CHAPTER TWELVE

Christ and Culture and God and Nature:
A Proposal Regarding Dr. Niebuhr's Typology

Christ and Culture, published by H. Richard Niebuhr in 1951, is one of the most widely read books in theological circles. If it were possible to produce a tally of the most frequently assigned seminary textbooks over the past 60 years, there is little doubt that it would be in the top ten. Various scholars, such as James Gustafson and Douglas Ottati, judge that the book builds a very solid foundation for theological analysis of culture, even though it may have some minor flaws.[1] On the other hand, the book has its detractors and critics, who can at times be quite harsh. The line of criticism begun by John Howard Yoder and extended by Stanley Hauerwas views *Christ and Culture* (hereafter C&C) as something akin to the anti-Christ, in its ability to lead the minds of so many Christians down a path of unfaithfulness to Jesus.[2] While I do have some sympathies with the latter view, my attitude toward the book is complex. When I assign *Christ and Culture* to my students, I do so with the conscious idea that the main value in reading it is not positive but negative: to read the book carefully and to come to an understanding of what is wrong with it is a valuable educational exercise. Nevertheless, my critical approach is not entirely dismissive; I believe that Niebuhr was sniffing down the right trail, but he did not quite reach the goal. He was trying to bring his binoculars into focus; the fact that he did not succeed does not mean that he was wrong to try or that he had them pointed toward the wrong object. This can be expressed differently by saying that the most effective type of criticism of *Christ and Culture* will not be sniping or griping complaints, but the positing of an alternative typology that accomplishes more effectively what Niebuhr was trying to accomplish. This is what I propose to do in the latter part of this essay. In the first part I will survey Niebuhr's argument, noting some of the common criticisms and adding a few more of my own.

I.   CRITICISMS OF CHRIST AND CULTURE

Niebuhr defines Christ in this way:

> As Son of God he points away from the many values of man's social life to the One who alone is good; from the many powers which men use and on which they depend to the One who alone is powerful; from the many times and seasons of history with their hopes and fears to the One who is Lord of all times and is alone to be feared and hoped for; he points away from all that is conditioned to the Unconditioned. He does not direct attention away from this world to another; but from all worlds, present and future, material and spiritual, to the One who creates all worlds, who is the Other of all worlds. (C&C, 28)

There have been many important contributions to modern Christological thinking; this is not one of them. This passage portrays Christ in language that is bizarre, abstract, and Gnostic. Niebuhr gives the impression that those scholars who are embarked on some variety of the quest for the historical Jesus are profoundly misguided. What Niebuhr seems to suggest, as he is laying the foundation of his book, is that we need an ahistorical Jesus.

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[1] See Gustafson's Introduction to the 2001 edition of C&C, and Ottati's "Christ and Culture: Still Worth Reading After all these Years." *Journal of the Society of Christian Ethics* 23, no. 1 (2003): 121-32.

[2] See Yoder's "How H. Richard Niebuhr Reasoned," in Glen H. Stassen, D.M. Yeager, and John Howard Yoder, *Authentic Transformation: A New Vision of Christ and Culture* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996), and Stanley Hauerwas and William H. Willimon, *Resident Aliens: Life in the Christian Colony* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1989), 39-43.

Niebuhr himself admits that his definition of Christ is "inadequate"(C&C, 29). Perhaps the chief sense in which this is the case is seen in his lack of attention to the meaning of the cross. I am not referring here to "theories of atonement," but to the obvious fact that Jesus was executed by the authorities of his day, who felt threatened by his message. Christ was not anti-cultural or a-cultural; he was steeped in the traditions of Jewish culture and saw himself as fulfilling the Law and the Prophets. He was threatening because he taught and embodied an ethics and a politics that is not based on domination and coercive violence, but on love of God, self, and neighbor. He was challenging the status quo, the default setting of human immaturity, which is idolatry, selfishness, and hatred of the other—who cannot be seen as the neighbor because of the foundational idolatry and selfishness. Jesus was seeking to transform the Culture of Cain into the Kingdom of God, which is precisely why he was killed; the Culture of Cain rejects every call to real repentance.

