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H. Richard Niebuhr and John Howard Yoder 1: Theology of Culture

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1. Introduction

Christian faith experiences a tension between its transcendent nature and the surrounding culture. On the one hand, Christian faith originates in the revelation of God, which transforms culture itself. On the other hand, the revelation is received and interpreted by humans in concrete situations. As Paul Tillich states, there is no such thing as “pure revelation.”⁽¹⁾ Although interpretation of revelation is not merely a human activity, but under God’s providence, it does reflect the human dimension. Past interpreted revelation has been further reinterpreted by following generations. Thus Christian faith is inevitably shaped by culture; and it conversely transforms culture. It is no exaggeration to say that two millennia of Church history have demonstrated the struggle between Christian faith and culture. In an effort to address this struggle, I would like to explore relevant issues pertinent to the relationship between Christian faith and culture.

This essay particularly focuses on H. Richard Niebuhr and John Howard Yoder’s theological understandings about Christian faith and culture. *Niebuhr’s Christ and Culture* (1951) has probably been the most influential

work in this field.⁽²⁾ Niebuhr was always concerned about the relation of Christian faith and culture in history from his early stage of academic life. His doctoral thesis at Yale was on Ernst Troeltsch.⁽³⁾ Troeltsch, sometimes considered ‘the first 21st century theologian,’⁽⁴⁾ was concerned about the problem of the absoluteness of Christianity. He was aware of other beliefs, and of the relativity of Christian churches in history.⁽⁵⁾ His history of religion approach finally led him to a conclusion of religious pluralism.⁽⁶⁾ Humans are historically conditioned and so are the churches. Obviously Troeltsch exerted a significant influence on Niebuhr. Whilst rejecting Troeltsch’s pluralism, which gave up the universal uniqueness of God revealed in Christ, Niebuhr valued his critical historical studies and accepted the relativism of human endeavour, so that no historical church can claim absoluteness. Niebuhr intended *Christ and Culture* (henceforth C&C) to be a supplement and correction of Troeltsch’s *The Social Teaching of the Christian Churches* from the viewpoint of “theological and theo-centric relativism.”⁽⁷⁾ Beyond this work, he has made other substantial contributions.

Niebuhr, in his first book, *The Social Sources of Denominationalism* (1929), inquired how religion and culture are related in American Christianity from a religious and socio-economic perspective. It was an analysis of the reason why Christianity was shaped into sect, denomination, and church. He realised that the churches were divided because of different economic, educational, ethnic, and class backgrounds rather than theological diversities. He found that a historical, sociological, and ethical approach was more fruitful in revealing differences of Christian denominations than a doctrinal approach.⁽⁸⁾ The emphasis of this study was on how Christianity was dependent on culture, and it failed to throw light on how Christian faith, which is essential in Christianity, in turn shaped culture.⁽⁹⁾ Niebuhr’s deep dissatisfaction with this work led him to a further study, *The Kingdom of God in America* (1937). Here he analysed leading forces within the Christian movement which moulded American culture. In this work we can already see his preference for transforming faith, which becomes a core answer to his Christ-and-culture inquiry. In *The Meaning of Revelation* (1941) Niebuhr tackled the problems of “the relations of the relative and the absolute in history.”⁽¹⁰⁾ Whilst acknowledging the unavoidable legitimacy of Troeltsch’s historical relativism, Niebuhr sought to combine it with the

constructive work of Karl Barth. In this book too he suggests a “conversion” approach.⁽¹¹⁾

Radical Monotheism and Western Culture (1960) was published after *Christ and Culture* (1951).⁽¹²⁾ Again, he analyses Christianity from a historical and socio-religious perspective and presents polytheism, henotheism, and radical monotheism. Niebuhr values radical monotheism for its potential continuously to reform the church and the world. *The Responsible Self* (1963) was published after his sudden death in 1962 by his son Richard R. Niebuhr and James Gustafson. Niebuhr says: “Responsibility affirms: ‘God is acting in all actions upon you. So respond to all actions upon you as to respond to his action.’”⁽¹³⁾ Gustafson tells us that it was “the most memorable theme in his [Niebuhr’s] course of lectures on Christian ethics” for most of his students.⁽¹⁴⁾ God is acting in history, establishing His kingdom; we are to respond to what God is doing in history with all our being.

Thus, Niebuhr’s main concerns lay in the relationship between the Church and the world, the relationship of the relative and the absolute, and a responsible ethic of the whole person to God — all of these always to be thought out historically. Christian response to the world should be personal response to what the sovereign God is doing in a particular situation; although such human responses in history were relative, the absolute God revealed Himself in Jesus Christ and through Christian communities guided by the Spirit. His understanding of the Christian faith and the world is most explicitly spelled out in *C&C*.

Christ and Culture was squarely challenged by John Howard Yoder’s article, “How H. Richard Niebuhr Reasoned: A Critique of *Christ and Culture*” (1996).⁽¹⁵⁾ This work, to my knowledge, is the most fundamental criticism of the book, although it has yet to receive a serious response.⁽¹⁶⁾ This article was originally written in 1958 and circulated whilst remaining unpublished.

This essay discusses both Niebuhr’s theology and Yoder’s criticism on Niebuhr. The critical engagement with both Niebuhr and Yoder leads us to embrace a believers’ church perspective as the basic vision for a viable theology of culture.⁽¹⁷⁾

2. Christ and Culture

The problem of Christian faith and culture has been discussed since the very early stage of Christianity. Niebuhr calls it an “enduring problem” and asserts that the essential problem is not Christianity and culture but Christ and culture. Christianity here is never considered absolute but relative because it “moves between the poles of Christ and culture.”⁽¹⁸⁾ After defining both Christ and culture, which are discussed below, he then presents five types of Christian response to this problem. We examine each type, and then discuss Niebuhr’s significant subjects: theocentric relativism, culture, and Christ.⁽¹⁹⁾ and transformation.

2.1. Two Extremes

2.1.1. Christ against Culture: Exclusivist Approach

The first approach emphasises the absolute authority of Christ and uncompromisingly rejects loyalty to culture because culture is fallen. The conflict between Christ and culture is conspicuous in this “either-or” position. It interprets the world dualistically: “Whatever does not belong to the commonwealth of Christ is under the rule of evil.”⁽²⁰⁾⁽²¹⁾

Niebuhr values this radical approach for three reasons: it is rightfully drawn from the Lordship of Christ; it is a typical early Christian attitude; and it has a balancing function to all other Christian groups, just as Romans 13 is balanced by I John.⁽²²⁾ When one recognises Christ’s radical authority, this exclusive answer is inevitable, without which Christianity loses its essential aspect.

Although it is an inevitable Christian answer, Niebuhr asserts that it is also an inadequate response. Firstly, the radical approach, withdrawal from society or rejection of culture, is not directly effective in changing culture.⁽²³⁾ Although it prepared a way for reformation in the society and church, such a reformation was not achieved because of this radical spirit. It was rather carried out by other people who embraced a different conviction over the problem of Christ and culture.

Secondly, these radical Christians, whilst rejecting culture, make use of its benefits.⁽²⁴⁾ The writer of I John and Tertullian, in condemning pagan philosophy, used its vocabulary. Tolstoy was in the midst of the Russian cultural movement of his time. Humans are part of culture, and all that they, even radical Christians, can do is to select and modify, under the authority of Christ, what is already there in culture.

Thirdly, the exclusivists tend to undercut the seriousness of sin.⁽²⁵⁾ They try to protect the holy community from the fallen world by separating from it. The assumption is that sin abides in culture and the community is unaffected, or less affected, by sin. Nevertheless such a community and the individuals comprising the community are obviously tainted with sin, too.

