

Christianity and Communication. By F. W. DILLISTONE. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1956. 156 pages. \$3.00.

No topic is more timely than the problem of communicating Christianity to the modern world, and no one is better equipped to deal with it than Dean F. W. Dillistone. His *Christianity and Communication* is a sober warning to Christians, and especially to Protestants, that unless they can come to terms with the mass media of our age, they may find themselves left at the post. He urges them to recognize in modern art forms, not the negation of hallowed tradition, but the working of the Holy Spirit toward a more effective proclamation of the Gospel. Whether such novelties as the jazz mass are in fact constructive remains to be determined. But in his approach to such innovations, the Christian is advised to be quite as experimental as the scientist.

The author's plea for a fuller exploitation of visual imagery and artistic symbolism, however, raises a still more fundamental question: Are all cultural forms religiously neutral, so that they may be indifferently incorporated into *any* religious system? Or do they express ideas and ideals which in any given case might contradict Christianity? Advocates of a fuller use of art forms by the Church frequently overlook this question, or rather, by neglecting it they imply the religious neutrality of cultural patterns. The author himself appears to imply this at times when he suggests that if we can only see things from our neighbor's perspective, by an effort of what he calls "imaginative identification," we will find that we agree with him. On this basis, he sees no difficulty in combining the biblical "history of Jesus" with a platonic "myth of Christ."

But there is a difficulty, nevertheless, despite the fact that this view is currently gaining ground in England through the influence of Austin Farrar and E. L. Mascall. The difficulty occurs at the point where the theologian is obliged either to embrace all symbols indiscriminately, or to allow that some are more revelatory than others. If he takes the former horn of the dilemma, he has exchanged the determinate, discriminating God of the Bible for the undifferentiated "infinite" of Hinduism. If he chooses the latter, then he has after all subordinated art

forms and symbols to a non-visual criterion. Rather than abandon the biblical God, Dean Dillistone chooses the latter alternative. Indeed, he makes a special point of showing how the dominant myths of modern culture all reflect, at least to some extent, an anti-Christian world view, whether political, scientific, or materialistic. It thus appears that Christianity may not appropriate uncritically whatever cultural forms lie ready to hand, but must subject them instead to a searching criticism, transforming those which can become the bearers of its own distinctive worldview, and discarding those which cannot. As the author says, we must be prepared, like Jeremiah, to do some demolition before we can begin construction.

Historic Christianity has tended either to ignore the necessity for demolition, or else to concentrate exclusively upon it. Roman Catholicism, in its desire to communicate at all costs, has tended toward compromising accommodation with pagan culture. Protestantism, reacting to the other extreme, has insisted upon a disjunction between Christianity and culture, and thereby sometimes hidden the light of the Gospel under a bushel. The solution must lie in the articulation of distinctively Christian standards of discrimination whereby Roman Catholics could more critically evaluate cultural forms, Protestants could more readily appropriate them, and both together could transform them into bearers of the Word. The systematic elaboration of such criteria, however, the author leaves to the reader, or perhaps to another book.

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