Niebuhr's definition of culture is also problematic. He argues that *culture* must be understood as it would be by a secular anthropologist, "without theological interpretation"(C&C, 30). Along these lines, he says that culture is "that total process of human activity and that total result of such activity to which now the name *culture*, now the name *civilization*, is applied in common speech. Culture . . . comprises language, habits, ideas, beliefs, customs, social organization, inherited artifacts, technical processes, and values"(C&C, 32). We are presented with a rather bland and vague picture of culture as everything that human beings do. The idea that this is a secular, objective, value-free view of reality reveals an important aspect of Niebuhr's approach. He is assuming that there can be a secular science of human nature that is superior to the traditional, theological understanding of human nature; its superiority resides precisely in its detachment from the passion-driven "value judgments" that human beings tend to make when they think theologically. It is interesting to note that at about the same time that *Christ and Culture* appeared, Eric Voegelin published *The New Science of Politics* (1952), which was a powerful critique of the philosophical incompetence of precisely the type of positivistic "social science" that Niebuhr considers to be essential to his definition of culture.[3]

We can make this aspect of the critique of *Christ and Culture* clearer by pointing to two obvious facts; Niebuhr has no substantive discussions of slavery or the Nazis in this book. He was writing in the wake of World War II, yet it did not occur to him to talk about the German Christians who supported Hitler as an example of the Christ of Culture type. Or perhaps it did occur to him, but he decided not to. He was writing at a time when black Americans were living under horribly oppressive conditions, which were somewhat of an improvement over the much more oppressive conditions that they had lived under during slavery. It did not occur to Niebuhr to discuss the white Christian justifications for slavery as an example of the Christ of Culture type. Or perhaps it did occur to him, but he decided not to. Regardless of which alternative we choose as an attempt to read his mind posthumously, it is clear that he was injecting himself and thus his text with a powerful anesthetic. He did not want to face squarely the evil that human culture is capable of producing. He refused to see human culture, as René Girard has taught us to see it, as essentially a lynch mob. Defenders of Niebuhr's text cannot respond at this point that Niebuhr can be excused because he lived before Girard's ideas became widely known. Niebuhr did not even attempt to address seriously the well known evils of Christian history using the resources of understanding that were plentifully available to him in the Bible and in the history of Christian thought up to his day.

Niebuhr defines "Christ" and "culture," and then assumes that the people who inhabit the five types would agree with his definition of those terms, but only differ with each other on how to relate them. This is an absurd assumption. As Darryl Trimiew has pointed out, "it must be recognized (as Niebuhr did not) that the oppressed have a different conceptualization of Christ and of Culture" than Christians who are in positions of power and privilege.[4] To put this more sharply, is a black person whose close relative was recently lynched going to have the same understanding of "culture" as a white person in that community or as Dr. Niebuhr?

Niebuhr says that the "Christ against culture" type is both logically and chronologically primary because of its emphasis on the direct Lordship of Christ over the lives of Christians (C&C, 45). Yet his strongest criticisms are directed at this type, which seems to imply that we "modern" Christians have a superior understanding of discipleship than the earliest Christians did. He spends several pages

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[3] See Voegelin, *Modernity Without Restraint*, ed. Manfred Henningsen (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2000), 96. Voegelin refers also to Max Weber's construction of "ideal types," which is the grandfather, through Ernst Troeltsch, of Niebuhr's types (98).

[4] "Jesus Changes Things: A Critical Evaluation of Christ and Culture from an African American Perspective." *Journal of the Society of Christian Ethics* 23, no. 1 (2003): 158.

summarizing and then attacking Tertullian and Tolstoy. He refers to the Mennonites in one sentence. I will return shortly to the Mennonites, but I wish to pause first to consider the case of Tertullian.

Niebuhr admits that Tertullian "does not wholly conform to our hypothetical pattern"(C&C, 51), yet he goes on to criticize Tertullian for being inconsistent by using cultural tools, such as language and philosophical ideas, to attack culture. The ineptness of Niebuhr's construction of types as a prelude to criticizing thinkers for not fitting the types has often been pointed out. But we can provide a more substantive response here by carefully examining a text by Tertullian, such as his short treatise on *Patience.*[5] Tertullian argues that God's character, as revealed through Christ, is the chief source of our knowledge of patience. This was a novel way of thinking; according to Robert Wilken, patience "was not considered a virtue by the ancients."[6] In the narrative of Christ, we see the divine presence patiently entering into the world through the womb of Mary, growing slowly into manhood, entering into his ministry only at the right time, serving the lowly, the sick, and the sinful, washing his disciples' feet, choosing the path of obedience to the redemptive task instead of the violence of the sword and the protection of "legions of angels." We ought to "marvel at the constancy of his meekness" and notice that he "has in no degree imitated man's impatience."[7]