Finally, Niebuhr gives two profound theological arguments against this radical position from the doctrine of the Trinity.⁽²⁶⁾ One is that radical Christians' loyalty to Christ tends to result in so-called "Unitarianism of the Son,"⁽²⁷⁾ ignoring God the Father and Creator and the Holy Spirit the Sustainer of the world and the church. The other is that the radicals' rejection of the fallen world leads them to a suspicion of the Creator of the world. Radical Christians have a tendency toward heretical dualism: an evil material sphere and a spiritual sphere guided by Christ and the Spirit in the believer. Thus they fail to understand the doctrine of the Trinity, slighting the presence and work of God and the Spirit in culture.

2.1.2. Christ of Culture: Inclusivist Approach

The second extreme approach relaxes the tension between Christ and culture.⁽²⁸⁾ It is a "both-and" position and harmonises Christ and culture by overlooking conflicting elements in the New Testament and society. The adherents of this harmonious approach are selective in their attitude both to Christ and to culture, and their Christ tends to be rational and abstract rather than historical and concrete. Their Christ is regarded as the greatest human achievement, or one which should be treasured, yet not as Lord of culture.⁽²⁹⁾ However it is to be noted that Niebuhr tells us that they at least recognise something beyond reason and partially acknowledge "a revelation that cannot be completely absorbed into the life of reason."⁽³⁰⁾ Niebuhr was probably prepared to call them Christians for this reason. We can infer that

their Christ is not totally swallowed in culture but contains a meagre tension with culture, although it is significantly less than any of the other four types.⁽³¹⁾

Niebuhr sees two positive aspects in this inclusive position. Firstly it indirectly helps the expansion of the kingdom of God. Evangelism is not their primary intention. However they stimulate other Christians to take the risk of indigenising Christian message, such as translating the gospel into the “vulgar tongue,”⁽³²⁾ which can result in fruitful evangelism. They also tend to talk to the leading class of the society in the sophisticated language of their time, and Niebuhr calls them “missionaries to the aristocracy and the middle class, or to the group rising to power in a civilization.”⁽³³⁾ The conversion of the leadership class, no matter how political it would be, enhanced the Christianisation of the society.

In addition, Christ-of-culture people help others by reminding them of “the universal meaning of the gospel.”⁽³⁴⁾ Although Jesus’ primary interest was in the Kingdom of God, He did not ignore the world.⁽³⁵⁾ He regarded some wise men as nearer to the Kingdom of God than others.⁽³⁶⁾ The inclusivists are aware of the differences of culture. Unlike Christ-against-culture people, they do not reject culture as a whole because of their high estimation of it.

However, this position has been criticised by both Christians and non-Christians, and Niebuhr also has the lowest assessment of this type.⁽³⁷⁾ It did not gain disciples for Christ; and its New Testament Jesus is constantly distorted.⁽³⁸⁾ Furthermore Niebuhr gives three other shortcomings, which are also applicable to the radical Christians.⁽³⁹⁾ Firstly, sin is treated superficially. Both exclusivists and inclusivists tend to presuppose an area free from sin: the holy community for the former and higher human spirit for the latter. Secondly, cultural Christians, as much as radical Christians, tend to treat law more seriously than grace. Whilst the radicals emphasise human response more than divine initiative, cultural Christians prefer self-depending knowledge. Whilst the former is due to Christ’s Lordship, the latter shows more independent spirit, which seems at variance with the shape of the New Testament witness. Thirdly, Niebuhr comes to the doctrine of the Trinity. Both radical Christians and accommodationist Christians, he says, dislike the doctrine. The former tend to consider the

doctrine as an integration of biblical theology with cultural philosophy; and the latter incline to identify Christ with the divine spirit because of their abstract tendency.

2.2. Moderate Answers

Niebuhr's other three types remain in between the two extreme types above. They are described as superior answers to the former two, and share four common convictions which distinguish them from those extreme positions.⁽⁴⁰⁾ Firstly Jesus Christ is the Son of God the Creator. Nature, on the basis of which culture is produced, is good. Therefore Christ cannot simply be against culture. Moreover they believe that humans are responsible to God in actual and concrete situations. Being given freedom and ability, developing culture is part of human obedience to God. Furthermore the central positions recognise the serious nature of sin and its universality. Whilst exclusive and inclusive Christians tend to disregard the radical nature of sin, these believe that humans can never attain to holiness. Finally the central Christians agree on the understanding of grace and law. They believe in the supremacy of divine grace and necessity of human obedience. Human culture is possible only by divine grace; and the experience of grace leads one to actualising the law in society.

2.2.1. Christ above Culture: Synthesist Approach

The synthesist approach is a "both-and" response like the harmonious approach. It acknowledges the gap between Christ and culture, and affirms the priority of Christ. Nevertheless the synthesists regard culture as having positive value of its own, although imperfect, and their Christ is the instructor rather than the judge. They think that Christian teaching and good products of culture are different but not always contradictory. We can infer that the synthesists by Niebuhr's definition do not accept any and every aspect of culture, but affirm culture conditionally and selectively.⁽⁴¹⁾

Niebuhr describes the synthesist position as an attractive choice. The synthesists open the door for the co-operation between Christians and non-Christians. At the same time, they maintain a distinctive Christian message.

Moreover, particularly in the medieval period, they preserved and developed Greek and Roman culture for the following generations.⁽⁴²⁾

Their shortcomings are spelled out as well. The synthesists tend to consider their approach, in particular Aquinas' theology, equal to the eternal law of God. Any answer is produced in a particular culture and is relative, but the synthesists by Niebuhr's definition do not recognise the cultural limit of their answers; when they realise such a limitation, they are regarded as moving towards Niebuhr's own view, the conversionist.⁽⁴³⁾ In addition, synthesist understanding of sin is superficial. Although they do affirm sinfulness of humans and take sin more seriously than cultural Christians, their recognition of it is not sufficient. Human reason for them may be darkened but it is not totally damaged, and this does not seem to be profound enough at all for the radical, paradox, and conversionist Christians.

2.2.2. Christ and Culture in Paradox: Dualist Approach

The dualist position, like accommodationist and synthesist positions, attempts to give a "both-and" answer to Christ-culture problem. However dualists do so in an extremely sharp tension. Unlike the accommodationists and the synthesists, the dualists, along with the radicals, are sensitive enough to recognise the serious depravity of both the human and culture. They are certain about two things: sectarian withdrawal from society could not help them since both the church and the world are seriously affected by sin; nevertheless God sustains them in culture and they are responsible for the world. Thus they hold the conflicting elements together: loyalty to Christ and responsibility to culture.⁽⁴⁴⁾ Their most explicit paradoxes appear in "law and grace" and "divine wrath and mercy."⁽⁴⁵⁾ Human performance falls short of the law, yet grace overcomes the law without ruining it; the wrath lies upon sinful humans, yet mercy embraces them. The dualists choose to live in the dynamic tensions.⁽⁴⁶⁾

The dualist position brought profound understanding of sin and its redemption by Christ. Its dynamic understanding of the Christ-culture problem was not only more persuasive and realistic but also more inspiring than other static approaches.

Nevertheless, Niebuhr points out three insufficient aspects of the

dualist approach. Firstly the dualists open the door to the antinomianism.⁽⁴⁷⁾ No matter how morally humans try to live, they still fall short of the divine law. This can discourage people from living conscientiously. Secondly the predominant spiritual concern leads them to be culturally conservative. Their regard remains mainly in the religious realm, and social matters are principally left untouched. We can say that its distorted examples in modern history would be pro-Hitler “German Christians”⁽⁴⁸⁾ and not a small number of Japanese Christians during the second world war. Both of them were schizophrenic with the loyalty to the nation and to Christ. Thirdly they have a tendency to pay insufficient respect to the positive aspects of God’s creation because of their principal preoccupation with Christ’s redemption, the radical nature of sin, and spiritual matters. Although it is ultimately temporary, fallen, and needs to be redeemed, it is nonetheless a good creation.

