)—God, through Christ, served as the creator and everything else is the created, both the seen and the unseen (see [Figure 1](#)). Now note the parallel structure of the first five verses of Genesis where the emphasis is on the word and importance of light—God’s first creative act.

In the beginning, when God created the universe, the earth was formless and desolate. The raging ocean that covered everything was engulfed in total darkness, and the power of God was moving over the water. Then, God commanded, ‘Let there be light’—and light appeared. God was pleased with what he saw. Then he separated the light from the darkness, and he named the light ‘Day’ and the darkness ‘Night’. Evening passed and morning came—that was the first day ([Genesis 1:1-5](#)).

Notice that whereas John metaphorically uses the concept of light to describe who Jesus was ([John 1:9](#)), Moses speaks of light in the literal sense. In both cases God spoke and light happened, one to see by, the other to live by. By presenting Jesus as ‘the light’ John connects the physical Jesus with the first act of creation—God spoke and there was light, while Jesus, the light of the world, spoke and drove away the darkness. In Genesis, nothing could happen without God’s word. Jesus was that Word and the first thing he spoke was light. Similarly without Jesus there is only despair and hopelessness in the human condition. John describes that condition in chapter [3:19-21](#):

The light has come into the world, but people love darkness rather than the light because their deeds are evil. Anyone who does evil things hates the light and will not come to the light,

⁸ All biblical quotations are taken from *Today’s English Version* published by the United Bible Societies.

because he does not want his evil deeds to be shown up. But whoever does what is true comes to the light in order that the light may show that what he did was in obedience to God.

Despite the religious context of his day, with the temple, sacrifices, feast days, and a recognition of the importance of religious practitioners, Jesus judged them: The above passage is prefaced by the statement, 'This is how the judgment works'. John was trying to show that despite their religiosity, the society was operating in the dark. Later John contrasts light and heavenly truth with darkness and earthly falsehood ([8:31](#)).

As John used darkness to characterize the society in which Jesus lived, so we continue today to emphasize what we can do in the natural realm rather than place our trust in the power and glory of Christ in the realm beyond the natural where light rules. If Jesus were to come into our context I think he would castigate our over-emphasis on the natural even as he spurned Israel's focus on the supernatural.

Through his writing John is showing human beings that both the supernatural and the natural realms are necessary and dependent upon each other. By using the incarnation principle (God with us) John patronizes the Greek world view of an unseen versus a seen world. Through Jesus the unseen was made plain—a theme that permeates the gospel. Jesus, John maintains, came to span the gulf between the two realms and be both God and human at the same time. As John expresses so well, 'We saw his glory, the glory which he received as the Father's only Son' ([John 1:14b](#)) but that was possible only because 'the Word became a human being and . . . lived among us' ([John 1:14a](#)). John brings this all together in the introduction to his epistle:

We write to you about the Word of life, which has existed from the very beginning. We have heard it, and we have seen it with our eyes; yes, we have seen it, and our hands have touched it . . . What we have seen and heard we announce to you also, so that you will join with us in the fellowship that we have with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ . . . Now the message that we have heard from his Son and announce is this: God is light, and there is no darkness at all in him ([1 John 1:1, 3, 5](#)).

He continues the theme of light established in the gospel, and argues that believers live in the light of Christ. If they accept his sacrifice he will forgive them of every sin (manifest as darkness that comes from the earthly context) and cleanse them by implementing truth (which comes from the light of the heavenly context). John maintains that for us to have fellowship with God we must interact with Jesus. Jesus, then, becomes the means of spanning the chasm because he is the only one who is both fully God and fully human. He is the only one who can mediate between the two realms ([1 Tim. 2:5](#)). Religion in the world today is an attempt to replace Christ with other ways to bridge the gap. From God's perspective, then (his world view if you will), our human, culture-bound, word view is out of balance with his. It is this perspective of culture, which needs to be transformed, that now draws our attention.

The need to transform culture

Not only must we appreciate the biblical perspective from above, but also the cultural context from below. Lengthy is the literature detailing the relationship between God and culture.⁹ As people who share culture we use this knowledge to our daily advantage without thinking about it. Societies around the world group their behaviour into the guiding principles of three archetypical behaviour modes: group-oriented consensus and

⁹ H. Richard Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture* (New York: Harper & Row, 1951), and Charles H. Kraft, *Christianity in Culture* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1979). See also Sherwood Lingenfelter's excellent discussion in *Transforming Culture* (Baker, 1992).

corporate lifestyles, hierarchical structures which emphasize ascribed status and family orientation and those that emphasize an individualistic alignment regularized by personal accomplishment and control. Elsewhere¹⁰ I have called these Kinship, Peasant, and Industrial culture types. People living in each type have radically different ways of perceiving the world, impacted by their focus on groupness, structure, or individuality. While, obviously over-reductionistic, such categorization helps us talk about the involvement of people in each type of society and the implications of Christ entering into such cultural contexts.

The shift in culture type noted in the introduction to this paper is a product of increased interaction between the types through increasing globalization. There are few isolated people today and the success of each culturally identified group depends on effective interaction with those around them. Thus an increased awareness of interdependence and common cause characterizes the shift to a 'post-industrial' or 'post-modern' culture type which incorporates elements of the other three types. There are many positive and negative aspects to this shift, even as there are strong advantages and disadvantages to living in any cultural context. The issue is not a dichotomous right or wrong, good or bad, but rather a recognition of what is and the fact that, despite being different, cultures serve to enable people to live their lives in conjunction with an established set of principles. It is to this issue of cultural adequacy that I address my remarks.

We in the industrialized west have seen our culture as superior because it enabled us, in a way never before possible, to live anywhere and do almost anything (including going to the moon). We took our technology with us and reduplicated a comfortable lifestyle based on our cultural standards wherever we went. The history of colonialism is the tale of how the world was impacted by this set of assumptions. In the doing, many others (living in ways that adequately reflected their time and place) saw apparent success and began to buy into assumptions learned from the bearers of a very different world view. Sadly this has resulted in considerable cultural disorientation and much increased stress. This has been manifest not only in material culture but in the area of beliefs and values as well. If medicine can take care of physical problems perhaps the need for maintaining contact with the spiritual realm which controls issues of health and welfare may not be as crucial as traditional societies once assumed. Hence there has been an increasing secularization as western civilization has spread.

Yet, despite a knowledge of science and the use of technology to solve problems, there is increasing stress as people live their lives, whatever the cultural context. The impact of increasing urbanism, global economics, scientific breakthroughs and the digitization of communication results in new ways of interacting. It is producing a new culture type that requires new ways to understand the relationship between the natural and the supernatural realms. In fact, a new epistemology is being formed, one that will impact all human beings as they interact in our changing world.

Understanding biblical truth in such a cultural context is the challenge for missions as well as for local churches as we approach the 21st century. It is a challenge we must take up as we seek to reduce stress on the one hand and revitalize the world to a greater understanding of God's place in the human context on the other. I do not wish to imply that so-called 'post-modernity' will produce the revitalization Wallace indicates is a natural part of reducing cultural stress. Rather, as Wallace also notes, the very establishment of what he calls a 'new steady state' implies the cycle will begin anew and

¹⁰ R. Daniel Shaw, *Transculturation* (Pasadena: William Carey Library, 1988).

soon repeat itself. Each wave of change, as Toffler points out in his trilogy,¹¹ is considerably shorter than the one before. (Agriculture lasted the longest, industry has served us well since the mid 18th century and we can anticipate that the technological age, implemented by a rapid expansion and availability of information, will be considerably shorter.)

How then, can we, empowered by the Holy Spirit, reduce the stress of the world we live in and enable a dark world to perceive the light? To do so we must follow John's example and understand the relationship between the God of the universe and God in the universe. We must seek to provide the whole gospel to the whole world, for if the 'post-modernists' are right, what affects one impacts all—we live in an increasingly interdependent world. Our search for salvation in this post-modern world must reflect such wholeness. We must, however, avoid seeing post-modernity as the salvation (many, as noted earlier, are in danger of doing this) and seek rather to interject the creator into this new context. In short we must seek a transformation of culture through an implementation of the incarnational approach to this new cycle. As others throughout history have followed this principle in previous cycles so must we. This brings us to the role of the church in society.

THE ROLE OF THE CHURCH

As the body of Christ in the world, the church must begin by interpreting Scripture in light of the new culture type. What is a post-modern gospel? Or, more correctly, how must the gospel be presented in a post-modern context? Given the characteristics of holism and interdependence, I see a turning to issues that are more reflective of the Bible than was often the case in the industrial (modern) context. Perhaps this is the time to do all we can to reduce the gulf between the material and non-material world, to narrow the gap between natural and supernatural. The church needs to strive for an understanding of a whole gospel. As God entered cosmic history through creation and the provision of redemption, so the church must seek to present a gospel that connects our present understanding of reality to God's cosmic reality. As God entered human history not just through the Word and the incarnation but also through providing guidance, healing (to body and soul) and equipping for the life that is to come, so the church must demonstrate how God can provide practical solutions to the problems of today. The church needs to be seen as actively reducing the stress people feel as they live their lives in a time and place. As God created and sustains natural history, so the church must increasingly have answers for the phenomena which impact our lives today—the natural and social disasters with which we began this discussion.

The church, in consultation with the Word, needs to begin developing a theology that departs from the modern world and addresses the post-modern. It needs to strive for a belief system that fills the middle zone with God's power on the one hand and the marvels of scientism and high-tech solutions on the other—a combination of the Holy Spirit and science. Contrary to the rationalistic approach of modernity these need not be mutually exclusive. We should depart from the dichotomistic world view so much a part of the culture we have known if we are to fit into the cultural milieu of a post-modern world.

The church must avoid a separation on evangelism to the exclusion of relating to human misery—both need to be part of ministry. God works through both nature and super-nature. Evil is not manifest only in human departures from cultural mores, it can

¹¹ Alvin Toffler's trilogy (*Future Shock*—1970, *The Third Wave*—1980, and *Power Shift*—1990, New York: William Morrow & Co) explicated the impact of the post-modern shift as it relates to western societies.

also be a product of demonic intervention. A change in culture type does not put the devil to rest; in fact, he may be more active than ever as an eclectic world view recombines the realms which modernity sought to separate. Perhaps the recent interest in 'power ministries' within the church is a product of the shift to a post-modern paradigm.

As Christians become aware of spiritual forces (both good and evil), they must avoid replacing the modern, rationalistic perspective with a new magic based on ritual rather than faith. Because we in the west have tended (as a product of our culture) to be action oriented, we emphasize (as noted earlier) 'doing'. This may result in our entering into confrontation with spiritual forces rather than allowing God to wage the battle on our behalf. Our old 'take charge' approach from the individualist model now affects our behaviour as we develop a more holistic view of the spiritual forces that impact our lives. Perhaps we have much to learn from those in kinship or peasant contexts that are less dichotomistic and therefore more aware of and involved with supernatural power. An analysis of the way Jesus approached these issues in his cultural context may not be helpful as we seek to implement a Christ-likeness in the new post-modern situation. The attitude of Christ must be in us ([Phil. 2:5-11](#)) but the manifestations of that attitude will vary radically from one culture type to another. Hence his operative stance in the peasant context of 1st century Palestine was very different from what is required in 21st century post-modernity. We dare not legalistically apply his 'methods' to our own conditions.

