

Christianity and Popular Culture

By David K. Naugle

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In his classic work *Christ and Culture*, H. Richard Niebuhr asserts that the relationship between earnest followers of Jesus Christ and human culture has been an "enduring problem."¹ How should believers who are "disciplining themselves for the purpose of godliness" (1 Tim. 4:7) relate to a world whose culture is dominated by "the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the boastful pride of life" (1 John 2: 16)? Culture is God's gift and task for human beings created in His image and likeness. At creation humanity received a "cultural mandate" from the sovereign Creator to have dominion over the earth and to cultivate and keep it (Gen. 1:26, 28; 2:15). But sin's effects are total, and culture—whether high, popular, or folk—has been corrupted thoroughly by rebellion, idolatry, and immorality. How, then, should Christians, who have been redeemed, "not with perishable things like gold or silver . . . but with precious blood, as of a lamb, unblemished and spotless, the blood of Christ" (1 Pet. 1:18-19) live in relation to culture? According to Jesus in His high priestly prayer, believers are to be in the world but not of it (John 17:11-16). But in what way? How do believers act in and interact with the "crooked and perverse generation" (Phil. 2:15) that surrounds them and of which they are a part?

This is not an easy question, and yet the Church cannot avoid responding to it. Over the centuries, various Christian communities have developed alternative perspectives on this very influential Christ-culture connection. In the extreme, some believers have advocated a complete *rejection of culture* (Anabaptists, fundamentalists), while others at the opposite end of the ecclesiastical spectrum have promoted a more or less uncritical *acceptance* of it (liberals of various stripes). Niebuhr refers to these two groups as the "Christ against Culture" and the

"Christ of Culture" traditions, respectively. The first group promotes Christ but tends to denigrate culture, while the second group promotes culture but tends to denigrate Christ. Both are unbalanced and are corrected by "Churches of the Center" that seek to do justice to both Christ and culture, though they articulate the relationship between them in different ways.

Roman Catholics tend to view the gospel as the *completion of culture*. Despite positive contributions, human cultural enterprises always fall short of divine intentions and must be fulfilled by God's gracious work of redemption in Christ and through the Church. Grace, according to this tradition, perfects nature. Christ is above culture and completes it.

Lutherans, on the other hand, prefer to emphasize how the gospel creates remarkable *tensions with culture*. Christians are citizens of two kingdoms—God's and the world's—and faithfully fulfilling responsibilities to both realms creates enormous, if not impossible, challenges. How difficult it is to render simultaneously the things that are Caesar's and the things that are God's! Christ and culture stand in a relation of paradox.

Finally, those who adhere to the Reformed tradition have enthusiastically promoted a vision of the *transformation of culture*. According to this viewpoint, the various cultural and social structures in this life can be renewed in Christ. No aspect of reality is alien to the kingdom of God. It all belongs to Him and must be influenced by the gospel through the Church as salt that preserves and light that illuminates. In this perspective, grace does not perfect nature, but in fact restores it. Christ is the transformer of culture.

These five models may not be perfect. They certainly overlap one another and each has certain strengths and weaknesses. There may be other, and even better, ways of examining the Christ-culture question. But in the last half century, this typology has served as a helpful heuristic device to stimulate thinking on the subject. Outlining the options here will ideally

prompt thoughtful Christian readers to reflect on their own understanding of the Christ-culture nexus, why they embrace the particular position they do, and what impact it has on how they think and live. Faithful followers of Jesus must give due consideration to this salient matter.

Certainly the authors of the essays that appear in this edition of *Findings* would encourage this kind of reflection, for each of them shares a significant measure of frustration at the relatively mindless, acultural stance of many evangelical believers. Ken Myers grumbles about the "pietistic cultural ghetto" that reigned among evangelicals in the earlier part of the twentieth century. Darren Hughes believes that an "anaesthetized" way of cultural life is the greatest threat facing the Church today. Drew Trotter reminds readers that Jesus' charge to His disciples to be in but not of the cultures of the world is a command, and not a mere statement of fact. T. M. Moore helps us to see the relationship between pop culture and culture in general. And Eric Jacobson speaks about an evangelical America that is out of cultural gas and running on fumes. Each in his own way longs for the evangelical community to take cultural matters seriously once again, especially popular culture, which is the focus of this edition of *Findings*.

