

Christ and Culture Valued: Test Cases on Fairness

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Abstract

This research engages H. Richard Niebuhr's work, *Christ and Culture*. Niebuhr's book is a seminal work on the historical trends of Christian cultural engagement. This research applies several tests to the paradigm demonstrated in Niebuhr's work. These tests demonstrate that *Christ and Culture* presents a paradigm that lacks fairness and does not adequately meet the goals of an explanatory paradigm. Niebuhr's paradigm has shaped the discussion of Christian cultural engagement for over fifty years, and this research was done to demonstrate the need for new conversation-shaping paradigms in the field of Christian cultural engagement.

Introduction

H. Richard Niebuhr's *Christ and Culture* is a seminal work in the field of Christian cultural engagement. Within this work, Niebuhr categorizes the various historical approaches to Christian cultural engagement into five separate categories. These categories are representative of key historical figures and theological convictions. Richard Niebuhr's work has extensive value as an academic resource that teaches about various historical approaches that have been taken to cultural engagement, but it cannot effectively define personal cultural engagement. Niebuhr's paradigm is very comprehensive in its explanation of Christian approaches to culture. However, while claiming a benign impartiality, the thesis of this paper is that Niebuhr presents a rhetorical argument for the conversionist model of cultural engagement, and this engrained polemic causes the paradigm to lose the simplifying power that paradigms should have in explaining the structure of a given field of study.

The Importance of Niebuhr

There is no doubt that *Christ and Culture* has been an extremely influential book. The numerous responses to his book exemplify just how important his work has been.¹ Furthermore, his paradigm has, in many ways, been a standard of reference for much of the work that has been done on the topic of Christian cultural engagement throughout the last half century. In his work, *Christ and Culture Revisited*, D.A. Carson explains,

¹ i.e. *Christ and Culture Revisited*, *Christ and Culture in Dialogue*, *Rethinking Christ and Culture*, and *Authentic Transformation: A New Vision of Christ and Culture* represent a small sampling of the major works done in reference to *Christ and Culture*.

“Even though Niebuhr’s *Christ and Culture* is more than fifty years old, it is difficult...to ignore him. His work, for good and ill, has shaped much of the discussion.”² For the last fifty years, students studying Christian cultural interaction would often begin their study with Niebuhr’s work, and they would find his influence throughout many of the other works they read.

Throughout his work, Niebuhr explores the “story” of Christian cultural engagement. This is one of the reasons why Niebuhr’s work has been so popular. It is more than a propositional paradigm; it is arguing for a specific view of the history of Christianity through the use of rhetorical structure. In his work, *Rethinking Christ and Culture*, Craig Carter explains, “Niebuhr did not simply write a sociological study of the various ways in which Christians, at various times and places, have sought to relate Christ and Culture; he told a story that made sense as a connected narrative and in which many diverse readers could see themselves.”³ Each reader of Niebuhr’s work begins to wonder where they themselves fall within the paradigm, and this increases its influence and effect on each individual.

In addition to presenting a specific story, Niebuhr’s work also performed the critical task of renewing the discussion on how the Christian should relate to the world. In his work, *Christ and Culture in Dialogue*, Angus Menuge explains, “In his seminal work on the subject, *Christ and Culture*, H. Richard Niebuhr” achieved his goal of “restoring a

² D. A Carson, *Christ and Culture Revisited* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: William B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 2012), xi.

³ Craig A. Carter, *Rethinking Christ and Culture: A Post-Christendom Perspective* (Grand Rapids, Mich: Brazos Press, 2006), 59.

living dialectic in thinking about Christ and culture.”⁴ Niebuhr’s work sparked a myriad of responses since its inception, and it has contributed greatly to the discussion of engagement. In 2008, more than fifty years after *Christ and Culture* was published, D.A. Carson explained, “Niebuhr has become an icon to which everyone refers....”⁵ As such, Niebuhr’s influence on this discussion has been substantial.

H. Richard Niebuhr’s Models

Niebuhr describes the problems facing Christian cultural engagement in terms of the relationship between “Christ” and “culture.” He describes an inherent tension between these two realities. First, “Christ leads men away from the temporality and pluralism of culture,” and second, “culture rejects the Christ who bids men rely on grace.”⁶ These two poles form the magnetic battlefield of Christian cultural engagement. Between these two “poles,” Richard Niebuhr describes five separate approaches to engagement that Christians have historically taken.

Describing Terms

Niebuhr utilizes terms in his work that should be clearly explained. The first ambiguous term that he utilizes is “Christ.” Believers tend to have a very well formed personal view of who Christ is. However, the nature of Christianity is such that nearly

⁴ Angus J. L. Menuge, ed., *Christ and Culture in Dialogue: Constructive Themes and Practical Applications* (St. Louis, Mo: Concordia Academic Press, 1999), 16.

⁵ Carson, *Christ and Culture Revisited*, xi.

⁶ H. Richard Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture*, 1st ed. (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2001), 39.

every sect of Christianity disagrees on exactly who “Christ” is.⁷ Despite these many views of Christ, Niebuhr claims to synthesize them all underneath his mantle of “Christ.”