The propensity for manipulating God for the benefit of individual prosperity, success, and even healing that has prevailed in modern Christianity still affects behaviour as we are in transition to a post-modern perspective. These benefits of relationship to God must be seen as his blessing upon those in whom he delights because of their faith, not as redemption itself.

The church, as always, must guard against heresy. There is a great need to recognize God's Word as the sole source of faith and practice and allow it to critique our every activity. At the same time, because of the variety of cultural manifestations around the world (and these will continue despite the change to a more post-modern perspective), we, as members of Christ's body, must be sensitive to differences in world view that impact religious behaviour patterns, not to mention styles of worship, and wide manifestations of ways to appropriate God to living in the human condition. Cultural differences will result in a wide variety of cultural expressions of Christianity. Such diversity should be welcomed as expressions of the creative image of God, not avoided or viewed as syncretism.

Finally, in this post-modern view, the church must focus on faith and recognize that the emphasis must be on how faith is manifest to impact the lives of others rather than on phenomenological tests. The focus must be on what God has done (on his redemptive act through Jesus Christ and a recognition of the power of the Holy Spirit to change lives), not on what we do. Faith, not works (the creator, not the created) is the prior question. Once that is settled, manifestations in a post-modern world will incorporate a holistic concern for people in every aspect of their lives. Jesus fits the whole, not just some of the parts that cannot be explained by science.

Thus the church, like the culture it seeks to influence, must become post-modern. People today are seeking meaningful, enlightened answers and increasingly these answers should imply supernatural influence. In this sense, people are asking religious questions which in many cases the church cannot answer because it has not made the paradigm shift from a modern to a post-modern world view. I often hear what I consider rationalistic answers to supernaturalistic questions. As the people of the world make this shift, so must the church or it will be quickly left behind and considered out of date and irrelevant. Recent adjustments in the area of spiritual power are a step in the right

direction and a sign that the church can assist society as it seeks to move beyond a highly dichotomistic and segmented response to holistic spiritual influence.

Increasingly the church, in order to relate to an interdependent world, must become interactive and relational in its approach to what Christianity means within a society. Increasingly the focus needs to be on God in relationship with human beings and human beings in relationship with other human beings, both within a social context, and across societies to a plurality of interactive behavioural patterns. The church needs to emphasize its relationship to God through Christ, not religion per se. It must be increasingly global (focusing on human need in general, as well as its manifestations in specific contexts). The concerns of the people are by definition concerns of the church. The church must also be inter-relational (communicating the gospel through life not just words) and through it all following John's approach to be light in dark places. In short, the church needs to develop an approach that connects this present reality with God's reality, the natural with the supernatural. It must fill the middle zone.

All this is an attempt to answer the religious quest of the human soul as my original assignment suggested. The church must perceive real need and connect with people at the point of need, not supply esoteric answers that sound scholarly or sophisticated but do not connect with real people in a real and needy world.

CONCLUSION

Human beings, created in the image of God, but now living in a fallen state, will always search for salvation. That salvation has been provided for them (and the whole creation) through Jesus Christ. The shift to a new culture type does not change the human condition, merely the way it is manifest in daily living. It is in relationship (wholeness, harmony, unity—to use post-modern concepts) with Christ that we realize salvation—relevant and necessary now as well as in the future, as Christ noted when he taught his disciples to pray ([Mat. 6:9-13](#)). The post-modern search for salvation is realized in Christ who is the head of the church. Therefore the church has the job of fulfilling Christ's role in the world. It must manifest him in relevant ways within particular contexts. In short, it must incarnate.

Jesus said that he came in order to give life—life in all its fullness ([John 10:10](#)). People cannot live full satisfying lives outside their cultural context. The church must take up the task of enabling people to fulfil their cultural expectations and live as their society was designed to enable people to live. How might Aristotle's virtues, so lacking today, be manifest in a new post-modern way? Like Scripture, these virtues seem somehow pan-human, above and beyond mere cultural consideration. But how they are implemented in various contexts is culture specific and will impact the way others in that societal complex perceive those who exhibit them.

The church (including all who make up its membership as the body of Christ on earth) has the responsibility to assist people in their search for salvation. This can happen only as Jesus enters into relationship with people and the light of his glorious gospel shines on their dark souls. Whatever the cultural context or how this relationship is manifest, Christ must always be at the end of the search. As he did in Palestine long ago, however, he (through his ambassadors) will apply the incarnational principle to revelation. As Dr Clyde Vautier sought to understand what God revealed through his Word, so we must translate that Word into the reality of life. Through our lives, lived commensurate with the issues society dictates as being important, we must seek to bring an end to the search for salvation. The good news is that as we enter into relationship with him, we cease our searching and recognize that we, like the lost sheep, have been found ([Lk. 15:3-7](#)). Our searching, our striving, for God is over. How that understanding in a post-modern context

is manifest, however, must, be continually revised. Salvation should be recognized as a dynamic process within a particular context ([Philp. 2:12, 13](#)). As people appropriate God's Word in their own lives, they can encourage others to accept the salvation God has offered through Jesus Christ, the light of the world and the end of the post-modern search.

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The Relationship Between Development and Religion

William van Geest

*Reprinted with permission from Together July–September 1997,
(abridged)*

This paper was given at a workshop on Churches and Development held April, 1997 in Toronto, Canada and sponsored by the Strategy and Christian Mission agency of World Vision International. It gives a good analysis of the theological and practical issues faced by churches, missions and development agencies in development programmes among poorer communities and the relationship of evangelism and church planting to them. It earths the issues of Christ, modernity and post-modernity for millions of people who struggle daily to survive. The four models outlined challenge evangelical agencies to critique their own mission statement and practice. Excerpts from the round table discussion at the workshop follow on from the paper.
Editor

THE NATURE OF THE RELATIONSHIP

What is the nature of the relationship between development and other religious activities, such as evangelism and church development? Can religious activities be separated from development? How compatible are they in practice? Does the implementation of one enhance or hinder the effectiveness of the other? What models of this relationship are most likely to result in effective development?

The key purpose of this paper is to promote discussion by offering definitions on various concepts in the relationship between development and other religious activities, and by identifying alternative models of the relationship.

Two contexts relevant to the topic should be noted before proceeding.

1. The ongoing impact of western colonialism and the beliefs that motivated it. The western cultural tradition (essentially, the indigenous European tradition), including its Christian components, has become a focus of considerable criticism and even embarrassment over against non-western traditions. Fear of repeating past mistakes haunts the relationship between development and activities such as

evangelism and church planting. While acknowledging this criticism, the paper also recognizes the past contribution and future potential of western culture in the global development process.

2. The changing nature of Canadian [or western] society, particularly its growing multi-cultural and multi-religious composition, and the appropriate role for government in this context.

How we respond to these two factors tends to influence heavily how we address this topic.

We want to show that some of the distinctions we make between religion, development and evangelism are not as clear as we may have thought. More importantly, we believe it is critical that our definition of some of the terms in this consultation be broadened in order to effectively discuss the issues at hand.

RELIGION: SEPARATE OR FUNDAMENTAL?

Religion in the western context has generally been equated with Christianity. Religion has been understood as belief in God, or at least, acknowledgement of the existence of a transcendent deity. Traditionally, people who were 'religious' were Christians; others were simply not religious. In the twentieth century especially, religion has increasingly been compartmentalized as a private, subjective matter wholly separate from scientific or public matters.

For many, religion is still associated with tradition, with the past. They assume that, with progress and modernization, the importance of religion will diminish. Religions in non-western societies are assumed to be obstacles to development and barriers to modernization. As in the West, it was assumed that these cultures would abandon their religion as modernization occurred.

These traditional assumptions have been fundamentally challenged by various developments, including:

—The failure of economic and political modernization to eradicate religion. In fact, in parts of the world, the reverse is true.

—The decline of the belief that science and public life are based on objective, rational assumptions that have nothing to do with personal beliefs.

—The emergence (or recognition) in Canada of religious communities such as Judaism, aboriginal religions, Islam, Buddhism, Hinduism, which have different views of the relationship of religion and culture.

—The emergence of holistic concepts of development and concern with sustainability are changing our view on religion in a development context. 'Spirituality' or religion cannot any longer be isolated from the development process.

Through all this we have begun to notice that the separation of religion from culture, from science and other areas of life is a Euro-American concept. For non-western cultures, religion is completely integrated with the rest of their life.

In his book *No Life Without Roots*, Thierry Verhelst writes: 'For most cultures in Third World countries, religion underlies every aspect of life: family, law, politics, land ownership, agriculture, technology, food, and so on. These elements are not autonomous but complement each other.'

Western culture is unique in separating religion from the rest of life. In fact, the assumption itself is a statement of belief and reflects a particular cultural reality.

The failure of traditional western concepts of religion to explain various phenomena and trends creates considerable ambivalence about the distinction between religion and culture or religion and development. Even most dictionaries offer two definitions of

religion. One essentially Eurocentric, emphasizes private, subjective beliefs in a transcendent being. The other deals more broadly with fundamental beliefs about the meaning and purpose of human life and the world.

Given the limitations of a western, compartmentalized view of religion and the ongoing viability of the holistic view of most non-western nations, the latter definition is most useful for the purposes of this dialogue. The Eurocentric definition simply creates two solitudes: religion and development. Not recognizing fundamental linkages between the two makes understanding of key cross-cultural issues nearly impossible. More specifically, it makes difficult an effective understanding of the key issues of this discussion and of development itself.

Therefore, this paper will adopt a broad definition of religion. It is: 'a belief system which expresses a fundamental allegiance or is held to be of ultimate significance; that which relates to the basic commitment of a person, community or institution'.

A clear implication of this definition is that perspectives and values about development, whether Christian or not, constitute a belief system. Thus all development, including the process by which it occurs, reflects an inherent religious paradigm.

CHANGING DEVELOPMENT PARADIGMS

Definitions of development have undergone considerable change in the past few decades. As society's beliefs have changed, so have concepts of development. The development experience has also offered many new insights into the meaning of effective development.

Changing definitions of development are reflected in three main historical periods. *The colonial* era tended to impose a *Eurocentric view* of development and religion on other cultures. This view distinguished between social and economic progress, but deemed them mutually reinforcing.

The *post-war years* are characterized by *modernization* theory which assumes that development occurs through successive stages of economic growth. This theory separated traditional religious activity (e.g.: church missions) from economic development, even though the theory itself reflects fundamental western beliefs about the inevitability of 'progress' and the primacy of the pursuit of economic growth and material well-being.

The separation of economic, technical and financial considerations from culture and religion has come under considerable criticism. In a discussion of the role of religion in development, in his book *Getting to the 21st Century: Voluntary Action and the Global Agenda*, David Korten writes, 'Development has long been treated as primarily a financial and technical problem. The importance of values has been generally neglected. This neglect contributes to many of the current global crises, in particular a high incidence of communal violence, the destructive use of natural resources, drug abuse and social injustice.'

The emerging view *today* is one of *sustainable development* which seeks to integrate economic, social and ecological aspects into the change process. The religious and cultural dimensions of sustainability are also beginning to be recognized.

The shifts from colonial to modernization to sustainable development reflect changes in underlying assumptions about the relationship between development and religion. Virtually all participants in development, governments, churches and other NGOs, have themselves undergone these transitions.

For our purposes, two changes in definitions of development are most relevant:

1. Development is now being understood more holistically. We now see that past development has often been one-sided, focusing only on economics or, in the case

of many churches, focusing only on changing the beliefs of individuals. Generally, definitions of development have become more inclusive and more sensitive to the full range of cultural and societal realities.

