



Niebuhr's *Christ and Culture*: A Re-examination

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After Gulliver has seen the Grand Academy of Lagado and its projectors, he reports on one of them:

There was a most ingenious Architect who had contrived a new Method for building Houses, by beginning at the Roof, and working downwards to the Foundation; which he justified to me by the like Practice of those two prudent Insects the Bee and the Spider.¹

Nations are often compared to houses. Accordingly, it is inviting to ask what the difference is between what this architect attempted and the attempt to interpret a nation and its culture, or “culture” generally, from an abstract point of view. Gulliver’s observation suggests the appropriateness of this question to a reconsideration of *Christ and Culture*.²

Niebuhr’s definition of that problem seems clear enough. He tells us that the problem is not found in the relationship of “civilization” and Christianity, “whether defined as church, creed, ethics, or movement of thought,” because Christianity “itself moves between the poles of Christ and culture”; and so “the relation of these two authorities [Christ and culture] constitutes its problem” (11).

But everything depends on how these dual authorities are defined, for their definition will affect the results of the investigation:

We shall need to exercise care lest we prejudice the issue by so defining one term or the other or both that only one of the Christian answers to be described will appear legitimate. (11)

¹Jonathan Swift, *Gulliver’s Travels*, ed. Herbert Davis (Oxford: Blackwell, 1959) 180.

²H. Richard Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture* (New York: Harper, 1951). All subsequent page references to *Christ and Culture* within the body of this essay are enclosed in parentheses.

These definitions might work in another way, however. They might make the problem one-sided by turning it into an exclusively theological exercise instead of emphasizing the alternatives that in fact make it a problem.

“Culture” is innocuous in the argument of *Christ and Culture*, even though it is one of the two “authorities” in that argument. To see that this is so, we turn first to a review of Niebuhr’s definition of “culture” and then to an alternative to this definition before returning to the question

posed here at the beginning.

I. NIEBUHR'S DEFINITION OF CULTURE: ADEQUATE?

Niebuhr modestly borrows his definition of culture from the social science of our day with the hope that it will be theologically neutral to begin with:

it must...be a definition of the phenomenon [of culture] without theological interpretation, for it is just this theological interpretation which is the point at issue among Christians. (30)

So he seeks the most general of all possible definitions of culture, though recognizing that “the general thing appears only in particular forms” (31) and that there are many of these (32). Particularities, however, exclude; and with help from the social scientists he cites, Niebuhr aims to include within his definition any and every thing made by human beings:

What we have in view when we deal with Christ and 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. Culture is the “artificial, secondary environment” which man superimposes on the natural. It comprises language, habits, ideas, beliefs, customs, social organization, inherited artifacts, technical processes, and values. (32)

This is the “culture,” he goes on to say,

which lays its claim on every Christian, and under the authority of which he also lives when he lives under the authority of Jesus Christ. (39)

Not so. To acknowledge the particularity of culture but then to define it in general terms evacuates it of such authority as it may have. As Niebuhr defines it, “culture” might have some highly attenuated authority within academic groves but none beyond it. There are no flags raised to culture and citizens do not salute it when they salute or otherwise honor a flag. Pericles, in his famous Funeral Oration for the Athenian dead, celebrated the accomplishments of a particular city, not of “culture” in general.³

These remarks lead us to observe that the concept of “culture” is itself questionable. It gained currency only in the aftermath of John Locke’s epochal transformation of our understanding of public life. We now take for granted what Locke argued for in the *Second Treatise of Government*, namely, the pattern of a limited government and a free society within which we seek our “comfortable self-preser-

³Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War* 2.34-46, cited from *The Peloponnesian War*, ed. T. E. Wick (New York: Modern Library, 1982) 106-114.

vation” through “acquisitiveness,” the object of which is the property protected for us by that limited government.⁴

This interpretation of our common life supports the belief that there is an entity called “society” which comprehends all human activities of whatever kind, economic, “cultural,” or even political; that this entity is governed by its own laws and that these laws are like the laws governing natural phenomena generally; and that these laws of society can in principle be made the objects of scientific inquiry, from which in turn the very notion of modern social science arises.