He expresses that the central “key” to understanding Christ is found in emphasizing Christ’s relationship to God. He writes, “Thus any one of the virtues of Jesus may be taken as the key to the understanding of his character and teaching; but each is intelligible in its apparent radicalism only as a relation to God.”⁸ In Niebuhr’s model, any believer in Christ must believe that Christ exhibits the authority of the Father in all things. Thus the model of “Christ and Culture” deals with “the authority of God, mediated through Christ, over the individual believers lives and its relationship to culture.”⁹ Nevertheless, having established the meaning of “Christ” in Niebuhr’s paradigm, what then does “culture” mean?¹⁰

“Culture” as it will be used in this context, refers to the sum total of human achievement. Niebuhr explains that he “cannot seek to define the ‘essence’ of this culture.”¹¹ However, he seeks to define three characteristics of “culture.” First, culture is social. It is both the social structures that have been passed down to us as well as the social interactions that we engage in. Niebuhr writes, “social life is always cultural.”¹²

⁷ For example, Niebuhr explains that liberal Christians often prioritize the love of God (p. 15), Christians who emphasize eschatology often prioritize the hope that Christ gives (p.19), and the Christian existentialist often emphasizes the obedience of Christ (p. 22). While all of these concepts are essential to who Christ is, the change in central focus creates a different overall view of who Christ actually was.

⁸ Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture*, 27.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 28.

¹⁰ It is worth emphasizing at this point how vague Niebuhr’s definition of “Christ” is. There is very little explanatory substance provided in his definition. The majority of his models will differ primarily because they view Christ substantially differently.

¹¹ Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture*, 32.

¹² *Ibid.*, 33.

The inclusion of all social life in Niebuhr's definition for "culture" immediately demonstrates how significant these models could prove to be. Nearly all of human life is social. A second characteristic of culture is the accumulation of human achievement. These achievements include laws, languages, economics, philosophies, beliefs, and technologies. Niebuhr emphasizes that culture is the "work of men's minds and hands.... It is that portion of man's heritage...which has been given us designedly and laboriously by other men."¹³ The third characteristic that Niebuhr ascribes to culture is the "world of values." Since Niebuhr's definition of culture includes all the works of man, he asserts that culture also includes the value judgments that led men to create these works. Niebuhr writes, "Culture in all its forms and varieties is concerned with the *temporal and material realization of values*."¹⁴ In summary, "culture," in Niebuhr's models, includes all human social interaction, all of the works of mankind, and all of the value judgments behind those works.¹⁵

Christ against Culture

The first model in Niebuhr's paradigm is that of "Christ against Culture." This model describes one of the two extreme positions of the paradigm. Followers of this position believe that a Christian has no loyalty or obligation to culture whatsoever. In fact, this position demands that its adherents totally reject any semblance of worldliness in favor of Christian community alone. Within Scripture, 1 John is held up as one of the

¹³ Ibid., 36.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Culture is an immensely large concept in this paradigm. It is not limited to "high culture," "pop culture," or "secular culture." Culture, as defined here, is impossible to escape. It inundates every part of life. These categories actually define the way believers live nearly their entire life.

primary supporting passages of this view. Niebuhr explains, “It is exceedingly important for the First Letter of John that Christians be loyal to no merely spiritual Christ but to a visible and tangible Christ.” He further explains, “The counterpart to loyalty to Christ and the brothers is the rejection of cultural society.”¹⁶

Essential to this view is a highly negative view of culture. The world, and culture as part of it, is incompatible with Christ. The spiritually depraved “world” that the Apostle John wrote about and “culture” are seen as synonyms in this model. The words of John then become, “Do not love the [culture] or the things in the [culture]. If anyone loves the [culture], the love of the Father is not in him.”¹⁷ This extends into all aspects of human civilization. “Political life is to be shunned.”¹⁸ The very institution of human government is “contrary to the spirit and law of Christ.”¹⁹ In the life of the soldier, this position finds equal contempt. Proponents see, at the very core of military service, a contradiction with the law of the Prince of Peace. Philosophy and the arts are equally stained.²⁰ There is no part of human culture that is God honoring. The rejection of culture is so great that it risks a “suspicion of nature and nature’s God.”²¹ Niebuhr explains, “At the edges of the radical movement the Manichean heresy is always developing.”²²

¹⁶ Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture*, 47.

¹⁷ *The Holy Bible: English Standard Version* (Wheaton: Standard Bible Society, 2001), 1 Jn 2:15. All instances of “world” changed to “culture.”

¹⁸ Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture*, 54.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 55.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 81.

²² *Ibid.*

The “Christ against Culture” model that Niebuhr develops is clearly an extreme position. With a categorically negative view of human institutions, the true disciples of this position must separate themselves from society entirely. Despite the impossibility of this task, many attempt it. A major movement that Niebuhr would place in this category is monasticism.

Christ of Culture

The opposite extreme within Niebuhr’s paradigm describes Christ as the “Christ of Culture.” Within this model, there is no contradiction or tension seen between Christ and the culture of man. In fact, “All conflict between Christ and culture is gone; the tension between church and world is really due...to the church’s misunderstanding of Christ.”²³ Properly understood, Christ is a champion of culture, an affirmation of all that is good within human institutions. Not only does Christ affirm culture, but he is the very truth that maintains the goodness of culture. Niebuhr explains, “Christ belongs in culture, because culture itself, without ‘sense and taste for the infinite,’ without a ‘holy music’ accompanying all its work, becomes sterile and corrupt.”²⁴ According to Niebuhr, Albrecht Ritschel is the best representative of this model in modern times. He “found no conflict” between the person of Christ and culture. In fact, he “attacked most sharply monastic and pietistic practices.”²⁵ He believed that “loyalty to Jesus leads to active participations in every cultural work, and to care for the conservation of all the great

²³ Ibid., 91.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Ibid., 97.

institutions.”²⁶ This model views the world primarily through man’s struggle with nature, and it views Jesus as the great spiritual leader that shows mankind how to overcome the evils of nature (both the nature within men and outside of them). This model rejects the notion that believers are at odds with the culture on account of Christ. Any disagreements between the church and culture that have arisen throughout history are merely due to misinterpreting whom Christ is and what he came to do.

