

Christ and Culture, H. Richard Niebuhr (Harper & Brothers Publishers, 1951, Torchbook paper, 1956) (read spring 2019)

Richard Niebuhr, the younger of two famous brothers (Reinhold was the other), says his purpose in writing this book is to “set forth typical Christian answers to the problem of Christ and culture and so to contribute to the mutual understanding of variant and often conflicting Christian groups.” He assures his readers, however, that “The belief which lies back of this effort ... is the conviction that Christ as living Lord is answering the question in the totality of history and life in a fashion which transcends the wisdom of all his interpreters yet employs their partial insights and their necessary conflicts.” (p. 2)

He starts by defining “Christ” and then “culture.” It seems like the first definition might be unnecessary if not impossible – doesn’t “Christ” mean “Jesus” the Son of God? – and Niebuhr essentially admits this. But he explains that while it is impossible to fully define Christ it is possible to describe, inadequately, some of the primary ways he has been viewed by his followers. He sets out four:

1. Liberal Christians magnify beyond all else about Christ the virtue of *love*. Yet Niebuhr points out that Jesus nowhere commands love for its own sake. Rather, love to Jesus is “the love of God and of the neighbor in God.” (pp. 15-16) And he concludes, “There seems then to be no other adequate way to describe Jesus as having the virtue of love than to say that his love was that of the Son of God. It was not love but God that filled his soul.” (p. 19)

2. The eschatological interpretation of Christ, exemplified by Albert Schweitzer, focus on Christ’s virtue of *hope*. He was consumed, they say, with the Messianic promise of God’s ultimate triumph and arrival of his kingdom. This view expresses a “deep truth,” but is also inadequate to define Christ. (p. 19 et seq.)

3. A third virtue of Christ is his *obedience*, which was radical and also an evident truth about him, says Niebuhr. But the primary exponent of Jesus as radically obedient, Rudolph Bultmann, “can find no real content in the gospel idea of obedience” and obedience is not separable from “radical love and hope and faith.” (pp. 24, 25)

4. Other virtues seen as primary attributes of Jesus Christ are *faith* and *humility*. But these too are inadequate to define “Christ,” although he “is indeed characterized by an extreme faith and by a radical humility.” (p. 25) But his faith was in God. Jesus certainly did not have a lot of faith in humans. Niebuhr says, “Only romantic fictionizing can interpret the Jesus of the New Testament as one who believed in the goodness of men, and sought by trusting it to bring out what was good in them.” (p. 25)

As for humility, Niebuhr says “the humility of Jesus is humility before God, and can only be understood as the humility of the Son. He neither exhibited nor commended and communicated the humility of inferiority-feeling before other men” such as Pilate and Herod. (p. 26) He also points out that when Jesus repudiated the title of “Good Master” he did not defer to other rabbis better than himself, but said, “No one is good but God alone.” (p. 27)

Niebuhr concludes his discussion of a definition of Christ by saying that it is better not to attempt to delineate him by describing any one of his excellencies but rather by taking them all together, and to realize that they are all due to “that unique devotion to God and to that single-hearted trust in Him” which can only be symbolized by calling him Son of God. (p. 27)

As for Niebuhr’s definition of “culture,” he says it is the “artificial secondary environment” that man superimposes on the natural environment, and it is comprised of language, habits, ideas, beliefs, customs, social organization, inherited artifacts, technical processes, and values. Some of its characteristics are:

1. It is always social. It’s the social heritage humans receive and transmit; whatever is purely private, so that it neither derives from nor enters into social life, is not a part of culture.” (p. 33)

2. Culture is human achievement; e.g., a canal is culture, a river is nature. It includes “speech, education, tradition, myth, science, art, philosophy, government, law, rite, beliefs, inventions, technologies.” (p. 33)

3. The world of culture is a world of values. All the human achievements that make up culture are designed for an end or ends, and the primary end is what is good for humans. In a statement that would certainly be challenged by many today, Niebuhr says, “It seems self-evident in culture than animals are to be domesticated or annihilated so far as these measures serve man’s good” The rest of that sentence seems to me to be questionable theologically: “... that God or gods are to be worshiped so far as this is necessary or desirable for the sake of maintaining and advancing human life, that ideas and ideals are to be served for the sake of human self-realization.” (p. 35) However, he is expressing here a cultural view of “God or gods,” not a Scriptural view.

