BOOK REVIEW:

Carson, D.A. THE GAGGING OF GOD: CHRISTIANITY CONFRONTS PLURALISM. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan

Reviewed by
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D. A. Carson is a Canadian missionary and scholar working in Christian higher education in the U.S. He has been a lecturer in New Testament at Trinity International University for a number of years. He now serves as research professor of the divinity school. *The Gagging of God*, subtitled, "Christianity Confronts Pluralism," is Carson's latest book and may be considered by some his Twentieth Century *magnum opus*, not so much because of the book's size (640 pages) but on account of the substantive challenge with which it deals: the writer is seriously concerned about what he perceives to be the inroads pluralism is making within the ranks of Christianity.

Pluralism, Carson acknowledges, is an extraordinarily difficult topic to define, therefore the first task he sets himself in the first chapter is to clarify his understanding of the term. In the writer's opinion there are essentially three phenomena which embrace the concept today: "Empirical pluralism, cherished pluralism, and philosophical or hermeneutical pluralism." The first variety may be seen as "the sheer diversity of race, value system, heritage, language, culture, and religion in many Western and some other nations" (13). By itself this growing variety is innocent enough, but does provide the climate for syncretism and the "virulent variety," which is taken up later on the book. "Cherished pluralism" is not so much a different kind of pluralism as it is a positive attitude towards the reality of empirical pluralism. The "giant" which Carson attempts to slay in his book, or at least expose, is philosophical pluralism, which is the posture which asserts that "any notion that a particular ideological or religious claim is intrinsically superior to another is *necessarily* wrong." [his emphasis]

This, according to Carson, has been the philosophical underpinning of post-modernism

and the recent approach to hermeneutics called deconstruction.

A major concern of the author is to help Christians understand the impact of philosophical pluralism on our culture. He observes that in just twenty-five years this new way of viewing reality has gripped Western intelligentsia for the most part and has wielded no little influence on the man in the street as well, providing both strata with a convenient basis for their relativistic approach to life.

Further impact of philosophical pluralism is to be seen in politics and law, which "trivialize all values [and] all religious devotion," as well as in the print and electronic media. The influence is so pervasive that it appears that no stratum of society is left untouched. In this regard pluralism's influence in the religious arena is perhaps the most worrisome matter to Carson, himself an avowed Evangelical—an influence which poses serious threat to the very evangel itself. If the gospel is to be understood as God's only remedy for the human condition, then it needs to be borne in mind that

> Exclusivism is the one religious idea that cannot be tolerated [by philosophical pluralism]. Correspondingly, *proselytism* [author's emphasis] is a dirty word. [Here] one cannot fail to observe a crushing irony: the gospel of relativistic tolerance is perhaps the most 'evangelistic' movement in Western culture at the moment, demanding assent and brooking no rivals. (33).

After the initial chapter which defines and delineates some of the major challenges of contemporary pluralism, the book is then divided into four parts:

1. Hermeneutics, 2. Religious Pluralism, 3. Christians in a Pluralistic Culture, and 4. Pluralism Within the Camp.

Part one, consisting of two chapters, traces the roots and development of post-modernism and its close relative, philosophical pluralism. Giving due recognition to the pitfalls of a historical panorama at this juncture, Carson conveniently identifies modernity as the starting point of what he labels as our present day "hermeneutical morass." Many scholars view Frenchman Rene Descartes as the philosopher whose name is synonymous with the advent of modernity—the movement which began the process of the "taming of truth." Descartes and his disciples, we are told, attempted to make reason the proper basis for all knowledge. This eventually led to the assumption by many that absolute certainty was indeed attainable. This faith in man's cognitive powers was also coupled with an equally confident reliance on the methodology of science. With much success in the latter arena, modernity's confidence received a great boost and near universal acknowledgement.

The realm of religion and theology did not remain untouched. Conservatives too joined the ranks of those who believed that a good mind and rigorous method guaranteed truth, thus unwittingly buying into the culture of modernism.

"Even in this century" writes Carson,

> some Bible colleges and seminaries have given the impression that rigorous training in Greek, Hebrew, and exegesis will almost guarantee an orthodox outcome in one's theology. Until recently, some have prided themselves in their ignorance of historical theology, judging it to be more or less a waste of time.... There was almost no reflection on how the culture of our age affects us as we engage in interpretation (64).

But the confidence in human ability did not continue indefinitely. Movements such as the new hermeneutic and its more radical step-child, deconstruction, have effectively eclipsed it and the modernity with which it was associated. Modernity itself was not monolithic. As Carson points out, within a generation after Descartes, the cartesian influence had begun to wane, due to the likes of Benedict de Spinoza. He was not alone. English deism also played its role.