2. Development is gradually being uprooted from the nineteenth century concept of inevitable economic, technological and social progress. Its claims to scientific objectivity are now generally dismissed. More and more effective development is being understood as the development of indigenous cultures and as a process of change rather than a specific level of achievement. We now recognize that development presupposes a definition of what is good, how society ought to be structured and change. The result is a growing diversity of views on the content of development, within a common framework of mutual respect and tolerance.

As development is being understood more holistically and in less objective terms, the role of beliefs and of religion in development is becoming more prominent.

One of the key questions set for this paper—What constitutes effective development?—needs to be understood against the background of changing definitions of development.

OTHER RELIGIOUS ACTIVITIES

The background information for the paper offers several examples of such activities: ‘evangelism and the propagation of the Christian faith, and efforts to encourage and build Christian faith communities’.

The use of ‘other’ to describe these activities implies that development itself is a religious activity. Many church-related NGOs would concur, particularly in regards to the motivation that inspires it.

Although all of the ‘other religious activities’ listed are relevant to our discussion, that of *evangelism* or proselytizing is perhaps key. For most churches, evangelism refers to intentional efforts to convert non-believers to acceptance of a particular faith and beliefs.

Within this definition, we must distinguish between programmatic and personal evangelism. The former refers to an organized and systematic programme including staff, resources and budgets with explicit and overt evangelistic goals and the means to achieve them. Personal evangelism focuses on personal conversations between a development worker and a community member about personal beliefs which may or may not convert the other to a specific faith.

Personal evangelism often tends to spring naturally from the development context. Many development workers are asked by those they work with why they are involved in development. If the motivation is explicitly Christian, a personal form of evangelism takes place. Given the critical importance of relationship building, both personal and organizational, evangelism of this kind is a common occurrence in relationships between church-based NGOs and development participants. The integrative nature of non-western cultures means that participants willingly engage in this type of evangelism.

EVANGELISM AND DEVELOPMENT

In their essay ‘Evangelism and Social Responsibility’, Vinay Samuel and Chris Sugden state: ‘Historically, no missionary society before the twentieth century stated its goals by declaring that its only legitimate activity was verbal proclamation. In its practice of mission, the missionary church introduced literacy, education, medicine, [and] technology.’

However, the experience and aftermath of colonialism in the North and South has led to an association of evangelism with westernization, imperialism and the imposition of beliefs on other cultures.

Concerns about the content of evangelism programmes include the perception of western superiority, the exclusivity of Christian beliefs, and the equation of western cultural values and customs with Christian beliefs and practices.

Christian churches in the North and South have responded in a variety of ways to the colonial experience. An emphasis on indigenous evangelism, theology and practices is perhaps the most significant one. For some northern churches, this has meant complete withdrawal from evangelism in the South. For others it has meant working only through southern partner churches. For most, it has involved a new emphasis on respecting local beliefs and cultures in evangelism programmes.

An often-ignored but well-known fact needs to be noted in this context. Christianity has a long history in many southern countries. 'Indigenous values' for many individuals and communities, in fact, reflect Christian beliefs. Strongly Christian countries include Ethiopia, with its ancient Christian traditions and, more recently, Zambia, which is 80 percent Christian. Certainly, southern Christianity, in its many forms, is in no way dependent on western mission work for its viability.

EVANGELISM AND SECULAR BELIEF CHANGE

A final issue related to a definition of other religious activities includes the relationship between Christian evangelism and secular efforts to promote specific beliefs in a southern context. It is not clear whether or how evangelistic efforts of Christian agencies differ fundamentally from attempts by secular agencies to affect the belief systems of the cultures in which they work or even other religious agencies in their work. Evangelism does not necessarily differ in method from other educational efforts of a 'non-religious' nature by northern agencies in the South.

For example, do efforts by northern agencies to protect southern natural environments reflect an environmental ethic based on traditional knowledge and oral cultures or a western one? Do family planning groups advocate means consistent with indigenous values about life and birth control or western views?

Certainly, some of the issues surrounding evangelism are not fundamentally different from many others which promote particular ideas. Concern with imposing values and respect for local culture or beliefs are shared among all engaged in the transmission of ideas cross-culturally.

A broad perspective on the issues relevant to this paper suggests that a simple separation of development and religion or other religious activities cannot be maintained. A sharp separation only obscures or avoids some of the critical questions this discussion must address. In fact, some of these issues lie at the heart of the entire development enterprise.

THE ROLE OF BELIEF CHANGE IN DEVELOPMENT

The role of belief change in development may be the most fundamental issue in our discussion of the relationship between development and other religious activities. It is directly relevant to the issue of cultural sustainability.

There is a growing recognition that belief change is inherent in development. Development is about change. Since culture cannot be isolated from development, some degree of belief change tends to occur in the development process.

All development agencies, including indigenous partners, bring particular beliefs to the development process. Even the best community development processes, by virtue of their methodology alone, may challenge indigenous beliefs. This is true for church-based NGOs, as well as for others.

For example, a public health agency combatting the spread of AIDS may advocate 'safe sex', which reflects specific views of sexual behaviour. A church-based NGO may reflect another set of norms. Either organization, or both, may confront and change indigenous sexual norms held by the target group.

Whether external beliefs are explicit or implicit, they are likely to influence existing belief systems in development processes.

A recognition that belief change occurs in all development activity creates tensions with a commitment to respect or protect indigenous cultures. This tension is, of course, inherent in all cultural exchanges. Ideally, it should be a source of creativity for both partners in the development process. But where imbalances of power exist, the indigenous belief system is most likely to be undermined.

The *fact* of belief change needs to be distinguished from *how* it is addressed. A variety of criteria or cautions regarding the acceptability of belief change have emerged in the development community to deal with this tension. These include respecting and maintaining continuity of traditional culture, general sustainability of the development effort, and the involvement of local leadership in the development process.

On these matters there appears to be little difference of opinion among most development agencies. The criteria of respect for other beliefs is not only seen as right, it is also generally accepted as critical for effective development.

CONFLICTING VIEWS OF BELIEF CHANGE

There remain differences on how agencies deal with belief change. One issue is the order of change in a development process. Is belief change ideally the first step of development or is it a consequence of a broader development process?

Some believe religious change precedes effective development. They would say acceptance of the gospel and a complete religious conversion is necessary, because this empowers people to achieve levels of health and sustainable economic activity not possible within the context of their traditional religion. Biblical views of personal conduct and responsibility are viewed as prerequisites to good health and a productive livelihood.

Others would want any religious change to be a product of the change process itself. While accepting the likelihood of changing beliefs, they place greater emphasis on ensuring that any new beliefs are rooted in a community's traditions and experience, building on indigenous foundations. When issues of belief emerge out of the broader development process, they would view such community-based changes as most likely to be sustainable.

Still others do not want to engage in proselytizing because they do not want individual belief change to be isolated from a broader development process.

In each case, there are differences of opinion on what makes development sustainable: fundamental belief change, political and structural change, ownership of the change process, or economic well-being.

Different experiences with missions and different views of sustainability have led to various responses by church-based NGOs.

Many churches with a long history of mission involvement in southern countries are concerned not to repeat mistakes they made in the past. They are concerned about insensitive or intolerant evangelistic activities that view the world as a culturally 'clean

slate' inhabited only by individuals needing conversion. They fear another wave of 'imperialist Christianity'.

Some have declared a 'moratorium on missions' because the idea of western Christians evangelizing southern countries, many of which already have substantial Christian populations, is inappropriate in post-colonial times.

In contrast, evangelistically inclined church-related NGOs do not believe that Christian evangelism—when offered in a voluntary, non-conditional manner—should be differentiated from the introduction of other ideas of a social, political or economic nature. Some have suggested that attempts to change the patriarchal nature of some societies is potentially as much an imposition as Christian evangelism. They argue that economic changes introduced in the development process may be as or more disruptive of local culture than the introduction of new religious ideas.

According to one agency contacted for this paper, the assumption that holistic development includes a spiritual component has led several Scandinavian governments to require that NGOs involve a local church in their development efforts. (How funding occurs in that context is not clear.)

WHAT IS EFFECTIVE DEVELOPMENT?

Some questions on the issue of belief change in development need to be addressed in the consultation process. These could include:

- Are some externally directed belief changes acceptable while others are not?
- Should 'religious' ideas be distinguished from other fundamental ideas about what societies ought to be like, such as human rights, the role of women and population control?
- Are claims about the exclusivity of Christianity any more different in a development context than more secular concepts?
- On what basis should the impact of Christian belief changes be evaluated?
- Does evangelism undermine effective development any more than the introduction of other foreign ideas?
- Is the disagreement among church-related NGOs based on *how* 'religious' ideas are introduced, or is the concern with the ideas themselves?

All these questions are relevant to one of the key concerns for the dialogue: What constitutes effective development?

FOUR MODELS OF DEVELOPMENT

The various approaches to development and other religious activities among church-related NGOs can be summarized in separate models.

These models refer only to the beliefs or approaches underlying specific development efforts. They do not refer to the *motivation* or the specific *methods* used in the development process.

Although the models represent distinct approaches to the relationship between development generally and other religious activities, some church-related NGOs may recognize themselves in more than one. A church agency may also participate in different models in different locations, as well as shift from one model to another over time. However, one model will typically predominate and reflect the agency's basic approach.

It should be noted that the models are not distinguished on the basis of *whether* belief change or spiritual issues are part of the development process. As discussed above, we assume that beliefs and spiritual matters are inherently involved in development. The

models are, however, distinguished by *how* their proponents view the role of beliefs in the development process.

Model 1: Development without religious activity

Agencies who have adopted this model believe that development activity, whether accompanied by specific spiritual changes or not, is important on its own merits. No attempt is made to convert or support activities leading to conversion or church development. Belief change may occur under this model, but no effort is made to determine a particular outcome.

While no proselytizing takes place, church-related NGOs that adopt this model would claim to be motivated by Christian commitment.

Different views of the role of Christianity in development are possible under this model. The activities of some church-related NGOs may be indistinguishable from those of non-Christian agencies with no claims to a specific Christian character for the development effort. Others may claim a distinctively Christian approach to development. However, in neither of them is any effort at church-planting or evangelism included in the development process.

For some agencies, a strongly Christian motivation and an emphasis on the Christian character of development workers is critical, even though no specifically Christian development approach or activity is sought. Proponents may speak of an 'incarnational' or 'presence ministry'.

While the relevance of Christianity to local communities may not be evident in a formal programmatic manner, informal connections to Christian beliefs may occur. This occurs, for example, when development workers are asked, as often happens, what motivates their involvement.

In addition, many church-related NGOs have counterparts or have identified compatible churches in the development context. While these churches may have no formal or even informal link to the development project, they are available to respond to basic belief concerns that arise out of the development process.

The challenge to basic belief systems may also occur more formally. At some points, indigenous spirituality may be perceived, either by the local community or the development agency, as in conflict with a specific development need. Different Christian agencies will respond differently. Some will seek solutions that reflect the local belief system. Others will respond in terms of a Christian belief, often through an invitation to local churches or mission agencies to establish an evangelism programme.

Whatever the case, a specific religious or basic belief issue is at stake. The discussion that occurs will reflect the basic beliefs of the community and the basic beliefs of the community and western development workers, regardless of their specific persuasion: Christian, Muslim, Animist or secular.

