1. Overview of Christ and Culture

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The Categories of "Christ and Culture"

Much of the dominant framework for contemporary discussions of the cultural effects of Christianity has been provided by H. Richard Niebuhr in his book *Christ and Culture* (1951). Niebuhr described five basic ways that Christians can conceive of Christ, and themselves, relating to the culture in which we live. These ways are: Christ above culture, Christ against culture, Christ and culture in paradox, Christ of culture, and Christ transforms culture.

It is commonly accepted that these categories are insightful and useful. Most people who discuss our topic refer to Niebuhr's work. Clearly any framework this widely used has managed to identify what many people believe are the key issues. However, despite these virtues I want to mention some defects in Niebuhr's categories.

One problem in his scheme surfaces when we consider the disjunction between how people categorize others and how people categorize themselves. Each of us categorizes people of other theological traditions as Christ of culture, or Christ against culture, or the like. But we, almost no matter who "we" are, invariably classify *ourselves* as "Christ transforms culture" people. About the only people I have spoken to who do not do this are fundamentalists who don't like the categories anyway.

Since we proclaim ourselves as "transformers" we tend to be upset when somebody else describes (or labels or accuses) us of being "against culture," or "above culture." There is an epistemological gap: we do not see ourselves as others see us and we do not see others as

they see themselves. While this is a common feature of life in general it does provoke some questions for us. One is whether the professed agreement on Niebuhr's categories is actually hiding a deeper disagreement about what these categories actually mean. Another is whether there are other deep differences upon which these categories do not touch. Let me give some examples.

The institution at which I teach, the Institute for Christian Studies, has grown up in a Reformed background. True to its lineage it wants to transform the world and, indeed, it sees its inherited Calvinism as virtually the ideal type of Niebuhr's "transformers." Most of its supporters regard more sacramental understandings of Christianity, for example, as necessarily manifestations of a "Christ above culture" mentality. However Niebuhr himself takes F.D. Maurice, a quite sacramental (and very active) nineteenth century Anglican, as his typical model of "Christ transforms culture" (Niebuhr 1951, 220ff.).

Calvinists also tend to put Anabaptists in a "Christ against culture" bracket, as does Niebuhr, and as do many other Christians. But the noted Mennonite theologian, John Howard Yoder, has complained strenuously about this. He points out that Mennonites consistently address fundamental problems in our society and that they work on solutions to them. Many Mennonites lobby about third world relations, about agricultural policies, about defense and about the criminal justice system. They suggest alternative patterns of farming or of mediation, and they try to make their own communities living models of a Christian pattern of society (Yoder 1985, 2-7). What they *don't* do, according to Yoder, is accept the principle of legitimate violence, despite the fact that this principle is accepted by society at large. He complains that it is only because of *this* that Mennonites, and other Anabaptists, are told that they are *against* culture *tout court*. Merely because they reject one practice they are categorized as (or accused of) rejecting the whole.

Yoder argues that, contrary to the common labels, Mennonites do believe that "Christ transforms culture" and that they are, in fact, far more consistent in this than anybody else. Their consistency is shown in that they are far more critical of the existing culture, in particular of its penchant for violence, and that they refuse to be conformed to it. Mennonites would criticize other Christians for accepting the present culture and its politics too uncritically. Many feel that other Christians accept the way things are and thus, usually unwittingly, slide into a "Christ of culture" position.

Another disjunction arises when Christians consider their *manner* of involvement with culture. Evangelicals traditionally have thought of social transformation as coming about largely by individual action. Anabaptists have seen transformation as coming about largely by the church as an alternative community. Reformed people have stressed that transformation will come about largely via Christian organizations, notably by Christian schools. Christians in "mainline" churches have emphasized action largely by the church itself. Unfortunately each of these groups has a regrettable tendency to see the others' form of action as a type of withdrawal. Evangelicals and mainline church people see Christian schools as a retreat from the world. Mennonites see evangelical individualism as a refusal to take a communal stand. Everybody else sees mainline churches working as if Christian activity were reducible to the activity of church officials.

