



*The Earth is the Lord's:
The Christian & Culture*



Alfred J. Poirier

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THE CHRISTIAN & CULTURE**

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How Do We Look At the World?

One of the recent public debates is that of our government's funding of the arts for such groups as the Corporation for Public Broadcasting (CPB), the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH). This concern pertains not only to us as citizens, but as Christians. How should a Christian think biblically about such an issue? This article seeks to set forth a framework for understanding the Christian's relationship to the Arts and Culture.

It is my own conviction that of the many varieties of Christian thought, the Reformed view (Augustinian-Calvinistic) has thought most biblically, frequently, and extensively about this very issue. Its conclusion may be summed up in one simple phrase—Man's chief end is to glorify God and enjoy him forever. Such a phrase has been summed up by the Latin slogan *solī deo Gloria*, i.e., "Let everything be done *alone to God's glory*."

This is the transforming principle of the Reformed world-view. And it has two major results for the Christian view of life. First, it is *God* who fills the horizon of the Christian's mind. All of life is seen as lived out *coram deo*, before the presence of God. Whether one is making a simple cup of coffee, or building a shed, or preaching a sermon, it is understood that God is most near and present. He stands always before us. His eyes are upon us in all we do, think, and feel. The second effect is that every act of life is purposeful. Each thought, word, and action is to aim to magnify *God's glory*.

Can you see how this transforming principle corrects our view of the world? Most Christians see the world through religious bifocals. They divide up life into two separate compartments: **the sacred and the secular**. Jesus' Lordship is then said to rule only over this "sacred" aspect of life: our prayers, worship, and overtly religious activities. The "secular" portion of our life, which is the larger part, consisting of our work, play, business relations, the arts, and all our culture-

making, is thought to exist independent of Jesus' rule. So, for example, when money is raised in the church it only concerns "the tithe." The tithe is a "sacred" issue. What is not discussed or taught is a biblical view of economics, just and equitable business practices, the ethics of competition in the market place. These things are considered "secular" and only distantly related to Christ's kingdom and Lordship.

Such a defective view of the world has as its major effect the making of Jesus irrelevant. The Lord is removed from center place and set aside, marginalized. Yet, this not need be the case. If we recover this transforming vision of life to be lived *solī Deo gloria* Christians can become agents of true change in the society in which they live.

Life suddenly pulses with hope in God. God is seen as always above, over, and beside us. As King, he rules and reigns above us. As our Prophet, he stands over and against our thoughts by instructing, informing, criticizing and blessing us. Finally, as our High Priest, he stands beside us and for us. Having once and for all atoned for our sins, he now intercedes for us.

With this new perspective, our every action is seen as a form of worship. As Paul instructs us: "**So whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God,**" **1 Cor. 10:31**. This kind of life is set over and against two common ways in which Christians relate to culture: accommodation or antagonism.

On the one hand, those Christians who accommodate themselves to their culture, instead of changing culture for the good, are changed by it.

On the other hand, those who are antagonistic toward culture usually abandon it to others—the unbelievers.

Sadly, in both cases, the Christian gives the pagan the keys to the house.

The Scripture counsels neither of these. We are neither to accommodate our thoughts and lives to the world, nor abandon it. Instead, we are admonished: **Do not conform any longer to the patten of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of**

your mind. They you will be able to test and approve what God's will is—his good, pleasing, and perfect will, “ Rom 12:2.

It is important to notice that this transformation takes place in the mind. This is not a barren intellectualism, but is the developing of the mind of Christ which engages our wills as we test and approve God's perfect will.

Let's explore further these two defective forms of Christian thought mentioned above. We will label them, for lack of better labels, Liberalism and Pietism.

While seemingly worlds apart, they both share a common view of the Christian mind, particularly the relationship between reason and faith. Both divorce reason from faith. This makes for a stagnant or volatile relation between these two. Either they will be like oil and water, never mixing; or like two predators, one will eventually devour the other.

A Look at Liberalism

Liberalism upholds man's reason as the final arbiter of faith and practice. Certain elements that generally adhere are the diminishing view of God, the supernatural, and direct revelation. Christianity devolves into being merely a product of culture. Christianity is understood as being a moral code instead of the good news of God's redemption of Man by grace through Jesus Christ. The hope of Christianity is turned into a hollow optimism.

