

One New Book for the Preacher

Kimberly C. Richter
Central Presbyterian Church, Atlanta, Georgia

THE CULTURE OF DISBELIEF by Stephen L. Carter. Basic Books, 1993. 320 pages.

At Central Presbyterian Church, the separation of church and state is marked by about four lanes of traffic. From one of my office windows, I look out at the gold dome of the state capitol building across the street. From another office window I see city hall. On yet another side of the church building are county government offices. Meetings with government officials concerning pressing issues are a regular part of the pastoral and congregational life here. During the legislative session our church building is used for various groups who need meeting space. We go in and out of each other's doors frequently as good neighbors often do.

It is true, however, that we knock on the government's door more often than they knock on ours. There was a time when the voice of the church was valued by the state more than it is today. Into this current situation comes an important book, *The Culture of Disbelief*, by Stephen L. Carter. The subtitle of the book is: "How American Law and Politics Trivialize Religious Devotion." One of Carter's central points is that the separation of church and state was originally intended to protect the *church* from undue influence and control by the state. Today that concept operates in the reverse, protecting the state from the church or, more broadly, religions in general. This separation has led to the trivialization of religious devotion in American law and politics. And this trivialization, Carter contends, has undercut one of the major functions faith communities can have in a democracy.

Religions, Carter writes, can "fill the vast space between the people and the government created in their name—a space...that the government might otherwise fill by itself" (p. 36). He describes religions as independent centers of power, providing an independent moral voice that helps to prevent a democracy from turning into simple tyranny. As "autonomous intermediate institutions," religious communities can be places of resistance to state policy with which the religiously devout disagree. The Civil Rights movement of the 1960s is an example of the church exercising its calling to be an independent moral voice that resisted and helped to undo an unjust legal system. Carter's definition of religious communities echoes Martin Luther King, Jr. who said: "The Church must be reminded that it is not the master or the servant of the state, but rather the conscience of the state. It must be the guide and the critic of the state, and never its tool." (Excerpt from *Strength to Love*, New York: Harper, 1963.)

Rather than being a cause for fear, this function of religious communities should be seen as a strength. For, as Carter says, "Influence (which is not at all the same thing as authority) is precisely what we should want our churches to have, for that is how they serve democracy" (p. 39).

Of course, many of us *within* these religious communities are the most resistant to attempts to influence American law and politics. And there is a reason for our reluctance. Carter captures many of our prejudices or stereotypes when he writes, only half tongue-in-cheek, "Taking religion seriously is something that only those wild-eyed zealots do: Operation Rescue, blocking the entrance to abortion clinics...you know who we mean, those Christian fundamentalists...the evangelicals...the folks

who want classroom prayer in public schools, but think God doesn't hear the prayers of Jews...you know, those television preachers...those snake-charming faith healers...and John Cardinal O'Connor...and the 'scientific' creationists...*Southern Baptists*, for goodness sake!" (Emphasis his, p.24.)

Many of us have surrendered religious language and activism in the political and legal realm to the much-discussed "religious right." One of the chapters that explores quietude is Chapter 2 entitled, "God as a Hobby." In that phrase, Carter states succinctly what he believes is a critical issue for believers: Religious devotion is widely acceptable as long as it remains a private issue. God "as a hobby" is comfortable, but when God and the claims God makes upon our lives and behavior become part of our conversation and our way of living publicly, people get nervous. If we keep our faith to ourselves, we are judged to be "safe"; we may even be admired. But if we speak and act out of our faith convictions in the public arena, we are suspect, even shunned. No wonder many of us choose just to "stay out of it."

But Stephen Carter, a professor of law at Yale University and a devout Episcopalian, tells us that our own stereotypes and silence have helped to trivialize the place of religious devotion to the detriment and confusion of American public life. It is refreshing to hear someone speak unapologetically of how faith does and should influence our life together. This book is informative on many fronts and resists being labeled as presenting a "liberal" or "conservative" viewpoint on the proper place of religious devotion in the public arena. People who define themselves in either of these ways—or those who live in the vast middle ground—will find their opinions and perspectives at times confirmed and at times challenged by what Carter has to say.

His knowledge of law and of specific Supreme Court cases undergird the treatment of topics as wide-ranging as prayer in the public schools, school voucher systems, abortion, capital punishment, and euthanasia. Many of these issues are being debated not just in the political realm, but also in religious communities. Carter's book frames the discussion well for those of us who do not have background or training in the finer points of the legal system.

The Culture of Disbelief has informed not only my private wonderings about the place of faith in the public square, it has also found its way into a sermon or two. It is a comprehensive yet very readable treatment of a subject that deserves broad discussion in the church and among the faithful. Book groups or adult education classes will find this book raising challenging and vital topics for discussion.

Stephen L. Carter does not offer us easy answers but, as he reminds us, that there are no easy answers is no reason to avoid the questions. Even if the view from your church window is more suburban or rural than ours, the need is still there for the faithful to have a voice and a part in addressing the very critical issues we must face if we are able to find better ways of living together in American society. Any church actively engaged in social issues or any church whose membership feels that the church ought to stay out of "politics" will be engaged by this important book.