There are many other possible and actual permutations of this mutual categorization but I will not attempt to list them all. I will merely note that we have a regrettable tendency to describe what others are doing as a retreat from society, rather than as an alternative attempt to change society, and that we often dress up our mutual representations and misrepresentations in Niebuhrian categories.

It could be argued that this confusion is the result of a *misuse* of Niebuhr and so does not demonstrate problems in his classification itself. However this misuse, if such it is, stems partly from the fact that there are many important features of the Christ/culture relation that these categories ignore but need highlighting. We have already touched on at least two of these features. One is the institutional *means* by which culture is to be transformed. The other is the way *different aspects* of culture (such as violence) should be treated. "Culture" is not a monolith. Perhaps some aspect of culture should be rejected, others adopted, others transformed. In short, Niebuhr's terms need to be disaggregated so that we can see the variety of different relations which they either cover or mask. I will try to make some suggestions about this disaggregation, beginning with the question of the institutional means of shaping culture.

Avenues of Transformation

Christians are usually connected with churches. This itself is not a problem, but it can become a problem when Christianity is identified with the organized church. When this happens the relation of Christ and culture is treated as the relation of the church and culture. This

problem can be exacerbated by the fact that many, if not most, of the people who write and deal more or less intelligently with these questions are in church-related employment and are often clergy. This reinforces a type of clericalization wherein the role of clergy, bishops, synods, churches and inter-church coalitions is highlighted while the role of the 99 percent of the Christian community who are not involved in this way are downplayed, and sometimes ignored entirely. While the role of the church as an organized body is vitally important, we cannot forget that the greatest Christian impact, for good and ill, lies in what its ordinary members do each day of their lives outside of organized church activities.

Hence any study of Christ and culture in Canada needs to consider the effect of the organized church itself and also the effect of individual Christians. Besides these, we need to look at alternative Christian communities and Christian organizations. A study of the church could highlight doctrine, preaching, social teaching, synodical decisions, clergy activities, coalitions and so forth. Analysis of individual Christian responses requires a subtle sociological examination of how Christians respond differently, if they do, to the major currents of our culture, and how they are shaped by and in turn shape that culture. An assessment of communal Christian responses would cover examples such as the Hutterites and Old Order Mennonites, and consider politically active communes along the lines of the Sojourners community in Washington, to take an American example. A consideration of non-ecclesiastical Christian organizations leads us to the bewildering array of schools, universities, publishers, radio stations, charities, political groups, lobbies, hospitals, and so forth, spread throughout every aspect of human life.

While it is difficult to do justice to this range of interaction, it is important to be aware of this full range. And the way we deal with this range should be shaped by our own Christian commitment. In this respect it should be emphasized that, for example, an Anglican perspective should not be only a study of what Anglicans have done but also an Anglican perspective (that is, a perspective shaped by Anglican theological tenets) on what everybody has done, that is, on the nature of our means of cultural formation. Our theological traditions are not only demarcations of who has done what, but should also be particular means of understanding what has been, is, and can be done. We need to look not only at, for example, what Presbyterians have done but also for a Presbyterian perspective on what to do.

Aspects of Culture
I will consider only three aspects of culture: religion as the root of culture, secularization, and the relation of Canada and the United States.

Beyond Ethics
Another area in which Niebuhr's categories need to be re-shaped concerns the various aspects of culture with which we deal. The questions we face in dealing with military power are different from those of family life: the questions we face with political parties are different from those of universities; the questions we face in music are different from those of automobile manufacture. I will not try to cover all the ramifications of this diversity, but I will suggest that we need to expand our view of a Christian contribution beyond what is commonly covered.

There is a common Christian tendency to treat the relation of Christianity and culture largely as an "ethical" or "moral" one. In this tendency Christianity is pictured as a source of "ethical" or "moral" principles which are then "applied" to key social questions. The result verges on a kind of natural law view, wherein faith provides rules or guidelines. This approach can be applied by both the right and the left. Those on the right try to use principles of personal morality relating to personal responsibility, often with respect to work or sex. Those on the left try to use political principles of equality or compassion.

