

Notes on Christ & Culture
By H. Richard Niebuhr

A. Acknowledgments

- a. Speaks of the “double wrestle” of the church “...with its Lord and with the cultural society with which it lives in symbiosis...”
- b. His effort to “condense my observations and reflections into five lectures and then again to refine and elaborate them in revision...”
- c. Cites Ernst Troeltsch as an important influence on his thinking
 - i. “...to be loath to force this rich variety into prefashioned, conceptual molds and yet to seek logos in mythos, reason in history, essence in existence...”
 - ii. “...helped me accept and to profit by the acceptance of the relativity not only of historical objects, but more, of the historical subject, the observer and interpreter...”
 - iii. Correctively Niebuhr (in his own words), tries “...to understand this historical relativism in the light of theological and theo-centric relativism...”
 - iv. Niebuhr thinks, “...that it is an aberration of faith as well of reason to absolutize the finite but that in this relative history of finite men and movements is under the governance of the absolute God.
- d. Refers to Augustine’s *City of God* in which the relativist of history make sense.
- e. Cites help from Etienne Gilson’s *Reason and Revelation in the Middle Ages* as well as “fruitful suggestions” from C.J. Jung’s *Psychological Types*.

B. Personal Acknowledgements

Chapter 1: The Enduring Problem

1 The Problem

- A. A “many-sided” debate about the relationship of Christianity and civilization.
- B. The debate is confused
 - i. Between the “exponents of Christian civilization and the non-Christian defenders of a wholly secularized society...”
 - 1. The elimination of Christian religion from public education
 - 2. For the “Christian support of apparently anti-Christian political movements.
 - ii. This debate is perennial and an enduring one
- C. Debate has yielded no single answer, “...but only a series of typical answers which together ...represent phases of the strategy of the militant church in the world.”
 - i. Distinguishes between the Captain’s (Christ) strategy and the “lieutenant’s” views, so that the Captain’s strategy not under the control of the lieutenants even if he uses them.
- D. Refers to Rabbi Klausner’s analysis of how Jesus—a Jew who remained a Jew until his death—confronted the Pharisees and the Sadducees.

- i. That could be summarized (by me) as ignoring Jewish cultural life that was embedded in national life. "Therefore" his people rejected him because he "set up nothing but an ethico-religious system bound up with his conception of the Godhead."
 - ii. "...instead of reforming culture he (Jesus) ignored it.
 - iii. Substituted the command to nonresistance for civil justice.
 - iv. Klausner concludes that "Jesus ignored everything concerned with material civilization in this sense he does not belong to civilization.
- E. Not all Jews of his day rejected Jesus in the name of their culture but "many" have because they saw him a threat to their culture.
- F. Story of Graeco-Roman Civilization's attack on the gospel
 - i. Popular animosity based on "...social piety...the problem was not merely political.
 - ii. The state wasn't always the aggressor
 - iii. In modern times open conflict has again arisen including nationalistic and communistic societies but "ardent champions of humanistic and democratic civilizations...have discerned in Christ a foe of cultural interests.
- G. Historical and social situations in which such rejections of Jesus Christ have taken place have been "extremely various."
 - i. Different groups and motivations
 - ii. Regarding Jesus' relation to culture is concerned we find his critics are offended by the same elements in the gospel and employ "similar arguments against it.
- H. Prominent among these "recurrent arguments is the contention that, as Gibbon states the Roman case, Christians are "animated by a contempt for the present existence and by confidence in immortality."
 - i. This attitude is not due to defective discipleship, but rather the "evident" source of his follower's convictions.
 - ii. Seems to mate contempt for present existence with great concern for existing men
 - iii. This bothers both Celsus (5th century philosopher who felt Christians ought to defend the Roman Empire) and "arouses" Marx and Lenin to hostility because believers do not care enough about temporal existence.
- I. Another argument against Christ: people rely on grace instead of summoning them to human achievement
 - i. The Romans if followed Christ would have ended up like the Jews without a patch of Ground to call their own.
 - ii. Marxists see grace as a "sleeping pill" almost as bad as the hope of heaven
- J. A third count in cultural indictments of Christ and his church "...is that they are intolerant."
 - i. Marxists didn't raise this objection (because they too were intolerant

- ii. However, Rome was tolerant and so had a problem with Christian intolerance
- iii. This objection wasn't applied to the Jews even though they, too, were intolerant—they were not seen as a threat because of their withdrawal.
- iv. However, Christians were members of Roman society
- v. Niebuhr points out that even democratic tolerance has its limits just "because it was carried out as a social policy for the sake of maintaining unity."
 - 1. This has been largely obscured in modern times,
 - 2. However, showed up with anti-Jewish attacks of German national socialism.
 - 3. This religious antagonism of modern tolerant culture to Christ is often disguised because it does not "call its religious practices religious." Hence gives voice to things like "religion should be kept out of politics and business"
 - 4. What this often means is that "not only the claims of religious groups but all consideration for the claims of Christ and God should be banished from spheres where other gods, called values, reign.
 - 5. This charge lies not only against Christian organizations, but the faith as well.

