“Christ and Culture” by Richard Niebuhr

Book Summary[[1]](#footnote-1)\*

### 1. The enduring problem

This chapter introduces us to the “enduring problem,” which to Niebuhr is the relationship between “Christianity and civilization” (1). This is a problem because we know Christ is perfect/sinless, and if culture is man-made (as Niebuhr shows it is), and since humans are imperfect/sinful, how can Christ mingle with imperfection? This is compounded by the fact that there are verses in the Bible that suggest we should be out of the world and also verses that suggest we should be in the world. This is even harder to see when the biblical literatures does not represent a single example of a belief that is represented in non-cultural forms. To show how Christians have attempted to deal with this “problem”, Niebuhr introduces and interacts with five views; Christ against culture, Christ of Culture, Christ above Culture, Christ and Culture paradox and finally, his recommended, Christ transforms culture.

In this first chapter, Niebuhr attempts to “define” who we mean by “Jesus Christ” and what we mean by “Culture”. About Jesus, Niebuhr states that our definitions of Jesus are inadequate (in the sense that they do not fully capture His totality), since they are culturally conditioned. But still he believes that they are adequate, for the purpose of meeting Him (14). Culture is defined as “the total process of human activity” and its result; it refers to the “‘secondary environment’, which man superimposes on the natural.” (32)

### 2. Christ Against Culture

*Description* — Here is the most uncompromising view towards culture which “affirms the sole authority of Christ over culture and resolutely rejects culture’s claims to loyalty” (45) “The counterpart of loyalty to Christ and the brothers is the rejection of cultural society; a clear line of separation is drawn between the brotherhood of the children of God and the world” (47-48).

*Some positives* — The people who believe/adopt this way of are the single-most reason why we can have some sympathy for this view, says Niebuhr (66). The people who reject the world “have not taken easy ways in professing their allegiance to Christ. They have endured physical and mental sufferings in their willingness to abandon homes, property, and the protection of government for the sake of his cause” (66).

*Some negatives* — Niebuhr believes that this position is inadequate; primarily because this separation from world and Christianity has never actually been achieved at any time, nor can we think that it can be. Also, there seems to be the false notion that sin lies in culture and when the Christian escapes culture, he/she can escape sin. This is certainly not the case (78). Most importantly for Niebuhr, this view does not adequately recognise Jesus’ and the Spirit’s role in creation. “Their rejection of culture is easily combined with a suspicion of nature and nature’s God:… ultimately they are tempted to divide the world in the material realm governed by a principle opposed to Christ and a spiritual realm governed by the spiritual God” (81).

### 3. The Christ of Culture

*Description* — In this view, men/women ‘hail Jesus as the Messiah of their society, the fulfiller of its hopes and aspirations, the perfecter of its true faith, the source of its holiest spirit” (83). These people seek to maintain fellowship not only with believers with also with unbelievers. “They feel no great tension between church and world, the social laws and the Gospel,… the ethics of salvation and the ethics of social conservation or progress. On the one hand they interpret culture through Christ, where those aspects that are most like Jesus are given most honour. On the other hand, they interpret Christ through culture, selecting from his teaching that which best harmonizes with the best in civilization (83).

*Some positives* — People tend to feel that only those who refuse to adapt to culture can make an impact on culture (blood of martyrs). However, history testifies that people were attracted to Christ also because of the “harmony of the Christian message with the moral and religious philosophy of their best teachers” (103) Also this group of people tend to attach themselves to many positions in society where they have the potential to make a deep impact in the lives of people.

*Some negatives* — Niebuhr’s biggest problem with this view lies in distortion of Christ when seen with the intention to make Jesus conform to the best of society. We are left with a non-authentic view of Jesus.

### 4. Christ above Culture

*Description* — This view does not make the ‘battle’ between Christ and culture (i.e. Do not say either Christ or Culture), but rather it sees the ‘battle’ between God and man (Holy God vs sinful man) (117). The adherents stress that God orders culture, and thus culture is neither good nor bad. When man sins, his rebellion against God is expressed in cultural (actual) terms, yet that doesn’t mean that culture is bad. Culture, they say, is sustained by God, and they see the harmony (synthesis) between Christ and culture as the best way to address the ‘problem.’ Niebuhr notes, “They cannot separate the works of human culture from the grace of God, for all those works are possible only by grace. But neither can they separate the experience of grace from cultural activity; for how can men love the unseen God in response to His love without serving the visible brother in human society?” (119).

*Some positives:* It attempts a fine balance between seeing Christ as part of culture (as the incarnation), and yet being outside culture (as God who sustains culture). Through this position, we can arrive at moral law for society, and even Christian involvement in society. Niebuhr explains saying that God created man as a social being and it is impossible for society to function without direction from God. The Church, therefore, while functioning for a spiritual purpose, has also an earthly purpose of being guardian/custodian of that divine law (136), and in that sense serves the world.