Christ above Culture

The third model that Niebuhr establishes contains the first mediating position in his paradigm. The proponents of this position, as well as the next two, try to maintain loyalty to both Christ and culture, but they see an essential tension between Christ and the culture of man as well. Niebuhr writes that these mediating positions all begin with the understanding that “Jesus Christ is the Son of God, the Father Almighty who created heaven and earth.”²⁷ By beginning with this confession, a commonality is established between Christ and culture. The proponents of these models will assert that, if the world (and thus the makings of culture) was divinely created by God, then it cannot be incompatible with His Son. Even so, Niebuhr argues that these mediating positions also share a belief in “the universality and radical nature of sin.”²⁸ These two convictions (the universality of sin and the original goodness of creation) define the competing orientations within the moderating positions.

²⁶ Ibid., 100.

²⁷ Ibid., 117.

²⁸ Ibid., 118.

Under the “Christ above Culture” model, Niebuhr introduces the position of the “synthesist.” Niebuhr writes, “the synthesist maintains...the paradoxical conviction that Jesus, his Lord, is both God and man.”²⁹ From this complex starting point, the synthesist rejects both extremes as over-simplifications. For the synthesist, “there is a double happiness for man, one in his life in culture and one in his life in Christ.”³⁰ Both roads lead to happiness. Moral goodness leads to happiness, and this happens only through effort. The synthesis believes that a man can be, in some sense, good apart from Christ. They view “the ‘merely moral life...’ [as] a great achievement, a product of man’s freedom.”³¹ This moral life allows for social happiness. However, the synthesist also believes that certain happiness “exceeds the nature of man,” and only “those...who share in Christ’s nature” can achieve this kind of happiness. In this way, the synthesis holds two separate realities at once—not truly equal, but neither truly comparable. In similar terms to human happiness, the synthesist views cultural law and divine law as two distinct and separate realities. Niebuhr writes, “Culture discerns the rules for culture, because culture is the work of God-given reason in God-given nature. Yet there is another law [which] the rational man must discover and obey.”³²

Amongst the three mediating positions, the synthesist is the most graciously acceptant of cultural values. While the other positions will view the good aspects of culture as derivatives of a higher good, the synthesist seeks to “discover the bases of right in the given, created nature of man and his world...the God who is to rule now rules and

²⁹ Ibid., 120.

³⁰ Ibid., 133.

³¹ Ibid., 134.

³² Ibid., 135.

has ruled, that his rule is established in the nature of things, and...man must build on the established foundations.”³³ Proponents of this view are criticized by those of other moderating positions on their failure to account for the “radical evil present in all human work.”³⁴ In the synthesist perspective, sin does not have the destructive power over the good of creation that the other two moderating positions give it.

Christ and Culture in Paradox

The fourth model in Niebuhr’s paradigm is that of “Christ and Culture in Paradox.” This view, while also trying to maintain an allegiance to both Christ and human culture, approaches the issue opposite of the synthesist. While the third group attempts to synthesize the two realities as separate goods that overlap, this group attempts to recognize them as totally separate and unable to be synthesized. Niebuhr writes, “the dualist lives in conflict...that conflict is between God and man...the issue lies between the righteousness of God and the righteousness of self.”³⁵ The dualists tend to have a much more pessimistic view of the human condition than the synthesists maintain. Niebuhr explains that while the synthesist views rationality as an answer to the struggle against sin and corruption in this world, the dualist rejects rationality as capable of fighting against sin. Niebuhr explains, “the dualist sees this fatal flaw, the reason in human affairs is never separable from its egotistic, godless, perversion.”³⁶

³³ Ibid., 142-143.

³⁴ Ibid., 148.

³⁵ Ibid., 150.

³⁶ Ibid., 156.

In regard to culture, the dualist agrees with the radical “Christ against Culture” proponents. Niebuhr explains, “the dualist...[pronounces] the world of human culture to be godless and sick unto death.”³⁷ However, these dualists also understand that they are part of this culture and cannot escape it. This leads them to two important paradoxes. First, the dualists assert that the law of Christ is not “an addition to the law of man’s nature but its true statement, a code for average normal man, and not a special rule for a spiritual superman.”³⁸ However, he also believes that no culture, through any law, can free itself from the state of sin that they are in. Niebuhr summarizes the paradox, “the law of God in the hands of men is an instrument of sin. Yet as coming from God and heard from His lips it is a means of grace.”³⁹ This relates to a second paradox that continues to paint this model in confusion.

Second, the dualist asserts that all the evils in the world are actually, in a certain sense, good. Niebuhr writes, “When [the dualist] deals with the problems of culture, he cannot forget that the dark sides of human social life, such things as vices, crimes, wars, and punishments, are weapons in the hands of a wrathful God of mercy.”⁴⁰ Thus, even the dualist’s view of evil in the world is paradoxical. These paradoxical views of law and evil drive the dualists approach to cultural life.

The dualist, “[seems] to be content to let state and economic life...continue relatively unchanged.” The dualist does not see the state as a truly positive entity, but

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Ibid., 157.