As a contrast, Tertullian finds "the origin of impatience in the Devil himself." The Devil deceived humanity out of envy and impatience. "What the angel of perdition was first—I mean, whether he was first evil or impatient—I do not bother to inquire; it is clear that, whether impatience had its beginning in evil or evil in impatience, they entered into combination and grew as one in the bosom of one father."[8] Through conversation with the Devil, the first woman was "touched by his breath, already infected with impatience," and she passed the infection on to her companion. "Since it had plunged Adam and Eve into death, it taught their son, also, to commit the first murder."[9] "Impatience is, as it were, the original sin in the eyes of the Lord."[10] In a world that is animated by impatience as Tertullian understands it, what will be the basic ordering principle of human culture? Revenge. Because human beings are filled with envy and impatience through their imitation of the Devil, they will constantly be injuring each other and responding in kind:

> Revenge mistakenly appears to be a soothing of one's pain, but in the light of truth it is seen to be only evil contending with evil. What difference is there between the one who provokes and the one provoked except that the one is caught doing wrong sooner than the other? Nevertheless, before the Lord each is guilty of having injured a fellow man and the Lord forbids and condemns every act of wrong-doing. There is no hierarchical arrangement in wrong-doing, nor does position make any distinction in that which similarity makes one. Therefore, the precept is unequivocally laid down: evil is not to be rendered for evil.[11]

Within the scope of just a few pages of text, Tertullian has produced a masterful diagnosis of the human condition that is in tune with the most sophisticated psychological and ethical thinking that we are capable of today, as we reflect on the post 9/11 era, with the benefit of centuries of thought behind us.

Tertullian concludes his treatise by surveying the ways Christians ought embody God's presence in the world by imitating Christ's patience. Patience leads to charity, which does not envy; it is not pretentious; it does not allow itself to be provoked. Everything else will pass away, except for: "faith, which the patience of Christ has instilled; hope, to which the patience of man looks forward; charity, which patience accompanies, according to the teaching of God."[12] The virtue of patience also lives in the body of the Christian, producing temperance. In sum, "when the Spirit of God descends, patience is His inseparable companion."[13]

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[5] See Tertullian, *Disciplinary, Moral, and Ascetical Works* (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 1959), 193-221.

[6] Wilken, *The Spirit of Early Christian Thought: Seeking the Face of God* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003), 283.

[7] Tertullian, *Disciplinary, Moral, and Ascetical Works*, 197.

[8] Tertullian, *Disciplinary, Moral, and Ascetical Works*, 200.

[9] Tertullian, *Disciplinary, Moral, and Ascetical Works*, 201.

[10] Tertullian, *Disciplinary, Moral, and Ascetical Works*, 202.

[11] Tertullian, *Disciplinary, Moral, and Ascetical Works*, 210.

[12] Tertullian, *Disciplinary, Moral, and Ascetical Works*, 215.

[13] Tertullian, *Disciplinary, Moral, and Ascetical Works*, 220.

This may seem like an odd digression from my survey of Niebuhr, but to note that his condescending attitude toward the brilliant and theologically sound insights of Tertullian is an embarrassing example of small-mindedness is actually a very important point. I am reminded of a story I once heard about a high school student who made a sophomoric criticism of Shakespeare in English class. The teacher wisely responded by saying that when you read Shakespeare, "he is not on trial, *you are.*" By surveying the history of Christian thought, Niebuhr has placed himself on trial. If his understanding of culture and of Christ is inferior to the understanding that is present in the minds of those he is criticizing, then he has undermined his own message in a profound way.

I turn now to consider some of the many critiques of *Christ and Culture* that have been written from an Anabaptist point of view. Examples include John Howard Yoder's essay "How H. Richard Niebuhr Reasoned," published in *Authentic Transformation*, Glen Stassen's article "It Is Time to Take Jesus Back," Duane Friesen's article, "A Discriminating Engagement of Culture: An Anabaptist Perspective," and Craig Carter's book *Rethinking Christ and Culture: A Post-Christendom Perspective.*[14] A common thread uniting these authors is the contention that Niebuhr's treatment of the Anabaptist tradition is distorting and unpersuasive. He pays scant attention to the substance of Anabaptist thought, which is a rich vein of Christological and ethical witness, choosing instead to simply shove the Anabaptists into the "Christ against culture" pigeonhole and move on. Niebuhr quotes with approval J.S. Mill's idea that authors are usually right in what they affirm and wrong in what they deny (C&C, 238). This surely snaps back upon Niebuhr in that his denial of theological significance to Anabaptist thought was a serious blind spot.