Both of these emphases have their merits, for there are certainly ethical consequences of our Christian faith. However we need to emphasize that being a Christian, or being a member of a Christian community, involves much more than believing in or following a particular set of principles, whether political or personal. Our faith shapes the whole of our life and involves more than the ethical dimension of life. It shapes not only particular questions of right and wrong but also basic questions about the nature of reality—what human nature is, what sin is and how it is manifested, what the nature and direction of history is, what law is, what idolatry is, and what the root of meaning of human life is.

These questions involve more than what is usually called ethics. They involve matters of epistemology, historical causality, jurisprudence, social structure, psychological variation—in short all the basic questions of social theory, philosophy, and human motiva-

tion. These are at the core of culture, and also at the core of faith. Particularly if we believe that "Christ transforms culture," as most of us—Niebuhr notwithstanding—seem to want to do, we must consider the full range of effects of our faith, and not be needlessly limited to versions of morality.

If religion is particularly concerned with the roots of our lives, then we need to give special attention to the roots of culture. Our words for the worship aspect of faith—cult—and for the interweavings of our lives—culture—stem from the same root. Both contain images of growth, development, nourishing and shaping. Indeed I think that the root of culture *is* religion, in the sense that the basic patterns of our lives are shaped by our basic commitment and belief in life which is our religion. Our "god" is that in which we place our faith and trust. Our culture expresses what lies in our heart. In a way culture is a type of incarnation—it reveals in flesh what we have within us.

Secularization

The relation of faith and culture requires that we pay special attention to the theme of secularization. By secularization I mean the increasing tendency to treat religion as a private matter which should not influence public life. In our desire to avoid Christian hegemony, and to repent of our previous triumphalism, we may sometimes take too accepting a view of secularization. Canada is certainly a pluralistic society, in the sense that it contains different and irreducible ways of life, but often we take what liberal individualists say about the consequences of this pluralism too much for granted.

One small example has arisen in the last few months. We received a letter at the Evangelical Fellowship of Canada from the Attorney General of Ontario asking about the use of oaths in Ontario law courts. Currently the oaths include the phrase "so help me God." The question the letter asked was whether, since there are people in Ontario who don't believe in God, or else believe in different gods, these words should now be removed in favour of a simple affirmation that one will speak the truth. This issue is not of major significance and I doubt if it will make much of a difference to our lives. But what *does* trouble me a great deal is the *rationale* offered for this proposed change. The argument for the removal of oaths and other aspects of Christianity from various areas of public life goes like this: "Some people like baseball, some people like basketball, some people like hockey, and some people don't like sports at all. There is a definite

plurality of views about sport and there is no agreement about which is best. Given this situation, the only fair and impartial view, the only view that will remove tension, is not to have any sports at all."

The question of diversity is supposedly solved by eliminating many of the contending parties from the public realm. The eradication of any public religious expression is offered as a solution to the genuine problem of the diversity of religions. However, this approach does not accommodate or deal openly with diversity. It merely *excludes* religious diversity and establishes secularism in its place.

The problem is a type of multicultural one, but the solution advocated is not multicultural but *a*-cultural. The problems of religious pluralism are very real and very difficult, but they are not to be solved by pretending that a secular society is genuinely pluralistic when secularism is in fact only one part of our plurality.

The Survival of Canadian Culture

A consideration of what lies at the heart of Canadian culture is particularly appropriate at this time when the question of our relation with the United States has been brought to a focus by debate on the free trade treaty. Critics of the treaty have maintained that it will, among other things, undercut Canadian culture, which will, in turn, lead to our cultural, economic and, ultimately, political integration with the United States.

