

RECONSIDERATIONS

EXPLORING CHRISTIAN THOUGHT IN THE UNIVERSITY COMMUNITY

APRIL 2006

VOLUME 6, NUMBER 1

THE CHURCH AND CULTURAL DISCERNMENT: DISTINGUISHING ENGAGEMENT FROM CAPTIVITY

Part I *Ken Myers*

At the end of the first chapter of the letter of James, we read a remarkable summary statement, a single sentence in which the whole of Christian obedience is summarized. Here again, there is an echo of Jesus' powerful compression of the whole of the Law into two phases: of loving God totally and loving our neighbors. James also offers a two-phase summary: "Religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father, is this: to visit orphans and widows in their affliction, and to keep oneself unstained from the world."

With an artful brevity, James restates the two commands that Jesus himself offered as a summary of obedience: the requirement of loving God and loving neighbor. Here the order is reversed, and the broad responsibility to love our neighbors is symbolized by the concrete and representative responsibility of caring for orphans and widows, that is, for those whose lives are broken and painful because of the deathly disorder by which sin ravages our lives. And the duty to love God with all our being is rephrased in negative terms as the duty to avoid worldliness. After all, as the apostle John warns us, worldliness is incompatible with having the love of the Father in us.

I described this as an *artful* brevity because there is a kind of tension in this summary of true religion. The caring for orphans and widows suggests an attentiveness to the messy reality of peo-

ple's lives. This is a religious duty that is quite far from the Gnostic ideal of pure spirituality. This is an obligation that shows us the kind of religion announced in the gospel: a religion that calls us *into* the world not away from it, because the gospel is not a private, wholly interiorized message, but the good news of the Kingdom of God, the rule of God over a reconciled *people*, who are called to love and serve the King throughout His Creation, not just in the austere privacy of their hearts.

But having reminded us of our call out into the world, James immediately warns of the danger of worldliness. These two phases, the love *of* the world (as in John 3:16) and the *refusal* to love the world (as in I John 1:15) are the axes or loci of true religion. The good news of the Kingdom calls us away from worldliness (that is, away from an understanding of reality that ignores God and that thus promotes disordered loves), but simultaneously propels us *into* the ongoing life of human society within God's Creation, where we are charged to imitate

Christ's love to us; as Paul declares, without love, we are nothing and we gain nothing. "Whoever claims to live in him," John writes in his first letter, "must walk as Jesus did." And of course that walk, that self-giving walk, was not simply a sequence of uplifting religious meetings, but a life of service with the needy, the bereaved, the suffering, the outcasts, the orphans and widows.

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Our faith is neither worldly nor other-worldly. The Bible repeatedly warns us about *worldliness*, which amounts to living as if God weren't God, as if *we* were the Lords of Creation; but the Bible does *not* encourage us to despise Creation, to reject human society, or to avoid cultural pursuits. We are not saved *out* of our humanity, rather we are saved into our *true* humanity. Because our Savior is also our Creator *and* our brother, because Jesus rose from the dead, ascended into Heaven and sits at the right hand of God the Father *still bearing our humanity*, there is no sphere of human experience in which Christian faith is irrelevant. And so we are called to be active in cultural life.

But what criteria should we use to guide our cultural activity? There aren't a lot of prooftexts that are relevant to most contemporary cultural life (which is just as well, since prooftexting is often a misleading practice). But if James's twin injunctions are to be taken seriously, we need to recognize that some forms of cultural engagement may well pollute us with rebellious and idolatrous stains.

Prior to the modern period, most Christians believed that the standard for cultural life was built into Creation: the order of the cosmos provided a framework for guiding the order of the individual soul *and* the order of society. In the words of the theologian Colin Gunton there was an assumption "that human life is good life when it conforms itself to the way things truly are, when it takes shape in the world as it truly is."¹ ...

The Scriptures, especially the Psalms and the Wisdom literature, reveal this attitude repeatedly. Consider the 4th chapter of I Kings 4, where we read a fascinating summary of the wisdom of Solomon. "And God gave Solomon wisdom and understanding beyond measure, and breadth of mind like the sand on the seashore, so that Solomon's wisdom surpassed the wisdom of all the people of the east and all the wisdom of Egypt." And having been reminded that Solomon spoke 3,000 proverbs and composed 1,005 songs, we are given a glimpse at the content of Solomon's wisdom, a summary of the sorts of things on which his wise proverbs and songs reflected. It is not the list we might expect. "He spoke of trees, from the cedar that is in Lebanon to the hyssop that grows out of the wall. He spoke also of beasts, and of birds, and of reptiles, and of fish." The source of Solomon's wisdom, wisdom that was applicable in many areas of

life, was reflection on the things God had made. The fear of the Lord is certainly the origin of wisdom, but its trajectory takes wisdom through regions shaped by the givenness of Creation. This chapter ends with a testimony to the universality of Solomon's wisdom, demonstrating that his insights were not simply a reflection of Israelite culture. "[P]eople of all nations came to hear the wisdom of Solomon, and from all the kings of the earth, who had heard of his wisdom." ...