³⁹ Ibid., 157.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 159.

instead, the dualist views the state as a “restraining [force, a] dyke against sin....”⁴¹ The state and law are necessary, but they “belong wholly to the temporal and dying world.”⁴² Therefore, believers do not ultimately belong to these entities; they belong with Christ. “It is at this point that the [Transformer of Culture] motif otherwise similar to the dualist, emerges in distinction from it.”⁴³

Christ the Transformer of Culture

The fifth and final model in Niebuhr’s paradigm is that of the conversionist. Niebuhr explains that the conversionist is similar to the dualist, but those who fit under this model are much more inclined to see themselves at home in culture. This positive attitude towards culture is driven by three theological convictions. First, the conversionist sees God’s creative activity as an equivalent biblical theme to Christ’s atonement.⁴⁴ This allows for a high view of creation’s goodness. The second theological distinction that the conversionist maintains is in relation to the fall. Niebuhr writes, “[The conversionist] distinguishes the fall very sharply from creation...the word that must be used here to designate the consequences of the fall is ‘corruption.’”⁴⁵ A conversionist strongly maintains the essential goodness of the created order. “It is not bad, as something that ought not exist, but warped, twisted and misdirected.”⁴⁶ The third theological conviction

⁴¹ Ibid., 188.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Ibid., 189.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 192.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 194.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

that the conversionist asserts is in relation to history. Niebuhr writes, “For the conversionist, history is the story of God’s mighty deeds and man’s response to them. . . . [He] does not live so much in expectation of a final ending of the world of creation and culture as in awareness of the power of the Lord to transform all things.”⁴⁷ These three theological convictions shape the conversionist.

Among the pillars of this model, Niebuhr lists St. Augustine, John Calvin, and F.D. Maurice. These men represent the model, but F.D. Maurice represents it most consistently.⁴⁸ For this reason, Niebuhr explains this motif in relation to Maurice. Niebuhr explains, “The conversion of mankind from self-centeredness to Christ-centeredness was for Maurice the universal and present divine responsibility.”⁴⁹ The universality of this conversion applies to all men. It also means that “the full realization of the kingdom of Christ [does] not, then, mean the substitution of a new universal society for all the separate organizations of men, but rather the participation of all these in the one universal kingdom of which Christ is the head.”⁵⁰

Critiques of Niebuhr

An influential work like Niebuhr’s *Christ and Culture* invites many critiques. A majority of these critiques tend to center on the explanatory power of Niebuhr’s paradigm. Does it helpfully simplify the discussion about how Christians should relate to culture? There are four major critiques of Niebuhr’s models as an explanatory paradigm.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 195.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 224.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 225.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 226.

Paradigm Application

The first major critique of Niebuhr's paradigm is that it fails as a method to categorize in a truly helpful way. At least on some occasions, Niebuhr's models complicate (rather than simplify) a discussion about forms of cultural engagement. Craig Carter engaged with this in his work *Rethinking Christ and Culture: A Post Christendom Perspective*. He explains that, when Niebuhr's models are used in relation to individuals, "More is obscured than is illuminated."⁵¹ Each of Niebuhr's models is centered on certain theological convictions and historical theologians. However, these convictions are too specific to be useful in categorizing individuals. This can be demonstrated through three test cases. The neo-Anabaptists, N.T. Wright, and the Religious Right all represent very different forms of cultural engagement, and yet, all three groups fall underneath the same model in Niebuhr's paradigm.

Neo-Anabaptists. The neo-Anabaptist movement is small but influential. James Davison Hunter provides an excellent presentation of the neo-Anabaptist tradition in his work, *To Change the World*. John Howard Yoder is perhaps the most important neo-Anabaptist thinker in modern times.⁵² His critiques of Niebuhr are demonstrated in the following sections. An exhaustive explanation of the tradition cannot be provided here, but three main points of distinction will be given.

⁵¹ Carter, *Rethinking Christ and Culture*, 63.

⁵² James Davison Hunter, *To Change the World: The Irony, Tragedy, and Possibility of Christianity in the Late Modern World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 152.

Neo-Anabaptist distinctives. First, the neo-Anabaptist tradition outright rejects the “Constantinian error.”⁵³ Hunter explains, “The Constantinian error here is that American Christianity has whole-heartedly and uncritically embraced [American capitalist] logic and practices to its own detriment and the detriment of the world it seeks to serve.”⁵⁴ Hunter goes on to explain that this dual allegiance to the political state and Christ serves as the central failure within American Christianity. Loyalty to the political state is antithetical to a loyalty to Christ.⁵⁵ The neo-anabaptists therefore reject political loyalty and involvement.

Second, the neo-Anabaptist movement affirms that the Church should be radically counter-cultural. Hunter writes, “When the church is the church, it will suffer the condescension and hostility of the world for its social and political non-conformity.”⁵⁶ This plays out in a few key ways. First, the neo-Anabaptists are committed to non-violence. This includes abstaining from war. In fact, “For neo-Anabaptists, pacifism is the fundamental mark of Christian discipleship....”⁵⁷ This pacifism requires many neo-Anabaptists to avoid working in organizations that have any ties to violent activities—namely political states, corporate entities, and police forces.

Third, the neo-Anabaptist movement is, in some sense, sectarian. The degree of sectarian thought amongst neo-Anabaptist writers varies greatly, but central to all of them is a conviction that “the central calling of the church is to be a worshipping

⁵³ Ibid., 155.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 157.

⁵⁷ Ibid., 158.

community.”⁵⁸ It is through the vehicle of the church that a believer can influence society. Instead of engaging with the state as a means to change the state, the believer is called to engage with the church as the means of indirectly affecting the state. The neo-Anabaptist Stanley Hauerwas explains, “The church doesn’t have a social strategy, the church *is* a social strategy.”⁵⁹ This statement represents an important distinction that can be demonstrated from Hauerwas. While the believer is not seeking to instigate change within social structures on an individual level, the church as a whole is, in fact, attempting to change the culture.

Neo-Anabaptists and Niebuhr. Due to these three distinctions, two of the possible models in Niebuhr’s paradigm can be disregarded as incompatible with the neo-Anabaptist movement.⁶⁰ Niebuhr himself would doubtless categorize the neo-Anabaptists as “Christ against Culture” radicals. However, there are three main tensions that require categorizing the neo-Anabaptists within a different model. First, the “Christ against Culture” radicals of Niebuhr’s models are defined as rejecting “culture.” However, Niebuhr’s definition of “culture” includes all of mankind’s social interactions. This rejection of social activities extends even to the point of rejecting church life. Niebuhr explains that proponents of the Christ against Culture position view churches as “self-centered organizations that assert their own infallibility; servants of the state, defenders

⁵⁸ Ibid., 160.

