Yoder's Christ and Girard's Culture: With Reference to Kierkegaard's Transformation of the Self

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Abstract:

With the theological inadequacy of H. Richard Niebuhr's work *Christ and Culture* hovering in the background, this paper will consider how Yoder's understanding of Jesus and Rene Girard's understanding of violent cultures can be brought into fruitful dialogue with each other. Søren Kierkegaard's theological psychology can also be used to deepen the conversation. How might Yoder's thought have changed if he had focused on the psychology of violence, instead of just the ethics of violence?

There are two main problems with H. Richard Niebuhr's *Christ and Culture*. The first is that Christ does not come into focus in the book. The second problem is that culture does not come into focus either. These are obviously two major flaws in a book with such a bold and catchy title.

John Howard Yoder's critique of *Christ and Culture* has been published in the book *Authentic Transformation*, and I recommend it to you highly if you have not read it. In this essay, Yoder demonstrates how insightful and gifted he is as a reader. He has the ability to be both genuinely sympathetic with an author, and also devastatingly perceptive in his comments. It is not necessary for me to summarize this essay by Yoder, especially since another speaker at this conference is addressing it in detail. But I do need to begin by elaborating briefly on my assertion that neither Christ nor culture come into focus in Niebuhr's book.

How does Niebuhr define Christ in the first chapter of his book? He says this:

> As Son of God he points away from the many values of man's social life to the One who alone is good; from the many powers which men use and on which they depend to the One who alone is powerful; from the many times and seasons of history with their hopes and fears to the One who is Lord of all times and is alone to be feared and hoped for; he points away from all that is conditioned to the Unconditioned. He does not direct attention away from this world to another; but from all worlds, present and future, material and spiritual, to the One who creates all worlds, who is the Other of all worlds. (C&C, 28)

Niebuhr had obviously read the Gospels, but in this passage he seems to be channeling Gnosticism rather than accurately reflecting the character of Jesus in the Gospels. His vision of Christ is so ethereal and transcendent that he could not possibly come to view Jesus in the way that Yoder later did, as someone whose life and teachings have a real application to the life of Christians in history. He has ruled out that possibility *by definition*.

When we turn to Niebuhr's understanding of culture, we find that he argues that in stark contrast to his definition of Christ, his definition of culture will be completely secular and not at all theological. Culture must be understood as it would be by a secular anthropologist, "without theological interpretation"(C&C, 30). Along these lines, he says that culture is "that total process of human activity and that total result of such activity to which now the name *culture*, now the name *civilization*, is applied in common speech. Culture … comprises language, habits, ideas, beliefs, customs, social organization, inherited artifacts, technical processes, and values"(C&C, 32). We are presented with a rather bland and vague picture of culture as everything that human beings do. What is lacking from this perspective is a sense of the real danger that lies buried within the concept of culture. Niebuhr's definition seems to leave out of account situations such as a lynch mob in the Deep South or the Holocaust in Europe as expressions of culture, because to take such things seriously would place in jeopardy his assumption that culture can be equated with civilization and can be defined in wholly secular terms. The blandness of Niebuhr's definition of culture is particularly striking given that he wrote this book in the wake of World War II.

While Niebuhr's *Christ and Culture* has not held up well as a guide for Christian social ethics, I would like to take another passage from his writings as a jumping off point for the remainder of my comments. In a little known sermon entitled "The Logic of the Cross," Niebuhr says this:

> The cross in history may be compared to the kind of an event which an astronomer means when, having computed the positions of the planets with the aid of his excellent Ptolemaean wisdom he discovers a planet in a position that does not fit into the scheme. His whole wisdom is called into question, and eventually the Copernican or Einsteinian revolution of his science may result. So

> the cross as a simple event calls into question the foundations of our worldly wisdom. (*Theology, History, and Culture*, 205)

This is a quotation that John Howard Yoder would have no problem endorsing enthusiastically. At the heart of his thought we find the idea that the cross is indeed an epistemological revolution--what Yoder calls the Original Revolution. But what is the "worldly wisdom" that Niebuhr says is called into question by the cross? Is it not the attempt to understand human culture on some other basis than what God was doing in the life and death of Christ? If this is the case, then we can understand Yoder's work, from beginning to end, to be a careful elaboration of this insight articulated by Niebuhr. Yoder realized that the only Wisdom really worthy of philosophical articulation, in the big picture of things, is that Wisdom that finds its starting point in the execution of an unauthorized Jewish rabbi 2000 years ago.