However, when that social science lapses out of its customary amnesia and recalls its own origins, it is likely to go back no further than the nineteenth century, to Emile Durkheim or Max Weber and in its grand moments to Tocqueville, or perhaps to the eighteenth century and the much reviled but seldom read Adam Smith. To do more would be to encourage recognition of the fact that its key concepts, such as “society” itself and “culture,” are debatable and to acknowledge the precedence of the history of political philosophy within which those concepts find their natural home.

Consider again the concept of “culture.” It was once associated with the cultivation of the mind. It now refers to any pattern of human behavior and so not simply to the cultivation of the mind. Indeed it may refer to academic culture or to the culture of the mental hospital. Furthermore, the canons of scientific inquiry properly direct us to avoid making “value judgments” among cultures of whatever kind.⁵

If the contestability of “culture” were readmitted into the analysis of Christ and culture, then we might begin to see that this “problem” involves a debate in which the terms are not set entirely by theology, that it is not essentially a theological monologue or a debate within theology about culture.

II. RECOVERING A BASIS FOR THEOLOGICAL TALK ABOUT CULTURE

To help recover the terms of that debate, we might observe that “culture” can be and has been understood as cognate with “constitution,” an obviously political thing. On this understanding of the matter, constitutions give form and direction to culture even as culture acts reciprocally on the constitution and thus affects how it will shape culture in the future.

The American case comes readily to mind. In James Madison’s argument, the chief object of the American constitution would be to protect “the different and unequal faculties of acquiring property,”⁶ the result of that constitutional protection and the very emphasis on property itself being the regime we still have: a “large commercial republic” along with the manners and mores, the “culture” natural to it.

There are other examples: Socrates’ praise of the laws of Athens in the *Crito*

⁴John Locke, *Two Treatises of Government*, ed. Peter Laslett (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1988) 285-302. See also Joseph Cropsey, “Political Life and a Natural Order” in *Political Philosophy and the Issues of Politics* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1977) 221-230; Allan Bloom, “Commerce and ‘Culture,’” *This World* 3 (1982) 5-20; and Sheldon S. Wolin, *Politics and Vision: Continuity and Innovation in Western Political Thought* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1960) 286-351.

⁵Compare Leo Strauss, “What Is Liberal Education?” in *Liberalism Ancient and Modern* (New York: Basic Books, 1968) 3-8.

⁶*The Federalist*, Jacob E. Cooke, ed., No. 10 (Middleton, CT: Wesleyan University, 1961) 58.

and his argument that every Athenian, not least of all himself, is in their debt; or Thucydides’

praise of Athens in Pericles' Funeral Oration already noted, and his claim that the Athenians look upon the death of their young with equanimity because of their love of the city and their recognition that the greatness of the city depends on such sacrifices.⁷ But whether the example be American or Greek, the point remains the same: the political thing, the city and its constitution of life, its creation of a "people," is primary and what we call "culture" but should instead call the "regime" is that constitution of life by another name.⁸

In *Christ and Culture* there are no traces of this understanding of how our lives are constituted, which is why it is useful to emphasize it here. Indeed, when Niebuhr introduces his readers to "the *pluralism* that is characteristic of all culture" (38) and tells them that there are many values in each culture, he concludes by saying:

Among the many values the kingdom of God may be included though scarcely as the one pearl of great price. Jesus Christ and God the Father, the gospel, the church, and eternal life may find places in the cultural complex, but only as elements in the great pluralism. (39)

To which we might add, on the same argument, that the culture of theology or of theologians is also but a part of "the cultural complex," and must be left to take its chances along with all other parts.

To entertain better hopes for the church, we need a different basis for assessing "the problem" of Christ and culture than the one we see Niebuhr borrowing here from today's social science. We have what we need when we recognize ourselves in our common life as constituted, as a people. The next step involves comparing this recognition with the biblical interpretation of our lives as being constituted within the church by baptism. The terms of this comparison would show the problem of Christ and culture in its full dramatic clarity and in all its power. In his analysis of "Christ and Culture in Paradox" (149-189), Niebuhr points us toward such clarity. But this clarity will emerge only after the alternative represented by "culture" in Niebuhr's formulation is more fully understood than it could be from his analysis. And where do we go for that? To make a long story short, that full understanding is available to interested students in Aristotle's political science.