⁵⁹ Stanley Hauerwas and William H. Willimon, *Resident Aliens: Life in the Christian Colony: A Provocative Christian Assessment of Culture and Ministry for People Who Know That Something Is Wrong*, Expanded 25th anniversary edition (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2014), 43.

⁶⁰ The “Christ of Culture” and the “Christ above Culture” models both maintain positive views of culture that the neo-Anabaptists clearly reject.

of the reign of violence and privilege, of inequality and prosperity; obscurers and falsifiers of the gospel.”⁶¹ He goes on to say that “the church is an invention of the devil...all churches are alike in their betrayal of Christ’s laws.”⁶² This position is in stark contradiction with the neo-Anabaptist views of cultural engagement. The neo-Anabaptist views engagement with culture as something to be done through the church; a rejection of the church is alien to this tradition.

Second, the “Christ and Culture in Paradox” position is rejected by neo-Anabaptists. Niebuhr explains, “The dualist joins the radical Christian in pronouncing the whole world of human culture to be Godless and sick unto death.”⁶³ He goes on to explain the difference between the “Christ against Culture” radicals and the dualists who claim the “Christ and Culture in Paradox” position, “the dualist knows that he belongs to that culture and cannot get out of it...”⁶⁴ Many neo-Anabaptists however reject this stance. For instance, Yoder writes, “...The Christian church according to the New Testament... will and should proceed precisely by denying such a global characterization of culture.”⁶⁵ Niebuhr’s dualists reject culture completely (only dealing with it because they are stuck within it); the neo-Anabaptists on the other hand do not outright reject all of culture. In fact, despite what might initially seem to be the case, the neo-Anabaptists attempt to interact with and change the greater culture. Hunter interacts with this misconception of the neo-Anabaptists:

⁶¹ Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture*, 61.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 61–62.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 156.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

⁶⁵ Glen Harold Stassen et al., *Authentic Transformation: A New Vision of Christ and Culture* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996), 69.

But is separatism the same as sectarianism? This argument has been made repeatedly; most forcefully in the contemporary period within the perspective of “Christian realism” given voice by the Niebuhr brothers.... Their claim was that Yoder and the neo-Anabaptists articulated a strategy of withdrawal, tribalism, and, therefore, political irrelevance. This accusation, of course, was rejected unequivocally by Yoder when he was alive and is mostly rejected today.... The church, then, only withdraws from responsibility as the world understands it. By existing as an alternative humanity living a different way of life, it constitutes a fundamental challenge to the ways of the world. This kind of lived-proclamation, they argue, does not constitute withdrawal but rather is its primary and most effective form of political responsibility.⁶⁶

There is a significant amount of separatism in the thought of neo-Anabaptists, but the *Telos* behind the neo-Anabaptist separation is not rejection of the world. Instead, the very separatism of the neo-Anabaptists is a way to engage the culture for change. The method of engagement is significantly different than what Niebuhr would have ascribed, but the motivation of the neo-Anabaptists does seem to fit within the “Christ the Transformer of Culture” model.

The third significant point in defining the neo-Anabaptists comes from John Yoder in his critique of Niebuhr’s models. He expresses, “What H. Richard Niebuhr meant by ‘transformation’ is so inadequately defined that its popularity with readers seems to correlate with an assumption that it is more or less indistinguishable from our western idea of progress....”⁶⁷ Yoder argues that Niebuhr’s models are slanted towards one of the models—namely the “Christ the Transformer of Culture” model. According to Yoder, any believer who wants to see culture progress is automatically defined as a conversionist in Niebuhr’s paradigm.

N.T. Wright. N.T Wright, the former bishop of Durham, is a prolific writer, and he often engages with cultural issues throughout his writing. If one attempted to

⁶⁶ Hunter, *To Change the World*, 165–66.

⁶⁷ Stassen et al., *Authentic Transformation*, 41–42.

categorize Wright within Niebuhr's paradigm, the "Christ the Transformer of Culture" model would seem to be the best option.

There are four main reasons why Wright, if forced into Niebuhr's paradigm, would be most accurately categorized as a conversionist. First, he believes in the essential goodness of creation. In fact, in his work, *Surprised by Scripture*, Wright explains, "The resurrection of Jesus is the reaffirmation of the goodness of creation...."⁶⁸ Christ died for creation because it is worth saving. Wright explains, "Here is the problem...that our sinfulness has meant that God's project for the whole creation...was aborted, put on hold. And when we are saved... that is in order that the whole creation project can at last get back on track."⁶⁹ The *Telos* of Christ's death, for Wright, is renewed creation. Wright's affirmation of the essential goodness of creation and its need for renewed creation requires that he be categorized as either a synthesist or a conversionist.

Second, he views the work of the Gospel in terms of both salvation and the renewal of the world. Personal salvation is not the end goal, but rather, a part of the greater goal. Personal salvation may lead to heaven, but Wright believes that the desire to escape to heaven is flawed.

Heaven is not a future state but a present reality; salvation 'kept in heaven' (1 Pet. 1:4) is hidden from present sight, not reserved for future experience; heavenly citizenship (Phil. 3:20) indicates one's ultimate allegiance, not one's future home, like Roman citizenship in Philippi; immediate transfer to Christ's presence is to the intermediate state; and the goal of salvation is the renewal of the cosmos (Rom. 8).⁷⁰

⁶⁸ N. T. Wright, *Surprised by Scripture: Engaging Contemporary Issues*, FIRST EDITION (New York: HarperOne, 2014), 107.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 34.

