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A Response from the Authors of the Worldly Church

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THE WORLDLY CHURCH

THE AUTHOR'S RESPONSE

FURTHER REFLECTIONS ON THE CHURCH IN THE WORLD
Leonard Allen

The four reviews of our book represent the kind of serious and thoughtful analysis we hoped the book would elicit. For this I am grateful to the reviewers. I find many of their insights provocative and helpful, both extending our thought and challenging it. I also disagree strongly with a number of their points — e.g., with Shaun Casey's assumption that "one cannot write a history of the Churches of Christ before this century." This assumption — standard among many historians — shapes his overall interpretation of our work, skewing it in significant ways. Several such issues raised in these reviews call for response, but I shall focus only on two: the nature and influence of the Enlightenment and the role of the church in the world.

A couple of the reviewers quarrel with the extent to which we lay blame on the Enlightenment for our woes, or at least the way in which we characterize it. Tom Olbricht's point about the variety and complexity of the Enlightenment is well-taken. I recognize such complexity, particularly that the influence of the Enlightenment in America assumed a different shape than in Europe. Further, I certainly do not wish to indict the Enlightenment for all the modern, Western ills or dismiss its positive legacy. The Enlightenment eradicated many false beliefs and superstitions that had characterized the pre-scientific age. Its great technological advances did much to relieve physical suffering and hardship. Its high regard for human liberty and its tolerance of diversity laid the foundation for modern democratic governments. Indeed, the very methods of critique that we employ in the book owe a considerable debt to the spirit of the Enlightenment.

Diogenes Allen has pointed to four basic principles forged in the Enlightenment which have become pillars of the modern mentality: (1) the assumption that the idea of God is superfluous; (2) the assumption that morality and society can be founded on human reason and not on religion; (3) the belief in inevitable progress; and (4) the assumption that knowledge is inherently good. It is not that the Enlightenment was all bad, but rather that these central principles of the Enlightenment unleashed secularizing forces that by the twentieth century had nearly run their course. We have now reached an advanced stage of secularization. Its shallowly-rooted sense of transcendent moral values fades so that people must now create their own values. What people once viewed as objective moral goodness clearly revealed in nature's laws turns into the subjective goodness of getting what you want and enjoying it. Utility replaces duty; self-expression unseats authority. 'Being good' becomes 'feeling good.'

The point is that this modern mentality forged largely in the Enlightenment is now breaking down. We are moving into a postmodern age. As a result, as Diogenes Allen notes, "Theologians no longer need to labor in the tight, asphyxiating little world of the Enlightenment or to become premodern." Thankfully we are not faced with the choice, on the one hand, of adopting the Enlightenment's narrow view of reason, confidence in scientific empiricism, and belief in the inherent goodness of knowledge begins to break down. Its shallowly-rooted sense of transcendent moral values fades so that people must now create their own values. What people once viewed as objective moral goodness clearly revealed in nature's laws turns into the subjective goodness of getting what you want and enjoying it. Utility replaces duty; self-expression unseats authority. 'Being good' becomes 'feeling good.'

The second issue I wish to focus on is the role of the church in the world. Three of the reviewers raise important issues in this regard. Tom Olbricht wanted to see a stronger call for servanthood in the world; he noted that the "opposite of worldliness from a biblical
perspective is not to avoid the world and its ways, but
godly servanthood in it.” Shaun Casey is concerned
that there is too little place in our theology “for grappling
with the world as we encounter it.” And John Stamps, using Niebuhr’s famous categories, finds our
position somewhat difficult to categorize (though he
surmises a Christ-and-culture-in-paradox stance in
our churches).

