An Analytical Review of
Christ and Culture by H. Richard Niebuhr
Submitted by Rodney Shaw

Note to reviewer: The assignment was for an 8-10 page analysis. Due to the weight of the first two views, I made only preliminary remarks concerning the last three views. I can provide additional analysis if necessary.
Christ and Culture

The Enduring Problem

Niebuhr’s book deals with the “enduring problem” of Christ and culture, how the two are often times in opposition to one another, and how the historical church has sought to harmonize the two. This “problem” is not an anomaly nor a hindrance to the kingdom of God. God’s message has always been an enduring problem to culture. The Old Testament accounts of Eden, Noah, Enoch, et al. portray this chasm between God’s message and the culture of humanity. But the audacious claims of the Incarnation, grace, resurrection, and the ethical demands of Jesus Christ exacerbate these tensions.

Jesus Christ Himself was rejected by his culture. Furthermore, He warned His followers to expect the same treatment. Rejection of Christ by any particular individual, group of individuals, or particular culture does not necessarily call for a review of Christian ethics or the Christian community. However, the issue is one that we must constantly be aware of because it goes to the root of Christ’s doctrines and much of the New Testament literature.

Niebuhr demonstrates the complexity of this issue by entertaining the philosophical, social, and theological ramifications involved in the discipline of Christian ethics. Ethics is no small task for the theologian, the pastor, or the layperson. Accordingly, he presents some major options for Christians to consider.

Niebuhr’s work is quite informative, and indeed demonstrates how many in the historical church have faced the issue of Christ and culture. Although Niebuhr is obviously dealing with theory and theology, the problem of praxis arises throughout the book. Ethical theories are
altogether different than ethical praxis. For the most part, there is no detailed mention of praxis until the page 121ff. Although he occasionally mentioned “turning the other cheek” and other implementations, the bulk of his discussion is on macro-ethics. This serves the purpose for a primer, but ethics must be fleshed out. The concerns of contemporary Western Christians, for example, have little in common with the example of Tolstoy.

The perceived hermeneutic in *Christ and Culture* appears to vary from my own, which left me with nagging questions. His hermeneutic is demonstrated in the statement, “Christ as living Lord is answering the question in the totality of history and life in a fashion which transcends the wisdom of all his interpreters yet employs their partial insights and their necessary conflicts” (2). Although there is certainly a whole and collective wisdom of the community and indeed various individual cultural emphases, this dynamic approach to understanding tends to leave one with the conclusion that no one person or individual has ever a had grasp on Christian ethics, and the total picture is not attainable until history is concluded, at which time, our complete understanding will be irrelevant to praxis.

On the same page Niebuhr seems to infer an opposing approach: “Christ’s answer to the problem of human culture is one thing, Christian answers are another” (2). Is Christ’s answer dynamic or static? In light of this consideration, I would like to have seen a biblical approach alongside the historical approach in Niebuhr. He does use Scripture, but in a proof-text fashion. In light of his statement concerning Christ’s answer *vis á vis* the Christian answer, I would like to have seen a presentation of Christ’s ethic from the Gospels. Furthermore, I would like to have seen an attempted presentation of the first generation of Christian ethics as recorded in the New Testament. These writers are the original implementors of Christ’s ethic, and a consideration of
their ethics would have added a great dimension. For example, Acts has numerous accounts of the message of Christ intersecting several different cultures. I Peter deals exclusively with Christians in a hostile culture. Pauline and Johanine literature have considerations as well.

Additional clarifications would have been helpful early on. Niebuhr never offers a working definition of “ethic.” Seeing that he spends much of his presentation in theory and macro-ethics, his use of “ethic” is at times foggy, and sometimes appears missiological. At other times it seems synonymous with sanctification. This questions the premise of the existence of a “problem.” Is the “problem” as simple as people (and even cultures) refusing the gospel over and against accepting the gospel?

He does mention that love of God and love of man are involved, but this alone does not produce a working definition, for again he devolves into missiology, sanctification, and other foci. Furthermore, he draws the following conclusion with no exegetical qualification or support: “The love of [toward] God is nonpossessive Eros; the love of [toward] man pure Agape” (19).

In addition, his definition of “Christ” is not as clear as I would have liked.¹ Though he offers a lengthy definition of “Christ,” it is not clear throughout the book whether “Christ” refers to a historical person, God incarnate, a set of orthodox doctrines that surround Christ, a culture, a “virtue” belonging to Christ, or the church as the embodiment of Christ’s doctrines. A clear definition of Christ is essential, for there are possibly three entities involved (depending on how “Christ” and “culture” are defined): Christ, the church (Christians), and culture (unbelievers, secular society, etc.).

