

## Ethics and History in H. Richard Niebuhr's *Christ and Culture*

"For now we see that the human response to divine action is not so much religion as Church, it is not the Christian religion with which we are concerned, as our predecessors were concerned with it, but the *ecclesia* which worships, to be sure, which has religious ideas and religious rites, but which is something more inclusive and more strange than a religious association. What is this body of Christ, this *Civitas Dei*, this new people? It stands in succession to and is akin to that other strange community of Israel which is not simply a religious society nor yet a political or a racial community. The Church always tends to retreat into religion and to become the religious institution of a civilization but cannot remain content with that role. Its members forever transcend the boundaries of what men call religion; they form sects, societies within society yet apart from society; they enter restlessly into the political and economic life of the civilizations in which they dwell; they seek a Zion which cannot be located in any part of earth and yet are not content to find their beatitude one by one in a heavenly Paradise. It is a pilgrim community which makes strangely enduring settlements. It is an abnormal community which does not fit into this world and yet forever seeks to make itself at home in a world that is a Fatherland."—"The Gift of the Catholic Vision" (1948)

"We are contemporary with men who in their thoughts and actions represent the human race; we are contemporary with mankind in its history, to which the physically dead belong as truly as the biologically existent; we are contemporary with the sins of the fathers visited upon the children to the third and fourth generation, and with their loyal keeping of commandments of which we receive the reward; we are contemporary with the Church, the company of all Christ's contemporaries. And then we are contemporary with one thing more: with the absolute, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, of the living rather than the dead, the one who in Christ binds all times together, God-in-Christ and Christ-in-God, whom we remember and expect even as we meet him in the least of our brothers and in the judgements which he executes through his unwilling servants. Our decisions must be made in the present moment—but in the presence of historical beings whose history has been made sacred by the historical, remembered actions of the one who inhabits eternity."—*Christ and Culture*, Chapter 7 (249)

### Exploratory Questions

- Are culture and civilization the same thing? Why or why not?
- Can an individual be understood outside of or apart from culture?
- What does culture mean from a Christian theological perspective?
- Should Christians reach different conclusions on involvement in a culture?
- Should Christians reach different conclusions on ethical matters?
- Should there be a single set of pan-historical Christian responses to certain issues?
- Is there a relationship between an individual Christian's ethical choices and the ethical decisions and actions of a Christian community?

H. Richard Niebuhr's *Christ and Culture* (1951) was based on the January 1949 lectures of the same name that he gave at Austin Presbyterian Theological Seminary. Its core ideas were also explicated in the unpublished essay, "Types of Christian Ethics" written in 1942 though the essay suggests that he did reconsider how best to type certain historical figures. *Christ and Culture* continues to be a best-seller and is often adopted as a textbook in colleges and seminaries. It has been defended for its pragmatic value as a beginning typology, that is as a set of generalizable categories that help begin a conversation about Christianity and culture rather than offer airtight descriptions of the actual complexity of historical Christian thought or practice. Despite these caveats, it has also been, at times, widely criticized for both its methodology and its historical accuracy. Methodological criticisms include the following:

1. The necessary distinctions between Christ, the Church or churches, and Christianity are at times muddled by Niebuhr's typology. It is not always clear whether the supposed tension arises from who Christ is, from what a particular Christian thinker has concluded, or what certain Christian communities do in actual practice.
2. Likewise, some have objected that the category of Christ extends to many that would be judged by others as heretical and not truly Christian—the Gnostics, Marcion, Leo Tolstoy, etcetera.
3. The shifting definition of culture in the book at times seems to be culture in general, but more often represents key aspects of culture. This is judged as confusing because a group that is supposedly of or against culture may in actual practice historically been supportive of some cultural aspects and very dismissive of others.
4. The category of culture smuggles in certain sociological definitions that may already be incompatible with a Christian understanding. Cultures are unstable structures that must make compromises if they are to survive. In particular, they assume a free-floating relativism or historicism that undercuts the objective call of Christ to obedience. Because we are inescapable part of our culture, such approaches would suggest that we cannot argue to a revealed command to all cultures and time periods. Furthermore, it is argued that Niebuhr does not give enough guidance as to which positions are to be rejected.
5. Likewise, given that the five types are generalizations, they are still too often used in practice to critique actual Christian thinkers and churches. Such Christian groups are supposedly not defined by a single category and yet are judged as being deficient precisely upon the basis of that category. Rather than increasing an understanding of other (past or present) Christian theological traditions, Niebuhr's types actually truncate nuanced discussion.
6. Others argue that Niebuhr's category of transformation, in particular, seems so obvious as to be a desirable one for a wide gamut of Christian positions. Everyone wants to be considered a transformationalist. Yet Niebuhr's own ethic, it is charged, is more concerned with personal than social choice and that he does not take seriously enough those political and economic structures which must be rejected as fatally compromising.
7. Still others think Niebuhr's category of transformation too easily gives itself to cultural accommodation rather than true transformation. Too much of the current culture is assumed to be acceptable, and Christian involvement with it is assumed as too easily able to correct it.

