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# Book review

**Charles E. Cotherman: *To Think Christianly: A History of L'Abri, Regent College, and the Christian Study Center Movement* (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2020) ISBN: 978-0-8308-5282-6, hbk, \$35.00, pp xviii + 320**

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Cotherman's book begins by posing the question "What does it mean to think Christianly?" In an attempt to answer the question Cotherman looks at the "small but significant network of individuals and Christian communities, or study centers" (p. i)

The Christian Study Center has been a fascinating North American phenomenon (L'Abri excepted). There are many of them scattered through North America. Here Cotherman traces their history and development. This is no mean feat. He has carried out over 30 interviews and excavated numerous archives at the institutions – the range of his research is evident in his 21-page bibliography.

Many of the Study Centers have been influenced by either James Houston (1922- ) and Regent College, or by Francis Schaeffer (1912-1984) at L'Abri. Hence it is fitting that Cotherman begins by examining the origins of both Regent College and Schaeffer's L'Abri.

He starts by looking at Regent College in Vancouver, despite that L'Abri was founded earlier (1955 as opposed to Regent in 1967). There is a remarkable overlap between L'Abri and Regent – the most obvious is the Christian faith. Both were centred on a charismatic leader, Schaeffer and Houston, certainly at the beginnings; and both focused on the needs of the laity. There are several differences too: Regent was academic, whereas L'Abri was more informal and collegiate. (Houston, perhaps because of his

Brethren background, quickly saw the need to involve others; Schaeffer was largely a one-man band.) L'Abri was more insular and sheltered and focused primarily on cultural pursuits, whereas Regent focused on academic and (applied) theological education without falling into the trap of being a seminary. Houston's desire for Regent was that it should be open to all and offer degrees rather than ordination training.

Houston's concern for Schaeffer was that L'Abri could become not only a shelter but also a ghetto; his aspiration was that Regent should not become a holy huddle. In 1970 he wrote to Schaeffer – his words of warning are apposite for all Christian Study Centers:

L'Abri has been your strength; please do not let it be a source of weakness because it became too much of a ghetto of thought. It is a shelter for those from outside but do not let it be a ghetto for the thought that comes from within.  
(Cited on p.33)

Both Regent and L'Abri were influential in the resurgence of Christian Study Centers around North America.

The Consortium of Christian Study Centers (CCSC) now has around 30 study centres affiliated to it. Obviously, Cotherman could not provide a history of all of them – in fact, two of them studied are not presently associated with the CCSC. The book looks at North American centres and focuses on those that have direct influence from Regent College and L'Abri. The main ones he discusses are:

- The C.S. Lewis Institute near Washington, DC (founded in 1976)
- R.C. Sproul's Ligonier Valley Study Center in Stahlstown, Pennsylvania (founded in 1971)
- New College Berkeley – associated with the University of California (founded in 1977)
- The Center for Christian Study at the University of Virginia (founded in the early 1970s)

It is good to see how God has enabled these institutions to thrive despite the lack of resources – both in terms of recruitment and finances. And to see how these centres have been used by God. Cotherman does a good job of focusing on both the strengths and weaknesses of the centres.

The question the book raises is why have these initiatives been relatively successful in North Americas but less so elsewhere? L'Abri began in Europe and there have been other L'Abris based in England, Brazil and the Netherlands, but apart from the L'Abri 'franchise' there has been little else. In the UK, for example, there is WYSOCS/ThinkingFaith Network, The Jubilee

Centre, Rutherford House and London Institute for Contemporary Christianity, but these are of a different model to L'Abri and Regent. It would make an interesting research project to investigate why other North-American-style Study Centers have been less successful elsewhere.

The book begins with a key question: "What does it mean to think Christianly?" However, this is not fully addressed. The majority of the Study Centers, discussed here, focus largely on theology, apologetics and the application of theological principles to contemporary issues – not, of course, that there is anything wrong with that! But, the implicit assumption appears to be that to think Christianly, is to think theologically. Important as that is, it does not exhaust what it means to think Christianly. However, as Cotherman does point out

None of the individuals and communities treated in these pages achieved this integration of life, faith, and mind perfectly, but they all held up this type of holistic life-mind engagement as an ideal (p 2).

This book provides an excellent historical analysis of these Study Centers and does so in an impartial and academic way – and also seeing the hand of God in the way these organisations have grown and developed.