For this audience, which consists of long time students of Yoder's writings, it is hardly necessary for me to provide a summary of his thought. I will merely point in a perfunctory way to the themes that he dwelt on for decades. Yoder studied under Karl Barth and developed his thought within the stream carved out by Barth. This means that Yoder took the Bible very seriously, was theologically conservative but not fundamentalist, analyzed the history of Christianity very carefully, and saw ethical positions as being logically entailed by theological beliefs.

While Yoder was not a fundamentalist in the sense of a person who believes in the inerrancy and perfect clarity of the Bible, he did give the Bible a very high degree of authority in shaping Christian belief and action. Indeed, his repeated complaint against the Niebuhr brothers and other mainstream ethicists is that they always read the Bible with an eye to finding some way of escaping from its concrete guidance. Yoder wanted to make it more and more difficult for Christian ethicists to do that. Yoder was theologically orthodox in the sense of affirming the deity of Christ and the Nicene vision of God as Trinity. But he was not content to let that vision be merely a vision, merely a system of belief to which Christians give assent. He insisted upon asking: If God was truly in Christ reconciling the world to himself, and if Christ calls us to follow him, then how can we

refuse to follow him and still claim to be worshipers of this God? Yoder wants to broaden the concept of orthodoxy to include orthopraxy. In this sense, Yoder's body of written work can be seen as an extension of the ethical volumes in Barth's *Church Dogmatics* (the second half of II/2, III/4, IV/4). Interpreting Christian theology as orthopraxy obviously involves articulating a critique of those aspects of Christian history which show a clear departure from the Gospel norms for Christian behavior. If Christians burned people at the stake, went on bloody Crusades, went from confirmation class to join the Hitler Youth, and so forth, then something has gone wrong at a fundamental level. The errors involved here need to be analyzed not just theologically but also historically. How did this type of ethical travesty become not just possible for Christians, but in many senses normal? Yoder is well known for giving the label "Constantinianism" to the place where the train went off the rails. This concept does not simply signify a period in time, but rather a continual temptation for Christians in all times and places. The temptation is to seek to control the course of world history, using worldly methods. Instead of trusting in God, Christians may seek to seize the reigns of power and attempt to manage the world as God's assistants. But when they do that, they are no longer working with Christ to embody his peaceful order in a sinful world; instead, they become part of the power structure which is fighting against Christ and persecuting him all over again.

In my view, the reason why *The Politics of Jesus* has become such a classic work of Christian ethics is precisely because in that book Christ comes into focus in a way that H. Richard Niebuhr was not able to achieve in his book. When Yoder says, "Jesus was, in his divinely mandated prophethood, priesthood, and kingship, the bearer of a new possibility of human, social, and therefore political relationships" (PJ, 52), we can see Christ clearly as the One who is bringing God's new order into a disordered and resistant world. When we see Christ more clearly, we can see that a bland and vague definition of culture is not satisfactory either, because culture is to a great extent how resistance to the kingdom of God is organized. Culture is not neutral but is actually opposed to the breaking in of peace and committed to maintaining the system of violence.

If I may be allowed to critique Yoder for a moment, it strikes me that he tended to define sin as basically being "Constantinianism." In other words, sin is the attempt by human beings to control human history, to guide it according to their ends and beliefs, apart from the pathway of suffering obedience revealed in the life of Christ. While this understanding of sin is correct, as far as it goes, I think that it needs to be given more nuance and depth. I find this stress on Constantinianism to be too intellectual, as if the Fall of Adam and Eve led directly to a lack of appreciation for the basic tenets of Anabaptist historiography. What I would press for is a more psychological understanding of sin that interprets the motivations which underlie violence. There are many forms of violence in the world: war, revolution, spouse abuse, armed robbery, school shootings, terrorism, and so forth. The inadequacy of "Constantinianism" as a way of getting a handle on all of these phenomena is apparent immediately. If we think of these different forms of violence as being the rooms of a house, the question is: "What is the foundation under the house?" Beneath all of these varied forms of violence, can we discern the nature of the psychological and spiritual disease which is manifesting itself in these forms of moral evil?