What Aristotle says about education bears directly on the matter of culture. He argues that education is an education in culture and that such education is specific to particular regimes. In Book Five of the *Politics* he observes that such education is the greatest yet least practiced preservative of regimes. It preserves when it corrects the excesses characteristic of particular regimes. Democratic regimes, for example, are defined by "the majority having authority, and freedom"; and, taken to excess, majority rule and freedom are "the opposite of what is advantageous" to them. As a corrective to these tendencies, education in a democracy must be strictly aristocratic. Aristotle has this education in mind when he goes on to argue in Book Eight that education is the first duty of the political community to itself, which is why "the legislator must...make the education of the

⁷Plato, *Crito* 50a-54e; Thucydides, *Peloponnesian War* 2.34-46.

⁸The best analysis of "regime" and related matters is in Leo Strauss, *Natural Right and History* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1953) 135-138.

young his object above all...where this does not happen in cities in hurts the regime.”⁹

It seems altogether necessary to touch on this aspect of Aristotle’s political science both because of what *Christ and Culture* does and does not do. It is a work of theology, not of political science; yet to the extent that it is “interdisciplinary,” it needs Aristotle more than it does contemporary social science. Even more, it is a work of theology that has become a classic in Christian ethics and so has its place in theological education. But at its best it is an incomplete guide to its central problem and so points beyond its formulation of that problem to the need for an education about political things that theological education itself does not provide.

III. PUTTING POLITICAL THINGS BACK IN *CHRIST AND CULTURE*

These remarks bring us to our conclusion and back to the question with which we began. What is missing from Niebuhr’s exposition of the problem of Christ and culture? Its survey of our tradition’s responses to Christ is nimble, lively, and magisterial; but its sense of politics pales by comparison. For lack of that sense, the book touches slightly on “culture,” the second of its two “authorities,” and thus makes that authority seem much less than authoritative.

Politics seems to have disappeared almost entirely from *Christ and Culture*, which, given its central problem, is strange. Culture has usurped the place of politics in his book; but it was and is politics that gives force to the problem Niebuhr addresses. To get a vivid sense of how important this difference is, compare the argument of his book with those parts of Gibbon’s *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* that describe first “the union and discipline of the Christian republic, which gradually formed an independent and increasing state in the heart of the Roman Empire” and then the imperial response to that intestine state.¹⁰ Whatever else may be said about Gibbon’s delicious irony, he shows exactly what is at issue between the two “authorities”: in his *History* we see those authorities clash; in Niebuhr, they coexist peacefully as theoretical constructions.

Politics may be missing from *Christ and Culture*, but it has reappeared in church life today in ways, perhaps, that Niebuhr could not have anticipated. Of course his book survives and still is read, which leaves us with an obvious question. Our theologians are the teachers of the church and so what does this theological book, and those that have followed in its wake, teach us about politics? “Not enough,” is the short answer and it leads us to recognize with Aristotle that in this particular matter such a book “hurts the regime.”

Gulliver might have recognized the results of this unsatisfactory theological dispensation. After all, he saw where the Laputans lived:

Their Houses are very ill built, the Walls bevil, without one right Angle in any Apartment; and this Defect ariseth from the Contempt they bear for practical Geometry; which they despise as vulgar and mechanick, those Instructions they

⁹Aristotle, *The Politics* 1310a and 1337a, tr. Carnes Lord (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1984) 167 and 229. See also Carnes Lord, *Education and Culture in the Political Thought of Aristotle* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University, 1982).

¹⁰Edward Gibbon, *The History of the Decline & Fall of the Roman Empire*, vol. 1, ed. J. B. Bury (New York: Heritage Press, 1946) 348. Chapters 15 and 16 are the most relevant here.

give being too refined for the Intellectuals of their Workmen; which occasions perpetual Mistakes.

As with their houses so also with their politics and for the same reason: both are askew because both are viewed abstractly. They trivialize politics and cannot distinguish it from the news of the day: they had a

strong Disposition...towards News and Politicks; perpetually enquiring into publick Affairs, giving their Judgments in Matters of State; and passionately disputing every inch of a Party Opinion.¹¹

But unlike both these insobrieties and that of their “most ingenious Architect,” our architects (we more often call them the Founders) planned differently. To understand the artifact they created and in turn to understand the place of that artifact in the history of political philosophy will spare us the intemperance and instability of the Laputans and put us in a better position to examine the theological riches of *Christ and Culture*.

¹¹*Gulliver's Travels*, 163-64.