

## Christian Studies

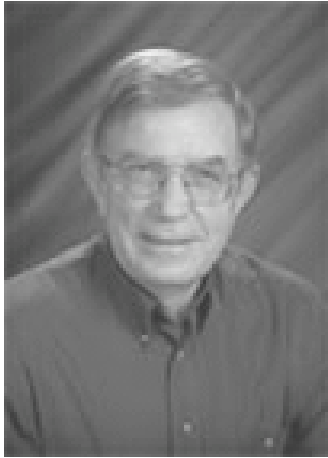
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## In Memoriam



Dr. Mike White  
1938–2007

Dr. Mike White, son of John and Frances White, was born November 26, 1938, in Danville, Illinois. He died August 31, 2007, while visiting his son Paul in Oklahoma City, Oklahoma. Mike received his undergraduate degree from Harding College where he met Gwen Combest, whom he married in 1960. After graduating from Harding, Mike entered the University of Illinois where he received his Ph.D. in Chemistry. Mike came to the University of Texas in 1966, where he held the Robert A. Welch Chair in the Department of Chemistry.

Mike published over 650 scholarly articles and graduated more than 50 doctoral students, many of whom are now teaching in universities around the world. In 2004 Mike

began a joint research appointment with Pacific Northwest National Laboratory in Washington State, where at the time of his death he was director of the Department of Energy's Institute for Interfacial Catalysis.

Mike was a longtime member and elder of the Brentwood Oaks Church of Christ in Austin and served on the Board of Austin Graduate School of Theology. Mike is survived by his wife Gwen; son Mark and daughter-in-law Melissa; daughter RaeAnne and son-in-law Todd Landrum and their children; and his son Paul. He is also survived by his mother, Frances, and four siblings.

A friend and administrative associate described Mike as “a mentor, a teacher, a friend, a model for righteous living, and a loving husband, father, and granddad. He treated those he met with respect and generosity, and his passing leaves a mighty gap in not just the academic and scientific community but also in the circles of faith in which he served and lived.”

Mike's common exhortation to friends was “Press on.” And we will press on; and because of having walked a part of the journey with Mike, we will do so with more resolve, and courage, and expectancy than had we not known him.

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## From Mystery to Mastery: Christo-Paganism Then and Now

Michael R. Weed

Differences regarding the nature of worship assemblies have disturbed American churches and synagogues for the last several decades. Revising the nature of worship assemblies reflects the influence of many factors in addition to the respective theological and liturgical traditions of different religions. Virtually all religious groups in America—Protestants, Catholics, and Jews—are experiencing major changes in the way the role of religion in their lives is understood. This is especially true with regard to the nature and purpose of worship assemblies.

A non-theological factor is also recognized as contributing to this development; namely, the plurality of religions and especially numerous versions of Christianity with differing ways of “doing worship” within specific traditions. This plurality has meant that regardless of church doctrine and church polity, religious groups compete with one another in attracting members from a broad pool of self-identifying but unattached believers and curious nonbelievers, referred to as “seekers.” Or, from another perspective, individual believers and believing families are faced with many options as they search for a church (or synagogue) which offers what they are looking for or which “meets their needs.” And as often as not, the criteria employed in finding a church have little to do with the historic beliefs of specific religious traditions or their doctrinal commitments. Surveys indicate that a high per-

centage of “church shoppers” list among their primary criteria for choosing a church such considerations as “accessibility” and “well run programs and activities for the children.”

A major factor contributing to the present situation is the indisputable fact that America has become a nation of spectators and entertainment consumers. Television offers instant entertainment—and distraction—in American homes twenty-four hours a day. Teachers, parents, and advertisers know that TV-watching, unlike reading, requires little concentration or attention and develops no particular skills. Not surprisingly, the attitudes and expectations that are being shaped and molded by the inescapable presence of the entertainment culture are not only being manifested in American schools; they are also being reflected in American churches and synagogues—and especially in worship assemblies.