Niebuhr uses the Gnostics as a key example of the "Christ of culture" type. This is a very odd and unpersuasive choice. The Gnostics were unworldly, seeking to escape vertically to a higher realm of spirituality. The "Christ of culture" type, as Niebuhr generally describes it, is this-worldly, seeking to conform theological ideas to the needs of the state. There are some obvious examples that would seem to fit this type much better than the Gnostics: the Inquisition, the Crusades, Christian slave owning, and the German Christians who supported Hitler. But these examples are so heinous that they would obviously explode Niebuhr's entire typological scheme. He could not point to these situations and maintain the overall attitude of pluralism that he employs in the book. He could not say that these are examples of a legitimate, though less-than-ideal, option for Christians to choose.

Niebuhr's outline of the "Christ above culture" position uses Thomas Aquinas to create a backbone for what Niebuhr calls the "Church of the center," an umbrella covering the last three types. But this introduces another ambiguity into his message. Are there three types (against culture, of culture, and the Church of the center), with subtypes, or are there five types? I find Niebuhr's summary of Aquinas to be helpful and generally accurate, though it needs to be pointed out that he does not mention Aquinas' defense of the execution of heretics. This is another example of Niebuhr's avoidance of the phenomenon of violence.

The "Christ and culture in paradox" chapter allows Niebuhr to summarize Karl Barth, without mentioning him by name. It also draws on Paul, Luther, and Kierkegaard. The latter is presented in stereotypical terms as a radical individualist, engaged in a "lonely debate with himself"(C&C, 180). That this way of labeling and dismissing Kierkegaard is incompetent exegesis has been thoroughly established in the better quality Kierkegaard scholarship that has been published in the last few decades.

John Howard Yoder observes that the "Christ the Transformer of Culture" chapter has an odd "vacuity about moral substance." An author's use of the words "transform" and "convert" would "ordinarily, one should think, call for someone to define with some substantial clarity one's criteria or lines of direction for change."[15] But those are conspicuously absent from Niebuhr's text. His use of Augustine and Calvin as exemplars of this type leaves the reader wondering precisely what the type means, because Niebuhr does not explain how Augustine's war against the Arians or Calvin's opposition to religious liberty show that they have been transformed by Christ or how they were transforming agents in their time period. It is interesting to note these comments, from earlier in the book, when Niebuhr was discussing the "Christ against culture" type: "They have led to reformations in both church and world, though this was never their intention . . . . In social reform they accomplish what they did not intend . . . . Protestant sectarians made important contributions to political customs and traditions, such as those which guarantee religious liberty to all members of a society. Quakers and Tolstoyans, intending only to

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[14] A bibliography of responses to *Christ and Culture*, which lists these and other similar pieces, is found here:
http://www.wabashcenter.wabash.edu/resources/article2.aspx?id=12648
[15] "How H. Richard Niebuhr Reasoned," in *Authentic Transformation*, 42.

abolish all methods of coercion, have helped to reform prisons . . ."(C&C, 66-67). In hindsight, regarding Niebuhr's book and also the history he considers, it seems that he is at least tacitly admitting the possibility that what he calls the "against culture" type may have actually accomplished more substantive transformations of human life in accordance with the gospel vision than what he calls the "transforming culture" type. If this is true, then his categories and the structure of his argument are thrown into serious disarray.

Overall criticisms of *Christ and Culture* are possible along the following lines. The relativism that seems to undergird the book is problematic. If there are a variety of possible approaches to Christian ethical existence, which are in some ways contradictory, yet are in some ways all legitimate, then it seems that there is no coherence to Christian thought and life. If a non-Christian were to ask what Christians believe about the relationship between Christ and culture, Niebuhr's answer seems to imply that "there is no there there."[16] If we could speak to Niebuhr, he would surely say that it is not acceptable for Christians to own slaves. This is not a matter for relativistic acceptance of different opinions. But the basis on which this normative view is built is left entirely hazy by Niebuhr. A defender of Niebuhr will likely respond to this by saying that I am criticizing Niebuhr for not doing something that he was not trying to do. He was not writing a normative treatise on Christian ethics. But this is precisely my point. I am criticizing Niebuhr for the choices that he made about what he was trying to do, because it is so difficult to discern what he was trying to do and how it provides any assistance to Christians seeking to understand reality. If the historical analysis is at many points inaccurate and unpersuasive, if the typology is muddled and confusing, and if the important phenomenon of violence is being ignored, then what benefit accrues from reading the book?

