

# RECONSIDERATIONS

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EXPLORING A BIBLICAL UNDERSTANDING OF LIFE AND CULTURE

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## IS THE CHURCH THE VILLAIN OF HISTORY?

*Dr. John Sommerville, Professor of History at the University of Florida and a member of the Christian Study Center Board, recently taught a class at the Study Center titled, "Is the Church the Villain of History?" The following excerpt comes principally from his second lecture.*

What we discovered in the first session is, first, that there is no such thing as religion, pure and simple. Religion in the singular is just an analytical term. In the real world, there are only particular religions, and these particular religions do not just differ in details but in their whole approach to the world and to life.

Second, we can judge a religion only on the basis of religion. There is no superior, independent, objective, self-validating, secular standard by which to judge religions. Religions, along with ideologies, are the most basic form of thought.

Logic builds within the frameworks provided by these religions or ideologies, but logic only equals the amount of consistency in our thinking, not the amount of truth. Logic or intelligence or rationality itself rests on certain beliefs. Even what counts as a "fact" is governed by larger assumptions and beliefs that are religious in nature. Post-modernists have been making this point with great fanfare, and they are right.

This week we want to look specifically at Christianity, and consider the charges that are often brought against it.

There is a widespread revulsion against our religious heritage, both for its real and alleged crimes in its past. The accusation that religion is to blame for a lot of the world's problems is a very common accusation these days, especially around universities. Professors won't argue the point, but they are likely to assume it and insinuate it. Students learn to pick up the cues, and they take it for granted that religion is not just useless but destructive. Some feel that religion deserves to be rooted out of our public life.

**If one judged a religion by its foundational texts, the Inquisition, religious wars, and the crusades would fail the Christian test.**

The most frequent complaints against the Christian religion are doubtless familiar to you: the crusades, the Inquisition, the religious wars of 1550-1650, persecution of witches, slavery, racism, oppression of women, anti-Semitism, opposition to science, and so on. Beyond that, our lists often become more personal and might even lead back

to a mean Sunday School teacher we had years ago.

An apologist for Christianity might try to show that these events were very different from the common perception of them, and there would be plenty to say along this line. The actual history of the Spanish Inquisition, for instance, makes very dull reading if you were raised on sensationalized accounts. Books like James Kennedy and Jerry Newcomer's *What If Jesus Had Never Been Born?* and Leland Ryken's *Worldly Saints: The Puritans As They Really Were* might make some critics pause. They would show

that the Church was being judged unfairly. But they are only defensive, and only turn the edge of the criticism. They would argue that Christianity was only the excuse but not the actual cause of those bad episodes. And yet they don't actually turn the argument in the Church's favor.

While it is true that there are many qualifications one can make of the usual accusations, which would tend to exonerate the Church, this is not the approach we will take here. Even if we were able to weigh the good that Christianity has produced against the bad, what would this prove? How positive would the result have to be to prove the truth or the divine origin of Christianity? Would it have to be absolutely positive, or would a bare tilt be enough?

I think there is a better way to engage the critics. Let me just start by asking what your general reaction is to the list we just repeated? How do you respond to the Inquisition, religious wars, slavery, anti-Semitism, and oppression? Probably you deplore them as I do. The question, then, is: Why are we agreed that they are all deplorable? Who taught us to recognize these things as evil?

The answer is that our condemnation of these practices comes from Christianity itself. Christianity itself teaches us that they are wrong, and for most of us there is no need to look any further than our own Christian heritage for the source of our revulsion. Is anyone arguing that the Gospels or St. Paul taught war on unbelievers? The apostolic Church taught submission to martyrdom, not crusading. If one judged a religion by its foundational texts, the Inquisition, religious wars, and the crusades would fail the Christian test. Christianity is a religion of love, and these practices violate this basic Christian principle.

But you might think there must be some other way of judging these crimes than a religious critique. You might think that ethics are somehow self-evident, and that calling our ethical standards Christian is a bit provincial or even relativistic. In fact, however, ethics are relativistic, by which we mean that they are "related" to particular religions and

ways of life. That doesn't make moral judgments unreal; one still has the job of judging these judgments. But there is no escaping religion in making our moral judgments on history.

One way to help us understand this is to recognize that the Christian standard is not the only standard by which we might have made our assessment. Take the following example, for instance. When the Anglo-Saxons in England adopted Christianity they didn't entirely understand what they had bought into. The values that they had always seen as self-evident were the values associated with the concept of honor, which means preserving the respect of others. The values Christians had learned to see as self-evident were the values of charity, which means wanting the best for others.

