

## H. Richard Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture*

### Chapter Two “Christ Against Culture”

#### I. Statement of the Position

“Whatever may be the customs of the society in which the Christian lives, and whatever the human achievements it conserves, Christ is seen as opposed to them, so that he confronts men with the challenge of an either/or decision [either Christ or culture]” (40).

“The first answer to the question of Christ and culture . . . is the one that uncompromisingly affirms the sole authority of Christ over the Christian and resolutely rejects culture’s claim to loyalty” (45).

“Common acknowledgement of the sole authority of Jesus Christ and the common rejection of the prevailing culture” (64-5).

*Logically*, it seems to follow from the common Christian principles of the Lordship of Christ. *Chronologically*, it was the typical attitude of the first Christians. (?)

#### II. Basis of the Position

##### A. New Testament

1. Matthew 5: 21-48; 5: 17-20; 23: 1-3

2. Revelation

3. 1 John 1: 6; 5: 19; 2: 8-9, 11; 3: 11-15; 2: 17; 3: 8; 5: 4-5 (combines positive meaning of Christianity in love and faith in Christ, but also advocates “the rejection of cultural society”)

1 John 2:15 Do not love the world, nor the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. 1 John 2:16 For all that is in the world, the lust of the flesh and the lust of the eyes and the boastful pride of life, is not from the Father, but is from the world. 1 John 2:17 And the world is passing away, and {also} its lusts; but the one who does the will of God abides forever.

##### B. Extra-biblical basis

## 1. Tertullian

1. Original sin is transmitted through culture.
2. Avoid social pagan religion, politics, military service, trade or business, philosophy and the arts, theatre, games, music.
3. “What has Athens (philosophy) to do with Jerusalem?”

## 2. The Teaching of the Twelve (Didache)

## 3. The Shepard of Hermas

## 4. The Epistle of Barnabas

## 5. First Epistle of Clement

6. Church is a new third race in addition to Jews and Gentiles.  
“Whatever does not belong to the common wealth of Christ is under the rule of evil” (50).

## C. The development of the “Christ against culture” position

1. The monastic movement: Rule of St. Benedict
2. Protestant sectarianism (16thc and 17thc protests against worldly church)
  - a. Mennonites
  - b. Society of Friends (Quakers)
3. Leo Tolstoy (*War and Peace*; *Anna Karenina*)—thoroughgoing opposition to the institutions of culture: state, church, property system, philosophy, arts, and government.
4. Eastern and Western Catholics, Orthodox, Sectarian Protestants, Millenarians, Mystics, Ancients, Medieval, Modern Christians.
5. \_\_\_\_\_ (you fill in the blank!)

### III. Strengths and Weakness of the Position

#### A. Strengths

1. Sincerity and single-heartedness of its exponents to the point of ostracism and martyrdom.
2. Important position in history. They successfully maintained the distinction between God and Caesar, faith and reason, God's will and man's, Christ and culture, and unexpectedly induced the reform of culture. Contributions achieved, however, by means of the mediation of other believers who gave a different answer to the Christ and culture question.
3. Need for this position in the Church's total encounter with the world. There is a legitimate aspect to this position that must be maintained then and now: biblical separation, yet also the "equally necessary movement of responsible engagement in cultural tasks" (68).

2 Cor. 6:14 ¶ Do not be bound together with unbelievers; for what partnership have righteousness and lawlessness, or what fellowship has light with darkness? 2 Cor. 6:15 Or what harmony has Christ with Belial, or what has a believer in common with an unbeliever? 2 Cor. 6:16 Or what agreement has the temple of God with idols? For we are the temple of the living God; just as God said, # " I will dwell in them and walk among them; And I will be their God, and they shall be My people\ 2 Cor. 6:17 "Therefore, \come out from their midst and be separate,\ " says the Lord. " And do not touch what is unclean\; And I will welcome you.

#### B. Weaknesses

1. Self-defeating denial of culture. "It affirms in words what it denies in action; namely, the possibility of sole dependence on Jesus Christ to the exclusion of culture." "Radical Christians are always making use of the culture, or parts of the culture, which they ostensibly they reject" (69).
  - a. Radical Christians borrow ideas and rules of culture in the government of the withdrawn Christian community and in the regulation of Christian conduct toward the outside world.
  - b. The needs of the withdrawn Christian community would lead to the development of a new culture; they can't separate themselves from those needs in themselves which makes culture necessary (Tertullian's advice to his wife regarding

remarriage; Friends on slavery; Pacifists on war; Tolstoy's life on family's estate).