Further, over the last several decades, intentional efforts have been made to adapt worship practices to popular tastes and trends of the surrounding culture. Surveys and questionnaires are now regularly consulted by church leaders in order to determine the type of music attractive to non-Christians, and worship is planned accordingly (e.g., music with fast-paced tunes and simple repetitive lyrics). In some up-to-date “worship centers,” well-placed coffee kiosks and the smell of popcorn are intended to put modern mall shoppers “in a good mood” and make them “feel comfortable.”<sup>1</sup>

It should be noted that strategic adaptations of the Christian faith intended to minimize its jars and clashes with the beliefs, attitudes, and tastes of non-Christian cultures were initiated many centuries ago. A classic example of this approach is evidenced in the missionary strategy advised by Pope Gregory in his letter to Augustine (later Bishop of Canterbury) and the party of monks whom Gregory had commissioned as missionaries to England in

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. John Parker, “Guide for the Perplexed,” *Touchstone* (Jul/Aug, 2006), 19.

596. In a letter dated July 18, 601, Pope Gregory clearly commends a policy of tactical accommodation to English paganism, advising Augustine and his companions that

the heathen temples of these people need not be destroyed, only the idols which are to be found in them. . . . And since the people are accustomed, when they assemble for sacrifice, to kill many oxen in sacrifice to the devils, it seems reasonable to appoint a festival for the people by way of exchange.<sup>2</sup>

This strategy of adaptation and accommodation to pagan cultures was carried out with numerical success and lies behind the evolution of St. Valentine's Day, Halloween, and the reshaping of the archangel Michael in the model of old Irish heroes. Centuries later, Spanish missionaries accompanying the conquistadors to Central and South America employed the same method of adaptation and adoption from which, among many other similar developments, evolved the Christo-pagan festival, *Dia de los Muertos* ("Day of the Dead").

It should be observed that in adapting the Christian faith to surrounding cultures, the church was accommodating Christianity to a mysterious world. It was a world inhabited by many religions, both crude and sophisticated, which at numerous sites and shrines, and through ancient and mysterious rites, variously related their devotees and adherents to a universe rife with good and evil supernatural powers and forces. Through this strategy of intentionally adapting Christian faith to the spiritualities of pagan environments, the church inevitably developed its own sacred sites, rites, and a panoply of intermediaries and intercessors—saints and martyrs—intended to replace their pagan counterparts. However unintentional, the result of such strategies was that paganism left an indelible stamp on Christian missions.

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<sup>2</sup> Stephen Neill, *A History of Christian Missions* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, Ltd., 1966), 68.

### **The New Adaptation: From Mystery to Mastery**

With the sweeping cultural changes—intellectual and spiritual—which accompanied the arrival of the Renaissance (1350 ff.) and the Enlightenment (1650 ff.), earlier adaptations of Christianity to the world of paganism soon proved a liability. The growing perception of an ordered universe operating according to discoverable physical laws pushed back the boundaries of ignorance and superstition. To be certain, a universe ordered according to laws discoverable by the human mind could support belief in the existence of a rational God. But the vision of such a universe also evoked unprecedented confidence in human abilities not only to comprehend the universe but also (employing knowledge of the workings of the universe—“natural laws”) to exercise increasing degrees of mastery over the seemingly “natural world.” Since the Enlightenment, attitudes associated with this outlook have continued to accelerate through modern science and technology’s relentless advances in mastering both the micro- and the macro-universes.

With immediate and practical applications to everyday life, the world of modern science quickly displaced the old world of mystery. The new and exciting world emerging was a world of problems to be solved and frontiers to be mastered through the continuing applications of human reason through science and technology. Telephones, automobiles, airplanes, air-conditioning, and television, not to mention medical advances and space travel, all in effect “sacramentally” validate and sustain the new “sacred cosmos” of science and technology which has extended its aura throughout the world over the past four centuries.

