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BEING "IN THE WORLD" BUT "NOT OF THE WORLD": A REFLECTION ON JOHN 17:14–18

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Abstract

While there is an agreement that the fact of culture is common to all people, its relationship to theology, mission, and ministry remains an important discussion topic among theologians, missiologists, ministry professionals, and church members. This article is a biblical and missiological reflection on the concepts of being "in the World" but not "of the World" in John 17:14–18. In the process, Richard Niebuhr's theological paradigms on culture are discussed and a biblical and missiological framework for approaching culture in mission and ministry is suggested.

Keywords: Culture, mission, ministry, incarnation.

Introduction

The topic of culture, especially the need for taking it into consideration in mission and ministry, triggers some uneasiness in some Christian circles. The "in the world" but "not of the world" concepts in John 17:14–18 constitute the basis of the recurrent dilemma involved in the discussion of Christians' attitude to culture.[1] Because the followers of Christ are not of the world, many Christians have taken a negative attitude toward culture. But because believers are also reminded of the fact that they are in the world, some see the need for Christians to interact meaningfully with their culture. There is thus an ongoing conflict among Christians on what their attitude should be toward culture. In their struggle with the practical, everyday issues of life, Christians are confronted by the dilemma of how to be "in the world" but not "of the world."[2] Therefore, an understanding of the role of culture and the Christian attitude toward it is of great importance both

[1]Henry R. Van Til, *The Calvinistic Concept of Culture* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2001), 15.

[2]Craig A. Carter, *Rethinking Christ and Culture: A Post-Christendom Perspective* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2006), 74.

in determining what the Bible says and in communicating the Bible's message in meaningful terms that are understandable by people in various cultural contexts.[3]

Culture is a multifaceted term difficult to exhaustively define. In the context of this article, culture refers to "an interrelated system of thought, belief, morality, ethical principles, social and family structures, and physical products developed by a group in order to organize life in ways which are understandable and workable so that they can survive, attain their valued goals, and successfully adapt to change in their environment."[4] In other words, culture entails the entire way of life of a particular group of people with distinguishable characteristics that set them apart from other human communities. Because culture determines the rules according to which each component of society is to interact with others, anything that is altered in one part of a culture inevitably impacts other parts of that culture.

This article reviews Richard Niebuhr's theological paradigms on culture and then suggests a biblical and missiological framework for approaching culture in mission and ministry.

Richard Niebuhr on Culture

The relationship between theology and culture has been and still remains an important discussion topic among theologians. Although theologians agree that the fact of culture is common to all people, they differ in their understanding of what culture is and its relationship to theology. While some of them see culture "as a source separate from theology to which theology must be correlated," others approach culture "as a term internal to theology."[5] This section discusses the relationship between theology and culture from Richard Niebuhr's perspective. Although Niebuhr's theological paradigms on culture have been heavily critiqued over the years, it is a fact that they have strongly influenced later theological developments on culture, and continue to do so to some degree even today. It is even appropriate to say that the theological world owes a great debt to Niebuhr's seminal work on culture as "perhaps no other book has dominated an entire theological conversation for so long"[6] as his *Christ and Culture*. Thus, *Christ and Culture* serves as the launching point for my perspective on the interaction between Christianity and human culture.

[3]Eunice Okorocha, "Cultural Issues and the Biblical Message," in *Africa Bible Commentary*, ed. Tokunboh Adeyemo (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2006), 1467.

[4]Donald Moorman, *Harvest Waiting* (St. Louis, MO: Concordia, 1999), quoted in William W. Schumacher, "Theology for Culture: Confrontation, Context, and Creation," *Concordia Journal* 42, no. 3 (2016): 214.

[5]D. Stephen Long, *Theology and Culture: A Guide to the Discussion* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2008), 53.

[6]John G. Stackhouse Jr., "In the World, but…" *Christianity Today*, April 22, 2002, http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2002/april22/8.80.html (accessed July 12, 2017).