Model 2: Development and evangelism as integral tasks

This model is adopted by Christian agencies whose objectives are development, but which believe that genuine development includes a change in spiritual circumstances as well as physical, social and political ones. Further, the desired outcome of spiritual change is acceptance of the Christian faith. The agency sees its approach of including spiritual change as inherent in a holistic development initiative.

For some church-related NGOs, evangelism and church planting are part of a development ministry, part of a process of holistic change process. They would see various kinds of change: physical, social, political and spiritual, as aspects of a total change process toward a specific Christian view of humanity and human life.

This model differs from the first in that specific belief changes are seen as desirable and are an *explicit* rather than *implicit* part of the development program.

This approach makes a strict separation of development and other religious activities difficult. However, because of the agencies' commitment to holistic development, their health, agricultural and other activities are not secondary to their evangelism and church-related activities.

Model 3: Development and evangelism as separate tasks

This model is consistent with much of traditional Christian mission activity. In fact, this model is probably the original development model, given the role Christian churches have played in the history of development efforts.

Agencies that adopt this model undertake an integrated approach, combining distinct elements into one overall programme. But there is no intrinsic connection between development activity (social, economic, health) and other religious activities, such as evangelism and church development.

The model of development used in this approach may be very similar to ones used by non-Christian agencies, even though the development programme may be motivated by Christian convictions. Its practitioners see development and evangelism and church planting as distinct and separable tasks of the church. One does not require the other to have validity. Even in cases where agencies would see conversion as the ultimate success of their work, non-spiritual development is seen as having basic intrinsic value.

Practical reasons may also be used to justify a separation of activities. Agencies may want to ensure that no one will convert to Christianity as a means to benefit from development activities. Or the priority of development or proselytizing may be purely contextual: What is the need of the particular individual or community? Or they may simply want to meet Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA) requirements that government funds not be used for activities of a 'religious nature'.

This model may also be a step on an agency's road to holism. It may reflect an incomplete effort to combine aspects of development that western society tends to separate. It may also reflect an organizational distinction within a church between 'mission' or evangelism efforts and 'relief and development' initiatives.

Model 4: Development as pre-evangelism

Agencies that use this model believe the real mission of the church is to 'preach the gospel' with the aim of making converts. Development begins with converted individuals. Once people abandon their traditional religions they are more likely to sustain a process of development. As one agency representative said, 'Traditional religions are antagonistic to change', therefore, religious change is a necessary precondition for sustainable development.

Some agencies that use this model view their development work as 'pre-evangelism'. Development work (or often relief activities) may be minimal and serve only to prepare people to accept the gospel. Others will have a more extensive development programme which in most ways comes to resemble model 3 in character.

Advocates of this model also consider their approach holistic, but the process of change is understood differently from others claiming a holistic approach. In fact, the separation of development from 'other religious activities' may be seen as entirely artificial.

Historically, this model has been associated with the establishment of hospitals and schools, although this is rarely done today. Agencies using this model have also adopted

more community-based approaches to health and literacy. Nevertheless, these programmes exist as a means to reach local people for the Christian faith.

The issue of 'rice Christians', or development being conditional on conversion, is of concern to agencies that give priority to evangelism, as well as to others. They are concerned with a weak and artificial church developing that cannot last beyond the agency's presence. A veteran missionary has referred to the prospect of creating 'rice Christians' as 'the bane of church-planting in poor areas'. They are also concerned with the potential for division in communities that conditional development activities could cause. There is a general consensus that any suggestion of conditions for development participation produces neither effective development nor genuine Christians.

THE EFFECTIVENESS OF THE FOUR MODELS

In the context of our subject, it is critical that we view the selection of criteria for effective development in an appropriate light. Although some may argue that conversion is an important component of development, as either a first step or a consequence, success or effectiveness in evangelism cannot be equated with development. The criteria adopted to evaluate effectiveness must be broadly developmental and not limited to a possible aspect of development, however critical it may be to some.

This paper takes the position that it is not possible to isolate belief change in any form from a total development process, even when no evangelism programmes are involved. Change cannot be isolated into one aspect of a person's or community's life. Therefore, criteria to determine the effectiveness of a model must be broadly developmental in nature, rather than focusing on the absence or presence of an evangelism programme.

This paper is not the appropriate context in which to discuss the details of effective development scenarios. However, it appears that all four models can be effective approaches to development. Each has its success stories, as well as failures.

Sustainable development projects have occurred in which development entirely reflected local beliefs and traditions. There are also cases in which entire villages converted to Christianity, and through this process undertook a successful, broader development process. Effective development can occur within various religious frameworks. *Neither the inclusion or exclusion of evangelism and church planting in a development programme necessarily determines its effectiveness.*

The evidence suggests that the key to successful development lies less in the model or end goals (as described above) adopted, than in the means or methods used to achieve success. Effective development is more probably dependent on the process of change than on particular outcomes. In addition, consistent with the growing recognition of cultural diversity as an ongoing global reality, dictating particular outcomes is becoming less acceptable throughout the world.

CRITERIA FOR EFFECTIVE DEVELOPMENT

There is now a broad consensus on the methods that are likely to lead to effective development. It includes previously discussed criteria, such as a holistic approach, community empowerment, and ownership of the development process as a means to sustainability, a partnership approach by outside agencies and others. Specifically, current development approaches seek to:

—Ensure voluntary acceptance of new ideas, beliefs and the development process itself.

—Root any new beliefs, methods, and organization in the experience and culture of local people.

—Reject use of acceptance of specific beliefs as conditions for development participation.

—Avoid creating or heightening divisions in communities through the development process.

—Ensure that social change is not dependent on outside agents for its sustainability.

—Recognize the implications of change in one aspect of a community's life for other areas.

Criteria such as these must be used to evaluate the effectiveness of models outlined.

We need to revisit the issue of belief change in the context of effective development. How does religious change measure against other changes in terms of criteria of effectiveness? It cannot be convincingly argued that belief change necessarily violates criteria of effective development any more or less than economic or political change. Concerns such as disruption of traditional culture, sustainability, and local control can be addressed in the context of evangelism and church planting. The issue is not *whether* belief change is an acceptable part of the development process, but *how* belief change occurs. Is it imposed? Is it a condition of development participation? Are those affected by development participating in the change process?

These criteria, of course, apply to all development agencies, northern and southern, Christian and non-Christian.

ASSESSING THE FOUR MODELS

One of the more significant areas of potential weakness for agencies which incorporate evangelism into their programs in any way has already been discussed. This is the issue of conditional development or the potential to create 'rice Christians'. Any indication of non-voluntary or conditional development undermines the entire process. Community ownership of a development process is not possible when this occurs.

Agencies for which evangelism has primacy over development (*model 4*: development as pre-evangelism), and even those which incorporate evangelism as a separate portion of their overall programme (*model 3*), must confront the issue of conditionality of aid directly, from the point of view both of effective evangelism and effective development. If Christianity must be voluntarily accepted and genuinely believed, as all would agree, then serious efforts must be made to ensure that no conditions—material, social, political or any other—are attached to its acceptance.

A weakness which may undermine the effectiveness of agencies which adopt *model 4* is the potential lack of attention to development theory, to thinking and planning practically about development. Even though actual practice may be to respond to physical needs as well as spiritual ones, the primary focus on spiritual change may lead to a relatively narrow development process which ignores other genuine needs among the local people. If development goals are secondary to evangelism and church development in a particular programme, they nevertheless must have their own integrity in order to be considered effective.

A 'pre-evangelism' approach to development, possible under *model 4*, is perhaps the most controversial one adopted by church-based NGOs. It has raised considerable concern in the development field generally and within CIDA and other NGOs. Critics say that with this approach, development (or relief) is not undertaken for its own sake, but to encourage or prepare people to be open to evangelism.

The two-pronged approach of *model 3* is vulnerable to concerns with mixed objectives or uncertainty among participants. For cultures that recognize no separation between religion and livelihood and other aspects of daily life, a separation of the two may lead to uncertainty and confusion. Which of the two is really the most important: development or evangelism? How do the two relate?

Agencies which incorporate other religious activities into an overall development framework (*model 2*) can also create false holisms. For example, attempts at conversion can be artificially merged into literacy or agricultural programmes so that the intent of the initiative becomes confusing. Despite the intentions of holism, agencies which adopt this model are bringing together activities which their western cultural background, and quite probably their church traditions, have separated. The likelihood for creating artificial or confusing initiatives may be high.

The approaches that place less or no explicit emphasis on belief change (e.g.: *model 1*) also have potential weaknesses. This approach often reflects the tradition of development which focuses on economic and perhaps social development and ignores the spiritual components of an indigenous culture. The importance of beliefs to the development process is often forgotten, as is the existence of the beliefs implicit in development concepts brought in by western agencies. It is also contradictory to assume that religious activity and beliefs are peripheral to an agency's own development paradigm, while insisting on its pre-eminence in a non-western development context.

Further, if religion or belief systems are viewed as matters of personal preference rather than as cultural necessities, their relevance to development activities will probably be ignored, despite claims to protect the indigenous culture.

Finally, the question of how the model applied to a specific development context is selected cannot be overlooked. How and by whom should the model be selected? Given the criteria of effective development, can it be determined only by the mandate of the agency? To what extent must a southern partner or the affected community be involved? How should the relevance of the specific development problem be considered in the selection process?

In summary, the weakness of most of the models used to address the issue of development and other religious activities are precisely those relevant to their entire western-sponsored development thrust. While some approaches may have particular strengths and weaknesses in relation to certain criteria for effective development, none is free from the risk of undermining an effective development process.

ROUND TABLE DISCUSSION ON DEVELOPMENT AND RELIGION

In April 1997, World Vision International's Strategy and Christian Mission division invited development practitioners and theorists from around the world to take part in a four-day think-tank to discuss development issues. One of the primary reasons for their meeting was to examine the role of religion in development.

Those taking part included Paul Hiebert, Bill Dryness, Augustine Musople, Ravi Jayakaraan, Melisachew Mesfin, Sam Voorhies, Bryant Myers, Tom McAlpine, Bruce Bradshaw and William van Geest.

The editors of TOGETHER were interested in their perspectives on how religion contributes to effective development, and in what ways it may detract from it. What follows is an edited version of the discussion that took place.

Paul Hiebert: It is becoming increasingly clear to me that part of the problem in addressing the issue of development today is that our western world view has created a dichotomy between religion and development. I'm not suggesting we bring science and

theology side-by-side. But we need to re-examine our whole model. I would like to hear Ravi's comments, because he models some of the things that I think have been very helpful.

Ravi Jayakaraan: I am intrigued by the question: Does religion enhance, does it reduce, does it hinder development? One of the things that we are becoming conscious of is the strong belief in a supernatural realm among many of those people with whom we do development. That is a part of their world and, therefore, part of their world view. We once thought we could avoid this aspect, and deal with only the empirical aspects of development. That's been a mistake we've made often. We have to address both dimensions.

As we go to communities in India and elsewhere in Asia, I have seen that areas over which people feel they have no control are allocated to God's jurisdiction. The other areas remain within their control. Of course, we believe that these are areas that God also has control of. As we work with these communities, we need to be prepared to address both the empirical as well as the supernatural.

Bill Dyrness: Tom [McAlpine] lead us in an excellent Bible study on [Psalm 104](#). We realized that the biblical world view is far more holistic than most of western Christianity's interpretation of those views. We realized that God is active and present in creation, causing the grass to grow and the animals to have a life that's full. That is God's work that God is presently involved in doing. So, when a development officer or practitioner comes into a community, God is already there, working, giving life and causing the grass to grow. God doesn't come in with the missionaries or practitioners. God is already there.