In the Biblical picture, the order of the material Creation, the form of Creation, often described in terms of God setting the foundations of the earth, is not separable from the moral order established in things. That coherence between the structure of the world and the moral order of human life seems to be behind Paul's declaration of moral order in the structure of Creation in the first chapter of Romans. Paul insists that there has been enough evidence in the things God has made concerning his character and his moral expectations, evidence available ever

since the creation of the world, that those who disobey God are without excuse. Not only is the glory of God evident in Creation, but the duty of man toward God is also evident, which would seem to include duties concerning how we live in space and time as embodied creatures. And so we come back to Creation as a guide to cultural life. The nature of nature should inform the structure of culture.

If we live in such a world, there's no escaping the conviction that *form matters*. The heavens don't display little signs saying "Go God!" The birds and reptiles and fish didn't share verbal insights with Solomon. It is the *form* of Creation that displays God's glory, that communicates his nature, and that instructs us in wisdom. If that's true, it would be mistaken to assume that the only thing Christians should care about is keeping our *content* straight, keeping the right abstractions in our heads, while we change the forms of the way we live, relate, communicate, and worship to satisfy the fashions of a culture that hates God. Can it really be that the form of Creation matters, but the forms of our cultural conventions don't?

The English theologian Colin Gunton's important book *The One the Three and the Many*, is subtitled *God, Creation, and the Culture of Modernity*. Gunton demonstrates ways in which "salient aspects of modern culture are predicated on the denial of the Christian gospel. . . . [T]he distinctive features of

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[modernity's] plight derive from its rejection of that gospel. . . ." ² But it is not only the gospel narrowly defined that modernity rejects. It is also, as Gunton's work exposes, views about Creation and about the nature of knowledge. Until the advent of modernity's revolutionary assumptions about reality, it was widely believed that order in the universe *can be perceived*, especially with the aid of divine special revelation, and that that order should properly serve as a model for human making and doing, for art and agriculture, for law and politics, for social and personal relationships, and, perhaps most importantly, for the life of the Church. In other words, in this older way of perceiving reality, cultural institutions and forms were not to be arbitrarily or capriciously or willfully engineered and selected, but developed and approved in harmony, in faithful resonance with the order God has established in the cosmos. Culture is, on this view, the cultivation of created nature. Healthy cultural forms are those that are faithful to the nature of things as God established it, and unhealthy cultural forms are the product of human desire suppressing or denying the created order.

As I've suggested, this cosmological assumption does not for the most part guide modern Western cultural institutions. Historian Franklin Baumer, in his book *Modern European Thought*, describes the evolution of the modern disenchantment of the world with the rise of modern philosophy and science and the ejection of purpose from the material world. "Nature, it now appeared, was like a great machine or clock, made of dead matter, possessing fundamentally mathematical characteristics, functioning mechanistically rather than teleologically, obedient to invariable natural laws. . . . Nature inevitably began to seem less like the setting for man's spiritual pilgrimage and more like a field for the exercise of human power. But where this was understood, it prompted, on the whole, more optimism than pessimism." ³

Why optimism? Because we fallen humans really like power. We want to be as gods. We don't like limits. We don't like having things mapped out for us in ways that limit our choices. So the insistence that Nature was inherently meaningless, gives us a lot more freedom to do whatever we want, which is, after all, what sin is. Modern culture is about control, about power. To be modern is to assume that we can

acquire complete control over nature and human nature.

And that means that modern cultural institutions, forms, and conventions are not seen as expressions of some meaning in the nature of things, but simply as expressions of human preference. We sovereignly construct meaning out of nothing other than sheer desire; our cultural institutions have no a priori obligations, no boundaries or laws they need to honor....

