

# (Reformers and Their Stepchildren) Postscript

by Leonard Verduin

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*Leonard Verduin explores the historical tensions between the Reformers and their radical counterparts, emphasizing the ongoing relevance of their struggles in contemporary faith and society.*

**Scripture:** John 17:14, Romans 12:2, James 4:4, 1 Peter 2:11, 1 John 2:15

**Topics:** "Church And Culture", "Faith Integration"

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## Description

Leonard Verduin discusses the historical rift between the Reformers and the men of the Second Front, focusing on the perennial problem of how the Church should relate to its environment, balancing being 'in the world but not of the world.' He highlights the tension between losing the Church's identity by being too worldly and becoming irrelevant by being too detached. Verduin emphasizes the importance of finding a middle ground, acknowledging the struggles faced by the Radicals of the Reformation who were often misunderstood but were proven right in many aspects over time. He warns against the dangers of too much accommodation to culture or too much detachment, advocating for a balanced approach in integrating faith and society.

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## Transcript

In this book we have dealt with the rift that developed between the Reformers of the sixteenth century and the men of the Second Front. This rift was the result of a problem that perennially besets the Church of Christ, the problem of how to relate that Church to its environment. It is the problem that is posed by the formula "in the world but not of the world." The history of the Church is, to a large extent, the story of a tension between two extreme tendencies: the one extreme makes so much of the principle "in the world" that the Church loses her identity; the other extreme makes so much of the principle "not of the world" that the Church becomes irrelevant. There is a frighteningly large element of truth in a sentiment expressed by Roland H. Bainton: "If there is no accommodation [to culture] Christianity is unintelligible and cannot spread; if there is too much accommodation it will spread, but will no longer be Christianity."! The way of orthodoxy is often the way of recovering equilibrium.

In this volume the Radicals of Reformation times receive more sympathetic treatment than they are wont to get, especially in the Reformed tradition. There are two reasons for this sympathetic treatment. One is that the time seems to have come to reverse the derogatory treatment to which these Stepchildren of the Reformation have been traditionally subjected. One can speak very well of them indeed before he becomes guilty of a bias as pronounced as that of those who have so long spoken evil of them; one can let

these Stepchildren play the role of the hero and he will be at least as near to historic truth as is the tradition that has so long assigned to them the role of the rogue.

A second reason for the sympathetic treatment given these Radicals of the Reformation is that history has to a large extent demonstrated that they were in a large way right. Little by little, step by step, item by item, Protestantism has, at least in the New World, come to endorse the very emphases for which these men pioneered. The free Church, the Church by voluntary association, the missionary Church, and a host of other features for which the Stepchildren agonized, have become part and parcel of the Protestant vision -- so much so that men are often surprised to learn that it was not always thus. It is not too much to say that in the New World, as well as among the so-called Younger Churches, the vision of the men of the Second Front has, to a large extent, fought through to victory. The First Amendment of the Federal Constitution of these United States, has, as has been intimated in this volume, carved out the kind of pluralistic situation for which the Stepchildren toiled; it has secured, by the highest law of the land, the kind of cultural and societal compositism for which they labored; it has laid low the sacralism against which they fought. And it has done so with apparent blessing. At the end of the New World experimentation with Old World sacralism, on the eve of the ratification of the Federal Constitution with its First Amendment, but six percent of the citizenry was Church-related; from that moment, the moment of the official repudiation of the sacral formula, dates the return to the Church, in a gradual increase, which without a single setback, has continued to this day, so that now the percentage of Church-relatedness stands in excess of sixty percent. When it is remembered that this is all strictly on a voluntary basis, with complete absence of the compulsions that go with the sacral formula, then it may be said that the American people have become the most religious people on earth. There are voices even in the Catholic Church[a] in the New World asserting that the Catholic Church is nowhere else in possession of the state of health in which it finds itself here. The heritage of the "heretic" seems therefore to be salubrious. For that reason also have we dealt kindly with it.

[a. We say "even in the Catholic Church" because of the fact that the Roman Catholic Church has not to this day rejected the sacral formula, nor officially espoused societal compositism.]