2.2.3. Christ the Transformer of Culture: Conversionist Approach

The conversionists recognise a sharp distinction between Christ and human achievement; they are aware of the radical sin in the human and culture. However they have a distinctively positive attitude toward culture. They believe that God reigns over culture and therefore Christians are responsible for cultural duties.

Niebuhr gives three characteristics of the transformation approach related to their involvement in culture.⁽⁴⁹⁾ Firstly they value the creation as much as redemption. They see the work of God in Christ not only in the Cross, the Resurrection, and the Second Coming, but also in the Incarnation. Christ who creates the world participates in culture. Secondly the conversionists sharply distinguish the evil human fall from the good creation by God. This corruption is from the created goodness and is exclusively a human act. Although it is evil, it is perverted good. Thirdly their understanding of history is existential. They believe that God interacts with humans in the here and now. They are more concerned with the present divine restoration than events in the past or future.⁽⁵⁰⁾

Augustine was a living example of the transformation of culture.⁽⁵¹⁾

Following his conversion, he transvalued and reshaped what he had learned as a non-Christian, instead of rejecting it all. Augustine believed that Christ “redirects, reinvigorates, and regenerates” all human activity, which is perverted and corrupted from the essentially good.⁽⁵²⁾ However Augustine did not dream of the total transformation of culture in which all human activities are directed to God in harmony and peace. He rather stayed with the traditional eschatological vision of the Scriptures: eternal separation of the saved and the damned.

Niebuhr wonders why Augustine did not thoroughly carry out the conversionist view, and conjectures that it is to be attributed to his defensiveness and justification of Christian tradition.⁽⁵³⁾ Obviously Augustine did not dishonour the Christian tradition, nor did he depart from the Scriptures. Augustine did have a defensive aspect as a church leader. Yet it seems to me rather that Augustine took sin more seriously than Niebuhr, and this did not allow him to entertain the optimistic idea of a thoroughly transformed culture at the end.

F.D. Maurice is the most unmistakable example of the conversionist for Niebuhr. Maurice fully held an affirmative attitude toward culture. He was deeply convinced that Christ, not the devil, is Lord of the world and that nothing can exist without Him. He believed the pervasion of culture seriously enough to distinguish himself from inclusivists and synthesists. In addition, he did not separate Church and culture like dualists or exclusivists. For Maurice, “the Kingdom of Heaven is within us, not through some efforts of ours to believe in it, but because it has always been He [Christ] came that He might make us know where it is”⁽⁵⁴⁾ The power of evil did not exist apart from forms such as “a spirit of self-seeking, self-willing, and self-glorification,”⁽⁵⁵⁾ which also existed among Christians. Such a separation of the Church and the world appeared to Maurice self-centred, and he insisted on an inclusive transformation: the conversion of the whole of humanity. He believed that all humans are created by God and members of His kingdom, and God can transform them into participation in the kingdom of God in the eschatological present, which was called “transformed culture.”⁽⁵⁶⁾ The transformation required “humiliation” and “exaltation.”⁽⁵⁷⁾ The humiliation allows people to accept that Christ is the head, and not they; the exaltation comes from the understanding that they are to serve the head and all others.

Universal salvation was necessary for him, because he could not “believe that He will fail with any at last; . . . ; but His will must surely be done, however long it may be resisted.”⁽⁵⁸⁾ This led to controversy and the loss of his chair at King’s College, London.

3. Theocentric Relativism

In order to discuss Niebuhr’s theology, first we must deal with his basic conviction, which penetrates his discussion of the Christ-and-culture problem. It is theocentric relativism. Niebuhr rejects both “sceptical historical relativism” and “subjective idealism” and advocates “theocentric relativism.”⁽⁵⁹⁾

Sceptical historical relativism emphasises objectivity, and claims the “unreliability of all thought conditioned by historical and social background,”⁽⁶⁰⁾ and believes that “we are without an absolute.”⁽⁶¹⁾ It is the understanding that every human action is carried out in history, limited in time and space, and therefore no universality and absoluteness can be claimed. Not only do we live in a temporal and historical world but also we, including our reason, are relative. “Our historical relativism affirms the historicity of the subject even more than that of the object; man, it points out, is not only in time but time is in man.”⁽⁶²⁾ This is what we are, and this is what we have in our theological inquiry.

It was Niebuhr’s intention in *C&C* to bring Troeltsch’s sceptical historical relativism into “the light of theological and theo-centric relativism.”⁽⁶³⁾ Troeltsch gave up claiming the universal validity of Christianity, although he indicated that it was the absolute truth for the European-American world.⁽⁶⁴⁾ The problem of the relativity of Christianity which Troeltsch raised is so profound that no serious theologian can avoid it. Niebuhr affirms, through Troeltsch’s critical eyes, that any form of Christianity is relative between the poles of Christ and culture, and says: “I have found myself unable to avoid the acceptance of historical relativism.” However he does “not believe that the agnostic consequence [of the relativism] is necessary.”⁽⁶⁵⁾ He believes in Christian faith as the absolute truth revealed to humans from the divine through Jesus Christ, and seeks a

way to hold both relativism and the absoluteness of Christianity. "Relativism does not imply subjectivism and scepticism. It is not evident that the man who is forced to confess that his view of things is conditioned by the standpoint he occupies must doubt the reality of what he sees."⁽⁶⁶⁾

Subjectivism seeks "to overcome the limitations which empiricism had brought to light by exalting the subjective as alone real."⁽⁶⁷⁾ Its typical example is existentialism represented by Kierkegaard and Bultmann. It tends to neglect objectivity and to become individualistic.⁽⁶⁸⁾ As Tillich called *The Meaning of Revelation* "the introduction into existential thinking in present American theology," Niebuhr's theology has an existential substance.⁽⁶⁹⁾ However it is not individualistic existentialism but "social existentialism," which emphasises the corporate and communal aspect.⁽⁷⁰⁾ Niebuhr strongly rejects personalising and privatising theology.⁽⁷¹⁾

It was Niebuhr's attempt to bridge a gap between Troeltsch and Barth. He states in *The Meaning of Revelation*:

Students of theology will recognize that Ernst Troeltsch and Karl Barth have also been my teachers, though only through their writings. These two leaders in twentieth century religious thought are frequently set in diametrical opposition to each other; I have tried to combine their main interests, for it appears to me that the critical thought of the former and the latter belong together. . . . It is work that needs to be done.⁽⁷²⁾

Thus Niebuhr acknowledges our historical relativity (Troeltsch) as a starting point of his theology, and at the same time claims the reality of our experience of God in confessional and communal forms (Barth).⁽⁷³⁾ Although historical relativism means despair to Troeltsch, Niebuhr rather accepts it as a starting point of his theological inquiry.

Niebuhr believes that theology should be *confessional* and *communal*. These are the conditions for theocentric relativism. In *The Meaning of Revelation* Niebuhr divides history into two: the *outer history* and the *inner history*.⁽⁷⁴⁾ "In external history we deal with objects; in internal history our concern is with subjects."⁽⁷⁵⁾ Whilst external history is "I-it" history "as a realm of the pure reason, internal history is "I-Thou" history "as a sphere of

the pure practical reason.”⁽⁷⁶⁾ Confessional and communal Christian theology belongs to the internal history.⁽⁷⁷⁾

He asserts that our statement about God is to be the statement of faith, and rejects so-called neutral and objective statement about God.⁽⁷⁸⁾ He supports Luther: “At the beginning of the modern era Luther vigorously and repeatedly affirmed that God and faith belonged together so that all statements about God which are made from some other point of view than that of faith in him are not really statements about him at all.”⁽⁷⁹⁾ Niebuhr believes that Christian theology must be dependent on God and therefore “every effort to deal with the subject [revelation] must be resolutely confessional.”⁽⁸⁰⁾ “There seems to be no way of avoiding such static and deistic interpretations of the revelation idea . . . save by the acceptance of the confessional form of theology. . . . A revelation which leaves man without defense before God cannot be dealt with except in confessor’s terms.”⁽⁸¹⁾

Although Niebuhr does not deny apologetic theology, he correctly deems that it should be secondary to kerygmatic or confessional theology: “Such defense may be innocuous when it is strictly subordinated to the main task of living toward our ends, but put into the first place it becomes more destructive of religion, Christianity and the soul than any foe’s attack can possibly be.”⁽⁸²⁾

Although Niebuhr’s relativism is confessional, it is not mere individualistic subjectivism. It has an objective aspect within internal history. Niebuhr believes: “[Christian theology] must ask what revelation means for Christians rather than what it ought to mean for all men, everywhere and at all times.”⁽⁸³⁾ His relativism stands “with confidence in the independent reality of what is seen, though recognizing that its assertions about that reality are meaningful only to those who look upon it from the same standpoint.”⁽⁸⁴⁾ This is an objective aspect.