This nest of problems can be traced to a lack of clarity in the genre of the book. As Yoder points out, Niebuhr was trying to change Christian ethics from a normative to a descriptive discipline.[17] But these are two different genres, namely ethics and anthropology. Anthropology seeks to understand human beings, while ethics tells them what they ought to do and avoid doing.

The location of anthropology within the larger realm of Christian thought needs to be clearly described. Niebuhr was trying to articulate a subject matter that is between two other subjects. On one side there is theology proper, which is reflection on God's character, activities, and purposes. On the other side is theological ethics, which expresses how Christians ought to live. It is clear that Niebuhr was not writing theology or ethics in *Christ and Culture*; he was writing in a third realm that lies between them, which can be described using terms such as anthropology or sociology of religion. When we pull the zoom lens back to take in this broader view, it becomes apparent that an overall approach to method in Christian thinking goes like this:

theology > anthropology > ethics

Ethical thinking needs to be rooted in a careful understanding of human beings, which in turn needs to be rooted in awareness of the divine source of life. Niebuhr was not writing ethics in *Christ and Culture*, but laying the foundation for ethical thinking by trying to give his readers a clearer understanding of themselves as historically and communally situated agents. But to describe method in this way raises an important question. In Christian thought, awareness of God is theological thinking, and ethics, understood as reflection on God's will for human life as seen through the Christ event, is theological thinking, but is anthropology somehow *secular* thinking? Must anthropology be forbidden to have theological underpinnings? It sounds odd to put it this way, but that is Niebuhr's belief:

A theologian's definition of [culture] must, in the nature of the case, be a layman's definition, since he cannot presume to enter into the issues raised by professional anthropologists; yet it must also, at least initially, be a definition of the phenomenon without theological interpretation, for it is just this theological interpretation which is the point at issue among Christians. For some of them culture is essentially Godless in the purely secular sense, as having neither positive nor negative relation to the God of Jesus Christ; for others it is Godless in the negative sense, as being anti-God or idolatrous; for others it seems solidly based on a natural, rational knowledge of God

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[16] Gertrude Stein said "The trouble with Oakland is that when you get there, there isn't any there there." I need to explain this in a footnote, because in my experience there are many people who have never heard this phrase and don't understand the allusion.

[17] *Authentic Transformation*, 41.

or His law. Christian disinterestedness forbids the adoption at least at the outset—of any one of these evaluations. (C&C, 30)

I find this to be one of the oddest and weakest passages in the book, and it is absolutely crucial for his overall project. Niebuhr is arguing that when Christian thinkers venture into the realm of anthropological reflection, they must remove their Christian hats and put on the hat of the secular social scientist. But Christian faith is not a hat that can be taken on and off in the way Niebuhr is suggesting. God's revelation in Christ leads to a comprehensive vision of reality. Christ's life, teachings, and crucifixion are not relevant only to theological and ethical thinking; they are also powerfully revelatory of the phenomenon of human culture. There is no such thing, therefore, as a legitimate form of "Christian disinterestedness" when it comes to comprehending human beings anthropologically.

Christ and Culture can also be criticized with the observation that because Niebuhr's typology is ahistorical, it obscures important historical developments that are essential for understanding Christian ethics. Yoder's stress on "Constantinianism" supports this point.[18] The shift from Tertullian's clear-sighted rejection of revenge as a Christian motivation to the burning of heretics at the stake in the Middle Ages is not a simple difference of opinion by well-intentioned Christians who just happened to prefer different "types" of ethical thought. The basic Anabaptist tenet that there was a "fall" into ethical apostasy after Constantine can be debated as to its precise meaning and relevance for Christian ethics, but it cannot be *ignored*, which is what Niebuhr seems to do. Another angle on this topic is articulated by René Girard, in his reflections on what has been called "moral yeast."[19] The gospels have been at work for centuries in the long, slow, subtle work of unveiling the scapegoat mechanism in human culture. This has resulted in our modern sensitivity to victims of all types.[20] This effect of Christian revelation is positive (in contrast with the negative "fall" into apostasy), it is empirically observable, and it is absolutely crucial to pay attention to this reality if one seeks to accurately describe either the history of Christian ethics or its contemporary manifestations. But Niebuhr seems to be oblivious to both the negative and positive aspects because he is strangely committed to conceiving of the types ahistorically as something akin to eternal forms.