2. Ultimate irony: the radicals fail to recognize what they are doing, and continue to speak as though they were separated from the world and its culture when in fact they are not.

#### IV. Theological Problems: Four Questions

##### A. The question regarding reason and revelation

The rejection reason as the method and content of knowledge found in culture revelation and the acceptance of revelation in its place is insufficient. Reason is still needed in not only interpreting and communicating revelation, but also in discerning genuine and false revelatory claims.

##### B. Question about the nature and prevalence of sin

The assumption is that sin is found in culture, but not in the Christian community of light. The radicals doctrine of sin is not that of TOTAL depravity, for they would seem to be exempt from it. But if we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves (and even the severe ascetic practices of the radicals would be in tension to their presumed innocence). Radicals need a comprehensive doctrine of sin.

##### C. The question about the relation of law and grace

Christ vs. culture model is forgetful of grace, is legalistic, and forgets the gospel is for all men and women.

##### D. The question about the relationship of Christ to the Creator of nature and the governor of history and to the spirit present in creation and the Christian community.

Radical Christians restrict Christ lordship and substitute ethical dualism (direction) for an ontological bifurcation of reality (structure). At the edges of the radical movement, Manicheanism is always present.

### Chapter Three “Christ of Culture”

#### I. Statement of Position

- A. Jesus is the Messiah of society, the fulfiller of hopes and aspirations, the perfecter of culture’s true faith, the source of its holiest spirit.
- B. This group is the polar opposite of the radical Christians, but is not to be identified with the “cultured despisers of religion” who reject Christ entire for the sake of their civilization. These are believers, liberal perhaps, in connection with all other believers.
- C. This group is at home in Christ and in their culture, sensing no great tension between the world and the church.
- D. These interpret culture by means of Christ, and Christ by means of culture; both Christ and culture possess authority over their lives, and both are modified to fit as deemed necessary.
- E. These believers are “this-worldly” oriented, without denying the other world; they seek to unite this world and the other world, and gaps between Christ and culture are filled in.
- F. This group is associated with liberal Christianity of the Protestant version, and is called by Karl Barth “Cultural Protestantism,” yet there are also non-modern, non-protestant adherents to this group.

#### II. Proponents of the Christ of Culture Position

- A. Jewish Christians and Judaizers (who accommodated Christ to the culture and tradition of the Jews)
- B. Gnostic Christians who accommodate Christ to the science and philosophy of their day; Christ’s naturalization or domestication led to a participation in culture with no tension or paradox.
- C. Abelard: Christ becomes metaphysical agent providing knowledge about reality; ethics is for the improvement of life; developed a moral theory of the atonement; Christ = great moral teacher (per Socrates, Plato); all conflict between Christ and culture eliminated.

### III. Cultural Protestantism

A. Point: all in this group are united in their attempt to interpret Christ as a hero of the manifold culture.

B. Examples:

1. John Locke, *The Reasonableness of Christianity*
2. G. Leibniz
3. Immanuel Kant, *Religion within the Limits of Reason*
4. Thomas Jefferson, *The Life and Teachings of Jesus of Nazareth* (Jefferson Bible)
5. F. E. D. Schleiermacher, *Speeches to the Cultured Despisers of Religion* (religion is feeling of "absolute dependence" and Christ of religion adds a gracious presence and aura of meaning to all tasks)
6. A. Ritschl, kingdom of God is a moral federation focusing on the fatherhood of God, the brotherhood of man, the value of the soul, the commandment of love.
7. Walter Rauschenbusch, social gospel for the moral reformation of society (America)
8. Adolf von Harnack (Germany)
9. Garvie (England)
10. Shailer Matthews and D. C. Macintosh (America)

C. Summary of viewpoint: Jesus is the great enlightener, teacher who leads us to attain wisdom, perfection, peace leading to a cooperative society via moral instruction and example; human situation is characterized by a conflict with nature and Christ as man and moral teacher is the means to overcome these conflicts as the great leader of spiritual and cultural causes in the human attempt to overcome these conflicts and tensions.