Not surprisingly, over the past several centuries Christianity has both consciously and unconsciously adapted itself to the emerging “sacred cosmos” of modernity in a manner similar to its earlier adaptations to the prevailing polytheistic environments. Understandably, adaptations of Christian-

ity to modern scientific and technological cultures are radically different from older Christo-paganisms. The incipient self-confidence in human mastery of the environment which becomes characteristic of modern Christo-paganism is clearly evidenced by nineteenth-century revivalist of the Second Great Awakening, Charles G. Finney. In 1835, in a lecture defending revivalism titled “What a Revival of Religion Is,” Finney clearly and candidly described the phenomenon of religious revivals by stating:

There is nothing in religion beyond the ordinary powers of nature. It consists entirely in the *right exercise* of the powers of nature. It is just that, and nothing else. . . . It is not a miracle, or dependent on a miracle, in any sense. It is a purely philosophical result of the right use of the constituted means—as much so as any other effect produced by the applications of means.<sup>3</sup>

Over a century and a half later, modern church growth exponent Rick Warren evidences that Finney’s “Christo-pragmatism” is perhaps even more suited to contemporary minds. In his best-selling church growth manual, *The Purpose Driven Church*, Warren exhorts church leaders that “healthy churches don’t need gimmicks to grow.” Warren tells his readers that “healthy churches grow the way God intends”—“they grow naturally.”<sup>4</sup> Following this, Warren explains how his Saddleback Church has carefully engineered its numerical success through such strategies as “not using songs with minor keys”<sup>5</sup> and “by avoiding ‘dead time’ in worship services to accommodate those with MTV- shortened attention spans.”<sup>6</sup> Warren also recommends

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<sup>3</sup> Charles G. Finney, *Lectures on Revivals of Religion* (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1960, orig. 1835), 13.

<sup>4</sup> Rick Warren, *The Purpose Driven Church* (Zondervan, 1995), 17.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 287.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 255.



that “doubling the light wattage in your worship center (he advises ‘secretly’) alters ‘the mood and may cause ‘a revival’.”<sup>7</sup>

Fifteen centuries earlier, Gregory’s missionaries adapted the Christian faith to the outlook, beliefs, and habits of seventh-century English pagans. The result was a Christian faith combined with a paganism which believed in countless mysterious supernatural forces—angels, demons, nymphs, sprites, ogres, fairies—who were believed variously to intersect human lives in the home, in the forests and fields, and in the market place.

Similarly, Rick Warren’s strategies adapt the Christian faith to the familiar taken-for-granted outlook of modern twentieth-century men and women. The result is a religious “outlook” which evidences a pre-committed confidence in “scientific” means-ends reasoning and thus pragmatically employs contemporary advertising strategies and promotional techniques with the same good intentions with which Gregory and earlier accommodationists adapted Christian faith to their own intellectual and spiritual environments.<sup>8</sup>

### Three Prophetic Voices

Not surprisingly, the evolution of the assumptions and outlook of modernity—and especially the influence of modernity on modern religion has not been without critics.

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 206.

<sup>8</sup> For example, Rick Warren encourages readers of *The Purpose Driven Church* to: “Figure out what mood you want your service to project, then create it.” (264); “We start positive and end positive.” (271); “We use humor in our services . . . it is not a sin to help people feel good.” (272); “Cultivate an informal, relaxed, and friendly atmosphere.” (272); “We made a strategic decision to stop singing hymns in our seeker services.” (285); “We have attracted thousands more because of our music.” (285); “Saddleback now has a complete pop/rock orchestra.” (290); “Use more performed music than congregational singing . . .” (291) (emphasis on entertainment); “The ground we have in common with unbelievers is not the Bible, but our common needs, hurts, and interests as human beings. You cannot start with a text . . .” (295); “make your members feel special . . . they need to feel special” (320, 323).

Within roughly a decade of Finney's observations, on the other side of the Atlantic Ocean, the enigmatic Søren Kierkegaard was engaged in writing searing attacks upon the state church of Denmark. With his satirical invectives, Kierkegaard ridiculed the spiritual impotence and corruption of the Danish church. Among other things, Kierkegaard charged the state church with having abandoned the Christianity of the New Testament.<sup>9</sup> With biting satire he also accused the Danish state church of having "out-miracled" Jesus. Kierkegaard observed that whereas Jesus had turned water into wine, the modern church had turned the wine back into water.<sup>10</sup>

With the popularity of books like Rick Warren's *The Purpose Driven Church* it is ironic, though no doubt insightful, that Warren himself predicts that the key issue for churches in the twenty-first century will not be church growth: it will be "church health."<sup>11</sup> Although Warren is not explicit, one wonders if he is reflecting on the long-term effects of strategic dilution—even trivialization—of Christian faith.<sup>12</sup> Warren's prediction appears to be receiving some support from recent surveys indicating significant dissatisfaction among megachurch members. For example, Willow Creek Community Church in suburban Chicago with 17,000 weekend worshipers recently found

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<sup>9</sup> Kierkegaard repeatedly juxtaposes "New Testament Christianity" and "the Christianity of the New Testament" to the church of his time. See his *Attack Upon Christendom* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1968).

