"The Christian Approach to Culture"

By EMILE CAILLIET

AN APPRAISAL

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Eminent thinkers do not always write distinguished books, but this new publication by the Stuart Professor of Christian Philosophy at Princeton Theological Seminary reflects the author to an unusual degree. Such being the case, understanding of the volume depends to some extent upon knowledge of the author. Dr. Cailliet combines in a unique way the evangelical tradition of French Protestantism with American academic life. Out of a remarkable conversion experience which came through reading the Bible, he went on to distinction in philosophy, anthropology and theology, his alma maters being the universities of Nancy, Montpellier, and Strasbourg. Decorated by the French government for his researches in anthropology on Madagascar, he is an authority on the primitive mind. His four books on Pascal have won international acclaim. He has taught at Scripps College in California, Wesleyan University in Connecticut, and the Graduate School of the University of Pennsylvania, where his chair was dedicated to Pascalian studies. The only layman on the Princeton Seminary faculty, he combines with mature scholarship a warm personal faith that makes his writing and teaching devotionally inspiring. In some respects, this Franco-American scholar stands today as an evangelical Schweitzer.

I.

Dr. Cailliet would not call himself a fundamentalist. And there are certainly important aspects of his thought that are not in accord with American fundamentalism. But he affirms the uniqueness of the Bible, the full supernaturalness of Christ, the Gospel of redeeming grace, and the necessity of personal Christian experience. He also claims for His Lord the whole realm of knowledge and sees the oneness of all truth under God. Conservatives will not agree with everything in this volume. But they will be challenged by it. Not only that, but the effort to master its pages will expand the horizon of their thinking. For let it be frankly said that this is not an "easy"
book. The reason lies not in lack of clarity upon the author’s part, but in the wide sweep of his argument and in the wealth of his knowledge. Very few scholars today could write such a book, because very few know enough about theology, philosophy, anthropology, mathematics, science, and literature to achieve a synthesis like this.

II.

Dr. Cailliet calls his book *The Christian Approach to Culture*, and it is just that. In as much as the word “approach” does not spell finality, this is not a final pronouncement. Rather is it a pioneer treatment of a field in good part unexplored. Thus a glance at the table of contents, which shows the last section (entitled, like the book, “The Christian Approach to Culture”) to be only 28 pages long, may give a misleading impression. Actually, the discerning reader soon realizes that the entire book is occupied with the approach to culture. The author has not lived and worked on the American campus for over twenty years without developing a deep concern for the spiritual plight of intellectuals who, erroneously equating Christianity with obscurantism, need to be shown the error of their ways because they too have souls to be saved.

The book begins with an account of the inevitable conflict between Christianity and the pagan culture of the early centuries A.D. Recognizing the necessity of such a stand “in the fact of the onrush of destructive and demonic foras,” the author sees this isolationism as “part and parcel of a regime of exception” and calls for a reassessment of “our cultural heritage and destiny in terms of the Christian frame of reference.” It is this frame of reference, wide enough to comprehend the continuity of all truth in the living God who reveals Himself in the Bible, in His Son, and in His Church, that underlies Dr. Cailliet’s thought.

The vantage point for this Christian frame of reference is for the author the One Church. By this he means neither a particular denomination nor some ecumenical organization. Instead, the One Church is for him defined in the words he quotes from the Anglican canons: “Christ’s Holy Catholic Church, that is, the whole congregation of Christian people dispersed throughout the whole world.” The Bible, he maintains, is “the living record of God’s disclosure of himself and his purpose in calling forth the community of his people made available by him for those who would ‘live themselves
into that community, thus becoming his children in Jesus Christ our Lord.” Throughout the ages this community has borne witness to the truth, and it is from within it that the author takes his stand.

A commendable feature of these opening chapters is the forthright manner in which Dr. Cailliet declares his convictions. “The observer,” he says, “is first and foremost a man of faith willing to show his colors at all times.” And he does just that, as he goes on to take as his “ultimate reference” the “perennial witness of the Israel of God, which is the Body of Christ,” a witness comprising the Scriptures, the Apostles’ Creed, the successive pronouncements of the great councils, and the confessions of the Reformed faith, the core of which is that “the living God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself.” Whereupon, he quotes as his credo the statement adopted in 1938 by the Evangelical Reformed Church of France, with its emphasis upon such things as the Gospel as expressed in John 3:16, the sovereign authority of the Holy Scriptures, salvation by grace through faith in Jesus Christ, the unique Son of God, the new birth, holiness, and the life eternal. The chapters that follow are, in the nature of the case, written more in the vocabulary of philosophy, anthropology, science, or literature than in that of Biblical theology. Yet the reader should not forget that under them lies this substratum of evangelical conviction, outcroppings of which appear from time to time throughout the subsequent discussion.

The accuracy of the title again comes to the fore in the chapter dealing with “The Observer’s Situation.” Here the author repudiates the identification of Christianity with any particular culture, even the Western type of Greco-Judean culture, branding such identification as idolatry. This being the case, “the culturally informed man of faith” can do no more than “initiate a conversation,” as Dr. Cailliet aptly puts it, “between Christianity and a certain type of cultural pattern.” This “conversation” is the approach to culture which the bulk of the book explores.