Niebuhr intricately details culture in terms of civilization, human achievement, values, and

¹Niebuhr himself describes his definition as “inadequate” (29).
pluralism. Though the intricacies of Niebuhr’s discussion are essential, a simplistic working definition might help in making the arguments that follow.

Christ Against Culture

In this first ethic, Christ against culture, Niebuhr clearly acknowledges three entities: Christ, the Christian, and culture (45). With this imagery, the Christian is between Christ and culture. The question becomes one of the Christian’s involvement with culture.

This approach emphasizes the sanctification issues involved. God’s strongest claims in self-revelation have always concerned his holiness. Furthermore, He demands holiness of His people. Accordingly, the concept of Christians living a separated lifestyle is in perfect harmony with Scripture.

Nonetheless, Christ against culture is one-sided in its approach to sanctification. This ethic often deteriorates into monasticism, asceticism, and a works-based relationship with God. Moreover, the focus of these “radicals” is usually not toward mission, but toward higher sanctification, thus leaving the task of mission undone. Those who support this ethic are “opposed” to culture, place Christ in juxtaposition to culture, and live in an either-or system that precludes Christian tasks, for they are against “whatever may be the customs” and all “human achievements of society” (40). Practically speaking, such an ethic is self-defeating because it has

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2 Leviticus 11:45; 19:2; Isaiah 6:3; Revelation 4:8. Holiness is the chief attribute by which God is revealed in the Old Testament (Leviticus 11:44-45; 19:2; Joshua 24:19; Psalm 22:3; Ezekiel 39:7; Habakkuk 1:12). It is holiness that directs His other attributes, e.g. love, not vice versa. For example, God’s holiness specifies the object of God’s love. He does not love injustice, oppression, or hatred.

3 Leviticus 11:45; I Peter 1:15f.

4 2 Corinthians 6:14-7:1; Ephesians 4:22-24; James 1:27; 4:4; I John 2:15-16; et al.
a limited appeal to new adherents.

Sanctification is not self-aggrandizement. The good works of a Christian are expressly for the tasks of worship and mission. Any ethic that omits these tasks is somehow not in harmony with the gospel. Niebuhr correctly notes, “While various New Testament writings evince something of this attitude, none presents it without qualification” (45).

Not only does this ethic strive for separation from the world, it actually “rejects” (47) the world. Once again, depending on the definition of “reject,” this position has some viability. Christians should most certainly reject participation and endorsement of activities and systems that are inherently and deliberately sinful. However, many functions and activities of society are for the sole purpose of maintaining society, e.g., labor, trade, and civil government. To reject natural and reasonable responsibility is not advantageous to the Christian or her task.

Niebuhr makes the point, “The idea which is common to second-century statements of this type is the conviction that Christians constitute a new people, a third ‘race’ besides Jews and Gentiles.” The concept of a “third race” (or whatever designation one chooses) does not necessarily preclude interaction with culture. This concept is also taught by New Testament writers, and it is equally as much about unification, equality, and solidarity as much as it is about “rejection.” However, the Christ against culture ethic “rejects” culture in the common understanding of the term.

Niebuhr posits Tertullian and Tolstoy as examples of the Christ against culture ethic. In

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5 Matthew 5:16; I Peter 2:12.
6 II Thessalonians 3:10.
7 Romans 2:9-11; I Corinthians 12:13; Galatians 3:28; Ephesians 6:8-9; Colossians 3:11.
my estimation, Niebuhr disqualifies Tolstoy from serious consideration by the claim that “Tolstoy shows little understanding for the meaning of the grace of God manifested in Jesus Christ, for the historical nature of Christian revelation, for the psychological, moral, and spiritual depths of both corruption and salvation. Hence he was more of a legalist than even the legal Tertullian” (64). And again, “Tolstoy substitutes for the Jesus Christ of history the spirit immanent in Buddha, in Jesus, in Confucius, and in himself” (82). Did Tolstoy have faith in Christ, or did he simply acknowledge Christ’s teachings as universal truths that could have been embraced if they had been taught by any sage or monk anywhere else in the world under any other construct? I cannot judge the faith of Tolstoy, but with the evidence Niebuhr presents, neither can I hold him up as an example of a Christian ethic, even a flawed ethic.

#### The Christ of Culture

The first two views Niebuhr portrays are quite polarized. Over and against those who embrace the *Christ against culture* ethic are those who espouse the *Christ of culture* ethic. This ethic is not “against” culture, nor does it “reject” culture. Rather, it is in “agreement” (41) with culture. Those who opt for this view “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. So they harmonize Christ and culture” (84).

This is not merely an ethic, but an entire theological construct, *vìz.* liberalism. Niebuhr shies away from “liberalism” and opts, in the context of ethics, to refer to this group in Barth’s term as “Culture-Protestantism” (84).

