Christ and Culture in America: Civil Religion and the American Catholic Church

Author: Philip Sutherland

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Christ and Culture in America:
Civil Religion and the American Catholic Church

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by

Philip Sutherland, S.J.

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Readers: Dr. Mark Massa, S.J.

Dr. Dominic Doyle

Introduction

Civil religion is a necessary unifying force in a religiously plural society such as the United States, but it can also usurp the place of Christianity in the believer's life. This is always a danger for Christianity which is can only be the "good news" if it is inculturated by drawing upon a society's own symbols. But it must also transcend the culture if it is to speak a prophetic word to it. Ever since Bellah's article about civil religion in America, there has been disagreement about the theological value of civil religion. Reinhold Niebuhr, James McEvoy and Will Herberg have argued that civil religion will inevitably replace transcendent religion in people's lives. Bellah, John F. Wilson and others argue instead that civil religion is necessary to develop the social bonds that hold modern secular societies together. Civil religion produces patriotism, a devotion and attachment to one's country, which is an important source of civic and communal identity. However, patriotism can also become idolatrous when that love becomes one's most important commitment.

American politics often fuses with the broader American civil religion that quietly underlies the national identity. Even as politicians pay rhetorical lip service to the importance of religion in the private sphere (especially Christianity), these same religious communities often have a difficult time standing up to the American civil religion that promotes the moral righteousness of all American military conflicts abroad, the expansion of democracy and neo-liberal economic policies around the world, and the unifying rhetoric of a nationalism that pits "true Americans" against ethnic or religious minorities. Identifying this civil religion as the primary religion of the United States is controversial and requires one to identify the hidden assumptions behind the political rhetoric that often co-opts Christianity's own religious symbols.

When the political state is the ultimate focus of one's loyalty, then the state takes the place that God should hold in a Christian's life. Instead of a universal Gospel, this nationalism supports a civic religion for which political boundaries both enforce and symbolize the inside-outside dialectic typical of any religious community. But in this case, the "insiders" are the "true Americans." John Courtney Murray, S.J., succeeds in both identifying this danger and showing how the American experiment can avoid it. We are a country founded upon the political separation of Church and state and the sovereignty of God as the "first principle of its organization."[1] Murray uses natural law theology to support his thesis that the American consensus, because it is based upon truths about the human person that are universally accessible to human reason, can serve as this necessary and unifying force within the political community.

H. Richard Niebuhr concluded at the end of his *Christ and Culture* that a viable model for this relationship between faith and culture was "Christ, Transformer of Culture." The problem with that type is that it can easily slide into a Messianic nationalism. Reinhold Niebuhr's preferred model was "Christ and Culture in Paradox," which acknowledges religion's important role in public life but, at the same time, acknowledges the imperfect character of all human institutions. However, Christianity must always exist within a particular culture and it is only from within a culture that Christianity then interacts with the culture. Specifically, the role of the Church is to be both be a prophetic voice that critiques the culture but also an animating force within it. Any theological model must balance this tension between religion and culture. It is a paradoxical tension precisely because religious faith can never stand outside of the culture that it opposes.

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[1] John Courtney Murray, *We Hold These Truths: Catholic Reflections on the American Proposition* (New York: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2005) 44.

Bellah, Herberg and Albanese lay out the American civil religion and its history of interactions with a plurality of denominations and belief systems. But their projects are descriptive, while Niebuhr's is proscriptive. Niebuhr's *Christ and Culture* helps to articulate and evaluate how Christianity should relate to the secular culture in the United States today. This approach assumes that theology is already a political discipline and asks questions that center around public theology. Specifically, how should the Catholic Church relate to secular American society as a public institution? Theology and religious commitments should not merely be private enterprises that concern themselves only with the individual and his or her relationship to God. Rather, the Church is already contextualized within a history and a society, and it is to that history and society which the Church must speak a word of hope.

Theologians such as J.B. Metz reject the modern belief that theology has no role to play in a secular society and should be limited to the private sphere. At the same time, Metz does not want to revert to a pre-modern era in which the theological, governmental and social structures were tightly intertwined. Many of the important contributions of the Enlightenment can be preserved while critiquing other parts of the ideology. Theology and the Church are already contextualized within a social ideology, but the consciousness of that *a priori* contextualization can then allow Christians to critique that ideology from a standpoint of faith.

This critical project is particularly viable in the United States where a history of the political separation between Church and State has protected the churches rather than marginalized them. Metz comes from a European context in which people were born into a national Catholic Church, so his concern is to maintain theology's public nature while preserving its rightful sphere of influence as distinct from the political sphere. The United States, however, is considered one of the most religious countries in the West precisely because its freedom of

religion has allowed so many different denominations to flourish. American civil religion is political because it unifies the citizens of the country, but it is also built upon New England Puritanism and Enlightenment Deism. It arose alongside the churches and, rather than replacing them, has subsumed the churches under an umbrella of American identity.

Metz offers a negative understanding of the role of theology which prevents any inner-worldly ideology, such as Marxism, from being absolutized. A Christian must not create a God out of human projects. Thus, theology cannot offer a divinely sanctioned plan for history. It is important to maintain the distinction between the ecclesiological and the political realms, but Metz does not offer a positive and substantive understanding of the Church's role in the modern world. It is to typologies such as H. Richard Niebuhr's that one must turn for a more coherent and systematic description of the possible kinds of interactions between these two spheres.

In chapter 1, I will defend the proposition that the United States does indeed have a civil religion and identify some of its main characteristics, and I will layout the two main sides within which my thesis falls—that a civil religion is both necessary and a threat to Christian faith. This will not be a forensic argument that traces the development of civil religion through history. I am mainly interested in arguing how it exists now, and I will use concrete examples of this civil religion: the symbolic power of the office of the President as a national high priest and the co-opting of Christian religious language into political rhetoric.

In chapter 2, using *Christ and Culture*, I will argue for a specific type of relationship between Christianity and civil religion so that neither one supplants the other. The nature and role of Christianity is as a public religion that must interact with the national, civil religion. This interaction must be further specified and explored. Should Christianity place itself primarily

outside culture as a critique of that culture, or seek to transform culture from within? To what extent can and should it do both?

Finally, in chapter 3, I will argue that the "Christ the Transformer of Culture" model is what underlies *Gaudium et Spes* and the ecclesiological shift from a synthesist model of the interaction between the Church and culture. At Vatican II, the Church found itself both resisting with the rise of secularity and embracing the separation of Church and State after the Enlightenment. Rather than completely reject the surrounding culture, *Gaudium et Spes* encouraged the Church to dialogue with the culture, to acknowledge what cultural developments were movements of the Holy Spirit and to work with all people to builder a more just and humane world. In the midst of a liberal and secular society, the Church could no longer afford to be completely withdrawn from the culture and consequently irrelevant to it; but it also could not be *too* relevant by completely capitulating to the surrounding culture and thus lose its own identity in the process.

I will conclude by gesturing toward other implications of my argument for the contemporary debate around immigration. In that case, there is a fundamental disagreement about the nature and role of the Christian Church in a pluralistic civil society as both a prophetic voice from outside society and a transformative voice within it. In a pluralistic society that values democracy, it is important that the civil society not be governed by any one religious sect. If the Church is to be more than a place of worship within a secular world, then it must understand both its mission and its limits within that society. "Christ the Transformer of Culture" model is at articulating the balance that the Church needs to strike with today's pluralistic, secular culture.

Chapter 1: America and Its Idols, "a religion of…many of the people some of the time"

The seal of the United States of America depicts an eagle with a scroll in its beak bearing the motto "E Pluribus Unum" ("from many, one"). But what is less well-known is what is on the reverse side of the seal: an unfinished pyramid surrounded, at the top, by the Latin statement "Annuit Coeptis" ("[he] favors [our] undertakings") and, at the bottom, "Novus Ordo Seclorum ("a new order of the ages"). Other proposals for a seal, eventually rejected, were Franklin's "Moses lifting up his wand and dividing the Red Sea…with the motto 'Rebellion to tyrants is obedience to God'" and Jefferson's "the children of Israel in the wilderness 'led by a cloud by day and pillar of fire at night.'"[2] Although the founders eventually settled on a seal that was less overtly Christian than these other proposals, it is clear that Christian symbolism informed how the founders interpreted this new American experiment. The seals suggested by Franklin and Jefferson show that many colonists viewed the new American nation as a "New Israel" being led out of captivity by God—a traditional biblical image that hearkened back to John Winthrop and his image of the new Puritan settlement as a "city set on a hill" that would be a beacon of hope to Europe.[3]

The founders of the United States were Deists, but they were influenced by a culture of Protestant Christianity that was transplanted from the European continent. Just how influential Christianity was remains an open question, particularly as one examines the intersections of American politics and religious belief. Does the United States have a "civil religion" in any substantive sense of that word? Is the civil religion, if it exists, merely synonymous with

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[2] Robert N. Bellah, "Civil Religion in America," *Daedalus* 96:1 (1967): 20, fn 5.
[3] John F. Wilson, *Public Religion in American Culture* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1979), 29.

Protestantism, is it a differentiated religion in and of itself, or is it a set of cultural values that undergird particular religious expressions such as Catholicism, Protestantism and Judaism?

What is Religion?

However, before looking at these questions, we must first quickly examine what we mean by the words "culture" and "religion." All societies are predicated upon and require a "community of meaning" in which there is a consensus on at least some fundamental beliefs, attitudes, values and expected ways of acting.[4] Culture is thus the foundation of all social order. But at the same time, it is precisely because it is below the surface of consciousness that culture is so difficult to describe. No society is without conflict because cultures change over time and people within a society must re-negotiate these shared beliefs. But what is constant is that one is born into and internalizes a specific culture from childhood.

The sociologist Emile Durkheim stretched the notion of culture to include a broad understanding of "religion." Durkheim famously declared that religion was a "fundamental and permanent aspect of humanity."[5] As an eminently social thing, religion is both constitutive of society and arises out of those same social relations. Society and religion are logically distinct but inseparable in reality. These insights led him to his definition of religion which will also guide this investigation: "a religion is a unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things…which unite into one single moral community called a Church, all those who adhere to

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[4] Kathryn Tanner, *Theories of Culture: A New Agenda for Theology (*Minneapolis: Fortress, 1997), 32.
[5] Emile Durkehim, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, Trans. Karen E. Fields (New York: The Free Press, 1995), 1.

them."[6] This is a very functionalist definition which describes a fundamental unifying force in all societies.