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An ethical system based in honor is a self-regarding ethic, while one based on charity is an other-regarding ethic. Our point is that they are equally self-evident to those who grow up with them. And they both have corollaries. With honor goes a concentration on pride, dominance, courage, glory, and loyalty. With charity goes a concentration on humility, service, peace, modesty, equality and respect for all. We have only to make this comparison to realize how Christian our moral orientation still is; the ethic of honor describes the values of a street gang. Maybe it's all right for the gang. It is at least better than nothing, but we wouldn't want to move to that neighborhood.

The Anglo-Saxons took a long time absorbing the very alien values preached by the missionary monks. They couldn't see how any society could survive that didn't respect strength. They twisted Christianity into something that could preach the crusades, which were to protect God's honor! Their division of labor left women and serfs and monks to specialize in the virtues of charity, but in all of these practices they acted in ways that were inconsistent with Christianity, and it is Christian teaching that calls the practices into question.

The point I am making is that while other religious and ideological viewpoints have been at work at times in our

history, people criticize Christianity today on the basis of Christian values. In effect, the critics are asking for more Christianity, not less. Nobody since Nietzsche has criticized Christians for being too peaceable or too charitable. Normally, people criticize Christian practice on the basis of Christian principles.

But now we come to another big point. Why did a religion with such a persuasive ethic go badly wrong sometimes? What forces in humans or in societies or in the religion itself, could turn a religion of charity into something hateful and evil? This is something that should concern Christians, and we need to look for answers.

Once again, we find answers within Christianity itself. If I pressed you to think of the main critics of religion in history, one of the first names that would come to mind is the name Jesus. Jesus frequently criticized the religious institutions of his day, and while his criticism sometimes dealt with political or class oppression, the primary focus of his criticism was on the way these things hid behind religion. How did Jesus think religion had gone wrong?

Wouldn't it be true generally to say that he was angered by religion being used to establish people's superiority over others, their power or material advantage, their pride? In short, he objected to religion being used for ulterior and selfish purposes. Whenever religion has become a means toward ends other than worship and dependence on God, it has turned the highest into the lowest. In the examples of atrocity listed above we can see Christianity being used for local pride, personal pride, class superiority, nationalism, and wealth; in short, we see it being used as a means of exerting power over others. And when is religion at its best? When it speaks truth to power.

One implication of what we've just said is that it is best to keep religion separate from the institutions of power. Of course, in our Western democracies, we are used to a legal separation of church and state. It seems the natural thing to us, but historically it is quite uncommon. Most major religions have grown up together with states. Christianity is the exception. It was born into a world where it was unpopular, and it survived centuries of persecution before it yielded to the temptations of power and respect.

While we would like to hope that religion would drag power up, history indicates that this is not the way things work. Jesus recognized this pattern and prepared us for it through his favorite metaphor -- the Kingdom of Heaven. If we were hearing that phrase for the first time, what would we think it might mean? The U.S. having a nuclear monopoly? The Moral Majority buying CBS? Osama bin Laden embracing a religion of love? Jesus' own images are very different: a mustard seed, leaven, a pearl. "My kingdom is not of this world," he said, "the kingdom of God is within you." This prepared his early followers to live a life in opposition to the kingdoms of this world, obeying God rather than the human powers.

Writing around 400 years after Christ, as the Western Roman Empire was crumbling, St. Augustine made the same point in *The City of God*. Not long before, the Empire had made Christianity the one official religion of the state, and now that arrangement was falling apart. How could God abandon this wonderful arrangement? Christians were bewildered, and pagan intellectuals were throwing this up to them as an argument against the Church. Augustine took a walk through history to show that there had always been a City of God in the midst of the City of this World. He showed that all states are based on power,

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### *Time to make summer plans!*

Now is the time to start thinking about attending the Study Center's first Summer Institute for undergraduate and graduate students. Visit the Center's web site for information, and if you could use brochures for your church, student group, children, grandchildren, nieces and nephews, et al, please call us.

We are eager to get the word out about this three-day institute that will encourage and equip students for life in the academy.

# NEWS FROM THE STUDY CENTER

## HIGHLIGHTS FROM THE FALL SEMESTER

### SHORT COURSES:

#### "IS THE CHURCH THE VILLAIN OF HISTORY?"

taught by Dr. John Sommerville, Professor of History at the University of Florida,  
from which the essay in this issue of "Reconsiderations" has been taken.

#### "USING THE COMPUTER TO IMPROVE STUDY OF THE BIBLE"

a short course taught by Dr. Jed Keesling, Professor of Mathematics at the University of Florida,  
on current electronic resources for Bible study.

