

## Notes on Niebuhr's 5 Types

First two in Niebuhr's list are juxtaposed by Niebuhr because they aren't middle ground...they lean to either Christ as the authority or culture as the authority.

**I Christ against culture** – Roughly a hostile stance towards the values, achievements and authority of secular culture. Niebuhr suggests the roots of monasticism are found in this but doesn't go into detail about that. Others he mentioned who hold this attitude are the Mennonites, the Society of Friends, (but not the Quakers—regarded Christ as the representative of culture).

Tertullian- famous for the quote, "What does Jerusalem have to do with Athens," Second century Christian leader whose views about Christ and culture are often juxtaposed with Clement of Alexandria's views about Christ and culture.

Tertullian among other things was concerned about those who were educated in Greek philosophy often became heretics and there are Scriptures that can be read as anti-philosophy.

My view: The question is whether the text is anti-philosophy or anti- **bad** philosophy. The question is whether Christian philosophers can do their philosophical scholarship from a distinctly Biblical point of view. It may not be that there is a Christian view of the Pythagorean theorem, but there might be a Christian view of theological and philosophical view of what mathematics amounts to. That is, whether mathematics is necessarily deeply imbedded in the nature of God, or whether abstract mathematics is totally independent of God and would in principle be true whether God or anything else existed or not. It raises the question, is mathematics and moral truths uncreated necessary truths. Or are mathematical and moral truths nominalistic (named) but don't stand for anything real?

Tolstoy is an example cited by Niebuhr of the ("come out" view) separatist—Niebuhr says Tolstoy came to this after painful struggle, when he accepted the Jesus Christ of the Gospels as his sole and explicit authority. (p. 57) Niebuhr strongly asserts that for Tolstoy the key to the whole was the law of non-resistance because the Christian faith was incompatible with the state because the state is based on love of power and the exercise of violence, whereas the love, humility, forgiveness and non-resistance of Christian life draw it completely away from political measures and institutions. Tolstoy had a low view of Church, "The Church as Churches...are anti-Christian institutions..."

Tolstoy turned against philosophy, the sciences and arts in which he had been nurtured.

Niebuhr doesn't cite this, but we can see this separatist attitude both explicitly and implicitly in the OT theocracy with Israel—this strict separatism motif was often used as an explanation for why Israel was commanded to wipe out the pagan culture and people in the Promised Land...however, note: it's hard to see that Jesus was by inaugurating the Kingdom of God through his death and resurrection, telling his disciples and followers to set up a theocracy immediately, so much of the spirit of strict separatism doesn't seem to be in the NT. Theocracy seems to be for the eschaton when Christ returns to consummate the Kingdom on earth.

According to Niebuhr there are 4 problems with this view:

- 1) The problem of reason and revelation—revelation is substituted for reason (Tertullian however did not say I believe because it is absurd. But he did say something very close to that.)
- 2) The question about the nature and prevalence of sin. Sin arises not only out of culture but also arises out of nature.
- 3) The question of the relations of law and grace. Does this perspective lead to legalism? My view: Historically yes, but not necessarily.
- 4) Niebuhr says the knottiest problem is the problem of the relation of Jesus Christ to the Creator of nature and Governor of history—is Jesus part of the Trinity? And to the Spirit immanent in Creation and in the Christian church. They end up often bifurcating the world into material (bad) and the spiritual (good) ending up in accepting something of the spirit of Buddhism, in Jesus, in Confucius and in himself. According to Niebuhr they tend to fall prey to the temptation of Spiritualism.

**II Christ of culture** – Gnostics, Abelard are mentioned as representative of this type; recognition of a fundamental agreement with culture (emphasis on that agreement is with the best of culture) - Jesus often appears as a great hero of human culture history—great achievement –

William James describes folks in this type as “once born” and “healthy minded.”

Niebuhr describes them as “equally at home in the community of believers... and the community of culture”

They do not feel a great tension between the church and the world.