### III. Defense of Cultural Faith

A. Radicals attacks on cultural Protestantism are an expression of their own cultural loyalty. All critiques of cultural Protestantism are from within the confines of a competing version of cultural Christianity: Marxist Christianity vs. Bourgeoisie Christianity; RCC Christianity vs. Protestant Christianity; Fundamentalist/Evangelical Christian vs. American Culture

B. The acculturation of Jesus Christ has contributed greatly to the extension of his power over humanity: Language, art and imagery, etc.

C. Cultural Christians are missionaries to the elite, aristocracy, educated, middle class.

- D. This approach reveals the universal scope of the gospel: it is for all, including elites.
- E. Radical Christians reject all things cultural as evil, whereas cultural Christians recognize polarities (direction?) and affirm those aspects of culture that are best. They make contact with culture rather than reject it.
- F. Rather than accusing cultural Christians with compromise, one can see that Jesus is like all things and people in a culture. He has many aspects and can be compared to philosophers, stoics, Spinoza, Kant, etc.

#### IV. Theological Objections

- A. Don't compromise Christ far enough according to the cultured despisers of religion; compromise Christ too much according to the radical Christians. It is impossible to overcome the offense of the cross in either direction.
- B. Loyalty to culture has exceeded loyalty to Christ.
- C. Anti-cultural Christians and cultural Christians are surprisingly alike: both separate reason and revelation. Reason for the culturals, revelation for the radicals.
- D. Both anti-cultural Christians and cultural Christians have rejected the idea of total depravity. Sin is excluded from Christian community for radicals, and from the highest forms of culture for the culturals.
- E. Both anti-cultural Christians and cultural Christians emphasize law over grace. By means of lawful obedience to the neglect of empowering grace, society will be transformed, either by legalism (radicals) or moral reformation (culturals). In both cases, emphasis is on self-reliant humanism.

## Chapter Four “Christ Above Culture”

### Introduction: The Church of the Center

- A. Given the human tendency to “bisect,” (either/or) and given the two principles of “Christ and Culture,” most believers (= church of the center) irrationally combine devotion to a Christ who rejects culture with devotion to a culture who that includes Christ (116).
  
- B. The “Church of the Center” has not taken the positions of either the radicals’ rejection or the culturals’ accommodation, asserting that the real issue is not Church vs. the world, but the relationship between God and humanity (117).
  
- C. Church of the Center agrees on certain points about responsibility in socio-cultural life including the following points:
  - 1. Jesus Christ as God and Creator of creation/nature, on which all culture is founded and which is good, and governed by God, cannot be entirely opposed to creation and nature. (117-8)
  
  - 2. Humanity is obligated to be obedient to God—to God in Christ and to Christ in God—and this obedience must be rendered in concrete actual life of natural, cultural humanity. Culture, by virtue of humanity’s freedom and intellect, is a divine requirement (118).
  
  - 3. Central Christians embrace a conviction about total depravity, and the radical, universal nature of sin, that neither persons nor communities, not even the Christian community, is perfectly holy (118-9).
  
  - 4. Central Christians hold to common views of grace and law-- recognizing the primacy of grace and the necessity of works of obedience including works of human culture as the blessing of God’s grace. Grace and cultural activity go together (119).
  
- D. Within the Church of the Center, three groups are discernible:
  - 1. Synthesists (Christ above Culture),
  - 2. Dualists (Christ and Culture in Paradox),
  - 3. Conversionists (Christ the Transformer of Culture).

## **The Synthesis of Christ and Culture (Christ Above Culture):**

### I. Statement of the Position

- A. For the synthesists, the issue of Christ and culture is not an either/or decision, but both/and: the biblical NT meaning of Christ separates them from the accommodating cultural believer and his appreciation for culture as both human and divine in origin, and also separates them from the radical who rejects it entirely (120-1).
- B. Otherworldly salvation is a major theme of the synthesist as is the establishment of a just culture; the radical requirements of Christ must be kept in the here and now as well as the fulfillment of the natural duties of procreation and social relations. To deal with this duality as the culturalists or radicals do is to take neither Christ or culture seriously enough (121-2).
3. The synthesists distinguish themselves from other central Christians by how they analyze the nature of the duality of Christ and culture and how they arrange these elements in a single structure of thought and conduct (122). For this group, Christ enters into life from above with gifts like salvation and revelation which human reason and effort cannot attain unless they are related to a supernatural society and a new center of value bestowed from above and added to natural life: hence, Christ above culture.

