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## Cultural Transformation and Religious Practice

By Graham Ward

Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005. vi + 187. hb. £ 40.00, pb. £ 18.99; ISBN: 0-521-83326-4/0521-54074-7.

[1] Graham Ward is one of the best known representatives of Radical Orthodoxy, which endeavours to challenge and change the contemporary culture rather than to accommodate to it. In line with the spirit of Radical Orthodoxy, Ward has examined Christian social practice, particularly against the backdrop of contemporary city, in his widely acclaimed *Cities of God* (London: Routledge 2001), a publication with a mainly theological orientation. As its sequel, the book under review aims at providing a more general model for understanding how cultures change, especially whether and how religious practice can shape the cultural transformation. The focus of discussion is on what makes a belief believable. Since this issue relates to how the cultural forces operate in the production of public truth, the book attempts to answer the question by borrowing the tools from the human and social sciences rather than employing the methodology of Christian theology. Despite extensive references to the work of Michel de Certeau, Michel Foucault, Pierre Bourdieu, etc., the underlying concern of the book remains how Christian practice may affect cultural transformation.

[2] The book is divided into three chapters corresponding to the three major questions to be addressed. The first question is: from where does the theologian speak? This chapter employs Bourdieu's notions of *habitus*, field and capital as the conceptual framework to analyze Karl Barth's person and work as a concrete example, in order to show that cultural forces do operate in theology. In other words, even though the possibility of Christian theology is based on the revelation of God in Jesus Christ, all theological knowledge is culturally mediated. For Ward, theology speaks not only from Christ, of Christ and in Christ, but also to culture. Contrary to Barth's rejection of apologetics, Ward argues that Christian theology is inevitably implicated in cultural negotiations, and is always in this sense engaged in an ongoing apologetics or Christian *Kulturkritik* (p. 94), which involves a reading of the signs of the times.

[3] The second question Ward attempts to address concerns how cultures change. In Chapter 2, he focuses on the relationship between the critical interpretation, production and the transformation of cultures, with special reference to the concepts of poetics and the resulting *poiesis* (p. 61). Ward suggests that cultural hermeneutics plays a pivotal role in cultural change. Through an understanding

of the process in terms of cultural rather than philosophical hermeneutics, Ward emphasizes that the whole process can never be an exact science and inevitably implies that all knowledge is local or situational. Through the adoption of a standpoint epistemology, Ward attempts to suggest that Christianity constitutes a stance which is not a subjective or individualistic 'subject-position', but a shared knowledge arising from a tradition and belonging to a socio-linguistic community. As standpoints are inter-subjective and even syncretistic, coming from and referring back to wider cultural traditions that are constantly undergoing new orientations, they furnish 'pro-jects', which implies some sort of critical engagement (pp. 88–89). Again, as all knowledge is relational, all pro-jects are local and all judgments are provisional (p. 98). This provisionality of judgment, Ward believes, makes transformation necessary and possible (p. 116). Ward insists that all cultural engagement should be pragmatic, but this does not necessarily imply any relativism on all judgments (p. 99), or even nihilism. In contrast to the radical hermeneutics of Baudrillard, Foucault, etc., Ward emphasizes the importance of agency, which is also relational rather than arbitrary. For Ward, there is no question of relativism, only relationality (p. 115). This position clearly marks the demarcation between Radical Orthodoxy and Nihilistic Textualism, borrowing the distinction made by Gavin Hyman in his *The Predicament of Postmodern Theology* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004).