One of the things we have been discussing here is how to go about eliciting people's understanding of how God is present in their communities. We should first talk with them about how their spring works, and maybe hear what they have to say about the spirits that are there in the waters. We need to hear their story before sending a development practitioner into the experience.

Melisachew Mesfin: I also have come to realize that the practitioner should not compartmentalize and say: This is spiritual; this is physical. There has to be a holistic understanding. Otherwise, you do not have a total study. You need to understand the value systems of the people.

The practitioner does not automatically know what community members feel. The practitioner first must analyse the situation. I have come to realize that the practitioner must try to preserve the customs of the people. However, the gospel cannot be compromised in any situation.

Augustine Musopole: These two areas—the natural and supernatural, the material and spiritual—are really very complementary. The practitioner must recognize that it is only as communities recognize new possibilities that they will embrace development.

One has almost to graft the gospel on the spirituality found in the community. The problem is that those who bring the gospel and development often deny the spirituality that they find in communities. They come in and clear the area in order to plant new seed. This has caused problems for communities. It brings about what I call a schizophrenic spirituality. It disturbs their sense of identity. It tends to uproot them.

So, the aim of transformational development really has got to take into account the whole person and the environment in which they live. In that environment, in Africa, especially, religion is key, because life itself is religious. If you deny the religious element, you risk losing these people altogether. The development effort will be greatly hampered as a result. But, if you tune in to their spirituality, this is going to help them see new possibilities, without alienating them.

Bill Dyrness: The community, of course, has to be listened to and taken into account. But then there is another community that we also recognize, and that is the community of believers. Ultimately, it is the community of believers who will exercise discernment as to what the community's needs may be, whether they are spiritual, material or psychological. So, it's not some outside expert who would do that, ultimately—although they can be valuable resources. Rather, the community will be empowered to make these determinations and judgements on what needs to be done.

Augustine Musopole: Just to add to what Paul Hiebert has been saying, this is where [Psalm 139](#) becomes very helpful. I call him the effective scientist who looks at the world—especially at the way he is made—and wonders at the greatness of God. The psalmist's response is, 'I am wonderfully and fearfully made.' I think that is the proper attitude of a scientist who sees God at work in the world. I think that sense of God's presence has been lost. We have driven a wedge between the supernatural and the natural. The biblical view is that the natural really reveals the presence of God in the world. [Psalm 19](#) tells us about that. So do [Psalm 8](#) and [Psalm 24](#).

So, can we not speak of a spirituality of science? Is there not that sense of spirituality in which the scientist is able to see something and be awed by it? He may just remain at the level of awe, like an artist. Quite often, it is the artists who really speak to us about the greatness of God in the world.

The fact that science has got one realm and theology has got another hasn't helped us very much. I think we are seeing the need to bring these two things together. Where do human beings come in? Perhaps we can be the bridge between what is called the natural and the supernatural.

Bruce Bradshaw: In one situation, World Vision development practitioners went to a village and introduced some agricultural innovations that had the potential to double the yield of sorghum. As they introduced the idea, they talked about the seeds, the chemical content of the fertilizer, things like this, all scientific in nature. The villagers talked this over. It was hard for them to imagine that these innovations had no spiritual foundation. The agricultural innovators had said nothing about a spiritual basis for what they were proposing.

Most of the village farmers were reluctant to accept the innovations, but one farmer did. He took the advice and the instruction of the agricultural innovators and planted the seeds, and he got an increased yield. Now, the agricultural innovators thought that that would ensure their successes. They expected that the rest of the farmers would follow the example of this one particular farmer.

Unfortunately, this farmer's son died within a year. Now, in a culture where infant mortality could be 20 percent, this was not unusual. But the villagers interpreted the death of this farmer's son as an expression of witchcraft. They believed that the spiritual basis of the agricultural innovations was witchcraft. They concluded that the farmer had sacrificed his son through witchcraft in order to increase his yields. They felt the price was simply too big. The project did not catch on.

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Lessons in Apologetics from The Debate at the Oxford Meeting in 1860

C.W. Song

This insight into the earlier debate on Creation and Evolution demonstrates the importance of thorough preparation and knowledge of the subject and an attitude of humility and grace in any such dispute. This lesson is valid in developing an apologetic in today's context. Editor

From the middle of the nineteenth century up to the present, *the theory of Evolution* has been one of the most influential theories that has made an impact on science, philosophy, sociology, pedagogy, history, psychology, religion, and so on.¹ *The theory of Evolution* seems to have gained undisputed sway over all theories and thoughts. To many, it is already a proved scientific fact, and revered as a form of belief. Has the long-time debate between *the theory of Evolution* and that of Creation already ended with that victory for the former through the proved facts? Indeed it was not long ago western society having guarded the Christian tradition, surrendered its predominance to *the Evolution theory* which is anti-Christian and anti-biblical. Now *the theory of Evolution* is widely accepted as the only way to explain the origin and process of the universe and life. Such a situational change (from Christian Creation to atheistic Evolution) reached its climax at *the Oxford Meeting of the British Association for the Advancement of Science* that caught the attention of so much of the world. While this tragic event was seen by many people as a clear cut victory for the Evolutionists, the theory of *Creation* seemed to be a belief stubbornly held on to in a desperate struggle by so-called fundamentalists. We, however, must not overlook the fact that this historical tragedy which brought about a victory for *Evolution* was not so much brought about as the result of a judgement based on facts and objective proofs as of many outside elements. Before the beginning of *the Debate at the Oxford Meeting*, the result was already fixed. There are a number of reasons for this.

First, the epochal situation of philosophy and ideology was of great advantage to the Evolutionists. Ever since the Renaissance, Europe have been filled with the fast development of science and the praise of human intelligence, while on the other hand, religious piety was weakened and biblical criticism was strengthened.² Moreover, the intensive studies on the metamorphosis and the succession of living organisms led by George de Buffon, Erasmus Darwin, Chevalier de Lamarck, E. Geoffrey Saint-Hilaire and so on had a general appeal. The only process left to the Evolutionists was how to dress it in a scientific fashion so as to prove the hypothesis in a scientific and logical way, which is the only alternative explanation of life to *Creation*.

Hence, when Darwin presented his theory to the world in an empirical and scientific way through his actual five year voyage, his theory was more than ready to be accepted. Then, the rough dispute at *the Oxford Meeting* played a role in the confirmation that *the Evolution theory* was a *fait accompli*.

Second, the apparent difference in the personal qualifications of the two debaters did not provide a fair ground for the debate. The result of the debate was not a reasonable

¹ See the following study: Paul A. Zimmerman, gen. ed., *Darwin and Creation* (Saint Louis: Concordia Pub. Hse., 1963), *The Influence of Darwinism*, by Raymond F. Surburg, pp. 168–204.

² Colin Chaut and John Fauvel, ed., *Darwin to Einstein* (Essex: Open University Press, 1980), pp. 27–28.

and objective one which was won from a cool-headed and rational pursuit of the truth but a temporary victory is based on the abilities of two debaters. The Evolutionists of that time were brought up within the circle of the Christian culture and had a broad knowledge of *Creation*. The analysis of fundamentalism, especially, was much emphasized upon, and the Evolutionists knew thoroughly how to attack the creationists. They were experts on *the Evolution theory* who had long been preparing *the theory as a substitute for the Creation theory*. Huxley was one of the most prominent scholars at that time. A biologist well acquainted with *the Evolution theory*, he was qualified to play the role of 'Darwin's Bulldog'. On the other hand, Wilberforce not only lacked the ability for arguing with his opponent³ but also was ignorant of *the Evolution theory* itself. He was merely a bishop, devoid of the scientific expertise. An oriental maxim suggests that 'if you know yourself and your enemy, you will never lose'. Accordingly, the awkward challenge of creationists against Evolutionists who were so well prepared deserved defeat. 'Pride goes before destruction, a haughty spirit before a fall'.⁴

Third, more professional, appropriate apologetic works, and aggressive countermeasures on the part of the followers of *the Creation theory* were not achieved even after *the Oxford Dispute*. Along with the continuous attention to and studies on *Evolution* after 1860 by such people as Grego Mendel, Hugo de Vries, Neo-Darwinists, Neo-Lamarchianists, the entire flow of thought was influenced by the enormous premise of *the Evolution theory*.⁵ Moreover, even in the United States which lagged a few steps behind in the areas of ideology and philosophy at that time a hard blow was given to the believers in *Creation* by the famous '*Monkey trial*' in 1925. The believers of *Creation* had to oppose the evolutionists again through their professional researches however belatedly. However, this was not done. This was mainly due to lack of the self-confidence of the churches, which resulted from the decisive blow given by the Galileo Trial. In short, it was due to *the Church's fear of science*. In fact, however, the Galileo tragedy came from the churches' misunderstanding of the Bible and their enforcement of dogmas.

To explain *the Oxford match* through an analogy, the Evolutionist played the game with favourable conditions and sufficient preparation amidst ardent support. Meanwhile, his opponent, Wilberforce, was filled with arrogance, ignoring his opponent. The two representative fighters were of different weight categories. The winner was already decided even before the match had started.

What lessons does this debate give to the Christian Apologists?

First of all, Christian Apologists should not make a challenge without sufficient preparation. This does not mean a cowardly attitude in fear of defeat. Fighting is for winning. One should not take the initiative in the fight when one is uncertain of victory. When one goes to fight, one must consider the background, and the result of the fight thoroughly and must choose the appropriate time, place and other strategies for victory.⁶

³ David N. Livingstone, *Darwin's Forgotten Defenders* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 1987), p. 34.

⁴ [Proverbs 16:18](#)

⁵ Of course, although these researches did show the opposing views and disharmonies in many parts of Darwin's Evolution theory, all their works accepted the hypothesis of Evolution.

⁶ The detailed strategy for Christian demonstrators against the Evolutionists should not be dealt with lightly here. However, it is more effective when attacking the opponent's weakness rather than trying to prove *Creation*; it is important to reveal inconsistencies in the hypotheses used as cornerstones for *the Evolution theory*, and accordingly to demonstrate it as one of the hypotheses that only try to explain the generation and succession of the universe.

Remember the tragedy of *the Debate at the Oxford Meeting* and the '*Monkey Trial*'. Jesus taught as follows:

Suppose one of you wants to build a tower. Will he not first sit down and estimate the cost to see if he has enough money to complete it? For if he lays the foundation and is not able to finish it, everyone who sees it will ridicule him, saying, 'This fellow began to build and was not able to finish.' Or suppose a king is about to go to war against another king. Will he not first sit down and consider whether he is able with ten thousand men to oppose the one coming against him with twenty thousand? If he is not able, he will send a delegation while the other is still a long way off and will ask for terms of peace. ([Luke 14:28-32](#))

Secondly, the special countermeasure must be accomplished by the expert of that field. No matter how logical and powerful in arguing the Christian Apologist with abundant knowledge of philosophy or theology may be, he is unable to be an effective apologist in the special area such as physics, biochemistry, and so on,⁷ because of his limited knowledge and understanding in that area. We should acknowledge that non-Christian professionals in such areas of expertise are very philosophical and logical at the same time. All men live according to their philosophy and logic. Non-Christian experts are also researching their studies, based on their philosophical backgrounds. In many cases, they use scientific results in their own logical way in order to support their ideology. Therefore, we need Christian Apologists who are physicists, biochemists, geologists, botanists, zoologists, and so on. We must acknowledge the fact that disputes that call for experts can determine the direction of the flow of the entire philosophical debate, though they are not easily understood by ordinary people. Apologetics, at the same time, should not be a matter of rhetoric or temporary persuasion of a certain group of people, but be an open discussion in which facts are earnestly pursued.

