

** [CRITICAL article on CD's theol. v. CCXXV] link*

BOOK REVIEWS

THE PROBLEM OF CHRIST AND CULTURE¹

Christ and Culture. By H. Richard Niebuhr. (Faber & Faber. 21s.)

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It is only during the present century that Christians have become fully aware of the problem of culture as one of the determining factors in religion no less than in secular development. But during the last thirty years it has come to occupy an increasingly important place in the thought of contemporary theologians and apologists. Dr. Richard Niebuhr is however the first to attempt a broad survey of the whole field of discussion and to compare the different answers that have been given throughout the ages to the relevance of the Person and teaching of Jesus Christ to the world of human culture.

For though we have acquired a new awareness of the nature and meaning of culture, the problem of Christianity and civilization is by no means a new one. It was implicit from the beginning in the conception of the World and the Kingdom of God and in the conflict between Christianity and the pagan society of the Roman Empire. It is a perennial problem which re-emerges in every age in a new form, and the importance of the new sociological concept of culture is that it makes it possible for us to analyse the problem more completely and to eliminate many of the misunderstandings which have been such a fruitful source of confusion in the past. Dr. Niebuhr is well qualified for a work of this kind, since he is fully aware of the complexity of the issues that are involved and is able to study and compare the different Christian answers to the problem in a singularly objective and disinterested spirit.

He classifies these attempted solutions into five main types, two of which are dualistic and three unitary.

(1) In the first place there is the view which emphasizes and exaggerates the opposition between Christianity and culture, a view which is represented by Tertullian in the past and by Tolstoy in modern times.

(2) Secondly there is the contrary position which entirely rejects this antithesis of Christ and Culture, and refuses to see any conflict between the spirit of Christianity and the higher traditions of human culture.

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The classical representatives of this view are the Gnostics in the early Church, Abelard in the Middle Ages, and Ritschl and the Liberal Protestants (whom he terms Culture-Protestants) in modern times.

(3) The third solution is the synthesis of Christ with Culture which does not however deny the essentially supernatural character of the Christian life. Of this attitude the typical representative is St. Thomas Aquinas. It is represented in antiquity by Clement of Alexandria, but it is significant that Dr. Niebuhr can find no adequate modern example, though he mentions Bishop Butler as a tentative suggestion.

(4) This synthesis is denied by the fourth position, which stresses the elements of disharmony and tension which are involved in Christianity. This is the position of Luther and Kierkegaard and it leads to a dualism between the kingdom of faith and the world of culture which is in some respects more radical than the simple opposition between the World and the Church which characterized Tertullian and the ascetics who rejected cultural values and participation in the common life of secular society.

(5) Finally, we have the position of those who admit the existing dualism and contradiction between the Kingdom of Christ and the world of human culture, but who see in Him the dynamic principle which is capable of transforming every aspect of human life and cultural activity: *instaurare omnia in Christo*. The representatives of this ideal of the regeneration of human society and culture are found by Dr. Niebuhr pre-eminently in St. Augustine and to a lesser degree in Calvin and Wesley and Jonathan Edwards, but among modern writers it is F. D. Maurice who expresses this point of view most completely and who evokes Dr. Niebuhr's warmest personal sympathy.

It can be seen from this brief summary how comprehensive is Dr. Niebuhr's treatment and how anxious he is to do justice to the complexity of the subject and to the diversity of the traditional Christian attitudes. In this he reminds us of Ernst Troeltsch who has evidently had a direct influence on his historical approach to the problem. It may be objected that his anxiety to do justice to the many-sided diversity of Christian thought has made his classification of types unduly complicated. It would surely be simpler and more logical to adopt a threefold classification since there are in the end only three possible attitudes—the rejection of culture, the acceptance of culture and the intermediate position of qualified acceptance and rejection which may be extended indefinitely to embrace almost all the gradations and varieties of orthodox Christian thought. In fact there is more in common between Dr. Niebuhr's 3rd and 5th groups—the synthesizers and the transformists—than his arrangement would suggest; for St. Thomas would not deny St. Augustine's transformism nor would F. D. Maurice reject Clement of Alexandria's attitude of cultural synthesis. In the same way there is a close affinity between the Montanist rejection of culture and that of the radical Protestant sects, like the Anabaptists—far closer indeed than

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that between Tertullian and Tolstoy who belong to different worlds. So too there is no real community of attitude between the Gnostics and Ritschl who go to form Dr. Niebuhr's second group. In fact it may be questioned whether the Gnostics are to be regarded as Christian at all, since their conception of Christ and their idea of man have far more in common with the Mahayana conception of Buddha than with anything in the Christian tradition. In these respects Dr. Niebuhr has tended to throw his net too widely so that the limits of his field of study become blurred. For if we include Tolstoy, why not Gandhi? If the Gnostics, why not the Theosophists? If Thomas Jefferson, why not Emerson? It is only where the divinity of Christ is accepted unconditionally that the problem of Christ and Culture becomes truly significant.

Yet no one can stress more clearly than Dr. Niebuhr has done the unique and transcendent character of the person of Christ as the One Lord who claims the total allegiance of Christians. He even writes that the subject with which he is concerned 'is not essentially the problem of Christianity and civilization; for Christianity, whether defined as church, creed, ethics, or movement of thought, itself moves between the poles of Christ and culture. The relation of these two authorities constitutes its problem'. Consequently he sees his subject as an 'essay on the double wrestle of the Church with its Lord and with the cultural society with which it lives in symbiosis'.