Niebuhr makes passing references here and there in the text to human violence, but he does not take violence and evil seriously as a topic that needs to be wrestled with as an aspect of anthropological reflection. He does not consider phenomena such as the Crusades, Inquisitors burning heretics at the stake, Anabaptists being drawn and quartered by both Catholics and Protestants, the wars of religion, the enslavement, brutalization, and lynching of Africans by Christian slave owners, and the participation by Christians in Hitler's machinery of death. (I am, of course, simply pointing to a few tips of the iceberg.) Why would Niebuhr not consider these phenomena as part of his attempt to understand how Christians have related to the cultures in which they have lived? Why does he appear to be an ostrich with his head in the sand?

One answer to this question is to suggest that he is simply trying to be nice. He wants to say nice things about each of the types, and that would be made difficult, if not impossible, if he were to take violence seriously. If he were to point to the German Christians, who enthusiastically supported Hitler, as examples of the "Christ of culture" position, then his overall façade of non-normative neutrality would be blown to pieces. If he were to describe the faithfulness of the early Christians and the Anabaptists in following the nonviolent witness of Christ as a contrast with the evil of fallen human culture, then his "church of the center" Catholics and Lutherans, who murdered the Anabaptists, would bear an unmistakable resemblance to the Romans who murdered the early Christians, just as they murdered Christ. All of a sudden, Niebuhr's niceness would remind us of the etymological root of the word nice, which is *nescience*—not knowing, ignorance. It would become apparent that Niebuhr was averting his gaze from evil because to take evil seriously would render his typology as he had conceived it useless.

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[18] See "The Constantinian Sources of Western Social Ethics," in Yoder's *The Priestly Kingdom: Social Ethics as Gospel* (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984).

[19] Servais Pinckaers: "Aware from experience of the sharpness of divisions between people, and knowing well that faith could not put an end to them by magic, St. Paul proclaimed that a moral yeast had come into the world capable of creating new relationships, but at a deeper level than that of their differences. Its effects would eventually permeate the social plane and would take the form of more humanitarian customs, and a recognition of the basic dignity and equality of persons, with special emphasis on the humblest, who most closely imaged the humbled, suffering Christ." *The Sources of Christian Ethics* (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 1995), 129-30. This idea also pervades David Bentley Hart's *Atheist Delusions: The Christian Revolution and Its Fashionable Enemies* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009).

[20] See Girard's chapter on "The Modern Concern for Victims" in *I See Satan Fall Like Lightning*.

I tell my students in my History of Christian Ethics course that there are three main angles from which one can approach the topic. There is the history of ideas: Augustine said this, Aquinas said that. There is the history of behaviors: Christians formed monasteries or went on crusades or fought duels. And there is the phenomenon of "moral yeast": concepts in the Bible contributed to cultural changes over long stretches of time, such as the ending of slavery, the birth of the hospital, the rise of critiques of patriarchal oppression of women, the development of "concern for victims," and so forth. When we put it this way, it is clear that Niebuhr is only interested in the history of ideas. The actual behavior of Christians in history is much too messy for him to fit into his schema of sanitized types and value neutrality, and the idea of "moral yeast" would involve a chronological perspective that he is explicitly ignoring by describing the types as ahistorical options for thought. In other words, Niebuhr is overly philosophical, overly focused on *ideas*, which prevents him from being seriously psychological on the one hand, and seriously historical on the other.

One way of accounting for the popularity of *Christ and Culture* is to say that it meets a deep hunger in human beings to understand the world in which they live. But this hunger, in my view, tends to be very shallow. We do not want to understand ourselves as agents capable of evil and violence. Thus, by avoiding a direct confrontation with evil, Niebuhr is meeting us where we are and tailoring his message to our fear of genuine self-knowledge.

I trace the problem here back to Niebuhr's earlier mistake in thinking that his definition of culture could and ought to be *secular*, non-theological. The Bible knows of no such as thing as a secular interpretation of culture, and in fact it provides us with a theological interpretation of culture that is more insightful than anything that secular anthropologists are able to articulate. That interpretation began with the story of Cain and came to its fruition with the story of the Cross.

This is perhaps the most famous quotation from H. Richard Niebuhr, in which he is summarizing 19th century liberal theology: "A God without wrath brought men without sin into a Kingdom without judgment through the ministrations of a Christ without a Cross."[21] We could summarize *Christ and Culture* in this way: "A God who does not care about violence brought human beings who feel comfortable with a variety of philosophical options into a Kingdom of niceness through the ministrations of a gnostic Christ." Ironic, isn't it?

