Theology and culture

Theology of Missions

Southern Nazarene University
Does what Christians believe give them a lens with which to view and interact with the surrounding culture?

In what ways do Christians allow the larger culture to shape and define their beliefs?
Two books

CHRIST AND CULTURE

H. RICHARD Niebuhr

Christianity in Culture

A Study in Dynamic Biblical Theologizing in Cross-Cultural Perspective

Charles H. Kraft

Foreword by Bernard Ramm
Richard Niebuhr

- Pastor in Evangelical and Reformed Church (St. Louis)
- Yale seminary professor when he published *Christ and Culture* (1951)
Niebuhr’s 5 classic positions

1. Christ against culture

- Following Christ means rejecting loyalty to “sinful” culture
- Church’s primary identity is that of resisting cultural accommodation
- A “holy huddle” of Christians who rarely dialog with outsiders
Niebuhr’s classic positions

2. Christ of culture

- Uncritical, accommodationist perspective
- Affirming both Christ and culture and denying any necessary opposition between the two.
- Christianity and culture become fused regardless of their differences
3. Christ above culture

An attempt at a synthesis of the two extreme positions

The gospel elevates and validates the best of culture while rejecting that which is antithetical to the gospel

Not “either-or” but always “both-and”
4. Christ and culture in paradox

- Sees culture as neutral with the tension being between God and humanity
- Each Christian is a subject of two realms--two "kingdoms," but one king, Christ.
5. Christ the transformer of culture

- A conversionist approach to culture
- Evil is a perversion of good rather than having its own fundamental reality
- The Puritan ethic perspective which sees the whole of life as in some sense requiring to be converted to Christ
Charles Kraft

- Missionary anthropologist
- “Christianity in Culture,” 30 years after Niebuhr
- Sees 3 groupings of positions
  - God against culture
  - God in culture
  - God above culture
Charles Kraft’s listing

- God against culture
  - Commitment to God is a decision to oppose culture
  - Assumes all of culture is evil
    - Speaking in tongues

THE WORLD
 (=Culture)

“Christian” Place, Attitude, Subculture

Escape
Two God-in-culture positions

- God or Christ is merely culture hero (position of many anthropologists)
- God is contained within, or at least endorses, one particular culture (Example: Hebrews)
Five God-above-culture positions

- God is above culture and unconcerned about human beings
  - Deism, African religions
  - Ignore God while holding tightly to some of Jesus’ teachings

- Christians follow requirements of both Christ and culture, but each in its own place (Thomas Aquinas)
God-above-culture positions

- Dualism in which Christian is like an amphibian
- Conversionist (Augustine, Calvin)
  - Culture is corrupted but usable and even redeemable
- Christ above-but-through-culture

Summary web page
This PowerPoint presentation is available along with related materials and other PowerPoint presentations at http://home.snu.edu/~hculbert/ppt.htm