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*CULTURAL TRANSFORMATION AND
RELIGIOUS PRACTICE*

The book sets out to address and answer three questions from the point of view of Christian theology: From where does theology speak? What are the mechanisms whereby cultures change? How might we conceive the relationship between the contemporary production of theological discourse and the transformation of cultures more generally? Drawing upon the work of standpoint epistemologists, cultural anthropologists and social scientists, the book argues that public acts of interpretation are involvements in renegotiating the future direction of cultural change. Though the enquiry is conducted from one particular standpoint – Christian theology – the observations and suggestions it makes regarding cultural transformation and the defence it makes of syncretism have more general application.

Graham Ward was formerly Dean of Peterhouse, Cambridge, and is now Professor of Contextual Theology and Ethics at the University of Manchester.

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This book began as a short essay on interpreting culture from a theological perspective conceived whilst on holiday during the lavender harvest in Provence. Over the subsequent months it grew and grew. I had opportunities to develop and try out some of my thoughts when invited to give seminars at the universities of Manchester and Cambridge. It was given a tentative form when I delivered the Gunning Lectures at the University of Edinburgh in the autumn of 2000. I wish to thank here my friends Marcella Althaus-Reid and Alistair Kee for their perceptive remarks whilst I lectured in Edinburgh. Throughout the project, the questioning and comments by others were fundamental. Their interventions made me change the direction of my research and opened new possibilities for approaching cultural transformation. The complexity of what I had become involved with began to increase such that there were times when trying to examine critically and articulate the dense webs of interrelated practices that constitute and keep any culture in motion seemed to me like attempting to discern figures in ectoplasm. Only when I began to understand the exact questions I was asking with respect to the discursive practices of Christian theology did an overall design emerge. There were two people in particular whose conversations were invaluable at that time. One was Charles Taylor, who argued with me about the role and nature of the social imaginary, and even found time to read through the final draft and make significant comments. The second was my friend and colleague at the University of Manchester, Dr Michael Hözl. I would like to dedicate this book to both of them with the ultimate line from Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*:

Legomen oun arxamenoï

‘Let us make a beginning of our discussion.’