It is said that our message will not be heard and accepted if we do not abandon certain allegedly outmoded cultural assumptions and forms. But often, the *internal meaning* of those forms is never examined or evaluated. So, for example, as the culture at large has become less comfortable with (indeed less tolerant of) formality in any form, churches have followed this pattern, sometimes awkwardly, sometimes with energetic enthusiasm. Whether in speech, in ways of organizing public meetings, in musical styles, in architecture and furnishings, or in habits of dress, the formal has given way to the informal.

Rarely do pastors and other church leaders seem to ask *why* our culture has taken this turn to the informal, a turn that may be unprecedented in human history, a turn that coincides with a heightened suspicion of authority, of truth claims, and of value judgments of all sorts. The choice between formality and informality is assumed to be neutral, comparable to a choice between chicken or fish on a menu, despite the fact that anthropologists, sociologists, linguists, and historians can identify weighty significance in such matters.

What if there is something in human nature that *requires* formality under certain conditions? What if preserving settings for formal speech and dress and movement and gestures and music was more in keeping with the kinds of creatures we are and the kind of world we inhabit? What if suspicion toward formality is expressive of deeper disorders in society and in the soul? Can the Church really give its blessing to this sort of cultural trend in the interest of making a more immediate connection with our neighbors if we thereby degrade their lives without their noticing? ...

The temptation to be winsome is always a temptation to forget who we are. Stanley Hauerwas, in an article called "Preaching as Though we Had Enemies," similarly observed: "Christians in moder-

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nity thought their task was to make the Gospel intelligible to the world rather than to help the world understand why it could not be intelligible without the Gospel."⁴ The gospel of the Kingdom begins with repentance. Our message to the world must include the sober fact that the world's own story about itself is inadequate. It doesn't even do justice to what the world is, let alone to who Jesus is. As theologian Robert Jenson once observed, "Since the message we have for the world contradicts everything the world could possibly suppose, argument is guaranteed whenever we show up—unless we have forgotten ourselves."⁵ We might as well get used to the fact that our message is as much foolishness to Americans as it was to the Greeks.

Facing up to the fact that our message has cultural consequences that may not be welcome is part of what happens when we recognize that the Church is not simply a fellowship of spiritually, internally, invisibly renewed people. We are instead a people who recognize the *cosmic* Lordship of Christ, who strive to configure our lives as best we can in ways that conform to the kinds of creatures we were originally made to be, and in whom by God's grace our full humanity will eventually be realized.

Our Lord is the Lord of all Creation; his miracles testify to that, as he calms winds, heals the sick, multiplies loaves and fishes, turns water into wine, raises the dead. He displays the same power and authority that we read about in all those Psalms. He is the Lord of the material world as well as of the spiritual world, commanding the demons *and* the weather with the same authority. And when he commissions the Church to pursue the vocation of discipleship, he begins by reasserting that authority. "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me." The Great Commission is not handed down by one who is qualified by virtue of his religious insights, or just because he paid the ultimate penalty for our sins. The commission given to the Church is in the context of Christ's Lordship over the cosmos, and the Church's work must always have that Lordship in view as it makes disciples, teaching them to observe everything the cosmic Lord has commanded. He is not just the Lord over their emotional lives or over their family lives. He is King of Kings, and Lord of Lords, and his disciples need to be trained to honor that sovereignty everywhere.

The apostle Paul would later summarize the redemptive work of Christ as "a plan for the fullness of time to unite all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth." "By him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities—all things were created through him and for him. And he is before all things, and in him all things hold together." The order of the cosmos, including the order of

human life on the earth in all of its cultural ramifications, finds its purpose and meaning and worth in Christ. Through the blood of his cross, all things are reconciled to God, whether on earth or in heaven.

This is not language that gives the impression that the gospel is just about transforming our inner lives. Christ, the Lord of Creation, is also the second Adam, the one through whom all the purposes of God for humanity in Creation can be rescued and, in the word of Irenaeus, recapitulated, literally, receive a new head.

And God's purposes for humanity are not private and merely spiritual. "Be fruitful and multiply, fill the earth and subdue it. Till the garden and care for it; name the animals." Wendell Berry has noted that culture begins in agriculture. We engage the Creation to survive, to discover its capacities, to enable it to flourish, and to discover creative opportunities for our own flourishing. Bread and wine, the divinely instituted means of communion with God, are cultural as well as agricultural products. Our task in Creation and in the New Creation ushered in by the Last Adam is to serve God in all aspects of our cultural lives.

