

***Against Christianity***  
**Peter J. Leithart**  
(Canon Press, 2003)

**Week 1: Preface and Chapter 1**  
**“Against Christianity”**

The aphorism is a common literary device that offers “a concise statement of a principle or precept given in pointed words.” It is a genre often used by philosophers and writers extending as far back as Hippocrates. Leithart has written a book of aphorisms about Christianity and about the Church, which he refers to as both theological bricolage and haiku. As Leithart states, the abbreviated poetic form of haiku “glances at the familiar from an awkward angle” making what had become commonplace fresh and new. Leithart places his book in the company of current scholars and approaches the topic of the “Church in culture” from a slightly different angle in order to offer his readers some “refreshed categories” and to “make strange” that which has become ordinary.

In his first chapter, Leithart takes a number of different approaches to state that he is *against* Christianity, making the case that “Christianity” has been too domesticated and bracketed by popular assumptions and non-biblical categories. As he states, “the Church is not a club for religious people.” Believing that modern Christians have lost sight of the political, communal, and public significance of the Church, Leithart hopes to retrieve and reanimate for us how the New Testament writers and Church fathers understood the Church in relation to its surroundings. Through this retrieval, we might begin to re-examine our understanding of how the spiritual and temporal realms coexist.

**Opening Question:**

Leithart takes a deliberately provocative tone by titling his book *Against Christianity*. How do you and your peers understand or define what “Christianity” is and do you think that Christianity needs a set of “refreshed categories”?

**Study Questions:**

1. Spend some time listing all the things that, according to Leithart, Christianity *is* and all the things that the Church and the Bible are *not*.
2. Judging by his title (*Against Christianity*), Leithart is employing a tone of complaint and protest. What is it about “Christianity” that Leithart is protesting? How is “Christianity’s” relationship to modernity significant?
3. How might Leithart’s excavation of certain Greek terms, such as *polis*, *koinonia*, *politeuma*, and *ekklesia*, change our understanding of the Church and how we think about the word “Christianity”?
4. In several places, Leithart refers to the ancient Church as an alternative governing body or alternative city that is public and communal, not private and individual. Do you think this is how the Church functions today?

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**Week 2: Chapter 2**  
**“Against Theology”**

In Chapter 2, Leithart takes issue with the discipline of theology, claiming that it is a “product of Christianity and aids in its entrenchment.” As an alternative to the doctrines and timeless truths with which theology frequently concerns itself, Leithart suggests that our attention is more appropriately focused when we consider the Church’s language and myths. If theology fails to understand that right doctrine is only true when it is enfleshed in speech and worship, then theology is at risk of “ensuring that Christians have nothing to say about nearly everything.” But the Church *does* have something to say, something that is radically different from what the world says, even as what it says contains the whole world.

**Opening Question:**

When you think of the word “theology” and what theologians do, what images, settings, or concepts come to mind? How might this compare to activities that are cumbersome to describe, such as riding a bike or learning a dance?

**Study Questions:**

1. What are some examples of the theology that Leithart is against? What is Leithart *for* in this chapter?
2. Leithart talks a lot about language. When we speak of languages, we speak of native languages, secondary languages, foreign languages and of being fluent or proficient. Your native language is the language in which you think; it is part of your identity because it precedes your choice and your consciousness. How is the language of theology at odds with the language of the Church as Leithart describes it? Would you say that either of these languages is your native language? Are you proficient in either of them?
3. In section 19, Leithart says that the “Church faces a crisis of worldliness” because she “lacks a mastery of her own language.” What does Leithart mean by worldliness and what is at stake for the Church in this crisis?
4. In addition to language, Leithart focuses on the importance of myth and ritual (i.e. practices and liturgies). Myths are the stories we tell to make sense of the world and rituals are how we enact those stories. In the previous chapter, Leithart referred to the Church as an alternative governing body. In order to be an alternative governing body, however, the Church must also have an alternative myth and alternative rituals. What governing myth does Leithart say American churches have failed to supplant with the gospel? Do you agree with this? Are there other myths or rituals that the Church adopts rather than replaces?

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**Week 3: Chapter 3**  
**“Against Sacraments”**

In the previous chapter, Leithart argued that a community’s language, story, and rituals have political consequences that take place in space and time. Every culture has its own ways of making sense of reality — its myths — and the various feasts, habits, and practices — rituals — of a culture enact those myths. These rituals are, in fact, what make a common culture. In this chapter, Leithart takes a closer look at ritual and one of the aspects most central to the worshiping life of the Church: the sacraments. For this conversation, Leithart constrains sacraments to refer to the two rituals instituted by Christ: baptism and the Lord’s supper. However, even though sacraments are rituals of the Church — and Leithart is *for* rituals — he titles his chapter “*Against Sacraments*” and says that he is “against sacraments to the degree that he is against Christianity.” Leithart points out how sacraments can be misconstrued as a type of religious paraphernalia that is super-added to the Church’s alternative account about the whole of reality. If this is true, than Christian ritual becomes a precious spectacle of a few people rather than a common participation in reality.