### II. Proponents of the Synthesist Christ Above Culture Position

- A. Early, medieval and modern church
- B. Roman and Anglican Catholicism
- C. NT Texts

Matt. 5:17 ¶ "Do not think that I came to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I did not come to abolish, but to fulfill. Matt. 5:18 "For truly I say to you, until heaven and earth pass away, not the smallest letter or stroke shall pass away from the Law, until all is accomplished. Matt. 5:19 "Whoever then annuls one of the least of these commandments, and so teaches others, shall be called least in the kingdom of heaven; but whoever keeps and teaches {them,} he shall be called great in the kingdom of heaven.

Matt. 22:21 They \*said to Him, "Caesar's." Then He \*said to them, "Then render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's; and to God the things that are God's."

Rom. 13:1 Let every person be in subjection to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those which exist are established by God. Rom.

13:6 For because of this you also pay taxes, for {rulers} are servants of God, devoting themselves to this very thing.

D. Justin Martyr

E. Clement of Alexandria

1. *Who is the Rich Man That Shall Be Saved?* Shows how one could have wealth (culture) and Christ—with Stoic detachment and Christian love (124)
2. *The Instructor*: concerned with the ethical training of Christians in temperance, frugality, self-control combined with or based on the best that the culture provides; but also there is a life of love of God, goodness directed to others, freedom—a life not of the world but filled in the world (126-7).
3. Regarding philosophy, Clement neither interprets Christ according to the thought patterns of the day, nor does he reject Greek philosophy, but sees it as a tutor leading the Greek mind to Christ (128).

F. Joachim Pecci or Pope Leo XIII (cultural christian) (138)

G. Joseph Butler (140)

H. Roger Williams (140)

III. Thomas Aquinas

- A. Thomas Aquinas is a monk (poverty, chastity, obedience) who has rejected secular culture, but is a monk in a church that has become the guardian of culture (learning, nations, family, religion) (129).
- B. His synthesis was a structure like a cathedral, planted in the world, but once entered, led to a domain beyond all secular concerns (130).
- C. In addition to a natural happiness in social life and in the contemplative life assisted by God's grace expressed in family, state, and church, there is also added the gospel—superadded to humanity by the gift of God and set on his way to supernatural happiness. There is both a natural happiness and an additional supernatural happiness layered on top of the natural happiness. Grace is placed on top of nature: *Donum super additum* ("gifts added on top") (134).

D. In the realm of Law, there is both a natural law and a supernatural law. Natural law is discovered by reason and directed toward society for the common good. Supernatural law is the revealed, divine law in Scripture for the guidance of the church. Both natural and supernatural law are derived from God's eternal law. Government of the state is similar to which there is added the government of the church (135).

#### IV. Strengths and Weaknesses of the Synthesist Position

##### A. Strengths

1. The synthesis is rooted in humanity's search for unity and integrity, and is above all a demand of God as He operates in human reason, society, and nature and as revealed in Scripture. The synthetic answer seems to respond to if not meet these demands (141-2).
2. The synthesists' appeal and affirmation of the importance of civil virtues and just social institutions, though in the Thomist sense these virtues and a just order is found in the given created, nature of humanity and the world (142-3).
3. Because synthesists recognize that the Creator and the Savior are one and the same and that salvation does not mean the destruction of creation, but that life must be lived in accordance with God's laws in both the natural and supernatural realms, there is a basis for cooperation with non-Christians and yet maintains christian distinctives (143).
4. They recognize that the gospel provides and promises more than just what reason and the natural life offer, "a royal feast at the end of the day," "all this and heaven too." Happy life now and in eternity.

##### B. Weaknesses

1. Synthesists will always, have always led to the absolutization of the culture in which the laws are discovered and formulated. The absolute laws of the Creator become the absolutization of the laws of the formulators of the culture (tyranny). No synthesis can be other than provincial, historical, provisional, symbolic.
2. Because the synthesists involved in culture, when the culture withers, it is defended more than the perennial gospel. This results from a failure to recognize the historically conditioned nature of

reason and institutions, forms which will pass away (reason and institutions are “reified” that is, treated as if they were things rooted in the natural or divine order, when in fact they have been created by human beings). Hence, this point of view lacks a true sense of history (146).