Here I want to extend and clarify the brief
treatment of this issue in The Worldly Church.
Niebuhr’s typology provides a good place to start. It
properly focuses on the church’s necessary interaction
with the world. It highlights the challenge of being in
the world but not of the world. But, though useful as
a tool of understanding, Niebuhr’s typology has a fun-
damental problem. As John Howard Yoder and others
have argued, it still retains the basic Constantinian
assumption that the church must take responsibility
for transforming the world into the Kingdom of God.
Yoder argues that such a way of putting the issue
presupposes the joining of church and world that
occurred during the third and fourth centuries (sym-
bolized by Emperor Constantine’s conversion to Chris-
tianity). The church began to view itself as responsible
for christianizing the social order and bringing all of
society’s institutions under the Christian umbrella.
In this view, calls for Christians to withdraw or separate
themselves from the culture are usually taken as signs
of irresponsibility. Such a formulation of the problem,
Yoder argues, misconstrues the biblical understand-
ing of both the church and the world.4 If one basically
agrees with such an assessment — as I do — then one
must fundamentally rethink how the church relates to
the world. Some readers of The Worldly Church con-
cluded that we were advocating a kind of Christ-
against-culture stance and were calling for a sectarian
withdrawal from culture. Here I want to press the case
that the church can most effectively engage the world
only as the church exists in sharp distinction from
the world.

To focus this issue we must look more closely at
the biblical understanding of the “world.” In the New
Testament, “world” can refer to the universe as a whole
or to planet earth and its inhabitants (e.g. Rom. 1:8;
Acts 17:24). But it is used most commonly, not in ref-
ence to a physical place, but to a system of values or
a social order opposed to God.

The admonition in 1 John 2:15-16 puts it
sharply: “Do not love the world, or the things in the
world. When one loves the world, love for the Father is
not in him. For all that is in the world, the lust of the
flesh and the lust of the eyes and the pride of life, is not
of the Father but is of the world.”

Here the “world” is the realm of enmity with
God. It is “the sum of the divine creation which has
been shattered by the fall, which stands under the
judgment of God, and in which Jesus Christ appears as
redeemer.” It is human society as it falls under the
sway of the “lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and
the pride of life”—or as C.H. Dodd rendered these
phrases, society “with its sensuality, [its] superficial-

Thus the “world” is not primarily a place or
material realm. It is not equivalent to created nature
or to all human culture. Rather the “world” is the
realm of unbelief, all of God’s creation that has not yet
come under God’s dominion. It appears in and through
all human culture. It manifests itself in everyone—inc-
cluding Christians—who choose not to profess Christ’s
lordship and make his way their way.

In New Testament perspective, two realms (or
eons) exist side by side in human history. One is the
world of sin and death, the other is the new humanity
which makes up the body of Christ. Each of these two
realms manifests itself socially or culturally. The old
realm or “world” shows itself in the structures of
human society in general (with its materialism, sensu-
ality, racial barriers, economic conflicts, and constant
declarations of human autonomy). The new realm
shows itself in the church and the new social order it
creates.

This new order (now becoming visible in the
church) must be kept uncontaminated by the old (the
“world”). It must maintain a distinctive quality of
existence. It must uphold radically different values,
treat people in radically different ways, and nurture
within its community a different view of reality. It
must maintain an ethos where following the way of the
cross becomes intelligible.

This means that the church must remain in a
significant sense a withdrawn community, living in
opposition to the “world.” When we say that, however,
we must speak carefully, for Paul does not instruct the
church to close itself off from the secular world or to
cease all association with the immoral people of the
world (1 Cor. 5:9-10). There must be separation, to be
sure, “but not of the usual kind. The church is not
prohibited from entering the world; the world is ex-
cluded from entering the church.”

We easily think that we can be God’s holy and
separate people by shutting ourselves off from the
world or isolating ourselves from it — and Churches of
Christ have too often done that. But it is never that
simple. For the “world” is both without us and within
us. Its boundary line runs through every human
heart.

The church thus does not simply withdraw
from the “world.” But it does stand apart from the
"world" as a distinct entity. Rejecting the Constantin-
ian assumption of Christianity's majority status, we
must assume that the faithful Christian community
will always occupy a minority status in its culture—
even in a so-called "Christian" culture. This separate,
minority status does not mean isolating oneself from
society or failing to care for it, nor does it mean self-
rightously elevating oneself above other sinful human
beings. To the contrary, this sharp disavowal of the
"world" and its values is done for the sake of the
"world." We form a separate, distinctive community
not to isolate and protect ourselves but because we
believe that we can best serve the "world" by being the
church.