But just as our blessedness finds cultural forms, so does our fallenness. Cultural institutions can honor our nature and the order of Creation, but they can also distort or twist or deny who we are and what the world is. When the Church is carelessly pragmatic about its cultural engagement, it misses out on the opportunity to fulfill God's wonderful intentions for humanity, and it runs the risk of giving its blessing to corrupted cultural structures.

Throughout its history, the Church has succumbed to the temptation to adapt its message and practice to fit the culture surrounding it. When this has happened there have sometimes been short-term benefits, followed by generations of long-term problems and losses. It may not always be possible to discern when cultural engagement becomes cultural captivity. But the only way we can hope to do so is by applying ourselves to thinking about life after evangelism. We need to be convinced that life after evangelism matters, that is, that the shape of our cultural life can be evaluated in terms beyond practical convenience and allegedly neutral personal preferences.

Ken Myers

¹ Colin Gunton. *The One, the Three, and the Many: Creation and the Culture of Modernity*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993: 14.

² *Op. cit.* 1.

Franklin L. Baumer. *Modern European Thought: Continuity and Change in Ideas, 1600-1950*. New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1977: 51.

³ *Ibid.* 46.

⁴ Robert Jenson. "On the Renewing of the Mind: Reflections on the Calling of Christian Intellectuals." *Essays in Theology of Culture*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994: 170.

NEWS FROM THE STUDY CENTER

PEOPLE IN THE NEWS

We are very thankful for the individuals who constitute the Board of Directors of the Christian Study Center. Though most of them work behind the scenes, they contribute in numerous ways—at the Study Center, in their own places of work and worship, in the Gainesville community, and beyond. We are glad to highlight the accomplishments of two of these board members in our Study Center news.

Dr. Jay Lynch, President of the Board of Directors for the Christian Study Center, has served as Associate Professor and as Physician at the University of Florida, Shands, and the VA Hospital. This spring, after thirteen years of service as Director of the Fellowship Program for Hematology-Oncology, Dr. Lynch stepped down. On Wednesday, January 18th, his division chief, colleagues, and fellows hosted a luncheon at which they recognized Jay's contributions and presented him with a plaque and a scrapbook of the over 30 fellows he trained. As Program Director, Dr. Lynch was responsible for all aspects of training oncologists to care for patients with cancer. He trained over 30 oncologists who are now doing research and/or patient care throughout Florida and the southeastern United States. We are glad to join others in recognizing the important contributions Jay makes at the Hospitals and in the community.

On January 4, **Fran Holm**, also a member of the Christian Study Center's Board of Directors, retired as Vice President for Economic Development at Santa Fe Community College. A *Gainesville Sun* article recognizing Mrs. Holm as one of Gainesville's Women of Distinction of 2006 described her work for SFCC as "bringing education and business together to consistently work to produce a highly trained workforce in the region, thereby increasing the economic opportunities in Gainesville." This mission manifested itself in the day-to-day efforts to cultivate partnerships between the college and businesses and civic organizations and in training students to enter the workforce in meaningful and rewarding careers.

In recognition of her contributions to education in Alachua County, Mrs. Holm has been awarded the Alan J. Robertson Medallion, the American Association of Community Colleges Award for Excellence in Tech Prep Education, and the U.S. Department of Education Award for Innovation in Tech Prep Evaluation. She has given so much to her community, and we congratulate her on her accomplishments and on her retirement.

GOOD NEWS FOR THE CHRISTIAN STUDY CENTER

Once again this year it has been apparent that there is no end to the opportunity to serve in the university community. It has also been apparent that the single greatest factor that limits our work is the size of our staff. We are excited, therefore, to announce that we will be adding a full-time staff person this fall and that this person will be **Todd Best**. Many of you know that Todd was part of the earliest discussions that brought the Study Center into being, that he served as our intern for two years while completing his MA in Religion at UF, and that he also served in a part-time role as Program Administrator. This past year he and his wife Holli have been in Missouri, but based on the excellent work that Todd did for the Study Center over several years of service with us, we were very pleased to invite Todd to become Assistant Director of the Christian Study Center, and we are especially pleased that he has accepted our invitation. We are excited about Todd's return, we are looking forward to having Holli and Todd back in town, and we are eager to see him once again, contributing to the work of the Christian Study Center. Please keep them in your prayers.