Here I turn to René Girard to broaden the discussion. Girard's understanding of culture is so much more fruitful than H. Richard Niebuhr's precisely because he doesn't downplay the connection between violence and culture. Instead, he emphasizes this connection, arguing that violence is in fact the engine which generates and drives culture.

Girard begins with the concept of mimetic desire. We human beings have a natural tendency to look to others as models of success. We think that by imitating others we deem to be successful, we will come to share in their greater fullness of being. We want to have what they have so that we can be as important as they are. This basic driving force in human affairs, mimetic desire, can be seen in the psychology of small children, in advertising, in romantic relationships, in fashion, in economics, and on and on. But if I am copying the desires of others, wanting to possess what they possess, then by definition I will create a rivalry with those others for the possession of those things.

And if those others are creating a rivalry with me, then we have the recipe for a war of all against all for possession of the idols of our desire.

How does human society prevent itself from degenerating into a chaos of violence driven by envy? "It is expedient that one should die for the sake of the many." The idea of channeling a society's violence toward a scapegoat is the solution to the problem, according to Girard. Killing a scapegoat, or attacking a minority group within society, provides an outlet valve for the build-up of hatreds, resentments, and violent impulses that are generated by mimetic desire. Killing the scapegoat is a cathartic event that creates a new sense of social unanimity that did not exist before. Sacrifice becomes salvific for the society, and it becomes the cornerstone of both religion and culture. But this cultural answer to the problem of possible social collapse is false because the problem should not exist in the first place. In other words, deceit becomes the one thing needful for society as it must not become aware of the injustice involved in its destruction of arbitrary scapegoats. Society must lie to itself about its foundation, because the mimetic desire at the root of the social system is itself a falling away from God; Girard calls it an "ontological sickness."

This is the point at which Girard's vision of human culture leads beyond the narrowness of secular social science to a broader theological anthropology. Girard clearly states that we can only articulate this understanding of human culture because our eyes have been opened up by the Bible. It is the cumulative effect of divine revelation in the Hebrew and Christian scriptures that has exposed the ontological sickness of mimetic desire and the scapegoating mechanism. The high point of revelation is the Gospels' depiction of the crucifixion of Christ, which tears the mask off of culture's insistence that it is in the right when it executes people. The Gospels expose this lie by clearly showing that Christ is innocent and that those who are killing him are in the wrong. In that revelation God triumphs and Satan is defeated. Girard understands Satan to be that principle in human psychology and culture that cries out for bloodshed, for violence, for revenge, for destruction.

Girard's thought gives to us a way of conceptualizing what H. Richard Niebuhr was incompetently pointing toward as Culture. In the wake of Girard's thought, we can see how wrongheaded Niebuhr was to simply write off Anabaptism as being "against culture." Of course, followers of Christ need to be against culture, when culture is seen in its true shape as an engine which needs to be fueled by the blood of scapegoats. There is no other place that Christians can stand if they seek to live out of what Niebuhr elsewhere calls the "logic of the cross."

The issues raised by Girard help us to bring the concept of culture into greater focus, just as Yoder helped us to bring Christ into focus. But we can see, after Girard, that the question of why human beings are violent is one which Yoder did not ask. This is a major gap in his thought. Barth did not ask this question in a serious way, but that in itself would not have prevented Yoder from doing so. Yoder was obviously very creative as a theologian, and he certainly could have turned his attention in this direction, but he did not do so. Toward the end of his life, Yoder developed an interest in Girard and began to enter into dialogue with Girardian concepts, but this observation points up the fact that this line of inquiry was not present at all when Yoder wrote *The Politics of Jesus*. At that time Yoder was asking questions about Christian faith and the *ethics* of violence, but not about Christian faith and the *psychology* of violence. This is the area that remains fuzzy and out-of-focus in Yoder's writings.