⁷⁰ P. S. Johnston, "Heaven," ed. T. Desmond Alexander and Brian S. Rosner, *New Dictionary of Biblical Theology* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2000), 542.

Wright's emphasis on the renewal of the world is indicative of the conversionist model in Niebuhr's paradigm. Wright is not simply balancing loyalty to culture with loyalty to the Gospel; he is advocating the transformation of the world by the Gospel.

Third, Wright is extremely passionate about cultural issues. Chief among them is his passion for social justice. He explains, "The Christian faith endorses the passion for justice which every human being knows, the longing to see things put to right... when the slave trade was at it's height...it was a group of devout Christians...who got together and made it their life's business to stop it."⁷¹ Wright believes that the church should be actively engaging and transforming the world. He explains, "The church at its best has always sought to transform society from within."⁷² This concept echoes the conversionist of Niebuhr's paradigm.

Fourth, Wright views the believer as a "foretaste" of heaven. He speaks against both the synthesist's and dualist's dichotomous views of culture and the Christian faith. He explains, "Left to ourselves we lapse into a kind of collusion with entropy, acquiescing in the general belief that things may be getting worse but that there's nothing much we can do about them. And we are wrong."⁷³ For Wright, believers should not try to synthesize two separate worlds, nor should they try to hold two distinct realities at once. Instead, they should seek to transform the world with the Gospel. He explains, "Our task in the present...is to live as resurrection people in between Easter and the final day, with our Christian life, corporate and individual, in both worship and mission, as a sign of

⁷¹ N. T. Wright, *Simply Christian: Why Christianity Makes Sense* (New York: HarperOne, 2010), 12.

⁷² Wright, *Surprised by Scripture*, 185.

⁷³ N. T. Wright, *Surprised by Hope: Rethinking Heaven, the Resurrection, and the Mission of the Church*, 1st ed (New York: HarperOne, 2008), 29–30.

the first and a foretaste of the second.”⁷⁴ He clearly exemplifies tendencies that best fit within Niebuhr’s “Christ the Transformer of Culture” model.

The Religious Right. The Religious Right is considerably easier to fit within Niebuhr’s models than either the neo-Anabaptists or N.T. Wright. The Religious Right unequivocally believes in changing the culture around them. Daniel K. Williams wrote in his book, *God's Own Party: The Making of the Religious Right*, that the Religious Right is centered on political activism. He explains, “Evangelical leaders...mobilized charismatic and Pentecostal Christians on behalf of politically conservative causes. Together these leaders created an interdenominational Religious Right that quickly established itself as a powerful interest group within the conservative Republican coalition.”⁷⁵

This movement of Christians was birthed out of a fear that the “Christian America” was being destroyed. Williams explains, “Inspired by Francis Schaeffer, an American evangelical writer living in Switzerland, they began speaking out against ‘secular humanism,’ which they claimed was destroying the nation. They turned to politics to save the country.”⁷⁶ Through the means of political activism, the Religious Right sought to move the country back towards a moral state. This is undoubtedly a direct parallel to the conversionists of Niebuhr’s paradigm.

⁷⁴ Ibid., 30.

⁷⁵ Daniel K Williams, *God's Own Party: The Making of the Christian Right* (New York; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 159.

⁷⁶ Ibid., 134.

The characterization of the Religious Right as “Christ the Transformer of Culture” conversionists is reinforced when the continued development of the movement is considered. After repeated failures to affect the cultural change that they desired, the Religious Right began to exhibit even stronger conversionist tendencies. Williams continues, “The Christian Right had become more vocal in its opposition to abortion, more militant in its politics, and more determined than ever to recapture the country.”⁷⁷ Perhaps more accurately than any other group, the Religious Right exemplifies the conversionist model of Niebuhr’s paradigm. The classification of the Religious Right, N.T. Wright, and the neo-Anabaptists—each exemplifying very different approaches to cultural engagement—within the same model of Niebuhr’s paradigm brings up an important question. What is the goal of a paradigm?

The power of a paradigm. Having looked at how Niebuhr’s paradigm works as a tool to define various groups, it is important to consider what it intends to accomplish. What is the purpose of models and paradigms? By what standard should Niebuhr’s models be judged as successful? In the following sections, there are two purposes for paradigms against which Niebuhr’s models will be judged. First, a paradigm should be a fair representation of what it is trying to present. Is Niebuhr’s paradigm a true and accurate representation of the various approaches to Christian cultural engagement? This question is primarily a question of fairness, and the following section, “Biased Paradigm,” will explore this question.

Second, the simplifying power of the paradigm will be considered. Does Niebuhr’s paradigm simplify a discussion on Christian cultural engagement? In a work

⁷⁷ Ibid., 187.

on the methodology of theological models, David Klemm, Professor and Chair of the Department of Religious Studies at the University of Iowa, explains, “One of the goals of a discipline is to find methods, strategies, and techniques for uncovering the structure of a given domain.”⁷⁸ Niebuhr is attempting to do just this. He is arguing for an underlying structure of historical Christian cultural engagement. Uncovering this underlying structure can assist in conversations about the entire discipline. Tim Keller further explains, “We can’t make sense of what people do without relating them to others and noticing continuities and contrasts. This is the nature of modeling.”⁷⁹ If Niebuhr’s model can simplify discussions about cultural engagement, then it is accomplishing the key goal of organizing the discipline of Christian cultural engagement.

The complications of Niebuhr. Niebuhr’s paradigm, however, does not necessarily simplify a discussion about cultural engagement. Take, for example, the classifications of N.T. Wright, the neo-Anabaptists, and the Religious Right. These three groups are vastly different in their application of cultural engagement and their reasoning behind cultural engagement. However, each of them falls within the category of “Christ the Transformer of Culture.”