By becoming a distinctive and set-apart com-
community, the church serves the world in at least two
important ways.

First, in taking its stance against the world, the
church enables the world to see its true plight or
lostness. As the realm of estrangement from God, the
world lives by a clouded and distorted vision of reality.
For this reason the world does not know it is the world.
It cannot name its most basic problem—rebellion
against God and declaration of its own autonomy. In
the language of John, it lives in darkness. Thus, as
Stanley Hauerwas has written, "the church serves the
world by giving the world the means to see itself
truthfully."

The church's first and highest calling, there-
fore, is to be the church. It shuns violence and retali-
ation, and thus helps the world see the way of peace. It
eschews control and manipulation of people, and thus
shows the world the way of respect and equality. It
breaks down racial and social distinctions in its midst,
and thus shows the world the sinfulness and injustice
of its divisions between people. It lets go of its posses-
sions with joy and gladness, and thus exposes the
world's idolatrous attachment to its money and posses-
sions.

The church thus serves as the "light of the
world." Through its light the church summons all
people to the praise of God. In this way at least part of
the world may be able to recognize itself as "world." Part
of the world may be able to see its lostness, its de-
ception and chaos. At the same time, however, much of
the world will scorn the church for attempting to show
the world its true nature.

Second, in taking its stance against the world,
the church creates an environment (or ethos) where
people can develop the skills and virtues necessary to
serve the world in sacrificial ways. The world, because
it is the realm of estrangement from God, the realm of
self-seeking and autonomy, cannot provide the train-
ing ground where people learn to follow the way of the
cross. Around us today we see an immense confusion
concerning the proper way to live. The spirit of our age
is marked by a relentless assertion of the self, a
swelling contempt for selfrestraint. The spirit of the
age is the spirit of aggressive individualism. Prophets
of individualism rise up, promising people that they
can "have it all" through bold self-assertion.

Such a world, of course, has its codes of ethics,
its standards of social decorum, and its admonitions to
service and goodwill. Such counsels do indeed check
unrestrained self-assertion and elicit a measure of
goodwill. And for that we should be thankful. But in
the final analysis, the world's ethical counsels almost
invariably hark back to self-interest and personal
advancement. They inevitably tie regard for others to
one's own egocentric gratification. So (the advice usu-
ally runs), if the narrow fixation on self fails to make
one happy, then one should seek to find happiness by
serving others. Or as one psychologist put it, "The task
... is to train persons to act for the benefits of another
because it is in their own self-interest."

Such advice is about the best the world has to
offer. Such training is about the best it can provide.
If we are to gain the skills and virtues required to
follow the way of the cross, we will have to acquire them
in a very different training ground. We will require a
community that stands in sharp contrast to the domi-
nant social order. For Jesus' way calls for kinds of
caring that in the eyes of the world seem reckless and
ill-advised. It calls for kinds of loving concern that
seem beyond the reasonable call of duty.

Jesus' way calls, in short, for character traits
and moral skills that appear either incomprehensible,
foolish, or impossible to a world schooled primarily in
the ethic of self-advancement. And indeed, Christians
acknowledge that such traits and skills are impossible
without the transforming power of the Holy Spirit that
works in and through the body of Christ. Indeed, we
acknowledge that the church can be the church only
through the power of the Spirit.

MOVING BEYOND THE SYNDROME
OF THE WORLDLY CHURCH
Richard Hughes

John Stamps and Mike Casey put their fingers
squarely on one of the most surprising aspects if the
career of The Worldly Church, namely, the fact that
it has received such diverse readings and interpreta-
tions from both the traditionalists and non-tradition-
alisits in Churches of Christ.

There are two themes, however, which are fun-
damental to this book and which we sought to make
abundantly clear. First, secularization—as we used
that term—denotes primary orientation toward this
world, its objectives, and its ambitions, and reliance on
human ability and progress to achieve those ends.
Clearly, such a perspective stands in marked contrast
to the conviction that ultimate reality is to be found not
in the affairs of this world at all, but rather in the one
who transcends this world and stands in judgment on
all human ambitions and achievements.
While I, for one, continue to feel that the Enlightenment was a watershed in the history of the West which profoundly accentuated secularization, Tom Olbricht clearly is on target when he suggests that the real root of secularization lies in the heart of human-kind who persist in worshipping and serving the creature rather than the Creator. In this sense, secularization has been with us always.