**Opening Question:**

How are rituals perceived among your peers and within the communities you are a part of (e.g., work, special interest groups, sports teams, church, family)? Does this perception change depending on the context? Does it make any difference if a ritual is indirect, individually chosen, or unspoken versus intended, commonly inherited, or explicit?

**Study Questions:**

1. In the first few pages of this chapter, Leithart discusses some essential features of ritual as well as some defining characteristics of modernity and postmodernity. What are these features and how are they opposed to each other?
2. Sections 6 through 8 offer some tendencies among evangelicals that make it difficult for them to grasp the significance of baptism and the Lord’s supper. Do you agree with Leithart’s description? How are these tendencies related to modernity?
3. In section 12, Leithart reveals why he is *against* sacraments. He reasons: “If ‘sacraments’ are completely different sorts of things from the signs and rituals of cultural life, then Christianity is something completely different from culture.” What does he mean by this and how does Leithart think the Church should relate sacraments to the rest of the world (i.e., cultural life and nature)? What is lost if the Church fails to make this connection?
4. Leithart says that “the new creation must take a social form.” If we are to imagine the Church as a new creation and rituals as social forms, how might we avoid the danger of our rituals degenerating into “postmodern spectacle”? How can (and how have) baptism and the Lord’s supper function as social forms that avoid this pitfall?

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**Week 4: Chapter 4**  
**“Against Ethics”**

Most of us don't think in terms of “ethics,” but we all live ethical lives and participate in ethical structures whenever we make moral decisions, obey the law, strive to be virtuous, or observe social norms and behaviors. At heart, ethics is about how we order our lives together. In this chapter, Leithart situates the topic of Christian social and moral behavior within the context of ancient Roman and contemporary democratic ethics to show how the Church offers a very different conception of virtue and far more comprehensive paradigm for ethics. But without the shared communal expressions of language, myth and ritual the Church's gospel degenerates into “an anti-culture,” or what Leithart has been referring to as “Christianity.”

**Opening Question:**

What are some common settings in which people today often speak about ethics?

**Study Questions:**

1. In this chapter, Leithart discusses how ethics is spoken and thought about in the early Church, in ancient Rome, and in modern American liberalism. Spend some time discussing the features of these three approaches to social behavior and governance. What love or priority orders how they do ethics?
2. Leithart states that the Church's “ethos was to be embodied in the structures that gave shape to the Church's living-together.” What are these structures and how does Leithart relate them to liberalism, to Judaism, and to ancient Rome?
3. Leithart begins the chapter by saying that the gospel is about the “transformation of hearts and lives,” including social and political life. Here Leithart takes issue with the often painful tension Christians experience between grace and works, or truth and effects. But regardless of how we feel, Leithart argues, without transformation there is no message, no witness, and no Church. Can you think of some other common separations within “Christianity” and within modernity that might impede Christians from being transformed?
4. Many Christians are interested in cultural change and renewal. In section 20, Leithart draws from the work of sociologist Philip Rieff, observing that “cultural change is a change in law” and that “changes in law are bound up with changes in priesthood.” What does he mean by this and how might it change the way we approach our particular cultural contexts?

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**Week 5: Chapter 5**  
**“For Constantine”**

Having been brazenly against everything that most Christians accept as given, in this last chapter, Leithart finally comes out and says what he is *for*. But what he is for seems disappointingly antiquated. What does the conversion of a fourth-century ruler have to do with the situation in which we find ourselves as twenty-first-century Christians? In order to explain himself, Leithart dialogues with some contemporary scholars, primarily Anabaptists John Howard Yoder and Stanley Hauerwas,\* who have argued against Christendom (“the adoption of the Church as providing the official religion”). At stake in this argument is the very mission of the Church: to carry out “a new, eschatological ordering of human life.”

**Opening Question:**

What connotations do you or people you know associate with Constantine and Christendom?

**Study Questions:**

1. Much of this chapter consists of an argument between Leithart and his chosen conversation partners: John Howard Yoder and Stanley Hauerwas. In sections 6 and 7, Leithart is careful to define his terms before proceeding. Review what Leithart means by “Constantine” and “Christendom” and spend some time discussing what the objections are — raised by Yoder, Hauerwas, and company — to Christendom. In what sense does Leithart agree with Yoder and Hauerwas?
2. What does Leithart say is truly the issue underlying the debate about Christendom? And what is it within the “anti-Constantine” approach that Leithart is arguing *against*?
3. What are some of the consequences of the “systematic pessimism” that Leithart exposes in the anti-Christendom view?
4. If the “mere presence of the Church means the end to ‘business as usual,’” what responses should the Church anticipate from its surrounding culture? What should we be prepared for?
5. Do you think that your understanding of “the Church” was altered as a result of reading this book? What was the most important epiphany or moment of insight that you grasped while reading?

\* Leithart later wrote a book called *Defending Constantine: The Twilight of an Empire and the Dawn of Christendom* (IVP Academic, 2010) in which he expands his dialogue with Yoder and Hauerwas and details more precisely the historical context and events of Constantine’s reign.