We can sum up this mishmash of criticism by saying that *Christ and Culture* is a mishmash book. It is difficult to figure out why H. Richard Niebuhr wrote it. What did he think he was accomplishing by writing it? He was not writing normative ethics, or the history of ethics, or theology. The best label that can be pinned on it is something along the lines of sociology of religion. But if in his understanding such a book can be written by an "objective," secular anthropologist, then how is what he has written theological and why is it assigned in theological seminaries? If, as Niebuhr seems to imply, an atheistic anthro-pologist could have surveyed the same terrain and noticed the same five types, then why did he spend his time writing this book instead of something else that would more directly employ his vocation as a theologian whose task is to shape leaders of the body of Christ?

What I am heading toward is the idea that Niebuhr should have reconceived his project as a work of *theological anthropology*. In that way, he could have retained much of the same content, but the plan and purpose of the work would have been much clearer. He could have articulated a more substantive and biblical vision of Jesus Christ as the foundation for Christian anthropological reflection; he could have described the various patterns of Christian thought and behavior in history as examples of how fallenness and sin distort and limit Christian thinking; he could have judged examples of ethical malfeasance, such as slavery, directly, instead of trying to maintain a façade of neutrality; he could have articulated much more effectively a vision for what it means for Christians to be agents of transformation as individuals and as a community.

AN ALTERNATIVE MODEL

Let us try to imagine what a coherent theological anthropology might look like.

I begin with the question: how many creation stories are there in the first few chapters of Genesis? The standard answer to this question is two. Genesis 1 tells the story of the creation of the cosmos in six days. Genesis 2-3 tells the story of the creation of Adam and Eve. But there is another creation story that is not usually thought of as such. The story of Cain and Abel in chapter 4 is an account of the first murder. That does not seem to be a creation story, but the opposite, an uncreation story. But how is Cain then

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[21] H. Richard Niebuhr, *The Kingdom of God in America* (New York: Harper & Row, 1959), 193.

described? He is *the builder of the first city*. In other words, this is a story of the creation of human civilization, which is founded upon an act of violence. When we describe the first few chapters of Genesis in this way, we can say that the three creation stories are describing three different things: the creation of the cosmos, the human soul, and society.

I can anticipate an objection to this idea. Someone could say that a creation story requires a Creator, and God is not the creator of violent human society. Fallen human beings create their own violent societies, but they are not God; they are just trying to usurp the place of God by seizing in their own hands the power of life and death. But that is precisely my point. When we look at Genesis 1-4 as a literary unit, there is a clear trajectory. In the beginning, God is the sole actor, the sole creative agent. In the story of Adam and Eve, the serpent tempts them by saying "You shall be as God . . . ." A wedge is driven between humanity and God, and humans alienate themselves from their source by becoming active agents in rebellion. In the story of Cain and Abel, that trajectory has come to its conclusion, as the fallen human being has now completely usurped the place of God to establish a different world than the one God intended. God created all things good, and humanity has founded its own social life on evil.

These chapters in Genesis outline for us the basic elements of theological anthropology. There is what can be called the vertical axis, with God above and nature below. Starting at the bottom, there are the basic elements of the cosmos, matter and energy; then there are the simplest forms of life, the intermediate forms of life, and human beings as the boundary between the material and the spiritual, bearing the image of God on earth. There is also what can be called the trajectory of the human soul in time. Each human being is unique, being born at a particular time and living out his or her days with a particular complex of thoughts, willed choices, and goals. There is also the horizontal plane of human social existence. Words such as family, community, congregation, society, culture, the state, and so forth, are pointing to various aspects of this horizontal plane. These three primary dimensions form the structure of reality as it is experienced by human beings. They can be visualized in a chart such as this:

			GOD			
			↑			*future*
			of being		*goals*	
			chain	*choices*		
friends	church	family	**_self_**	society	state	culture
		memory	great			
	history		↑			
past			**NATURE**			

This way of describing the elements of reality as it is experienced by human beings is certainly not original with me. These dimensions were differentiated in consciousness and articulated in language in the ancient world, and awareness of them has continued up to the present day. (This does not mean, however, that human beings have fully grasped the meaning and importance of these dimensions as a pathway to self-understanding.)

