History of the Integration of Religion and Society

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Professor

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Assignment #1 – Core Essential Elements 1. Select One (1) Core Essential Element from the Syllabus Outline: a. Create a 350-word original discussion paper (with cited sources) during the first week of the term. Post this document in DIAL. b. Professor will check for quality of content and word-count requirements. Grade assigned will be Credit or No Credit (CR/NC).

When considering approaches and models for the integration of religion and society, H. Richard Niebuhr’s seminal classic “Christ and Culture” (1951) stands prominent on the field informing our understanding. He presents possible Christian frameworks ranging from opposition to culture to agreement with culture or some combination of the two. Hegeman believes Nieburh has missed a key point when regarding God and culture. Focusing on two of Neiburh’s frameworks: Christ the transformer of culture and Christ and culture in paradox, thoughts from seminal Lutheran theologian August Menuge provide additional important insight regarding the integration of religion and society.

Hegeman (2007) believes Niebuhr was too focused on responding to the existing culture and we would be better served by focusing on culture-making, though he does suggest some respect for Neiburh’s Christ, the transformer of culture, framework. (p. 21) Hegeman believes our call flowing from God’s command giving humanity dominion over the earth is to “transform the earth, not to transform the existing culture…” (p. 22) Hegeman does recognize that sin has impacted this process and culture exists in “ugliness and dissonance” with God’s original design. (p. 12) But highlighting God’s lordship, he does not believe culture “just happens” and that our approach should focus on specific acts that human beings “perform on God’s original creation.” (p. 12)

From a theological standpoint, Hegeman’s view is a bit naive. While he is not incorrect, he is simply incomplete. Like Niebuhr’s Christ, the transformer of culture, framework he believes the fallen world can be transformed into a godly world. Menuge (1999) in discussing Nieburh finds mistaken optimism that “…the fall only perverted things which were created good, that these things remain inherently good and capable of reform…” (p. 42) The danger for God’s kingdom in these overly optimistic approaches is “The emphasis on transforming culture has the danger, of becoming the whole reason for the church’s existence. The ‘social gospel’ may quickly replace the true gospel of grace and promise with a work-righteous religion of Law…” (p. 45)

Lining Hegeman’s observations with Niebuhr’s Christ and culture in paradox framework provides a more comprehensive Biblical approach that is realistic and recognizes an important Biblical insight heretofore missing. Scripture certainly reveals Christ’s Lordship but qualifies this in terms of two kingdoms. Christ rules over the world, in Lutheran parlance, in his left-hand kingdom through law and principles that build up civilization and restrain the evil that would tear down civilization. (p. 40) Christ’s right-hand rule is his kingdom of grace, composed of Christian believers who have been brought in by God’s grace and mercy made possible by Christ’s redemptive work on the cross. (p. 40) Two kingdoms with two different purposes are ruled through two different means. Menuge points out they exist “side by side” in paradox “never to be resolved in this life.” (p. 40) This is not to suggest the Christian, nor the Christian church cannot work to bring God’s truths to bear in society to facilitate godly change. Menuge points out that along with this Lutheran understanding of the two kingdoms comes an emphasis on vocation, the godly living out of our lives in service to others. This serves as a means for “curbing the consequences of sin.” (p. 41) Nieburh was critical of the paradoxical view because he believed it could lead to antinomianism and affirmation of existing imperfections in institutions and rulers. (p. 42). Here Menuge makes a key point. “Understood aright therefore, Christian vocation is anything but a timid accommodation of existing cultural institutions.” (p. 47) Rather than social stagnation, the paradoxical approach preserves the Christian Church’s call to make disciples through the proclamation of grace while upholding the place through vocation for the Christian to use God’s truth, the Law, in what Lutherans call its third use, to guide society toward a godlier form. It, however, recognizes that the world will never be transformed by works of the law into a godly form that would eliminate the need for grace and the right-hand kingdom.

The Christ and culture in paradox approach does make room for positive Christian engagement with the culture to combat sin and injustice and improve life for our fellow human beings. Here Hegeman’s perspective is of value, for God did indeed command humanity to cultivate civilization out of what God had given, so the Christian’s task within his or her vocation is not simply resisting evil and corruption but it is also about building something beautiful and godly out of the lives God has given us together.

**David, this is a great interaction you frame between Hegeman and Niebuhr! The fall affects society in differing degrees in different areas and stages of progress and decay. There is value to each of Niebuhr’s categories when appropriately applied. I think that is why his book attained the status of an enduring classic. See also Carson, D. A. (2008). *Christ and Culture Revisited* as well as Stassen, G. H., Yeager, D. M., & Yoder, J. H. (1996).  *Authentic Transformation\_ A new vision of 'Christ and Culture.'***

**Dr. Ward**

WORKS CITED

Hegeman, David. (2007). *Plowing in hope: Toward a biblical theology of culture* (2nd ed.). Canon Press. <https://read.amazon.com/?asin=B08RNJFQVJ&ref_=dbs_t_r_kcr>

Menuge, Angus. (1999). Christ and culture in dialogue. In *Christ and culture in dialogue*. Concordia Publishing House.