Rather than thinking about religion as a differentiated subset of culture, Durkheim reverses the equation and makes culture a consequence of religion. As a unifying force within society, religion is constitutive of the shared beliefs, values, and practices that support social cooperation. Furthermore, as an anthropologist, Durkheim was concerned first with observable rites and practices rather than cognitive beliefs:

> There can be no society that does not experience the need at regular intervals to maintain and strengthen the collective feelings and ideas that provide its coherence and its distinct individuality.[7]

These practices oriented toward sacred things are what give rise to the collective ideas and feelings, for it is "through common action that society becomes conscious of and affirms itself, society is above all an active cooperation."[8] These practices, both mental and physical, thus form both society and the individuals within that society. Religion, then, is characterized by shared social practices that presuppose a world classified into sacred and profane realms.[9] Each "homogenous group of sacred things" then constitute an "organizational center" around which "gravitates a set of beliefs and rites, a cult of its own."[10] The distinguishing characteristic of religion is *not* worship of a deity or orientation toward the supernatural, but its orientation toward things in the world that are set apart.

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[6] Ibid., 44.
[7] Ibid., 429.
[8] Ibid., 421.
[9] Ibid., 34.
[10] Ibid., 38.

Durkheim's definition of religion both simplifies our investigation in some ways and complicates it in others. On the one hand, Durkheim's theory suggests that America does have some kind of underlying and unifying religious structure that should manifest primarily in actions. On the other hand, his definition of religion is predicated upon an absolute separation between the profane and the sacred realms. There is a fundamental duality inherent to religious worldviews that can even reach the point of antagonism, such as in monasticism where believers try to escape from the profane world.[11] This aspect of the model does not fit the modern context of the United States. If civil religion exists, it is clearly part of the warp and woof of the ordinary culture rather than a separate sphere that requires the mediation of a priest. Durkheim's theory was based upon aboriginal Australian societies in which religion and society were coterminous. In our post-Enlightenment, secular context, we must adjust our understanding of the role of a society's religious force to account for this separation of civil society from religious belief.

One helpful distinction in this regard is Albanese's distinction between "ordinary" religion and "extraordinary" religion. Ordinary religion is synonymous with culture and "shows people how to live well within boundaries."[12] It reinforces social bonds and corresponds well with Durkheim's understanding of religion as a unifying social force. Ordinary religion is difficult to describe because it is always in the background and is simply "how the world is." Extraordinary religion, on the other hand, is outside the ordinary social arrangements and is most often what people identify as "religion." Extraordinary religion involves an "encounter with some form of otherness, whether natural or supernatural."[13] Ordinary religion is diffused

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[11] Ibid., 37.

[12] Catherine L. Albanese, *America: Religions and Religion*. 2nd ed (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth Publishing Company, 1992), 6.

[13] Ibid.,7.

throughout a culture, while extraordinary religion is condensed.[14] At this point, Albanese is

slightly modifying Durkheim's understanding because ordinary religion will still have its

"condensed" moments: special rites that "maintain and strengthen the collective feelings and

ideas" that allow society to cohere together. But these condensed social rites, because they are

part of the normal texture of culture, often do not stand out as specifically religious activities.

Extraordinary religious rites, however, encourage special language and ways of thinking that are

distinct from the surrounding culture precisely because their purpose is to reach beyond that

culture to a transcendent reality.[15]

      All religion, according to Durkheim, is centered around this absolute distinction between

the sacred and the profane. Even what Albanese calls ordinary religion possesses concentrated

rituals oriented to something "sacred" or "set apart." In this respect, ordinary religion is no

different than extraordinary religion. These rituals, however, connect two spheres of reality that

are not stringently separate in ordinary life. For example, a Presidential inauguration has the

trappings of a high Mass and a religious experience. At the same time, the President is covered

extensively by the media and critiqued by the public. During these normal times, whatever

sacred sphere that was accessed during the inauguration has become joined to the profane. In this

way, American civil religion, because of the character of our secular culture and separation

between church and state, has both elements of Durkheim's and Albanese's models. American

civil religion is centered around the sacred through rituals that unify society. However, these

rituals are also part of an ordinary, everyday culture in which the sacred and profane are not

separated to the extent that Durkheim observed in the Australian aboriginal societies.

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[14] Ibid.

[15] Ibid., 7.

In this light, Clifford Geertz's definition of religion is the most helpful for our purposes

because it includes both of these examples of ordinary and extraordinary religion. Geertz states:

> A religion is a system of symbols which acts to establish powerful, pervasive and long-lasting moods and motivations in men by formulating conceptions of a general order of existence and clothing these conceptions with such an aura of factuality that the moods and motivations seem uniquely realistic.

Geertz's definition does not focus solely on actions, but on "concrete embodiments of ideas,

attitudes, judgments, longings, or beliefs."[16] These symbols produce "moods and motivations" in

reaction to placing the experience within a larger "cosmic framework" of what is most real.[17]

Religious symbols interpret the world in a very specific way by relating the person's

existence to "a wider sphere within which it is conceived to rest."[18] This specifically *religious*

perspective can be differentiated from other kinds of perspectives such as the "common-sensical,

the scientific, and the aesthetic" which all construe the world differently.[19] For example, the

experience of a sunset is aesthetically interpreted if the person is absorbed in the beauty of the

event itself. A religious perspective, however, would relate the sunset to the "really real" such as

to a larger cosmic creation myth that explains why the sun sets every 24 hours.[20] Unlike the

scientific perspective which is based upon systematic doubt, the religious perspective always

appeals to an authority—such as a myth or divinely revealed scriptures—that covers the

conceptions of the "really real" with an "aura of factuality."[21] Rather than the "common-

sensical" perspective marked by "simple acceptance of the world…as being just what" it seems

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[16] Clifford Geertz, "Religion as a Cultural System," *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Basic Books, 1973) 91.
[17] Ibid., 98.
[18] Ibid., 108.
[19] Ibid., 111.
[20] Ibid., 112.
[21] Ibid., 112.

to be, the religious perspective interprets reality in an ultimate context: "charity becomes

Christian charity when it is enclosed in a conception of God's purposes."[22]

Geertz's definition of religion incorporates both the "sudden eruptions of extraordinary

events" which engender religious interpretation, but also the more common "persistent,

constantly re-experienced difficulty" of interpreting the world from the other perspectives. These

problems of meaning, such as inexplicable suffering, often motivate a religious interpretation of

one's experiences. Religion is not limited to only the "ordinary" or the "extraordinary" events of

life. In this way, Geertz can incorporate the fusing of the profane and the sacred realms which

Durkheim's definition does not allow. Geertz's definition is most amenable to seeing the

presence of civil religion in America, and it is to the history of that phenomenon that we now

turn.

What is Civil Religion?

The United States' experiment in the separation between church and state set the context

for one of the most religiously pluralistic cultures to develop in the modern world. Religion—

traditionally a unifying force in political society—has also served as a differentiating and, at

times, divisive force within that same society. These questions are explored in Will Herberg's

Protestant-Catholic-Jew. Herberg, examining the sociological data from the 1950's, concludes

that the "American Way of Life" functions as a common set of values in the culture which get

expressed primarily as one of the three main religious denominations: Protestantism, Catholicism

and Judaism.[23] Robert Bellah famously called this set of values a "civil religion" andshowed how

Americans had their own creed, code and cult that possessed many of the same features as the

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[22] Ibid., 111,98.
[23] Will Herberg, *Protestant-Catholic-Jew: An Essay in American Religious Sociology* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1960), 77.

Christian religion.[24] However, Bellah's analysis was ambiguous and vacillated between viewing

civil religion as a differentiated religion in society and as a subconscious set of values and

cultural orientations shared by the majority of the culture. Finally, Catherine Albanese in her text

shows how Protestantism, "civil religion" and a "cultural religion" have all contributed to

providing civic and cultural unity in American society.[25] Her analysis is the most nuanced and

sophisticated of the three because it separates some of the threads that contribute to the idea of an

American "civil religion." Rather than portraying civil religion merely as a common set of values

(à la Herberg) or presenting it as its own differentiated religious system (à la Bellah), Albanese

attempts to do justice to both positions and examine the complexity of the topic. She also traces

how Protestantism was the *de facto* civil religion for much of American history. This is a point

appreciated by Herberg, ignored by Bellah and fleshed out in greater detail by Albanese. In the

end, one can conclude that there is a "civil religion" in America but precisely what that concept

has meant has varied greatly through this country's history.

Herberg has some very important insights in his analysis of immigrant experiences and

their transplantation of religious identities from Europe to the New World. In Europe the

immigrants identified themselves by their local village, but the American culture did not make

such distinctions and instead grouped them together according to language. Eventually, rather

than identify themselves as "Apulians or Sicilians," the immigrants began to identify themselves

by culture and eventually nationality—Poles, Italians, Germans.[26] This was also the start of the

ethnic churches in America in which first generation immigrants found some continuity with

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[24] Bellah, 4.
[25] Albanese, 395.
[26] Herberg, 13-14.

their lives back in the Old World.[27] But far from a uniform "melting pot," instead the cultural

assimilation of the immigrants was a "transmuting pot" that changed the succeeding generations

more and more into an "idealized 'Anglo-Saxon' model."[28] Thus second-generation immigrants

found themselves "at the boundary" as mediators between the foreign cultures of their parents

and the surrounding American culture.[29] As "doubly alienated, marginal men," many would

reject their cultural heritage and religion altogether.[30]

As long as new immigrants kept coming, this turning away of the second generation had

little impact on the larger society, but the cessation of immigration in 1924 served to amplify the

effects not of the second generation but of the third generation.[31] Herberg repeats Marcus

Hansen's pithy insight to explain this new social phenomenon, that "what the son wishes to

forget, the grandson wishes to remember."[32] Rather than feeling culturally displaced, the

members of the third generation instead sought to recapture the heritage of their grandparents.

However, as American-born children of immigrants, the "old-line ethnic group, with its foreign

language and culture, was not for them."[33] What they did recover was the religion of their

grandparents, but made "genuinely American" by replacing the ethnic language with English.[34]

In the process of "recovering" their heritage, what they actually recovered was an Americanized

source of group identification. What emerged with the third generation was a "new and unique

social structure" called the "religious community."[35] Religious association became the primary

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[27] Ibid., 16.
[28] Ibid., 21.
[29] Ibid., 17.
[30] Ibid., 16.
[31] Ibid., 30.
[32] Ibid.
[33] Ibid., 31.
[34] Ibid.
[35] Ibid.

identity marker for members of the third generation, for most of the second generation and more

generally for an entire nation of immigrants.[36] This religiously-based social identification

increasingly fell into one of three main religious categories: Protestants, Catholics and Jews.[37]

Herberg characterizes America as a "triple melting plot" in which each of three major

religions are considered "equally and authentically American" because they are all particular

manifestations of the "American Way of Life."[38] This "common religion" is not a differentiated,

positive religion in the sense of the three religious communities, but instead is a "spiritual

structure" of "ideas and ideals, of aspirations and values, of beliefs and standards."[39] It is the

"operative faith of the American people" which includes the uniquely American axiomatic

principle of religious pluralism: the belief that the diversity of religions and churches in society

is a good thing.[40] For this reason, Herbert is critical that they have become "integrated as parts

within a larger whole defined by the 'American Way of Life'" and reduced merely to the

particular means of promoting "ideals and standards that all Americans are expected to share on

a deeper level."[41] It is this general sense of religion that is behind President Eisenhower's

statement that "our government makes no sense unless it is founded in a deeply felt religious

faith--and I don't care what it is."[42] The immigrants to America are expected to give up most of

their culture, their language and their ethnic identity as they assimilate into the melting pot.

