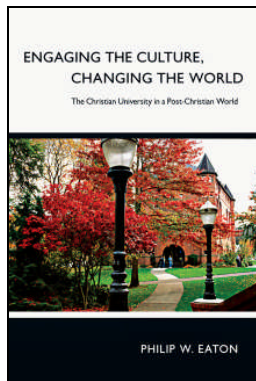


BOOK EXCERPT



*Engaging the Culture,
Changing the World:
The Christian University
in a Post-Christian
World*

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Negotiating a World of Colliding Maps

The late Jewish novelist Chaim Potok said on my campus some years ago that “we live in a world of colliding maps.” Each one of us has constructed our own little, individual story, our map, out of the bits and scraps of information we have been given. Here we are, floating around in a large universe of meaning, bumping into one another from time to time, but with very little compelling sense of connection, direction or congruence. Highly individualized maps of where we are headed, lots of collision, no big drama that holds it all together, very little authority or tradition to guide us—that’s the way we might describe our view of the world at the moment. We live with “an irresolvable and unstable pluralism—the collision and conflict of competing cultures,” says sociologist James Davison Hunter. This “is and will remain a fundamental and perhaps permanent feature of the contemporary social order, both here in America and in the world.”

I was out on Google Earth the other day, and I zeroed in on some of the complex spots on our planet. I looked down into the streets of Bagdad, then over to Tehran and on to Jerusalem. I skipped over to see the explosive sprawl of Shanghai and Seoul, and then looped over into the streets of London and New York, and then across to Seattle, where I live. There are all kinds of maps drawn down there, in every spot in the world. And we all consider that *our map* holds just the right angle on the rest of the world. People are willing to lay down their lives to defend or promote their own special map. We each believe our map to be true.

Then I pulled back and took a long look at the whole marvelous planet, this spectacularly beautiful globe, so green and healthy from this distance, floating as it is in such massive blue space. Is there a purpose here for the whole? Is there a big story that brings this entire planet together with some kind of *narrative of meaning*? Is there a story of how it came to be, how it got to be in this very place, where it is going? Or is it just floating? Must we just settle for the collision of the local maps as the final view of meaning for the earth? Is there hope for this globe beyond its conflicts?

There are so many maps within the big map, maps drawn up by geography, by deep and ancient roots in history, culture, religion. This causes us to

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ponder whether things like economic interdependence, discovered in powerful new ways in our century, bring us together. And do the powerful, new forces of technology bring the human community together meaningfully into a map that makes sense of it all? Or will the separate maps keep colliding, perhaps progressively more violently as time goes by? As we look closely at the trouble spots where maps are indeed colliding, it is hard to believe that human flourishing is possible on this beautiful, troubled globe.

The philosophical, cultural and educational orthodoxy of our day says there is no big map, no overarching story, no drama into which we are all swept. There is no story out there we can all trust to give us the outline of what is true and meaningful and good. We are told there is no story big enough and compelling enough to attract us and cause us to attach our own little stories to a bigger, more promising drama. There is no overarching story for our time, no metanarrative, as contemporary philosophers call it. And there is, of course, no one—no authority—designated and trusted to outline the contours of the larger map.

Ultimately we also can read everything in terms that are purely individual. Everything is personal. Everything depends on each of us as individuals, first to deconstruct any meta-map we have been given and then to construct our own separate map. We find ourselves making our own choices about what is meaningful, what is true and good, what is right and wrong, even what is beautiful. This map-making business is up to each of us.

This is the culture in which we live, this world of colliding maps, and the implications for our discussion about higher education and the Christian university are profound. We must ask what our education is like—indeed, what our future will be like—if the very story we pass on to the next generation is a story of no-story or a story of colliding stories. What happens when our definition of human flourishing can be found only in the collision of meanings? What happens as we try to educate in a world of colliding maps?

—from chapter three, “Negotiating a World of Colliding Maps”