What are the differences between Canadian and American culture? A major part is captured by David Putter in his conclusion to a book-length survey of Canadian views of the United States. Putter sums up the contrast this way:

> What Canadians have sensed was that their culture and their system still largely accept the principle of authority while American society and the American system did not accept this principle in any comparable degree. . . . Canadians believed that the state through some authority should provide moral direction for the society it governed. Moral direction meant discipline, order, responsibility, obedience, even inhibition. America, too, has believed in discipline, order, responsibility and the rest, but it has believed in them as self-imposed, through the acceptance of a Protestant ethic, not imposed by public authority (Wise and Brown 1967, 128-29; see also Marshall 1987a).

George Grant expressed a similar view in his *Lament for a Nation*. Canadians had "an inchoate desire to build in these cold and forbidding regions, a society with a greater sense of order and restraint than freedom-loving republicans would allow. It was no better defined than a kind of suspicion that we in Canada could be less lawless and have a greater sense of propriety than the United States" (Grant 1965, 69-70).

If these depictions are correct, or rather, were correct, then we might ask what lies behind them: what basic view of life and what basic commitments in life have we had that are different from those in the United States? I believe that the difference lies in our Anglican and Catholic religious traditions as distinct from America's non-conformist traditions, but to defend this would take us too far afield and is, in any case, beyond my ability.

However, dealing with this question is ever more urgent precisely because of increased trade and other economic linkages. Will this interaction destroy whatever is unique in Canada or is there in fact nothing left in Canada that is unique and sustainable anyway? For many years the great Canadian political philosopher George Grant put aside discussion of Canada's relation with the United States because he believed that the basic assumptions about Canada's political life, what we understand to be the nature and meaning of human life, had already become the same as those of the United States. Hence he held that the integration of the two would be merely a matter of time. The core of whatever had been distinctive had already been destroyed, and what remains is just the rationalization of the process. I do not know whether he was right but I sense that he was. When I read books by Margaret Atwood, for example, I believe that she illustrates some ways in which Canadians *have been* different but that she can provide no foundation on which such differences can be maintained. In Canadian public life there is no longer anything really distinct from the forms of liberalism found in the republic to the south. (I am using "liberalism" in George Grant's sense of "a set of beliefs which proceed from the central assumption that man's essence is his freedom and therefore that what chiefly concerns man in this life is to shape the world as we want it" (Grant 1969, 141; see also Marshall 1989, 4-17).

As Christians we have not dealt well with this matter. Certainly there has been sporadic vocal opposition to free trade and to overt examples of undue American influence. There has been criticism of

American capitalism and individualism. Yet the Americanization of our political parties by leadership conventions and popularity contests, and the Americanization of our political theory by the adoption of the language of individual rights, equality and autonomy has continued with either little Christian comment or else with Christian support. The failure to challenge these trends stems in some part from our inability to consider the religious depths of culture, including such notions as individual rights. I agree with the sociologist Seymour Martin Lipset when he remarked, "Perhaps the most important step that Canada has taken to Americanize itself—far greater in its implications that the signing of the free trade treaty—has been the incorporation into its constitution of a bill of rights, the Charter of Rights and Freedoms, placing the power of the state under judicial restraint" (Lipset 1989; see also Marshall 1987b).

Closing Remarks

If the question of Canada's future is not already a large enough problem to think about we may also consider the future of Christianity itself. We live in a peculiar situation in the modern world. Despite many appearances to the contrary, we are living in the greatest age of missionary expansion in the history of the Christian church. The number of Christians worldwide increases by many millions each year. There has also been a shift—by now largely completed—of the weight, the centre of gravity, of Christianity from the North Atlantic region to the Third World. Hence we can be very hopeful about the future of our faith in the world, and we can be assured that the future of the West is not the future of Christianity.

Yet at the same time there is a continuing contraction in the influence of Christianity in the West. Our faith becomes ever less influential, at least in public life. There are many reasons for this, but a major part is our lack of understanding of what culture is, of what drives it, of what shapes it, and how it relates to our Christian faith. If this book can be even a small means of helping us understand and clarify some of these questions, it will have done the Christian church in this country a great service.