But before such exploration proceeds, the challenge of Karl Barth to Christian philosophy is faced. Here Cailliet insists that Barth has out-Calvined Calvin in the extreme to which he carries the total corruption of human nature. He quotes Paul’s recognition of general revelation (Rom. 1:19,20) in support of man’s ability to know something of God through nature, and, while acknowledging man as a sinner, affirms also that man still remains a bearer of God’s image. This critique of Barth, though trenchant and unspar-
ing, honestly admits a debt to the Swiss theologian for "having restored the high notion of the honor and sovereignty of God." Yet he declares the Barthian view to be not just a revolt against reason but "a radical Theologism," confining all knowledge, mathematical and scientific included, to the Word of revelation. In contrast, Dr. Cailliet affirms "a Christian landscape of reality" wherein "our Sovereign God, the Creator and Upholder of the universe, is at the roaring loom of events and reveals himself in his creation, in the texture of history, and in the human soul." Consequently, he asserts the validity of a Christian view of nature and human nature, a Christian approach to psychology and history, and a Christian epistemology leading to a Christian metaphysics. Just as theology clarifies the way in which light is presented to the world, so Christian philosophy "should remain in the world without being of it, so as to prepare the path of the world toward the light." It is in this sense, he says, that Bunyan sums up Christian philosophy in a single sentence from his pilgrim's mouth: "I am a man that am come from the City of Destruction, and I am going to Mount Zion."

III.

Such is the foundation upon which this Christian approach to culture is built. It has been summarized at some length, because the four remaining sections of the volume rest squarely upon it. These sections are entitled, successively: "The Religious Relationship of Ancient Man with Reality," "The Ontological Deviation," "The Situation We Face," and "The Christian Approach to Culture." They are so packed with thought and fact that limitations of space forbid a point by point analysis. However, discussion of some of their significant aspects will serve to light up the author's thought.

The chapter entitled "The Dim Light of Ancient Days" is an exposition of the fact that "there is on every side evidence of a primitive revelation in the light of general revelation." It could only have been written by a first-rate anthropologist. Here is keen criticism of the evolution-progress theory of the origin of religion. Especially helpful is the assertion that pre-historic men had "from time immemorial . . . an intellect comparable to our own" and that their "primitive" state was due to the fact that "they had nothing to start with and there was nobody from whom they could learn anything." Thus the author says "however limited the technological equipment of our distant ancestors, their high degree of intelligence
would seem to have given them access to far more power than their will was able to control."

Passing from pre-historic man, Dr. Cailliet embarks on a critical examination of Western philosophy. These are highly original pages, and it would take a professional philosopher to evaluate them adequately. The author detects in pre-Socratic Greek thought, behind the crude anthropomorphism of gods and goddesses, a concern for righteousness "truly akin to that of the Hebrew prophets." Not only that, but he also maintains that this affinity of early Greek thought for the Old Testament point of view comes to full flower in Socrates, provided that "the real Socrates" is uncovered (an admittedly difficult task) beneath the biased sources in which he comes down to us. This "real Socrates" was bent on finding what "truth for him" was and on doing that truth once he found it. Perhaps not all readers will share the author's extremely high view of Socrates' "divine mission," yet the bold departure from the traditional interpretation of Greek philosophy will challenge their thinking.

IV.

This bold departure is pursued in "The Ontological Deviation," which constitutes the third part of the book. Here is a masterly critique of the Roman Catholic interpretation of philosophy from Plato and Aristotle, down through the Augustinians and Thomists, to Kant and Whitehead. The basic thought is that Plato, through granting independent reality to his ideas, transformed the human mind from a "knower" to a "pseudo-maker." This ultimately results in what Dr. Cailliet calls "the ontological deviation." The implied "paradox of the reality of the intelligible" is seen in conflict with the Hebrew-Christian concern with reality and as cutting the nerve of a deep experience of reality based on Biblical knowledge. The tension in Augustine between Christian orthodoxy and Neo-Platonism is shown to be that of "a creative mind wont to be both a pseudo-maker and a grateful receiver at the same time." Then, with the re-discovery of Aristotle about the twelfth century, the scientific approach that viewed the mind of man as chiefly a knower of a phenomenal world came into conflict with the Christian forms of Platonism and Augustinianism. This conflict, Dr. Cailliet points out, seemed at one time to have been resolved by Aquinas through his "submission of the knowing intellect to the existing
world" and his demonstration that Being in the sense of Exodus 3:14 is prior to man's idea of being. Thus the vast structure of Thomism arose, as the author beautifully puts it, "in the domain of thought like the spire of a cathedral piercing the blue mist of a glorious morning."

Nevertheless, strains within Scholasticism helped break down the philosophy that Roman Catholics are endeavoring to restore in our day. The twin rocks which wrecked Thomism are seen to be the advent of modern scientific method and the purpose within Thomism itself of isolating natural theology from a theology of Biblical inspiration. The Reformers knew better and recognized, though only partially, the solidarity between the new science and rising Protestantism. This whole discussion is peculiarly relevant today, when Thomism is on the ascendancy among many intellectuals who, repudiating the Biblical view of reality, must have something to fill the vacuum.