In his book *Christ and Culture*, Niebuhr presents five paradigms as possible attitudes of Christians to culture: Christ against Culture, Christ of Culture, Christ above Culture, Christ and Culture in Paradox, and Christ the Transformer of Culture.[7]

The *Christ against Culture* position perceives an opposition between Christ and human culture. It stresses that "whatever may be the customs of the society in which the Christian lives, and whatever the human achievements it conserves, Christ is seen as opposed to them, so that he confronts men with the challenges of an 'either-or' decision."[8] In other words, the church must systematically confront its surrounding culture instead of seeking ways to be contextual in its witness to it. As such, true Christians must be very serious about holiness by withdrawing from the world into separate communities of believers.[9] Thus, there seems to be a warfare or adversarial relationship between some Christians and their culture. For those who perceive in culture something inherently hostile to Christian living, culture is an enemy of the church that should be always confronted or shunned.[10]

Some of the early cross-cultural missionaries viewed the way of life of other cultural groups as wholly erroneous and at times even regarded it as their duty to indiscriminately wipe out these cultural groups' religious and cultural practices and replace them with a Western transformed character.[11] The indiscriminate rejection of a people's cultural practices either creates a void that is filled by imported practices leading to the gospel being misunderstood and rejected, or the old religious and cultural practices simply go underground.[12] Whenever cultural practices go underground, believers cognitively assent to orthodox Christian beliefs and join in the public denunciations of their "old" cultural forms, but

[7]Richard H. Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1951).

[8]Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture*, 140.

[9]Thomas K. Johnson, "Christ and Culture," *Evangelical Review of Theology* 35 (2011): 4–7. He cites the Old Order Amish made up of descendants of Swiss and Alsatian Anabaptists of the 16th century as a contemporary example of the advocates for the "Christ against Culture" paradigm.

[10]Schumacher, "Theology for Culture," 212.

[11]Stefan Höschele, *Christian Remnant—African Folk Church: Seventh-day Adventism in Tanzania, 1903-1980* (Boston, MA: Brill, 2007), 262. This is not an attempt to discredit missionaries' achievements. While their service is appreciated, it is also important to point out some of their mistakes so that we do not continue to repeat them today. See also Felix Chingota, "A Historical Account of the Attitude of Blantyre Synod of the Church of Central Africa Presbyterian towards Initiation Rites," in *Rites of Passage in Contemporary Africa: Interaction between Christian and African Traditional Religions*, ed. James L. Cox (Cardiff, UK: Cardiff Academic Press, 1998), 147.

[12]Paul G. Hiebert, *Anthropological Insights for Missionaries* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 1985), 184, 188.

privately retain their loyalty to them especially in times of serious crises.[13] The indiscriminate rejection of other cultural ways of life was often rooted in some missionaries' ethnocentric tendency to associate the gospel with their own culture and, as a result, they judged all other cultural ways as bad. Against this ethnocentric attitude towards other cultures, William Schumacher argues that "the recognition that there are many cultures, and that all of us live and move within a cultural context, means that *none* of us sits on a supercultural or transcultural perch from which we can decisively evaluate cultures, arbitrate cultural differences, or define authoritatively what 'Christian culture' is supposed to look like."[14] Although it is clear that Christ is against the evil elements of every culture and that the *Christ against Culture* paradigm can help identify and strongly object to features of cultures that are incompatible with biblical principles,[15] its "call for separation [into holy communities] tends to minimize the potential influence that Christianity may have for good upon society."[16] Besides, "if we understand 'culture' as the pervasive patterns of life and the assumptions and values that are implicitly shared by a community, one cannot really 'withdraw' from the culture one finds oneself in, any more than a fish can 'withdraw' from the water in which it swims."[17]