However, because of the cultural value of religious pluralism, the immigrants are *not* expected to

give up their religion (as long as it falls under one of the three main religious communities).

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[36] Ibid.
[37] Ibid.
[38] Ibid., 39,78.
[39] Ibid., 75.
[40] Ibid., 75,85.
[41] Ibid., 82.
[42] Ibid., 84.

Religious identification has become the immigrant's identifying marker which locates him within American society. Rather than being a divisive feature of American society, the diversity of religious beliefs and practices are unified under the umbrella of the "American Way of Life." This umbrella serves as an essential unifying feature of American society and culture.

The "American Way of Life" can be understood as a type of "secularized Puritanism" in which originally Puritan values of idealism, moralism, activism, individualism, emotionalism, simplicity and pragmatism became co-opted as authentically American values that are shared across the religious spectrum.[43] Protestantism in its many denominational forms was the primary religion of the colonists and, primarily through its practices of revivalism, succeeded as a "religion of the disinherited" that appealed to the lower social strata who were gradually conquering the western frontiers.[44] By the beginning of the 20th century, the identification of Protestantism with the American Way of Life was almost complete.[45] Catholicism and Judaism would try to differentiate themselves from Protestantism in order to attract and retain members, but they too were Americanized and took on the Protestant cultural values of American society. For example, the average American Catholic absorbed the pluralism of the culture and believed that his church was merely one among several, despite the Vatican's insistence that the Catholic Church was the one, true church.[46] This reflected the secular context of the United States. Unlike in Europe where there existed national churches, all religious communities in the new world were voluntary associations. This phenomenon, later labeled denominationalism, has

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[43] Ibid., 81.
[44] Ibid., 103. Such "religions of the disinherited" included Baptists, Methodists and Disciples of Christ.
[45] Ibid., 110.
[46] Ibid., 151. Herberg highlights the role of John Courtney Murray, S.J., as an American Catholic who would influence the Church about this issue at the Second Vatican Council.

characterized the religious milieu of the country since colonial times.[47] By sharing such universal cultural values, the faiths could accommodate themselves to America.

One example of this interaction, Millennialism, is an important Protestant belief that influences American culture even today. As a theological concept, millennialism is tied to the book of Revelation and the expectation of a new age in which God will rule the earth. This concept influenced the Puritan understanding of their colonial origins as settling in a New Israel.[48] Culturally, this same idea would express itself, not in reference to God, but in reference to America as a land of great promise and hope. This American exceptionalism would motivate the nation's westward expansion and influence the self-understanding of many Americans who believed they were entering a new age of technological and cultural advancement.[49] This secular millennialism mixed with theological postmillennialism, the belief that Jesus would return after the millennium had arrived through the "Spirit working in the church."[50] Many postmillennial Protestants interpreted the advancement of American territory, culture and scientific knowledge in the 19th century as evidence that the millennium was beginning. They viewed their role in the world as one of spreading the gospel and improving the human condition in order to hasten the coming of the millennium.[51] It is easy to see how such theological beliefs became incorporated into the political rhetoric of the civil religion. It is a short leap from theological postmillennial expectation to political rhetoric that articulates a divine mission to spread democracy and liberty

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[47] Albanese, 10.
[48] Ibid., 427.
[49] Ibid., 427.
[50] Ibid., 425.
[51] Ibid.

around the world. This mission would be a major impetus for Manifest Destiny in the 19th century and for the great "American century" at the end of World War II.

Because Protestantism was the main influence upon American civil religion, for much of the country's history many Americans viewed Catholics with a mixture of suspicion and hostility. Catholic immigrants constantly struggled to claim their identity as Americans while not abandoning their religious commitments. It was not until the election of John F. Kennedy, and the writings of John Courtney Murray, when the majority of Americans began to view Catholicism as fully compatible with the American Way of Life. Just as Calvinism drew upon its religious tradition as its adherents came together as "Americans," so too did Murray draw on Catholicism's rich tradition of the natural law. The Founding Fathers "built better than they knew" by understanding that a "democracy is more than a political experiment; it is a spiritual and moral enterprise."[52] Rather than rights originating from the State, the Founding Fathers believed that a Providential God was the source of all rights. Americans possess certain self-evident, natural rights because they are a people and not because they are citizens. This "universal moral law" is the social glue that binds the American political community and governs it.[53]

Herberg briefly discusses, but fails to develop, his construct of the "American Way of Life" as a differentiated civil religion. Herberg comes very close to identifying the American Way of Life with a "civic religion" that sanctifies the society and culture which it reflects.[54] Certainly the American Way of Life includes commitment to democracy, the Constitution, free

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[52] Murray, 77, 51.
[53] Ibid., 51.
[54] Herberg, 263.

enterprise and egalitarianism.[55] These attitudes tend to make Americans moralistic in their

worldview to such an extent that if America has a civil religion, then the President is the high

priest who leads America in its divine mission to bring "democracy and free enterprise" around

the globe.[56] But ultimately he does not develop this into a full-fledged theory of a civil religion

that centers its worship in the political community itself and is institutionalized in specific ways.

Instead, Herberg retreats to his view that Americans primarily believe in "religion itself" and in

the redemptive act of believing in something—they have a "faith in faith."[57]

Herberg does a masterful job at locating an inchoate sense of a common religion that

underlies the major religious traditions in American society. But he mostly ignores the

contribution of Africans who were forcefully transported to the New World, and he completely

ignores Islam. His rigid view of the "triple melting pot" quickly broke down after the 1960's

when many other religious, racial and cultural identities began to fragment American society.

Herberg's analysis is not perfect, but he does recognize the importance of the immigrant

experience in the development of American religious history in the 20th century. The deep need

to feel that one has an identifiable location in the larger society led to a near-total assimilation of,

at first the Protestants, and later the Jews and Catholics. Even though they preserved their

religious heritages, that preservation was ultimately another manifestation of the deeper common

cultural values that united the many into one nation.

Bellah states in the beginning of his essay that Herberg was wrong not to identify an

"elaborate and well-institutionalized civil religion in America" that exists "alongside of" and

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[55] Ibid., 78.
[56] Ibid., 264.
[57] Ibid., 265.

"clearly differentiated from the churches."[58] This "civil religion" in fact "requires the same care in understanding that any other religion does."[59] Its high priest is the President, its rituals are events like Presidential inaugurations and civic holidays, and its texts include Presidential inauguration speeches in a preeminent way. Its creed is one of "the rights of man" that are more basic than any political structure and provide a "point of revolutionary leverage from which any state structure may be radically altered."[60] Its mission is to "carry out God's will on earth" which frequently means spreading American values around the globe.[61]

However, as others have pointed out, Bellah's essay is constructed upon a "systematic ambiguity" around how he sees this phenomenon playing out in society.[62] Elsewhere he seems to endorse a cultural model of "civil religion" when he refers to it as a "religious dimension" and, in a footnote, endorses the Durkheimian notion that "every group has a religious dimension" and perhaps that is why this civil religion has escaped notice.[63] He further states that American civil religion has occurred only "semiconsciously" in society.[64] So is the American civil religion a differentiated, well-institutionalized aspect of American society that should be studied like any other religion, or is it a diffuse, religious-like phenomenon that has developed underneath American culture?

Bellah seems to agree with Herberg that there is a definite religious dimension that has become integrated into American politics while not also supplanting other explicit manifestations

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[58] Bellah, 1.
[59] Ibid.
[60] Ibid., 4.
[61] Ibid., 5.
[62] For the critique I am indebted to John F. Wilson, *Public Religion in American Culture* (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 1979), 144-148.
[63] Ibid., 1 and 19, fn 1.
[64] Bellah, 12.

of religious belief. For example, when examining Kennedy's inaugural address, Bellah notes that Kennedy (a Catholic) never mentions Christ or the Catholic Church because the tradition of American separation of church and state has always segregated the religious sphere, "which is considered essentially private," from the political one.[65] The political sphere maintains a "religious orientation that the great majority of Americans share," but it is not identical with any church.[66] Thus, Kennedy and other presidents have drawn upon Christian symbols, beliefs and language, but at the same time this common civil religion has always been other and more inclusive than just Christianity. This is very similar to Herberg's observation that while the immigrants were expected to assimilate to American society in their behavior, dress, language and other cultural accoutrements, they were never expected to change their religious beliefs. Herberg identifies this phenomenon with the great American value of religious liberty that has become ensconced in American culture. Bellah likewise points out that the political separation of church and state has led to a privatization of religion. Both authors are correct that religion is viewed in American society as one of the few areas of private life that should not be controlled by the larger American culture or government.

What seems clear in Bellah's analysis is that until the Civil War, whatever "civil religion" existed was more in line with Herberg's "common religion" of the culture than it was a differentiated religion in itself. In 1789 Washington declared November 26 as the first Thanksgiving Day of "public thanksgiving and prayer," in line with the pattern of later presidents who would consistently call upon God but not upon Christ.[67] This God from which the presidents seek protection is a "Unitarian" God who is "much more related to order, law, and

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[65] Ibid., 3.
[66] Ibid.
[67] Ibid., 7.

right than to salvation and love" and who is "actively interested and involved in history, with a special concern for America."[68] Presidents such as Jefferson will not hesitate to use symbols from the Christian Bible such as the Exodus narrative when comparing America to the Promised Land to which God led his chosen people from their oppressors in Europe.[69] The function of this common religion was not to advance Christianity or any sectarian church, but instead to serve as a "vehicle of national religious self-understanding."[70] It shared much with Christianity, but its purpose was to unify a diverse people one nation. Thus, one could be both a good Christian or Jew and a good American because the differences of religious denomination did not override the common orientation of the national civil religion.