The situation at present is evidently different from that from the late nineteenth to the mid twentieth century. There are many Apologists who have researched *the Evolution theory* in connection with their field of expertise and have firmly believed in *Creation*. It is time for us to shake off *the obsessions of Galileo, the Oxford Meeting, and the Monkey Trial*. Let us argue with them with confidence and wisdom!

Books Reviewed

[*Interpreting God and the Postmodern Self: On Meaning, Manipulation and Promise*](#)

Anthony C. Thistleton (Robert Forrest)

[*The Fabric of Theology: A Prolegomenon to Evangelical Theology*](#)

Richard Lints (Randall E. Otto)

[*Remembering the Christian Past*](#)

⁷ Although it is not easy to simply set boundaries of the themes or areas for this dispute, Christian Apologists must know that the number of themes which are impossible to debate based only on philosophical logic is on the increase. Until recently, time and psyche were metaphysical themes. Now significant advances in physics and biochemistry, etc. have been made related to time and psyche. Leaving aside acknowledging their results, for a dispute on an equal level at least, Christian Apologists who are experts in these fields, who can fully understand and converse in these terms, are needed.

Robert L. Wilken (Ray Laird)

[Three North American Evangelical Voices](#)

David Wells (Alister McGrath)

[No Place for Truth](#)

Mark Noll (Alister McGrath)

[The Scandal of the Evangelical Mind](#)

Don Carson (Alister McGrath)

[No Place for Truth, or Whatever Happened to Evangelical Theology](#)

David F. Wells

[God in the Wasteland: The Reality of Truth in a World of Fading Dreams](#)

David F. Wells (Amos Yong)

[Science and the New Age Challenge](#)

Ernest Lucas (Douglas C. Spanner)

Book Reviews

INTERPRETING GOD AND THE POSTMODERN SELF: ON MEANING, MANIPULATION AND PROMISE

by Anthony C. Thistleton

*(Scottish Journal of Theology: Current Issues in Theology. T & T Clark, 1995, xi + 180 pp.
æ9.95)*

Reprinted with permission from *Anvil* 14:1.

Reviewed by Robert Forrest

Academic careers and authorial reputations are currently being built on the shifting sands of postmodernity. Within our theological college, I have found that an undergraduate course entitled 'Christian Responses to Postmodernity' attracts good students, eliciting a mixture of anxiety and elation. This is hardly surprising since none of us is untouched by the postmodern denial of transcendence, whether through television, advertising, the street nihilism of 'lager culture', or an endless emphasis on style rather than substance.

However, Anthony Thiselton has made an illuminating contribution to the plethora of studies on this subject. His well-organized book is an expanded version of four lectures delivered in Aberdeen. It still bears the original fourfold structure, with each section now divided into six chapters. The four sections deal with: manipulative rhetoric and truth; a hermeneutics of the self; Don Cupitt and the 'Sea of Faith' movement; and a theology of hope grounded in the triune God.

What is especially helpful in Thiselton's study is that it is addressed, primarily, to the postmodern self, 'a mere flotsam, driven by the surface currents of the power interests and language worlds of society', a self which lives near the abyss of despair.

Thiselton's pastoral, even evangelistic, approach recalls the compassion of Jesus towards the wounded and scattered crowds of Israel ([Matt. 9:36](#)). He offers the balm of

hope in God, the relational Trinity, with the assurance that such a God does not employ or engender manipulative techniques. The book's capacity to persuade is closely related to its rhetorical power to attract a postmodern reader to the stance Thiselton portrays. After all, not only is rhetoric 'all that postmodernity can offer' (p. 113), but it is *as rhetoric* that the postmodern self judges all discourse, including Thiselton's. Presumably, for this reason, Thiselton appeals to the non-manipulative character of Christian love and to the integrating power of future hope, so addressing both the fear and residual aspirations of the post-modern self.

This is not to say that Thiselton abandons rational discourse, but his own position requires that he offer a relational address, not an abstract declaration. He is at his most polemical in Section Three, showing signs of irritation with Don Cupitt's intellectual meanderings. But the concern here seems less with Cupitt himself than with those garrulous Sea of Faith supporters who try to hold together modernist 'autonomy' with a postmodernist dissolution of the abiding self. Notwithstanding Thiselton's seriousness, Cupitt's Nietzschean project of 'infiltrating' the Church of England, using deceit, comes across as a rather sad case. Interpreted charitably, Cupitt's programme sounds like a Richmal Crompton plot for William, rather than Nietzschean radicalism. But Thiselton's concern for those who find liberty in rejecting the 'realist God' (which is presumably some metaphysical construct) is evident.

Throughout, he seeks to engage seriously with the postmodern self. To this purpose, he brings into play a pantheon of witnesses: biblical scholars, philosophers, theologians, critical theorists and so on, whose range will be familiar to readers of Thiselton's work on hermeneutics. All this scholarly effort, however, will do nothing to convince a hard line postmodernist, who, after all, is committed to relentless atheistic denial of transcendence. But then hard postmodernism is like the British comedian Charlie Drake's fairy who goes up and up in ever decreasing circles. One can only hope for an eventual re-emergence. But appeal to a well grounded hope can at least be attempted with a soft postmodernist.

It is difficult to do justice to the range of Thiselton's scholarship in this thoroughly readable book. Indeed, it is good enough to encourage further questions. For example, Thiselton challenges the rather flat interpretation of 'power' in postmodernism (cf. pp. 142-144, 159-160), but, we ask, how might this richer analysis of power bear on Christology (e.g. on [Matt. 28:18-20](#))? Further, does 'postmodernism', as the levelling of all signs and cultures, provide an ideological superstructure for late twentieth-century techno-capitalism and its fluid global market? After all, while nation states, which are now in eclipse, are disrupted by the litigation, suspicion and conflict which postmodernism promotes, this very social fragmentation offers post-cold war technology new fields of investment in security systems, consolatory pornography, and the private world of virtual reality. New forms of enslaving freedom thus become possible, with postmodern nihilism providing the ideological justification. If Christian theologians were to read [Rev. 17-18](#) specifically within these horizons they might find themselves in collision with the dominant socio-economic power. The church might then become a community which, besides suffering opposition, would also be interrogated about the reason for its hope ([1 Pet. 3:15](#)).

THE FABRIC OF THEOLOGY: A PROLEGOMENON TO EVANGELICAL THEOLOGY

by Richard Lints

(*Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 1993. xii. 364 pp. \$19.99*)

Reprinted with permission from Westminster Theological Journal, Spring 1995

(Reviewed by Randall E. Otto)

The author's stated purpose is to describe the theological project by outlining the bases necessary for thinking theologically. In an age that is marked by 'epistemological schizophrenia', Lints endeavors to provide a cohesive and unified work in theological methodology, 'to outline an evangelical theology that is at once biblically and culturally sensitive' (p. 2028).

Lints describes the rise of evangelicalism after the Second Great Awakening, the frequent disdain for confessional traditions among revivalists, the war with modernism at the turn of this century, and the withdrawal of evangelicalism from the intellectual and social spheres. Although there are common beliefs among evangelicals, the movement lacks cohesion and identity due to cultural biases inherent in it. 'Evangelicals have set about defending a collection of distinct theological beliefs rather than producing a unified vision of theology. They have assembled not a well-crafted piece of clothing but a loosely stitched patchwork quilt' (p. 55).

Evangelicals must resist the popular inclination to divorce doctrine from the overarching flow of history in Scripture. The cohesion Lints seeks ensues from the totality of redemptive history which informs each portion of Scripture. Exegetical, biblical, and systematic theology are interrelated and must inform one another. Instead of translating out the categories of the original story, theology ought to bring the modern person into the conceptual world of the Scriptures. To illustrate how theology should return to its roots, he cites the work of Luther and Calvin, the Reformed scholastics, Jonathan Edwards, and Geerhardus Vos. Over against this 'theological past', he portrays the 'theological present' of postmodern theology and its pluralistic cultural setting, autonomous Enlightenment roots, and hermeneutical character. Evangelical theology must not recoil from the challenges presented by postmodern theology, but should engage it in becoming increasingly public and critical of modernity and pluralism. 'Critical reflection (i.e., the sort of reflection that refuses to stop asking difficult questions of accepted norms) must be an important element of the theological task, but it must be a fundamentally dependent critical reflection rather than an autonomous reflection' (p. 238).

Believing that evangelicals have lost the church identity for their theology and the theological identity for their church, Lints calls evangelicalism back to a theological framework that is founded in the redemptive matrix of history. Some of Lints' assertions might be somewhat loosely stated; for example, does 'the fact that biblical passages have at least two authors (one divine and one human)' mean that 'authorial intention may move in two directions' (p. 20295)? If the divine intention may veer from the written biblical witness instead of simply going beyond it (in the same direction), much of the basis for Lints' insistence on rigorous grammatico-historical exegesis would appear to be eviscerated. Similar concerns may also be raised about what may be a too casual equation of revelation with history (p. 310). Notwithstanding these caveats, this work is sweeping in scope, penetrating in analysis, and suggestive for theological work to come. One hopes that Lints, having proposed a path toward a biblically and culturally sensitive theology, will accept the onus inherent in his book to develop further an evangelical theology that successfully overcomes the malaise that presently afflicts both evangelicalism and postmodernism.

REMEMBERING THE CHRISTIAN PAST

by Robert L. Wilken

*(Grand Rapids, William B Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1995. ISBN 0-8028-0880-8 pb.
180 pp)*

(Reviewed by Ray Laird, Principal, Bible College of South Australia)

It is refreshing to read the work of a scholar who moves so easily among the Fathers of the Church and who sees their relevance for our times. Such is this book from the pen of the William R. Kenan, Jr., Professor of the History of Christianity, University of Virginia at Charlottesville. It is a salutary reminder that all wisdom is not of recent origin, but that there are many valid insights that come to us from the pre-Enlightenment era. Wilken himself makes the point. He observes that it is an acute problem for the church that Christian intellectuals 'have hired themselves out as apprentices to a body of literature that is drawn almost wholly from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries' (p. 175). The consequent neglect of the Bible, the Fathers and the Scholastics has impoverished not only Christian academia but also the leadership of the church and those who come under their care.

Wilken takes us on a brief journey through the ancients, stopping off at issues that are very relevant to our generation. Through the minds of the giants of bygone times he discusses pluralism, tradition, secularism, culture, reason, the Trinity and other pertinent issues. The discussion is handled with a great deal of acumen, not in an unrelated fashion, but by one who knows well the tides and currents of the day in which we live. The insights he shares are both challenging and encouraging. What is more, they have the ring of truth.

It is impossible to read the ancients without being struck with the sense of piety that pervades many of their writings. It is fitting and satisfying to find that Wilken writes not only about intellectual issues but also about some very practical issues concerning Christian character and conduct. His discussions on practical holiness and the place of the affections in Christian life and experience are as delightful as they are instructive. In an age which tends to breed superficiality it is healthy to be confronted with the thoughts of those who sought to tread the paths of devotion. Wilken leads us very competently down the paths of a profound yet robust spirituality.

