other voices

CHRISTIANITY AND CULTURE

The January issue of the Union Seminary Quarterly Review publishes "Some Ethical Foundations of Christian Theology", which is the inaugural lecture of Dr. Roger L. Shinn as Professor of Christian Ethics. The following is an excerpt.

Modern historians and social scientists have opened up immense new possibilities for the understanding of culture. Following great pioneers like Max Weber and Ernst Troeltsch, many gifted scholars have added to our insight of the relation between faith and culture. Exactly in this area lie some of the greatest problems and adventures of the American church in these days.

How can we, to take one example, disentangle within our ethics the Christian responsibility and the habits of our particular society? Many a churchman still assumes that the prudential ethic of the Enlightenment, which had some relation to the religious virtues of the Puritans, is part of his Christian faith. Many an editorialist or politician uses his standard quotations, not certain whether they come from Scripture or from Poor Richard's Almanac. Now that we no longer live in the Puritan culture, what of the ethic of our forefathers is still valid, what obsolete?

And how can we, to take another example, find ethical help for situations which the human race has never faced before? What is the ethic of international relations, of war and peace in the atomic age? What is the economic ethic for our society of high productivity? What is the ethic of reproduction in over-populated lands?

Christian ethics, without claiming a monopoly for the interest in culture, has long had as a foremost concern the study of society and its relation to the Christian message. Increasingly this concern becomes essential, both for the practical work and for the theological concerns of the church.

Another way to get at the same subject is to investigate the characteristic heresies of our time. It is true that a careful study can discover repetitions of many of the heresies of ancient times: of docetism, Arianism, Pelagianism, and so on. But we are not likely to see the whole direction of the church's history hanging on a subtle metaphysical decision.

Men are not likely to martyr other men or turn bitterly against their friends over the meaning of hypostasis and ousia or over the filioque clause.

Without belittling these traditional controversies, one must say that the heresies which tempt the church today are primarily ethical ones. Great political-economic movements threaten or lure churchmen into apostasy. We have seen dictators try to take the church into camp, corrupting its message for their vicious purposes. We have seen free societies persuade the church to soften its message, to present the Judge of mankind as a partisan of their way of life. If the American church fails in our time, the reason will not be that lions have eaten its leaders or police burned them at the stake; it will not even be that our economy and politics have enticed them into renouncing God in lust for wealth and power. It will be that a culture has so embraced and cajoled them that they worship its idols, even while directing their liturgies to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Let us grant that Christian ethics, as preached in our time, has itself contributed to some of these heresies. It has sometimes chained the church to legalisms which had nothing to do with the Gospel of God's grace. It has fought obvious evils and neglected more dangerous and insidious ones. It has poured its scorn on publicans and sinners, while salving the consciences of self-righteous hypocrites. It has often served its culture—including the pocket-book and the imperial impulses of its culture—to the denial of the Lord. But just as the answer to bad theology is never less theology but better theology, so the answer to a misguided religious ethic is not a less ethical, but a more profoundly ethical faith.

In suggesting that culture is frequently a temptation to heresy, I am not advocating a search for some "pure," a-cultural Gospel. The Word once made flesh in Jesus Christ must constantly find its flesh in every culture. In the ecumenical church the many cultural expressions of Christian doctrine and life can glorify God in a richer harmony than any one alone or than any attempt at a supercultural church. But Christian faith always—and never more than in our time—must recognize culture both as the most significant aspect of God's creation for its work and as a source of temptation to apostasy.