He makes various other points about these values; for example, they must be realized in temporal and material form, they are to be conserved so they can be enjoyed and transmitted to future generations, and they are pluralistic – “many, disparate, and often incomparable.” (p. 38)

After offering these tentative definitions of “Christ” and “culture,” Niebuhr says Christians and the church are always in a dialogue about how to follow Christ in a given culture. Some answers emphasize the opposition between Christ and culture (e.g., “come out from among them and be separate”) while others find a fundamental agreement between Christ and culture (for example, noting the close relation between Christianity and Western civilization). (see pp. 40-44)

Next in a series of chapters Niebuhr explores, one by one, each of the positions Christians have taken with regard to the relationship of Christ and culture.

Chapter 2 deals with the radical view that *Christ and culture are totally separate* and Christians owe fealty only to Christ, not to culture. Tolstoy is the primary modern example here, while in the early church Tertullian, the great north African theologian, sharply rejected the claims of culture. Other examples include the various monastic movements, such as that governed by the Rule of St. Benedict.

Tolstoy interpreted Gospel teaching, especially Matthew 5, literally, and concluded that Christ came to establish God's Kingdom through his eternal law, which Tolstoy summarized in five definite injunctions, with the "law of nonresistance" the key to the whole. (pp. 59-60) But he did not express a personal devotion to a personal Lord, and for him the "law of Christ" was more significant than the person of the lawgiver. Also, Tolstoy showed little understanding for the meaning of the grace of God. (p. 64)

Niebuhr says that while the "movement of withdrawal and renunciation" from the world is a necessary element in every Christian's life and also in the church, it must be followed by an equally necessary movement of responsible engagement in cultural tasks. (p. 68) He also says that sole dependence upon Jesus Christ to the exclusion of culture is impossible, because humans not only speak but think with the aid of the language of culture. (p. 69) We are born into a certain culture, whether Jewish or Roman or Chinese, and as Christians we must translate the culture of the Scriptures into our own culture.

Turning to the other extreme in Chapter 3, Niebuhr analyzes "The Christ of Culture." These Christians "harmonize Christ and culture," although "not without excision" because the New Testament and social custom have "stubbornly discordant features" and cannot be completely harmonized. (pp. 83-84) In the early church the Gnostics, now generally regarded as heretics, sought to "disentangle the gospel from its involvement with barbaric and outmoded Jewish notions about God and history." (p. 86)

Niebuhr says that Gnosticism sees in Jesus Christ "not only a revealer of religious truth but a god, the object of religious worship; but not the Lord of all life, and not the son of the Father who is the present Creator and Governor of all things." (p. 89) In the second century Abélard was, in spirit though not in content, much akin to the Gnostics. For him Jesus Christ was the great moral teacher who did in a higher degree what Socrates and Plato had done before him. But Niebuhr comments that Abélard did not recognize the hard demand that the Sermon on the Mount makes on the Christian. Instead, what he offers "is kindly and liberal guidance for good people who want to do right and for their spiritual directors. All conflict between Christ and culture is gone; the tension that exists between church and world is really due, in the estimation of an Abélard, to the church's misunderstanding of Christ." (pp. 90-91)

A whole slew of liberal Protestant theologians followed Abélard in basically doing away with any conflict between Christ and culture. The main theme is this: "Jesus Christ is the great enlightener; the great teacher; the one who directs all men in culture to the attainment of wisdom, moral perfection, and peace." (p. 92) These theologians "accommodate Christ to culture while selecting from culture what conforms most readily to Christ." (p. 94)

Although Niebuhr is critical of this "acculturation of Christ," he points out that often the attacks of both Fundamentalists and Roman Catholics are based on their own cultural values. As to Fundamentalists, he says, "The movement that identifies obedience to Jesus Christ with the practices of prohibition, and with the maintenance of early American social organization, is a type of cultural Christianity." As for Roman Catholics, their reaction against Protestantism "seems often to be animated by a desire to return to the culture of the thirteenth" century. (p. 102)

Nevertheless, Niebuhr finds some positive aspects to the “Christ of culture” Christians. (See pp. 106-108). But his theological critique of their position is powerful. He points out that “the cultural answers to the Christ-culture problem show a consistent tendency to distort the figure of the New Testament Jesus. ... They take some fragment of the complex New Testament story and interpretation, call this the essential characteristic of Jesus, elaborate upon it, and thus reconstruct their own mythical figure of our Lord.” (p.109) His discussion of theological objections to cultural Christianity is somewhat difficult to understand, for me at least, but I think it turns on the impossibility of rejecting all supernatural aspects of Jesus while maintaining the view that he is “the great teacher of rational truth and goodness, or the emergent genius in the history of religious and moral reason.” (pp. 110-111; see pp. 110-115)