Nevertheless we must recognize that the writers and schools of thought with which Dr. Niebuhr deals did not themselves see the problem in those terms. They were not really aware of culture in the modern sense of the word—of that elaborate network of social relations and institutions, conditioned by economic forces and historical traditions in which man is involved both consciously and unconsciously from the cradle to the grave. They were concerned primarily with opposing moral and spiritual forces—the Kingdom of God and the Kingdom of Satan—and secondarily with the rival claims of concrete institutions, above all of the Church and the State. There was, of course, always a tendency to identify the two hostile spiritual orders with the two rival social institutions, but it was only the fanatics and the sectarians who identified them completely, and orthodox Christianity has always recognized the authority of the state as a power ordained by God to which the Christian owed obedience and service. It is true that the primitive Christian use of the term 'The World' to describe both the world of man as the object of God's love and as the kingdom of darkness, which rejects Christ and persecutes His servants, easily lends itself to misunderstanding. And the same is true of the Pauline use of the word 'Flesh' to denote the evil principle which is at war with 'The Spirit' and which leads mankind to sin and death. Such a terminology can easily be misinterpreted in a Manichean dualist sense. Yet it is clear enough that St. John and St. Paul were no Manicheans—that St. John taught that the Word was made flesh for the sal-

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vation of the world and that St. Paul believes in the redemption of the body which is the temple of the Holy Spirit.

Now the problem of Christ and Culture which perplexes the modern theologian is of just the same nature as the old Christian paradoxes of the Kingdom and the World and the Spirit and the Flesh. In so far as human culture is the social and historical expression of fallen human nature it belongs to the Kingdom of the World and its works are works 'of the Flesh', so that the achievements of human civilization may be rejected by the Christian as a tower of Babel built by man for his own ends in ignorance or defiance of God. But in so far as human nature is redeemable, so also is culture. It is not possible for man to exist without culture, for that is the condition of his social existence. And the same is true of the Christian. He cannot isolate his faith from his life and as soon as he begins to live a Christian life he begins to create a Christian culture.

This is no doubt true of every religion, but it is of peculiar significance for Christianity, because Christianity is essentially a religion of redemption which centres in the belief in a historical Person who is also the Mediator between God and Man. For the mystery of redemption by Christ is not only a theological mystery, it is also an historical event and a creative process by which humanity is regenerated and made new. The Pauline doctrine of the Mystical Body shows how the Incarnation is a progressive principle which is extended through the Church and the Sacraments to form a living organism united to Christ as its Head. And this vital process of spiritual change must operate on the plane of culture which is the external plane of social behaviour as well as on the internal plane of faith and spiritual experience. There is no aspect of human life and no sphere of human action which is neutral or 'secular' in the absolute sense.

But there still remains the problem of the inevitable conflict between the culture-changing action of the Christian minority or the individual Christian and the loyalty of the unconverted majority to the existing social order and to the inherited cultural tradition. This conflict is inescapable, and this is the real problem of Christianity and culture which every age and indeed every individual has to face. But it is a conflict which takes many different forms from the open warfare between the persecuting State and the martyr Church to the hidden process of penetration and leavening which goes on in a culture which is nominally Christian no less than in a secular society in which Christians and non-Christians are mingled. But these differences do not affect the essential nature of the process which always involves the principle of conflict between two rival spiritual forces and the principle of the penetration and leavening of the natural order by the order of grace.

If this is so, it would seem that Dr. Niebuhr's Fifth Answer, the 'Transformist' or 'Conversionist' solution is the true one and that the

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transformist attitude to culture is the only one that can be regarded as Christian in the full sense of the word. No doubt particular Christian thinkers and schools of thought can concentrate their attention on one of the two elements of the transforming process and stress the principle of conflict or the principle of leavening, and penetration in apparent exclusion or disregard of the other. But the two elements are always present and it is impossible to deny one of them altogether without obscuring the central character of Christianity as the religion of Divine Incarnation and human salvation. Nevertheless the pluralism of Dr. Niebuhr's treatment has the advantage of widening the range of his survey and showing the same central truth from many different angles. Even those views which seem to be non-Christian or sub-Christian, like the position of Tolstoy or that of the Gnostics help to clarify the true nature of the Christian answer. At the present time especially when the secularization of culture has reached such a point that man's moral existence seems threatened by the impersonal non-moral forces of totalitarian organization and total war, it is useful to remember that Christianity has never preached easy solutions or minimized the problem of evil but has faced the vision of a world prostrate under the power of evil—a world which must be both renounced and remade in the power of Christ.

CHRISTOPHER DAWSON

AN EXAMINATION OF FREEMASONRY

Darkness Unveiled. By Walton Hannah. (Augustine Press. 12s. 6d.)

ONE of the most curious bypaths of eighteenth-century history is to be found in the connexion which then existed between the Catholic priesthood and the masonic order. It was to be met with not only in the lower ranks of the clergy but in the Hierarchy as well. The number of clerical freemasons might not, as is sometimes asserted, have run into thousands but it certainly ran into hundreds. On the eve of the Revolution in 1792 out of 629 French Lodges of the Grand Orient rite an ecclesiastic sat in the master's chair. After 1815 few priests were freemasons except perhaps in Spain and Portugal. In the latter the participation of the clergy in the Craft was of scandalous proportions as late as ninety years ago. A writer in the *Rambler* tells us that the Hierarchy was mainly recruited from the Lodges to which many if not most of the canons and seminary professors belonged. Less than fifty years ago the Holy See insisted on the resignation of Mgr. Le Nordez, Bishop of Dijon, who was charged with masonic affiliation, the incident playing an important part in the train of events which led up to the separation of Church and State in France. Very different is the story of the connexion between the Church of England and Freemasonry.

The Popes at no time acquiesced in membership of the lodges on the