In my research, the phenomenon of violence does come into focus when Girard's thought is brought into dialogue with the writings of Søren Kierkegaard. Kierkegaard was widely read in the twentieth century, but it is far from clear that he was widely understood. In most cases, his interpreters and critics laid over his writings a heavy layer of their own biases, preoccupations, and jargon. This resulted in a phenomenon I refer to as Kierkegaard Graffiti. Just as the vandal who spray paints a building hastily in the dark and then runs away has no real appreciation for the architecture of the building he is defacing, so also did Kierkegaard's deep and complex authorship become the victim of misconstrual and slander by people who did not expend the time and effort required for developing a clear understanding of his central concerns. Just one example of this graffiti

is the phrase "the leap of faith" which is considered by many authors of encyclopedia articles to be the perfect summary of "Kierkegaard's philosophy." It turns out that he never used that phrase anywhere in his writings.

A more accurate summary of Kierkegaard would proceed along these lines. Kierkegaard understood the world as the sphere of the creative activity of God. He took very seriously the fundamental biblical theme that God creates the universe through speech. Everything that exists does so because God is speaking it into existence. The human soul is that unique place in all of nature where the voice of God can be heard and responded to consciously. The animals, vegetables, and minerals are simply given from God's hand without self-consciousness; but human beings are able to be aware of their divine source. We are not only spoken into existence, but we also have the ability to be hearers of that speech. This is our transcendent nobility as human beings, but it is also our peril.

Just as we are superior to the lower animals because we can respond to our Creator consciously, so also can we sink below them into the abyss of sin. The psychology of the animals is set, determined. But our psychology is rooted in freedom. Another way of putting this is to say that we do not simply exist; we are coming into existence. Our character is not set in stone; our character is shaped by our experiences, our fears and anxieties, our relationships with other people and with our Creator. We have the ability to shape our own character (and to be shaped) through our response to the voice of creation that is speaking us.

The fact that we are not determined means that we can experience an emotion that is unique to us: angst. Angst arises out of the ambiguity of our future. There are various possibilities open to us if we choose to allow our self to develop in this direction or that direction. The most basic choice which presents itself to us at all times concerns our response to the divine call of creation. We can respond positively to this call and allow ourselves to be drawn forward into the fullness of selfhood that God intends for us, or we can attempt to deafen ourselves to God's voice and seize control of our selfhood. This is precisely what Adam and Eve did, and what we all do as their children. They

sought to "become as God," to usurp the place of God as the shaper of their future. In the same way, human beings down through the centuries have tried to manage and contain their angst by turning away from God in an attempt to avoid the pain of personal growth. We find it easier to reinforce the status quo of our souls and our societies than to allow the continuing process of creation to make, unmake, and remake us.

When we start down this path of deafening ourselves to the voice of God, we quickly develop a psychological inertia. Our commitment to avoiding the pain of growth is so strong that we organize our character and our societies around that commitment. When we cut ourselves off from the fullness of what the future could hold for us, we inevitably become stunted and misshapen as persons. Instead of living creatively in the tensions of existence before God, such as freedom and necessity, the eternal and the temporal, we careen in one direction or the other, seeking then to fortify ourselves within one of those poles of existence. What we are seeking to evade above all else is the possibility that we could actually become ourselves before God. Instead of moving in faith into the fullness of life that God calls us to, we choose to follow the pathway that Kierkegaard calls "the sickness unto death."

When God comes to us in the person of Christ, what do we do? We could allow him to heal us of our sickness and lead us back into the process of creation. But we don't do that. We are enraged by the voice that judges our smallness and choice of mediocrity. We must silence this voice in order to protect ourselves from its disturbing call. We stop up our ears and rush upon Jesus to kill him. Kierkegaard is pointing us in the direction we must look if we seek to understand the violence which erupts from the depths of human soul. Violence is not "senseless"; it has a purpose. It seeks to fend off the possibility that always lies before us—the possibility that we could become the mature, loving human beings that God is creating us to be.