Space forbids tracing in detail the manner in which "the ontological deviation" led in Descartes to the secularism of culture through making man's reason the measure of everything, and in Kant to a deep agnosticism in which the categorical imperative became "a hybrid artifact where intelligibility and reality were wrought out in one act of existence," thus sealing off "the way to a supernatural God of grace." At this point, however, Dr. Cailliet begins an examination of the relationship of major physical concepts to philosophy, showing the dependence of Kantianism upon Newtonian physics and the consequent loss of the scientific basis of Kantianism, when the physical sciences were liberated through the new views of Einstein, Planck, et al. Yet the new physics also is unable to provide a reference, while in the philosophy of Whitehead the same tendency of the human mind to become a pseudo-maker recurs. Modern moral science is likewise inadequate to provide a reference. So the analysis proceeds, until it becomes plain that we cannot "study the annals of our civilization without being driven back . . . to what the Bible calls a 'lost' humanity in need of redemption." In short, the modern secular order is in a state of thorough frustration.

V.

The nature of this frustration is discussed in Part Four, which is in many respects the most brilliant portion of the book. Here,
taking a cue from G. Campbell Morgan's *Crises of the Christ*, Dr. Cailliet shows that man has reversed God's order which puts worship above everything else. There follow pages of acute literary criticism in which the need for spiritual compensation attendant upon the loss of true worship is traced through Milton, the 18th century Gothic novel, Goethe, and 19th century romanticism culminating in the pessimism of Tolstoy and Hardy and the decadence of Maupassant and Baudelaire.

Following this presentation of "A Western World without Radiance," the chapter entitled "An Eastern World with a False Radiance" is a thorough-going dissection of the inner basis of Communism. Showing that Communism sets itself up as a substitute religion, the author punctures its claims by an analysis that reveals it as based upon a naturalism as old as Lucretius, though expressed in modern parlance in the Evolution-Progress principle. (In a keen aside, he remarks: "Surely a limit was reached when this same faith-principle [Evolution-Progress] was called upon by a liberal Christianity to provide a new framework for the reinterpretation of biblical material. Thus the Bible message was recast according to a principle entirely foreign to the data at hand. And so, even the history of the Israel of God was turned into an ideology!") This chapter, printed separately, would do great good if circulated among confused intellectuals in our colleges and universities.

The culmination of the book is surprisingly brief, consisting of three short chapters. As has already been remarked, the title of this section ("The Christian Approach to Culture") may be misleading; the whole volume, in the sense that it carries on a continuous conversation with culture, constitutes an approach. Unless the reader realizes this, he may misunderstand these concluding chapters. In them Dr. Cailliet turns to the new physics of relativity and leans heavily upon Charles Hartshorne's Terry Lectures at Yale (The Divine Relativity). He takes as a leading clue a new reading of Exodus 3:14 in accord with some recent archeological research, which stresses the meaning of this *locus classicus* as being HE WHO IS rather than HE WHO IS, so shifting the emphasis from the ontological to the personal aspect of God in line with His disclosure of Himself to Moses as I AM.

There will, of course, be readers who will not be fully convinced by this section. For one thing, there would seem to be an
element of danger in attempting to frame even a philosophical concept of God in line with the new science, simply because there is no guarantee that relativity-quantum is the final view. If it goes the way of Aristoteleian and Newtonian views, what then? Again, the definition of God as “the Cosmic Self, Redeemer in Christ of our false ‘ego’ in the living Body of the one Church,” while differentiated from pantheism, is not completely satisfying. And indeed the author does not claim finality for it. It may well be that at this point the thought has become too big for the vocabulary, a predicament inevitable in any human attempt to put into words the nature of the Deity. One wonders also whether a thinker of Dr. Cailliet’s stature needs to place, as it were, so many eggs in Hartshorne’s basket.

VI.

Questions like these bring us back to the introductory portion of this review. We have here a book by a genuinely Christian philosopher. His frame of reference cannot, however, be equated with Biblicism on the one hand or with liberalism on the other hand. Some evangelicals of good will and culture will regret occasional concessions to liberalism, such as the assumption of two Isaiahs and the treatment of the account of man’s creation in Genesis 2. Dr. Cailliet’s view of Scripture is that of the Princeton of today rather than the Princeton of Hodge, Warfield, and Machen. Others will wish that he might have found a place in his description of the landscape of reality for a clear mention of eschatology, for surely the future hope of the Church is part of the divine plan.

But putting aside such questions—and who could write a book of these monumental dimensions without raising questions—the value of this volume is plain. Here is bold and honest exploration of territory too long neglected by Christian thought of all shades. Here is incisive criticism of deeply entrenched philosophies. Here is penetrating insight into the mind of ancient as well as modern man, a devastating unmasking of Communism, an unflinching repudiation of anything that sets the mind of man in the supreme place that belongs to God alone, and a noble exaltation of Christian theology. Those who read the book with careful attention will have the stimulation of association with a great and dedicated intellect and will be challenged to discriminating thought about some of the deep problems of the human mind and soul.