On the one hand they interpret the culture through Christ regarding those elements in it as most important which are most accordant with his work and person, on the other hand they understand Christ through culture, selecting from his teaching and action as well as from the Christian doctrine about him such points as seem to agree with what is best in civilization. Better than liberal it should be called Cultural **Protestantism - a peaceful cooperative society achieved by moral training.**

For Abelard Jesus was the great moral teacher who "in all that he did in the flesh...had the intention of our instruction," doing in a higher degree what Socrates and Plato had done before him.

Often interpret Christ as the hero of manifold culture.

John Locke, Leibniz, and Kant and Thomas Jefferson

They tend to think that man's reason is darkened but is not in its nature misdirected; for them the cure of bad reasoning lies in better reasoning, and in the aid of the divine teacher. (Very different view from the Type we'll discuss later which is the "Christ and culture in paradox.")

Jefferson thought Christianity had it wrong from the beginning and then corrupted more as brought down to us, but thought Christ's ethics were perfect. Jesus Christ as the great Enlightener, the great teacher....

Niebuhr spends a great deal of time reviewing Albrecht Richschl (German Protestant Theologian) as a thought leader in this movement. Describes him as the most representative theologian in the 19<sup>th</sup> century of the Christ of culture view.

Niebuhr describes the Christ of culture view, "...only by engagement in civic work for the sake of the common good, but faithfulness in one's social calling, is it possible to be true to the example of Christ." P. 97

Niebuhr seems to characterize this in the following way, if the hope of God making things right in the eschaton, there is the hope of the present rule of the transcendent Lord of heaven and earth to make things better. P. 99

(In short, I think this amounts to saying: loyalty to Jesus leads to active participation in every cultural work and to care for the conservation of all great institutions.)

Niebuhr, who thinks Christ of culture is heavily criticized, says their position can be true of fundamentalists who criticize liberals, the "...terms differ, but the logic is always the same: Christ is identified with what men conceive to be their finest ideals, their noblest institutions, and their best philosophy."

Niebuhr's evaluation/objections:

- 1) In so far as part of its purpose is always that of recommending the gospel to an unbelieving society to some special group, such as the intelligentsia or political liberals...it often fails to achieve its end because it does not go far enough or it might introduce an element that will weaken the cultural movement.
- 2) He thinks thought leaders of Christ of culture go "too far in the judgment of their fellow believers of other schools."
- 3) Niebuhr thinks that Gnostics "...take some fragment of the complex New Testament story and interpretation, call all this the essential characteristic of Jesus, elaborate upon it and thus reconstruct their own mythical figure of the Lord.
- 4) Christ of culture folks tend to (like their opponents) separate reason and revelation, but evaluate the two principles differently. Reason, they think is the highroad to the knowledge of God and salvation; Jesus Christ is for them the great teacher of rational truth and goodness or the emergent genius in the history of religious and moral reason. Revelation amounts to the "the growth of reason in history."
- 5) Interpreting Jesus as the Christ of culture involves the Trinitarian problem.
- 6) Concludes "...it becomes more or less clear that it is not possible honestly to confess that Jesus is the Christ of culture unless one can confess much more than this. (In effect I think he's saying that those of the Christ of culture sacrifice the New Testament characterization of Jesus and that's accommodation).

Now moves to the middle positions taken by the church—they are **synthesists**:

**III Christ above culture** – Affirms both, but realizes Christ demands more loyalty. Fundamentally concerned with God and man and not Christ and culture, still some kind of synthesis..

Does not regard its solution of the Christ-culture problem as compromising...for it, the fundamental issue does not lie between Christ and the world, important as that issue is, but between God and man and approaches the Christ and culture problem from that point of view and with that conviction.

Niebuhr describes that there were tentative efforts to state synthetic answers "...particularly in connections with the problem of revelation and philosophic wisdom by the Apologists of the second century particularly Justin Martyr."

**Clement of Alexandria is the first great representative of the type.** Clement used Plato, Aristotle, Xeno, Aristophanes and Menander as guarantors of the truth of practical Christian ethics.