Aristotle said that "all action intends a good." In other words, whenever human beings act, they *think* that they are doing something good. The Nazis thought they were making the world a better place by killing off as many Jews as possible. President Truman thought he was ending World War II sooner by dropping atomic bombs on two

Japanese cities. Timothy McVeigh thought he was striking a dramatic blow against a tyrannical federal government. In other words, human action is always either directly ethical in the eyes of the actors, or it is a kind of "teleological suspension of the ethical" which amounts to the same thing. McVeigh could admit that killing innocent people is not in itself a good thing, but the badness of the act is outweighed by the goodness of the prophetic statement. Similar thoughts run through the minds of Islamic terrorists. And ironically, similar thoughts no doubt run through the minds of those troops who carry out retaliatory actions against the terrorists, if those actions result in the loss of civilian lives. Everyone is innocent in their own eyes, because everyone is intending a good.

From Kierkegaard we can gain a better understanding of how human evil results from a perverted definition of the good. From him we can learn that in the case of the most twisted individuals the self is so filled with rage toward God and the ongoing process of creation that the person's actions no longer make any sense in terms of this world. Consider how the Columbine High School shooters killed others and then committed suicide. They had already checked out of this world. Consider how we search in vain to find any shred of rationality in the actions of the World Trade Center terrorists. When human beings cold-bloodedly board airplanes and suicidally guide them to a murderous apocalypse, their actions can aptly be described as expressing a "transcendental rage." The subconscious object of this rage is God. The human self has become so twisted and malformed that the only good it can aim at is the affirmation of the self in utter defiance of God and the goodness of creation. The self's desire to avoid the pain of growth is so strong that it has declared war on God and God's creatures, which includes the self itself. Thus we can understand the very close relationship between the suicidal mentality and the homicidal mentality. Ultimately, the most effective way for the self to prevent itself from growing psychologically is to end its own existence as a self. When human sin is taken to its logical extreme, self-extinction becomes the only good that human action aims at.

In my view, Kierkegaard's thought is deeper and more subtle than Girard's. Girard's starting point, mimetic desire, describes human behavior after the fall into sin.

Kierkegaard takes us to a deeper level of understanding by allowing us to interpret the Fall itself, not simply as an episode in the remote past, but as the event of alienation from God which each sinner repeats in his or her own life. These two thinkers combined paint a powerful picture of what Yoder meant when he spoke of the "unwilling world" into which Christ brought his message of transformation (PJ, 96). Yoder could have turned his attention to thoughts such as these, but he missed a great opportunity by not doing so. Anabaptist historiography, in other words, could be broadened out into an Anabaptist theological psychology by entering into serious dialogue with thinkers such as Girard and Kierkegaard.

Books have been written arguing that modern natural science developed in the West precisely because of the impact of the Judeo-Christian tradition on Western culture. Nature could be studied and analyzed because God was understood to be the transcendent Creator of the world. Nature cannot be studied if one sees gods and demons everywhere. I think that an equally strong argument can be made that modern social science also developed in the West because of the impact of the Judeo-Christian tradition. One can begin to think about the pathologies of human beings if one sees them as fallen creatures distinct from and in many ways opposed to the gracious will of their Creator. More specifically, it can be argued that it is Christ's revelation of God the Father as nonviolent, rather than violent, that opens up the possibility of the kind of social science that we see in Girard and other modern commentators on violence and evil. If one believes that violence has its ultimate origin in God, then one will not ask the question, "Why are people violent?" One will see God as violent, nature as violent, and humanity as violent. That is simply the way things are. One will try to ensure that one's tribe or religion or nation is able to rule over others by being the most successful at violence. This question, "Why are people violent?", is a uniquely Christian question, one that has entered into human consciousness because of the Christ story as it is told in the Gospels. If we know God by knowing Christ, then we can see that the grace and love of God truly express God's character; we, as creatures made in God's image, should also express grace and love toward our fellow human beings (see an important passage in

Karl Barth, *The Christian Life*, 131-132). If, instead, we are filled with a murderous rage, it must be because we have fallen away from God. In other words, the fact that people are now beginning to ask this question about the causes of human violence is itself a sign of the epistemological revolution that the Cross has accomplished in human history. If Yoder had grasped this point and developed it in book form, it would have been a great gift to the theological world. That he did not do so is not so much a detraction from his achievement as it is a task which we ought to take up and carry forward in his spirit. By doing so, we would be moving toward an articulation of "the wisdom of the cross," which is superior to that which H. Richard Niebuhr called the Ptolemaean "worldly wisdom."

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