

BOOK REVIEW

of

D.A. Carson,

The Gagging of God: Christianity Confronts Pluralism,
Zondervan, 1996.

This book is in the Evangel Library,
and this review is by Larry D. Paarmann.

In the Preface to this book, Carson writes that “the one common theme of the great majority of commentators who seek to define Western culture at the end of the twentieth century is pluralism. . . . In my most somber moods I sometimes wonder if the ugly face of what I refer to as philosophical pluralism is the most dangerous threat to the gospel since the rise of the gnostic heresy in the second century, and for some of the same reasons.” You may or may not agree with this call to concern, but if you have high regard for D.A. Carson as an evangelical writer and thinker, and I hope you do, then we should at least pay attention to what he has to say. Saying that something may be the greatest threat to the gospel in 1900 years is certainly not a mild statement. But, you may be thinking, “I thought pluralism was a good thing.” Well, if what you mean is, given a pluralistic society we should be tolerant of the beliefs and ethnic backgrounds of others, surely you would be correct. But, our pluralistic society presents challenges far more demanding than does the need for tolerance and understanding. In our pluralistic society “people without strong doctrinal commitments may take on highly diverse and even incompatible ideas and fuse them in some way (syncretism), or they may take on highly diverse and even contradictory ideas *without* fusing them, simply letting them stand, unaware that the elementary demands of consistency are being violated.”

The Gagging of God has over 600 pages and 14 chapters. My only criticism of the book is that it could be shorter without sacrificing much if anything. I get the feeling that this book is D.A. Carson’s *magnum opus*, but then again he did warn us in the Preface of his concern for this topic. After a Preface, Chapter 1 is The Challenges of Contemporary Pluralism. The remainder of the book is divided into four parts: Part One is Hermeneutics. Part Two is Religious Pluralism. Part Three is Christian Living in a Pluralistic Culture. Part Four is Pluralism Within the Camp. Part One has two chapters: The Taming of Truth: The Hermeneutical Morass, and Escaping from the Hermeneutical Morass: “Let God be true, and every man a liar.” Part Two has five chapters: Has God Spoken? The Authority of Revelation, What God Has Spoken: Opening Moves in the Bible’s Plot-line, What God Has Spoken: Climatic Moves in the Bible’s Plot-line, God’s Final Word, and On Drawing Lines, When Drawing Lines Is Rude. Part Three has two chapters: Nibbling at the Edges: The Range of the Challenge, and The Vision Thing. Part Four has four chapters: Fraying, Fragmented, Frustrated: The Changing Face of Western Evangelicalism, On Heralding the Gospel in a Pluralistic Culture, On Banishing the Lake of Fire, and “This is my Father’s world”: Contextualization and Globalization.

In Chapter 2, The Taming of Truth: The Hermeneutical Morass, Carson writes: “All the challenges arising from postmodernism and philosophical pluralism are connected in some way with *hermeneutics*, with how we interpret things. . . . philosophical pluralism infers that objective truth in most realms is impossible, and that therefore the only proper stance is that which disallows all claims to objective truth.” After briefly reviewing the rise of modernity, Carson relates how a commitment to philosophical naturalism seemed connected with success in science: “science was often associated with positivism in epistemology. Indeed, scientific knowledge became the model for all knowledge: data had to be obtained empirically, or they were suspect. Meanwhile religion, relegated to the category of mere opinion, was necessarily based on ‘faith.’ Such ‘faith’ was assumed to be making a bogus claim if it pretended to knowledge, which of course had to be empirically based. ‘Faith’ was merely a privatized opinion. It had little to do with the public arena, and less and less claim on public learning or morals.” Carson bemoans that evangelicals were not immune to these influences. “True, conservatives did not so easily buy into passing critical theories and were less liable to succumb to philosophical naturalism, except in indirect ways. But they wrote many books on hermeneutics that presupposed a rigid subject/object distinction. Even in this century, 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 very recently, some of them prided themselves in their ignorance of historical theology, judging it to be more or less a waste of time: learn how to do exegesis, and the right answers will be cranked out. There was almost no reflection on how the culture of our age affects us as we engage in interpretation.” Near the end of the chapter Carson writes: “The point should now be very clear. Although not everyone is on the same page, although not everyone is committed to postmodernity, although not everyone thinks that no readings of texts are ever incorrect, although not everyone follows David Tracy in theology, and although not everyone follows Polanyi or Kuhn in science (after all, the sheer diversity that constitutes empirical pluralism is where I started this book), the fact remains that these movements are perceived to be on the cutting edge, and their influence in our culture is vast. Truth disappears, retreating before the culture of interpretation, dissolving in the mists of postmodernity.” However, on the facing page he offers some encouragement: “The importance of these developments to our topic cannot be overestimated. While some people on the street (and some scientists) still think of science as the realm of indisputable fact, and religion as the realm of mere opinion, developments in the philosophy of science have shown, by one route or another, that anything complex in science is inevitably theory-laden, and all complex theories include components that are not themselves directly demonstrable by empirical means.” In other words, there is the beginnings of a realization in our culture that it is not always possible to objectively separate facts, or an interpretation of them, from one’s philosophical or religious commitments.

Chapter 2 more-or-less sets the stage for the rest of the book. The chapter titles above give some idea as to where Carson goes with it. But what about *The Gagging of God*? Philosophical pluralism and postmodernity gag God in the sense of not allowing Him to speak. If the only real truth (modernity), if there is any truth at all possible (postmodernity), then all religions are mere opinion or worse. Phillip Johnson in his book *Reason in the Balance: The Case Against Naturalism in Science, Law & Education*, InterVarsity Press, 1995, reviewed in the December 2002 issue (Volume 14, No. 12) of *Evangel News*, explains how our culture tolerates religion as long as it is only something that is very personal, ethnic, or a matter of tradition, but it has no place in the arena of ideas, such as in science, law, and especially not in education. This has marginalized faith to the more-or-less irrelevant. This has gagged God. In this culture, it is difficult for God to be heard. Therefore, much of the remainder of Carson’s book is about God’s Word and the authority of Scripture. Part of the message of the Bible is that God has spoken, and that He has revealed certain things about Himself, about us, about our condition before Him, and of the world to come. This is a message that the world needs to hear. While our culture, and wrong religious ideas, may attempt to gag God, it is part of our calling to do what we can to make His message known.