When Bellah states that the civil religion is a "collection of beliefs, symbols, and rituals with respect to sacred things and institutionalized in a collectivity," he is drawing upon Durkheim to show that religion is institutionalized in the national culture, especially as this nationalism centers on the President.[71] There is not a national church that substitutes for Christianity, Judaism or any of the other private religious denominations. This centering of the civil religion upon the President is only reinforced during the Civil War when a new theme of "death, sacrifice, and rebirth" enters the Presidential rhetoric.[72] Especially in the Gettysburg Address—which he describes as part of the "Lincolnian 'New Testament' among the civil scriptures"—birth, sacrifice and rebirth are recurrent symbols that echo the Christian scriptures without explicitly invoking the Christian church.[73] As already seen, Christian themes became co-

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[68] Ibid.
[69] Ibid., 8.
[70] Ibid.
[71] Ibid.
[72] Ibid., 10.
[73] Ibid.

opted by the civil religion but it did not replace private denominational commitments. The churches were in charge of "personal piety and voluntary social action" while the civil religion advanced a collective self-understanding that served to unify the nation.[74]

Bellah identifies the theme of sacrifice as "indelibly written into the civil religion" after the assassination of Lincoln who, like the war dead, was martyred for the nation.[75] This symbolism of sacrifice became ritualized physically in national cemeteries such as the Gettysburg National Cemetery and the Arlington National Cemetery. The Arlington National Cemetery has received the dead of every succeeding war, and it is the site of the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier and the site of the tomb and eternal flame of former President John F. Kennedy.[76] These sacred places are "national churches" that instantiate the theme of sacrifice that became so prominent in the national civil religion during the Civil War. Similarly, a ritual calendar for this civil religion is observed and promoted by the public school system. Memorial Day, Thanksgiving day, the Fourth of July, Veterans Day and the birthdays of Washington and Lincoln all serve to integrate the family and the community into the "national cult."[77] These days are the Sabbath days for the national civil religion.

Bellah saw the civil religion as alive and well in the American nation. It functions as the "genuine apprehension of universal and transcendent religious reality as seen in or…as revealed through the experience of the American people."[78] This common experience has produced a genuinely American version of religion that is "activist, moralistic and social rather than

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[74] Ibid., 8.
[75] Ibid., 11. People would note the religious symbolism of Lincoln's death on Good Friday, Albanese, 451.
[76] Ibid.
[77] Ibid.
[78] Ibid., 12.

contemplative, theological, or innerly spiritual."[79] Unlike in France, the American civil religion

has never been "anticlerical or militantly secular" and instead borrowed a great deal from the

majority religion.[80] The average American "saw no conflict between the two" and the civil

religion was able to build up—along with the denominational churches—"powerful symbols of

national solidarity and to mobilize deep levels of personal motivation for the attainment of

national goals."[81] For example, the Christian symbols of Exodus and the New Israel have been

both explicitly and implicitly linked to the idea of "manifest destiny" as America conquered the

west and later engaged in imperialistic adventures overseas.[82] The rhetoric of America as the

"New Jerusalem" and the "last hope on earth" has been used to justify the Vietnam War.[83] This

fusion of "God, country and flag" that is part of the civil religion has also deeply influenced the

nationalist orientation of the American religious denominations as they have acculturated to the

larger national culture.[84] The public civil religion and the private denominational religions have

influenced each other and developed alongside each other throughout the history of the nation.

The civil religion exists in the national political rhetoric, in the calendar of holidays and

in the national culture that emphasizes God, freedom, democracy and sacrifice as touchstones of

a unified nation. This civil religion has been very useful at rallying the nation in times of crisis,

particularly during the Revolutionary and Civil wars. But as Bellah points out, the idea of God is

by no means static and he asks the very live question (especially after Kennedy's election as the

first Catholic president): could there be an agnostic president?[85] Such an occurrence would

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[79] Ibid. He is quoting from S.M. Lipset, *The First New Nation* (New York: W.W.Norton, 1964).
[80] Ibid., 13.
[81] Ibid.
[82] Ibid., 14.
[83] Ibid., 15.
[84] Ibid., 14.
[85] Ibid., 15.

necessitate a profound change in the civil religion. Far from being a unified religious cult that can be differentiated from other religions, the American civil religion is best described as a cultural phenomenon that intersects with a variety of personal religious commitments of the American people. The civil religion is the "point of articulation between the profoundest commitments of the Western religious and philosophical tradition and the common beliefs of ordinary Americans."[86] It is the soil upon which other religious traditions have been transplanted. But it is also tightly entwined with the Protestant religions that were transported from Europe by the Puritans and other colonists. While not being identical with Protestantism, the civil religion clearly borrows from Christian symbolism in its fusion of the two.

Catherine Albanese more fully draws out the character of what she calls "public Protestantism" and its influence on American religious history. Public Protestantism originated in the Calvinist Christianity of the early Puritan settlers—nearly 90% of the congregations in the colonies in 1660 could be described as broadly Calvinist in inclination.[87] Many factors contributed to the pervasive influence of Calvinism among the colonies, especially the educational earnestness of Puritan Christians who founded Harvard College in 1636 and operated the first printing press in the colonies.[88] They also founded elementary schools and influenced the production of school textbooks and curricula into the twentieth century as teaching materials that communicated not only math and literacy but also religious concepts. These texts would become an impetus for the Catholic Church's decision to found their own schools in America in the 19th and 20th centuries.[89] Furthermore, Anglicanism in the southern colonies and Puritanism

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[86] Ibid.
[87] Albanese, 399.
[88] Ibid.
[89] Ibid. 399-401.

in New England enjoyed a privileged status as the established religion until the late 19th century. Many of those who governed theses colonies were required to be members of the established religion.[90] In all of these ways, a religious stamp was imprinted on the political and civic life of the earliest Americans because Church and state were far from separate at the local levels.

This public Protestantism supplied many of the values and beliefs that became associated later with the phenomenon of civil religion. Religious liberty and democratic equality were all valued to different extents by the religious groups that fled Europe under persecution and sought refuge in the New World. Of course, these values would later become enshrined in the founding political documents of the new nation under the influence both of Protestantism and the European Enlightenment.[91] The subsequent separation of church and state would influence the organization of American Protestantism in such a way that it fueled denominationalism (the union of distinct communities within the larger Christian church) and voluntaryism (the voluntary nature of all church membership).[92] As Herberg argued, denominationalism and voluntaryism influenced how ethnic immigrant groups identified themselves within the larger society. Their voluntary religious affiliation became both a marker of identification for the immigrant group and a symbol of their status as properly assimilated Americans within the "triple melting pot" of Protestant, Catholic and Jew.

Albanese goes into depth to explain the common characteristics of American culture and American public Protestantism: moralism, activism, individualism, emotionalism, simplicity and pragmatism. This list, almost identical to Herberg's description of the "American Way of Life,"

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[90] Ibid., 401.
[91] Ibid., 403.
[92] Ibid., 404.

came to characterize not only Protestantism but American culture in general. Albanese correctly points out the two spheres of influence interpenetrated and that it is probably impossible to discover which came first.[93] Protestantism strongly influenced American culture, and American culture strongly influenced Protestantism.

Albanese shows in detail how public Protestantism was a binding cultural force for the early nation. However, as shown in Herberg, immigration began to change the makeup of the American people and less and less people identified with the Puritan heritage. Something else was needed to unify a diverse people and Albanese identifies this as "civil religion," and which she describes as a form of "religious nationalism."[94] Specifically, civil religion generally refers to a "religious system that has existed alongside the churches, with a theology (creed), an ethic (code), and a set of rituals and other identifiable symbols (cultus) related to the political state."[95] This definition is very similar to Bellah's definition of civil religion as a "public religious dimension" that is expressed in a "set of beliefs, symbols, and rituals."[96] The key here is that the civil religion is oriented toward the political state.

However, according to Albanese, the experience of the Revolutionary War cemented a civil religion that was fully established by the time of George Washington's inauguration.[97] Certainly many of the theological themes reviewed above influenced the rhetoric during the Revolutionary War—for example, the Americans were the New Israel and the British were the Egyptian oppressors at the time of the Exodus.[98] There was a definite scriptural and millennial

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[93] Ibid., 406.
[94] Ibid., 433.
[95] Ibid.
[96] Bellah, 4.
[97] Albanese, 435.
[98] Ibid., 438-439.

aspect to the rhetoric that was only heightened when the Continental Congress ordered days of

fasts and thanksgiving that were modeled on older Puritan days of prayer.[99] Similarly, the

Enlightenment, particularly through the influence of the Freemasonry movement, influenced this

burgeoning civil religion. Rather than a Christian conception of a Trinitarian God, the

Freemasonry movement believed in a Deist God who worked through the natural world.[100] This

God ruled over all human authority and could be appealed to as a higher divine law. This rhetoric

of a higher divine law and a ruling Providence was part of the revolutionary rhetoric of the

founding Fathers and, as shown by Bellah, is later used consistently in Presidential inauguration

speeches.

This civil religion had many of the characteristics of theistic religion. The practice of

erecting and gathering around Liberty Trees provided a center for community orientation around

the values of the revolution.[101] The burgeoning religion even had its own divine figure, George

Washington, who was described both as a Moses freeing his people from slavery and as the

Roman general Cincinnatus who fought for his country and then returned to his farm.[102] As

Albanese points out, this double identification of Washington with both Jewish and Roman

themes revealed the pluralism of American civil religion.[103] While heavily influenced by

Protestantism, by the time of the Revolutionary War and the ratification of the Constitution the

American civil religion was oriented less around Protestantism. It was oriented much more

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[99] Ibid., 439.
[100] Ibid., 440.
[101] Ibid., 443.
[102] Ibid.
[103] Ibid.

around the political bond that the nation had forged through a common set of shared historical experiences that included the inauguration of a President and the ratification of the Constitution.

Albanese traces much of the history of American civil religion in the 19th century in a way similar to Bellah. As Freemasonry was discredited, Protestant religious rhetoric came once again to the fore. Particularly during the Civil War, millennial themes influenced how Americans on both sides of the conflict viewed the war—as a "final battle between good and evil."[104] Similarly, religious rhetoric influenced how Americans interpreted the assassination of Abraham Lincoln, who was shot on Good Friday and whom many believed was another Jesus who sacrificed himself for the good of the people.[105] Sacrifice became a part of the civil religion.

Albanese identifies the 1950's as a time of erosion of the civil religion as a unifying force. Unlike Herberg, who sees the "American Way of Life" in the 1950's as a strong, unifying cultural force, Albanese recognizes that growing diversity began to weaken the traditional cultural bonds. For example, attendance and enthusiasm at Memorial Day celebrations—a holiday originally instituted after the Civil War to unite Americans around the value of sacrifice for one's nation—began to wane dramatically and reached a nadir in the 1960's.[106] Many became less sure of the significance of sacrifice in foreign and morally ambiguous wars such as the Vietnam War (1954-1973).[107] Albanese insightfully states that as the "past became older and the revolutionary events more distant," Americans had trouble relating to such cultural foundations.[108] The civil religion has always both looked to the past for meaning but also

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[104] Ibid., 451.
[105] Ibid.
[106] Ibid., 456.
[107] Ibid.
[108] Ibid., 460.

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encouraged values that tended to reject the past for the future.[109] Protestant themes of being

chosen by God for a mission and of millennialism were future-oriented. And what Albanese does

not state is that the 1960's were also a time of great cultural upheaval as racial minorities,

women and other oppressed groups began to question the *status quo*. As Albanese states, the

civil religion "was the religion of, at best, many of the people some of the time."[110] The unity of

the past had served to cover over a great deal of diversity and disagreement. But the civil religion

could not bear the weight of such multiplicity.