Chapter 4. In this chapter, entitled “Christ Above Culture,” Niebuhr discusses various attempts to reconcile or synthesize the more extreme positions covered in the previous two chapters; in other words, to find common ground between the anticultural radical Christians, who reject all claims of culture in favor of following Christ alone, and those who essentially see culture as primary and accommodate Christ to culture. This means he is talking about the “church of the center,” which rejects both extremes and recognizes “the primacy of grace and the necessity of works of obedience.” (p. 119) Christians in the center “cannot find in themselves, as persons or as communities, a holiness which can be possessed,” and they have a fundamental agreement about “sin’s universality and radical character.” (pp. 118, 119)

In the early church Clement of Alexandria was the first great representative of those who attempt to synthesize Christ and culture while adhering to the central doctrines of sin and salvation (p. 123 et seq.), while Thomas Aquinas was “probably the greatest of all the synthesists in Christian history.” (p.128 et seq.) Niebuhr writes:

Thomas understands fully – as many a cultural Christian does not seem to do – how superb and superhuman is the goodness required by the commandments to love God with all one’s heart, soul, mind, and strength, and to love one’s neighbor as one’s self. He recognizes that where faith is absent it cannot be produced by an act of will; and that the hope of glory, attractive as it appears in lives animated by it, will not come as a consequence of resolution. Yet they are not impossible virtues; neither are they accidental gifts of luck, or of a capricious nature that produces strange moral and spiritual geniuses now and again. They are given and promised by God through Jesus Christ, given in a foretaste, promised in fullness. Those who receive them share in Christ’s nature; they no longer live for themselves, but have been lifted out of themselves.... (pp. 134-135)

Niebuhr also says that this kind of synthetic combination is characteristic of Thomas’s theory of the law. Thomas believed that all humans have the capacity to discern “natural law,” but that there is also the divine law, above and beyond natural law. For example, “Thou shalt not steal” is a commandment found by reason and in revelation; “Sell all thou hast and give to the poor” is found in the divine law only. (p. 135) But Thomas was Roman Catholic, and his “fundamental conviction” was that God had ordained that His gifts should reach the lowest beings by an institutional mediator: the Church (p. 137), which of course is not the position of Protestants.

Although Niebuhr offers a critique of the synthesists in this chapter, he then spends a whole chapter on those he calls the “dualists,” who are (apparently; I don’t fully understand this argument) both more focused on the miracle of God’s grace and on the utter sinfulness of humans that infects every human endeavor; i.e., all of culture. (p. 149 et seq.) The Apostle Paul is one example. While the synthesist regards the cultural life as having a certain positive value of its own, Paul sees culture as having a kind of negative function. In his view, social institutions like civil government seem more designed “to prevent sin from becoming as destructive as it might otherwise be, rather than to further the attainment of positive good.” (p. 165) Niebuhr writes, of Paul’s theology:

As long as man remains in the body he has need then, it seems, of a culture and of the institutions of culture not because they advance him toward life with Christ but because they restrain wickedness in a sinful and temporal world. (p. 167)

Niebuhr says that Martin Luther’s answer to the Christ-culture problem has a “strongly dualistic note.” Luther makes “sharp distinctions between the temporal and spiritual life, or between what is external and internal, between body and soul, between the reign of Christ and the world of human works or culture.” (p. 171) This enabled him to urge strict punishment, even death, against lawless peasants while enjoining Christians to have the faith and love that produces “a joyful, willing and free mind that serves one’s neighbor willingly and takes no account of gratitude or ingratitude, of praise or blame, of gain or loss” (p. 170) The way he reconciles these apparently disparate attitudes is by making clear that Christians live in God’s kingdom, a kingdom of grace and mercy, but those miserable peasants (presumably nonchristians) live in the kingdom of the world, a kingdom of wrath and severity. (p. 171)

Although Luther came under the conviction that what was demanded of man in the gospel was absolutely required by an absolute Lord (p. 172), this did not lead him to reject life in culture to focus solely on obeying Christ because he came to thoroughly understand “that the gospel as law and as promise was not directly concerned with the overt actions of men but with the springs of conduct.” (p. 173)