All this is not to say that the Stepchildren's solution of the Church's knottiest problem solves all her difficulties. No indeed. In fact, it raises some new ones. The problem with which they dealt, the problem of the mode d'integration of Church and society, is in the very nature of things ultimately and finally insoluble; that which derives from the resources supplied by the paliggenesia (the new birth) cannot be intergrated smoothly with that which has no other resources than those that are present in the unregenerate heart. Perhaps a *modus vivendi* (a way of getting along as best we may) is the best we can hope for, a being "in the world" without being "of the world."

This problem remains, even if and when the Stepchildren have their way. The Christian, in the New Testament sense of that word, is a sojourner. But to play well the part of a sojourner is no easy task. For a sojourner stands halfway between a native and a migrant; he must walk the thin line that separates total engagement from total disengagement. This can never become easy.

There are straws in the wind which indicate that the battle that raged at the Second Front is not ancient history and a thing of the past.

We shall mention a few.

There are, to begin with, certain overtones of the so-called ecumenical movement that leave the impression that sacralism is not quite dead, not even in the areas in which the First Amendment is in force.

Although it is indisputably true to say that whatever may be good and great in the American tradition developed in the climate of religious pluralism and denominational multiformity, one detects in the temper of some of the advocates of Church union a decidedly negative attitude toward America's past in this matter. We are asked to go in sackcloth because of the "sin of denominationalism" -- whatever that "sin" may be. What is this but to look askance upon a feature of the American landscape, a feature concerning which we have laboratory proof that it is a blessing, even if not an unmixed one?

Under the tutelage of such ecumenicalism, an "American religion" could be developing, a religiosity to which every right-thinking American would be expected to rally. This would be the "Common Faith" of which John Dewey spoke so oracularly. This could usher in a new sacralism; it could herald the coming of a new "right" religion. And that would call for the creation of a new Second Front; it would make needful again the creation of a Protest such as that of the Stepchildren in their day, against the everybody-embracing Church. Such a development would bring back into the parlance of men once again the expression "the fallen Church," or "the false Church."

[b. It is an alarming fact that in the literature advocating the amalgamation of all churches into a single church the concept of "the false Church" is virtually unknown; all that calls itself the Church is, so it seems, by that token entitled to the name.]

Closely related to the foregoing, and perhaps likewise indicative of an emerging neo-sacralism, is the revival on the contemporary scene of the medieval word "sectarian." Need it be pointed out that in the climate of authentic Americanism there can be no such thing as "sectarian"? This word is a correlative, a word that derives its meaning from a companion concept. Just as the word "wife" requires the concept "husband," just as the word "employer" requires the concept "employee," so does the word "sectarian" require the concept "sacral." A thing can be sectarian only in the climate of establishment. A sectary is, historically, etymologically, by definition, a person who deviates from the "right" religion. But as long as in America there is no "right" religion, that is, as long as the First Amendment stands unrepudiated, there can be no "sectarian" position. He who labels a thing "sectarian," or a man a "sectary," has already in substance embraced the idea of establishment, has already abandoned the postulate that in the American vision all religiosities are equally right in the eyes of the law. Such a man is already operating with the concept of a "right" religion; he has already embraced a new sacralism. And he is but one step 'short, and it is a short step, from the inevitable concomitant of all sacralism, namely, persecution for him who dissents from the "right" religion. He has done his bit to bring back the world against which the Stepchildren inveighed. He has already approximated the days of the Stepchildren, in which it was held that he who declares that the pope is the vicegerent of Christ is fully entitled to the Boor but that he who denies it must sit down and hold his peace. Theism is a "sectarian doctrine" only if and when atheism has been called the "right" position.

This brings us to the educational front in the contemporary American scene. Here the First Amendment, which was written in order to provide and secure a climate in which all religious persuasions would have equal rights before the law, which was intended to provide religious multiformity, is being quoted as though its intention had been to provide religious vacuity. The First Amendment, which was intended to preclude a too favorable position for one religious tradition (and the consequent handicap for the rest), has become a handicap for all religious orientations. This piece of legislation, intended to preclude the rise of sacralism in

the United States, is being quoted in support of a new sacralism, the sacralism of secularism. The upshot of all this is that, in the classroom, he who believes that the universe is "running" talks at the top of his voice while he who believes that the universe is "run" must prudently lower his voice. This handicap for the person of the latter conviction is an intolerable violation of the First Amendment, which forbids the highest law of the land to prevent the free exercise of religion no less than it forbids the "establishment" thereof.c