Clement not only connected ethics and the New Testament but also philosophy and faith. Niebuhr describes this attitude of Clement in the following way, "...the clear image of truth, a divine gift to the Greeks"—it is "school-master to bring 'the Hellenic' mind, as the law, the Hebrews, 'to Christ.'

(I take this to say something like this: just like the "law" of the OT was the school-master to bring Hebrews to Christ, by analogy, philosophy was the schoolmaster to the Hellenic/Greek mind to bring them to Christ.)

He combines appreciation of culture with loyalty to Christ at a time when the church was still outlawed. It represents, according to Niebuhr—a sense of responsibility in the church for the maintenance of sound morals and learning than the feeling of obligation for the continuance and improvement of the great social institutions—it is more concerned with the culture of Christians than with the Christianization of culture.

The idea of accepting full social responsibility for the great institutions came more from Aquinas. Many Protestants who abandoned the Ritschlian answer (for the "Christ of Culture" Type) are attracted to Thomist without being tempted to transfer his allegiance to the Roman church. ( My view: Which is to say Niebuhr is saying that Protestants in following the Thomistic example, didn't become Catholics, but incorporated the ideas in to their form of Christian practice.)

In my interpretation of what Niebuhr is asserting about Aquinas amounts to saying that Aquinas saw in Greek philosophy (especially Aristotle), a way to synthetically combine Christ and culture in a way where Christ's authority in life was supported by the insights he could glean as he read and understood Greek culture and philosophy when they were in certain ways adjusted (provided support or complementary) to what theology was saying.

He completes this chapter on this type by pointing out one of the great challenges of those who adopt this type of answer: (my spin) tie yourself to a cultural (or scientific explanation) or answer in the present generation, then be prepared to be orphaned in the next.

(Niebuhr wonders at the beginning of the next chapter as to whether this type is a disguised version of accommodation to culture.)

#### **IV Christ & culture in paradox** – Niebuhr identifies this type as “dualist.”

It is a dualist view but not a Manichean dualism where you're not sure which is going to win the struggle between good and evil, “both and” approach, that wants to hold together the two, but distinguish between the two, loyalty to Christ and responsibility to culture.

Real existential conflict is between God's righteousness and ours. Sees the miracle as the gracious forgiveness God not based on merit.

See the problem of human sinfulness as more important than merely darkened reason as do the Christ of culture type, therefore also sees the corruption in culture as different from them, too. The corruption is more complete and sordid in culture, too, from their perspective. Does not subscribe to the idea that Reason should be exalted to the position of judge and ruler of all things. In the dualist view “the whole edifice of culture is cracked and madly askew...”

No distinction between wisdom of (secular) philosophy and folly of the simpleton before God—sees the sordidness of everything that is creaturely in the presence of God's holiness—sees a fatal flaw in everything. In this they are like the radical Christian in pronouncing the whole world of human culture to be godless and sick unto death.

But there is a difference: the dualist knows that he belongs to that culture and cannot get out of it and that God indeed sustains him in it and by it, for if God in His grace did not sustain the world in its sin it would not exist. So, he can only speak in what sounds like paradoxes.

The two big paradoxes of particular importance to the dualists are the paradox of the law of grace and the paradox of divine wrath and mercy.

God's Law is not an additional law given to human laws; it transcends.

So, two things: the law of justice and the law of love; the second transcends the first.

This transcendent over-riding reality, however, needs to be lived out in the first ...in present culture.

Niebuhr describes this type as more a "motif" than a school of thought with clear cut examples of adherents. He sees in Apostle Paul in some of what he wrote as very suggestive of this. (Too lengthy to go into here) He also suggest Augustine and Luther as candidates.

He sees in Luther a double attitude toward reason and philosophy, toward business and trade, toward religious organization and rites, as well as toward state and politics.

Niebuhr's virtues and vices of this dualism:

- 1) It mirrors the actual struggles of the Christian who lives "between the times"
- 2) It recognizes the dynamic character of God, man, grace and sin. (My reading...it takes into account changing circumstances and what the changing circumstances demands)
- 3) However, dualism tends to lead Christians into antinomianism and into cultural conservatism (doesn't produce cultural reform). They tend to think governments are bulwarks against evil and not for positive change.