3. Leads to an institutionalization of Christ and the gospel. The law of Church becomes the law of Christ! Must recognize that the institutional church is also an historical, and temporal order as is the state, school, economic institutions, etc. The church as a human institution is not absolute (only Christ is), but if it so deems itself, it leads to things like the Inquisition. Without a recognition of the temporal nature of the synthesis as a historical, human made creation, then time seeks to exercise eternity, and man the power of God (147).
4. Leads to an absolutization of the spiritual aspect of the synthesis as the distinctively higher, eternal realm. Synthesists combine life in the world with life in God on the basis of a hierarchy, and leads quickly to old-fashioned dualism. Distinguishes grades of perfection: those living the natural life are inferior (cobblers, merchants) to those living the spiritual life (monks, nuns, missionaries). False dichotomy (147-8).

## Chapter Five “Christ and Culture in Paradox”

### I. Statement of the Position

- A. The strongest critic of the synthesist perspective (Christ above culture) have come neither from radicals who say the position is a sell-out of the gospel because of their cultural involvement or from the culturalists who believe it retains remnants of the outmoded evangelical faith; rather, the strongest criticism of synthesists has come from the dualists who seek a both/and solution to the question of Christ and culture (149).
- B. The key issue or question that serves as the starting point for the C/C issue for the dualist is the conflict between God and humanity or God and us. This logical starting point is the great act of reconciliation that has occurred in the divine-human battle, the miracle of grace and an incredible depth of understanding of the deep sin of man which it forgives (150-51).
- C. The dualist has a very strong sense of the fact that in this divine-human relationship, the grace is in God and the sin is in man:
  - 1. Grace and faith is always in God as God’s action and attribute by which He reconciles human beings (151).
  - 2. Sin is in humanity and humanity is in sin. Dualists differ greatly from synthesists over the extent and thoroughness of sin seeing sin deeply affecting human reason, religious culture, seeing degradation and corruption in all of human work and activity (152-3).
- D. Regarding the nature of corruption in culture, the dualist regards all human culture and action as infected with sin and godlessness, exemplified in 1000s of ways. The whole of culture is cracked and madly askew (153-4).
- E. Whereas the synthesist rejoices in the rational content of law and socio-cultural institutions, the dualist calls attention to the lust for power, and the will of the strong in these institutions. The synthesist defends rational elements in culture and the dualist points out that reason and culture is never separated from its egoistic, godless perversion (155-6).

- F. Dualists joins the radical in pronouncing culture as godless, BUT dualists knows that they belong in that culture, cannot and should not get out of it, and that God sustains them in it and also by it. Christians have inescapable cultural responsibilities, though it is a domain infected with sin (156).
- G. Hence in this situation of being both against and for culture, the dualist speaks in paradoxes. Tension is everywhere present in this paradigm between Christian and cultural commitments and how to fulfill them.
- H. Two paradoxes are most important:

1. Law and grace: The Law, which reveals sin, is therefore a means of grace.
2. Divine wrath and mercy: In nature, humanity meets reason, order, goodness, and yet at the same time force, conflict, destruction. In Scripture, God's mercy is obtained by means of God's wrath as it is poured out on Christ. Wrath is the expression of God's love and God's love is the expression of wrath for those who disbelieve (158-9).

## II. The Christ/Culture Paradox in Paul and Marcion

Point: the C/C in paradox concept is more of a motif in relation to certain isolated issues (like reason and revelation) than a school of thought, except in the case of Martin Luther for whom it was a basic school of thought (159).

### A. St. Paul (160-67).

1. For Paul, Christ was everything and by His cross, he had died to the world and the world had died to Paul (what is the meaning of the word "world" here?). For Paul, to live is Christ and to die is gain (160).
2. For Paul, Christ had relativized all human institutions and all works of humanity. By "relativized," Niebuhr means diminished their absolute, idolatrous status. Christ had revealed the unrighteousness of every human work (160-1).
3. Yet, for Paul, in culture and every culture, in all activities and stations of civilized life, human beings were subject to Christ's redemptive work--not a new culture but a new principle of life leading to a new humanity (161-2).