The man who is credited with sowing the seeds of modernism's destruction is Emmanuel Kant. Like other shapers of modernity, Kant also

> insisted on absolute intellectual autonomy. But in *The Critique of Pure Reason*, Kant argued for a position that has become an axiom of post-modernism. He argued that the self does not so much discover what is objectively out there in the world, but *projects* order creatively upon the world (67).

The process of growth was slow (two centuries, according to Carson) but sure. The seed-bed of modernism was destined to transform itself into the forest of post-modernism.

With the neat subject/object distinctions of modernism challenged by the Kantian approach, it was now left to thinkers like Heidegger, Gadamer and Wittgenstein to attempt a complete overthrow of modernism's hermeneutical paradigm. But it would take more than the replacement—the new hermeneutic—to trumpet the disappearance of objective truth.

The responsibility for that belongs to another movement begun in France when the new Hermeneutic was approaching its peak. The new movement known as radical hermeneutics is associated with names like

Ferdinand de Saussure (Structuralism) and Jacques Derrida (Deconstruction). Whereas in structuralism the arbitrary nature of words is exploited, it is the weakness of language to make reference to reality that is the focus of thinkers like Derrida.

Part 2 of Carson's exposé focuses attention on religious pluralism, in five chapters of exposition and evaluation. "Philosophical pluralism in the religious arena," Carson informs us, "has certain affinities to various forms of universalism, some of which have been around for a long time". With this assertion the reader is taken on a journey back in time to establish a connection between third century universalism and that of our own day. On the journey important distinctions are made with respect to the various forms of universalism, but the writer assures us that essential to the view is the belief that no human being eventually will be lost. This commitment provides common ground for religious pluralists today. Although Carson recognizes that Karl Barth did not fully espouse universalism, his name is one of the first to be mentioned in this phase of the discussion. Here it is pointed out that Barth's hope of the ultimate salvation of all mankind was made possible by re-defining the view of election coming out of the Reformation period. Other theologians, notably Brunner and J.A.T. Robinson, are also cited for their contribution to the debate. Some of them see tension and even contradiction in the biblical texts, which speak about the ultimate destiny of the saved and unsaved.

Perhaps the most radical of the universalists-pluralists in our day is John Hick. According to Carson, he is the most influential scholar among the lot. Carson points out that Hick's view moved from conservative to controversial when Hick's theological centre of gravity shifted from *"Christocentrism to theocentrism."* This allowed him to focus more attention on "God," which later for Hick became nothing more than a depersonalized *Reality*. As such God now becomes the salvific entity for all religions whether they recognize "him" or not.

Carson feels that such universalistic/pluralistic affirmations must not go unchallenged. If God has spoken, if God has given us a particular revelation, then that revelation should become normative in any discussion regarding universalism or its antithesis, exclusivism—notwithstanding the various approaches to the question of revelation. The approach which does justice to all the data at hand, in Carson's view, is the one which recognizes the close connection between the doctrine of God and bibliology, because "the God of the Bible is a God who acts and talks. He is personal." This truth is both "rich and complex," expressing itself in propositional terms, though not reduced to such expressions. Given this position, avows the author, "both

orthodoxy and heresy are possible" (175).

With the statement of his position on biblical veracity, Carson attempts to demonstrate how the exegesis of many pluralists leaves much to be desired, precisely because of their selective and arbitrary handling of the biblical texts. Case in point:

> At the 1993 Annual Meetings of the American Academy of Religion and Society of Biblical Literature, one scholar read a paper offering a postmodern interpretation of I Corinthians 8:1-6. He argued that in this passage Paul is a polytheist correcting the error of monotheism in the Corinthian church. One of my colleagues rose to his feet during the question period and asked the speaker if this was supposed to be a serious exegesis of I Corinthians 8. The speaker replied affirmatively. My colleague replied with words to this effect: "Then isn't it incumbent on you to justify your interpretation, which you confess to be idiosyncratic, by arguments that refute other readings and show yours to be right?" The speaker promptly responded that he was not claiming his interpretation was right or correct; how could he, if he was offering a postmodern reading? So my colleague continued, "I thought you might answer that way. Then what would you say if I read your paper and interpreted it as a defense of Pauline monotheism and an implicit rejection of postmodern thought?" The speaker responded, "You can interpret my paper any way you want to. What do you expect me to do? Have a foundation for my belief?"
>
> I suppose he was consistent.