Albanese identifies civil religion as a differentiated, positive religion in a much stronger

sense than does Bellah who equivocates about precisely how to characterize civil religion. On

the one hand, he desires to present civil religion as a differentiated religious system with its own

creed, code and cult. However, Bellah really identifies common cultural values that have served

to orient American society. Albanese, on the other hand, shows that civil religion was identical to

Protestantism early on and then it quickly became oriented around the events of the

Revolutionary War and the founding of the new nation. Holidays, constitutional parades, liberty

trees, George Washington and Protestant religious symbols all contributed to a burgeoning

national identity that unified the people around a common political center. Though it is a loose

religious system, there are identifiable patterns of action and rituals that make up this civil

religion.

Albanese goes further and also distinguishes between civil religion and "cultural

religion." In fact, she states that the "one religion" of America is expressed in three forms: public

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[109] Ibid.
[110] Ibid., 461

Protestantism, civil religion and general cultural religion.[111] To further complicate matters, she states that civil religion and cultural religion are very similar in that they both are the "(mostly) ordinary religion of many Americans some of the time."[112] Civil religion is but "one expression" of the larger presence of cultural religion.[113] In other words, civil religion and cultural religion both serve to unite American society through a commonly shared set of beliefs, code of behaviors and rituals. Yet cultural religion is a larger set that includes, but cannot be reduced to, civil religion.

Much of cultural religion is below the level of conscious awareness and the boundaries between "cultural religion" and "civil religion" are porous. Her brief survey provides many examples of how Americans generally "order their lives and search for meaning within the everyday world" in ways distinct from the civil religion already discussed. For example, the American ritual calendar includes many days that are also part of the civil religion of the country such as Memorial Day and the Fourth of July. But there are other days as well—Halloween, New Year's, Christmas—that are often celebrated by Christians and non-Christians alike. These days have a larger cultural meaning such as general good will among families and friends that transcends their connection to any particular denomination.[114] Many of the common stories in the media also present Puritan and Revolutionary themes of millennial expectation that have been present sine the nation's founding.[115] Even sporting events resemble religious rituals and can lead to transcendent experiences of community.[116] It can be difficult to distinguish between

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[111] Ibid., 498.
[112] Ibid., 497.
[113] Ibid.
[114] Ibid., 466.
[115] Ibid., 470-471.
[116] Ibid., 475.

merely "cultural religion" and "civil religion," though the two kinds of ordinary religion are distinct.

Albanese's insight is that civil religion, though explicitly Christian and mostly identical to Puritanism at the founding of the colonies, gradually morphed into different manifestations. By the inauguration of George Washington, Enlightenment themes began to replace specifically Christian ideas. During the Civil War, the theme of sacrifice and new rituals developed in order to organize the community around remembrance of the dead. But gradually even the Enlightenment themes faded and by the 1950's Herberg can identify an "American Way of Life" that is specifically American but religiously general. Most Americans expressed their commitment to the nation and to the values of democracy and equality through their own private denominational affiliations as Protestant, Catholic or Jew. Bellah recognized this phenomenon, called it a "civil religion," and even argued for the resurgence of civil religion in the time of the Vietnam War to address emerging questions about foreign policy.[117] Albanese sees this secularization of civil religion as continuing in the form of a "cultural religion" that shares elements of creed, cult and code but lacks the explicit references to God and to Christianity that heretofore had characterized civil religion in America. It is here that one can see how the separate spheres of the sacred and the profane identified by Durkheim have almost become identical in the ordinary experiences of most Americans.

A type of civil religion has existed and continues to exist in America. But these authors show that its manifestations have varied substantially over time. While the phenomenon of a unifying cultural force has remained constant, the substance of that bond has not. The challenge

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[117] Bellah, 18.

for the nation now is to define a new civil religion that is not only manifested in the tri-partite religious denominationalism that Herberg identified, but that can also include Muslims, other minority religious groups and even atheists. It remains an open question if the civil religion must center on a conception of a transcendent deity, a theological theme still expressed today in political rhetoric but clearly abandoned in the cultural religion of everyday life. Finally, there are limits to civil religion, for as Albanese identifies, civil religion has always only been a unifying cultural force for "many of the people some of the time." The existence of pluralism will always put pressure upon the one religion of America and force it to continue to adapt to external pressures.

The challenge for American Catholics is to negotiate the tension between the "ordinary" civil religion and the "extraordinary" Catholic religion. Much of the time, these two religions coexist peacefully and even productively. But particularly in times of national crisis such as war, a fierce nationalism can place the American Catholic at odds with a culture that does not uphold the same values as the Catholic Church. At the same time, a respect for religious pluralism necessitates that private citizens do not impose their personal religious beliefs upon the entire society. The American Catholic community, then, must decide how to be both faithfully Catholic and faithfully American. It is in light of this tension that we now turn to H. Richard Niebuhr's *Christ and Culture* and to his typology of the ways that these two religions may interact.

Chapter 2: America, a "Nation with the Soul of a Church"

In an answer to the question, "What is America?" G.K. Chesterton replied that it is a "nation with the soul of a church."[118] Chesterton was referring to the fact that the nation had a definite creed. However, Sidney Mead pointed out decades later that all nations have a unifying creed, what is unique to America is the character of the creed as a "cosmopolitan, inclusive, universal theology." [119] This creed both bonds together disparate religious sects and, through the power of a non-sectarian civil government, prevents any one particular religious group from dominating the others.

Using Benjamin Franklin and other founders of the nation as examples, Mead points out that their understanding of this American "creed" was not *syncretistic* but, rather, *synergistic*. They did not believe that the common American theology was a combination of all the individual theologies of the individual churches, but rather it was the product of the separate churches working in combination toward a common goal.[120] Thus, he quotes Franklin as proclaiming that the "essentials of every religion" were to be found in all of them, while any particular sect contributed additional articles of belief.[121] Franklin contributed a bit of money to every church in the country as a way to symbolize his belonging to all of them.[122] This belief, echoed as well by Jefferson when he said that all religions "are good enough," is part of the inclusive, universal American creed.[123]

What precisely defines this implicit American theology is debatable. Mead quotes Franklin and, a century later, Josiah Strong in order to show that concepts such as the existence

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[118] As quoted in Sidney E. Mead, "The 'Nation with the Soul of a Church,'" *Church History* 36.3 (1967): 262.
[119] Ibid., 270.
[120] Ibid., 270.
[121] Ibid.
[122] Ibid.
[123] Ibid., 271.

of God, the immortality of humans and humanity's accountability to God are particular beliefs that run through much of American history.[124] As Mead points, one may debate the particulars, but to do so is to admit the truth of his claim that a general sentiment is present in American society. Mead echoes the thesis of Will Herberg, that to be American is to be part of a particular religious community, but that it does not matter precisely to which sect one belongs because all of the churches share the most generalized and important theological beliefs.

Mead dismisses the risk of idolatry inherent in such a merging of the national identity with theological principles. He insists that the national creed includes the belief that God is above any human institution and that this belief safeguards the entire social arrangement from being idolatrous.[125] This implicit belief that the rights of Americans are natural and God-given is echoed in the Declaration of Independence, the writings of James Madison and the speeches of Abraham Lincoln who famously stated in his second inaugural address that the "Almighty has His own purposes…the judgments of the Lord are true and righteous altogether."[126] Unlike Herberg, Mead believes that the implicit American creed, at its best, is essentially prophetic and not merely reflective of the American Way of Life.[127] Such a creed has been present in the nation since the beginning and has always placed American society underneath the judgments of a higher deity.

He concludes that the struggle between Christianity and American culture is not really between the Church and the State, but rather has always been between the competing religious groups themselves.[128] More specifically, the conflict is between particular religious sects and the

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124 Ibid., 272.
125 Ibid., 274.
126 Ibid., 277.
127 Ibid.
128 Ibid., 278.

universal American theology that transcends and includes them. As particular religious sects

sought to impose their particular will on the country, it forced the neutral civil government to

adjudicate these conflicts when they threatened to disrupt the civil order.[129] Thus, religious

freedom led to religious pluralism which entailed denominationalism and sectarianism. Unlike

the early Puritans who believed they were the "New Israel of God's elect," America's

experiment in religious freedom created a culture of religious voluntarysm in which every church

claimed to be the most important among others and which its members were free to join or leave

at will.[130] But because the ultimate theological truths are universal and transcend any particular

religious manifestation, then no denomination can claim or function as the church of the entire

nation. The church of the entire nation is really the implicit creed that encompasses all particular

churches.[131] That is what Mead means when he repeats Chesterton's phrase that America is "a

nation with the soul of a church."

As far back as the Puritans, Protestantism viewed the American experiment as the "ark of

God's redemptive work in the world."[132] The nation became the primary source of personal and

group identity for people divided by religious sectarianism. Herberg labeled this unifying

principle "the American Way of Life," but it is clear that such a force predated the 20th century.

This cultural understanding was prevalent in many histories that emphasized Protestant

America's unique relationship to God and its divine role in history.[133] Americans tended to view

themselves as forming a "community of righteousness" destined to fulfill God's historic

purposes.[134] The American identity was neither anti-religious nor secular, but instead "borrowed

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[129] Ibid., 278.
[130] Ibid., 279.
[131] Ibid.
[132] Ibid.
[133] Mark S. Massa, *Catholics in American Culture* (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 1999) 222.
[134] Ibid., 280.

selectively" from the religious traditions in such a way that the "average American saw no conflict between the two."[135] As Mead points out, the most common symbol in Christian churches of his day was the United States flag.[136] To be a good Christian was to be a good American.

This emphasis on a national unity that transcends particular denominational differences lays behind the Catholic ecumenical outreach that accelerated after Vatican II. Boston's Richard Cardinal Cushing described such an experience of unity amidst diversity:

> [I] came to recognize that the differences between Catholics and Protestants in America were not so much religious as they were social and cultural…I discovered that what the ecumenists today call 'nontheological factors' were isolating us and setting Catholic against Protestant…more than our doctrines.[137]

Cardinal Cushing's statement is remarkable because it dismisses doctrinal concerns that even a few years before were the source of great social division. His statement is reflective, however, of Mead's point that a universal, inclusive understanding of what it means to be American runs throughout the history of the nation. This unifying force transcends any single sectarian expression and instead unites all of the various churches under one theological umbrella. The ultimate truths expressed in varying ways by the many different sects are the truly important doctrines recognized by all Americans.

Mead only shows Christianity and American culture in harmonious and productive relationship. And for much of American history, at least for the majority of Protestants, this has been the case. But such a rosy picture is far from the truth. Throughout American history, minority and break-away Protestant sects were consistently persecuted and even exiled by the larger Christian community. Whether they were the Quakers or the Mormons, Mead's picture of

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[135] Bellah, 13.
[136] Mead, 273.
[137] Mead, 281, quoting Richard Cardinal Cushing in "Can Christians Really Unite?" *Dominion* 21 (Jan., 1966): 19.