One of the beauties of this book is that it reminds us that 'there is nothing new under the sun'. The church has faced the issues that we face today. It has been there and emerged in strength to bear its witness to new generations. We can learn much from their testimony. Another significant feature is the impression of wisdom that permeates the pages that have flowed from the author and those of the past with whom he has engaged. This signifies that it is beneficial indeed to engage with our roots and with those who have shaped our Christian heritage. Seekers after wisdom will find much to satisfy. Then, too, a feature of good speaking and good writing is the thirst that it generates. Wilken's book is a welcome introduction to ancient springs. Anyone who accompanies Wilken on this journey will wish to drink deeper at the sources themselves.

On the technical side the omission of an index and a bibliography is regrettable. This lessens its value for students. However, the chapters are self-contained, which makes for ease in pursuing a particular topic. The footnotes are useful, directing the reader to the appropriate sources.

ALISTER MCGRATH REVIEWS THREE NORTH AMERICAN EVANGELICAL VOICES

David Wells (Gordon Conwell Seminary)

No Place for Truth

Mark Noll (Wheaton College)

The Scandal of the Evangelical Mind

Don Carson (Trinity Evangelical Divinity School)

The Gaggling of God

Reprinted with permission from *Themelios* Vol 22:3.

Evangelicalism has always been suspicious of the academic world, and quite rightly so! In the first place, there is anxiety about the secularism, relativism and pluralism that seem to be endemic in much of today's American higher education. Evangelicals—and, increasingly, many others as well—have noted with growing concern the indications that the modern American academy seems to have more to do with ,litism, ideological warfare and rampant anti-religious propaganda than with learning. Some academic theologians have often seemed to be little more than acolytes to these trends, affirming what often turn out to be profoundly illiberal theologies and firing both their opponents and less than totally enthusiastic colleagues, rather than engaging in the dialogue for which the academy was once noted, honoured and valued. Many state universities give the impression that they have become little more than Institutes of Political Correction. It is very difficult to read works such as Paul C. McGlasson's *Another Gospel: A Confrontation with Liberation Theology* (1994) without being concerned about the 'theological fascism' that seems to be rampant in some liberal seminaries.

Then there is the issue of relevance. Why bother with higher education? The important thing is to get on with preaching the gospel. Anything else is irrelevant. And the issue of relevance is top of the agenda for many evangelicals. As John E. Smith points out in his major study of 1963. *The Spirit of American Philosophy*: 'It is no exaggeration to say that in American intellectual life, irrelevant thinking has always been considered to be the cardinal sin.' Evangelicalism has always shown itself to be at its best in insisting that the gospel is deeply relevant to the life of ordinary people. So why risk side-tracking evangelicalism from some seriously relevant activity by suggesting that it become more concerned about academic issues?

Those who are concerned with understanding the contemporary state of North American evangelicalism will find the three works to which I refer in this short article deeply rewarding. Each, in different ways, explores aspects of the ways in which evangelicalism has responded to a number of pressures in modern American culture. In each case, the authors regard the outcome to be unsatisfactory.

I

The two of the three that have been out longest are authored by David Wells of Gordon-Conwell Seminary, *No Place for Truth* (Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, 1993) and by Mark Noll, of Wheaton College, *The Scandal of the Evangelical Mind* (Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, 1994). Wells argues forcefully that evangelicalism has lost whatever grasp it once had of the importance of systematic theology. The strongly pragmatic nature of the movement has, he suggests, led to an emphasis on church growth, feel-good preaching and styles of ministry informed largely by secular psychology. The role of classical theology has become seriously eroded, with evangelical seminaries failing to allot it the place of honour it was once universally acknowledged as possessing. No longer is theology regarded as integral to maintaining and nourishing Christian identity in the world, or as a seminal resource in forging new approaches to ministry. Instead, it has become preoccupied with 'a technology of practice' and 'techniques with which to expand the church and master the self that borrow mainly from business management and psychology'. There is a widespread consensus within American evangelicalism that Wells has identified a real and worrying trend within the movement. Although some of his critics have suggested that his particular presentation of these defects is a little overstated, Wells makes some wise and helpful comments concerning the causes and

possible consequences of this neglect of theology. The work remains a fundamental challenge to American evangelicalism to keep a strong sense of theological identity.

II

A criticism of a somewhat different nature is set out by Noll. Armed with a masterly knowledge of the history of American evangelicalism, Noll suggests that evangelicalism is, as a matter of fact, quite well served by its theologians, and points to leading writers such as James I. Packer and Thomas C. Oden to make his point. The real problem is not that evangelicalism has neglected its theology; it is that it has failed to do anything of cultural significance with it. As a result, evangelicalism has largely failed to have any significant impact on the world of letters, art, drama or music, save in a kind of Christian sub-culture. The 'scandal of the evangelical mind' thus lies in the fact that, in the recent past, evangelicals have failed to allow their faith to shape their understanding of the world, and to engage with it.

Noll's work is superbly written, and can be seen as the 'lament of a wounded lover'—someone who is deeply committed to evangelicalism, yet saddened and hurt by its failings. While sharing Wells' concern for theology, Noll does not regard evangelicalism as suffering from serious neglect in this area. Rather, his concern is to move on from a theological foundation to intellectual cultural engagement—an engagement which he believes (and the evidence he musters is persuasive) to be distinctly lacking at present. Noll's plea is for evangelicalism to take its cultural task seriously, and foster evangelical contributions in this presently neglected area.

III

The third book is by Don Carson, well known for his many writings in the field of NT studies. Entitled *The Gaggling of God* (Leicester: Apollos, 1996), it explores the way in which the rise of postmodernism has provided a challenge to evangelicalism. Carson chooses to focus on the area of NT interpretation (an excellent decision), and is able to set out clearly the many weaknesses of postmodern hermeneutics. Readers who are active in any literary field will find his criticisms of postmodern theory persuasive and helpful. Perhaps I have misunderstood Carson at some points; however, I gained the impression that he regards postmodernism as a *uniformly* negative matter. My own impression is that it does indeed have serious weaknesses; nevertheless, it at least allows evangelicalism to throw off its enslavement to Enlightenment rationalism, which has so hindered its spiritual and theological vitality in the first half of the present century. Postmodernism, like the modernism which it aims to displace, is best viewed as containing both opportunities and challenges for evangelicalism. It is the task of theologians to distinguish these. While I personally have considerable doubts about the merits of postmodernism, it does at least allow us to shake off the 'evangelical rationalism' that has managed to infiltrate North American evangelicalism at a number of points.

The general conclusion of these works is that evangelicalism has a lot of work to do—recovering the importance of theology, engaging with the 'shakers and movers' of modern Western culture, and ensuring that evangelical approaches to NT interpretation and the distinctiveness of the gospel are not compromised through the pervasive influence of postmodernism. These are genuine concerns, and I have no intention of dismissing or trivializing them. Others could easily be added to the list.

So why does the kind of serious cultural and academic engagement suggested (although in very different ways) by each of these writers matter to evangelical students? The story is told of a conversation between two of the most celebrated German liberal Protestant theologians of the nineteenth century. Albrecht Ritschl and Adolf Harnack. The

more conservative sections of the German Protestant churches had recently gained some significant political victories, and seemed poised to eliminate a threat posed by liberalism.

Ritschl's advice to Harnack is reported to have been something like this: 'Never mind about the politics—get on with writing the books that will change the way people think. In the long term, that is what will be of decisive importance.' As one looks at the sustained gains made by liberalism in German Protestantism up to the eve of the First World War, the wisdom of Ritschl's advice is clear. To win the long-term victories, you have to influence the way in which a rising generation thinks.

But why should we want to do this? Would it not be a distraction from the real work of evangelism and pastoral care? I concede that we must ensure that these are not neglected, and my dream has to do with supplementing these concerns, not displacing or replacing them. But the goals are laudable, and the results potentially enormously significant. Evangelicalism has been given a hard time in the liberal arts colleges of North America and colleges in the United Kingdom, generally being depicted as intellectually vacuous, culturally destructive and spiritually simplistic. Evangelicalism is portrayed as something you grow out of, not something you grow up within. I am quite sure that evangelicalism, firmly grounded in the truth and relevance of the Christian gospel, has the potential to extend its influence into the higher education sphere. Not only would this invalidate the seductive stereotypes that are force-fed to our students; it could also lead to the values and beliefs of evangelicalism percolating into areas of our culture where it is at present a silent absence.

Others have seen the wisdom of encouraging such engagement. In the period immediately following the Second World War, the World Council of Churches secured funding to allow it to launch a program to encourage potential theological educators in emerging nations to be taught at leading Western seminaries. Needless to say, these seminaries tended to be strongly liberal in their orientation. The result? Countless seminaries in developing nations found that their faculties began to be dominated by people who had received their PhDs from institutions dominated by a liberal ethos. By a gradual process, which mingled osmosis and replication, those seminaries often drifted into sharing that same liberal ethos. That lesson has been learned. John R.W. Stott, who is widely celebrated as one of global evangelicalism's wisest and most discerning leaders, saw the importance of this point, and set up a program in England to encourage such emerging leaders to gain PhDs at educational institutions which were either evangelical, or sympathetic to evangelicalism. The results of that program—named the 'Langham Trust', after Stott's flagship church of All Souls, Langham Place, London—have been substantial.

In their individual ways, the three books to which I have referred affirm the need for evangelicals to take their theology seriously, and to apply it to life in the world. They help us shape a vision of what is needed if evangelicalism is to advance in the next millenium. Each of the authors is a senior and respected leader and thinker. I recommend *Themelios* readers to read and digest them; I urge them even more strongly to act on their basis, and begin to shape a vision for the future.

NO PLACE FOR TRUTH, OR WHATEVER HAPPENED TO EVANGELICAL THEOLOGY

by David F. Wells

*(Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1993 319 pp. \$24.99
hardback; \$16.00 paper)*

God in the Wasteland: The Reality of Truth in a World of Fading Dreams

by David F. Wells

(Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1994 278 pp. \$19.99
hardback; \$16.00 paper).

Reprinted with permission from Pneuma Fall 1996

(Reviewed by Amos Yong)

One may question the propriety of reviewing both of these volumes in PNEUMA since there is only one direct reference to Pentecostalism in the first and not many more than that in the second. Even so, make no mistake about it: David Wells, Andrew Mutch Distinguished Professor of Historical and Systematic Theology at Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary, has prophetically engaged contemporary American Evangelicalism in all its varieties, including Pentecostal and Charismatic culture insofar as they exist under the shadow of modernity. Granted that words such as *Evangelical* and *modernity* oftentimes resist definition, in these pages Wells' concern is not so much with sociological or ecclesiastical correctness, but rather with the heart, soul, and *mind* of the Church of Christ, and especially those who profess to be Bible-believing Christians.

It would help, however, to see how Wells defines both *modernity* and *theology* since his overarching concern is how the former has rendered the latter impotent in the Church. *Modernity*, on the one hand, is what Wells also calls Our Times: the values, worldview and culture which have resulted from the social changes wrought by modernization and secularization, processes generated by Enlightenment rationalism, economic capitalism, industrial technology, mass urbanization, and global telecommunications. *Theology*, on the other hand, comprises a confessional element, reflection, and the resulting cultivation of virtues leading to Christian praxis. Wells' argument throughout is that modernity has effectively fragmented society, decentered theology and sundered it from life, and seduced the Church so as to hinder her from discerning her cultural captivity.

