

Jesus Changes Things: A Critical Evaluation of *Christ and Culture* from an African American Perspective

Darryl M. Trimiew

Abstract

Christ and Culture remains a useful heuristic device for discerning and interpreting the process of struggle and change produced by the attempts of the church to minister to the world. It is also helpful for ecclesial self-evaluations. While its typologies are conceptually imperfect, they can be used, nevertheless, to disclose important changes in society and within denominations. These attributes can and do help to facilitate the African American church's ongoing liberation efforts and therefore, hopefully, the flourishing of African American communities.

H. Richard Niebuhr's monumental work, *Christ and Culture*, like all of his work, is a product of his time and his place. His sudden death in 1962 left us with an ethical legacy that has yet to be fully realized. His work was produced before the realization of several progressions in the fields of theology, ethics, and political or cultural liberations, global and local.

Niebuhr never had the opportunity to read James Cone, Jose Miguez Bonino, Gustavo Gutierrez, Katie Cannon, or other liberationists. He never lived to realize the complete political overthrow of white political imperialism in Africa, the triumphs of the civil rights revolution, gay liberation, feminism, or the loss of the Vietnam War.

Accordingly, he represents a form of ethics from a different era, from a different world. His work was groundbreaking for its era, but its era is clearly past. How then, in the twenty-first century, should his work serve as a resource for African American morality, among other communities? I will

attempt to answer this question and in so doing review and critique his classic work, *Christ and Culture*.¹

Today we are forced to ask whether his work might simply be a historical artifact, both beautiful and useful, that exemplifies the successes and failures of the European-American twentieth century. Is it not merely a rich resource for understanding liberal western Christianity, circa 1951? Clearly, without this resource and an insightful understanding of it, we cannot fully understand where we have come from, where we might go, and, more importantly, where we might need to go.

Yet as rich as it is, of what use is it in a constructive sense for a post-liberal, post-modern world? I argue that Niebuhr's work, particularized, relativized, and transmogrified by various communities can serve as a new wineskin to store new moral wine, rather than a derelict cask.

Nonetheless, we must recognize its historic limitations and its limited applications. I will do so with an understanding that I am engaging in revisionism and reinterpreting his Christ-transforming-culture typology. By implication, this paper represents a review, criticism, and use of his heuristic device. We will start with a review of his theory of moral agency and the standard criticisms of it.

As I maintained in my first published work, *Voices of the Silenced: The Responsible Self in a Marginalized Community*, the exercise of moral responsibility by empowered selves is the crux of Niebuhr's approach and vision.² His Christ-transforming-culture typology features as its moral agents empowered selves. This orientation is unremarkable given his own location as an empowered self. The key question is whether Niebuhr believed that culture was most clearly transformed in a morally superior fashion only by powerful Christians and whether in his opinion the oppressed could also transform culture. Further it must be recognized (as Niebuhr did not) that the oppressed have a different conceptualization of Christ and of Culture and are themselves generally formed and found in subcultures. Lastly, of great interest is the process by which transformation is thought to take place.

We must note that the liberationists of Niebuhr's generation, the disinherited, such as Martin Luther King, Jr., W. E. B. Dubois, or Jomo Kenyatta were not recognized by him as transformationist.³ Thus it is not unfair to infer from this lapse that Niebuhr did not see the oppressed as significant transformational moral agents. Or, perhaps he understood that the oppressed of previous Christian subjugated groups had been transformation agents, but was not able to see how his oppressed contemporaries could serve in that capacity.

That he was unable to make this connection constitutes a failure on his part and that of a whole generation of white ethicists. However, it does not follow necessarily that his classic work cannot be of use to the oppressed. But why should a modern liberationist bother to employ his typologies and heuristic devices and to what ends? Could it not be said, once again, that his

work represents an important step in Christian social ethics but also constitutes a moral Neanderthal line, i.e., a necessary but now prehistoric dead end?