Americans of all sects united under one cultural roof is not representative of all Americans throughout history. Furthermore, Mead's analysis neglects the treatment of Jews, Catholics and Native Americans since the founding of the nation. As Herberg points out, Catholic immigrant communities were as much a way to support each other in a hostile culture as they were a way to develop an identity as Americans who belonged to a particular religious community. And since Mead wrote, the prevalence of Muslims and atheists in American society has only grown. It is not at all clear today that to be a good Muslim or a good atheist is to be a good American.

These examples of conflicts between religious sects and between religious sects and the larger society (at times even the government itself) highlight the fact that Mead's analysis is a bit too optimistic. At this point, it is helpful to examine other possible relationships, particularly as we focus upon the relationship of the Catholic Church in America to the larger American culture. Unlike the Protestant culture that has permeated American society since the founding of the colonies, Catholics—to quote Garry Wills—have always been distinctly aware that they "grew up different."[138] Catholics tended to live in subcultures that existed within, and frequently in opposition to, the dominant Protestant culture. It was not until Vatican II when the Catholic Church as an institution began to step outside of its protective ghetto into the 20th century. With that transition arose new questions about how the Church should relate to its surrounding culture.

H. Richard Niebuhr's book *Christ and Culture* offers five helpful models for understanding this interaction. Three of these models—Christ against culture, Christ of culture, and Christ above culture—are important to examine but are ultimately not helpful models for understanding the Catholic Church's relationship to American culture today. The first two

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[138] This quote is from Massa, 2, who cites Garry Wills, "Memories of a Catholic Boyhood," *Esquire* (Feb., 1971), http://classic.esquire.com/memories-of-a-catholic-boyhood.

models are too extreme and distort the gospel. The third model, Christ above culture, presumes that both the Church and the wider culture are oriented toward the same divine ends and can be synthesized into a coherent structure. In today's secular world, this arrangement is no longer the case and we must search for new models. "Christ and culture in paradox" is one possible model for today's context, but ultimately fails because of its overly negative view of humanity. The final model, "Christ the Transformer of Culture," best describes the church-world relationship that is beginning to take shape at Vatican II, particularly in its final document *Gaudium et Spes*. This model, when properly modified by a Catholic understanding, is not a utopian fantasy. Instead, it is a dialogue between two parties that have much to learn from each other. In this way, the model is similar to the interpersonal dynamics between two people who desire to understand each other within a mutually enriching relationship.

As Niebuhr himself notes, typologies necessarily use leaky categories. They attempt to make distinctions between ideas that do not always neatly separate: "the type is always something of a construct."[139] Even though he uses historical figures in order to demonstrate his ideal types, no one person or group can ever conform completely to a type. The types are ideal models in which to fit the recurrence of common historical patterns. Niebuhr desires to point to the "continuity and significance of the great *motifs* that appear and reappear" in the long history of Christians puzzling out how to interact with the wider culture while still being true to their faith.

The "Christ against culture" model is one extreme on a spectrum that is bounded at the other end by the "Christ of culture" model. In fact, their positions as the poles of a spectrum already suggest that they are probably inadequate models for a relationship between faith and

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[139] H. Richard Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture* (New York: Harper & Row, 1951), 43.

culture that respects both the *ad intra* and *ad extra* natures of the Church. The Christian church is

called both to seek the salvation of the souls within her walls, but also to reach out to all those

who live outside. Nonetheless, examining precisely why the "Christ against culture" model is

inadequate can be a helpful step toward articulating a more fitting model.

The attempt of this model to "uncompromisingly" affirm "the sole of authority of Christ

over the Christian" is admirable.[140] But the extreme nature of its position is clear when it

presumes that this fidelity to Christ must come at the cost of any claim of culture over the

Christian. There are certainly strains of such a rejection in scripture, most notably in 1 John and

its distinction between the Christian community and the world: "do not love the world or

anything in the world…the world and its desire are passing away, but those who do the will of

God live forever."[141] There is a definite separation in 1 John between those in the Christian

community and those outside of it, with the author going so far as to refer to those who have left

the community as antichrists.[142] At the same time, Niebuhr acknowledges that any attempt to

interpret historical documents in such binary terms will fall apart upon closer examination. The

author of 1 John also declares, for example, that Jesus Christ is the "atoning sacrifice" both for

our sins and for the sins of the world.[143] The emphasis in the letter is certainly upon love for

one's fellow believers in the Christian community, but there are at least hints that those outside

the community are still saved by Christ. Furthermore, it is likely that the author assumed the end

of the world was imminent, and so he did not comment upon how a Christian should participate

in the social institutions of the culture, own property or pay taxes.[144] It is unclear precisely how

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[140] Ibid., 45.
[141] 1Jn. 2:15-17. All scriptural citations are from the NRSV and cited from www.biblegateway.com, accessed April 1, 2017.
[142] 1Jn.2:18-19.
[143] 1Jn 2:2.
[144] Niebuhr, 49.

far the author would have gone in rejecting the surrounding culture if he believed the Parousia was delayed.

As already mentioned, Niebuhr's goal is not to present a one-sided, biased picture of these authors. His goal, instead, is to show how certain motifs have recurred throughout history, beginning with scripture, moving into the early Christian community and even to contemporary times. One such motif is the assumption that the conflict of the believer is not with his own nature but with culture.[145] Thus Niebuhr quotes Tertullian who states that Christ came "as one who aimed to enlighten men already civilized, and under illusions from their very culture, that they might come to the knowledge of the truth."[146] The fear behind the "Christ against culture" type is that the "Christian is in constant danger of compromising his loyalty to the Lord."[147] Even the most minimal involvement with the pagan religion can put the Christian in spiritual danger through participation in idolatry and polytheism. Yet even Tertullian does not believe the Christian can ever completely cut himself off from participation in the culture, for in his defense of the Christian community he points out to the Romans that "we sail with you, and fight with you…and in like manner we unite with you in your traffickings."[148] Even Paul, who warned against eating the meat sacrificed to idols, also said not to be disagreeable in the market or at a meal hosted by an unbeliever if the provenance of the meat is unknown.[149]

This is the fundamental problem with the model of exclusionary Christianity. It presumes that human beings can ever separate themselves from the larger culture. But as Niebuhr admits earlier in the chapter, "we cannot escape culture any more readily than we can escape nature."[150]

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[145] Ibid., 52.
[146] Ibid., 53. He quotes Tertullian, *Apology*, xxi.
[147] Ibid., 53.
[148] Ibid., 53, quoting Tertullian, *Apology*, xlii.
[149] 1 Cor. 10:25-27.
[150] Niebuhr, 39.

The logical fallacy behind sectarian communities that withdraw from the surrounding culture is that they can never completely extricate themselves from their cultural setting. Indeed, to form one's personal and communal identity around being against another is still to continue a relationship with the other. The culture of a sectarian community is still partially defined by what it is not. Its cultural values include the belief that it is good that the community is not the same as the larger culture.

The radical Christian always makes use of the parts of the culture which he claims to reject.[151] He or she speaks and thinks with the aid of language. The Christian community, even after its withdrawal from the dominant culture, must function with its own cultural and social systems. These political, economic and philosophical systems must arise from somewhere, for scripture is not a sufficient source of all the conceptual resources required to found a society. Scripture itself is inflected with the philosophical and social concepts that it inherited from Judaic, Roman and Hellenistic cultural sources. Furthermore, the Christian also has a moral imperative to spread the gospel to others outside of his community and to act with love toward his neighbors who are both inside and outside of his community. But to interact with others requires a grounding in the meaning of language and the cultural ideas that enable communication to occur in the first place. The interpretation of scripture itself requires one to transplant the scripture from the culture of ancient Palestine into a new cultural context. As Niebuhr states, a Christian can "withdraw from its more obvious institutions and expressions," but for the most part he or she can only select and modify those things that have been received through the mediation of the surrounding society.[152] There is no true escape from culture.

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[151] Ibid., 69.
[152] Ibid., 70.

The primary answer given by any sectarian group to the Christ and culture question is to respond that the achievement of a Christian life is wholly distinct from the aims that humans seek in the world; politics, economics, science and even arts, while good, should not be the main foci of a Christian community.[153] Thus, even though the monastic communities contributed a great deal to culture, their main intention was the spiritual perfection of their members apart from civilization and in obedience to Christ.[154] The spirituality behind the "Christ against culture" model can vary greatly while sharing a general rejection of the "world." Apocalyptic Christians reject the culture because they believe the coming divine order is imminent; mystics announce the reality of the eternal order that is hidden behind the transient temporal order.[155] Even differences between Catholic and Protestant creeds are ultimately unimportant to this model because both religious traditions can share in the rejection of the "world" and a focus on God's coming kingdom. The primary theological problem with such a stance toward culture is that it emphasizes one truth (the sovereignty of God) at the expense of another truth (Christians are also called to spread the gospel within the temporal sphere).

These ethical concerns, however, are built upon other theological presuppositions that are also fallacious. At the theological heart of this model is a Trinitarian problem: how to understand the relationship of Jesus to God the creator of the universe and to the Spirit immanent in that creation.[156] The temptation of people within this model is toward a Manichean ontological dualism that only sees God and the Spirit present within the Christian and his community, and

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[153] Ibid., 56.
[154] Ibid.
[155] Ibid., 65.
[156] Ibid., 80.

therefore all of the material realm outside of the community of faith is governed by the antichrist (to use the theological language of 1 John).[157]

This ontological bifurcation is the root of several other theological problems about issues of reason and revelation, sin and human nature, and law and grace. Rather than seeing God present through the Spirit in each of these realities (a both/and mentality), the exclusionary Christian will tend to pit them against each other (an either/or mentality). Created reason is corrupt because it is present in culture, while revelation is incorrupt because it comes directly from God.[158] Thus, the author of 1 John can declare that the Christians have knowledge because they have been "anointed by the Holy One."[159]

Similarly, there is a tendency for exclusionary Christians to so associate sin with the culture that they neglect the sin present within themselves and within their Christian society. Even the author of 1 John admits that sin must still be conquered within the Christian community: "if we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us."[160] But if sin is more deeply rooted in human nature than the exclusionary Christian assumes, then his or her strategy of withdrawing from the world is not sufficient to effect Christ's victory over the world.[161]

Finally, and closely connected, is the relationship of law and grace. Niebuhr wisely points out that the follower of this model, by withdrawing form society, is seeking to set firm boundaries with the surrounding culture. As such, there is naturally an emphasis upon ethical conduct because of the importance of living in a way that contrasts with the non-Christian

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[157] Ibid., 81.
[158] Ibid., 76.
[159] 1 Jn. 2:20.
[160] 1 Jn 1:8.
[161] Niebuhr, 79.

society.[162] Furthermore, forming a new society that is very different from the society in which the community originates necessitates the development of clear rules of conduct. Critics of this model often seize on this focus upon legalism rather than upon grace. It is an unfair critique, however, because such people as the author of 1 John, for example, clearly state that the grace of God is primary: "since God loved us so much, we also ought to love one another."[163] Similarly, Tertullian states even though the Christian looks no different from non-Christians in his daily activities, he in fact looks different because of his changed interior state: "he knows grace and hence reflects grace."[164] These writers and others do not neglect the grace of God as much as some exemplars of the other types whom we will examine later.

