

# The SBJT Forum: How May Evangelical Theology Transform Culture?

*Editor's Note:* Readers should be aware of the Forum's format. D. A. Carson, Carl F. H. Henry, C. Ben Mitchell, R. Douglas Geivett and Craig Blaising have been asked specific questions to which they have provided written responses. These writers are not responding to one another. The journal's goal for the Forum is to provide significant thinkers' views on topics of interest without requiring lengthy articles from these heavily-committed individuals. Their answers are presented in an order that hopefully makes the Forum read as much like a unified presentation as possible.

**SBJT:** Now that *The Gagging of God* has been published, do you have further thoughts as to how it could address theology and culture?

**D. A. Carson:** I am grateful to Dr. Paul House and his staff for including in this fascicle the opening chapter of my book *The Gagging of God*. What he has asked me to do in this Forum column is reflect a little on what has happened since its publication a little over a year ago. If I were finishing the manuscript today, what would I change?

I confess I would not alter the main line of my argument. But I would probably tweak the emphases here and there, along the following lines:

First, in the intervening two years or so since I sent the manuscript to the press, quite a lot of new literature on postmodernism has been published, and some of it is very important. If I could, doubtless I would interact with some of it. Perhaps two or three examples will prove helpful.

(a) In 1995, Johns Hopkins University Press published *Higher Superstition: The Academic Left and Its Quarrels with Science*. The authors, Paul R. Gross and Norman Levitt, are accomplished scientists. They

write out of a modernist epistemology, and they disavow Christian faith. What makes their book important, however, is its damning indictment of postmodern trends in the university world. They write well, they are utterly fearless, and sometimes painfully amusing. Thoughtful Christians will not want to align themselves with the modernist epistemology of Gross and Levitt—informed Christians should opt for neither a modernist nor a postmodernist epistemology, although there are some important things to learn from both—but there are few books more revealing of intellectual trends in our centers of learning.

(b) History is messy. Although Western cultural dynamism is deeply tied to what in *The Gagging of God* I call philosophical pluralism, inevitably there are holdouts, responses, and so forth. Since finishing the manuscript, I have come upon several very recent responses that deserve careful reading. None of these is going to stem the tide: a cultural movement is far too broad and powerful to be reversed by a single book in a couple of years. Nevertheless, thoughtful readers will want to think their way through a book such as *Objec-*

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tivity: *The Obligations of Impersonal Reason*, by Nicholas Rescher (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1997). I disagree with some elements of its central thesis (it surely expresses more confidence in unfettered human reason than it ought to), but its argument is important.

(c) In *The Gagging of God*, I suggested that some evangelical scholars are in danger of being seduced by academic prestige, and that what we need is Christian thinkers who conscientiously and openly work at their disciplines out of the matrix of a biblical worldview. Intriguingly, something of the same argument is advanced in essays written by Bruce Kuklich and D. G. Hart (the former of whom is an atheist and the latter a Christian) in a book they jointly edited, *Religious Advocacy and American History* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997).

Second, although I said quite a bit in *The Gagging of God* about the expression of postmodernism in the declining morals of the West, I think I probably should have devoted more space to that subject than I did. A recent essay in *U.S. News and World Report* demonstrates that the capital turnover in the porn industry exceeds that in cigarettes, booze, and drugs combined. Polls show that 85% of Americans now think that the definition of "sin" should not in any way be tied to God. In his latest book, *Slouching Towards Gomorrah* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1996), Robert Bork argues that the strange combination of radical egalitarianism and radical individualism, coupled with a court system assuming powers that the Founding Fathers never envisaged, leaves us lurching toward all that coarsens and debases, and suggests that the disciplined and refined thought necessary for the maintenance of democracy is in danger. But I am prepared to stick

with my proposals for the way ahead.

Finally, had I to do it over again, I would probably argue even more strongly and at still greater length that evangelism in postmodern America increasingly entails a worldview clash. We are in Acts 17 in Athens, not in a synagogue in Acts 13. Just as missionaries who evangelize, say, devout Hindus or Buddhists, find it necessary to present much of the Bible's story-line and theological framework, *as part of their evangelism*, so also must contemporary evangelists, who bear witness to Christ before the current generation of biblical illiterates, start a long way back. This is a considerable change from the pattern of most evangelists in this country a mere twenty years or so ago, when most of our hearers could still interact with the basics of the Judeo-Christian heritage, and "preaching the gospel" meant preaching a small part of the Bible's plot-line (however central that part is). The implications of this for evangelism are critically important, and are being worked out by a relatively small number of effective evangelists, in local churches and universities, who are fruitfully heralding the gospel to people entirely outside the pale of "churchy" folk. My own efforts at university evangelism offered grist for the mill when I wrote the book, but in retrospect I wish I had culled the experience of many more people in this area, and included the best of it in the pages of *The Gagging of God*.