I believe that his work remains useful but that his conception of transformation is itself what most needs to be transformed. We also need a clearer statement as to how transformation comes about and who is competent to engage in the struggle for its realization. James Cone has raised this issue many times, i.e., the question of who can do theology.⁴ Sharon Welch has raised it in a different way, suggesting that her Christ is one who inspires and empowers communities of resistance.⁵

It is the genius of Niebuhr's work that he correctly identifies the reality that wherever Christians have lived and moved, helped and oppressed, they have all claimed Jesus Christ as their inspiration and leader, and felt compelled to relate their understanding of him to their respective cultures. They have all tried to bring their existent understandings of Christ into conversation and harmony with their prevailing culture and, for some of them, their existential subcultures. Further, Niebuhr's typologies have made it clear that different contemporary communities have had competing Christologies and hence, different and competing cultures. His work made it clear that none of these communities and Christologies were immediately self-evident to anyone but the practitioners. Yet time and further consideration of historical events suggests that certain Christian practices that were generated or upheld by certain Christian communities were and are morally superior to others, particularly as they are manifested as political cultures. Martin Niemöller and Dietrich Bonhoeffer expressed Christologies and anthropologies that are now conceded by nearly all to have been morally superior to those of the German National Church. The religious intolerance of the Inquisition and the Puritan commonwealth are now seldom championed over radical reformation and Anabaptist Christologies and practices. Jomo Kenyatta is now considered the father of his country, Kenya, rather than merely a Mau Mau terrorist. Martin Luther King's *Letter from a Birmingham Jail* is considered by all but the most rabid modern racists to be a much clearer expression of a transformative Christ and a Beloved Community than the views of his contemporary white clergy opponents.⁶

This review may sound like Monday morning quarterbacking and so it is, but Monday morning quarterbacking is only possible when Sunday has passed and the game has been decided and, lastly, only when there is a football community that is united in its understanding of great football. Contemporary moralists now reject the historical practices of genocide, religious intolerance and persecution, political imperialism, and violent segregation. The Christs of those oppressive visions, like the Christ of the Afrikaner apartheid-supporting church, are now seen as Christs of oppression, as transformative Christs, but also as brutal and unjust ones.⁷ In the case of the Christ of the Afrikaners it eventually became a Christ-of-

culture, a civil religion, no longer transforming the land but resisting, most oppressively, transformation. It would be easy to try and say that such visions did not constitute any true vision of Christ or any faithful church, but such an assessment would be fatally simplistic. Those historic communities never held out their Christologies and practices as being anything other than holy. In some cases they saw themselves as a Christian vanguard that was transforming culture (their own for the better) or transforming inferior pagan cultures at the command of Christ. For African Americans, the historical reality has been, as black Muslims are fond of reminding us, that we worship a Christ whose presence was embodied into our communities and culture by rape, genocide, slavery, subjugation, chauvinism, and continuing denigration and misrepresentation of who we are and who Christ is.

With such a history of manipulation by a number of believers one may well wonder, what can be the use of Niebuhr's typologies?

First, these typologies are conceptually defective, because Niebuhr's definition of culture is too broad and because no actual Christian communities actually fit into these typologies.⁸ Moreover, actual Christian communities in the modern world manifest these typologies in different ways depending on what particular ethical issue is in dispute. Any particular community can move on any given issue such as capital punishment from one typology to another, sometimes opposing the prevailing culture, (sometimes) transforming it, sometimes merely manifesting it, some times merely floating above it. Yet Niebuhr's typologies have persisted precisely because, flawed as they are, they do serve as a devices for measuring and evaluating how Christian communities are interrelating with other institutions and how they are interacting globally.⁹

All Christian communities are deeply set into patterns of behavior dictated by their past histories and their current interests. Accordingly, most understandings of *Christ and Culture* must be viewed on some level as expressions of that self-interest. This assertion may seem cynical but it is not.

It is no surprise, for example, that marginalized people such as African Americans have in many instances worshipped a Christ who they believed was set on a liberative task on their behalf, transforming a culture that denied their humanity into one that embraced them, among others.¹⁰ In Martin Luther King's Christology, transformation takes place because of what Christ has done and begins with the spiritual transformation of the believer.¹¹ In this understanding of Christ-transforming-culture, the disinherited are responding to the divine initiative of God in the struggle to overthrow oppressive political cultures. Christ is Emmanuel; Christ is with us, particularly in the struggle as we struggle.¹² It must be said, of course, that this characterization of Christ may be as false as the Christologies of Nazi sympathizers, Ku Klux Klan members, and the worst of the Spanish Inquisition. Since our struggle has not been concluded, it is now currently

impossible to assign a definitive moral evaluation to this Christ or to this culture. Those of us who serve this liberating Christ do so in faith, with the knowledge that this struggle may not be won in our lifetimes. Because we are fallen though Christ is not, our struggle may not even be as holy as we make it out to be. Yet it is the immutable task of each generation, as Niebuhr first noted, to take up these cudgels, in faith. God is judging us morally, and doubtless we have failed and will fail morally in some, if not many respects. Yet the Monday morning quarterbacking of the past is not without its uses. Even a cursory review of such aforementioned fiascos compels us to note that "Christs" acting with state or economic powers do seem to hurt the cause of Christ as such praxis is subsequently evaluated by Christian and other moral communities.¹³ In short, the Christ of the slaves is morally superior to the Christ of the slave masters; even the sons and daughters of the slave masters now say so.

