Opinion
Spirituality



(Unsplash/Clay Banks)



by Michael Sean Winters

View Author Profile

Follow on Twitter at @michaelswinters

Join the Conversation

Send your thoughts to *Letters to the Editor*. Learn more

March 4, 2020

Share on BlueskyShare on FacebookShare on TwitterEmail to a friendPrint

H. Richard Niebuhr devotes almost half of his book, *Christ and Culture*, to discussing the first two possible responses to the problem of Christ and culture. Those two responses are the poles between which all other responses make their case. He deals with the remaining three responses to the problem in much less time, and so shall I, in part because the central three groups define themselves in relation to the two already examined. One can more easily discern their qualities.

Further, Niebuhr begins his treatment of these alternate responses by noting that the first two he has considered — the radical Christians who posit Christ against culture and the accommodationists who worship a Christ of culture — have never been the primary way of the Christian community:

> The great majority movement in Christianity, which we may call the church of the center, has refused to take either the position of the anticultural radicals or that of the accommodators of Christ to culture. Yet it has not regarded its efforts at solution of the Christ-culture problem as compromising however sinful it knows all human efforts to be. For it the fundamental issue does not lie between Christ and the world, important as that issue is, but between God and man. … The agreement is formulated in theological terms, and the relevance of such formulae to the practical questions of Christian life is often obscure both to radical critics and uncritical followers. It is as great, however, as that of relativity and quantum theories to inventions, to medical and even political practice, in which millions participate who have no understanding of the theories. (p. 117)

It is in the understanding of Christ as son of the creator that the church group bridges the perceived gap between Christ and culture on which the radical Christians fixate and confess a firm belief in "a certain harmony of conviction about the universality and radical nature of sin." Radical Christians may exempt themselves from sin's domain, and the accommodationists "tend to deny that it [sin] reaches into the depths of human personality." The church group instead sees sin in all its depth and pervasiveness, reaching into the heart of the Christian and to the depth of his personality.

Advertisement

Among this church party, Niebuhr sees "three distinguishable families … and each may at special times or on certain specific issues find itself more closely allied to one of the extreme parties than to the other movements in the central church." He designates these families the synthesists, for whom Christ is above culture, the dualists, for whom Christ is in paradox with culture, and the conversionists who posit a Christ who transforms culture.

The synthesist recognizes the differences between Christ and culture that "accommodation Christianity never takes seriously, and that radicalism does not try to overcome." The commandments are more demanding than the accommodationist allows, and yet they cannot "be made to rhyme with the requirements of human life in civilized society by allegorizing them or by projecting them into the future … or by relegating them to the sphere of personal disposition and good intention." Niebuhr states: "They are too explicit for that." Mankind's own nature compels him to try and bridge these gaps, because that nature, though radically sinful, was yet created by the same creator who ordered the world. "There are other laws besides the laws of Jesus Christ; and they are also imperative, and also from God" (p. 121-122).

The synthetic answer is discernible by the second century of the common era, in someone like Justin Martyr, but Niebuhr contends the first great "representative of the type" is Clement of Alexandria, a contemporary of Tertullian.

> A Christian, in Clement's view, must then first of all be a good man in accordance with the standard of good culture. Sobriety in personal conduct is to be accompanied by honesty in economic dealings, and by obedience to political authority. But this is by no means the whole of the Christian life. There is a stage of existence beyond the morally respectable life of the church-goer. Christ invites men to attaint, and promises them the realization of a perfection even greater than that of the passionless wise man.

Alas, poor besotted humankind: How must we contend within ourselves over the dangerous, self-deluding satisfaction of living "the morally respectable life of the church-goer."

The synthesists are always averse to "either/or" approach characteristic of the radical Christians and, indeed, the "both/and" approach has become dominant in the Christian church and exemplified in the great of all synthesizers, Thomas Aquinas. *

> [H]is Christ is far above culture, and he does not try to disguise the gulf that lies between them. His own manner of life indicates how he unites the two claims, the two hopes and beginnings. He is a monk, faithful to the vows of poverty, celibacy and obedience. With the radical Christians, he has rejected the secular world. But ***he is a monk in the church which has become the guardian of culture, the fosterer of learning, the judge of the nations, the protector of the family, the governor of social religion*** … a remarkable practical synthesis. … The synthesis was not easily attained or maintained; it was full of tensions and dynamic movements and subject to strains. Both sides of the church, the one in the world and the one in the cloister, were subject to corruption, but also served in each other's reformation. In reality, the unity of church and civilization, of this world and the other, of Christ and Aristotle, of reformation and conservation, was doubtless far removed from the idealized picture later imagination and propaganda have devised. Yet it was a synthesis such as is not likely to be achieved in modern society; which lacks, among other things, two of its prerequisites — the presence of a widespread and profoundly serious radical Christianity protesting against the attenuation of the gospel by cultural religious institutions, and ***a cultural church great enough to accept and maintain in union with itself this loyal opposition***. (p. 129-130, emphasis mine)

Aquinas lived in a remarkable age, to be sure, but he also was a remarkable man who, perhaps more than any before or since, not only achieved a synthesis of Christ and culture, but grasped the relationship of doctrine to practical ethics. "The whole effort at synthesis here is informed by, if not grounded on, the conviction of which Trinitarian doctrine is a verbal expression; namely, that the Creator of nature and Jesus Christ and the immanent spirit are of one essence," Niebuhr writes. "Man does not possess three ways to truth, but has been given ways to three truths; and these three truths form one system of truth" (p. 131). The difference between "three ways to truth" and "ways to three truths" should not obscure the equally important change of voices in the verb from the active "possess" to the passive "has been

given." God is the protagonist for the synthesist. Nor does the synthesist succumb to the temptation of the accommodationist of overlooking inconvenient passages in Scripture.

