

By What Authority. The Rise of Personality Cults In American Christianity, Richard Quebedeaux, Harper and Row/ Fitzhenry, 1982; hc., 204 pp.

Does the "electronic church" have a message we need to hear today? What impact does it have upon society? The theme of Quebedeaux's book is the investigation of the electronic church, the leaders of popular religion, their influence and the authority they wield. The book stresses the social impact of the mass media and technological advance in modern America. It says that the ministry of the institutional church, its beliefs and its members are greatly affected by the popular religion transmitted by the mass media. Quebedeaux discusses the function of popular religion in modern America and traces the origin and development of the personality cult in contemporary popular religion.

Quebedeaux sharply criticizes the electronic church pointing out that its leadership is more interested in the appeal than the message. Celebrities appear to be the new leaders of American popular religion and as a result the gospel is blunted. God is not God of both wrath and love, but of love only. He is the good God who is within easy reach, who will meet the believers' everyday problems. Listeners are assured that if they submit to God the right decisions will be forthcoming. On the programs, suffering, like poverty, is viewed as a product of negative thought. The moral values are generally those espoused by the political right.

Television and, to a lesser extent, radio evangelists, focus on the causes and issues that bring a positive response. Because of the nature of television, the full gospel cannot be preached. The message is simple and direct. It gives the impression that everything is understandable and remediable. The public largely determines the content of the message. "The evangelists of the electronic church and their celebrity guests preach and teach the gospel of a good God who is able to save anyone and everyone who wills it, from poverty, ill-health, and, most of all, from boredom."

Quebedeaux writes about the well-known Oral Roberts, Jerry Falwell, the host of the "PTL Club" Jim Bakker, Pat Robertson of the "700 Club" fame, Rex Humbard of the "Cathedral of Tomorrow" and Robert Schuller with his "possibility thinking."

Quebedeaux gives an excellent evaluation of Schuller's methodology. This is worth noting as Schuller has made his influence felt in Reformed circles. As a matter of fact, he still is an ordained minister in the Reformed Church of America. "For Schuller, the foremost theoretician of popular religion in the 1980s, sin is negative thinking, original sin is a poor self-image, and hell is looking back on one's life to see 'what I could have become, but didn't.' Here everything is not only understandable and remediable, everything is achievable as well. Even tragedy, 'according to the Crystal Cathedral pastor, is not only remediable, it can be turned into an 'inspiring triumph' through possibility thinking, a belief epitomized in Schuller's slogan, 'The cross is a plus sign.'" Where does the electronic church get its authority? There is a crisis of authority in the Western world, a lack of knowledge among Christians, and a decline in the status of the professional ministry. Modern America is homeless as a result of the demise of

traditional values and authority pattern. The electronic church fills the vacuum. Celebrities appear to have the answer. "Born again (or otherwise religious) stars or superstars attain their status as 'leaders' simply by being famous, by being visible – as beauty queen, a pop singer, a corporate executive, a politician – and nothing else. Such a leader no longer needs a theological education and formal training and experience in the ministry, because success – in any field – gives them their authority."

Quebedeaux's critique is scathing. On television and radio you have no "prophets" but only "profits" he writes. The screen evangelists fail to acknowledge the reality of sin. In our culture of hedonism, entertainment and "the beautiful people," we need living saints. "If Christianity wishes to have a positive and transformative influence in America – to speak again with authority – its leaders will have to provide the one thing all modern Americans need most of all: a loving family and a home. And to do this it will have to have heroic leaders – strong saints – and a new medium to bring the church home in a more substantial way than the electronic church has done."

At times Quebedeaux is guilty of overkill. He says, for example, "The unaccommodating conservative forces – the fundamentalists – deliberately cultivated an attitude of ignorance and obscurantism." This is an unfair and inaccurate assessment. His discussion on the nature and authority of scripture is weak. He charges that "The doctrine of biblical inerrancy, based on the prepositional character of revelation, was formulated and systematized by fundamentalist theologians (mainly Presbyterian and Baptists) and popularized by the revivalists during the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries." This observation is both sweeping and not true to fact.

As the electronic church is in the limelight of public attention, Quebedeaux's book provides a thorough evaluation of this phenomenon. I find it one of the best contributions on the subject. I hope that this important book will be widely read. Quebedeaux, a well-known lecturer, is the author of *The Young Evangelicals*, *The New Charismatics*, and *The Worldly Evangelicals*.

. Johan D. Tangelder
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