

# Christ and CULTURE

How Christians Relate  
to the World In Which They Live

by Rev. Mark A. Miller

based upon Christ and Culture by H. Richard Niebuhr  
with additional material from  
Choosing the Good by Dennis P. Hollinger

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## **Study Plan**

- Introduction** - what are we looking at and who was H. Richard Niebuhr
- (1) **Christ Against Culture** - Christian rejection of culture and society
  - (2) **Christ Of Culture** - Christian embrace of culture and society
  - (3) **Christ Above Culture** - Spirituality and the world on different levels
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# INTRODUCTION

As Christians we are individuals and communities (such as churches) committed to the reign of Jesus Christ in our lives and the coming Kingdom of God, a reality in harmony with God. We are also creatures living in a world that is frequently discordant to God's character, will, and purposes that functions in ways that challenge us to continually make decisions about how we relate to it, to each other, and to our God in ways that uphold our commitments to God and to each other.

For all social creatures, of which humans are the most sophisticated, most of our lives are spent making decisions guided by how we have chosen to relate to society and the culture in which we participate. As Christians, our relationship with culture and society is affected by our beliefs about God, Jesus, and the doctrines and teachings of Bible and church. How the Christian faith affects our involvement in our world is not uniform but takes on several different forms ranging from an attempt to completely separate from surrounding culture and society to fully integrating into it.

In this study, we shall explore five ways Christians relate their faith to the social world around them using the insights of H. Richard Niebuhr.

Helmut Richard Niebuhr (b. 9/3/1894, d. 7/5/1962) was a Christian theologian and ethicist who taught for many years at Yale Divinity School, the same school from which he had received his PhD. His primary concern was how humans relate to God, to each other, to the communities in which they take part, and to the world at large. In 1951 he published his most famous book, Christ And Culture, in which he explored how Christianity has historically responded to culture and society. Although both the book and Niebuhr's views have drawn some criticism, Christ and Culture remains a highly influential and respected study of the sociology of Christianity and continues to provide insights for us today.

# CHRIST AGAINST CULTURE

## Christian Rejection (or Separation) of Culture and Society

### Description / Characteristics

- A strong and absolute border exists between the realm of God, in which the redeemed people of God reside, and the fallen world, in which the rest of sinful humanity and humanity's social, political, and economic institutions exist.
- Christ has sole authority over Christians. Society and culture have no claim of loyalty.
- Christians reject many facets of society – war, property, politics, sports, entertainment, art, business, education, science, and technology. Believers must withdraw from society or, at the very least, avoid its cultural influences.
- Christian life is focused on family and communities of like-minded believers (especially church).
- There is little or no expectation that believers can have any impact on the world.

### Examples

- Tertullian (155-220A.D.) - This early church theologian believed that God had created a good world but many parts of it had become corrupt and contrary to Christ and his teachings. In particular, he saw much of society, its culture and even government, asserting claims of prominence in the life of people that compromised their loyalty to Christ. Thus, he felt that much of society should be questioned and even rejected.
- Medieval Monasticism – Although monasticism incorporates many diverse groups, many early and medieval monastics sought to remove themselves from the social world. Monks and nuns took vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience, which imply renunciation of life outside the monastery. Even those, such as the Franciscans who served the needy outside the monastery walls, considered the separated life to be the true embodiment of Christian living.
- Anabaptist Movements – Anabaptists pushed the Reformation of the 16<sup>th</sup> century further than other Reformers. They sought a radical discipleship that accepted only believers' baptism, independence from the state, the church as the true

community, and rejection of warfare. Their views were radical enough to be perceived as a threat by both churches and governments of their era, who persecuted the Anabaptists. The Mennonites of today, in particular groups such as the Amish, provide the closest examples of the Anabaptist ideal.

## Assessment

Consider the following questions in light of what we know about

- how Jesus interacted with people in the world around him, especially people on the margins of society (e.g. the Samaritan woman at the well, tax collectors),
- instructions given to his disciples as he sent them out to minister (see Matthew 10),
- the Great Commission (see Matthew 28:16-20, especially “make disciples of all nations”),
- Paul's missionary journeys into pagan Greece and Asia (now Turkey) and his planting of churches in those areas,
- the concern about the seven churches addressed in Revelation and their relationships to the cultures around them.

What do you think are the advantages of the Christ Against Culture position?

What do you think are the disadvantages of the Christ Against Culture position?