K. Other attacks on Christ

- i. The forgiveness that Christ practices and teaches is said to be irreconcilable with the demands of justice or free man's sense of moral responsibility.
- ii. Injunctions against the Sermon on the Mount...are found incompatible with the duties of life in society.
- iii. Christian exaltation of lowly offends aristocrats and Nietzscheans
- iv. Followers of Christ also have difficulty combining His claims on them and those of society.
- v. Roughly, this history of Christianity, in chapters, just is as having to do with this problem through its ideas and society.

L. Niebuhr does not see the essential problem here as between Christianity and civilization.

- i. The relationship between these two authorities constitutes its problem
- ii. E.g., "...when Christianity deals with the question of reason and revelation, what is ultimately in question is the relation of the revelation in Christ to the reason which prevails in culture.

M. Issues of loyalty to church or state are in the background, so we need to define the terms of Christ and culture and what Niebuhr means by them.

2 Towards a Definition of Christ

- A. Christian is ordinarily defined as “one who believes in Jesus Christ” or as “a follower of Jesus Christ.”
 - i. More adequately thinks Niebuhr as “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 understanding of themselves and their world.”
 - 1. The main source of the knowledge of God and man, good and evil, the constant companion of the conscience, and the expected deliverer from evil.
 - ii. However, large number of interpretations of His essential nature
 - 1. A Teacher
 - 2. A new law and religion
 - 3. The cause which they have chosen (or has chosen them).
 - 4. Roughly a producer of a new life.
 - 5. Primarily a new community.
- B. Despite other views of Jesus Niebuhr asserts a fundamental unity
 - i. Jesus Christ is a definite character and person whose teachings, actions, and sufferings are of one piece.
 - ii. Christ who exercises authority over Christians or whom Christians accept as authority is the Jesus Christ of the New Testament.
 - iii. Jesus can’t be confused with Confucius, or Socrates or a Plato.
 - iv. There are the original portraits (where he is recognizably one and the same) with which all later pictures may be compared and by which all caricatures may be corrected.
 - v. Jesus Christ is their authority and that the one who exercises these various kinds of authority is the same Christ.
- C. Despite this, when we undertake to define the essence of Jesus Christ...we enter into the continuous deviate
 - i. Can’t present by means of concepts and propositions a principle which presents itself in the form of a person
 - ii. Hence, a temptation to speak in redundancy or forego interpretation
- D. If we cannot say anything adequately, we can say some things inadequately
 - i. Niebuhr asserts that though every description is an interpretation, it can be an interpretation of objective reality
 - ii. Jesus Christ can be described, but short of completeness
- E. In principle any description from an arbitrary point of view will be evident to needs to be complemented by other interpretations of the same subject
- F. The virtue of Christ which religious liberalism has magnified beyond all others is love, yet when we examine the NT we can become dubious of the descriptive value of such phrases.
 - i. However, Jesus’ character and virtues point in the direction of God, not in the virtue itself