4. Paul's point of view is not just eschatological, awaiting Christ's return and final judgment, and the final expression of the Kingdom of God; NO, the great revolution in human experience was neither past nor future, but was going on now (in between the times!) (162-3).
5. Hence, Paul could not take the route of the radical Christian by removing self and others out of cultural world into an isolated Christian community of the saved. Even the Christian community was not exempt from sin. Hence, Paul as part of his proclamation formulated a Christian cultural ethics, for Christian culture and for intercultural relations (163-5).
6. While on occasion, Paul seems to be a synthesist, several differences are present. (1) Synthesists move from culture to Christ, nature to supernatural; the synthesist sees culture positively; (2) Paul moves from Christ as Judge of culture and Redeemer to Christian culture; Paul sees culture negatively as means to keep sin from spreading (as say the government does in Rom. 13) (165).
7. Paul, as a dualist, has two ethics--one ethics of regeneration and eternal life, and the other an ethics of the inclusive wrath against all unrighteousness (166-7).

#### B. Marcion (167)

Marcion is variously called a Gnostic, radical, Manichean, but a Paulinist above all, beginning with divine goodness and mercy. But he could not square the OT view of God and a world of evil with the NT view of God. Hence, he embraced two Gods, the OT God whom he rejected and the NT God who is the father of the Lord Jesus Christ.

#### C. Other dualists: Augustine, Scotists, and Occamists

### III. Martin Luther and Modern Times

- A. With virtually opposite perspectives seen in his *Treatise on Christian Liberty* and his *Against the Robbing and Murdering Hordes of Peasants*, by virtue of his juxtaposing and double attitude and sharp distinctions, ML appears as a dualist.
- B. Yet, ML does not divide what he distinguishes: life in Christ and life in the world/culture, and Kingdom of God and the kingdom of the world are

closely related. Both are affirmed in a single act of obedience, not a double allegiance or a divided soul (172).

- C. ML rejects the position of the synthesists and the position of the radical (172-3).
- D. The basis of ML's dualism is that God cleanses the springs of action, God creates and recreates the ultimate community in which all action takes place. Hence, no need for separation into monastic communities, but service takes place in all vocations of life. ML therefore affirmed life in culture as a sphere where Christ ought to be followed (174).
- E. Philosophy, education, music, commerce, politics, military--in all these areas and more (except monasticism), a Christian was free to work and develop (174-5).
- F. ML's dualism is a dualism of the HOW and the WHAT: HOW is determined by Christian faith to do faithfully and lovingly what culture requires. We discover the WHAT by the activity itself. The psychological premise is that man is a dynamic being, forever active by virtue of our God-given nature. The drive to action is from God, its direction and spirit is from faith; its content from reason and culture (176).
- G. The Lutheran dualist finds life both joyful and tragic, living with the hope that the present evil age and affairs in the world will end, succeeded by the kingdom of God. Death ends the world's ills, and makes an end to sin (178-9).
- H. ML was a dynamic, dialectical thinker in which there was an interactionism between faith in Christ working by love in the world of culture (though his followers paralleled the areas of Christ and culture statically) (179).

#### IV. Søren Kierkegaard and a Few Other Names

##### A. Søren Kierkegaard

1. The dualism with which SK wrestles is that of the infinite and the finite and therefore he skirts and never comes to grips with the C/C issue. His main concern is the "individual" --the isolated, individual in developing virtue and a "lifeview," but not in relation to others; hence, cultural societies do not concern SK (180-81).
2. In effect, SK is protesting against the Christ of culture in Denmark, which had domesticated the gospel, erasing all tensions (181)

B. Others: Ernst Troeltsch, Reinhold Niebuhr, Roger Williams, A. Nikolai Hartmann

## V. The Virtues and Vices of Dualism

### A. Virtues

1. The Christ and culture in paradox mirrors experience and is true to reality, of Christ's power and human sin (185).
2. Dualists have a dynamic view of God, man, grace, and sin and have made great contributions to Christian knowledge and action, reinvigorating both Christianity and culture (185-6).

B. Vice: CC in paradox leads to antinomianism and cultural conservatism:

1. Antinomianism: in that they cast aside rules for civilized living because of the presence of sin in culture.
2. Cultural conservatism: change focuses on the church and religious life and not on the cultural domain and is more content with status quo.