# CHRIST OF CULTURE

## Christian Embrace of (the best of) Culture and Society

### Description / Characteristics

- The highest and best elements of culture and society accord with Christianity and its ideals.
- Minimal dissonance between Christianity and the norms of society that are perceived to be good.
- Sees the good in society as harmonizing with Christianity.
- There are distinct points of contact between non-Christian culture and Christianity. For example, legal and moral codes worked out by non-Christian persons or institutions that accord well with the moral teachings of Jesus.
- Faith is related to and expressed in the language of science, psychology, sociology, and philosophy (I.E. faith is cross-disciplinary and not just a corner of a person's life or a completely distinct way of life).
- Culture is recognized as having a role in shaping the Christian faith so that it has power and effectiveness for those within that culture. The various culturally influenced elements or forms of worship are examples of this.
- Culture is interpreted through the life and teachings of Jesus Christ and the Christian faith is understood, in part, through culture.

### Examples

- Cultural Protestantism (Classical Liberalism) – Late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century movement that wanted to make Christianity more acceptable to the modern mind. The mystical, transcendent, and supernatural was considered to be out of step with modern understandings of the world. God was thought to be close to and involved in our earthy lives and that God and the best of human activity worked together to make a better world. Even though not immune from sin, society and its institutions could be redeemed if directed to the good.
- America's "Religious Right" and "Liberal Left" both embrace specific elements of culture and seek to guide and shape society. That both these are tightly integrated into American culture is evident in identification with Republican and

Democratic politics, respectively.

- Use and reliance on modern technology to assist evangelism – Examples of this include the use of television and radio in years past and the internet and social networks today.
- Prosperity churches and preachers – These folk wholly embrace capitalism, consumerism, and the accumulation of wealth in religious terms.

## **Assessment**

What do you think are the advantages of the Christ Of Culture position?

What do you think are the disadvantages of the Christ Of Culture position?

# CHRIST ABOVE CULTURE

## The World and Spirituality on Different Planes of Reality

### Description / Characteristics

- There is only one world (creation) but two dimensions of reality exist: (1) the reality of the “everyday” world, its culture and society, and (2) the reality beyond the “everyday” characterized by spiritual focus and aspiration to the divine ideal of God.
- Humans, and their societies and cultures are good and should be affirmed because all were created by God.
- All societies and cultures contain both holy and sinful elements and this is a reminder that there is more to reality than politics, law, economics, education, and all other social structures and institutions. This “something more” is spiritual and divine and does not contradict the world but goes beyond it. There is **no** repudiation of the everyday world in favor of a spiritual one.
- Most are called to live in the everyday world, living godly lives and giving their best to whatever they do. Others are called to separate from the everyday world, shifting their focus to the spiritual reality and leaving behind a secular life.

### Examples

- Thomas Aquinas (13<sup>th</sup> century) – This towering figure of medieval Christian scholarship had a “both-and” view of the secular and spiritual realities in the world. He was a devoted monk who lived a life separated from the secular world by vows of poverty, celibacy, and obedience, yet he believed that all Christians had important roles to play in society.

Thomas detailed his Christ above culture views in his understanding of happiness (basic happiness can be attained through culture and nature but perfect happiness is found only in the vision of God received through grace) and the virtues (natural virtues of wisdom, justice, temperance, and courage are evident to all but salvation requires that humans receive from God the theological virtues of faith, hope, and charity, which raise persons to a higher way of living). He also supported living well withing the world of work, family, government, education, and etc., but pointed out that some are called out of that

world by God to the religious orders or the monastery.

- Roman Catholicism – RC theology does not place the world of the secular and spiritual in opposition (as most Protestant theology) but sees the two realities as harmoniously related God's singular creation. God's grace does not make up for something lacking but elevates humans to a new and unearned level of existence.

This view of the world allows RC's to have a strong social conscience and involvement with the poor and others in need as well as a structure in which persons are called out of the world to lives centered on spirituality (priests, monks, nuns, popes, etc.).

- Some Evangelistic and Pietistic (“holiness”) Protestants – These Protestants believe that secular life is legitimate and valuable, yet there is often (some would argue “always”) a higher calling to ministry, especially in the mission field. Some will thus sacrifice their secular careers to heed their calling.

## **Assessment**

What do you think are the advantages of the Christ Above Culture position?

What do you think are the disadvantages of the Christ Above Culture position?