*Some negatives* — One of the problems that bothers Niebuhr is that this position when pushed to its limit leads to the institutionalization of Christ and the gospel. This is evident especially when this position can draw attention away from the “eternal hope and goal of the Christian” towards instead the “temporal embodiment” in a “man-devised form” (147). Also, “they do not… face up to the radical evil present in all human work” (148).

### 5. Christ and Culture in Paradox

*Description* — Similar to the ‘Christ above Culture’ is the Christ and Culture in Paradox view. While the members of this group want to hold together “loyalty to Christ and responsibility for culture” (149), they believe that this cooperation is not a happy balance/union that the above Culture group would like people to believe. Alongside the cooperation of Christ and culture, they stress on a severe ‘paradox’ where a ‘conflict’ exists between Christ and culture due to sin in culture; in the dealing of Christ with culture, we see both sin and grace.

*Some positives* — This view rightly capture the biblical tension depicted for Christians in this world. For man is “under law, and yet not under law but grace; he is sinner, and yet righteous…” recipient of “divine wrath and mercy”(157). This is in fact a dynamic process, not a static rejection or acceptance of culture of the previous ‘models’ but rather we sense, almost from experience, that our dealing with culture is fraught with pain and peace.

*Some negatives* — In one thing, Niebuhr says, that this position becomes static; it is in that the Christian loses the voice to say anything meaningful in/to culture. It is a position that leads us to accept culture (conservatism) because we see in each instance both wrath and mercy; and because we see both, there is a danger that we act in favour of neither.

### 6. Christ the Transformer of Culture

*Description* — This group can be described as ‘conversionists’ who have a more “hopeful view toward culture” (191). There theological conviction comes from seeing God as creator, knowing that man’s fall was from something good, and the view that we see God’s dramatic interaction with men in historical human events (194). Thus about human culture they believe it can be “a transformed human life in and to the glory of God” through the grace of God (196).

In practice, this view means that we work in culture for its betterment, because God ultimately had some hand in human creativity, and it was good (and can be good). We also work for its transformation because while there is sin in culture, it is not all lost, there is hope through Christ, for redemption of cultures. Furthermore, we would defeat sin not by escaping it or fighting it directly (like focussing on the devil), but rather with our eyes on Jesus, our desire to be positive and God-oriented, will help to defeat sin (like focussing on Christ, thinking whatever is excellent).

### 7. A “Concluding Unscientific Postscript”

Niebuhr ends his book calling for decision. This is not because he believes that the last option is the best presented and most logical; on the contrary he believes that the answers for the enduring problem remain “unconcluded and inconclusive” which could be extended indefinitely (230). Saying that theory can go on and on, he proposes that we move from “consideration to action, from insight to decision” (233). The problem of Christ and culture cannot be answered through study but in the realm of “free decisions of individual believers and responsible communities” (233).

This chapter is not therefore a traditional conclusion where another would summarizes his point of view. Niebuhr is not appealing for simple/un-critical social action. He proposes an awareness of three things to guide our action. (For the sake of simplicity, I am rearranging his order to better express what I think he is saying, in relation to what we are studying).

Niebuhr argues that we need to be aware of the relativism/culturally conditioned nature of our actions. He says that since we have “partial, incomplete, fragmentary knowledge” we need to have a measured opinion (not be too optimistic) about our ability to be involved in culture for the Lord. We are limited by our “technical knowledge” and “philosophical understanding,” and consequently our decisions for/in this complex world are coloured by our limitations (235).

Also Niebuhr stresses that we do not act alone, or for ourselves alone. Rather, we act as believers, for a higher purpose, to act in the present moment (history) with real consequences and results alongside eternal reward. The way out of this relativity, and our action, Niebuhr rights states, is faith. In light of Jesus Christ, we make our “confessions and decisions both with confidence and humility which accepts completion and correction and even conflict from and with others who stand in the same relation to the Absolute” (238). This is because “faith in the Absolute, as known in and through Christ, makes evident that nothing I do or can do in my relative ignorance and knowledge,… right without the completion, correction, and forgiveness of an activity of grace working in all creation and in the redemption” (238-239). This is not a position of laziness, but recognizing that in our faithfulness (to attempt to transform culture), we rely on the grace that will change our minds and work in and through our limitations (241). In his final paragraph Niebuhr says,

“To make our decisions in faith is to make them in view of the fact that no single man or group or historical time is the church; but that there is a church of faith in which we do our partial, relative work and on which we count. It is to make them [our decisions] 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” (246).

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1. \*<http://theintersection.pbworks.com/f/Summary%20of%20H.%20Richard%20Niebuhr%20%20Christ%20and%20Culture.pdf> [↑](#footnote-ref-1)