This matter becomes much more complex the closer we get to our own Sundays of contention. What systems and practices constitute current moral fiascos in the making? Monday morning quarterbacking is, finally, of limited value. Indeed, it is the primary function of ethics to try to determine, within an existential time frame, the better practices, morally speaking, of individuals, groups, and communities. Such a determination would facilitate, when necessary, the discontinuation of certain evil practices as well as the establishment of certain ameliorating practices. In this process, the typologies that Niebuhr has proposed can serve as initial evaluators that enable us to get a handle on what conflicts need what resolutions.

The African American Church, for example, has never been monolithic in its Christologies or its practices, aside from what Peter Paris has called its wholesale adoption of the Christian tradition, i.e., a commitment to non-racist expressions of Christianity in the acceptance of the parenthood of God and the sibblingship of humanity.¹⁴ How that inclusivity has been played out has varied depending upon the era involved, class, demographics, and the peculiar church history with which African slaves became converted to being African American Christians. In many respects these typologies, like other aspects of imperially imposed Christianity, were simply stamped upon African American Christians as a side effect of the proselyting process. Where Christ-against-culture churches did the converting, Black churches were, at least initially, also Christ-against-culture. Some abandoned this initial imprinting; some did not.

My own denominational location in the Christian church, Disciples of Christ, is illustrative of this point. The Stone-Campbell movement, which was the founding religious impetus, emphasized a return to primitive Christianity as well as a commitment to freedom and ecumenism.¹⁵ The historic split of the movement into the Churches of Christ, Independent Christian Churches and the Disciples of Christ, was made along theological fault lines.¹⁶ Churches of Christ, by and large, continued a strong

commitment to primitive Christianity, and a continued resistance to certain claims of modern culture, i.e., a Christ-against-culture typology. Disciples of Christ, on the other hand, embraced higher criticism hermeneutics, and modern cultural claims towards the American mainstream culture. Disciples have at times adopted a Christ-of-culture stance as well as, on occasion, a Christ-transforming-culture approach. Even the original Stone-Campbell movement sought to transform ecclesiastical culture by championing primitive Christianity and ecumenism in an attempt to halt widespread denominational disputes. Be that as it may, what is interesting to note is that with the historic Stone-Campbell split into two or more separate denominations, black churches simply went with whatever side of the conflict they were on. Black churches that were founded or supported primarily by Church of Christ white believers continued that tradition and the ones likewise established by Disciples of Christ followed that road. Only two golden threads continued between the two black groups that subsequently became two different black sub-denominations. Those two threads were first, a continuation of the cultural cultic worship style of praying, singing, and preaching that is distinctly African-influenced and; second, and more important for the purposes of our current discussion, a political theological commitment to producing and reproducing a non-racist expression of Christianity in a racist Christian culture, which regardless of the intent of the churches was by its nature transformative in its intent. In other words, both black Church of Christ members and black Disciples of Christ members sought to transform their macro-society from one committed to racism to one committed to equality. This is why an examination of each denomination can legitimately find each manifesting the overarching theology and practices of their respective denominations, that is to say purity from worldly influences is continued in the Church of Christ, and a celebration of mainstream cultural experiences in Disciples of Christ settings. These positions are miles apart from each other and yet individual black congregations and pastors in each denomination have worked hand in hand in the ongoing struggle for greater recognition of civil rights. Accordingly, black Church of Christ members and black Disciples of Christ members are much more apt to be found marching together for rights than studying the scriptures together. In this sense, Niebuhr's typologies are merely signposts for how various Christian communities might act in the world with regard to certain issues. Most assuredly, no black churches act monolithically within any one typology.

Still the primary questions will not go away. Of what use are these typologies for black churches? And how, in the larger picture, can these typologies aid in living the Christian life and mission in morally justifiable ways?