The synthesist who follows Aquinas likewise integrates the moral life in ways the radical Christian would dismiss. The "ways to blessedness are many," Niebuhr observes. "There is the way of the culture of the moral life through training in good habits; and the way of intelligent self-direction; and the way of ascetic obedience to the radical counsels of Jesus; and the way of gracious, spontaneous love, faith, and hope; but this last way is not one that man can find, nor one on which he can walk on his own power" (p. 133). The "merely moral life" at which the radical Christian may scoff is, for Aquinas, "a great achievement" and a necessary precursor to any hope to attain to the higher virtues of contemplative life.



St. Thomas Aquinas is seen in stained glass at the Basilica of Our Lady of the Immaculate Conception in Guelph, Ontario. (CNS/The Crosiers/Gene Plaisted)

Recently, I had occasion to call attention to one of my favorite quotes from Niebuhr, when discussing the opposition to Pope Francis that treats the tradition of the church as a museum piece, not as something that is still alive. Niebuhr argues that the late 19th-century effort to revive Aquinas necessarily entailed a repudiation of his method:

> Yet Leo XIII and all who followed him in calling for a new synthesis on a Thomistic basis are not synthesists. The synthesis of Christ and culture is doubtless their goal but they do not synthesize Christ with present culture, present philosophy, present institutions as Thomas did. … What is sought here is not the synthesis of Christ with present culture but the re-establishment of the philosophy and the institutions of another culture. … the reign and Lordship of Jesus have been so identified with the dogmas, organization, and mores of a cultural religious institution that the dynamic counterpoises characteristic of Thomas' synthesis have disappeared, save in the accepted theory itself. (p. 138-139)

The absence of any synthesis today that is comparable to that of Aquinas has done nothing to lessen the yearning for one nor its practical necessity:

> There is an appealing greatness in the synthesist's resolute proclamation that the God who is to rule now rules and has ruled, that His rule is established in the nature of things, and that man must build on the established foundations. He expresses in this way a principle that no other Christian group seems to assert so well but which all need to share; namely, the principle that the Creator and the Savior are one; or that whatever salvation means beyond creation it does not mean the destruction of the created. Practically stated, he affirms most clearly that the conduct of life among the redeemed cannot fall short of life under law, however high it must rise beyond it; and that law is never merely a human invention, but contains the will of God. (p. 143)

Niebuhr's affinity for the synthesists does not blind him to the problems: it is one thing to posit that law "contains the will of God," somehow written into the nature of things, and quite another "to formulate the law in the language and concepts of a reason that is always culturally conditioned." He speculates that while it is possible to conceive of a synthesis that does not require a church, it is almost impossible, that the institutionalization of Christ and the Gospel is the natural outcome of the procedure of synthesis, even though such an institutionalization is bound to result in "a usurpation in which time seeks to exercise the power of eternity and man the power of God." He notes also that the Christ-above-culture synthesis can too easily lead to the distinguishing of "grades of Christian perfection," a mischief-making

enterprise that is "beyond the range of men and sinners."

The synthesist's approach is easily identifiable as the approach of the churches — the things that distinguish one Christian denomination from another are largely found elsewhere. I often wonder what it was like to have lived in the time of Aquinas, that era we breezily call "the Age of Faith." The great gothic cathedrals mirror in stone the soaring intellectual achievements of Aquinas, but surely some of the stone masons of medieval France harbored doubts about their beliefs, or their church or at least about their clergy. Some put hand to stone because it put food on the table, not because of any religious devotion. Yet the church largely governed that culture and so the synthesis was possible.

The habits of thought and observation that started Thomas Aquinas down his path to theological greatness, those thoughts and observations do not emerge from the culture of our day. The modern synthesis can mimic the methods of Aquinas, but not the results. Indeed, since the Renaissance turned man's attention back on himself, it is hard to even imagine how anyone could think a medieval suit of intellectual clothes could still be worn, although there is obvious use in that suit as a model of what a synthesis can look like. Any synthesis we might try and achieve, however, would look very different, and it may be the saddest fact about contemporary Christianity that it is impossible to even imagine a contemporary Aquinas doing for our age what the Angelic Doctor did for his.

[Michael Sean Winters covers the nexus of religion and politics for NCR.]

Editor's note: *Don't miss out on Michael Sean Winters' latest. Sign up and we'll let you know when he publishes new Distinctly Catholic columns.*

**This paragraph has been added. It did not appear in an earlier version due to an editing error.*

Read this next: Christ and culture in paradox, and Christ as transformer of culture