Such a view has dominated many of the mainline churches in this century. It is no wonder that they themselves have simply adopted the rallying cry of other world views: Marxism, Feminism (e.g. worship of Sophia). At best, it results in an enervated Christianity. At worst, it gives rise to a new paganism.

What of Pietism?

Pietism's relation to culture is either that of enmity or indifference. Culture is either all the work of the devil, irredeemable; or it is useless. Very few of this persuasion adopt the extreme. The reason is that we can't. However much we live in this world we cannot escape it. At best, the efforts of such pietists at the extreme go into the building of alternative communities—Protestant monasticism. Consequently, the culture around them decays all the more rapidly and remains in darkness, as the Christians stop being salt and light.

Many in Pietism see the impossibility of being independent of culture. But, not having an all encompassing world and life view, sustain a very tenuous relationship to the culture. While using the benefits of man's cultural works: telephone, airplane, fax, radio, television; it has difficulty in seeing such artifacts as giving glory to God except in the propagation of the gospel. Consequently, those other cultural endeavors of man: the arts, and the sciences, which do not have a direct relationship to evangelism, are forfeit to the world. It is no wonder that such a relationship to the world makes the Christian in his witness very weak. The consequences are:¹

- *the media is used mostly by ultraconservatives.* Thus, one theological segment of the Christian community tends to speak to the world for us all.
- *a commercialization of the faith.* Jesus is robbed of his glory and divinity when we sell him like a commodity—a Jesus

¹These examples are taken from Harry E. Farra's article "The Closing of the Christian Mind," in the now defunct magazine, *Eternity*, January 1988, p. 46-47. Farra at the time was the head of the department of speech communication at Geneva College, Beaver Falls, PA.

T-shirt or bumper sticker; hawked like a common ware,
“Honk twice, if you love Jesus.”

- *A crassness and sickly sentimentalization of our faith.*
Christian poetry is most often cheap, religious poetry, no more sophisticated than “Hickory, dickory, dock the mouse ran up the clock.” Christian drama rarely rises above the bathrobe and sandals kind. Christian music devolves into the inanity of “Jesus is My Statue of Liberty.”

What’s the Effect?

Without surprise, our youth are ignorant of history, disdainful of art and literature. Is it any wonder that in the end, an impoverished culture produces a weak witness?

What actually happens is that our youth must go to the secular culture to be trained in getting on in this world. Whether it be in business, science, or the arts, the secularist at least has not abandoned these pursuits, understanding better than the Pietist Christian, that this is the *real world*.

J. Gresham Machen pointed out the difficulty the pietist has in adopting his attitude of disdain or indifference to culture. Says Machen “*the desire to know and the love of beauty cannot be entirely stifled, and we cannot permanently regard these desires as evil*”² [Q. Is there in this system, reasons and motives that would lead to paganism?]

That being true, it is the Reformed wing of the Reformation, under the formative principle of *solī Deo gloria* and *coram Deo*, that has seen the greatest pursuit of developing a distinctively Christian world and life view. But this has also

²J. Gresham Machen, *Christianity and Culture*, a speech given in 1912 originally titled “The Scientific Preparation of the Minister” delivered September 20, 1912 at the opening of the one hundred and first session of Princeton Theological Seminary.

caused Calvinism to be slanderously vilified by the secularist, as the secularist knows who his true opponent is. Modern humanism has effectively made pietism and Romanism irrelevant. They are no match for it. One has no comprehensive system, or world and life view to challenge humanism, and the other, though comprehensive, is intuitively understood to be wrong or inadequate.

This came home to me recently when reading a bok by Richard John Neuhaus, *The Naked Public Square*, and finding this once Lutheran pastor, and now a Roman Catholic scholar, admit:

“More than any other figure of the period, Calvin systematically tried to reorder, both conceptually and practically, the institutional relationship of sacred and secular. It is no accident, as the Marxists say, that Calvin much more than Luther is relentlessly attacked in secularist readings of history.

He posed and poses a very real alternative to the way in which first-principle questions about religion and society have been publicly addressed in the last two centuries. The textbooks of a century shadowed by Auschwitz and the Gulag Archipelago villanize Calvin for the execution of Michael Servetus. He is given prominent place in the gallery of humanity’s horrors in the hope that thoughtful people will be discouraged from considering anew the alternatives he explored.

