



Christ and Culture(s)

A book from the ancient East...lit up by the light of the dawn...breathing the fragrance of the Galilean spring...in cosmopolitan Greek with marks of Semitic origin,...a book of the village and the town...of the people and the peoples.

Adolf Deissmann's description of the New Testament fairly breathes the excitement—spurred by turn of the century comparative religions and archaeology—of insights about the settings of the New Testament and early Christianity which had “taken possession” of a generation.¹ That work clearly testifies to the particularity of the Christian gospel, in the content of its witness to the Christ and in the shape that witness took in the lives of hearers. To recognize, for example, the metaphors of slavery and manumission that underlay Paul's assertion that the Christian was a “slave of Christ” purchased “for freedom” (Gal 5:1) was to see the identity and proclamation of Jesus the Christ reimagined, never general, always addressed to specific persons in concrete cultural situations. There Christ is met and in response a specific life is called forth, takes shape, and is lived out.

Implications are there in the Great Commission: “Go and make disciples of *all nations*” (Matt 28:16); there as an early Christian community is compelled almost unwillingly into mission to the gentiles—“If God gave the same gift to them as he gave to us...who was I that I could withstand God?” (Acts 11:17). The church always finds the Spirit leading it *into the world*, eliciting from it ever new formulations of theology and proclamation. It may be that debate about the “relations of Christianity and civilization” is “enduring.” Yet far from being a “problem,”² it is of the of the gospel's essence that witness to Christ be embodied in cultural expressions. The Word of God and its particular shaping for and of the hearer in proclamation can never be separated.

In the forty years since Niebuhr's now classic statement, the impact of a plurality of cultures on Christian theology, witness, and life has been overwhelming. In this final number of our tenth year *Word & World* restates its commitment to ongoing conversation on the implications for Christian ministry of both poles: *Christ* and *Culture*. At the same time *Christ and Culture(s)* suggests changing variety of images to which each article herein contributes a distinct facet.

The concluding essay of our anniversary series on “Theology for Christian Ministry,” joins previous ones by Claus Westermann, Elizabeth Achtemeier, and Douglas John Hall. *Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza's* personal reflections fit nicely with our theme when she asserts that authentic biblical interpretation requires that it be theological and “for the church and the world.” That meanings of biblical texts are always for specific settings is to be seen in her interpretive approach of a “critical feminist theology of liberation.”

¹Adolf Deissmann, *Light from the Ancient East*, rev. ed. (New York: George H. Doran, 1927) 392-93.

Torleiv Austad, professor at Oslo's Menighetsfacultetet, after a year's study in the United States, observes the context and shape of Christianity here, noting the specially strong themes of liberty and individualism, a lessened zeal for mission, varied styles of Sunday worship, and the impact of merger on churches forming the new Evangelical Lutheran Church in America.

Within the theme proper, *Paul Martinson*, seminary professor of Christian missions and world religions, takes the Genesis theme "created in the image of God" as a basis for reflection—with insights from Eastern religions—on how culture informs the ways we imagine the human, from nature, society, and the experience of the other. From this he suggests implications for imagining the person of Christ as brokenness in specific cultural contexts.

Larry Jorgenson, Lutheran pastor in Brevig Mission, Alaska, focuses on the continuing impact of popular religious piety—rooted in shamanism and the native spirit world—viewed against the complex history of missionary activity in Alaska. He ponders the impact that such specific cultural contexts have on how and with what success evangelism is carried on.

The specific cultural context for *Duane Olson*, Martinson's colleague in Christian missions and world religions, is the continent of Africa. Underscoring the burgeoning literature of "contextual" theology on that continent, he argues for the crucial solidarity of the church's concerns for contextualization with the particularity of its gospel witness and its faithfulness to the apostolic message.

One of the most pervasive modern institutions of culture is the corporation. *Stewart Herman*, professor of religion at Concordia College, Moorhead, MN, applies a "Lutheran ethics of trust" to employee-management relations and to concerns for corporate social responsibility, concluding with comparisons of that approach to other ethical models.

Political science professor *Jack Schwandt* invites a reexamination of H. Richard Niebuhr's *Christ and Culture*, arguing that the definition of culture there, too heavily reliant on sociological models, requires expansion by a reappropriation of an Aristotelian awareness of the "political" nature of culture.

Finally, to those who would drive too deep a wedge between preaching and ethics—between the gospel and specific Christian response—*Charles Campbell* offers the example of Martin Luther's sermons, which hold proclamation and ethics in a dynamic tension by which the gospel always takes shape in the particularity of the Christian life lived out as a pilgrimage.

The Resources section begins with a Face to Face discussion by *Thomas Basich*, a Twin Cities pastor, and *Charles Lutz*, director of the former American Lutheran Church's Office of Church in Society, on the appropriateness of divestment of holdings in corporations doing business in South Africa as a tactic against apartheid. Christian witness in specific cultural settings often requires difficult decisions about life and death issues. At the same time, responsible Christians can and do disagree on what particular faithfulness to the gospel requires.

In Texts in Context, *Diane Jacobson* sketches the miraculously transforming power of the Isaiah texts of Advent series B to lead us from lament to hope as we prepare to celebrate the Word of God become flesh among humanity—Christ in and with culture at its very heart.