Niebuhr’s Five Categories

**Background: What is Culture?**

Culture includes all symbolic and learned, non-biological aspects of human society. No one is without culture; all of our habits of thinking are manifestations of culture. Niebuhr defines it as the artificial, secondary environment which man superimposes on the natural. It comprises language, habits, ideas, beliefs, customs, social organization, inherited artifacts, technical processes, and values. When the NT writers spoke of “the world” it is this social heritage to which they were referring.

You can think of culture as “water to a fish.” You can also think of it as shared meaning. What implications does this have for our comprehending “truth?” What role does sin play in this?

Niebuhr says “Not eschatology, but sonship to God is the key to Jesus’ ethics.” The focus is not on “the kingdom” but on God himself.

**The Five Categories/Models:**

**Christ Against Culture** (Separationists)

Culture has no claims on a believer’s loyalty. There is and should be a clear separation. The difficulty inherent in this perspective is that it proceeds from an overly simplistic definition of culture. While Separationists see themselves as rejecting culture – as living outside of and in judgment of it – they are doing little more than advocating particular forms of culture. This fails to recognize that all of creation was affected by the fall.

They urge a “return to Biblical ways of thought.” What does that mean?

We are called to be separate, but not to separate ourselves.

**Christ of Culture** (Accommodationists, “Cultural Christians”)

Fundamental agreement between “Christ” and anything deemed good or worthy in any given culture or subculture.

We no longer keep a Sabbath rest, because it is incompatible with the demands of capitalism. This is an accommodation of Christ to culture.

Cultural Christians all but do away with the notion of sin; separationist Christians see sin as controllable by strict observance of cultural boundaries.

Cultural Christians and separationist Christians are in essential agreement that Christ is the Christ of culture… they simply differ with respect to what the character of that culture should be.
Christ above Culture (Synthesists)

Also called “Christians of the Center” or the “Synthesists.” Sees both dualisms and unity in the Christian’s relationship to culture. Christ calls us to higher values than our culture, by itself, would ever inspire. This view is an attempt to synthesize the extreme positions advocated by the separationists and the accommodators of Christ to culture.

Niebuhr says that for this perspective, the fundamental issue does not lie between Christ and the world, but between God and man. Thus, attention is focused, not simply on Christ, but on the God to whom Christ is obedient. This view begins with the idea that culture is founded on nature, and nature itself is “good” as it was founded by and is sustained by God himself. Since God sustains nature, and since God is inseparably united to Christ, Christ and the world cannot be simply opposed to each other. Consequently, the Christian cannot reject the world on the basis that it constitutes the “realm of godlessness.”

The proponents of this approach place greater emphasis on grace than do legalist Christians.

They recognize a gap between Christ and culture (differing from separationists or accommodationists). But, Niebuhr criticizes them on the basis that they attempt to combine God’s work and man’s work in one seamless system. Consequently, they do not face up to the radical evil present in all human work. Synthesist Christians see interaction in the great institutions of society as the way to transcend the grip of sin.

In trying to be in, not of, the world, these Christians place too great an emphasis on the worldly part of the equation.

Christ and Culture in Paradox: (Dualists, “Two Kingdoms”)

This is Luther’s position. This position places much greater emphasis on the forces of sin and evil… they are much more consequential. Dualists see even our best efforts as sordid and depraved.

“Where the synthesist rejoices in the rational content of law and social institutions, the dualist, with the skepticism of the Sophist and positivist, calls attention to the lust for power and the will of the strong which rationalizes itself in all these social arrangements.”

For the dualists, reason in human affairs is never separable from its egoistic, godless, perversion.

For the dualists, our involvement in institutions functions only to restrain evil. It does not move us closer to Christ.
Synthesists move from culture to Christ; dualists move from Christ to culture (important distinction).

A criticism offered by Niebuhr is that both Luther and Paul appear primarily concerned with bringing change to the religious institutions of society. “For the rest they seemed content to let state and economic life – with slavery in the one case and social stratification in the other – continue relatively unchanged.”

Christ the Transformer of Culture (“Conversionists,” Transformationalists of many kinds, including Neo-Calvinsits)

The “conversionist” approach has a decidedly more optimistic tone than any of the previous views outlined by Niebuhr. With the exception of the cultural Christians (who more or less deny the reality of sin altogether), the separationists, synthesists, and dualists view the permeating effects of sin in ways that result in a “biding of their time,” as they wait for a transhistorical redemption.

To a far greater extent, the conversionists emphasize the “kingship” dimension of Christ’s involvement in human affairs. For them, Christ is the “ruler” of this world, and the effects of sin in no way diminish that rule. Niebuhr (1951) tells us that the conversionist tendency is to “… hold together in one movement the various themes of creation and redemption, of incarnation and atonement” (Niebuhr, p. 193). Consequently, these Christians do not understand human history in linear terms – envisioning the intensity of Christ’s influence waxing and waning through different epochs. Rather, creation has never been (and cannot even exist) without the (present) ordering action of Christ.

The conversionists have a different view of the fall of mankind than do Christians holding the other perspectives. In their view, though the fall has radical consequences for all creation, its effects are not such that the very substance of creation becomes something evil. The effects of the fall are primarily moral and personal, rather than physical and metaphysical (Niebuhr, 1951). In other words, “Man’s good nature has become corrupted; it is not bad, as something that ought not to exist, but warped, twisted, and misdirected” (Niebuhr, p. 194). Consequently, the conversionists see culture as “perverted good” rather than “evil.” We might say that evil enters into something good and deforms it – much like breaking one’s leg has a distorting effect on the leg, but does not change the ontological status of that leg. We would deal with the broken leg, not by getting rid of it, but by transforming it into what it once was. “The problem of culture is therefore the problem of its conversion, not of its replacement by a new creation; though the conversion is so radical that it amounts to a kind of rebirth” (Niebuhr, p. 194). Thus, continuing with the “broken leg” analogy, we see that while the solution to dealing with a broken leg is not to “get rid of it,” neither is the solution to replace it.

An important consequence of this view is that its adherents are consumed with the idea that Christ is king of creation (and that includes culture) as much in the present as in the future. The problem of culture is not solved by rejecting it (as the radicals maintain), embracing it (as the cultural Christians advocate), achieving a rational fit between God’s work and man’s work (as the synthesist Christians attempt) or actively “waiting it out”
(as in the dualist approach). Rather the problem of culture is resolved in its transformation. The promise is for “now” and for the “age to come.” The power of the risen Lord transforms Christians in the present, and enables them to work toward the renewal of all things. Our work is therefore neither futile, as though all things will simply pass away, nor is it based on human effort, and therefore destined to failure. Niebuhr summarizes:

The eschatological future has become for him an eschatological present. Eternity means for him less the action of God before time and less the life with God after time, and more the presence of God in time. Eternal life is a quality of existence in the here and now. (Niebuhr, 1951, p. 195)

Human history, then, rather than comprising a simple chain of events, involves a dramatic interaction between the creator and the created. Culture is transformed only when the individual is submissive to Christ. But, the result is not the elimination of social problems. The transformation of culture begins with Christ’s transforming work in the individual and ultimately finds resolution in God’s purpose (Heddendorf, 1989). “This is what human culture can be – a transformed life in and to the glory of God” (Niebuhr, 1951, p. 196).

A key to the transformational perspective lies in the idea that the new beginning that Christ brings to the world is not dependent on a break in temporal history (Niebuhr, 1951). Rather, the kingdom is both now, and in the age to come. This new beginning is not simply realized transhistorically – “… it is realized through the concrete events of Jesus’ life and the concrete responses to him of men in the church” (Niebuhr, p. 201).