Yet today some of the most provocative and rigorous thought about religion and society is being done by those who call themselves Calvinists, especially by those who identify with the Calvinist ‘revisionism’ of Abraham Kuyper (d. 1920), the Dutch theologian and political leader.”³

³Richard John Neuhaus, *The Naked Public Square: Religion and Democracy in America* (Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 1984) p. 175

Let me then summarize what we have covered:

1. The formative principle of Calvinism can be summed up in two slogans: *coram Deo* and *soli Deo gloria*. All of life is lived in the awareness of God being ever present in blessing and judgment. Nothing is neutral. All things come under his sovereign rule and law. All things are from him and through him. But all things are also to him. As the seed must become a plant, bud, blossom, and bear fruit, so all of life must be to God's glory, manifesting God's glory as it is opened up under man's cultivating hand.
2. We saw that only this gives the Christian the fundamental basis for his cultural endeavors. Pietism & Liberalism are deficient theologically and thus culturally. To use a comical illustration: Pietism hides its head in the sand; Liberalism thinks it is the sand; only Calvinism's formative principle (which is the true biblical principle) can build sand castles to the glory of God!

An Example of a Trojan Horse

We have looked very briefly at the common responses to culture that Christianity has given: Liberalism, Pietism, and Calvinism. Now it is time to give a good example of how a failure by Christians to develop a biblical world view leads inevitably to a weakened form of Christianity and eventually makes the gospel itself unable to be heard.

To begin with, let us listen to a great Christian, scholar, and Calvinist of an earlier generation: J. Gersham Machen. Machen was one of the most articulate defenders of the faith during the Modernist-Fundamentalist Controversy in the early part of the 20th century. He not only had a heart for missions, but he understood well the affect a culture has for good or ill upon the church's evangelism. Says Machen:

“We are all agreed that at least one great function of the Church is the conversion of individual men. The missionary movement is the great religious movement of our day. Now it is perfectly true that men must be brought to Christ one by one. There are no laborsaving devices in evangelism. It is all hand-work. And yet it would be a great mistake to suppose that all men are equally well prepared to receive the gospel.

It is true that the decisive thing is the regenerative power of God. That can overcome all lack of preparation, and the absence of that makes even the best preparation useless. But as a matter of fact God usually exerts that power *in connection with certain prior conditions of the human mind*, and it should be ours to create, so far as we can, with the help of God, *those favorable conditions* for the reception of the gospel.

False ideas are the greatest obstacles to the reception of the gospel. We may preach with all the fervor of a reformer and yet succeed only in winning a straggler here and there, *if we permit the whole collective thought of the nation or of the world to be controlled by ideas which, by the resistless force of logic, prevent Christianity from being regarded as anything more than a harmless delusion.*

Under such circumstances, what God desires us to do is to destroy the obstacle *at its root*....[This] method of procedure is based simply upon a *profound belief in the pervasiveness of ideas.*

What is today a matter of academic speculation, begins tomorrow to move armies and pull down empires. In that second stage, it has gone too far to be combated; the time to stop it was when it was still a matter of impassioned debate. So as Christians we should try to mold the thought of the world in such a way as to make the acceptance of Christianity something more than a logical absurdity.”⁴

⁴J. Gresham Machen, “The Scientific Preparation of the Minister,” a address delivered September 20, 1912 at the opening of the one hundred and first session of Princeton Theological Seminary. This has been turned into a monograph title *Christianity and Culture* n.p., n.d. p.5

Do you think Machen is right? Have we, by our silence and self-imposed ignorance, permitted our culture to be controlled by pagan ideas? And has not the effect of this been to prevent Christianity from being regarded as anything more than a harmless delusion? Let us look at one example.

Fact and Value

Indifference to cultural issues soon makes the claims of the Christian faith but another illusion and thereby makes evangelism all the more difficult. To illustrate this, let me take a pair of terms defined by a group of philosophers in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century.

They were called neo-Kantians. It was a very powerful philosophical movement in Germany (where many unwitting evangelicals went to study). One of their contributions to our culture is the pair of ideas called: *facts and values*.