Niebuhr concludes that the dualism in Luther’s solution of the Christ-and-culture problem was the dualism of the “How” and the “What” of conduct. He says humans have a “drive to action” and

its direction and spirit is a function of faith; its content comes from reason and culture. Hunger drives us to eat; our faith or lack of it determine whether we eat as good neighbors, with concern for others and to the glory of God, or anxiously, immoderately, and selfishly; our knowledge of dietetics and the dietary customs of our society – not Hebraic legislation about clean and unclean or church laws about fasting – determine what and when to eat. Or, our curiosity makes us seek knowledge; our religious attitude determines how we seek it, whether with anxiety for reputation or for the sale of service, whether for the sake of power or for God’s glory; reason and culture show us by what methods and in what areas knowledge may be gained. As there is no way of deriving knowledge from the gospel about what do as a physician, builder, carpenter, or statesman, so there is no way of gaining the right spirit of service, of confidence and hopefulness, of humility and readiness to accept correction, from any amount of technical or cultural knowledge. (p.176)

Another point that is very interesting to me is that Paul and Luther have been characterized as cultural conservatives. Except for religion, they seemed content

to let state and economic life – with slavery in the one case and social stratification in the other – continue relatively unchanged. They desired and required improvement in the conduct of princes, citizens, consumers, tradesmen, slaves, masters, etc.; but these were to be improvements within an essentially unchanged context of social habit. Even the family, in their view, retained its dominantly patriarchal character (p. 188)

Niebuhr says, “Conservatism is a logical consequence of the tendency to think of law, state, and other institutions as restraining forces, dykes against sin, preventers of anarchy, rather than as positive agencies through which men in social union render positive service to neighbors advancing toward true life.” (p. 188)

Chapter 6 is entitled “Christ The Transformer of Culture.” In it Niebuhr explains the “conversionist answer to the problem of Christ and culture,” which he says belongs “to the great central tradition of the church.” (p. 190) He says the “conversionists” have a more hopeful attitude toward culture, based on three theological convictions:

(1) A strong interest in creation. “The Word that became flesh and dwelt among us, the Son who does the work of the Father in the world of creation, has entered into a human culture that has never been without his ordering action.” (. 193)

(2) The nature of man’s fall from his created goodness. This fall for the conversionist is “a kind of reversal of creation.” Man’s good nature “has become corrupted; it is not bad, as something that ought not to exist, but warped, twisted, and misdirected.” (p. 194)

(3) A view of history. History is “fundamentally not a course of merely human events but always a dramatic interaction between God and men.” In other words, it’s the “story of God’s mighty deeds and of man’s responses to them.” (pp. 194-95)

Niebuhr has an interesting explanation of Wesley as “the great Protestant exponent of ... perfectionism,” the idea that Christians can be cleansed from all sin now, not in the hereafter. Wesley pointed out that the New Testament does not say “the blood of Christ will cleanse at the hour of death, or in the day of judgment, but it ‘cleanseth,’ at the time present, ‘us,’ living Christians, ‘from all sin.’” (p. 219) I would say yes, but an hour or minute later there we are, back sinning again. Only in Heaven, I believe, will we be permanently free of sin, as well as the consequences of sin. Cf. Rev. 21:1-4.

In his final chapter, Niebuhr says that no one can give *the* Christian answer to the problem of Christ and culture. We can just each make our own decision about what we should believe and do in the light of what we understand. Niebuhr says our solutions and decisions are relative, and that

We have not found and shall not find – until Christ comes again – a Christian in history whose faith so ruled his life that every thought was brought into subjection to it and every moment and place was for him in the kingdom of God. Each one has encountered the moun-

tain he could not move, the demon he could not exorcise. (p. 235)

With regard to human freedom to choose, Niebuhr points out that faith is “a power and a value for which we have been chosen. It is a good we must consent to and receive and hold fast; it is not something that we originate and choose in independent freedom.” (pp. 251-52)

Finally, he notes the irrationality of the Gospel, how everything believed about the goodness and utter faithfulness of God seemed to be denied in the crucifixion of Christ, but then totally restored in the resurrection. (p. 255) To make our decisions in faith, Niebuhr says, is

to make them in view of the fact that Christ is risen from the dead, and is not only the head of the church but the redeemer of the world. It is to make them in view of the fact that the world of culture – man’s achievement – exists within the world of grace – God’s Kingdom. (p. 256)

Although this is not an easy book to understand, Niebuhr is a very good writer, with arresting phrases, like referring to part of the social gospel “which expected to change prodigal mankind by improving the quality of the husks served in the pigsty.” (p. 220) Also, we are members of the church and subject to it “as hands or feet, ears or eyes, arthritic fingers or stiffened joints.” (p. 232)

This book made me think. Parts of it I do not understand, some parts that I do understand I disagree with, but mostly it opened my eyes to concepts that seem right and helpful to me. I’m glad I read it.