These three groups not only engage with culture differently, but they harshly criticize each other on account of their cultural engagement. For example, N.T. Wright levels harsh criticism against the Religious Right’s *ethos* of cultural engagement.

⁷⁸ David E. Klemm and William H. Klink, “Constructing and Testing Theological Models,” *Zygon?* 38, no. 3 (September 2003): 502, doi:10.1111/1467-9744.00517.

⁷⁹ Timothy Keller, *Center Church: Doing Balanced, Gospel-Centered Ministry in Your City* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2012), 195.

I think the religious right in the United States may be construed as a clumsy attempt to recapture the coming together of God and the world that stubbornly remains in scripture but which the enlightenment repudiated, and which fundamentalism continues to repudiate with its dualistic theology of rapture and Armageddon. It is as though the Religious Right has known in its bones that God belongs in public but without understanding either why or how that makes sense.⁸⁰

Wright regularly critiques the religious right. There is little agreement between the two on either theological or practical concerns of cultural engagement. An even greater complication is presented by the neo-Anabaptists.

Hunter engages with this topic. He explains that the Religious Right and left may disagree on theology and policy, but “the neo-Anabaptist’s... own compelling but unusual approach is an inversion of the model embraced by the conservatives and progressives.”⁸¹ While they are attempting to alter the culture, their entire approach is radically different. Hunter summarizes this concept well.

Where the identity of the Christian Right is forged largely through their opposition to secularism and secularists, where the identity of the Christian Left derives from their opposition to the Right, the collective identity of the neo-Anabaptists comes through their dissent from the State and the larger political economy....⁸²

N.T. Wright, the Religious Right, and the neo-Anabaptists all view engagement through the lens of “transforming culture,” but the differences between the three approaches are extensive. Classifying someone within the “Christ the Transformer of Culture” could then evoke any of these three concepts. This, rather than simplifying a discussion about cultural engagement, would lead to a need for even further nuancing and classification. All models will inevitably be overgeneralizations, but when a singular model holds three

⁸⁰ Wright, *Surprised by Scripture*, 173.

⁸¹ Hunter, *To Change the World*, 168.

⁸² *Ibid.*, 164.

prominent, opposing (and at certain points, opposite) methods of engagement, the paradigm does not seem to have the ability to substantively simplify the discussion. Why is it that the paradigm fails to simplify this discussion?

Biased Paradigm

The second major criticism of Niebuhr's paradigm explains why his models cannot effectively simplify the discussion. Namely, the entire paradigm is biased to lead people towards a particular model. Craig Carter explains, "...the shape of the book clearly indicates that Niebuhr favors the Christ transforming culture type."⁸³ This conclusion is likely the result of three main observations. First, Niebuhr provides no critique at the end of conversionist model. This is the only model that he decided not to critique. Second, He placed this model at the end of the paradigm. There is a clear progression of approval from Niebuhr as each new model is introduced. Third, and likely most important, the application language used for this model is far more vague than any other model. This allows for readers to more comfortably fit themselves within this model.

However, it is likely that Niebuhr's polemical reasoning was not centered on simply asserting the conversionist model. It is far too vague to be of any real or formative value. Carter posits, "Niebuhr's intention in this book, however, is not just to argue for the superiority of the transformationalist approach under the guise of a benign relativism. He also has an even more important agenda; namely to argue against the first type, the

⁸³ Carter, *Rethinking Christ and Culture*, 61.

Christ against culture position...⁸⁴ There is a clear agenda throughout the book that demonstrates the impossibility of the radical position. However, this position is built in an unfair way. Niebuhr likely intended this model to contain the neo-Anabaptists and monastic traditions, but he constructed it in a way that seemed easy to dismiss. This is the hidden straw man in Niebuhr's paradigm.

This straw man is largely based in Niebuhr's definition of culture. Angus Menuge rightly criticizes Niebuhr on this point. He explains that it immediately biases readers to reject the "Christ against culture" position. He further explains, "On Niebuhr's conception, culture is 'monolithic' and an all-inclusive category covering everything man does to nature. Taken literally, this automatically makes rejection of culture absurd...."⁸⁵ This definition of culture alone makes this model irrelevant, but the bias runs much deeper than simple definitions.

Yoder's critique of Niebuhr's work takes into consideration the overall polemical storytelling of the paradigm. He explains, "The book C&C is...an intentional mix of two modes of approach to the experiences it reviews." He goes on to explain that, first, "[Niebuhr's work] partly exemplifies a...style according to which all five 'types' are in some sense 'right,' and all are needed...." This approach presents Niebuhr as an impartial judge. He is simply presenting the many partially correct models of engagement. However, the second approach "partly represents a 'directional' or 'dialectical' view according to which the fifth pattern is truer than the others."⁸⁶ As each model fixes the

⁸⁴ Ibid.

⁸⁵ Menuge, *Christ and Culture in Dialogue*, 45.

⁸⁶ Stassen et al., *Authentic Transformation*, 67.

issues that Niebuhr critiqued the previous model for, the reader begins to understand a story of progression that subtly places the “Christ against culture radicals” in last place, and it leads most people to self identify with the “Christ the transformer of culture” conversionists. This unfair presentation is, in large part, why Niebuhr’s models lead to a common classification for the neo-Anabaptists, N.T. Wright, and the Religious Right.