For the neo-Kantians, facts were those things that could be objectively and certainly known, empirically verified, measured, and quantified. Because they were objective, they were public—that is, universally knowable. Values, on the other hand, were private, man-made creations. Mere opinions of the day.

That water freezes at 32 degrees Fahrenheit was a fact. It was a fact whether or not you believed it. And if you didn't believe it, you were wrong.

But if you believed that adultery was wrong, or that particular acts are crimes, or that Jesus is the Christ, these were merely private opinions, values. They are neither right nor wrong but simply “yours.” They just are *your* opinions about how *your* manners should be imposed upon the rest of society.

Facts are true no matter what; values are arbitrary and are “true” only in the sense that at any one time, a majority of the people in society may hold to them. But they can change and do change, as society's viewpoint changes.

Yet, having adopted an indifferent attitude to culture,

especially an anti-intellectual stance, we Christians continue to lose the battle where the battle is being fought.

Is it important to challenge “fact and value” definitions—in the pulpit? Yes! From our highest courts this hideous lie has infected and blinded us. Our country’s legal system rests upon its moral beliefs. When we become moral relativists, so we become legal relativists. So then, what have our leading jurists been saying? Listen to the following. Take special note of the dates of these quotes. It reminds us that this is no new battle. Both quotes are from the same man, one of our nation’s most distinguished jurists and Supreme Court Justices of the early part of our century, Oliver Wendell Holmes:⁵

1. *The Common Law*, 1881

“Truth is the *majority vote* of that nation that could lick all others.”

2. *Letter to John C.H. Wu*, 1926

“So when it comes to the development of a *corpus juris* (i.e., a body of law) the ultimate question is: What do the dominant forces of the community want, and do they want it hard enough to disregard *whatever inhibitions* may stand in the way.”

Did you understand what you just read? Did you see how Holmes is defining truth not as an absolute, objective, standard but as a simple majority vote? And what of his letter of John C H. Wu? Here we have our nation’s most influential judge encouraging the people to follow after their wants to the disregard of whatever inhibitions they may have. Is this not a counsel for anarchy? Does he not in effect, ask us to sear our consciences? And have we not in the 20th century done just that?

⁵taken from Francis A. Schaeffer, *The Complete Works of Francis A. Schaeffer*, (Westchester: Crossway Books, 1982) vol 5, p.218

So we find a culture today disregarding their inhibitions: be it indiscriminant sex, extramarital sex, aborting of the unborn infant, homosexual relationships, discrimination against those of other races based purely upon racial differences.

And if we Christians denounce these as “sins” are we not told that we are only trying to impose our private values?

Has not this one set of paired ideas impaired people from hearing the gospel truth? How can we speak of gospel truth if truth is merely the majority vote? How can we call people to flee from sin when sin is redefined?

One of the signs in the Christian community is the loss of our language. Once Christians spoke of the “divine moral order,” “creation ordinances,” and “natural law.” [Remember the uproar over Justice Clarence Thomas’s admittance of there being a “natural law”?]]

Our adoption of this language of fact and value implicitly concedes the victory of the neo-Kantians, and has the Christian admitting that their claims are no more than “values,” arbitrary, man-made, impositions of manners that should be given no greater regard than any other set of manners. It is no wonder that the unbeliever thinks we are unwarranted in imposing our morality.

Morality, if it means anything, it means the current set of manners imposed by the majority. And Christians do not seem to be a majority. Of course, many Christians think they have an answer in pointing to a Christian majority, but by doing so again concede the basic presupposition of the neo-Kantians. Law is only the will of the people at one given point in time.

It is no wonder that such an idea has spread like yeast in our culture. Most magazines and television news is now accompanied by statistics, polls, and the citing of percentages. Of course, many are aware that anything can be proven by polls. Or better, asserted by them. This is a consequence of sociological law.

If law is made by the larger, or louder voice, then force prevails over reason and argument. Thus, a consequence of

sociological law has been the demise of reasoned and persuasive debate and the rise of the public protest, often violent. “Might makes right” becomes the way we resolve our disputes and win public approval. Instead of arguing for truth, we yell and hope our yelling drowns the other voices and make it appear that our group is *the* majority group (whether real or not).