As Niebuhr states, there is much to appreciate about this theological position, even if it is pragmatically untenable and internally self-contradictory. The question that all of Niebuhr's models attempt to answer is how a Christian must live in the interim period between the incarnation and the Parousia. A rejection of culture, even if only of the culture's most significant institutions, is still a profound witness to the transcendent destiny and trans-political loyalty of the human race.[165] A Christian who refuses to participate in military service or the worship of the Roman emperor is making a profound statement that his or her religious values require the Christian to live in tension with the society. Such an extreme stance also forces Christians to live their lives with greater integrity, and it helps to keep the Church from becoming merely an "instrument of the state…as one more group of power-hungry or security-seeking men."[166] Any adequate model of Christ and culture, then, must strike a balance between allowing for some

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[162] Ibid., 78.
[163] 1 Jn 4:11.
[164] Niebuhr, 80, quoting Tertullian, *Apology*, xlii.
[165] Ibid., 68.
[166] Ibid.

tension with society when necessary, while not completely rejecting the culture or subsuming its values to those of the culture.

This "Christ against culture" stance was the one exemplified during the "long nineteenth-century" of the Catholic Church that extended from the French Revolution until *Gaudium et Spes* was promulgated at Vatican II.[167] The Church as a *societas perfecta* (to use Bellarmine's image) was the prevailing ecclesiology, incarnated in the structures of an alternate society.[168] In America, Catholic immigrants tended to live together and form a "parallel network" of institutions, a "Catholic ministate" to use the phrase of Charles Morris.[169] These "cradle to grave" institutions that included parishes, hospitals, businesses owned by Catholics, schools, the Knights of Columbus and even a Catholic press, allowed Catholics to immunize themselves from the corrupt culture of liberalism that was infecting the modern world and also to prepare themselves to undertake the spiritual battle necessary to restore the world to the kingship of Christ.[170] It is not a coincidence that Piux XI instituted the Feast of Christ the King in 1925 in order to remind Catholics that their allegiance was not to any earthly power.

It is to the "Christ of culture" which we now turn and which can easily be described as the exact opposite of the previous model. Rather than focusing on God and the coming Kingdom, the focus is on humanity and the present time. To use Niebuhr's metaphor, the previous "Christ against culture" model was a circle with one center, but in this model Christianity is an ellipse with two foci: the forgiveness of sins and the striving toward the perfect human society which is

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[167] John W. O'Malley, *What Happened at Vatican II?* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008), 56.
[168] Joseph A. Komonchak, "Vatican II and the encounter between Catholicism and liberalism," *Catholicism and Liberalism: Contributions to American Public Philosophy,* eds. R. Bruce Douglass and David Hollenbach (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1994), 77.
[169] Massa, 3, quoting Charles R. Morris, *American Catholic: The Saints and Sinners Who Built America's Most Powerful Church* (New York: Times Books, 1997), ix.
[170] Massa, 3; Komonchak, 77.

the ultimate goal of such divine assistance .[171] Jesus is the "great educator…philosopher or reformer" whose work is the "training of men in their present social existence."[172] Whether they are the Judaizers of Paul's time, the Gnostics of the Hellenistic world or the liberal Protestants of the twentieth century, they all interpret Jesus primarily in cultural terms and minimize any conflict between Christ and culture.[173]

Rather than humanity versus culture, the focus is on humanity versus nature. The great accomplishments of humanity lie in its conquests over the external world. The ethical duty of every person is the victory of his reason over his own irrational nature. As Niebuhr states, humanity faces a "double problem" in the ethical realm, for it must "subdue its own nature" and "overcome the despair" which arises from understanding that the external, natural world is indifferent to humanity's own transcendent desires.[174] Such a paradigm fits in well with the Enlightenment emphasis upon human reason and autonomy.

The Church is not a separate, walled-off community, but rather an inclusive religious association in which all of humanity can eventually come together in a peaceful, cooperative society.[175] The focus is on ethics, the interpersonal dynamics that govern the quality of human communities, and Jesus is the great teacher who directs all people toward wisdom, moral perfection and peace.[176] Jesus is not so much the "Christ of the New Testament" but the "principle of mediation between finite and infinite" within the culture, the man who enters into the lives of all people and "adds an aura of infinite meaning to all temporal tasks."[177] The

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[171] Niebuhr, 97.
[172] Ibid., 84.
[173] Ibid., 84-85.
[174] Ibid., 96.
[175] Ibid., 92.
[176] Ibid.
[177] Niebuhr, 93, is paraphrasing Schleiermacher's *On Religion*.

vocation of the Christian is not to evangelize a culture that is resistant to the gospel, but to engage in the building up of the Kingdom of God through one's activities in the cultural sphere. Being true to the example of Christ is to engage in one's "civic work for the sake of the common good" and to remain faithful to one's "social calling."[178]

The most valuable aspects of culture to preserve are such achievements as the use of human reason, scientific advancement, social cooperation and democratic principles. Monarchies, religious wars, and political and religious persecution are dismissed as historical aberrations and cultural artifacts of a bygone era. Christian beliefs about original sin and crucifixion, resurrection and salvation are glossed over. Jesus achieved some things for humanity that could not be achieved through human labor alone, such as the forgiveness of sins and immortality.[179] Nevertheless, the focus is never to transcend the temporal order, but rather to advance the kingdom of God on earth.

These types of disciples try to reconcile the gospel with what is best in human culture in their own time. In the era of the early Church they sought to interpret the gospel in the light of Ptolemaic astronomy and Hellenistic philosophy; in the nineteenth century they sought to understand the gospel in terms of evolution and the principles of human reason.[180] Similarly, they will excise the parts of the scripture that do not suit their purposes by focusing on Jesus' teachings about the Kingdom of God but ignoring the apocalyptic ones. They tend to ignore important theological concepts such as the fall, incarnation, judgment and resurrection which would suggest "cracks in time," discontinuity and interruption.[181] In contrast to the "Christ

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178 Ibid., 97.
179 Ibid., 100.
180 Ibid., 86.
181 Ibid., 84.

against culture" model, the focus is not on eschatology and the sovereignty of Christ as Lord of heaven and earth.[182]

At the same time, one can see that this model is the basis for any kind of intentional engagement with culture. This model avoids the ontological dualism of the first model because, while God's creation is still a source of conflict with humanity, this conflict can be overcome through the Christian improvement of human culture. Jesus is the Messiah of all human culture. Proponents of this model accept what is good even in non-Christian cultures. This openness to culture has attracted many followers over the centuries because the Christian evangelizers have inculturated the gospel into the languages, concepts and values of these other cultures. Niebuhr points to Paul as the great exemplar of this kind of inculturation: attracting people to the "harmony of the Christian message with the moral and religious philosophy of their best teachers, and by the agreement of Christian conduct with that of their exemplary heroes."[183] These Christians recognize that there is a "stability in human wisdom" because they recognize that God is Lord of all cultures, that Jesus is the savior of all of humanity and that his Spirit is immanent in all cultures.[184]

Unlike the exclusionary Christians, the proponents of the Christ of culture model do not think that reason and revelation, sin and human nature, and law and grace are in conflict. Revelation is merely the "religious name for that process which is essentially the growth of reason in history."[185] Sin is present in irrational passions and institutions, but human nature and

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[182] Ibid., 99.
[183] Ibid., 103.
[184] Ibid., 105,107.
[185] Ibid., 111.

society is perfectible through proper moral and cultural formation.[186] Grace is "ancillary" to the human enterprise that depends upon the correct use of reason.

Yet, upon closer inspection, a strict conflation of Christ and culture leads to other theological problems. The conflation of reason and revelation fails to address the fact that the belief "Jesus is the Christ" cannot be reached through reason alone, and so revelation cannot be completely absorbed into reason.[187] Just as the holy community of the "Christ against culture" model was a realm free from sin, so too now the human person led by purified reason is also free from sin.[188] And the heavy focus on a self-reliant humanism gets dangerously close to Pelagianism; it is not clear how the human person needs grace. Finally, this model too raises Trinitarian questions. God is immanent in human reason and culture but no attention is given to God's immanence in the natural world. How does the same God relate both to the power manifest in the natural world and to the human achievements that seek to conquer that same natural power? Relatedly, if Jesus is immanent in human culture, then what is the role of the Spirit? Niebuhr insightfully concludes, one must always "confess more" than merely that Jesus is the Christ of culture.[189] The identification of Christ completely with culture is ultimately incoherent because it solves some theological problems while creating others. The Jesus present in the gospels is much more than the teacher of wisdom and ethical conduct. The variegated histories of cultures exemplify something other than the presence of the spirit of Christ in their eras of irrational violence and oppression.

The "Christ of culture" model is the extreme version of a Christianity that is too accommodating to culture. This model is the paradigm behind a Protestantism that has

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[186] Ibid., 112.
[187] Ibid., 111.
[188] Ibid., 112.
[189] Ibid., 115.

accommodated itself to the American Way of Life and to the general American theology that transcends any particular, sectarian expression. This American civil religion was able to incorporate even the Deist Founding Fathers because they too were disciples of a "Christ of culture" who shared the great values esteemed by the Democratic culture of the time: the freedom of the individual, social cooperation and universal peace.[190] As the Catholic Church began to embrace these Democratic values as well at Vatican II, it had to think anew about how to engage a culture toward which it had long been hostile. This openness to culture and reading the "signs of the times" would be an analogous movement from a closed "Christ against culture" stance toward a more inclusive "Christ of culture" one. The dilemma, as always, is to engage the culture without being identical to the culture. The next three models that Niebuhr describes are all attempts to hold Christ and culture in the appropriate amount of tension.

One of those models that attempts this balance is the "Christ above culture" model, or what Niebuhr also calls the "synthesis of Christ and culture."[191] Culture is neither wholly evil nor wholly good, but rather a mix of holiness and sinfulness, divinity and humanity, reason and revelation. The synthesist wants to take seriously the gap between Christ and culture (in response to the accommodation to culture) *and* try to overcome the gap (in response to the withdrawal from culture).[192] In order to achieve the proper balance, the disciple of this model must take seriously human culture and acknowledge that it is good as far as it goes. The key to this model is that human efforts can only take the Christian so far. God must do the rest by grace.

Niebuhr's prime example of this synthesis is Thomas Aquinas. In this system, culture is the preliminary training ground for eternal life with God, and the Church is the guardian of the

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[190] Ibid., 99.
[191] Ibid., 120.
[192] Ibid., 121.

culture, but the final end of the human person is always the beatific vision.[193] It is significant that

rather than pit revelation against reason, Thomas baptizes Aristotelian philosophy to serve this

higher end. Christianity and culture are not opposed, but rather Christianity builds upon culture

and completes it. That is why Niebuhr calls this model "Christ above culture." Christ is always

separate from culture, but the path toward Christ is through culture. There is a "double

happiness" for the human being: the "imperfect happiness" of the temporal sphere and the

perfect happiness of eternal life with God.[194] Culture is not against Christianity nor coincident

with it. It is an incomplete good for the human person because it alone is not sufficient for

humanity's ultimate happiness.