Rejecting individualistic subjectivism, Niebuhr suggests *communal* theology. He states: “We can proceed only by stating in simple, confessional form what has happened to us in our community, how we came to believe, how we reason about things and what we see from our point of view.”⁽⁸⁵⁾ Internal history “can only be confessed by the community.”⁽⁸⁶⁾ He summarises his position, emphasising the significance of communal narrative:

Christian theology must begin today with revelation because it knows that men cannot think about God save as historic, communal beings and save as believers. . . . And it can pursue its inquiry only by recalling the story of Christian life and by analyzing what Christians see from their limited point of view in history and faith.⁽⁸⁷⁾

Thus, Niebuhr emphasises the confessional and communal aspect of theology.⁽⁸⁸⁾

In the past, theologies directly appealed to nature, intuition, or the Scriptures. However Niebuhr is convinced that looking at external nature, internal intuition, or even the Scriptures cannot be a basis of theology if they are not interpreted from the perspective of Christian faith.⁽⁸⁹⁾ Rejecting external objectivity and merely internal subjectivity, Niebuhr upholds “the theology of revelation,” which is based on what we see in our relativity.⁽⁹⁰⁾ In spite of our limit and relativity, God has disclosed Himself to us in history, particularly through Jesus Christ to the full extent; and such knowledge of the absolute gives us confidence, and guides us to humility or acknowledgement of our limit. “Just because faith knows of an absolute standpoint it can therefore accept the relativity of the believer’s situation and knowledge. If we have no faith in the absolute faithfulness of God-in-Christ, it will doubtless be difficult for us to discern the relativity of our faith.”⁽⁹¹⁾ Thus theocentric relativism is an acknowledgement of our relativity because of our faith in the absolute and infinite God, who reveals Himself to us as reality despite our relativity. This is a significant characteristic of Niebuhr’s theology.

It is to be noted that the meaning of being confessional and communal in Niebuhr’s theology slightly changes in the later period. As mentioned above, Niebuhr divides internal history and external history in *The Meaning of Revelation* (1941). This is due to the Kantian separation of pure reason and practical reason. Niebuhr treats revelation as a matter of the inner history; confessional and communal theology also belongs to the internal history. Such a modern dualism unhealthily divides the self instead of uniting it. It also leaves the external history untouched by Christian faith. In *The Responsible Self* (1963), however, we see that Niebuhr later tries to overcome

this dualism by the concept of the “responsible self” as a whole person responding to God in all aspects of life.⁽⁹²⁾ He says: “In religious language, the soul and God belong together; or otherwise stated, I am one within myself as I encounter the One in all that acts upon me.”⁽⁹³⁾ He humbly presents this suggestion:

It may be that the general problem which we have tried to solve with the use of these two familiar distinctions [facts and values] can be brought to our attention in a slightly different perspective with this view of ourselves as responsible beings, though it remains doubtful whether the ultimate problem of the unity of the self can be solved by means of this approach entirely more satisfactorily than it has been by means of the older distinctions.⁽⁹⁴⁾

Thus in the later period, Niebuhr does not regard revelation and being confessional and communal as simply matters of internal history. However the confessional and communal aspect continues to occupy a significant role in his theocentric relativism.

John Howard Yoder criticises Niebuhr’s relativism in defence of ‘radicals’ on the ground that the New Testament and most classical theology insist that God’s will can be known to us. He says, “God’s transcendence is namely the ground of the assurance that our knowledge of God’s call . . . is reliable and binding because, even though partial, it comes from God when it encounters us in Christ,” whilst for Niebuhr “the transcendence of God is a code term to reinforce our uncertainty about the normativity of the incarnation.”⁽⁹⁵⁾

It is certainly true that orthodox Christian tradition tells us that God’s will is fully revealed in Christ, whose life and teaching are the norm for every Christian. However the interpretation of the New Testament and its application do vary according to people; and the interpretation and application are entrusted to the church which is also historical and diverse. God actualises His purpose in spite of human shortcomings and diverse Christian beliefs. Niebuhr’s severe criticism of the radicals, to which Yoder belongs, is directed against their arrogant attitude that only they know the truth, denying human diversity and fallibility.

Moreover Niebuhr's relativism does not necessarily affirm that all five types are "equally true" as Yoder assumes.⁽⁹⁶⁾ Some are described as better than others. Niebuhr nevertheless believes that God works also through those who have different convictions from him. We are to *confess* our own conviction with confidence and humility, and not to force it on other people as *the* Christian truth, neglecting our fallibility and diversity. As Niebuhr says, we are not in the position to declare *the* Christian answer. Sheep know the voice of their good Shepherd, and we should trust the providence of God in history. If our purpose or activity is of human origin, it will fail; yet if it is from God, no one will be able to stop it.⁽⁹⁷⁾ We should remain in the position of witness but not in the seat of the judge. Niebuhr in his typology takes the pluralistic stance that we need all five types because of his theocentric relativist conviction that humans cannot have the absolute form of Christianity. It is noted in the Acknowledgements, continually repeated in the discussion of types, and again confirmed in the final chapter of the book. In spite of his favourable attitude toward the conversionist type, he is determined not to give the final answer, showing a respect for every type.⁽⁹⁸⁾

The theocentric relativism reminds us of the incompleteness of the churches. Although a concrete Christian community should be a locus for Christian theology and actual Christian living, its elevation to the infinite position is a fatal mistake. The better a church is and the more we commit ourselves to a church, the more easily such an elevation occurs. It blinds us to the work of the Spirit in other Christian communities and in the world; and it can be nothing but a hindrance to co-operation between the churches. Theocentric relativism safeguards us from such a mistake.

Niebuhr's theocentric relativism is thus a healthy attitude and a significant contribution to Christian ethics. It affirms human fallibility and diversity, and evades claiming a universal validity of a certain interpretation and application of Christian faith. This prevents us from arrogantly self-righteousness theology. Nevertheless it claims the absoluteness of the revelation in confessional and communal form. This is not a broad way but a delicate path on the boundary of the infinite and the finite. Seeking the will of God despite our relativity requires our seriousness and commitment to our community and to our confession. By contrast the lack of seriousness and commitment leads us only to a sceptical relativism.

4. Culture

Niebuhr defines culture in a loose fashion. Culture is “that total process of human activity and that total result of such activity to which now the name, *culture*, now the name civilization, is applied in common speech.” He also calls it “the ‘artificial, secondary environment’ which man superimposes on the natural.” It is what the New Testament writers called “the world,” to which Christians of every generation are bound.⁽⁹⁹⁾ He then gives four characteristics of culture: it is “social,” a “human achievement,” “a world of values,” and a place of “pluralism.”⁽¹⁰⁰⁾

However, Yoder insists that Niebuhr, without noting it, redefines culture as “a given non-Christian civilization to the exclusion of the cultural productivity of Christians,” or as a “majority position of a given society.”⁽¹⁰¹⁾ Yoder’s own Mennonite perspective is the basis for this judgement; for he is sensitive to the Mennonites’ contribution to culture and objects to the fact that Niebuhr simply puts them into the ‘against culture’ category.