## Chapter Six “Christ the Transformer of Culture”

### I. Statement of the Position

- A. Conversionists are most like the dualists, yet have themes in common with other perspectives. It is a position of the Church of the center—central Christians (190).
- B. Conversionists distinguish God’s work in Christ and humanity’s work in culture, but they don’t isolate themselves in “Tolstoyan Bitterness.” They carry out cultural duties faithfully, yet they don’t modify Christ’s sharp judgment of culture (190).
- C. Christ is the Redeemer focusing on His redemptive work that penetrates to the deepest levels of the human heart, [transforming the affections from which all things flow]. Jesus forgives sin and is not just a lawgiver or counselor, but redeems all things from the inside out (190-91).
- D. Regarding sin, conversionists are more like the dualists, seeing it deeply rooted in the human soul and pervading all of life and culture; yet, Christians must still carry out cultural tasks [and do so joyfully] (191).
- E. The conversionists have a much more positive and hopeful attitude toward their cultural tasks and responsibilities for three primary reasons:
  - 1. The Doctrine of Creation. Whereas the dualist emphasizes redemption and the God/humanity relationship, conversionists emphasize both creation and redemption. Redemption does not overpower creation nor is it forgetful of or opposed to it. This view emphasizes a neglected aspect of Christology, namely (1) His participation in creation and (2) the redemptive significance of the incarnation. There is a unity between the doctrines of creation, incarnation, redemption, atonement and cultural responsibilities (192-3).
  - 2. The Doctrine of the Fall: Conversionists understand the fall to be from humanity’s created goodness. Dualists virtually identify creation and sin in a Gnostic way, thereby denigrating the body and cultural institutions. The radical fall amounts to a reversal of creation (uncreation!) and to its corruption (misdirection). Human nature is corrupted, but not bad in itself; it is a perverted good, not

intrinsically evil. The problem is not the rejection or abolition of culture or creation, but its conversion or transformation (193-4).

3. The Doctrine of History. History is a dramatic interaction between God and humanity, the in breaking of God to bring redemption to the world via His magnalia Dei, His mighty deeds (Heilsgeschichte). A comparison of the alternative views of history according to the five C/C positions:
  - a. Radical: history is the story of a rising Church and Christian culture and a dying pagan civilization under judgment.
  - b. Cultural: story of the human spirit's encounter with nature and the attempt to control it.
  - c. Synthesist: history is a period of preparation under natural law and reason as well as the gospel and church awaiting ultimate communion of the soul with God in eternity (beatific vision).
  - d. Dualist: history is a period of struggle between faith and unbelief, a period between the promise of life and its ultimate fulfillment.
  - e. Conversionists: history is the story of God's might deeds and the response of humanity to His works and revelation in history.
- F. Summary: Conversionists emphasize the divine now, the goodness of the present historical and cultural moment, realized eschatology and the "already" aspect of the kingdom of God, eternal life as a quality of life now, the possibility of renewal and the transformation of all things in God and for His glory and human benefit (195-6).

## II. Conversionist Motifs in the Fourth Gospel: John

- A. Doctrine of creation of a good world and the incarnation of God in Christ by which God affirms His relation to whole world in its material and spiritual aspects (197)
- B. Use of the word "world" of both creation itself and humanity which God "so loved." Also, an emphasis on the fallen, perverted world in which Christ obeys the Father, but the this "world" rebels (198).

- C. Sin is the denial of true life. History is subordinated to the time-eternity relation. Eternal life is possible now, already, and is the Johannine equivalent of the synoptic emphasis on the kingdom of God/heaven (201).
- D. The new birth begins with God from above in the Spirit, citizenship in a kingdom whose origin is not of this fallen world. The Holy Spirit is present in the believer as the Spirit of Christ (201-2).
- E. Christ for John is the Converter and Transformer of human actions and culture. His interest is in the spiritual transformation of man's life in the world (203-4).
- F. Yet, John is not a thoroughly conversionist document as is seen in his particularism. New birth and life seems possible for only the few. Universalistic statements are balanced by the world's opposition to Christ. Does John really combine conversionists ideas with the isolation and separation of the radicals as Niebuhr suggests? (205).