The other theme, central to this book, is that our movement, as an authentic child of the Enlightenment, was born and bred in a spirit of self-reliance and profoundly oriented toward human achievement. For this reason, secularization has dominated our movement from its inception. For many years, the themes of self-reliance and human achievement took the form of legalism and sectarianism—attitudes still too much with us. The current zeal to meet “felt needs” is only the most recent incarnation of a fundamental outlook that has been with us since the early nineteenth century. In fact, there is no one in one can perceive the spirit of self-reliance and faith in human progress more clearly than Alexander Campbell himself. A case in point: when some suggested that God, through his initiative, might bring the world to an end in the year 1858, Campbell objected, not so much on the grounds that no one knows that day or hour, but rather on the grounds that human progress had not yet run its course. He argued for the “incomparably paramount” consideration that

this world is but as it were awaking from sleep . . . [that] it was but yesterday that the mariner’s compass was discovered, that printing was shown to be practicable, that steam power was laughed at as an absurdity, and the electric telegraph ridiculed as the hobby of a vagarian’s brain. . . . We have too much faith in progress . . . to subscribe to the doctrines of these theological gentlemen who hint the last days are at hand. ¹

The Worldly Church sought and seeks to make clear that secularization is a phenomenon intertwined with our movement from its outset. To portray the book as arguing that secularization took its rise within the last twenty years, or to portray its authors as looking to the earlier years of the twentieth century as a golden age for Churches of Christ, is simply a misreading of the text.

On the other hand, while the spirit of self-reliance has been a dominant theme among Churches of Christ since the early nineteenth century, I do not wish to portray our movement in these terms alone. For one also finds, running throughout the history of our movement since the earliest years of the nineteenth century, another theological tradition whose emphasis came down squarely on the frailty of human-kind and the sovereignty of a transcendent God. Often this perspective manifested itself in a strong doctrine of separation from the ambitions of the world; in a profound awareness of the Holy Spirit living and working in the lives of believers; in a keen anticipation of a millennium, brought about not by human progress (as with Campbell) but by the initiative of God; in a refusal to defend or participate in human governments on the grounds that Christians belong to a radically different Kingdom; and in its insistence that restoration at its best looks not so much to structural patterns of the primitive church as to the pattern of the cross of Christ which calls us to empty ourselves in the service of others.

The fountainhead of this perspective, at least in our movement, was Barton W. Stone. But the legal, sectarian, and self-reliant side of our heritage both overshadowed and absorbed the Stone tradition from an early date. Increasingly, the once glorious and radical vision of the upsidedown Kingdom of God came to signify only the “true church,” and the theme of separation from the world increasingly meant nothing more than separation from “the denominations.” Still and all, various dimensions of Stone’s perspective were kept alive through the years—sometimes in dynamic and powerful ways—by people like David Lipscomb, James A. Harding, J. N. Armstrong, R. H. Boll, Frank Rhodes, R. C. Bell, K. C. Moser, and Andy T. Ritchie, to name only a few. Some of these themes continue to be part of our heritage, and find expression today in treatises like those authored by Bill Love and Don Haymes in this issue of Leaven, and in Leonard Allen’s new book, The Cruciform Church.

The fact is, the history of our movement is essentially a tale of the ways in which the Campbell and Stone traditions intertwined with one another, often in ways that were theologically both inconsistent and contradictory.² As much as anything, the amalgamation of these two diverse perspectives has contributed to the institutional “identity crisis” which haunts so many in Churches of Christ today.

For those of us concerned with this “identity crisis,” our task is quite clear. Tom Olbricht has summarized that task simply by pointing to the words of the prophet Malachi (3:7): “Return to me.” The problem we face grows from the fact that there is much in our heritage—the sectarianism, the legalism, the self-reliance, and the negative approach to preaching described so well by Mike Casey—that contributes little or nothing to that return. How, then, can we heed the words of the prophet and at the same time find a place to stand in our own historic tradition? This is the dilemma that makes our “identity crisis” so acute. Further, what appears to be a paucity of resources to sustain this return is precisely what drives so many out of Churches of Christ into other traditions.