This ethic is equally as hard to justify as the first, yet its methodological claims seem more
arbitrary. *Christ against culture* can be justified, in part, by using Scripture, albeit it gets off track by omitting Scripture. Culture-Protestantism, on the other hand, seems to approach Scripture with *a priori* conclusions drawn from culture, and, in the words of Niebuhr, it “select[s] from his [Christ’s] teaching and action as well as from the Christian doctrine about him such points as seem to agree with what is best in civilization” (84).

This makes the claims of culture-Protestantism extremely arbitrary and dynamic. For example, how is “what is best in civilization” determined? Is it the most good for the most number of people? If so, what is good? Is comfort relative? Furthermore, it allows for the potentiality of numerous conflicting ethics to subsist simultaneously. Furthermore, if Christ is “harmonized” with culture, then what is Christ? Is the Christ of North America the same as the Christ Ethiopia? Is the Christ of the first century the same as the Christ of the twenty-first century? In what meaningful way can a person have faith in Christ, when Christ has become dynamic?\(^8\)

Niebuhr describes the task of culture-Protestantism: “in the case of Christ they try to disentangle the rational and abiding from the historical and accidental” (84). Who is the arbiter of this process and how does one even approach it? If one denies the supremacy of the very foundations that originally conveyed Christ to the world, in what sense can anything subsequent to those foundations be truly “Christian”?\(^9\) Elsewhere Niebuhr offered a description of liberalism: “A God without wrath brought men without sin into a kingdom without judgment through the ministrations of a Christ without a cross.”

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\(^8\) I am aware that liberalism is more complex than this simple presentation, but this is the evidence that Niebuhr presents.

\(^9\) This goes back to the question, “What is Christ?”, and by extension, “What is Christianity”? 
Culture-Protestantism blurs Christ. It tends to change Christ from a person to a social ideology, and it is contingent on a dynamic hermeneutic, that, in the words of a modern theologian, “must be interpreted again and again in new situations and in concepts and images that are understandable to people in those situations . . . [I]t is necessary to reinterpret the language of Christian faith—its stories, doctrines, and symbols—for our own time and place.”\(^{10}\)

Niebuhr raises a question of motivation when he considers the Gnostics as proponents of this ethic: “Christianity so interpreted became a religious and philosophic system, regarded doubtless as the best and the only true one, yet one among many” (87). “From the point of view of the culture problem, the effort of the Gnostic to reconcile Christ with the science and philosophy of his day was not an end but a means” (88). This is the general tenor of culture-Protestantism. Its purposes for Christ appear utilitarian, inasmuch as He advances \textit{a priori} positions. This begs the question: “What is unique about Christ?” Furthermore, could they stand behind any other faith and achieve the same ends? Niebuhr advances this same conclusion citing Schleiermacher (93).

Ritschl is cited for a tamer version of culture-Protestantism. To Ritschl, “Theology which ought to set forth the authentic content of Christian religion in positive form, needs to draw its content from the New Testament and from no other source” (95). This view of the ethic “needed to be regarded as an ellipse with two foci, rather than as a circle with one center. One focus was justification or the forgiveness of sins; the other, ethical striving for the attainment of the perfect society of persons . . . . [F]orgiveness meant the divine companionship that enabled the sinner

after every defeat to arise again and resume his work at the ethical task” (97). This rendition is extremely viable, and in fact, could be classified as a different variety altogether than culture-Protestantism; although it is arguable that it can be taken as far as Niebuhr does: “Only by engagement in civic work for the sake of the common good, by faithfulness in one’s social calling, is it possible to be true to the example of Christ” (97).

Niebuhr claims that the “cultural Christians tend to address themselves to the leading groups in a society . . . . They are missionaries to the aristocracy and the middle class, or to the groups rising to power in a civilization” (104). This is interesting, seeing that they are also the ones who preach liberation the most forcefully.

Niebuhr sums up the vulnerability of culture-Protestantism: “Nothing is as evanescent in history as the pansophic theories that flourish among the illuminati of all times under the bright sunlight of the latest scientific discoveries; and nothing can be more easily dismissed by later periods as mere speculation” (86).

The Christ Above Culture

*Christ above culture* has valuable tenets. Niebuhr presents the primitive Catholic church as an example. This ethic understand the reality of culture, and the ensuing responsibility that the church has by virtue of her existence. “[M]an is obligated in the nature of his being to be obedient to God . . . . [T]his obedience must be rendered in the concrete, actual life of natural, cultural man. In his sex life, in eating and drinking, in commanding and obeying other men, he is in the realm of God by divine ordering under divine orders” (118).