Almost the entirety of *No Place for Truth* is devoted to an analysis of modernity. Wells begins with an historical snapshot of Wenham, a New England town, sketching its journey from pristine Puritanism to Our Times (ch. 1), and then follows in chapter 2 with a discussion of the global expansion of modern culture. The resulting disappearance of theology from public life (ch. 3), he argues, proceeds from two central values which characterize American culture: individualism, where the self is elevated (ch. 4); and conformism, which goes hand in hand with democracy and the rhetoric of equality (ch. 5). Individualism has produced a therapeutic psychologizing of the Christian faith where its members ride the unending quest for self-fulfillment and wholeness, while conformism has blurred the distinctions between leadership (the pastorate) and laity. This blurred distinction eventuates in the professionalization of the pastorate (ch. 6) and the transformation of the office from that of being a broker of truth to that of being a manager of small rural churches and big megachurch businesses.

Not surprisingly then, Wells writes, the end result of modernity is the absence of theological vision in the Church and the splurge of faddish consumerism into the Christian marketplace. Individuals in the pews have become self-absorbed and the Church has conformed to the world. In Our Times, truth has been subjectivized, sin psychologized, redemption turned into a therapeutic process, and churches converted into enterprises specializing in religious techniques and serving as self-help centers. In addition the clergy have been transformed into the new cultural disablers, Gospel pulpits have been disguised as platforms of entertainment, and Christians have succumbed to consumer culture, neglecting their witness to the reality of God. In all of this, the reason for the disappearance of truth has less to do with the self-profession of the Church than it has with the processes of modernity. Evangelicalism still confesses the centrality of the Scriptures and clings to doctrinal orthodoxy, but has been unable to translate the truth of

God into life and instead has compromised the Gospel in Our Times. In short, today's Evangelicals, including many Charismatics and Pentecostals, have been duped into thinking that their middle-class status is a sign of divine blessing rather than seeing such as symptomatic of the encroachment of modernity into the Church and the betrayal of the soul of the Gospel. Wells concludes his diagnosis by calling briefly for a return to the biblical God (ch. 7) and hinting at a recovery of an older version of Evangelicalism when truth and theology were central (ch. 8).

The suggestions for the reformation of Evangelicalism are more fully developed in *God in the Wasteland*, properly billed as a sequel to *No Place for Truth*. Here, Wells equates modern culture with 'the world' warned of in the New Testament. Belief in God exists but is inconsequential, and the Church in her concessions to worldliness has failed to recognize the spirit of the world. As a result, a new paganism has been loosed into the post-modern wasteland of self-consciousness, self-consumption, and self-seeking. The clergy themselves have not been able to avoid blessing this endless pursuit of health and wealth and have even dispensed panaceas using the means of modern society (chs. 1–4). The solution called for is a recovery of the transcendence, holiness, and authority of God (ch. 5), and a stronger version of the providence of God against the emasculated liberal notion of divine immanence (ch. 6). In all of this, Wells calls for a retrieval of God from the periphery to the center and a reinvigoration of theology to meaningful discourse and practical application.

Wells has publicly proclaimed what many have probably felt and have privately mused about the state of the Church. Overall the books are well written although his argument tends to drag on in places. Because of the massive cultural analysis that is undertaken, generalizations have been unavoidable, but they are based for the most part on solid empirical studies and are well documented. The Appendix to *God in the Wasteland*, for example, contains the results of a survey given in seven Evangelical seminaries, the findings of which confirm Wells' overall thesis and are summarized in Chapter Eight; in addition, the footnotes and combined bibliography of both volumes exceed 600 entries, almost 50% of which are sociological studies and intellectual and cultural histories. More important than these observations, however, are the questions which persist from such thought-provoking investigation. Two inevitably arise out of Wells' bold convictions.

In the first place, one is struck from the beginning of *No Place for Truth* with Wells' insistent anti-modernism. What Wells is against is the worldliness of contemporary Christian culture and the concomitant attitudes arising from this secularization which banish God to the margins of human existence and privatize theology. While Wells is sound in his analysis, he is unconvincing when he suggests that one can accept the benefits of modernity, such as technological advances, and yet triumph over its accompanying tensions by returning to an older version of Evangelicalism where theology reigned supreme.

Wells implies that a return to an older Evangelical theology is central to the health of the church, and herein lies the import of his appeal to the confessional element in theology. However, he apparently ignores the fact that the pockets of conservatism which have attempted to hold out against the onslaught of modernity are also the same groups which are increasingly marginalized and whose theology has been rendered obsolete for Our Times. Wells' own conservatism is nowhere more blatantly exposed than in his gender exclusive language, although his response would be that to be inclusive would be an accommodation to the spirit of this age. Wells seems to acknowledge that Our Times have demanded a theological *aggiornamento* and he is cognizant of the need for *reformation*, but strangely, chooses instead the opposite route of return and recovery. The problem of Our Times, however, is that the theology of Paul, Augustine and the Reformers

needs not simply to be restated, but to be constructively engaged. Theological reconstruction has been an ongoing and necessary function of the Church. Its shortcomings lie not in the efforts that have been made but in the complexities of Our Time. It can hardly be said that Wells' trenchant anti-modernism secures a viable foundation for such an effort. In this regard, the forward-looking theologies of Evangelicals such as Clark Pinnock and Stanley Grenz may be more helpful.

Second, and related to the first, is Wells' pessimism. At times, Wells seems to be more of a reactionary than a prophet. He decries the experiential nature of much of contemporary theological method (here, Charismatics and Pentecostals would be guilty by association) and yearns for a return to a more cognitive-based theology based on Scottish Realism. He avoids the complicated issues uncovered by contemporary hermeneutics and the sociology of knowledge, giving the impression that Evangelical theological recovery is a simple process. His polemic against liberalism and Roman Catholicism has extended back over two decades. It seems that there is not much to Our Times that Wells can assent to as the workings of God. At one place near the beginning of *No Place for Truth*, Wells quizzically comments that the monstrosity of modernity appears to have emerged, unlike other momentous transformations, without any human planning at all. He concludes that because the forces of modernity are beyond the engineering capabilities of mere mortals, it must be characterized as an 'accidental revolution.' Strange that Wells, who otherwise assails Arminianism and affirms Reformed theology, should credit the emergence of Our Times solely to the spirit of this age and ignore the possibility that God still may very well be in charge of the Church and the world. To be sure, the Church is not to confuse the workings of the world simplistically with a diluted notion of divine immanence. However, is it not possible that in his own zeal for the truth, Wells has lost almost all trace of God altogether. What basis of hope remains for the Church if God's activity cannot be recognized? It is no wonder then that Wells speaks in the concluding Chapter Nine of *God in the Wasteland* of the 'strange confidence' of hope. Perhaps it would be appropriate here to note that in not engaging Pentecostal/Charismatic spirituality, a potentially valuable resource for a reconsideration of the dialectical tension between divine transcendence and immanence may have been overlooked.

These criticisms are not meant to detract from the importance of these books. While addressed specifically to Evangelicals and their leadership, Wells also speaks forcefully to those in the Pentecostal/Charismatic tradition. Pentecostalism is a history of come-outism and a prophetic stance which, like that of their Evangelical brothers and sisters, has not been able to avoid the seductions of the world. On the contrary, a case can be made that Pentecostal and Charismatic culture is steeped in worldly ills such as telemarketing and televangelism which are the most visible symptoms of the invasion of modernity into the heart and soul of the Church. Historically, Pentecostals have eschewed rigorous theological thinking giving rise to the endemic hazards of popular Protestant ideology. David Wells may cautiously disassociate himself from the role of a prophet, but for those of us who have the ears to hear him, the Spirit may breathe something afresh into our lives. For those of us interested in articulating a Pentecostal/Charismatic theology, and who believe in Jesus' injunction to love the Lord our God with all our heart, soul and *mind*, reading Wells is a must.

SCIENCE AND THE NEW AGE CHALLENGE

by Ernest Lucas

(Leicester: IVP [Apollos] 1996 190 pp œ10.99 pb

ISBN 0-85111-440-7)

Reprinted with permission from Churchman 11:2 1997

(Reviewed by Douglas C. Spanner)

The New Age movement, like several other ingredients of the contemporary outlook, is very mixed-up in its loyalties. On the one hand it challenges the idea that 'science is the defining model of truth'; on the other hand some of its sympathizers are only too ready to enlist the support of science's more prestigious recent insights to bolster their own case. In this well-argued book Dr Ernest Lucas deals comprehensively and fairly with both sides of the matter. He is well-qualified to do so, having been a research chemist before he turned to biblical studies. He notes in his brief Introduction that when he began working at The Institute for Contemporary Christianity in London in 1986 the term 'New Age' was virtually unknown over here; but in the last five years he has noticed the theology sections in three large academic bookshops he frequents shrinking and being overtaken by New Age shelves. It is therefore a teaching the biblical conservative needs to take seriously.

Dr Lucas has researched his subject well, and presents his conclusions in as user-friendly a way as he can. He first gives a general account of what the Movement is all about. It is a 'melting-pot' of new and old ideas from both East and West, driven by a sense of the 'spiritual aridity' of western secularism. It sets little store by rational logic, much more by intuition and feeling. A few physicists, struck by the strangeness of the world of Einstein and Heisenberg, have tried to link this with the mysticism of the Far East: Fritjof Capra (*The Tao of Physics*) and Gary Zukev (*The Dancing Wu Li Masters*) are two examples familiar to many. Most physicists would strongly reject any connection, and the author quotes a number of authorities to this end. (It seems to your reviewer that a far better case could be made out for a link with biblical doctrine—for instance with [Deut 29:29](#); [Eccles 3:11](#); [8:17](#); [Rom 11:33](#)). Dr Lucas then turns to Teilhard de Chardin's thought and critically discusses his major work, *The Phenomenon of Man*. This does not exhaust the contribution of biology to the New Age ethos however; biologists Rupert Sheldrake and James Lovelock have started other trains of thought that the Movement has found useful. 'Morphogenesis' is the subject of one. It is a great mystery how cells in the developing embryo know exactly in what direction they are to differentiate, what organ they are to form part of—the liver, the connective tissue, or something quite different. Sheldrake postulates mysterious pre-existing things called 'morphogenetic fields' which function to convey the necessary information for them to know this; but very few biologists (or physicists!) believe in them. It is of course again their very *mystery* that attracts New Agers. Lovelock in his turn has put forward the idea that the whole planet Earth should itself be regarded as a living organism, even in a sense an intelligent one. This is the *Gaia Hypothesis* (the name being chosen from Greek mythology as Gaia was the earth consort of Uranus, the sky god). Again, all this fits in well with New Age ethos; but it can hardly be taken justifiably to mean that science lends it conspicuous support.

On a rather different tack Lucas refers to the influential paper of 1967 by Lynn White in which he laid the blame for our ecological crisis on the Judeo-Christian faith, i.e. on [Gen 1:26](#). (Although I have not read this paper I suspect that it is one more example of the haste with which superficial study of the Bible has led to entirely unwarranted conclusions.) The whole matter is well discussed in a chapter *Ecology and New Age Spirituality*, followed by one on *Green Christianity*. There is a final chapter on *Conclusions*—about Science, God, Process Thought and Trinitarian Theology.

Altogether this is a very welcome treatment of an important contemporary concern. It is judicious, temperate, comprehensive, informative and well-referenced. It is a book to be recommended to thoughtful and well-educated sympathizers. There are fourteen pages of Notes; a Bibliography of five; and a general Index of five.

Journal Information

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