Returning to our root metaphor is instructive. Even a Sunday morning quarterback can anticipate that the continued struggle to overcome racism

will incline all black Christian churches to manifest in some way a transformative Christ. In some manifestations this Christ may be against culture, of culture, in paradox with it, synthesizing it, or radically and directly trying to revolutionize (radical transformation) it. Accordingly, faulty as these typologies are, they help to describe the various ways that black Christians, among other Christians, have tried and will try to serve Christ faithfully in a hostile world. Various arguments will arise, from time to time, about the usefulness of each type for the process of transforming a racist, sexist, homophobic, and class exploitative American society: such arguments cannot detain us at the present. (The black church itself is riddled with some of these vices.) Suffice it to say, however, that certain historical decisions that have already been made continue to deeply influence further developments. More simply put, it is not accidental that Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., a Baptist minister, was the leader of the civil rights movement. Most black Christians of his era were either Methodist or Baptist, for certain historical reasons. King was a transformative moral agent and served and projected a transformative Christ. It is unlikely that the leadership of ongoing struggles for transformation against racism, sexism, homophobia, or class difference, will come from a Christian leader who is not theologically inclined to see as his or her role, and as a duty for the Church to engage as part and parcel of its mission, the struggle to transform the world. Thus the Christologies and practices that engage in public discourse, public policy formation and public disputes, are the ones most likely to transform our lives together and this fact was observed long ago by Niebuhr. It is for this very practical reason that whoever will be the next Martin Luther King, Jr. or Fanny Lou Hamer, will not likely come from the ranks of a Christian group whose primary orientation is to simply resist the culture, assimilate into it, or triumph on a personal, individual level without directly challenging the culture.¹⁷

Niebuhr's typologies, as flawed as they are, are therefore useful for interpreting and analyzing the work of prominent Christian leaders and movements. For blacks, it is important to analyze carefully the shift of recognition and influence of African American "religious leaders" from a civil rights orientation, highlighting prophetic criticism ala, King, Jesse Jackson, or Al Sharpton, to a priestly therapeutic dispensation of balm à la T.D. Jakes. Jakes' meteoric rise has transformed black Christian culture. It remains to be seen what effect this change will have on African American culture in general. Still, for a liberationist, *Christ and Culture*, despite its flaws, is still highly instructive because of Niebuhr's great insight that God and the reign of God cannot be equated with the praxis of anyone, not even Christian liberationists who stand in solidarity with the poor and oppressed, who engage in partnership with marginalized folks in the ongoing struggle against systems of oppression. Such praxis evidences the will of God, but cannot be equated with the One beyond the many who calls us all into

question even as we strive to serve Him. Indeed, Christian communities that seek to embody a transformative Christ must accept that we will fail to do so perfectly, even as we try. To achieve true liberation we need checks and balances for our endeavors, engagement with our oppressors, and sometimes even opposition from them when we go astray. What really transforms the world in the best sense of that term does have certain attributes and does encourage certain values. These practices and values can be explained and justified with the use of a variety ethical arguments. Thus a Christ-against-culture group that opposes participation in what David Loy has called our new global religion, the insatiable pursuit of material well-being, the religion of the market, can by its very resistance to our current culture transform it.¹⁸ Similarly, a Christ-of-culture stance with regard to participatory democracy can undergird our morality that has been, historically, doubtfully supported by philosophically questionable arguments and half-baked Deism. The insight that somehow God transcends history and that Jesus is the Christ also allows us to struggle with each other and work with each other and do so with humility. These facts, if no others, constitute excellent reasons for adapting these typologies that Niebuhr insightfully, but imperfectly established.

NOTES

¹ H. Richard Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture* (New York: Harper, 1951).

² Darryl M. Trimiew, *Voices of the Silenced: The Responsible Self in a Marginalized Community* (Pilgrim Press, 1993).

³ Victor Anderson notes the importance of Niebuhr's work for American public theology while noting the under utilization of Black moralists, writing. "This underdevelopment cannot be attributed to an insufficient list of possible representatives. For one may easily draw from the religiously motivated public practices of such figures as David Walker, Frederick Douglas, Sojourner Truth, Booker T. Washington, W. E. B. DuBois, Ida B. Wells, Martin Luther King, Jr., Fannie Lou Hamer, Malcolm X, Elijah Muhammad, and Howard Thurman. Ironically some of these figures are Niebuhr's contemporaries and their work was not utilized by him either in his own work." See Victor Anderson, "The Wrestle of Christ and Culture in Pragmatic Public Theology," *American Journal of Theology & Philosophy* 19 (May 1998): 135.