- ii. It is extreme to the extent it is extreme in devotion to the one God
 - iii. For Jesus there is no other finally love-worthy being
 - iv. This awareness can make our love for God compatible with anger in ways that love for the sake of love does not.
 - v. Niebuhr asserts that according to the Synoptic Gospels He emphasized in conduct and teaching the virtues of faith in God and humility before Him much more than love.
- G. Niebuhr asserts that to understand how the virtue of love “fits’ into understanding we must pay attention to Jesus’ theology
 - i. God is love but love is not God
 - ii. Jesus’ love of God is not love of cosmic love
 - iii. Jesus’ use of the term Father speaks of his loyalty that cannot be captured when the terms fatherhood and deity are identified
- H. Jesus’ emphasis on love of neighbor is not to put devotion to both God and neighbor as equal
 - i. God is only to be loved with heart, soul, mind and strength
 - ii. Neighbor love is put on the same level of value that the self occupies.
 - iii. Niebuhr asserts that ascribing “infinite” or “intrinsic” value to the human soul seems wholly foreign to Jesus; he does not speak of worth apart from God.
 - iv. “Neighbor love” does not make sense if it is abstracted from the primary love of God.
 - v. The love of man is pitiful rather than adoring—it is giving and forgiving rather than grateful
- I. Niebuhr finds 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.
- J. The Christ of the NT possesses Jesus with possessing virtues but in an extreme manner disproportionate to secular, cultural wisdom
- K. Albert Schweitzer put the virtue of Jesus’ hope (instead of love) as a unique characteristic
- L. As in the case of putting the virtue of love as unique, it is presented as a deep truth that transforms ethics.
- M. Niebuhr thinks that the Jesus of the NT was clearly animated by an intense hope, but his hope was not (he thinks) determined by an eschatology, rather his hope was in God.
- N. Niebuhr also thinks that this elevation of virtues rather than elevation of God that produces radical virtues applies to obedience.
 - i. Jesus was radically obedient
 - ii. He was obedient unto death
 - iii. Can be interpreted as an existentialist commitment to the authority of obedience (rather than to God)
- O. Niebuhr thinks this is still something lacking in the existentialist portrait of the obedient Christ.
 - i. The virtue has been abstracted from that realization of God

- ii. Bultmann doesn't see any real content to the idea of obedience in the gospel and no doctrine "of duty or of the good. It is sufficient for a man in every concrete situation in life, in the here and now...Man does not meet the crisis of decision armed with a definite standard, he stands on no firm base, but rather alone in empty space...He [Jesus] sees only the individual man standing before the will of God...Jesus teaches no ethics at all in the sense of an intelligible theory valid for all men concerning what should be done and left undone."
 - iii. Jesus knows that love and faith alone make obedience possible and that God is the bestower of all these gifts
 - iv. The obedience of a Son whose sonship is not definable as just obedience to a principle that constrains obedience.
- P. The same result comes when we examine the Protestant concentration on the faith of Jesus Christ and the monastic interest in his great humility leads to the same result.
 - i. Faith and humility are not things in themselves, they are in relations to persons
 - ii. Only romantic fictionalizing can interpret the Jesus of the NT as one who believed in the goodness of men and sought by trusting it to bring out what was good in them.
 - iii. The faith of the son is too extreme for those who conceive themselves as sons of nature, or of men, or of blind chance.
- Q. Jesus' humility is also inordinate.
 - i. It would not be surprising if a new school of interpretation arose in the wake of existentialism with an attempt to understand him as the man of radical humility.
 - ii. However, Jesus is humility before God
 - iii. Before the Pharisees, high priests, Pilate and Herod he showed a confidence that had no trace of self-abnegation.
 - iv. Jesus spoke with authority and acted with confidence of power.
 - v. Even when he repudiated the title of "Good Master" he did not defer to others rabbis better than himself.
 - vi. The humility of Christ is not the moderation of keeping one's exact place in the scale of being, but rather that of absolute dependence on God and absolute trust in Him.
 - vii. The secret of the meekness and the gentleness of Christ lies in his relation to God.
- R. Thus, any one of the virtues of Jesus may be taken as the key to understanding his character and teachings, but each is intelligible in its apparent radicalism only as a relation to God.
 - i. It's better not to attempt to delineate him by describing one of his excellences but rather to take them all together.
 - ii. The extremeness in his virtues is due to that unique devotion to God and single-hearted trust in Him.

- S. Therefore, Niebuhr reasons, belief in Jesus Christ by men in their various cultures always means belief in God.
- T. Yet this is only half the meaning of Christ, considered morally
 - i. Jesus is the moral mediator of the Father's will toward men
 - ii. Because he loves God passionately, he loves men with the perfection of divine (unconditional) *agape* love since God is *agape*.
 - iii. Jesus, however, is mediatorial, not median.
 - iv. He is not the center from which to radiate the virtues of God and of men
 - v. Jesus exists rather as the focusing point in the continuous alternation of movements from God to man and man to God.
- U. 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.