Niebuhr and Scripture

The third major criticism of Niebuhr is his misuse of Biblical data. This misuse exemplifies a key misunderstanding that Niebuhr used to form his paradigm. For each model, Niebuhr presents certain books of the Bible that “represent” the various models. The Christ against culture radicals are represented by 1 John,⁸⁷ and the Christ of culture believers are represented by James.⁸⁸ Furthermore, Paul is seen as both the spiritual father of the dualist,⁸⁹ and the true representative of the conversionist.⁹⁰ In this way, Niebuhr “claims” certain aspects of scripture for each model. He, in doing so, puts the Biblical authors at odds with one another, and more importantly, he seems to indicate that God (as the divine author of all scripture) is arguing for different models at different times.

In his work, *Christ and Culture Revisited*, D.A. Carson explains this aspect of Niebuhr’s work. Carson writes, “Niebuhr’s view...is that the Bible in general, and the New Testament in particular, provides us with a number of discrete paradigms. We are being faithful to Scripture so long as we align our choices with any one of these

⁸⁷ Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture*, 46.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, xlvii.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 159.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, liv.

paradigms.”⁹¹ This hermeneutical belief (a belief about the science behind interpreting Scripture) allows for a disjointed, paradigmatic approach to how Christians engage with a sinful culture. However, as has been argued extensively elsewhere, the canon of scripture should not be interpreted as a confusing set of various paradigms, but instead, as a single, unified account of God’s consistent revelation to mankind.⁹²

Niebuhr recognizes the differences in the Biblical authors as endorsements of separate approaches to cultural engagement, and this seems to be a misrepresentation of the Scriptures. Perhaps, instead of choosing a model, the Biblical authors matched their “model” to the culture and situation surrounding them. D.A. Carson explains that this hermeneutic is a much more plausible explanation of the diverse language in scripture:

Yet historic confessional Christianity has insisted that... we see how the Bible hangs together... not just what one part of the biblical tradition says.... It is now widely recognized that in the first century, Christians did not speak of “the Gospel of Matthew,” “the Gospel of Mark,” and so on; rather, they spoke of the one gospel, the gospel of Jesus Christ, *according to* Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. Similarly across the New Testament corpus: read sympathetically, the rich diversities are mutually complementary, and, without for a moment weakening the attention that must be paid to historical peculiarities, the *canonical* function of the text demands that we listen to all of these voices and integrate them appropriately.⁹³

Niebuhr fully recognized that the Biblical authors emphasize different motifs, and he utilizes that to defend his various models. However, if the Bible is taken as complimentary and unified, these various motifs must be interpreted as consistent with one another. This is, perhaps, why Niebuhr struggled to find historical theologians who perfectly fit into any of his models. Carson explains, “What [Niebuhr] sees as a weakness

⁹¹ Carson, *Christ and Culture Revisited*, 41.

⁹² Peter John Gentry and Stephen J. Wellum, *Kingdom through Covenant: A Biblical-Theological Understanding of the Covenants* (Wheaton, Ill: Crossway, 2012), 82–128.

⁹³ Carson, *Christ and Culture Revisited*, 42.

in Augustine and Calvin suddenly becomes a strength: Augustine and Calvin are trying to integrate *all* the non-negotiables of biblical theology, which is precisely why they cannot adopt Niebuhr's "pure" form of the conversionist model."⁹⁴

If scripture is to be taken as a unified whole, then one cannot just pick Paul's defamation of human culture and hatred of idolatry in Romans 1 as a guide to engagement. His view of fallen culture must be taken in conjunction with the way he engaged with the men of Athens in Acts 17. He utilized the practice of idolatry to explain the Gospel. If one was to take just these two accounts of Paul, it would be nearly impossible to make him fit into one of Niebuhr's categories.

Carson explains, "At some point... one begins to wonder if the discrete patterns are the best way of thinking about the relations between Christ and Culture."⁹⁵ There may have been many different manners in which believers have engaged culture, but that does not mean that Scripture teaches many different models. It could just as simply mean that Scripture teaches one method that allows for many different applications.

All or Nothing Modeling

The fourth and final major criticism of Niebuhr's paradigm is that it tends to demand a certain rigidity of application. John Yoder has criticized Niebuhr on this point. Yoder explains that, according to Niebuhr's models, in regard to culture, "one must either withdraw from it all, transform it all, or keep it all in paradox."⁹⁶ There are many reasons

⁹⁴ Ibid., 59.

⁹⁵ Ibid., 40.

⁹⁶ Stassen et al., *Authentic Transformation*, 84–85.

why this simply does not work in reality. It does not account for the complexity of the world we live in. Yoder further explains, “Some elements of culture the church categorically rejects (pornography, tyranny, cultic idolatry). Other dimensions of culture it accepts within clear limits (economic production, commerce, the graphic arts, paying taxes for peacetime civil government).”⁹⁷ He goes on to explain that there are other parts of culture that believers should openly support, and still more parts of culture which believers should create.⁹⁸ While Yoder’s critique of Niebuhr is biased by his neo-Anabaptist tendencies, at least one of his points is valid: sticking to a rigid system will not allow for the complex applications that scripture demands.

Conclusion

Niebuhr’s models hold great value for learning about patterns and motifs of engagement throughout history, but they are less effective at accurately simplifying discussions. They do not categorize Christian cultural engagement beyond simply, and generally unfairly, developing a couple models that have been emphasized throughout history. While these models can help believers think through various aspects of proper engagement, they cannot replace a gospel-centered, spirit-driven lifestyle. The multifaceted diversity of approaches demonstrated by the neo-Anabaptists, N.T. Wright, the Religious Right, and the numerous other Christian organizations that engage culture cannot be defined by such a rigid system of models.⁹⁹

⁹⁷ Ibid., 69.

⁹⁸ Ibid.

⁹⁹ While Niebuhr’s models tend to be unfair, there is a great need for conversation-orienting paradigms in discussions on Christian cultural engagement. One promising model is demonstrated by Tim Keller in his work *Center Church*.

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