In light of such a "hermeneutical morass," as Carson calls it, how then should we live? The situation may be alarming, but the author of *The Gagging of God* strongly argues that nothing jeopardizes the objectivity of divine revelation, be it the culture-relatedness of truth, which is undeniable, or the cultural relativity seeking to domesticate it. What must be taken seriously by the Christian is the entire deposit of truth, "the whole counsel of God," summarized in the Bible's story-line and the robust christological model (denied by Pluralists) that is richly woven into its royal fabric. This approach to the Bible, Carson is confident, holds the best promise of providing Christians with an authentic and comprehensive picture of the world.

Following this, Carson then presents a panoramic view of the Bible's plot-line, from Genesis to Revelation, engaging various disparate positions along the way. Important biblical themes such as creation, the *imago Dei*, accountability and dependence, the fall and God receive brief

but responsible treatment. These themes are then used to evaluate today's expressions of pluralism and inclusivism.

A variety of inclusivist positions are identified by Carson. "Soft" inclusivists are those who hold out the bare possibility that some may be saved quite apart from the proclamation of the Gospel. "Hard" inclusivists are those who are just a hair's breadth away from pluralism. For this brand of inclusivism the knowledge of Christ is not absolutely necessary for salvation, since all the saved enter the Kingdom on the basis of Christ's work. These "believers" simply trust God as they have come to know him. On this score Carson argues that both pluralists and "hard" inclusivists are too selective with the biblical evidence.

But what about post-mortem evangelism (i.e., the belief that all those who died without having heard the gospel will get a chance to do so). One proponent is Clarke Pinnock, who also embraces some form of inclusivism. It is very difficult, says Carson, why anyone would want to hold these two positions at the same time, since they both seem to cancel each other out.

As Carson continues to engage inclusivists, both from within and outside the Evangelical camp, he isolates and discusses a number of texts that are often thought crucial and problematic, even for exclusivists. These are, to name a few, Mt. 7:14; 25:31-46; Lk. 15; Jn. 14:6 and Rom. 2:14-16.

The third major division of the book, comprising two chapters, looks at the impact of pluralism on various segments of Western culture. After pointing out that this culture is in serious trouble (particularly because of the waning influence of Judeo-Christian assumptions), institutions like government, the judiciary, education, as well as matters of ethics/morals and religious freedom are examined, and an embryonic Christian response articulated.

Carson's suggestion for the full participation of Christians to face the challenges of a post-modernist society includes having a wholistic vision of which route to take in becoming a part of the solution. Here certain preliminary issues must be faced. First, the Christian eschatological hope cannot be ignored, because, rightly understood, it provides the necessary balance between an overly optimistic social engagement on the one hand, and antipathy towards glaring human need, on the other. Second, the possibility and responsibility of Christians influencing the political process, must be exploited, despite the peculiar challenges in this arena. The third issue is best cast in the author's own bold type:

- **If we live in a pluralistic democracy, tensions inevitably arise between our obligation to persuade others of the truth and rightness of what we believe, and the obligation to allow them**

to disagree—not least because we want to be allowed the freedom to disagree with others (414).

Following the exploration of this thesis and a presentation of the proffered solutions of other thinkers, Carson then underscores the priority of the gospel in any strategy that is advanced to address the human condition. In the face of lingering Marxist criticism, nihilistic post-modernism, and the compromise of religious pluralism, Christians must demonstrate their commitment to the unfolding drama of redemption (the Bible's story-line) and carry out their obligation to proclaim the life transforming power of the evangel.

In light of the above, the final section entitled "Pluralism within the Camp" investigates the way in which western Evangelicalism is being affected by its post-modernist culture. Carson observes that Evangelicalism going into the 21st Century, though full of potential, is too much characterized by "selfism"—an evidence that it has bought into the culture of Western consumerism. This affects in a profound way how the gospel is presented in some circles, with a primary focus on meeting felt needs. Relevance becomes the buzz-word but the danger is that revelation is sacrificed. Consequently the primary frame of reference is no longer scripture but the social sciences, a trend Carson finds deplorable.

What then is the way forward in properly proclaiming the exclusive evangel? Five suggestions are delineated by the author: (1) The intellectual, moral, and existential climate of our age is to be "critiqued"; (2) our evangelistic endeavour must recognize the "paradigm shift" in world-views taking place in the West, and, like the apostle Paul in Athens, learn to modify our presentation to address that reality; (3) the rudiments of the historic gospel must be repeatedly proclaimed with authority and courtesy; (4) hard thinking must go into not only how we "lip" the gospel but how we live it; and (5) creative ways of Gospel proclamation, which remain faithful to NT patterns of evangelism, must be pursued in the spirit of boldness and dependence.

