Jesus and Academic Culture Series

Podcast #2: Chapter 1 in Niebuhr's *Christ and Culture*

Preview

- What are Niebuhr's key Chapter 1 definitions?
- What are his most important claims and assumptions?
- What kind of support does Niebuhr give for his claims and assumptions?
- How should we think about Niebuhr so far?

What are Niebuhr's key Chapter 1 definitions?

- 1) Definition of a Christian
  - Ordinarily "…one who believes in Jesus Christ…" or "…a follower of Jesus Christ."
  - Niebuhr: "…one who counts himself as belonging to that community of men for whom Jesus Christ—his life, words, deeds and destiny is of supreme importance as the key to the understanding of themselves and their world."
  - Leaves out the mentioning penal substitutionary atonement.

What are Niebuhr's key Chapter 1 definitions?

- 2) Definition of Christ
  - Large number of interpretations of His essential nature
    - A Teacher, a new Law and religion, The cause which they have chosen, or has chosen them, a producer of a new life, or primarily a new community
  - Neibuhr asserts a fundamental unity, but there is a continuous debate.
  - Niebuhr finds that "….there is no other way to describe Jesus than to say it was not that love filled his soul, but that God filled his soul."
  - Any one of the virtues of Jesus may be taken as the key to understanding his character and teaching, but each is uniintelligible in its apparent radicalism only as a relation to God.

What are Niebuhr's key Chapter 1 definitions?

- 3) Definition of culture
  - He's working on a layman's definition rather than entering into the issues raised by professional anthropologists
  - Initially it must be a definition of the phenomenon without theological interpretation—but at the same time he asserts a Christian cannot adopt this point of view of defining without theological interpretation
  - "…cannot venture to define the "essence" of this culture, we can describe some of its chief characteristics
    - Always social
    - Has social heritage component
    - Is a human achievement
    - Designed for human end(s)
    - Values that are concerned dominantly of the good for man
    - The realization and conservation of values
    - Attention must be directed to the pluralism that is characteristic of all culture.
  - We do not know nature apart from culture—no man looks at the world with pristine eyes.

What are Niebuhr's key claims?

- 1) From the "Acknowledgement" section: a relativistic understanding of history is to be understood under the governance of the absolute God.
  - Could be this is his epistemic humility rather than a metaphysical constructivism.
  - (I say that it is) Important to understand the difference between the two and the consequences.
- 2) The debate about (Christ and culture) has yielded no single answer (that is, it has not yielded a consensus view).
- 3) According to Niebuhr you can distinguish between Christ's strategy for Christ and culture relations and his "lieutenant's views" of Christ and culture relations!

What are Niebuhr's key claims?

- 4) There have been many "cultural" attacks on Christian faith…not just by governments.
  - Christians are "…animated by a contempt for the present existence and by confidence in immortality." (Hostility because believers do not care enough about temporal existence.)
  - Christians rely on grace rather than summoning them to human achievement
  - Christians are intolerant
  - The forgiveness of Christ doesn't fit nicely with a free man's sense of moral responsibility
  - Exaltation of the lowly offends autocrats and Nietzscheans
  - And more…

What are Niebuhr's key claims?

- 5) The relationship between these two authorities —Christ and culture—are what constitutes its problem!
- 6) Jesus' radical dependency on his relationship to God is the way to understand Jesus' radical virtues. Thus, you must take all of his excellences together.
- 7) Each approach to interpreting Jesus Christ tends toward the same issue—the power and attraction of Jesus Christ exercises over men never comes from him alone.
- 8) We cannot (should not) try to understand a culture in terms of simply being a particular society.

What are Niebuhr’s key claims?

- 9) No man looks at the world with pristine eyes—we do not know nature apart from culture.

What support does Niebuhr give?

- 1) Preliminary Remarks:
  - Conversations about virtually anything have a variety of explicit claims (look for arguments and evidence); and, also we have assumptions some of which are shared by the audience and some of which are not shared (sometimes hard to discern what is assumed)
  - Explicit claims: typically made explicit in legal-like language—we are talking about Party of 1st part & the Party of he 2nd part…, but also in informal language that need to be teased out in context.
  - Implicit claims and assumptions—not argued for. Examples: there is an external world, the external world is pretty much as we perceive it, theories of truth and theories of knowledge…there are different theories of knowledge—strong and weak theories
    - For instance: Strong Theory of Knowledge—>to say you know something you cannot be wrong about it (Cartesian)
    - or like: Weak or Fallible Theories of Knowledge—>to say you know something you are still conceding you could be wrong (probabilistic science)

What support does Niebuhr give?

- Niebuhr's "Hidden" Assumptions
  - Essentialist or non-essentialist?
  - Clarification between relativistic view of history and relativistic to absolute view of history (God's understanding of history)
  - Epistemic humility or metaphysical non-sense?
  - Communitarian or individualistic understanding of Christian faith? Some evidence for both.

What does Niebuhr get right?

What I currently think

- 1) The relationship between these two authorities (Christ and culture) are what constitutes its problem!
  - An important claim to make to understand his case.
  - I give it a qualified endorsement, seems somehow fundamental to discern.
- 2) His definitions of “Christian”, “Christ” and “culture”, especially the latter two have some assumptions that need to be clarified.
  - Is he an essentialist or non-essentialist?
  - What is his position on epistemology and metaphysics…need more data.

What does Niebuhr get right?

What I currently think

- 3) His claim: Jesus' radical dependency on his relationship to God is the way to understand Jesus' radical virtues. Thus, you must take all of his excellences together.
  - I think right but for other reasons. I think God's nature has parts, that is, God's nature is not simple.
- 4) His claim: The debate about (Christ and culture) has yielded no single answer (that is, not yielded a consensus view).
  - I think he's right from A) the informal historical argument he gives in the rest of the book and B) my own experience within the Christian community.

What does Niebuhr get right?

What I currently think

- 5) His claim: You can distinguish between Christ's strategy for Christ and culture relations and his "lieutenant's views" of Christ and culture relations!
  - Can probably be viewed as epistemic humility rather than metaphysical nonsense.
- 6) His claim: Each approach to interpreting Jesus Christ tends toward the same issue—the power and attraction of Jesus Christ exercises over men never comes from him alone.
  - I'm less sure of this because he doesn't offer a separate argument for this, it uses the term "never" in his assertion, and it's an empirical question that could be settled.
  - I'm not sure what bearing this claim has on his other claims.

What does Niebuhr get right?
What I currently think

- 6) His claim: There have been many “cultural” attacks on Christian faith…not just by governments.
  - Historical argument resonates with other historical research.
- 7) His claim:) We cannot (should not) try to understand “culture” in terms of simply being a particular society.
  - Seems obviously true, there are a diversity of cultures and sub-cultures and that you would look for universal characteristics among them. However, it needs to be clarified as to any differences between what we call “culture” and what the Bible calls the “world.”
- 8) His claim: No man looks at the world with pristine eyes—we do not know nature apart from culture.
  - Agree if understood as “completely” pristine eyes, but I think we can know things about experience apart from culture (some math, moral truth, possible other intrinsically good and bad values).

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