The advocates of the *Christ of Culture* position perceive God's total approval of human cultures through the incarnation of Jesus whereby he entered the history and the particularities of the Jewish culture.[18] Here, the outright conflict between Christ and culture gives way to a harmony between the two.[19] By perceiving Christ's incarnation as God's seal of approval of human cultures, the *Christ of Culture* position tends toward an indiscriminate accommodation of all cultural values as it often feels no great tension between the church and the secular world.[20] By doing so it "indirectly minimizes change in the lives of converts whereas the gospel challenges people individually and corporately to turn from their unbiblical practices."[21] Thus, this paradigm opens the door to religious

[13]Jack Partain, "Christians and Their Ancestors: A Dilemma of African Theology," *Christian Century* 103, no. 36 (1986): 1067.

[14]Schumacher, "Theology for Culture," 217.

[15]Ibid., 213.

[16]Rick Allbee, "Christ Witnessing to Culture: Toward a New Paradigm between Christ and Culture," *Stone-Campbell Journal* 8, no. 1 (2005): 18.

[17]Schumacher, "Theology for Culture," 214.

[18]Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture*, 41.

[19]Stackhouse, "In the World, but…"

[20]Tennent, *Invitation to World Missions: A Trinitarian Missiology for the Twenty-First Century* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel, 2010), 161.

[21]Boubakar Sanou, "Religious Syncretism as a Worldwide Mission Challenge: A Biblical and Missiological Response," *Asia-Africa Journal of Mission and Ministry* 8 (2013): 136.

syncretism—"the blending of different (sometimes contradictory) forms of religious beliefs and practices"[22]—as Christians continue to maintain beliefs and practices that stand in conflict with the gospel. By making little distinction between Christ and human culture, this position also tends to drift towards humanism, animism, or whatever the prevailing view is in a given culture.[23] The advocates of the *Christ of Culture* position must not overlook the fact that although Christ was incarnated into human form and context, in his ministry he categorically condemned religious and cultural practices that were contrary to divine principles (e.g., Matt 5:31–32 and Matt 19:8–9; Matt 15:1–6).

The *Christ above Culture* paradigm seeks to stay away from both an uncritical accommodation to culture and a complete denial of the validity of culture in the process of gospel transmission. While it elevates and validates the positive dimensions of culture, it rejects the cultural values that are antagonistic to the gospel.[24] Nevertheless, this paradigm hardly acknowledges that even though God exists outside of human culture, the Scriptures reveal that "he is willing to enter human culture and work through it in order to engage in meaningful communication with humans."[25]

The *Christ and Culture in Paradox* position is that of the dualists. By making a sharp distinction between the secular and spiritual life, and between the reign of Christ and human culture,[26] this paradigm is unable to reach a meaningful synthesis of Christians' attitude to culture.[27] It struggles with the acknowledgment that although the world is in a fallen state, God still "uses human culture as a vehicle for interacting with humans."[28]

Niebuhr's last paradigm, *Christ the Transformer of Culture*, is cognizant of the fact that although all human cultures are corrupted by sin, no single culture is beyond the possibility of being renewed by the power of God. Because the gospel is about the promise of transformation, through conversion, human beings and their

[22]Sanou, "Religious Syncretism as a Worldwide Mission Challenge," 133.

[23]Paul G. Schrotenboer, "Christ and Culture," *Evangelical Review of Theology* 22 (October 1998): 319.

[24]Paul Louis Metzger, "Christ, Culture, and the Sermon on the Mount Community," *Ex Auditu* 23 (2007): 35.

[25]Glenn Rogers, *The Bible Culturally Speaking: The Role of Culture in the Production, Presentation and Interpretation of God's Word* (Bedford, TX: Mission and Ministry Resources, 2004), 31. See also Boubakar Sanou, "Divine Revelation and Context: An Interplay of Influences," *Journal of Adventist Mission Studies* 12, no. 1 (2016): 107–113.

[26]Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture*, 171.

[27]Allbee, "Christ Witnessing to Culture," 19.