[c. How a member of the Supreme Court can argue that the First Amendment restrains the government of the land from "promoting a religion, all religion ..." is indeed difficult to understand. The First Amendment actually sets no limit to the extent to which the government can support "all religion" -- save the limit imposed by a policy of impartiality. As far as the first Amendment is concerned, laws could be passed whereby the salaries of clergymen and all other practitioners of religion would be paid in whole or in part with public funds -- just so there be no partiality shown. This would merely be to extend to the civilian area certain policies that are already in vogue in the military; the First Amendment is not being violated when the salary of an army chaplain is paid; violation would occur if and when a partiality toward the Protestant (or Catholic) chaplain is evinced.]

Although the First Amendment officially repudiates sacralism, and so endorses the views for which the men of the Second Front fought, the repudiation of sacralism has not as yet become the heritage of every individual American. That this is so, and the extent to which it is so, became apparent during the campaign of the late and much lamented President Kennedy. There were many Americans who were against Kennedy because he was a Roman Catholic in his religious loyalties. Their tacit assumption was that the "right" religion in America is some version of Protestantism. These people were blissfully unaware of the decidedly un-American nature of this stance in the matter; they were blissfully ignorant of the fact that their pose is a direct rejection of the highest law of the land; they were blissfully unmindful of the fact that theirs is an essentially medieval position, one that has bathed the world in blood and tears."

In all events, the battle that raged at the Second Front is a battle that did not end with those who fought there. It is part of an Eighty Years' War, a contest in which generations succeeding each other will be involved. For this reason the story that we have sought to tell in this volume will be useful reading for all who come after them and who seek to fight the good fight of faith.

[d. It is of course an altogether different question whether a Roman Catholic can with good conscience take the oath of office. The Roman Catholic Church has not openly, much less officially, repudiated the sacral formula -- which he who promises to support the Constitution must repudiate. In situations where she can get away with it, the Catholic Church leaves no stone unturned to impose serious civil handicap upon all who dissent from her position. And she does this with the full knowledge and approval of those who govern her affairs. In view of these incontestable facts it is not incorrect to hold that in order to take the oath of office as President of the United States one must be either an off-color American or an off-color Catholic. When John F. Kennedy made it unequivocally clear that he was the latter, declared in very clear terms that he shared heartily in the American rejection of sacralism, then there was no further reason to oppose his candidacy on this score. (How he could do this without thereby coming under the rebuke of the Catholic Church leaders is a question by itself.) His career in office, from the very beginning to the hour of infamy on the streets of Dallas, left little to be wished for in the matter of fidelity to the American principle of a-sacralism.]

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## Bibliographical Footnotes

\*For abbreviations used in these notes, see List of Abbreviations, p. 10.

### INTRODUCTION

Cf. Luther's Commentary on Genesis 41:45 (Werke, St. Louis Edition, Vol. II., col. 417).

### CHAPTER I (DONATISTEN!)

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3. Cf. Origen, Contra Celsum, VIII, 69.
4. We are dependent here upon Leo Pfeffer, op. cit.
5. Details in this paragraph are derived from W. H. C. Frend, The Donatist Church (Oxford, 1952).
6. Cf. Codex Theodosianus, XVI, 1:2.
7. Quellen Hesse, p. 381."
8. Cf. Adolf Harnack, "Die Didache und die Waldenser," in Texte und Untersuchungen zur Geschichte der Altchristliche Literatur (Leipzig, 1886), S. 269.
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13. Cornelius, II, 18.
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17. Corpus, cf.. Vol. I, p. 143.
18. Quellen Hesse, pp. 111f.
19. Ibid., pp. 112f.
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21. The University of Michigan has a microfilm copy of this translation.

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6. The correspondence from which we quote may be consulted in *Fontes Rerum Austriacarum*, Band 19. Cf. also *Revue d'Histoire et de Religieuses* for 1951, No.!.

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9. Ibid., p. 231.

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13. This and surrounding quotations are from the Dutch translation of Beza mentioned earlier.

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15. For data see H. Q., *De Kerkhervorming in Vlaanderen* (Arnhem, 1868), Part II, pp. 149, 154, 166, 170, 186, 209.

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#### POSTSCRIPT

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