The “identity crisis” has its roots not only in the amalgamation of competing themes in the Stone and Campbell traditions, but also in the tension between the themes of restoration and unity that has plagued the movement from its inception. Indeed, while Disciples of Christ increasingly made Christian unity their central concern, so Churches of Christ increasingly made the ideal of restoration the core of their theological agenda. By the early years of the twentieth century, many—perhaps most—in Churches of Christ...
We should tend, instead, to the task of rethinking the restoration theme, seriously asking what this theme might contribute to the task of radical discipleship in a fallen world.

-Richard Hughes
OF CROSSES, CLOWNS, AND DOG FIGHTS
Michael Weed

I commend the respondents for the seriousness with which they have taken their task. Before addressing their comments, however, I would like to make two brief observations.

First, The Worldly Church was not intended to be a full theological statement. From the outset it was envisioned as a "tract for the times." We simply attempted to call certain neglected issues to attention. Among other things, we hoped to raise the conversation above preoccupation with internecine arguments on the one hand and shallow discussions of "ministry technique" on the other. We hoped to offer a provisional framework for addressing the issue of secularization and to bring others into the discussion. It is my impression that we succeeded in encouraging thought about the direction of the church as a whole and in bringing about more serious recognition of the subtle ways our environment is making inroads into the very life of the church.

Second, one common (and baffling) response has been the charge that we generalized on the basis of a few large churches. We have, in fact, called attention to a process long-recognized to be at work in American religion -- perhaps as early as Tocqueville's observations on American religiosity (ca. 1835), and more recently noted in Peter DeVries' Mackrel Plaza (1958) and sociologist Peter Berger's The Noise of Solemn Assemblies (1961). It is a problem recognized to be affecting Protestants, Catholics, and Jews: Herberg and Heschel (Jewish), Willimon and Hauerwas (Methodist), Leith (Presbyterian), Neuhaus (Lutheran/Roman Catholic), Postman (United Churches of Christ), and countless others have addressed the issue. The secularization of American religion is not limited to a few large churches in urban areas; it is present wherever there are a few TV sets, digital watches, and Bic pens.

Tom Olbricht's comments are insightful and may offer a needed corrective. Clearly secularization has broad roots antecedent to the rise of the Enlightenment (the rise of cities, the development of nominalism, etc.). Perhaps we should have distinguished between secularization and secularism, or at least distinguished between secularization as an intellectual movement and as a cultural phenomenon. I suspect secularization's complexity is probably better understood within a broader cultural context than within a narrowly intellectual one.

Regarding Olbricht's suggestion that the whole problem of secularization can be understood as a problem of idolatry, I have a mixed reaction. On the one hand, he is correct in wanting to set the issue clearly in a theological framework. And he is right in seeing it as involving idolatry. On the other hand, this should not dismiss the importance of bringing to bear historical, sociological, and psychological insights on the problem. Further, without saying much more theologically, it is not particularly helpful simply to label the problem as that of idolatry -- which I take to be the root of all sin.

Olbricht may be correct in missing an extended biblical theology underlying The Worldly Church's critique. I do not, however, think that this invalidated the critique. (And I think there is more biblical theology there than Olbricht allows, although he is probably right regarding our failure to emphasize adequately the positive nature of the Christian life.) Regardless, churchmen like Olbricht need to continue providing a theology that will serve the church struggling with the problems we have identified.

Michael Casey charges that The Worldly Church gives an oversimplified picture of how we got here and that some of its generalizations do not hold. He questions (a) whether the problem is as widespread as we suggest and (b) whether secularization in the church is a development of our own rationalistic tradition.

I think that he is incorrect regarding the degree of secularization but probably more accurate in his second point. Secularization is a very complex process which clearly is engulfing theological traditions very different than our own. I think he is correct in finding sources of our secularization other than in our Enlightenment roots. I would also argue that we turned to the evangelical tradition partly to fill gaps in our own rationalistic tradition, and partly because it would "play" to increasingly sophisticated congregations embarrassed by our sectarian past.