[28]Rogers, *The Bible Culturally Speaking*, 27.

cultures can move from self-centeredness to Christ-centeredness.[29] Since culture is dynamic rather than static, all cultures can go through processes of change and transformation with their encounters with the gospel.

The above theological perspectives on culture portray culture in generalized terms as a monolith to which a Christian must take a single attitude. However, since cultures are plural and diverse, theological perspectives on culture should "in some sense be plural and diverse rather than monolithic and uniform across all times and places."[30] Any of these positions on culture that Christians adopt will not only inform the way they perceive the world but also shape how they approach Christian witness. In other words, peoples' approach to mission and ministry is shaped by their perspective on culture and their understanding of the interplay between the gospel and human culture.[31]

Towards a Biblical and Missiological Perspective on Culture

God works in a redemptive way within human culture. Jesus' incarnation into the cultural life of first-century Palestine to communicate with people is a valuable indication that God is able to work through human culture to reach and interact with humans.[32] From this perspective, God likely "views human culture [although tainted by sin] primarily as a vehicle to be used by him and his people for Christian purposes, rather than an enemy to be [always] combated or shunned."[33] Also, because culture can be defined as "everything that people have, think, and do as members of a society,"[34] God's command to humanity to have dominion over creation (Gen 1:26) could be interpreted to mean that he created them with a culture-producing capacity. In the process of taking dominion over creation, humans develop cultures and lifestyles specific to their contexts. Therefore, the "do not love the world or anything in the world" of 1 John 2:15–16 and "the whole world is under the control of the evil one" of 1 John 5:19 are not to be taken literally as a call to systematically reject culture but rather are to be approached as a call to refrain from participation with Satan and his human allies in their use of one's culture. God's true attitude toward culture is that he "seeks to

[29]Bruce Guenther, "The 'Enduring Problem' of Christ and Culture," *Direction* 34, no. 2 (2015): 217, 218.

[30]Schumacher, "Theology for Culture," 217.

[31]See Sanou, "Divine Revelation and Context," 107–113.

[32]Charles H. Kraft, *Anthropology for Christian Witness* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1996), 33.

[33]Charles H. Kraft, *Christianity in Culture: A Study in Biblical Theologizing in Cross-Cultural Perspective* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis books, 2005), 81.

[34]Gary Ferraro and Susan Andreatta, *Cultural Anthropology: An Applied Perspective,* 9th ed. (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth, 2012), 28.

cooperate with human beings in the use of their culture for his glory. *It is allegiance to the satanic use of that same culture that he stands against, not the culture itself*"[35] (emphasis in the original). Although God is above culture as it is warped by the pervasive influence of human sinfulness, nevertheless "culture [like individual temperaments] is not in and of itself either an enemy or a friend to God or humans. It is, rather, something that is there to be used by personal beings such as humans, God, and Satan."[36]

The incarnation of Jesus can be viewed not only as a revelation of God to humanity but also as his "ultimate rebuke against the *secularization of culture*"[37] (emphasis in the original). However, this is not a call for an uncritical divinization of human culture.[38] It is important to state that every culture has positive elements that can be used by Christians as well as aspects which express the demonic and dehumanizing forces of evil that must be challenged.[39] That may be why Paul Hiebert maintains that the gospel can be adequately communicated in every cultural context enabling people to grow in faith within the context of their own culture without having to change cultures to become Christians.[40]

The passages in 1 John 2:15–16 ("do not love the world or anything in the world") and 1 John 5:19 ("the whole world is under the control of the evil one") are not the only biblical references concerning the attitude of God or Christians toward "the world." The Greek word *kosmos* for "world" used in 1 John 2:15–16 and 1 John 5:19 is also the word employed in John 3:16 in reference to the world as the object of God's abundant love. *Kosmos* is also the word Jesus used in his intercessory prayer for his disciples in John 17:14–18:

> I have given them Your word; and the world has hated them because they are not of the world, just as I am not of the world. I do not pray that You should take them out of the world, but that You should keep them from the evil one. They are not of the world, just as I am not of the world. Sanctify them by Your truth. Your word is truth. As You sent Me into the world, I also have sent them into the world.