**V Christ the transformer of culture** - hangs on to radical distinction between God's work in Christ and man's work in culture (thus similar to the "against" *motif* and the "synthesis" *motif* but with hopeful attitude with culture.

What distinguishes between the conversionists from the dualists is that the former has a more positive and hopeful attitude toward culture.

3 doctrines that influence their thinking:

- 1) The first relates to Creation. Creation is not only the setting for redemption, but the sphere in which God's sovereign ordering work operates.

The Creation activity of God and of Christ-in-God is a major theme, neither overpowered by or overpowering the idea of atonement.

The conversionist finds "room for affirmative and ordered response on the part of created man to the creative, ordering work of God, even though the creature may go about his work unwillingly as he tills the ground, cultivates his mind, organizes his society and though he may administer perversely the order given him with his existence.

He sees culture perverted, but not inherently sinful...which is very similar to their view of humans...

- 2) The Fall is moral and personal, not physical and metaphysical even though it does have physical consequences.

It has to do with the nature of man's fall **from his created goodness...**

Sees sharp distinction between the fall of man and the conditions of the body.

A key word is corrupted, but not totally corrupted as to not exist, but a perversion of the good in humans. (Humans made in the image of God, not totally corrupted but perverted.)

Hence his culture is all corrupted ORDER rather than order for CORRUPTION, as it is for dualists.

Humans aren't "evil" they're in need of conversion; and so is in need of a radical rebirth of culture.

My view: Sometimes the human condition is explained this way: humans are totally depraved, but that doesn't mean humans are completely corrupted because then humans wouldn't exist, but it does mean every important aspect of humanity is corrupted—will, emotions, and mind.



- 3) A view of history that holds that to God all things are possible in a history that is not fundamentally a course of merely human events, but always a dramatic interaction between God and humanity.

The eschatological future has become the eschatological now. Humans live in the divine now. Eternity means for him less the action of God before time and less the life with God after time, and more the presence of God in time.

The conversionist with his view of history does not live so much in the expectation of a final ending of the world of creation and culture as in awareness of the owner of the Lord to transform all things by lifting them up to himself.

Augustine builds up the idea of improving society to only eventually dismiss it.

Niebuhr gives as examples of this motif: Augustine, Calvin, Jonathan Edwards (though Niebuhr thinks Edward's teaching led to shabby revivalism) the English theologian F.D. Maurice (whose teachings were sympathetic to the Christian socialist movement)

He does not give explicit criticism of this view—is this then the view that Niebuhr champions?

Some notes on the Postscript...what he calls a "Concluding Unscientific Postscript" in the manner of Kierkegaard's book, ***Concluding Unscientific Postscript to Philosophical Fragments***

Niebuhr is here taking up the problem I mentioned when we discussed his Chapter 1. It amounts to how to understand the human knowledge condition. Are things relative to each other or relative to an objective reality. Are humans who are limited by incomplete knowledge, being born in a specific time in history, able to know truth or get closer to truth or get closer THE truth?

What is Niebuhr's metaphysics? Is it a radical form of Postmodernism that denies there is not a particular way reality is apart from the organizing project of human minds or is a less radical form of Postmodernism that admits of human fallibilism because of incomplete knowledge, but believes there is reality out there that is independent of minds that we seek to discover.

There's a big difference between the two as we have discussed elsewhere.

The former is a self-referentially incoherent idea in that cannot be rationally believed. It implicitly claims (sometimes explicitly claims) that there is no objective reality beyond

human minds and then implicitly claims that view is objectively true independent of human minds.

While Niebuhr does seem to endorse a Kierkegaardian existential commitment to make decisions without complete knowledge or an ability to resolve the subjectivity problem of humans, he does seem to tip his hand as to what he believes in the last paragraph of the postscript. He writes: "...To make our decision in faith is to make them in view of the fact that no single man or group or historical (view?) is the church; but **that there is a church of faith** in which we do our partial relative work and on which we can count..." (emphasis mine)