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11 Once again we need clarification of “civic work” and “common good.”
In this synthesis of the previous two views, Christ and culture enter into a balanced tension: culture benefits from Christ and Christ benefits from culture. This ethic sees man as an agent of God in culture, and thereby subject to both the demands of the gospel and the demands of nature, giving the demands of the gospel preference. This view has much Scriptural support. Furthermore, this view is the first one that Niebuhr ascribes definitive praxis to.

One argument against the synthesis view is that reason, human accomplishment, and the various institutions of culture are dynamic, and therefore the foundation of culture cannot be in tandem with the foundation of Christ without a constant re-evaluation, else it becomes antiquated and irrelevant.

This is basically a difference in hermeneutic. However, this argument against the synthesis view does not stand, even as a hermeneutical argument, if culture is not made a foundation, but only held in tension with Christ. If Christ remains the foundation one’s relationship to culture is only thus inasmuch as his relationship with Christ dictates and allows, then Christ is truly “above” culture, and the criticism vanishes, for no matter how much culture changes, the Christian does not have to re-establish her foundation.

The danger of institutionalizing Christ is also leveled against the synthesis view, but this potential is realized in all of the ethics.

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12 Matthew 28:19-20; Matthew 10:16; et al.

13 Praxis exists more in Christ of culture than in Christ against culture, however, Niebuhr does not articulate praxis nearly as clearly in either of these views as he does in Christ above culture. This may coincidental.
Christ and culture in paradox may be the most polarized ethic under consideration. It has a damned-if-you-do/damned-if-you-don’t dynamic. It presents culture and Christ in tension with one another, with sometime conflicting demands. The conflict is not between God and man, but between God and us (150). The believer must live a life of obedience to both, seeing that Christ is present in and has ordained the ordinances and authorities of culture.

“Thus in the dualist’s view the whole edifice of culture is cracked and madly askew; the work of self-contradicting builders, erecting towers that aspire to heaven on a fault in the earth’s crust” (155f.). Accordingly, the dualist “lives in conflict” (150). For this ethic, “life must be lived precariously and sinfully in the hope of a justification which lies beyond history” (43).

This view seems contrary to the nature of Christ, who declared “Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid” (John 14:27, NRSV). Furthermore, Christ foretold, “When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth; for he will not speak on his own, but will speak whatever he hears, and he will declare to you the things that are to come” (John 16:13, NRSV). To Paul, “God is a God not of disorder but of peace. (As in all the churches of the saints” (1 Corinthians 14:33, NRSV). (The whole issue of Paul and dualism must be reserved for another paper.)

**Christ the Transformer of Culture**

This *motif* has much credit, and many of the church’s theologians have espoused at least portions of this ethic. Although we live in culture and cannot escape it, Christ can overcome culture in the life of the believer. The gospel does not form a new society, but it transforms the
existent society.

This ethic has emphasis on both creation and redemption, and portrays the Christ event as God’s transforming agent in the earth.

Conclusion

H. Richard Niebuhr is to be commended for engaging in an evaluation of the church. The church must ever seek to self-examine in order that it might maintain faithfulness to Christ and His commission to the church. This can only be done through honest reflection.

Niebuhr’s categories have become standards in contemporary theology. Albeit, Niebuhr basically documented historical approaches, and this is only half of the task—and indeed the second half. Any approach to Christian ethics should have a biblical premise. Instead of jumping to Tertullian, Tolstoy, and others, it seems the most pressing obligation of a Christian scholar is to at least begin with the biblical literature. What do writers of the New Testament say about Christian ethics? What do they say about the interface between the church and society? Did Christ Himself, upon whom this whole construct is founded, have anything definitive to say concerning these topics? Furthermore, are there biblical themes concerning Christ and culture—any synthesis that can be constructed by the various New Testament writers? Other than occasional proof-texts, Niebuhr leaves this critical issue untouched.

Indeed, there are significant portions of the New Testament that deal with these issues. I Peter deals entirely with Christians living in a hostile society. In particular, personal relationships between Christians and non-Christians is dealt with in detail in I Peter. Romans, as well as other epistles, deal with the topic as well.
Acts is equally as important as any other New Testament book concerning Christ and culture. Acts documents how the apostolic church encountered their culture, and indeed is the strongest witness for the issue at hand. Acts is the first generation of praxis concerning the teachings of Christ, and this by those who heard Him teach and who were personally tutored by Him.

Finally, as a Pentecostal, I ask the question: What empowers a believer for any particular ethic? If there is no need of an external empowerment for a Christian ethic, how is this ethic any different than a humanist ethic? I believe the indwelling Spirit empowers the believer for the ethical task. Indeed, Jesus said, “And see, I am sending upon you what my Father promised; so stay here in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high” (Luke 24:49, NRSV). “But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth” (Acts 1:8).