And what about our own moral consciences? Have we not as Christians become timid in our assertion? How many of us can say with equal certainty that adultery is wrong and that water freezes at 32 degrees Fahrenheit? If we hesitate even a moment, on that last question, we reveal the presence of a Trojan horse in our hearts. An idolatrous perspective of the world has deceptively taken up residence in our souls.

By adopting such thinking, and equally reprehensible, by not challenging it, we have allowed “fact” to dominate our culture and let it eat up value. It is what has been happening since Christians divided the world into sacred and secular, faith—reason, religion—science.

Not surprisingly, secularists have understood this, as the following quote demonstrates. It is by the French biologist and philosopher, Jacques Monod: “If this unprecedented event in the history of culture took place in the Christian West rather than in some other civilization, it was perhaps thanks, in part, to the fundamental distinction drawn by the church between the domains of the sacred and the profane.”⁶

By dividing life into sacred and secular and only allowing God into the “sacred” realm, Christians had made Christianity irrelevant for most of life. We have in effect handed over the whole realm of creation to the secularist. They have won by forfeit. Christians went from admitting that God and the Christian beliefs have some relevance to life, to saying they had little relevance to life, and the secularists are merely trying to finish it

⁶in Brian J. Walsh and J. Richard Middleton, *The Transforming Vision: Shaping a Christian World View* (Downers Grove: IVP, 1984) p. 115

by showing that they have no relevance to life.

Yet, in it all, there is great hope because the pietist's indifference or animosity to culture cannot last long. So we find that evangelicals are raising their voices in shock at how the culture is decaying. Many of its spokesmen cry that we are entering the next Dark Ages. Some have not given up the fight. But, the question remains: Do we know how to fight? If we are going to build a culture, do we know how deep to dig to lay our foundation?

Or shall we merely build on "tradition" or "Judeo-Christian morality"? Neither has proved strong enough to withstand the floods of humanism in times past. We are naive to think they will be sufficient for today and tomorrow.

I am reminded of a conversation I had with the Rev. Lane Adams. He is a Presbyterian minister who went to work for Campus Crusade International. He was assigned to be the executive director of a University System that Bill Bright wanted to build in North San Diego. Lane shared the great difficulty he was having since the only one who had established a reputation for thoroughgoing Christian education were the Calvinists, and Campus Crusade is consciously Arminian and Pietist.

He finally had to leave his position because Campus Crusade was unwilling to move in that direction and Lane was by that time unwilling to make a halfway effort. If it was to be a University, it must be willing and able to radically transform culture, beginning with the student's mind. It could not be a sandwich of philosophies slapped together: part Christian, part traditionalism, part secular (neutral).

How Should We Then Live?

So far, we have looked briefly at the three common ways Christians have interacted with culture. First, we looked at the way in which Christians have conformed to their culture; then

we observed how other Christians have sought to abandon culture to paganism and sought to create their own subculture; finally, we examined how some Christians have seen Christ as Lord over all culture and have sought to redeem culture.

Now it must be emphasized again that by the word “culture” we are not referring simply to “the fine arts.” Instead, we use this word to speak broadly about all of the activities of mankind that spring from his being created in God’s image and called upon to subdue and rule the earth. Thus, by culture we mean: the business world, the natural sciences, civic and political responsibilities, the relationship between state, church, and family, as well as the humanities.

It is with such an understanding of culture that we realized that even those who abandon culture cannot escape it. If the Christian is not going to write good plays and films and books, the pagan will. If the Christian doesn’t set the ground rules for life in the business world, the unbeliever will.

If the Christian doesn’t put forth solid arguments for the lawful and equitable governing of men in a nation, others of a different religion will.

Since the late 1800s evangelical Christians have abandoned what was once their goal—transforming culture for Christ. We have been satisfied to live in our own subculture with little thoughtful engagement of our culture. And we have done so mostly with the idea that we only need to be concerned about conversions, not culture.

Instead, we must return to a radical vision for our faith. That vision has found expression with peculiar insight and strength in the Christian movement we call Calvinism with its thoroughgoing supernaturalism, its deep awareness of the effects of sin on man, its comprehensive vision of God’s glory and majesty and sovereignty over every area of life.