In this prayer, Jesus does not ask God to take his disciples out of their sinful context, but rather to protect them from the evil one as they remain and minister in that context. Although Jesus also prays for his disciples' holiness ("Sanctify them by Your truth," v. 17) and calls us to holiness and warns us not to be conformed to this world, he nevertheless wants his followers to be active in the world. "Probably Jesus recognized that the real problem with worldliness is not

[35]Kraft, *Christianity in Culture*, 83.

[36]Ibid., 89.

[37]Tennent, *Invitation to World Missions*, 179, 181.

[38]Ibid., 181.

[39]Hiebert, *Anthropological Insights for Missionaries*, 56.

[40]Ibid., 55.

something 'out there in the world,' but rather something deep inside ourselves—our own unbelief, pride and ingratitude toward God. All this could easily come along with us, if we try to withdraw from the world into holy communities."[41] Therefore, 1 John 2:15–16 and 1 John 5:19 should not be interpreted literally as a call to reject culture. Read together with John 3:16 and John 17:14–18, these texts are better understood as a call to live in real contact with culture without letting one's identity, thoughts, priorities, feelings, and values be controlled by it. God not only redeems people from the godlessness of their cultures (1 Pet 1:18–19) when they accept Christ as their Savior, he also sends them back into the same godless cultures as light bearers to work with him for their cultures' transformation. In other words, while we continue to be in contact with human culture,

> our identity, thoughts, priorities, feelings, and values should be continually sanctified by the truth—the living Word of God. And as such sanctified people, Jesus sends us into the world in a way that is similar to how the Father sent Jesus into the world. We can probably summarize the central thrust of this biblical text [John 17:14–18] by saying: Jesus wants us to be in the world but not of the world for a very specific purpose: He has sent us into the world as hearers and bearers of the Word.[42]

Conclusion

To a large extent, Christians' attitude toward culture, especially in mission and ministry contexts, depends on their theological presupposition about culture and their understanding of how God revealed himself in the past and continues to do so in the context of human cultures. Being in a sin-tainted world neither invalidates Christian witness nor excuses Christians from fulfilling their God-given mission of participating in the redemption of fallen humanity. The Christian expectation of future glory and complete redemption has implications for believers' attitude toward human cultures. The salt of the world metaphor (Matt 5:13) is an evangelistic call to intermingle with the world and transform it. As disciple-makers and ambassadors for Christ (Matt 28:18–20; 2 Cor 5:20) and salt and light of the world (Matt 5:13–16), it is not possible to visualize the Christian movement apart from human culture.[43] "Just as Jesus incarnated himself into Jewish culture, so his religion is to be incarnated into every culture."[44]

[41]Johnson, "Christ and Culture," 5.

[42]Ibid., 6 (emphasis in the original).

[43]Van Til, *The Calvinistic Concept of Culture*, 17, 57.

[44]Gorden R. Doss, "Shifting Worldviews in Encounter of African Traditional Religion and Christianity" (paper presented at the Fifth Annual Andrews University Seminary Scholarship Symposium, Berrien Springs, MI, February 2009), 1.

Because the Word of God is native to none of our cultures, no Christian should think about their culture as standard or normative and thus set it over or against other cultures. Rather, each Christian should view their culture as also fallen and need of redemption. Approaching the incarnation of Christ as a divine precedent of communication with humans, the church does not have to stand indiscriminately against human culture. Rather, acting as the salt and light of the world, the church can be a powerful change agent in God's hands by being incarnational in its mission and ministry. The leavening influence of godly Christians who are model citizens can help transform their society a small step at a time (Matt 13:33).