As Christians, however, we should be able to see clearly the unflattering truth about ourselves and our world without recourse to self-deceiving machinations (theological and otherwise).

-Mike Weed

Further, I also think that he is right in tracing much of our own secularization to the evangelical tradition -- itself permeated with secularizing tendencies. I also suspect that our fascination with pop psychology may partly be traced to roots in evangelical piety. Thus there are three identifiable sources of our secularization: our rationalistic tradition, the eван...
Regarding Michael Casey's practical suggestions -- with which I am largely sympathetic -- I am less than optimistic. Admittedly there are signs of hope; but there are also other signs. For example, the type of training given preachers, the proliferation of various specialized ministries devoid of solid theology, and the lack of responsible catechetical material all suggest things may get worse. Regarding preaching, I fear that our expectations may be too dominated and molded by television personalities to permit an adequate image of the preacher's role and identity.

Shaun Casey's comments are difficult to address succinctly. His view that we wish to restore the Church of Christ to some earlier version is unfounded. We make no claims that things are worse now than earlier -- only that they are different.

Casey contends that our call for a recovery of transcendence fails to recognize that Churches of Christ have suffered from what he terms an overly transcendent view of God bordering of deism. He is right about the quasi-deism but he is wrong to associate it with transcendence. Deism is a limiting of God and denial of transcendence.

He also suggests we use a secularization theory which permits us to ignore the evidence. Yet, he presents no alternative theories. The issue is simply this; all of us know that anything religious people do (e.g., watch dog fights or laugh at clowns) is not automatically a religious activity. Clearly religious institutions may thrive by marketing their wares to meet a wide variety of "needs" (relief from boredom, etc.). Consumer-oriented American religion has escaped the fate of European state-sponsored religion by following this path.

Shaun Casey prefers to see the church's fascination with pop psychology as reflecting the "terrible psychological toll exacted by our theology." This seems parochial. Catholic, Lutheran, Presbyterian, and Baptist leaders all recognize and struggle with this problem, which is reflective of the self-preoccupation of our therapeutic society.

Casey sees the current "hodge podge" as more reflective of bad theology and a lack of theological method rather than "the recent period of alleged secularism." Rather, he attributes the present situation to a "prudential gospel, excessive focus on self, reverence for power, etc." Here it seems that Casey has simply described secularism's practical face -- however much one attempts to avoid the term.

John Stamps introduces H. Richard Niebuhr's typology and uses it to discuss issues raised by The Worldly Church. Niebuhr's typology (which recently has come under criticism) obscures the fact that the "Christ against Culture" type may in fact be a way of serving the culture, i.e., one may separate from culture on behalf of culture. One of the underlying issues is whether we translate the gospel or accommodate it to a particular culture. Presumably, when the gospel is accurately translated and better understood, it remains "folly" and still stands in tension with the current expressions of "the wisdom of the world." At the same time, the gospel is capable of illuminating, exposing, challenging the world, and offering an alternative vision.

By contrast, the way of accommodation reduces the offense of the gospel for the sake of short-lived "relevance" to a particular society or culture. Ironically, this quest for "relevance" invariably results in some form of "theological provincialism" all in the name of being taken seriously by some intellectual or social "province" (e.g., Wall Street, the University, etc.) before whom we seek acceptance and legitimation.

Clearly Stamps is right: there is no responsible theological alternative to being a "sect" in the sense of being an alternative community which in its very existence illuminates the surrounding darkness and challenges of the gods of the age.

In conclusion, I would again like to thank the respondents and to add a personal comment. If I were not a Christian I would be pessimistic about the present situation. As Christians, however, we should be able to see clearly the unflattering truth about ourselves and our world without recourse to self-deceiving machinations (theological and otherwise). Our confidence is not in ourselves and not in the world but in "the God who gives life to the dead and calls into existence the things that do not exist." It is this one in whom we trust and on whom we depend for a rebirth of faith and faithfulness.