# CHRIST and CULTURE in PARADOX

## Christians Gritting It Out By Grace in a Sinful World

### Description / Characteristics

- Sin is part of all human activity and even the most righteous acts are corrupted by sin. Thus, culture is badly askew and society is itself sinful.
- Humans belong to this fallen world and cannot escape its corruption. Thus, the notion of withdrawal from the world is not actually possible.
- The solution for Christians is God's grace that allows them to be committed to Christ and forgiven by God while at the same time a part of the fallen world.
- Each Christian belongs to both the Kingdom of God and the kingdom of the world "simultaneously just and sinner" (as Martin Luther put it) with responsibilities and roles in each kingdom. Both kingdoms are ordered by God and under his control but the kingdom of the world is affected by human sin.

Citizenship in the Kingdom of God means living in a kingdom where the Word of God is the rule, Christ is Lord and King, and ethics are guided by Christ's teaching (such as in the Sermon on the Mount).

Citizenship in the kingdom of the world entails participation in society and culture, its governance, economics, cultural, and all other day-to-day institutions.

- The two kingdoms are not in conflict but living in both creates a tension the Christian must deal with each day.
- There is no expectation that the world can be fully redeemed and perfected (...it is what it is...).

### Examples

- Martin Luther – the 16<sup>th</sup> century churchman who kicked off the Protestant Reformation. He believed in the two kingdoms and saw that they functioned differently. In the Kingdom of God, the gospel guided life. In the kingdom of the world the gospel does not function as the guiding ethic because the world is not the realm of the redeemed. To maintain proper order in the world sometimes measures common to the world but prohibited from the Kingdom of God, such as coercion and violence. What marks Christians living in the world and

performing their worldly responsibilities there is that they live by faith and the Word of God in the more private and “spiritual realms” of their lives. For Christians to live within the paradox of the two kingdoms depends upon God's grace.

- Reinhold Niebuhr (1892-1971, H. Richard Niebuhr's older brother) – This influential American theologian fleshed out what might best be called “Christian social realism”. At its heart is the notion that Jesus' ethics can be applied successfully only to the life of the individual or very small groups of like-minded people. Because of sin societies and nations cannot be shaped by the gospel and will always be political in nature. The best that can be hoped for is a balance of power between competing groups. The harmful effects of unrestrained self-interest and collective egoism must be dealt with through what works in the fallen world – political influence, economic pressure, and military coercion. But these approaches are tempered by the ideals of Jesus who calls Christians to do better even though perfection is unattainable.

## **Assessment**

What do you think are the advantages of the Christ and Culture in Paradox position?

What do you think are the disadvantages of the Christ and Culture in Paradox position?

# CHRIST TRANSFORMING CULTURE

## Christians Changing the World for the Better

### Description / Characteristics

- Humanity, and therefore society and culture, are sinful. However, something can be done to change society toward a religious ideal.
- Because God rules over all things and is active in all human works, the world can be changed. Two basic assumptions are that (a) God has always been involved in history and (b) interacts with humans.
- God is both creator and redeemer. Bringing the world into being is God's act of creation. Transforming the world into something better is God's act of redemption.
- Christians engage with the world in ways that are intended to bring the world into conformity with the ways of God.
- General focus on social justice (conversion of social structures and institutions) rather than individual conversion.

### Examples

- John Calvin – He believed that government should be informed by the Christian faith and the sound doctrine of the church. Ideally, the nation should be built upon the laws of God as realized in the life and teaching of Jesus. His public work and preaching pressed in this direction.
- Social Gospel – This concept originated in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century (but has roots in the abolitionist movements of 18<sup>th</sup> century England & America) as a response to the evils of poverty that grew out of the rapid rise of the industrial economy. Those who espoused the social gospel sought to alleviate poverty, hunger, poor working conditions, and other problems plaguing cities and poor rural areas. The theological basis for the social gospel was Jesus' compassionate works that helped the poor, the sick, and those pushed to the margins of society.
- Liberation Theology – Originally a movement originated from the poverty and oppression of Latin America, it now refers to a family of movements centered on the human problem and God's solution to the disenfranchisement and

oppression of many minority groups (for example, African-Americans and women). Liberation theology looks to a complete overturning of the social order in order to bring liberation.

- Moral Majority, Christian Coalition, & other conservative right-wing socio-political groups – Highlighting the problems of traditional family breakdown, the banning of prayer in schools, abortion, pornography, and national defense, these groups have in common the belief that Christians should use their faith to inform their political choices.

## **Assessment**

What do you think are the advantages of the Christ Transforming Culture position?

What do you think are the disadvantages of the Christ Transforming Culture position?