#### "PUZZLES, PROBLEMS, AND POSSIBILITIES: AN ASTROPHYSICIST REFLECTS ON THE STATE OF THE UNIVERSE"

taught by Dr. George Lebo, Professor of Astronomy at the University of Florida, the course explored the frontiers of current astronomical research from a biblical perspective.

#### "THE ENDURING TRUTHS OF GENESIS THREE"

beginning with the Genesis text and its biblical context, this class also considered readings that range from John Milton's *Paradise Lost* and C. S. Lewis' *Perelandra* to William Blake's *Marriage of Heaven and Hell* and Albert Camus' *The Fall*.

### READING GROUPS:

"The Church and Postmodernism" - a reading group led by Todd Best particularly for clergy, campus ministers, and lay leaders in local churches.

"Christianity and the Arts" - Richard Horner has been facilitating this discussion of Rookmaaker's *Modern Art and the Death of a Culture* especially for those directly involved in the creative arts.

"Graduate Roundtable" - Todd Best has been leading this discussion for graduate students on the subject of calling.

### SPECIAL EVENTS

"The Church and Postmodernism" a lunchtime lecture by Dr. Richard Horner, hosted by the Study Center.

## A SPECIAL NOTE OF CONGRATULATIONS

Study Center Intern and Research Assistant Todd Best recently completed the Master of Arts degree in the Department of Religion at the University of Florida. His area of emphasis has been the philosophy of religion, with particular focus on religious knowledge. His thesis examines how Christian thought engages the processes of knowledge in the university. For the time being, Todd will stay on in his role at the Center while he pursues admission to a doctoral program in philosophy. *Congratulations, Todd!*

# NEWS FROM THE STUDY CENTER

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## HIGHLIGHTS OF THE COMING SEMESTER

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### DR. JAMES DAVISON HUNTER: MONDAY, JANUARY 27

The Study Center is pleased to announce that Dr. James Davison Hunter, Kenan Professor of Sociology and Religion at the University of Virginia, will be delivering a lecture at the Keene Faculty Center on "Moral Discourse and Its Ironies," on Monday, January 27, at 4:00 p.m. Dr. Hunter, whose work is well known in both sociology and religion, serves as Director of the Institute for Advanced Study of Culture and as Director of the Pew Center on Religion and Democracy. He will speak again on Tuesday morning to the Christian Faculty Fellowship on "The Professor as Mentor."

### 2ND ANNUAL COLLOQUIUM ON FAITH & SCHOLARSHIP: SAT., FEB. 22

Co-sponsored with Intervarsity Christian Fellowship's Graduate and Faculty Ministries, this one-day colloquium for graduate students will explore the relationship between Christian faith and academic work. Dr. Charles Mackenzie, respected philosopher, theologian, and former college president will deliver the keynote talk. Providing an autobiographical account of his journey through the academy will be Dr. Samuel Hill, Professor Emeritus in the Department of Religion at the University of Florida.

### "HOW TO WATCH A MOVIE: CHRISTIAN IN A CELLULOID CULTURE"

Taught by Steve Gregg and James Walden, both members of the pastoral staff of Creekside Community Church, this short course will meet weekly at 7:30 p.m., on Monday evenings from February 3 to March 3. Dealing with issues that range from cinematic technique to underlying philosophical issues, the course will help us all become more thoughtful and deliberate about our movie watching.

### COLLOQUIUM ON CHRISTIAN THOUGHT

This semester's reading group will explore the writings of Annie Dillard, a Pulitzer Prize winning author whose work explores the paradox of splendor and disappointment in human experience.

*For updates and additional events at the Center, please call the Study Center  
or visit us online at [www.christianstudycenter.org](http://www.christianstudycenter.org).*

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## BUILDING FUND UPDATE

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We are pleased to report that the building fund has reached nearly \$17,000. While we are still well short of our \$50,000 goal, we are encouraged, and we know that we will be able to begin renovations that will create a large classroom at the Study Center for the fall semester of 2003. Additional funds will not only allow us to complete the classroom but also help us: replace the carpet throughout the building, update security and fire safety systems, clean and paint the outside of the building, replace and add furniture in the coffee shop, upgrade and landscape the parking lot, furnish and equip the current conference room as well as the new classroom, and perhaps even turn the remaining unused portion of the building into a library.

## — WHAT STUDENTS DON'T — KNOW ABOUT THEIR MAJORS

*In his class, "Is the Church the Villain of History?" John Sommerville suggested that we consider the Christian roots within many of the academic disciplines. The following is an addendum to his essay. We offer it as a resource for Christians who want to think "Christianly" about their fields of study.*

If you thought that religion addressed only religious or spiritual questions, you need to know that all majors involve religious and spiritual questions. Don't leave college without considering them.