The penultimate chapter, "On Banishing the Lake of Fire," takes up the difficult and complex subject of the final judgement, and the last chapter addresses the issue of contextualization and globalization. "When is Spirituality spiritual? Reflections on Some Problems of Definition" is the topic of the appendix.

The appearance of this sizable volume may be reason enough to believe that evangelical scholarship on the threshold of the Third millennium is coming of age. The late F.F. Bruce, in his memoirs, pointed out that at the beginning of the century it appeared that

evangelical authors were few and far between. Today the situation has changed, some would say, dramatically. Witness the publication of other sizable contributions from scholars like Carl Henry, Leon Morris and, more recently, Gundry, Fee, Grudem and Bock. Others outside and within the camp have judged these works substantial and I believe *The Gagging of God* will be accorded a similar response.

I also believe that Carson should be applauded for his boldness in addressing such a controversial topic with sensitivity and skill. In this vein, one recalls his *Exegetical Fallacies* of the last decade, in which the interpretations of several NT scholars are called into question.

In this recent volume both NT and OT scholars are challenged for this or that reading of Scripture. Many will definitely question Carson's competence in taking on OT specialists such as Brueggemann and Goldingay, but few can doubt the author's breadth of scholarship, evidenced by the number of individuals with whom he interacts—not just those in the biblical and theological arena, but with others who work within the fields of the natural and social sciences as well. The bibliography alone is over forty pages.

Overall, one would have to say that Carson's fearless spirit displayed in writing this volume is also tempered with an attitude of fairness throughout, as he discusses countless contrary opinions. He is not afraid to criticize noted scholars even within the evangelical camp. In this regard, the reader should not be surprised to find names like Wells, Noll, Stott and Craig, himself a champion of a theistic "big bang" theory. (A few hold to a similar theistic connection, but the evidence, they say, seems to support the explosion at the climax of the universe and not the commencement).

Notwithstanding Carson's evenhandedness at many points in the book, sometimes the reader is left to wonder if the author is not guilty of the same kind of hubris against which he inveighs. *The Gagging of God* is about the defense of truth. Any one who writes in this vein faces the challenge of "speaking the truth in love". I hope that critics will judge the book's tone unoffensive.

More convincing is the author's thesis that post-modernism for the most part is epistemologically and hermeneutically bankrupt and nihilistic to the core. Yet this is essentially the philosophical posture of much of First World academia. As a penetrating critique of western culture, the book has to be judged a success.

Carson writes as a deeply concerned teacher, preacher and Christian. All those who wear these labels should read the book, particularly tertiary level students. Although the author primarily focuses attention on the North Atlantic culture, those living in the Caribbean should not

ignore his book on this count. If there is any truth to the dictum "North America sneezes; the Caribbean catches a cold," reading this work may even become obligatory.

The book is well organized and documented and, apart from a few untransliterated Greek words in text and footnotes, it is generally "user friendly." It is a pity, though, that Timothy Erdel's article on pluralism (*Binah* 1996) appeared too late for Carson's consideration. But can this be said of McGrath's book on the future of Evangelicalism and Brown's *Heresies*. It appears that the author is unaware of Tipler's *The Physics of Immortality*, which, I think, might have aided his case significantly. But all this would have made the book more bulky. The subject index does not include "Apologetics," which is dealt with on pages 184-9, and there are at least a couple of typos (e.g., on page 494, "the [sic] had their own CDs.,"). The date for Longenecker's article, cited on page 243, is also wrong. But these minor matters do not detract from the worthwhile contribution of the book.

In conclusion, I must say that as I read through *The Gagging of God* I found myself registering hearty agreements at many points, as the author denounces our decadent pluralistic culture. But when the searchlight was eventually focussed on my corner, I became uncomfortable. I am hoping, then, that other teachers will read the book and share my misery; hopefully together we will repent. I will let Carson have the last word on this matter:

> If postmodern thought has tried to gag God, unsuccessfully, by its radical hermeneutics and its innovative epistemology, the church is in danger of gagging God in quite another way. The church in Laodicea...makes the exalted Jesus gag.
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> I cannot escape the dreadful feeling that modern evangelicalism in the West more successfully effects the gagging of God, in this sense, than all the post-modernists together, in the other sense.... The things from which we must turn are not so much individual sins—greed, pride, sexual promiscuity, or the like, as ugly and as evil as they are—as fundamental heart attitudes that squeeze God and his Word and his glory to the periphery, while we get on with religion and self-fulfillment.