But the approach that our authors take toward popular culture is unusually refreshing. They avoid the expected evangelical denunciation of mass cultural expression reminiscent of the "Christ against culture" mentality. Instead they take a more constructive approach. Though each is well aware of the spiritual and moral dangers that attend popular culture (Ken Myers's article in particular), they aspire to demonstrate what it can in fact contribute morally and spiritually to the lives of thoughtful Christians who are seeking to engage culture redemptively.

The basis for their approach, both explicitly and implicitly, is the doctrine of common grace. This is the idea that "there is indeed a kind of non-salvific attitude of divine favor toward all human beings manifested in three ways: (1) the bestowal of natural gifts, such as rain and

sunshine, upon creatures in general, (2) the restraining of sin in human affairs, so that the unredeemed do not produce all of the evil that their depraved nature might otherwise bring about, and (3) the ability of unbelievers to perform acts of civic [read: cultural] good."²

Indeed, as Psalm 145:9 states, "The Lord is good to all, and His mercies are over all His works." If this is, indeed, the case, and certainly it is, then we should expect nonbelievers as well as believers to be blessed by God. This surely includes various gifts and talents by which they make significant cultural contributions, even at the popular level. Therefore, Christians can learn much and benefit in important ways from the work of non-Christians through contemporary artistic and cultural expressions. In advocating this approach, our authors add a new component to the Christ-culture typology delineated above: *Culture transforms Christians*. The arrows of positive influence are thereby reversed. Not only do Christians have something significant to offer non-Christians, especially in terms of special redeeming grace, but non-Christians have something significant to offer Christians, especially in the form of common cultural grace! In fact, the cultural contributions of nonbelievers are often more thoughtful and of a higher quality than the cultural contributions of believers. As a result, the Church should be both humbled by and grateful for the common grace roles that their non-Christian counterparts play in cultural affairs.

How do the authors in this edition of *Findings* flesh out these themes? Ken Myers's article, "Modernity, Morality, and Common Grace: Christian Reflections on the Dynamics of Popular Culture," provides a framework for thinking about these matters. He begins by pointing out the unique role that evangelist Francis A. Schaeffer played in the 1960s and 1970s in reviving an interest in evangelical cultural engagement. His vision was inspired by the Calvinist doctrine of the lordship of Christ over the whole of life. About the same time, Carl Henry,

Thomas Howard, Frank Gabelein, and Clyde Kilby were advocating the same agenda as Schaeffer, who was especially concerned to discern the worldview implicit in various cultural forms. Schaeffer's disciples pointed out, however, that even those with non-Christian worldviews still generated cultural products that, surprisingly, were in keeping with Christian norms, a fact that Myers believes can be traced back to common grace. But just as the "Schaeffer generation" was renouncing its cultural benightedness, at that very moment the surrounding culture itself was disintegrating rapidly into an "anticulture" (Philip Rieff). This cultural self-destruction was the fruit of the seeds of disorder planted in the modern period, a fact well documented by sociologist Daniel Bell. This cultural malaise has been particularly pernicious for the post-Schaeffer generation to deal with. It has failed to reflect wisely on the merits or demerits of particular cultural artifacts and on the overall systemic character of cultural life. This is especially true when it comes to popular culture, which differs markedly from folk culture given the former's mass distribution and commercial orientation, among other things. As Myers points out, however, popular culture can still be a conduit for common grace. But conditions are such today that they make it difficult even for common grace to retard the malevolent effects of an omnipresent popular culture whose fundamental goal is to liberate people from all restraints. Indeed, fundamental social institutions, including the university, are designed to shape the moral character of any people. But these days it seems that all institutions must submit to the dictates of popular culture and are sources of moral disarray. Consequently, Myers asserts, "Popular culture as we know it poses a greater problem for Christians than is usually acknowledged." God, he acknowledges, can accomplish His purposes for every society, but Romans 1 suggests that sometimes His purpose is judgment rather than mercy. And popular culture, apart from common grace, may be an instrument of the former rather than the latter.