Counter-attacking, Yoder argues that Niebuhr presupposes two characteristics of culture without stating or justifying them: it is “monolithic” and “autonomous.” Yoder disputes this on the ground that culture is not monolithic or autonomous in relation to Christ.⁽¹⁰²⁾ He continues that when culture is assumed to be monolithic, then given Niebuhr’s types, one should either reject culture totally, or accept it all, or keep it all with Christ in paradox, or transform it all. Otherwise one must be considered inconsistent, and this is precisely the accusation Niebuhr levels at theologians.

Yoder is partially correct that Niebuhr assumes that culture is monolithic and autonomous. In the discussion of culture Niebuhr tends to grasp culture comprehensively, which gives a monolithic impression.⁽¹⁰³⁾ Niebuhr sets up the problem as a matter of two poles: Christ and culture. Here culture appears to be a solid object ‘out there’ rather than a complex entity. Niebuhr assumes that radicals always rejected culture and states: “For the radical Christian the whole world outside the sphere where Christ’s Lordship is explicitly acknowledged is a realm of equal darkness.”⁽¹⁰⁴⁾ Moreover Niebuhr’s “dualist joins the radical Christian in pronouncing the whole world of human culture to be godless and sick unto death.”⁽¹⁰⁵⁾ Here

again he seems to consider culture monolithic. For these two types, culture is foreign to Christ, and therefore it is autonomous of Christ. Thus Yoder's observation of Niebuhr's assumption that culture is monolithic and autonomous is to this extent correct.

Just as Niebuhr's comprehension of historical figures is not fully accurate, so his assumption of the monolithic and autonomous nature of culture is not accurate for radical and dualist Christians. Radicals, for example, selectively accept some elements in the given culture. Tertullian uses pagan philosophy to express his thought,⁽¹⁰⁶⁾ and Tolstoy discriminates good art from bad art. Their attitude is constantly selective. They end up, it is true, not accepting many aspects of the majority opinion of the society, but they never reject culture as a whole. There is, says Yoder, nothing reprehensible in this; this "inconsistency" is not "a logical or moral flaw."⁽¹⁰⁷⁾ Niebuhr says that Paul's ethics is not solely derived from the teaching of Christ, but is "based on common notions of what was right and fitting, on the Ten Commandments, on Christian tradition, and on Paul's own common sense."⁽¹⁰⁸⁾ However, Paul does not take his ethics from just any part of culture, but carefully chooses some elements of cultural wisdom which could be used for Christian ethics. He takes a selective attitude. The dualists also have a selective attitude. In reality Christians similarly have taken a selective attitude toward culture in history.

However Yoder is wrong to consider that Niebuhr consistently adhered to the idea of a monolithic and autonomous culture in his survey.⁽¹⁰⁹⁾ For we find that Niebuhr says: "Cultural Christians note that there are great differences among the various movements in society; and by observing these they not only find points of contact for the mission of the church, but also are enabled to work for the reformation of the culture."⁽¹¹⁰⁾ Cultural Christians select "from his [Christ's] teaching and action as well as from the Christian doctrine about him [Christ] such points as seem to agree with what is best in civilization," and "harmonize Christ and culture, not without excision, of course, from New Testament and social custom, of stubbornly discordant features."⁽¹¹¹⁾ This implies that they ought selectively to accept what is to be affirmed in culture.

Whilst cultural Christians select both from culture and Christian perspectives, synthesists see culture more through Christ in their selection

and are discriminating in their cultural selection. Clement understands that, as a motivation of economic activities, “stoic detachment and Christian love are not contradictory” although they are distinct.⁽¹¹²⁾ It is obvious that stoicism is chosen out of many philosophical thoughts. “His [Clement’s] Christ . . . uses its [culture’s] best product as instruments.”⁽¹¹³⁾ Aquinas likewise selectively accepts Aristotelian philosophy out of countless human thoughts.

The transformationists are ambiguous in their treatment of culture. The fourth gospel, with its exclusive tendency, assumes that transformation is limited to the few. Augustine too does not pursue a theology of thoroughly transforming culture. Therefore they are considered inconsistent by Niebuhr. They selectively choose some elements of culture for transformation. They believe that although salvation is possible for any human, not everyone goes through the narrow gate.

Maurice is a better example of the transformation type for Niebuhr. He takes a somewhat monolithic approach to culture and insists on an inclusive position: the conversion of all humankind. The transformation requires humility to acknowledge Christ as the head and willingness to participate in His kingdom. However he believes that the whole world will be converted at the end because God cannot fail in His work. Although the acknowledgement and participation are conscious acts, which each aspect of culture has to select individually, Maurice does have a strong monolithic flavour of culture in his idea of universal conversion.

Thus definition of culture changes according to theologians. ‘Monolithic’ is more applicable to some than others. Niebuhr expects accommodationist, synthesist, and some transformist Christians selectively to accept some elements of culture. Likewise in those three cases, Christ’s divine nature as the Creator and the Sustainer of the world is more emphasised than radical and dualist types, and culture is not autonomous of Christ. The degree of such acceptance varies according to the type. Niebuhr’s vagueness of definition and his simple two-pole setting of Christ and culture to cover all five types obscure the complexities.

In sum, Yoder is quite right that culture can never be monolithic. Culture is a name given to an extremely complex human product, and there is no such thing as a block of culture ‘out there.’ Christians throughout

history have selectively dealt with different aspects of culture. Although Niebuhr does not always deal with culture as monolithic, and culture actually is never monolithic, he sets up the Christ-culture problem with two poles in such a way that culture appears monolithic and independent of Christ. The sheer breadth of his definition of culture inescapably creates the impression that culture is considered monolithic.

5. Christ

Niebuhr defines Christ in a loose sense just like the case of culture. As culture is described as one pole, Christ appears to be the other pole. Some scholars question this two pole setting. Douglas F. Ottati notes: "It seems equally important to ask not just about the adequacy of the five types, but also about the appropriateness of the theological polarities in terms of which the types are constructed."⁽¹¹⁴⁾ Moreover Yoder sharply criticises the polarity setting.

Jesus has become in sum one of the poles of a dualism. It is we . . . who shall judge to what extent we give our allegiance to him and to what extent we let his critical claims be conditioned by our acceptance of other values, within the culture, which He in principle calls us to turn away from. We also are in charge of defining the other pole of the dualism. . . . (According to Niebuhr) we still have the last word; Christ does not. Jesus is very important; Lord he is not, if "Lord" denotes an ultimate claim.⁽¹¹⁵⁾

Yoder claims that Christ must not be simply one pole because such a Christ is a reduction of the Christ in the New Testament. In consideration of this critique, we have to answer two questions: whether Niebuhr's Christ is always just one of two poles; and whether Niebuhr's Christ is a reduction of the Christ of the New Testament, and therefore inadequate.

5.1. One of Two Poles?

To the first question I would like to suggest that Niebuhr's Christ is not always simply one of the two poles. Although Niebuhr's Christ is described as one pole, the simple two-pole framework appears only in the chapters of the "enduring problem," "Christ against culture," and "Christ and culture in paradox," where culture appears monolithic and autonomous from Christ. However since the theologians covered in his survey had different understandings, the Christ accordingly changes as Niebuhr describes other types of Christianity.

The radicals' Christ was the closest to that of the New Testament among the five types. Their Christ has an absolute authority, which demands His Lordship above all creatures. His exclusive divine aspect has a keen tension over against the fallen world. The Christ of the dualist Christians has an absolute power and authority as divine. He condemns the fallen world, but commands Christians to endure there, pursuing their responsibility for society. The world is too fallen for Christ to transform it completely until the very end of history. In these two cases Christ clearly becomes one pole.