Did you know that the central question in medicine is a spiritual one? The concepts of health and disease are not scientific. The AIDS virus is just as much a part of nature as you are. If the natural is what you go by, then science can make no distinction between diseased and healthy. The distinction is a response to values that originated in religious world-views, and people in medical fields are responding to a religious call whether they are aware of it or not.

Did you know that the central problem in law is a religious one? That is the question of how we should relate to each other. The recent concentration on "rights" is an awkward way of insuring an ethical order when we don't recognize religious values. As an effort to correct the deficiencies of an earlier order, it is proving to have problems of its own.

Did you know that some of the world's great music, art, architecture, poetry, drama and fiction is even now being written under the inspiration of Christianity? Composers of real (not pop) music are producing large amounts of music that tries to express religious themes. Church building inspires architects who are tired of creating temples to money. And writers in many languages besides

English are producing literature that explores religious themes at a Nobel Prize level.

Did you know that education is fundamentally a religious enterprise? As the post-modernists have correctly shown, what we call rationality is highly artificial, and since there are no self-validating rational principles, education must be built on foundations of belief. All education, including Liberal education, turns out to have an interest in indoctrination.

Did you know that the central concept of business is a spiritual one? The term wealth does not primarily mean money. It means weal or well-being, which involves religious perspectives. Money is only a means toward this end, and if we have no idea of what well-being is, money will not help us get there. Isn't this becoming more and more obvious?

Did you know that the central problem of government administration is a spiritual one? It is the question of individual and social well-being. Governments go well beyond anything a secular philosophy could justify, and would do well to allow religion to be part of political discussion. In fact, religious notions of justice are richer than the secular reductions of this concept.

Did you know that the central question about science is a religious one? The question is, What use are we to make of our knowledge? Oddly, this isn't part of the scientist's kit, but there would be no reason for science if the knowledge were pointless. Also, when we say that humanity is a part of nature, what does that say about "nature?" We usually ask what it says about humanity, thinking it makes us "impersonal." But if we turned the question around, we might see that the image of God is stamped all over creation.

*John Sommerville, Professor of History  
University of Florida*

*Continued from Page 3*

and that Christians are like permanent aliens or pilgrims. Though they are not to abandon the world, they must live in permanent tension with the world's City.

In the middle ages the separation of Church and state preserved some of this realization. The Church did not want to be absorbed into the state, and in its better days it maintained some distance so that it could be true to its calling. The theory of the two swords, spiritual and temporal, was an acknowledgment of a secular sphere. The wrestling coach who taught history in your high school may have taught you that in the middle ages church and state were one, but he was wrong. They were two. The emperor was not the head of the church, and that made Western Civilization different from every other. This was a good thing, and it was in keeping with Christian teaching.

When the Church went wrong it did so by not respecting a distance from the secular. Observing some separation would often have avoided the evils in which the Church became involved. This is not to say that the Church should not be involved with issues of the state at all. It should add its leaven, be "the salt of the world," as Jesus put it. But the history of the failures of the Christian church when

tempted by power, and the history of similar problems within Islamic societies that recognize no secular realm at all, demonstrate the difficulties that emerge when religious institutions yield to temptations of power.

So to sum up, first, we have found that it was Christianity that taught us that the Church's failures were in fact failures. To those who criticize the Church on the basis of its own ethic, we should ask what other ethic they can think of. And second, we find that in its recognition of different, but interpenetrating realms, Christianity has always had within itself the cure for such failures.

As Christians, we need not feel that our religion itself is threatened by criticisms of the Church. The criticisms only show how influential Christian morality continues to be and how desperately the world needs Christian truth. If no one saw anything wrong in the Church's record, that would truly mean that the world was lost. So long as the world itself applies Christian values, however, even unconsciously, there is reason for hope.

*John Sommerville, Professor of History  
University of Florida*

CHRISTIAN STUDY CENTER OF GAINESVILLE

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"Reconsiderations" is a bi-monthly publication of the Christian Study Center of Gainesville. Its purpose is to explore a biblical understanding of life and culture and to offer resources to those who seek to serve God with a whole mind. If you do not wish to receive "Reconsiderations," please let us know by e-mailing us at [info@christianstudycenter.org](mailto:info@christianstudycenter.org) or calling us at 352-379-7375.

The Christian Study Center of Gainesville exists in order to encourage the university community in the exploration of a biblical understanding of life and culture.

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