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The Dialectic between Christ and Culture

The guiding question of our two readings for today is, “what role does the larger culture play in our theological tasks?” That is, how does culture influence our understanding of our religion—Christianity in both cases. The foregone conclusion of both authors is that the culture in which the theological conversation is taking place has a profound influence on the Christian theology of that context. While this answer seems obvious to us, my own family in the Amish/Mennonite communities of Kansas would deny that the surrounding “world” has anything to do with them or their understanding of Christ. Of course this reaction against the dominant culture is itself admitting the role of the culture in the identity and theological convictions of this group. Both authors understand religion and culture to be in dialectical conversation with each-other. Culture can and does influence religion while religion can and does influence culture. The two can move in harmonious ways together or one can resist the other. H. R. Niebuhr formulates the question in this way, “Is Christianity, as gospel, a simple thing which enters into relation with other simple elements, or with compounds, being modified by them, or is itself a compound so that issues would need to arise within it and differentiations would need to take place on the basis of Christian convictions alone?”

Niebuhr sets out a typology of ways in which Christians understand the relationship between Christianity and Culture. Each of the five Weberian ideal types is a description of the family resemblances of the various ways in which people understand how religion and culture *ought* to interrelate (or not). No one person or group would ever match one of these ideal types exactly; rather than being actual descriptions, they are useful constructs for understanding

and analyzing the various positions. My Mennonite family, for example, approximates the “New Law” type fairly closely. Culture is seen as simply antithetical to their religious understandings and should be rejected in all its forms.

Rieger is more interested in how power—understood primarily in the language of empire—actually does influence Christianity and how Christianity influences the power of empire. Whereas Niebuhr’s typology explores various types’ positions on how Christ *ought* to be related to culture, Rieger formulates descriptions of how various Christological positions are in cahoots with and resist empire. Rieger describes how each of the Christological ideal-types can be used either to support or resist empire. Empire, in this framework, is the collection of language, culture, religion, politics, economics and power, concentrated in the hands of the few, which control and dominate the lives of the many. Religion can be co-opted into serving the empire and its *status quo* when those in power (or with a vested interest in maintaining the *status quo*) define how religion relates to the culture, political discourse, etc. But, there is always a gap between the vision of Christ presented by the centers of power and the vision of Christ articulated in the faith, which Rieger calls the “*real* of Christ.” This distinction between *reality* and the *real* is complex. Rieger defines it this way:

“The battle between *reality* (the commonly accepted version of the way things are, upheld not by correspondence to a referent anchored in people’s lives but by power) and the *real* (that which has been pushed below the surface and repressed in the formation of the dominant version of reality) is as uneven as any battle between dominant and repressed forces: reality seems to win every time.”¹

1. Joerg Reiger. *Christ and Empire: From Paul to Postcolonial Times* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2007), 10.

The gap between the dominant articulation of Christ and the Christ found in the heritage of the tradition (however a group may understand the sources of this heritage) is what Rieger calls *the Christological surplus*. Out of this surplus the dominant power structures can be critiqued, challenged and reframed. For example, in the Christological vision of Christ in the three offices of prophet, priest and king, the role of king can be used to model colonial power. Rieger uses Schleiermacher as the model-type in this example since Schleiermacher was doing his theology as the European colonial empires were at their apex. Schleiermacher challenges colonialism in many ways, but is also deeply embedded in it.² The offices of prophet, priest and king can be put to use by the colonial powers and Schleiermacher's appropriation is aware of this problem and reframes the offices magnifying Christ's power is attractive rather than coercive. The resulting Christology is not a brutal colonialism, but yet retains a strong anti-Semitic character. Schleiermacher finds surplus in the dominant Christology that enables him to reframe the Christological vision.³ Rieger's concern is that we look for our own blind-spots and find surpluses in our theology to resist empire in all its forms.

My concern is the blind-spot that I see in Rieger's project of resisting empire. He claims that "the problem with empire is not primarily a moral one—it is not that all empires are necessarily equally evil and wrong."⁴ But his language belies a strong bias against empires. Using the singular-indefinite "empire" in place of a specific empire ("the 20th Century US economic empire") seems problematic. While not all empires are *equally* evil and wrong, the assumption is that they all are evil and wrong in various degrees—an overtly moral claim.

2. Rieger, 207ff.

3. Ibid. 213.

4. Ibid. 3.

Viewed through my own Mennonite heritage, I am inclined to agree with Rieger's assessment of empire, but I am compelled to acknowledge that this may be a blind-spot in my own theology.

Resisting the ideal-type of 'empire' is very different than resisting a specific empire. Niebuhr's use of ideal-types demonstrates common patterns that are never in-and-of-themselves real. They are useful constructs to get a handle on a vast array of cultural dynamics. Rieger seems to be using his historical examples not as ideal-types but as individuals of a species. That the US is a global economic and military empire is not a fact with which I will dispute. Nor will I dispute the fact that some people in the United States use Christological claims to support their own economic, political and ideological interests—interests which coincide with the interests of the US empire. My worry is that Rieger is lifting up examples that demonstrate his point and neglecting the wealth of counter-voices that do have real, if not dominant, power to create change. The categorical claim that only those on the margins can see things that *cannot* be seen from the top is problematic.⁵ I do not deny that it is difficult for a CEO of a huge corporation to know what effect his (gendered term used intentionally) corporate policies will have on the lowest levels of workers, but there is no proportionality between "difficult" and "impossible." To make it impossible for us to recognize our own sins makes repentance equally impossible. Repentance from sin and resisting evil, not empire, are our baptismal vows—the best way of resisting evil may be in resisting empire and the dominant culture, but that is not necessarily true.

5. Ibid. 9.