However, in the other three cases Christ is not simply the other side against the world. The Christ of cultural Christians is the furthest from the New Testament and has very little tension with the world.⁽¹¹⁶⁾ Their Christ is a good teacher. He does not condemn sins and has little Lordship or divinity. He is almost a part of culture, and thus there is very little polarity in Him. The Christ of the synthesists has more tension with culture than the Christ of cultural Christians. However He is to affirm the goodness of nature rather than to judge it. The Christ of the transformationists has absolute power and authority. Their Christ has two aspects. On one hand He tells the world what needs to be transformed; on the other hand He is the Creator and the Sustainer of the world. The inclusive divine aspect of their Christ is emphasised more than any other type; the Son participates in creation and the Father participates in the redemptive work of the Son.⁽¹¹⁷⁾ This Christ is not simply one pole but He also supports the other pole.

Thus Christ is not always described as one of the two poles. Christ can be a part of culture (accommodationist); and Christ can be a transcendent

Creator and Sustainer of culture (conversionist). Niebuhr does not give a precise definition of Christ, which is probably due to a variety of understandings by theologians.

5.2. Reduction of New Testament Christ?

Now we have to discuss the other aspect of Yoder's claim that Niebuhr's Christ is a reduction of the Christ of the New Testament and therefore inappropriate. Yoder states, although the "radical" position is the one which comes closest to what the introductory chapter had told us about the teachings and nature of Jesus" and "to which reference is constantly made in the course of the later discussion," it is most fundamentally challenged and its historical treatment is most unfair.⁽¹¹⁸⁾ "H. Richard Niebuhr is committed, in addition to his sincere loyalty to the Jesus Christ of the New Testament, to the independent value of certain 'other sources' of moral judgment. They are not autonomous over against God, but they are independent of Jesus."⁽¹¹⁹⁾ Yoder further states that since Niebuhr's Christ "points away"⁽¹²⁰⁾ from the cultural realm, it needs "the corrective of a 'more balanced' position."⁽¹²¹⁾ Niebuhr thinks, according to Yoder, that "the New Testament's critical judgment on creaturely rebellion must be redefined so that it need not be taken seriously as an alternative but only as one perspective among several."⁽¹²²⁾ Yoder thus argues from the radical viewpoint that Niebuhr's Christ is not the Christ of the New Testament with radical authority and commands, but merely "a straw man."⁽¹²³⁾

Yoder further censures Niebuhr's understanding of the Trinity. He asserts that there is a tension in Niebuhr's Trinitarian thought between Christ (His radical teaching), and the Father (origin of the goodness of nature) and the Spirit (divine providence in history), and gives a sharp critique of it. He says that although the doctrine of the Trinity was meant to "safeguard the unity" of the Father, the Son, and the Spirit, Niebuhr rather affirms the distinctions or complementary differentiations between them.⁽¹²⁴⁾ Thus Yoder insists that both Niebuhr's Christ and his Trinity are distorted. Since Yoder assumes that Niebuhr's five types are not descriptive but normative to lead the reader to the transformation type, we should focus on the Christ of the transformationist in this discussion, excluding the Christ of

the other four types.⁽¹²⁵⁾

Since we cannot separate Niebuhr's Christ from the doctrine of the Trinity, we assess Niebuhr's Christ and his understanding of the Trinity together.⁽¹²⁶⁾ Stassen insightfully asserts that Niebuhr's implicit backbone is his Trinitarian understanding of the sovereignty of God. Stassen traces Niebuhr's life story, and convincingly argues that the sovereignty of God is the predominant subject in Niebuhr's theology, and it contains three essential themes: "(1) the reality of God's rule in and over all, including the bitter and the tragic; (2) the independence of the living God from subjective values and human institutions, which God judges; and (3) the redemptive manifestation of God in Christ, within our real history."⁽¹²⁷⁾ Stassen shows how often and profoundly these three themes appeared in Niebuhr's writings, including *The Kingdom of God in America*, in which Niebuhr sought transforming faith in American history, and *C&C*, in which transformation is a key concept.⁽¹²⁸⁾ There seems no reason to doubt the significance of the three themes in Niebuhr's theology particularly in relation to transformation.

In the discussion of Christ in *C&C*, Niebuhr describes the Son in relation to God; Christ should not stand alone but as Son of the Father.⁽¹²⁹⁾ Although he does not explicitly mention the Spirit in the chapter, the Spirit seems to be implied there and appears in the later chapters. Niebuhr's critique of the radicals and affirmation of the conversionists are based on his Trinitarian approach that the radicals, being Unitarians of the Son, fail to see good nature in culture, whilst conversionists acknowledge it, along with cultural Christians. Stassen is correct to say that this "three-fold or Trinitarian understanding of the sovereignty of God" is Niebuhr's criterion in assessing the five types.⁽¹³⁰⁾ "His [Niebuhr's] criteria are the three dimensions of the sovereignty of God he has consistently advocated."⁽¹³¹⁾

We cannot help receiving an impression from *C&C* that the radical teaching of Christ in the New Testament is somewhat moderated by the abstractness of the Father and the Spirit. Yoder is right in pointing it out. However the moderation is not because of Niebuhr's commitment to "other sources" independent of Christ as Yoder asserts. In fact, Niebuhr takes the Christ of the New Testament seriously. He clearly states: "The fact remains that the Christ who exercises authority over Christians or whom Christians

accept as authority is the Jesus Christ of the New Testament; and that this is a person with definite teachings, a definite character, and a definite fate.” He also says that although the understanding of Jesus Christ may differ according to one’s position “there always remain the original portraits with which all later pictures may be compared and by which all caricatures may be corrected.”⁽¹³²⁾ For Yoder the moderation appears to be a reduction of the New Testament Christ, a tension within the Trinity, and Niebuhr’s commitment to other sources. However it is rather to be regarded as a tension within Christ. Niebuhr uses expressions like “God-in-Christ” and “Christ-in-God,”⁽¹³³⁾ in signifying Christ’s participation in the Creation and God’s participation in the Incarnation, Death, Cross, and the Resurrection,⁽¹³⁴⁾ and he does not sharply distinguish Christ from the Father and the Spirit. Naturally culture is not totally alien to Christ-in-God. Niebuhr’s culture is not autonomous from Christ; although he seeks values also outside the New Testament, they are not independent of Christ the Creator.⁽¹³⁵⁾ Instead of a tension within the Trinity, it is a tension between Jesus Christ who revealed Himself in the first century Palestine window and Christ-in-God and Christ-in-Spirit as the second Person of the Trinity. Using Stassen’s three themes, we can state that God’s concrete disclosure in Christ (the third principle) is weakened by God’s absolute rule over the world (the first principle) and God’s dynamic transcendency beyond our comprehension (the second principle). We cannot simply call it a reduction of the New Testament Christ; for the New Testament does testify not only to the humanity of Christ but also to His eternal nature and active participation in the Creation.⁽¹³⁶⁾ Nevertheless it is a problem that Niebuhr does not discuss the relationship or priority between the two; for it can open the door to diluting the radical teaching of Christ not by His transcendent nature but by our own reason, common sense, or even convenience. When we face the radical teaching of Christ, we very often give the final authority not to Him but to ourselves, compromising such teaching.

Niebuhr’s three-fold understanding sounds perfectly orthodox. For sure he carefully avoids the pitfall of an Unitarianism of the Son. He warns against overemphasis on Christ in Christian theology, and says that he must reject “the tendency in much postliberal theology to equate theology with Christology and to base on a few passages of the New Testament a new

unitarianism of the second person of the Trinity.”⁽¹³⁷⁾ Niebuhr rejects the idea that theology “substitute[s] the Lordship of Christ for the Lordship of God” and that “theology is turned into Christology.”⁽¹³⁸⁾ He particularly sees the problems of the Unitarianism of the Son in its exclusiveness. Since the Son always sought the will of the Father and glorified Him, we should not focus only on the Son, ignoring the Father.