<sup>[4]</sup> Based on the discussion of the previous chapters, Ward turns to the heart of the matter—how religious practice can affect the transformation of culture. Ward attempts to address the question from an eschatological perspective. This approach assumes that people measure the credibility of a relationship by some culturally specific models of the perfect, working relationship (p. 112). By engaging in dialogue with the work by Benedict Anderson, Charles Taylor, Paul Ricoeur, Jürgen Habermas, Sigmund Freud, etc. on rhetoric and authority, social imaginary, imagination and action, etc., Ward suggests that the distinction between the dominant social imaginary and the marginal forms of conceiving and living the social life is not stable. The 'projective function' of imagination, which is rooted in desire, can be transformative, utopian and critical of ruling interests and values (pp. 135–137). The discussion so far, especially the inclusion of the motif of *eros*, clearly echoes Ward's emphasis in his previous book on the church as the erotic community (*Cities of God*, pp. 152–181). Ward's discussion here is largely inspired by the work of Cornelius Castoriadis, who was not mentioned in *Cities of God*. Castoriadis' views on *psyche*, *koinonia* and *logos* provide a framework for Ward to understand the distinctive contribution of religious practice.

<sup>[5]</sup> Ward himself makes it rather clear that '*poiesis* is not solely a Christian or a religious activity'. However, he insists that 'Christian *poiesis* has today the potential for considerable impact on public accounts of what is true because of two prevailing conditions'. The first is the 'new visibility of religion' in the cultural shift registered in such words as 'post-modernity', 'late-capitalism', 'post-secularism', etc. The second is 'the long-term indebtedness of cultural traditions in the West to Christianity's ideas, myths, motifs, symbols and practices.' (p. 165) Ward's formulation of the second condition is reminiscent of Ernst Troeltsch's view that

Christianity remained 'valid' to European society because of its historical connection with European civilization. However, Troeltsch was rather cautious in suggesting that while Christianity might be valid to the Western world, it might not be necessary to other parts of the world (Troeltsch, *Christian Thought* (London: University of London Press, 1923), pp. 1–35.). In contrast, Ward seems to be more confident, if not less cautious, when considering the role Christianity can play in cultural transformation.

<sup>[6]</sup> Although Ward notes that the Christian *poiesis* will also have to defend itself against the charge of being arbitrary (p. 167), he is confident that the eschatological and ethical critique of the world offered by Christianity may bring forth not only negative critique, but also positive cultural transformation. This is because the Christian *poiesis*, as well as critique, driven by both the Christian hope and desire, and embodied in the Christian practice, may affect others through the body of Christ, which is intertwined with the physical bodies, civic bodies, social bodies and sacramental bodies (p. 170).

<sup>[7]</sup> Excepting a very minor typing error on p. 85, which reads: 'But having begun r to . . .', the book under review is well written, demonstrating Ward's admirable mastery of the theories from various fields. However, although Ward declares at the beginning of the book that he attempts to address the general issue of how cultures change, the concluding part remains largely based on the case of Christianity, with no particular reference to other religions. Furthermore, it is important to note that most of the theorists he refers to are Westerners, who are likely to have worked out their theories through their observations of societies or cultures with which they were familiar, namely western societies. In fact, the two conditions stated by Ward himself reflect that his horizon remains largely confined to the contemporary (mainly Western) as well as Christian context. It is therefore, natural to raise the question as to whether the model proposed by Ward is generally applicable to other religious traditions and non-Western culture / society, even though it would seem to work well with the case of Christianity in the contemporary western world.

<sup>[8]</sup> Perhaps we may take China as an example. Whereas the majority of the population in China is constituted by peasants rather city-dwellers, Ward's theological concern primarily relates to city. In contemporary China, one may find some signs for the 'new visibility of religion', but religion remains largely a private rather than public matter in China due to its political system and control. Furthermore, it is rather unclear as to whether China is now undergoing a cultural shift registered in such words as 'post-modernity', 'late-capitalism', 'post-secularism', etc. The most important remains that Christianity has not played an important role in the cultural traditions of China. In this case, the two conditions stated by Ward seem not to be entirely applicable.

<sup>[9]</sup> It would thus be particularly interesting to know whether Ward would advise contemporary Chinese Christians to adopt the robust attitude advocated by Radical Orthodoxy against modern culture as well as Chinese culture.