MARS HILL AUDIO JOURNAL: HELPING US TO THINK ABOUT THE NEIGHBORHOOD

In the October 2003 edition of *Reconsiderations*, Todd Best reviewed Mars Hill Audio Journal, the innovative project of Ken Myers, a former editor for National Public Radio. Mr. Myers visited the Christian Study Center early this spring as the distinguished guest speaker for the InterVarsity Graduate Christian Fellowship's Colloquium on Faith and Scholarship. He also inspired an audience that packed the Study Center's classroom with his evening lecture on whether the Church is engaged or captured by the culture. We offer the first half of this lecture to you as the lead article of this month's edition, and we re-present Todd's review of Mars Hill with the hope that you will explore this resource. It is invaluable to those individuals who are sensitive to the current intellectual climate and curious about how to engage the culture of the world as a thinking person of faith.

We live in a culture that demands little from us intellectually. In fact, our society often pushes us in the opposite direction. Our way of life is defined not by reflection but by whatever media and fashion trends happen to dictate. Sadly, our educational system does little to battle the aversion to a reflective life. The end goal of education has more to do with the acquisition of skills for a good job than with the pursuit of knowledge for human flourishing. Even in the mainstream of American religious life, where long-standing traditions can be found, there is little exploration into those traditions for the purpose of understanding ourselves and our culture.

Mars Hill Audio Journal is a refreshing change that offers hope for those who sense the inadequacy of these cultural norms. Offered bi-monthly, Mars Hill Audio Journal is a ninety-minute audio magazine that offers insightful

discussion from a Christian vantage point on a wide array of cultural issues. There is a core Christian motivation for the journal, which recognizes that "fulfilling the commands to love God and neighbor requires that we pay careful attention to the neighborhood: that is, every sphere of human life where God is either edified or undermined." This paying attention to the neighborhood is what drives Myers to interview contemporary thinkers as a way to consider not only the devotional component to Christian commitment (Bible study, prayer, etc.) but also "our enjoyment of literature and music, our use of tools and machines, our eating and drinking, our views on government and economics, and so on."

This motivation to explore the complex ways that the Christian faith can speak to our human situation serves as the impetus to each edition of the journal in which Myers conducts about a half-dozen, ten to fifteen minute interviews with scholars, artists, philosophers, poets, and others. Topics range across social philosophy to the sciences, from ethics to ecology, and from theology to technology. Guests are generally published and are known experts in their fields. Memorable topics have included religion and democracy, moral law as a component of cultural thought, Islamic resentment of the West, living well amidst intrusive communications technologies, artificial intelligence, the work of J. S. Bach, and the recent resurgence of J. R. R. Tolkien. It is interesting to note also that Mars Hill interviews over the years have included such local scholars as UF Professor of History John Sommerville, who also teaches at the Christian Study Center, and UF English professor James Twitchell.

While Mars Hill reveals the multitudinous applications of the Christian faith across the arts and sciences, it also encourages listeners to adopt an interdisciplinary approach, by showing - through the unification of faith - the inter-relatedness of questions and issues from diverse

and seemingly incongruent fields. The current issue of Mars Hill continues to demonstrate this interdisciplinary focus, including a critique by Carson Holloway of sociobiology and evolutionary psychology as foundations for political thought, Ben Witherington III's consideration of why people lend credence to the implausible historical account of *The Da Vinci Code*, and Roger Lundin's discussion about why experience fails to supplant revelation as a source of authority.

While the stated purpose of the journal is "to assist Christians who desire to move from thoughtless consumption of modern culture to a vantage point of thoughtful engagement," the journal clearly has appeal for anyone who wants to be more thoughtful about culture and who wants to look into the resources of the Christian tradition for interpreting and improving cultural life. Because the Mars Hill Audio Journal is available only by subscription, not many people know about it, but we would like to help change that. We think it is one of the finest resources available for devel-

oping a well-informed understanding of contemporary culture.

If you contact Mars Hill by e-mail, phone, or online request, you can receive a complimentary sample issue of the Journal. In addition, Mars Hill once again has agreed to offer a discounted subscription rate to new subscribers who mention *Reconsiderations*: six issues on CD for \$39 instead of \$48 or on cassette for \$29 instead of \$36. We hope you will take advantage of one or both of these offers. You can reach Mars Hill Audio by phone at 1-800-331-6407, by e-mail at tapes@marshillaudio.org, or through their website at www.marshillaudio.org. When you subscribe, be sure to mention *Reconsiderations* and give the following code: REC0406. You must subscribe before June 30, 2006, in order to qualify for this special offer.

C. John Sommerville is Professor Emeritus of History at the University of Florida.

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Reconsiderations is a quarterly publication of the Christian Study Center of Gainesville, whose purpose is to offer the thoughtful consideration of a Christian understanding of life.

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