

Author: Paul F. Bosch [paulbosch31@gmail.com]

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CHRIST AND CULTURE

- 1 There are three books that made me who I am.
- 2 I read the first in Muhlenberg College, inspired by my studio art teacher, Mr Cassini. He recommended I read Franz Boas' Primitive Art. Boas is not an artist or art critic. He's an anthropologist, and in this book he studies the art of the Tlingit, the indigenous people of Canada's Northwest Coast, the carvers of the totem poles.
- 3 He asks, in this book, is art primarily what he calls significant or primarily formal? He concludes art is primarily formal, not significant, and he converted me. He gives me freedom to paint the way I do.
- 4 If you were to see a circle with a straight line attached, drawn on a wall in a cave, was the artist trying to signify, to represent, a frying pan? That would be significant. Or did the artist simply enjoy circles and lines? That would be formal.
- 5 The second book that made me who I am is Christ and Culture, by H. Richard Niebuhr, Reinhold's brother. I read it at Philadelphia Seminary. It gave me permission to be a Lutheran. Of this, more in a moment.
- 6 The third book is Liturgy Coming to Life, by the Anglican Bishop of Woolwich, John A.T. Robinson. I read this book five years out of Seminary, at the suggestion of Henry Horn, then Campus Pastor in Cambridge, Massachusetts, and it gave me permission to devote my life to ritual, liturgy, and its treasures. Of this too, perhaps more – in a later posting.
- 7 It's Niebuhr I want to consider in this posting.
- 8 Niebuhr's book traces the history of the relationship between Christ and culture. Culture is the name we give to the demands of our position in life. They're sometimes referred to as the Orders of Creation. Bonhoeffer calls them Mandates of Creation. They each demand something of us. How do the demands of Christ, and Christian faith, address each of them, with their demands?
- 9 There are six aspects to culture. A) Sex and family life, B) the political realm. C) the economic realm, D) the realm of science, technology, education, and medicine, E) the realm of the arts: painting and drawing, music, poetry and prose, the theatre and dance, and even F) leisure time, play, and fun.

10 There are two extreme positions, at either end of a left / right continuum, you might say. And there are three middle and mediating positions, granting a measure of autonomy to each of the Orders listed above. Five in all.

11 Each of the five positions Niebuhr explicates appears in history chronologically. The first position developed during Bible times, the second with Constantine, the third under the popes, the fourth under Luther, and the fifth under Calvin.

12 But you may also find each of the five positions contemporaneous. They're each present today, in one form or another.

13 The FIRST position emphasizes the opposition between Christ and culture. It stands at the far left of our continuum. Christ has come to judge the nations; he presents his followers with an either/or decision. The monastic movement, and today's Mennonites and Quakers, represent this position. To be a Christian means to separate yourself completely from the world and its allurements.

14 The SECOND position, according to Niebuhr, is the exact opposite of the first. It arises long after Christians have been subject to persecutions. And it arises when civic authorities (example: the emperor Constantine) bestow their blessings on Christian faith. This position stands at the far right of our continuum, you might say.

15 This second position emphasizes the agreement between Christ and culture. Christ is seen as a hero of cultural history. There is almost no problem between the demands of Christian faith and the demands of the culture. Whatever culture. Of course Christ blesses family life and structures. Of course a Christian is an obedient patriot. Of course a Christian is a faithful capitalist. Or communist. You get the picture.

16 This second position is the very opposite of the first position. There are no problems or conflicts in living any life within each of the cultural mandates. Each cultural mandate may go its own way, ultimately redeemed by Christ.

17 There are three middle positions. Each of these grants a measure of autonomy to each of the Orders or Mandates of Creation. But they differ significantly.

18 The THIRD position arises from Roman Catholicism. It sees Christ as the sponsor and custodian of culture. The culture – whatever culture – can go its own way, and possesses a certain amount of autonomy. But faith is its custodian.

19 So if any conflict arises between the demands of the culture and the demands of faith, the Pope wins. Faith has the last word. Christ above culture.

20 There is a FOURTH position, the Lutheran. Niebuhr calls this Christ and culture in paradox. The life of faith and the life within culture represent Two Kingdoms. Both represent God's love. Both must be obeyed, and there will be inevitable consequences when they diverge. Your life is walking a tightrope, sometimes falling off to one side or the other. So you must say your prayers. You must ask forgiveness.

21 The Lutheran position tends to use the word "Christian" always as a noun. Never as adjective. There is no such thing as Christian music. Or Christian politics. Or

Christian marriage! Christians DO all these things, of course, in 9 A-F above. But they belong to the Kingdom on God's Left. To the First Article of the Creed. On God's Right is the Kingdom of the Gospel, the Good News. Alone.

22 There is yet a FIFTH and final position in Niebuhr's reckoning. This position owes its origin to Calvin, and it sees Christ as culture's redeemer. This is a conversionist position. It sees the possibility of culture influenced and even redeemed by faith. Niebuhr himself is a Calvinist, not surprisingly.

23 It's worth noting that other Christian bodies – Anglicans, Methodists, United Church, Pentecostals – do not have distinctive theologies, but rather borrow from the five Niebuhr lists. Mostly from Calvin, sometimes from Roman. Almost never from Luther.

24 There are pathologies – my word, not Niebuhr's – to each of the five positions I have sketched out above.

25 The pathology of the first position is that it sees no good whatever in the demands of culture. To be a person of faith means renouncing your culture. At its most extreme, you would not marry. You would not vote or pay tax or serve in the emperor's army. You would beg, rather than participate in your culture's economy. The arts seduce you away from faith. And so on.

26 The pathology of the second position is that it assumes too much of the demands of culture. If the emperor says, "Burn the Jews", you burn the Jews. We have seen the terrible consequences of this position in the 20th Century.

27 The pathology of the third position is its pride, its superbia. It does not honour its culture as it should, in my view. It assumes the First Article of the Creed within the Second Article. It makes its culture redemptive.

28 The pathology of the fourth position is quietism. If the emperor oversteps, those who try to live out the fourth position can be tempted to retreat into passivity.

29 Bonhoeffer in his last years saw the results of the Lutheran Two Kingdom passivity in Nazi Germany, turned in his Lutheran ticket, and effectively became a Calvinist. (Long ago I wrote a paper in Graduate School to this effect – and received an A. From my Calvinist teacher, Gabriel Vahanian!)

30 The pathology of the fifth position is similar to that of the third position above. It tends to put the cross over city hall. It tends to ignore or to debase the First Article of the Creed.

31 Well, there they are. As I have said above, I will happily claim a place within the fourth position, in spite of its pathologies. I believe only the fourth position takes the culture with proper seriousness.

32 And you must be prepared to say your prayers!

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