The next three articles take a more positive view of popular culture and its common grace contributions, especially through the media of film and television. In his essay "Seeking 'Holy Moments' at the Movies," Darren Hughes argues that Christians ought to take the arts more seriously, film in particular. His contentions rest on the Christian aesthetic of French film critic Andre Bazin as well as the doctrine of common grace. Bazin, as described in a scene from *Waking Life* (2001), believes that film is especially effective in recording and revealing God's active presence in human lives. Since God is manifested in all of creation, film documents these manifestations as no other medium can, and offers viewers brief glimpses of transcendence. Furthermore, if "God also takes a positive interest in how unbelievers use God-given talents to produce works of beauty and goodness" (Richard Mouw), then filmmaking should be no exception to this principle of common grace. Most Christian critics simply moralize about the latest Hollywood productions. Hughes, however, believes that they should cultivate a thirst for the transcendent in viewers by reorienting their expectations. Additionally, he suggests that they should equip themselves with the ability to understand the medium of film better and the culture that produced it. For Hughes, therefore, seeking holy moments at the movies can be a spiritual discipline that, like prayer, meditation, and solitude, fosters intimacy with God. But for this to happen, viewers must understand how movies work, especially through the editing process, and they must have developed their senses and capacity of taste. For this latter concern, Hughes draws on the recent work of Frank Burch Brown (*Good Taste, Bad Taste, Christian Taste*, Oxford, 2000), who contends that the senses must be trained if they are to be used rightly, and that good taste consists of aesthetic perceiving, enjoying, and judging. If viewers develop themselves in these ways, then viewing films might become an experience of *Otium Sanctum*, or holy leisure, and not just mindless entertainment. Hughes concludes his essay by offering

practical advice on how to become an active and engaged film viewer, including several helpful websites, and a list of his favorite directors and their must-see productions.

In his essay "Gaining the Whole World: Reflections on Movies and What They Tell Us About Ourselves," Drew Trotter is concerned about the effects of popular culture on the Church. He makes it quite clear that believers must engage culture in a profound way out of obedience to Christ without any kind of compromise. A whole host of questions present themselves for consideration along these lines. But Trotter chooses to focus on the question about engaging the "popular arts, specifically movies." What can people learn about themselves through this medium? How can such insights benefit Christians? On the basis of common grace, he believes that film has much to teach believers about sin, humanity, community, joy, hate, love, and depression. They are also adept at exposing viewers to a variety of theological and philosophical issues such as freedom and determinism, space and time, life and art. As an example, Trotter selects *A Beautiful Mind*, which was the Academy Award winner for best picture in 2001. After providing some background on the film's production and basic story line, Trotter sets forth negative and positive themes from the movie that prove instructive for Christians. He scrutinizes the movie's thoroughgoing humanistic orientation and then takes a look at the redeeming power of both marital love and human community. He concludes his reflections by reminding his readers that Christians must be actively engaged with culture, and film is an important component in this process. Believers are to gain the whole world for Christ, and watching films with discernment is one weapon needed in this task.

Eric Jacobson, in his unconventional article "A Peek behind the Toob," reverses the pattern of thinking evident in the three preceding installments. His wrestling match is not with popular culture, but with Church culture: "How do I maintain," he asks, " a spiritually and

intellectually sound relationship with one of the world's vibrant and creative cultures [television], while worshipping in a religious tradition that seems to have neither interest in, nor investment in, nor understanding of that culture?" For Jacobson, the gas tank in American evangelicalism is empty and running on fumes. Why are Christians missing in the entertainment industry? Why is American Christianity anti-intellectual and so culturally disengaged? In days gone by, if it hadn't been for non-Christians, there would not have been any culture at all! When evangelicals did finally return to the cultural scene, they immediately jumped on the advertising bandwagon (if ads can sell products, they can sell Jesus, too), and they treated people as consuming machines to be manipulated (the current worship wars reveal as much, in Jacobson's opinion). This "utilitarian manipulation" is one major component of contemporary culture overall. On the other hand, there is the serious, purposeful, intellectual "unpopular culture" of nihilistic meaninglessness as well (one thinks here of NPR, perhaps). According to Jacobson, popular culture, as "a glory and gift," fits right in between these two extremes. It serves as an alternative to both manipulation and meaninglessness. It is an agency of common grace. Since TV manufactures audiences to sell products to, they cannot be manipulated as machines. They cannot be told that life is nihilistic. Rather, they must be entertained. So Jacobson sees a redemptive role for popular culture as an antidote to the present cultural mess. His advice is unique: Turn your TV back on. You will find things worth watching and thinking about. He tells readers what to look for in a variety of programs, and even shows how expressions of grace can be found in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*.

Happy reading!

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Notes

1. H. Richard Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture* (New York: Harper and Row, Publishers, Harper Torchbooks, 1951), chap. 1.

2. Richard J. Mouw, *He Shines in All That's Fair: Culture and Common Grace* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001), p. 9.