Nevertheless although Niebuhr intends to hold to the Christ of the New Testament, in reality the concrete and radical teaching of Christ does not at all occupy a significant role in C&C. We must therefore seek a way to hold the orthodox Trinitarian understanding of Christ without losing a sharp edge of the teaching of Christ in the New Testament. As a result Niebuhr’s theology leaves the final authority, not to Christ, but to us to judge right decisions. Niebuhr was too reluctant to give concrete ethics even in confessional and communal form.⁽¹³⁹⁾ Although his theocentric relativism or permanent revolution may dissuade him from being concrete, he still can and should present concrete suggestions in confessional and communal form. Christian ethics should seek the direction of the concrete to be effective as much as possible. Christ’s teaching, His life, and other New Testament teaching are concrete. Although our efforts in concrete expression of ethics are relative and incomplete, mere abstract ethics can hardly transform the world.

Notes

- (1) Tillich 1955, 5. Tillich says, “Wherever the divine is manifest, it is manifest in ‘flesh,’ that is, in a concrete, physical, and historical reality, as in the religious receptivity of the biblical writers.”
- (2) Niebuhr 1975.
- (3) Niebuhr 1986.
- (4) Professor Claude Welch sometimes called Troeltsch the first 21st century theologian in his Ph.D. seminar at Graduate Theological Union in Berkeley. Garrett E. Paul also writes in the “Introduction to the English Edition” of Troeltsch’s *The Christian Faith*: “The man once thought to be the last theologian of the nineteenth century may yet turn out to be the first theologian of the twentieth — or even the

- twenty-first.” Troeltsch 1991, xvi.
- (5) Troeltsch 1972, 92-93. He especially recognises Judaism, Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, Platonism, and Indian philosophy of religion.
 - (6) Welch 1985, 282-289. Welch discusses the development of Troeltsch’s thought on the issue of the absoluteness of Christianity.
 - (7) Troeltsch 1931; Niebuhr 1975, xii.
 - (8) Niebuhr 1957, vii.
 - (9) Niebuhr 1959, ix.
 - (10) Niebuhr 1960a, vii.
 - (11) Tobo 1980, 129-134.
 - (12) Niebuhr 1960b.
 - (13) Niebuhr 1978, 126.
 - (14) Niebuhr 1978, 25.
 - (15) Yoder 1996.
 - (16) Professor Glen H. Stassen, a co-author of *Authentic Transformation* with Yoder, kindly forwarded my electric mail question to Yoder, if he had seen any serious response to “How H. Richard Niebuhr Reasoned.” Yoder replied: “I HAVE SEEN NO SERIOUS RESPONSE ANYWHERE.” Yoder suddenly passed away in his office in the morning of 30 December 1997, shortly after he had answered my inquiry.
 - (17) I plan on writing H. Richard Niebuhr and John Howard Yoder’s theologies engaged in the transforming culture in the near future in the light of a believers’ church perspective.
 - (18) Niebuhr 1975, 11.
 - (19) Another significant subject for Niebuhr is “transformation.”
 - (20) Niebuhr 1975, 50.
 - (21) Niebuhr sees its typical examples in the First Letter of John, Tertullian, and Leo Tolstoy. I John says: “Do not love the world or the things in the world. The love of the Father is not in those who love the world.” (I John 2:15.) The second century representative, Tertullian, believed that sin dwelt in culture, and therefore, it is alleged, rejected culture. (Niebuhr 1975, 52.) Tolstoy interpreted the New Testament literally and sought to obey the law of Christ in it. (Niebuhr 1975, 58.) He discarded every aspect of culture except for the arts. Being an artist, he could not totally reject the arts! (Niebuhr 1975, 60-63.) Niebuhr also alludes to the monastic movement, Protestant sectarianism, Wiclif, and Kierkegaard in this category. (Niebuhr 1975, 56, 65.)
 - (22) Niebuhr 1975, 45, 65-68.
 - (23) Niebuhr 1975, 66-67.
 - (24) Niebuhr 1975, 69.
 - (25) Niebuhr 1975, 71-76, 78

- (26) Niebuhr 1975, 79-82.
- (27) Niebuhr 1983, 152.
- (28) Niebuhr 1975, 83-88.
- (29) Niebuhr 1975, 41.
- (30) Niebuhr 1975, 111-112.
- (31) Niebuhr observes this type of Christianity in various people: Jewish Christians who tried to hold Christian faith and Jewish tradition, Christian Gnostics, AbŹlard, and Culture-Protestantism (Protestant Liberalism). (Niebuhr 1975, 84-91.)
- (32) Niebuhr 1975, 104.
- (33) Niebuhr 1975, 104.
- (34) Niebuhr 1975, 105.
- (35) "Jesus Christ has many aspects." (Niebuhr 1975, 107.)
- (36) Mark 12:34.
- (37) Niebuhr 1975, 109-110.
- (38) Niebuhr 1975, 108-109.
- (39) Niebuhr 1975, 112-115.
- (40) Niebuhr 1975, 117-119.
- (41) Niebuhr lists Clement of Alexandria and Thomas Aquinas as typical examples of this type. Clement lived in the period when Christians were still in a minority; therefore his interest was limited to the "culture of Christians" rather than the "Christianization of culture." (Niebuhr 1975, 128.) While maintaining a distinctive Christian faith, Clement believed that Christians were to attain cultural virtue and good cultural disciplines were to be kept in the church. Aquinas is the most typical representative of the synthesist type. He worked on a Christian culture involving the whole of Medieval society. His Christianity is often considered to have two storeys. While his Christ was far above culture, his ground floor is controlled by the wisdom of culture.
- (42) Niebuhr 1975, 143-145.
- (43) Niebuhr 1975, 145-146.
- (44) Niebuhr 1975, 152-156.
- (45) Niebuhr 1975, 157-159.
- (46) The Apostle Paul and Martin Luther represent this type. While proclaiming the distinctive Christian message, Paul utilised cultural wisdom for practical matters. (Niebuhr 1975, 164-165.) Such a cultural Christian ethics was based on reason and wisdom of the culture. Although these did not contradict the Hebrew Scriptures and the teachings of Jesus, they were at best only non-vicious and could not be virtuous. After all, Paul was preoccupied with the kingdom of God; and for him matters of this world are secondary or worthless in comparison to the kingdom. Luther distinguishes two kingdoms: the kingdom of God filled with grace and

mercy, and the kingdom of the world filled with wrath and severity. (Niebuhr 1975, 171.) Niebuhr asserts:

“More than any great Christian leader before him, Luther affirmed the life in culture as the sphere in which Christ could and ought to be followed; and more than any other he discerned that the rules to be followed in the cultural life were independent of Christian or church law.” (Niebuhr 1975, 174.)

However he believed that these two kingdoms are closely related, and tried to hold them in tension without separating them. He did not “divide what he distinguishes.” (Niebuhr 1975, 172.)