3 Toward the Definition of Culture

- A. From this inadequate definition of the meaning of Christ we turn now to the task of defining in similarly tenuous fashion, the meaning of culture.
- B. A theologian's definition of the term must, in the nature of the case, be a layman's definition since he cannot presume to enter into the issues raised by professional anthropologists.
- C. Initially it must also be a definition of the phenomenon without theological interpretation.
 - i. For some purely secular (not in relation to God)
 - ii. Others as being anti-God or idolatrous
 - iii. For others based on a natural, rational knowledge of God or His law
 - iv. Christian disinterestedness forbids the adoption, at least at the outset, of any of these evaluations.
- D. We cannot be trying to understand culture in terms of simply being a particular society.
 - i. Like Western culture
 - ii. Troeltsch believes Christianity and Western culture are so inextricably intertwined that a Christian can say little about his faith to members of other civilizations, and the latter in turn cannot encounter Christ save as a member of the Western world.
 - iii. However, the culture that Niebuhr is concerned with is not a particular phenomenon, but the general one even though a Christian of the West cannot think about the problem save in Western terms.
- E. We cannot be trying to define culture by taking into view some special phase of human social organization and achievement.
 - i. It should be done when the problem is stated in terms of Christ's relation to science and philosophy, as in the question of revelation and reason or of his relation to political organization as in the question of church and state.
 - ii. Jakob Burkhardt thinks "culture" is distinguished from both religion and state.

1. Regards these three powers religion, state, and culture as "supremely heterogeneous to each other."
 2. In his usage culture is distinguished from the other two powers by its nonauthoritarian character.
 3. "The sum of all that has *spontaneously* arisen for the advancement of material life and as an expression of spiritual and moral life"
 4. It is the realm of the variable, free not necessarily universal of all that cannot lay claim to compulsive authority.
 5. The spearhead of such culture is speech, the foremost expressions of its spirit are found in the arts.
 6. Niebuhr demurs: These doubtlessly raise special problems, but we can find no clear demarcation between them and those that arise in political and religious society.
 7. Niebuhr thinks that authoritarianism and freedom are distributed as Burkhard seems to think.
 8. It is especially arbitrary and confusing to define culture as though it excluded religion and the latter as though included Christ, since the problems with which we are concerned are often most difficult in the realm of religion.
- iii. Niebuhr asserts that what we have in view when we deal with Christ and culture is that total process of human activity and that total result of such activity to which now name culture, now the name civilization is applied in common speech.
 - iv. Culture is the "artificial, secondary environment" which man superimposes on the natural
 - v. Comprises: language, habits, ideas, beliefs, customs social organization, inherited artifacts, technical processes and values.
 - vi. This "social heritage", this "reality sui generis" which the NT writers frequently had in mind when the spoke of "the world" which is represented in many forms.
- F. Niebuhr asserts we "cannot venture to define the "essence" of this culture, we can describe some of its chief characteristics.
- i. It is inextricably bound up with man's life in society; it is always social.
 - ii. Quotes Malinowski: "The essential fact of culture as we live and experience it, as we can observe it scientifically is the organization of human beings into permanent groups."
 - iii. Culture is the social heritage they receive and transmit.
 - iv. What is purely private is not part of culture.
 - v. Social life is always cultural.
 - vi. Culture and social existence go together.
- G. Culture, secondly, is *human achievement*
- i. We distinguish culture from nature by noting the evidences of human purposiveness and effort.

- ii. Hence it includes just about everything...
 - iii. It is the result of past human achievement
 - iv. The gifts of culture unlike the gifts of nature cannot be possessed without striving on the part of the recipient.
 - v. The world so far as it is man-made and man-intended is the world of culture.
- H. In the third place these human achievements are all designed for an end or ends.
 - i. The world of culture is the world of values.
 - ii. But not so with respect to natural occurrences
 - iii. But so, with respect to cultural phenomena
 - iv. What men have made and what they make we must assume is for a purpose
 - v. It is designed to serve a good
 - vi. It can never be described without reference to ends in minds of designers and users.
- I. The values with which these human achievements are concerned are dominantly those of the *good for man*.
 - i. Philosophers seem to agree that man must serve his own good, and that he is the measure of all things.
 - ii. Man begins with himself as the chief value and the source of all other values.
 - iii. It is not only conceivable that men should undertake to labor and produce for the sake of some other beings' good, but it seems true that they do indeed in their cultures often seek to serve causes transcending human existence.
 - iv. Even totemic to modern societies they identify themselves with orders of being that include more than men.
 - v. They seek to realize what is good-for-reason.
- J. Culture in all of its forms and varieties is concerned with the temporal and material realization of values.
 - i. It is fallacious to think of culture as materialistic in the sense that what men labor to achieve is always the satisfaction of their needs and physical and temporal beings.
 - ii. Even the economic interpretations of culture recognize that beyond material goods men seek to gain fewer tangible values.
 - iii. It takes a lot of labor to do this.
 - iv. Visions of order and justices, hopes of glory must at the cost of much suffering be embodied in written laws, dramatic rites, structures of government, empires, ascetic lives.
- K. Cultural activity is almost as much concerned with the conservation of values as with their realization.
 - i. They need to be written afresh generation by generation on the "tables of the heart."
 - ii. Education and training are important to keep that.