These elements of reality were clearly a part of Niebuhr's thought world as he was writing *Christ and Culture*. Any reader of the book who is attentive to passages where Niebuhr uses the words God, nature, the soul (or self), and society (or culture), can easily verify this. This passage is just one of many that could be quoted in this connection:

> [For Tertullian, the] conflict of the believer is not with nature but with culture, for it is in culture that sin chiefly resides. Tertullian comes very close to the thought that original sin is transmitted through society, and that if it were not for the vicious customs that surround a child from its birth and for its artificial training its soul would remain good. (C&C, 52)

While Niebuhr was aware of these elements, it is clear that he did not use the concept of the dimensions as a structuring principle for his argument. This can be seen clearly when we consider the comments of Robert Kolb, who wrote an article entitled "Niebuhr's 'Christ and Culture in Paradox' Revisited." Kolb argues that in Luther's thought there are two primary dimensions, the vertical relationship with God and the horizontal relationship with other human beings. He discusses Niebuhr's text in these terms.[22] If

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[22] Robert Kolb. "Niebuhr's 'Christ and Culture in Paradox' Revisited." *Lutheran Quarterly* 10, no. 3 (1996): 259-79.

Niebuhr had explicitly constructed his argument around *three* dimensions, then Kolb's article would certainly have been altered to take that concept into consideration.

The three dimensions are in fact the structuring principles of reality as it is experienced by human beings. If therefore, Niebuhr seeks to give us an understanding of human beings, he needs to employ the dimensions as key concepts. He does not do that; but on the other hand, perhaps he does. This ambiguity of the book may be one of the sources of the fascination it holds for so many readers. The first two types he describes, Christ "against culture" and "of culture," can be understood as the horizontal plane types. The horizontal plane is an extremely complex field of similarities and dissimilarities between human beings, when we consider factors such as race, religion, language, gender, nationality, etc., etc. We can plausibly summarize Niebuhr's argument by saying that these two ideal types oversimplify reality by clinging either to a "sect" of true believers (on the left side of my chart) or by accepting a "culture" or a "state" as a vector of salvation (on the right side).

The "Christ above culture" type can obviously be associated with the vertical axis of God and nature. The primary theologian who represents this type in Niebuhr's text is Thomas Aquinas, whose overall message paints a picture of human beings as existing in the middle of the Great Chain of Being. Below human beings are the corporeal animals; above are the angels, Christ, and God. Humans are spiritual-corporeal beings who live in the middle of this cosmic hierarchical axis.

The "Christ and culture in paradox" type can be interpreted as introducing the individual self into the field of vision. The duality at the heart of this type arises out of the reality that the self is simultaneously related to God and also an inhabitant of the horizontal plane of social existence. Luther's "two kingdoms" language arises out of this complexity, but it needs to be recognized that it is the self or the human soul that is the key emergent element in this type. The fact that Niebuhr places Kierkegaard in this camp and (wrongly) accuses him of excessive individualism (C&C, 180-81) fits perfectly.

Parenthetically, we can support the idea that Niebuhr was aware of the dimensions by pointing to *The Responsible Self*. His schema in that work describes "man-the-citizen" who obeys laws and commands (vertical), "man-the-maker" who is self-directed through the trajectory of existence (temporal), and "man-the-responder" who lives in relation to others (horizontal).

Where does this analysis leave the "Christ transforming culture" type? If the dimensions of reality are the milieu within which human beings live, and if the inadequacies of the types can be seen in their tendency to exist in too small of a box by overemphasizing one of the dimensions, then the idea clearly presents itself to us that the pathway toward a more genuine life in tune with God is to open ourselves up and live in a complex way within all of the dimensions at the same time. If we were to do this, we would be allowing ourselves to be transformed by God and we would be better able to be transforming agents in the world by modeling in our lives the richness of a divinely graced complex life. We would fulfill the greatest commandment by loving God, ourselves, our neighbors, and all of creation. Another way of expressing this idea is to suggest that Niebuhr could have taken the good points of the first four types and combined them into a comprehensive ethical vision; he could have also shown how the negative points of the four types result from a lack of balance and complexity in inhabiting the dimensions. In this way, his anthropological analysis would have led into the realm of normative Christian ethics, while still recognizing the distinction between the spheres of thought. But this would have been a very different book from the one Niebuhr actually wrote. *Christ and Culture* as we have it is bedeviled by the issue of "relativism" because Niebuhr was not clear enough in his conception of what he was seeking to accomplish by writing the book. The five "types" end up being a screen that Niebuhr sets up between himself and reality; the screen prevents him from seeing clearly the phenomena he was trying to interpret. He was so extremely close to seeing things clearly, that we can only conclude that for him *the truth was hiding in plain sight*.