- (47) Niebuhr 1975, 186-189.
- (48) Yoder 1996, 39.
- (49) Niebuhr 1975, 191-196.
- (50) Such a motif appears in the Fourth Gospel, the theologies of Augustine of Hippo, and F.D. Maurice. Although the Gospel of John clearly expresses the fall, the creation is essentially good since it is God’s work through Christ. (Niebuhr 1975, 196-206) The fall is the perversion of the goodness of the creation. Although he indicates the end of history, his major emphasis is on the eternal now or the existential moment. Thus Niebuhr sees John’s concern with the divine transformation of the human in the present time. Nevertheless John did not mix the Church and the world outside, and thought that such a transformation was possible only to the few. In this sense, Niebuhr says, he had an exclusivist flavour.
- (51) Niebuhr 1975, 206-217.
- (52) Niebuhr 1975, 209.
- (53) Niebuhr 1975, 216-217.
- (54) Maurice 1884b, 576.
- (55) Niebuhr 1975, 224.
- (56) Niebuhr 1975, 228.
- (57) Niebuhr 1975, 226.
- (58) Maurice 1884b, 577; Niebuhr 1975, 226.
- (59) Niebuhr sometimes uses the term “historical relativism” in a positive sense, in which it is the same as “theocentric relativism.” See for example, Stassen 1996, 150-151. However “theocentric relativism” expresses both our relativity and the reality of what we see more appropriately than “historical relativism.”
- (60) Niebuhr 1960a, 16.
- (61) Niebuhr 1975, 238.
- (62) Niebuhr 1960a, 13.
- (63) Niebuhr 1975, xii.
- (64) Welch 1985, 287-289.
- (65) Niebuhr 1960a, vii.

- (66) Niebuhr 1960a, 18.
- (67) Niebuhr 1960a, 16.
- (68) Niebuhr's critical attitude toward subjectivism can be seen as early as 1927. Tobo 1980, 44-45.
- (69) Tillich 1941, 455.
- (70) Niebuhr 1975, 241.
- (71) Niebuhr 1960a, 21.
- (72) Niebuhr 1960a, x.
- (73) Although Niebuhr enthusiastically supports Barth's confessional and communal approach, he does not fully accept Barth's theology. Barth was reacting against human-centred liberalism, and inclines to overemphasise the transcendence of God and to neglect God's interaction with humans in the relativity of history. Niebuhr says: "If an anthropocentric mode of thought tried to define religion within the limits of humanity then this purely theocentric approach tends to present a faith within the limits of deity." Niebuhr 1931, 420-421.
- (74) This may be Troeltsch's influence since "Troeltsch makes a methodological distinction between the self-understanding of contemporaries or those involved and a verdict coming from outside." Drescher 1993, 289-290.
- (75) Niebuhr 1960a, 64.
- (76) Niebuhr 1960a, 65.
- (77) H. Richard Niebuhr with this inner history became a forerunner of narrative theology along with Karl Barth. Barth's understanding of the revelation is two-fold: objective and subjective. God once in history revealed Himself in the event of the Incarnation; and the revelation is experienced in the present by the individuals and communities. Barth believed that the objective event in the past could become a subjective experience although he did not explain how it could happen. Barth 1956, 203-279, especially 237-240. See also Stroup 1981, 48, 51, 266.
- (78) Niebuhr 1960a, 37.
- (79) Niebuhr 1960a, 23.
- (80) Niebuhr 1960a, 40.
- (81) Niebuhr 1960a, 41-42.
- (82) Niebuhr 1960a, 39. Niebuhr chose to focus on Karl Barth, instead of Paul Tillich whose theology he studied first, or Emil Brunner who was accepted widely by American theologians. Furuya insightfully suggests that it is because of Niebuhr's conviction that theology should be non-apologetic and confessional. Furuya 1963, 87-89.
- (83) Niebuhr 1960a, 42.
- (84) Niebuhr 1960a, 22.
- (85) Niebuhr 1960a, 41.

- (86) Niebuhr 1960a, 73.
- (87) Niebuhr 1960a, 42.
- (88) See also Niebuhr 1948, 516.
- (89) Kliever 1991, 71.
- (90) Niebuhr 1960a, 37.
- (91) Niebuhr 1975, 239.
- (92) Tobo 1990, 135-136, 157-161. Tobo discusses Niebuhr's shift from a modern dualism of pure reason and practical reason to postmodern integration of them.
- (93) Niebuhr 1978, 122.
- (94) Niebuhr 1978, 83.
- (95) Yoder 1996, 81.
- (96) Yoder 1996, 80.
- (97) John 10:4, 27; Acts 5:38-39.
- (98) See Ottati 1988, 324; Yeager 1996, 104-105; Niebuhr 1975, 233. Cf. Yoder 1996, 41.
- (99) Niebuhr 1975, 32.
- (100) Niebuhr 1975, 32-39.
- (101) Yoder 1996, 56. Charles Scriven also mentions Niebuhr's redefinition of culture. Scriven 1988, 46-47.
- (102) Yoder 1996, 51, 54-57.
- (103) Niebuhr 1975, 29-39.
- (104) Niebuhr 1975, 106.
- (105) Niebuhr 1975, 156.
- (106) Yoder 1996, 56-57.
- (107) Yoder 1996, 54.
- (108) Niebuhr 1975, 165.
- (109) Yoder 1996, 54, 85. Yoder consistently assumes that Niebuhr's culture is monolithic and autonomous till the end of his essay.
- (110) Niebuhr 1975, 106.
- (111) Niebuhr 1975, 83-84.
- (112) Niebuhr 1975, 124.
- (113) Niebuhr 1975, 127.
- (114) Ottati 1988, 325.
- (115) Yoder 1996, 43. Yoder also asserts: "The tension will not be between . . . 'culture' . . . and 'Christ' . . . , but rather between a group of people defined by a commitment to Christ seeking cultural expression of that commitment (on one hand) and (on the other) a group or groups of other people expressing culturally other values which are independent of or contradictory to such a confession. This latter group is what the New Testament calls 'the world.'" Ibid., 74.
- (116) Niebuhr 1975, 108-109.

- (117) Niebuhr 1975, 192.
- (118) Yoder 1996, 42, 46, 61. It is interesting that McDermott, a Roman Catholic theologian, feels that H. Richard Niebuhr is “against the Catholic synthetic position,” and asserts: “Whereas ‘Christ and Culture in Paradox’ had a biblical advocate in St. Paul, ‘Christ the Transformer of Culture’ followed John’s gospel, and even ‘Christ Against Culture’ was based on the *Apocalypse* and *I John*, the Catholic position of ‘Christ Above Culture’ lacked all biblical support.” McDermott, 106-107.
- (119) Yoder 1996, 63.
- (120) Niebuhr 1975, 28.
- (121) Yoder 1996, 60.
- (122) Yoder 1996, 64.
- (123) Yoder 1996, 60.
- (124) Yoder 1996, 62.
- (125) Yoder 1996, 41.
- (126) Cf. Kliever 1991, 138.
- (127) Stassen 1996, 131.
- (128) Stassen 1996, 131-140.
- (129) Niebuhr 1975, 11-29.
- (130) Stassen 1996, 142.
- (131) Stassen 1996, 140.
- (132) Niebuhr 1975, 12, 13.
- (133) For instance, Niebuhr 1975, 192, 249; Niebuhr 1970, 117, 118, 119, 120, 121, 124, 129, 130.
- (134) Niebuhr 1975, 192.
- (135) A significant difference between Niebuhr and Yoder’s Christology is that whilst Niebuhr emphasises the Christ’s Creator aspect as much as the Redeemer aspect, Yoder intensely regards Christ as Messiah and Lord. “These practices [which Yoder suggests as the church’s social ethics] are enabled and illuminated by Jesus of Nazareth, who is confessed as Messiah and as Lord. They are part of the order of redemption, not of creation. . . . The standard account of these matters had told us that in order for Christians to be able to speak to others we need to look less to redemption and more to creation, or less to revelation and more to nature and reason. . . . In the practices I am describing (and the thinking underlying them), the apostolic communities did it the other way around.” Yoder 1994, 370-371.
- (136) Logos Christology is a typical example of this kind.
- (137) Niebuhr 1960c, 250.
- (138) Niebuhr 1960b, 60.
- (139) According to Kliever, “His [Niebuhr’s] early counsels to moral inaction and monastic withdrawal were themselves strategic moves rather than programmatic

policies and even these he later saw to be ill-advise and ineffective.” Kliever 1991, 150.

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