⁴ James Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation* (Seabury Press, 1975).

⁵ Sharon D. Welch, *Communities of Resistance and Solidarity: A Feminist Theology of Liberation* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1985).

⁶ S. Jonathan Bass, *Blessed are the Peacemakers: Martin Luther King, Jr., Eight White Religious Leaders, and the "Letter from Birmingham Jail"* (Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana State University Press, 2001).

⁷ James R. Cochrane's work is illustrative of how this change in theology and perspective took place. See "Christ and Culture: Now and Then," *Journal of Theology for Southern African* 71.1 (June 1990): 39-55.

⁸ See especially the insightful criticism by John Howard Yoder in his essay entitled, "How H. Richard Niebuhr Reasoned: A Critique of Christ and Culture," *Authentic Transformation: A New Vision of Christ and Culture*, ed. Glen H. Stassen, D. M. Yeager, and John Howard Yoder (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996), 47 and, from a distinctly different point of view, Diane Yeager's article in this *JSC* issue.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 48-49.

¹⁰ What is most amazing is the fact that we blacks have, for much of our church history, maintained Christologies that were oppressive.

¹¹ Martin writes, "Only through an inner spiritual transformation do we gain the strength to fight vigorously the evils of the world in a humble and loving spirit." *Strength to Love* (New York: Harper & Row, 1963), 13.

¹² Martin writes, "Here on all the roads of life, he is striving in our striving. Like an ever-loving Father, he is working through history for the salvation of his children. As we struggle to defeat the forces of evil, the God of the universe struggles with us. Evil dies on the seashore, not merely because of man's endless struggle against it, but because of God's power to defeat it. *Ibid.*, 64.

¹³ Robert Benne, "The Church and Politics: Four Possible Connections," in *Moral Issues and Christian Response*, ed. Paul T. Jersild and Dale A. Johnson (New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1988), 4-12.

¹⁴ Peter Paris, *The Social Teaching of the Black Churches* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1985), 10.

¹⁵ Colbert S. Cartwright, *People of the Chalice: Disciples of Christ in Faith and Practice* (St. Louis: CBP Press, 1987), 15.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 19.

¹⁷ Martin Luther King, Jr., is highly observant on this point, writing, "The church must be reminded that it is not the master or the servant of the state, but rather the conscience of the state. It must be the guide and the critic of the state, and never its tool. If the church does not recapture its prophetic zeal, it will become an irrelevant social club without moral or spiritual authority. If the church does not participate actively in the struggle for peace and for economic and racial justice, it will forfeit the loyalty of millions and cause men everywhere to say that it has atrophied its will. But if the church will free itself from the shackles of a deadening status quo, and, recovering its great historic mission, will speak and act fearlessly and insistently in terms of justice and peace, it will enkindle the imagination of mankind and fire the souls of men, imbuing them with a glowing and ardent love for truth, justice, and peace." Martin, *Strength to Love*, 47.

¹⁸ David Loy, "The Religion of the Market," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 65.1 (Spring 1997): 275-90.



Copyright and Use:

As an ATLAS user, you may print, download, or send articles for individual use according to fair use as defined by U.S. and international copyright law and as otherwise authorized under your respective ATLAS subscriber agreement.

No content may be copied or emailed to multiple sites or publicly posted without the copyright holder(s)' express written permission. Any use, decompiling, reproduction, or distribution of this journal in excess of fair use provisions may be a violation of copyright law.

This journal is made available to you through the ATLAS collection with permission from the copyright holder(s). The copyright holder for an entire issue of a journal typically is the journal owner, who also may own the copyright in each article. However, for certain articles, the author of the article may maintain the copyright in the article. Please contact the copyright holder(s) to request permission to use an article or specific work for any use not covered by the fair use provisions of the copyright laws or covered by your respective ATLAS subscriber agreement. For information regarding the copyright holder(s), please refer to the copyright information in the journal, if available, or contact ATLA to request contact information for the copyright holder(s).

About ATLAS:

The ATLA Serials (ATLAS®) collection contains electronic versions of previously published religion and theology journals reproduced with permission. The ATLAS collection is owned and managed by the American Theological Library Association (ATLA) and received initial funding from Lilly Endowment Inc.

The design and final form of this electronic document is the property of the American Theological Library Association.