### III. Augustine and the Conversion of Culture

- A. In Augustine, there are various aspects of the C/C models: radicals (monasticism), culturalists (neo-platonism), dualists (war, slavery, body).
- B. Yet, Augustine is the theologian of cultural transformation by Christ and he illustrates in himself and his own life the conversionist motif—rhetoric, neo-platonism, ciceronian moralism, all transformed into service to Christ (208-9).
- C. Christ is the Transformer of culture in that He redirects, reinvigorates, and regenerates the life of human beings expresses in all human works which have been perverted from their fundamentally good nature (209).
- D. Augustine begins with creation and its goodness, but sin has corrupted it. Sin has had radical, catastrophic impact on the self and culture:
  1. Impact of sin of the self. Humans are made good but have become corrupt such that their corrupt nature produces a corrupt culture. Man's primary goodness is in God, and so original sin meant turning away from God to the self and the world in and of itself apart from God to inferior values, clinging to a created good as though it were the chief good or value. This disordered love leads to a disordered life and soul (211).
  2. Impact of sin on society/culture. The socio-cultural impact of sin is devastating. Regarding human beings, "there is no so social by

nature, so unsocial by its corruption as this race.” Disorder extends to every phase of cultural life. Yet all this socio-cultural sinfulness is parasitic and depends upon the underlying presence of a fundamentally good created order. God rules and overrules humanity in their corrupt, personal, and social existence.

- E. Christ came to heal and restore perverted human nature and therefore culture by reattaching the soul to God and restoring it to the right order of love (love is the key to life acc. to Augustine!) causing the soul to love God first and foremost and to love what it loves in the creation in God and Christ and not in the context of idolatrous devotion or selfishness. Christ restores what has been corrupted and redirects what has been perverted (213-4).
- F. Bottom line is this: all of life is the beneficiary of the conversion of man’s love--everything loved rightly--and consequently when a person begins in faith in God, then a love for the order which God has put into all His creation is established. The believer is therefore encouraged wholeheartedly to discover, learn, and trace out God’s design and wisdom in creation and humbly to follow His way. All things then are restored in and by God and by the rightly directed love of redeemed persons (including emotions, virtues, reason, arts and sciences, politics, and all cultural activities) (214-5). [Hence, “the multitude of the wise is the welfare of the world” Augustine, *The Enchiridion*]
- G. Yet, Augustine was not a postmillennialist. He did not anticipate the redemption or restoration of all humanity or all cultural activity. Rather, he sees a spiritual society of the elect with angels living in parallelism with the damned. This motif is developed in his magisterial City of God (*Civitas Dei*). Question: why didn’t Augustine develop an eschatology consistent with his soteriology or redirected love? Hence, he still retains a measure of the paradox position (216-7).
- H. John Calvin, who follows in Augustine’s footsteps, is more of a conversionist than is Augustine and Luther! Yet, he too retains some separatist and repressive tones (218).

#### IV. Perfectionism and F. D. Maurice

- A. How important the idea of Christ’s transformation of humanity and culture is made clear by the tenacity of the ideal of perfection in these two thinkers:
  1. John Wesley: for whom Christ was the transformer of life.

2. Jonathan Edwards: Christ is the regenerator of persons and culture (219-20).

#### B. Views of F. D. Maurice

1. Christ is the Lord of humankind whether they believe it or not. Humanity is social by nature, designed to live in community in which Christ reveals the nature of life and society, sin, and redemption. Hence, FDM is in conflict with both unsocial Christians and unchristian socialists. The church has failed to proclaim the true spiritual condition of humanity.
2. Humanity has a deep disease and self-contradiction which is the denial of the law of his being, which seems to be a selfishness and individualism and a denial of sociality and community (222-3).
3. The prevalence of corruption and self-contradiction is especially disheartening in the church. FDM is the most consistent of the conversionists because of his belief that Christ is king and that the focus ought to be on Christ, not on our sin. The conversion of humanity from self-centeredness to Christ centeredness is the universal present divine possibility. FDM is a universalist (226).
4. The full realization of the kingdom of God, in light of this universalism, did not mean the substitution of a new universal society for separate organizations and cultures, but the participation of all of these in the one universal kingdom of which Christ is the head (226-7).
5. Eschatologically, FDM did not negate time, history, or creation, but saw that the real issue is the spirit of humanity and that the time of conflict and of Christ's victory is now. We are not dealing with the conversion of culture but of man's spirit from which culture emerges (228).