- iii. Culture is a social tradition which must be conserved by painful struggle not so much against nonhuman natural forces as against revolutionary and critical powers in human life and reason.
- L. Finally, attention must be directed to the pluralism that is characteristic of all culture.
 - i. There are interweaving interests
 - ii. Culture is concerned with what is good for all
 - iii. Individuals have special claims and interest
 - iv. Societies are always involved in more or less effort to hold together in tolerable conflict the many efforts of many men in many groups to achieve and conserve many goods.
 - v. Among the many values the kingdom of God may be included but only as an element(s) in the great pluralism.
- M. Sometimes we state the fundamental human problem as that of grace and nature, in human existence we do not know a nature apart from culture—no man looks at the world with pristine eyes.

4 The Typical Answers

- A. Given these two complex realities--Christ and culture—an infinite dialogue must develop in the Christian conscience and the Christian community.
 - i. In its concern for the conservation of the many values of the past, culture rejects the Christ who bids men rely on grace.
 - ii. The Son of God is himself child of a religious culture and sends his disciples to tend his lambs and sheep
 - iii. A new answer will provide a new rejoinder.
- B. We can, however, define typical partial answers that recur
 - i. Seems they are less a product of culture as a part of the problem itself
 - ii. Niebuhr will offer in the following chapters such typical answers
 - iii. Five sorts of typical answers will be offered as a guide to what follows
- C. Answers of the first type emphasize the *opposition* between Christ and culture.
- D. Recognition of a fundamental *agreement* between Christ and culture is typical of the answers offered by a second group.
 - i. Jesus often appears as a great hero of human culture history—the greatest human achievement.
 - ii. Many of this view see a close relation between Christianity and Western civilization, between Jesus' teachings or the teachings about him and democratic institutions.
 - iii. Or occasionally interpretations that emphasize the agreement between Christ and Eastern culture or some that tend to identify him with the spirit of Marxian society.
- E. Three other typical answers agree with each other in seeking to maintain the great differences between the two principles and in undertaking to hold them together in some unity.
 - i. They are distinguished from each other by the manner in which each attempt to combine the two authorities.

- ii. One of them the third kind (Christ above culture), understand Christ's relation to culture somewhere as the men of the second group do: he is the fulfillment of cultural aspirations and the restorer of the institutions of true society. But they see him also discontinuous as well as continuous with social life and its culture.
 - 1. This synthetic type is best represented by Thomas Aquinas and his followers
- iii. Another group of median answers constitutes the fourth type (Christ and culture in paradox)
 - 1. In these the duality and the inescapable authority of both Christ and culture are recognized, but the opposition between them is accepted.
 - 2. They are subject to the tension that accompanies obedience to two authorities who do not agree yet must both be obeyed.
 - 3. They refuse to accommodate (so like Christ against culture).
 - 4. Yet they differ in the conviction that obedience to God requires obedience to the institutions of society and loyalty to its members.
 - 5. They are subject to two moralities and in that polarity they live precariously.
- iv. Finally, the third of the mediating answers is the conversionist solution.
 - 1. With the first and fourth groups they agree that human nature is fallen or perverted and that this perversion not only appears in culture but is transmitted by it
 - 2. So there is an opposition between Christ and all human institutions and customs.
 - 3. But they do not behave like the Christ against culture type and separate or the Christ and culture in paradox and endure in the expectation "of a transhistorical salvation."
 - 4. Niebuhr identifies Augustine and John Calvin as associated with these
- v. When the answers are put this way to the enduring problem, it becomes apparent that a construction has been set up that is partly artificial.
 - 1. A type is always a construct.
 - 2. No one person or group completely conforms to a type.
 - 3. Niebuhr asserts that though the method of typology is historically inadequate, it has the advantage of calling to attention the continuity and significance of the great motifs that appear and reappear in this enduring problem.

END OF CHAPTER 1