But objections also arise from the particular Christian groups that Niebuhr's book claims to describe:

- Mennonites, including Old Order Amish and the Bruderhof, reply that rather than being *against* culture in general, they produce their own culture—agriculture, education, economics, art, and so on. There has been a slippage in the terminology—"culture" for Niebuhr now means that of a majority culture. But the making of an alternative culture may be the best way to practice Christ's lordship over created life.
- Lutheran theologians have stressed that a dual stress on law and gospel need not lead to the individual Christian being uninvolved in direct political action or to the conclusion that the claims of Christ cannot override those of a corrupt state. A dynamic view of vocation can affirm the stability of vocations without also leading to conservative, static hypocrisy. The "paradoxical" view is a reminder that no temporal order can bring in the kingdom of God. Rather the emphases on vertical responsibility to God and on horizontal responsibility to others help mitigate against both antinomianism and a spiritual justification for a political order.

Then, there are numerous historians who insist that Niebuhr's descriptions do not do justice to particular historical figures.

	<b>Christ against Culture</b>	<b>Christ above Culture</b>	<b>Christ Transforming Culture</b>	<b>Christ and Culture in Paradox</b>	<b>The Christ of Culture</b>
<b>Typological Categories</b>	Radical The New Law	Synthesist Architectonic	Conversationist	Dualist Oscillatory	Accommodationist The Natural Law
<b>New Testament Examples</b>	I John Revelation	Mark 12:17	Gospel of John	Paul's Epistles	James [Phil 4:8; Acts 17]
<b>Chief Historical Examples</b>	Tertullian Tolstoy	Clement of Alexandria, Thomas Aquinas, Leo XIII	Augustine F. D Maurice	Marcion Luther	Christian Gnosticism, Abelard Albretch Ritschl
<b>Passing Historical Examples</b>	<i>The Didache</i> <i>The Shepherd of Hermas</i> , Benedictine Monasticism, Mennonites	Justin Martyr Joseph Butler Roger Williams	John Calvin Karl Barth	Kierkegaard Ernst Troeltsch, Roger Williams, Nikolai Hartmann	John Locke Kant Thomas Jefferson Schleiermacher Rauschenbusch

### “Types of Christian Ethics” [Introduction]

1. What does Niebuhr mean by the typological method as opposed to the genetic one? (xxxvii-xxxviii)
2. Of the earlier typologies of William James, Max Weber-Ernst Troeltsch, the socio-economic, and the philosophical, which ones strike you as more effective in categorizing important Christian differences? (xxxix-xl)
3. What makes Gilson's typology distinctive? (xli-xlii)

### Chapter 1. The Enduring Problem

1. Why does Niebuhr argue that the problem is not as simple as Christianity versus secularism?
2. Do you find any of the four charges typically made against Christianity and culture true to any extent? (4-11)
3. What makes the answer as to whom Jesus is so important to Christian ethics? (12-14)
4. How does Niebuhr place Christ at the center of love and hope? Likewise, how does this shape practical action? (15-22)
5. Why does Niebuhr find a picture of Christ's eschatological obedience deficient theologically? (23-26)
6. What makes Christ the perfect moral mediator? (27-29)
7. Which models of culture and civilization does Niebuhr argue are too limited? (30-32)
8. Do you find necessary all of Niebuhr's seven characteristics of culture? Explain (32-39)

**Chapter 7. A “Concluding Unscientific Postscript”**

1. Why does Niebuhr hold that insisting on only one Christian answer to culture/civilization would be to usurp the Lordship of Christ? (231-32)
2. Is he correct to say that the “answer” to be given at any time is in the “free decision of individual believers and responsible communities? (233-34)
3. Do you find all four of his reasons for the “relativism of faith” equally convincing? Why or why not? (234-37)
4. What does it mean that God’s faithfulness is known in and through Christ, and how does this extend to one’s neighbor? (239-41)
5. How does Niebuhr look to Kierkegaard (ala’ Johannes Climacus) as a guide to the *how* of faith yet not as a complete guide? (241-45, cf. 248)
6. Why does Niebuhr insist that a Christ considered outside the testimony of the wider (and historical) Church is “not an actual Christ”? (245-46)
7. How are our decisions ones lived in the present moment yet also in the light of Christian history? (246-49)
8. How are our decisions also shaped by our culture, past and present? (250)
9. How do loyalty and trust work together in faith’s decisions? (251-53)
10. How have the Incarnation, Crucifixion, and Resurrection of Christ reshaped any discussion of ethics? (254-56)