<sup>10</sup> Søren Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling* (New York: Doubleday & Company, 1954), 48. Among other things, Kierkegaard also criticized worship services with trained choruses which he saw as reducing would-be worshippers into passive audiences. Kierkegaard suggested that God is the audience; the congregations are the performers.

<sup>11</sup> Warren, 17.

<sup>12</sup> One wonders if "church health" will be a major concern in part because "church growth" churches, weakened by preoccupations with lighting and fast-paced entertainment-style worship, and mistrustful of leaders because of manipulative and covert methods, will be unable to engage the onset of boredom as they fail to keep pace with ever-pressing demands for newer—larger, louder, faster, brighter—distractions.

that involvement of church members in “church activities” was not being accompanied by spiritual growth. One of Willow Creek’s ministers is quoted as saying, “We found our people were hungry for more . . . they wanted to go deeper with the Bible. They wanted to go deeper with personal spiritual practices.”<sup>13</sup>

Finally, Neil Postman, a Jewish social critic, professor at New York University, and one of the first to study the impact of technology on modern culture, specifically called attention to the impact of television on education and religion. In his book *Amusing Ourselves to Death* (1985), Postman warned that

on television, religion, like everything else, is presented, quite simply and without apology, as an entertainment. Everything that makes religion an historic, profound and sacred human activity is stripped away; there is no ritual, no dogma, no tradition, no theology, and above all, no sense of spiritual transcendence. On these shows . . . God comes out second banana.

Postman made two further observations:

There is no great religious leader—from Buddha to Moses to Jesus to Mohammed to Luther—who offered people what they want. Only what they need. But television is not well suited to offering people what they need. It is “user friendly.” It is too easy to turn off. . . . As a consequence, what is preached on television is not anything like the Sermon on the Mount. Religious programs are filled with good cheer. They celebrate affluence.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> “Willow Creek finds limits to its model,” *Christian Century*, January 29, 2008, 16. In this article, researcher Diana Butler Bass reports having interviewed “dozens and dozens of people” leaving megachurches for churches which provide a deeper level of Christian faith. See also Mark Galli, “A Deeper Relevance: Why Many Evangelicals Are Attracted to That Strange Thing Called Liturgy,” *Christianity Today* (May 2008), 29-41.

<sup>14</sup> Neil Postman, *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business* (New York: Viking Penguin, Inc., 1985), 121.

Then, an especially sobering reminder for modern Christians to hear from a non-Christian, Postman notes:

I believe I am not mistaken in saying that Christianity is a demanding and serious religion. When it is delivered as easy and amusing, it is another kind of religion altogether.<sup>15</sup>

### **Another Kind of Religion Altogether**

Indeed, “another kind of religion,” is a risk associated with all adaptations of Christianity to human cultures. Modernity, however, with its indisputable accomplishments in science and technology, constantly threatens to attract human trust away from the transcendent Creator to confidence in the creature’s ability to master the natural, the social, and—increasingly—the spiritual environments.

William Willimon has suggested that contemporary Christians must be self-consciously and intentionally countercultural. Modern culture has been compared to the undertow at the beach: it is relentless, invisible, and dangerous. Christians should not be in the habit of raising wet fingers in the cultural winds—or constantly monitoring questionnaires and surveys—in order to accommodate modern tastes. Without an alternative frame of reference, accommodation is not strategy or a tactic; it is an inevitability.

As the eschatological community, the church incarnates a transcendent reality. As such, the church provides a vantage point from which to discern the pseudo-realities of a world which, estranged from its Creator, is estranged from its own nature and purpose.

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

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