Culture has an important role in preserving and transmitting humanity's ability to

understand truth through the proper use of reason and to live an ethical life through the ordinary,

civil virtues. The great social institutions such as the family, state and Church are mediators of

God's grace for human society through their role in this process of cultural and human

development. God's grace is always at work, but it builds upon the material conditions of the

human person and of society.[195] The "merely" moral life in society is neither irrelevant to

Christian progress nor the human person's ultimate goal.

This principle that "grace perfects nature" is key to the synthetic model. The gospel

always adds something more. As Aquinas states:

> There must be superadded to man by the gift of God certain principles, whereby he may
> be put on the way to supernatural happiness, even as he is directed to his connatural end
> by natural principles, yet not without divine aid.[196]

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[193] Ibid., 132.
[194] Ibid., 133.
[195] Ibid., 134.
[196] Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae,* I-II,q62.a1, as translated by Niebuhr, 134.

The human person can only acquire theological virtues through God's added grace. Similarly, the natural law is discoverable by means of reason but the divine law transcends that is must be discovered through revelation.[197] Human abilities must be supplemented by specific virtues from God and by knowledge of the revealed truth of divine law. The role of the Church in such a system is to provide grace through the sacraments and to direct human persons to their supernatural end with God.[198] But the Church also helps to order temporal life through its guidance as the keeper of the divine law.[199] In Aquinas' synthesis, all of the social institutions—church, state, universities—work both toward helping human beings to live together peacefully on earth while directing them toward their supernatural end with God.

This model is very attractive because it both preserves the autonomy of the natural world and acknowledges the goodness of reason and culture. All of creation, especially reason and culture, is good because they can direct human persons toward their temporal happiness. Creation is not evil but the foundation upon which God's grace continues to build. In principle, there is no conflict between God and creation or between nature and human society. Such a model takes seriously the primordial truth that what God creates is good. Revelation builds upon created reason, grace completes created humanity and the divine law completes the natural law. This positive view of creation also contributes to a better understanding of the Trinity than we have yet seen in the other models. The Creator and the savior are one because the savior is one who saves humanity in creation rather than from creation.[200]

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[197] Niebuhr, 135.
[198] Ibid., 136.
[199] Ibid., 136.
[200] Ibid., 143.

Unfortunately, such a model is not viable in today's world. As Niebuhr points out, there

is a hierarchical character to his vision of the interaction between the Church and society. In

such a society, he states:

> …a chain of command extends from the Divine Lawgiver and Ruler through…the church with its papal head, through the subordinate princes…till it reaches the final subjects, who have only to obey.[201]

God orders the temporal world by means of cultural institutions, particularly the Church, which

are oriented above themselves toward the divine. This model worked well in a feudal society

built upon hierarchies of power. But Niebuhr is correct to observe that, although such nineteenth-

century Catholic leaders like Pope Leo XIII seemed to promote a synthetic model of Church and

state interaction, they were in reality promoting something else.[202] While the synthesis of Christ

and culture was their goal, they wanted to synthesize Christ with the culture of the thirteenth

century rather than their own contemporary culture. They merely repeated Aquinas' theology

without attempting to adapt it to a world marked by religious pluralism rather than a unified

Christendom. The focus was on recreating the social and cultural world of the thirteenth century

rather than upon the presence of Christ in the contemporary world. This reversion to the past, of

course, was impossible and contributed to the "long nineteenth century" that was marked more

by the "Christ against culture" paradigm rather than a synthetic one.

This tendency of the anti-Modernists to defend the particular culture of the thirteenth

century rather than attempt a new synthesis reveals another problem with the paradigm: a lack of

a proper understanding of history. Aquinas conceived of natural law as something knowable

through the proper use of reason by any human person in any society and in any historical era.

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[201] Ibid., 137.
[202] Ibid., 139.

Yet his hierarchical view of the natural order came out of a medieval worldview, and his conception of the ultimate end of the human person arose from within a society in which the existence of God was presumed. However, as soon as one acknowledges the historical and cultural particularity of all beliefs, then one also must acknowledge that culture is subject to continuous transformation. The gospel may not change, but humanity's access to its truths in every age is necessarily provisional and fragmentary. And as soon as the gospel and the culture are no longer static, then the synthesis breaks down. In other words, Aquinas synthesized a particular configuration of his culture with the gospel. When the culture changed, the synthesis he created needed to change as well.

Finally, one can argue that Aquinas' perspective on culture and human society is much too optimistic. He does take account of sin in his theology, otherwise there would be no need for grace. Human beings are fallen and cannot achieve the end for which they are created by themselves. But if sin really does infect humanity at an ontological level, then all of humanity's actions, including its use of reason and production of culture, should be tainted as well. It is not clear why human culture and reason should be the unmitigated goods that they for him. Because they are infected by sin, they can just as often lead to unhappiness. In an effort to take the radical nature of sin more seriously, Niebuhr presents his final two models: "Christ and Culture in Paradox" and "Christ the Transformer of Culture."

In order to examine further the "Christ and Culture in Paradox" model—what is often termed "Christian Realism"—it will be helpful to turn to Reinhold Niebuhr (H. Richard Niebuhr's brother) on the Protestant side and to Johann Baptist Metz on the Catholic side.[203]

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[203] Massa, 269. He calls this theological movement "Christian Realism" in line with other authors. See also Reinhold Niebuhr, *Christian Realism and Political Problems* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1953) and George Hammer, *Christian Realism in American Theology: A Study of Reinhold Niebuhr, W.M. Horton, and H.P. Van Dusen* (Upssala, Sweden: Appelbergs Boktryckeriaktiebolag, 1940).

Niebuhr attacks the two main theses that modern theology and history has based itself upon: 1) the perfectibility of the human person and 2) the idea of progress.[204] These assumptions, he asserts, have led the modern social and psychological sciences to many erroneous conclusions precisely because their methods are founded upon these faulty premises.[205] For Niebuhr, these theories totalize human nature at the cost of distorting it. Thus, the human being's freedom is a source both of great creativity and horrendous destruction. A person's lustful desires, ambition and egocentricity cannot be controlled merely through the use of reason and proper social control.[206] These assumptions also contribute to that second erroneous assumption, that human culture, properly directed, can control the historical destiny of humanity and lead it to a future utopia.[207]

But, as Niebuhr shows, there is ample historical proof from Communism to *laissez-faire* capitalism that these assumptions are incorrect. Because they do not take into account the moral limitations of human nature, any totalizing ideology will inevitably lead to great misery. Niebuhr thinks these facts about human nature are self-evident and the basis of what he calls "Christian Realism." [208] The Modern desire to control the human person through the use of rational, technocratic means is misguided at best and evil at worst. As a Christian theologian, he wants to use the resources of Christianity to recover a much more realistic and proper understanding of the human person as both corrupted by sin and redeemable by Christ. However, and this is important for his political theology, while individual human beings can often check their self-

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[204] Niebuhr, *Christian Realism*, 3.
[205] Ibid., 3.
[206] Ibid., 8.
[207] Ibid., 11.
[208] Ibid., 6.

interested impulses, it is unrealistic to expect that humanity's collective behavior can ever be brought "completely under the dominion of reason or conscience."[209]

At the same time as Niebuhr, J.B. Metz was also presenting a Catholic version of "Christian Realism." These theologians were using philosophical critiques prevalent at the time to critique the Modernist project. Neo-Marxists such as the Frankfurt School were becoming suspicious of the capacities of human reason and its technical mastery over nature. As one member of this School wrote: "there is no document of civilization which is not at the same time a document of barbarism."[210] Niebuhr and many others were beginning to recognize that the historical detritus left in the wake of so-called human progress was piling up. Certainly for Metz and Niebuhr, and for many in the second-half of the twentieth-century, the horrors of two world wars, the Holocaust and the subsequent rise of totalitarianism was prompting a stark re-evaluation of the Modern political project.

Metz viewed praxis as constitutive of the Christian idea of God. His suspicion of ideologies made him wary of the "usual linear relationship" between theory and praxis in which praxis means "carrying out, applying, or concretizing a theory that has already been formulated."[211] This uncritical appropriation of theory can blind one to the ideological interests that are served by it—usually the interests of the victors of history. That blindness is the traditional problem with theories of history that have ignored the human history of suffering. Instead, Metz places praxis alongside theory when he recognizes that Christian concepts such as "metanoia, conversion, and exodus…belong to the fundamental way theology operates."[212]

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[209] Reinhold Niebuhr, *Moral Man and Immoral Society* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1952), xii.

[210] Walter Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History," trans. Harry Zohn in *The Frankfurt School of Religion: Key Writings by the Major Thinkers*, ed., Eduardo Medieta (New York: Routledge, 2004), 267.

[211] Johann Baptist Metz, *Faith in History and Society: Toward a Practical Fundamental Theology*, translated and edited by J. Matthew Ashley (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 2007), 61.

[212] Ibid., 62.

Discipleship expresses a knowledge that is "essentially practical."[213] Christianity is a dialectic (not a linear progression) of theory and praxis, subject and object: "only by following him [Jesus] do Christians know the one they have gotten involved with and the one who saves them."[214] Thus the memory of God's actions in human history and the narratives that both describe those actions and call forth a practical response in discipleship constitute theology as a praxis-oriented discipline. In other words, Christian theologies that deny the responsibility of subjects as meaningful actors in history also deny their own identities as Christian theologies.

Metz focusses on suffering in history as a way to develop a spirituality for Christians in today's world. He focusses specifically on Israel's experience because of its history of cultural and political insignificance.[215] This poverty of Israel means that it could not separate itself from its own suffering and was forced to cry out to God for help. And it is this poverty of spirit that is the model for all Christians. But this constant questioning of God always looks to the eschaton, toward the time when God will "prove Godself to us as love."[216] The cry of Israel to God throughout the Psalms, Lamentations, Job and the prophets—"How long yet?"—must not be silenced in Modernity's quest to soothe itself, to anesthetize itself from the pain of suffering and its accompanying guilt. The resurrection and second coming of Jesus is God's answer to all innocent suffering and the basis of hope for the future. As the "firstborn of all creation," Jesus is both the fulfillment of God's promises to Israel and a sign of its future fulfillment (Col. 1:15).

Metz and Niebuhr both exemplify important theological ideas behind the "Christ and Culture in Paradox" model. If the models presented thus far were on a continuum with the

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[213] Ibid.
[214] Ibid.
[215] Johann Baptist Metz, *A Passion for God: The Mystical-Political Dimension of Christianity*, translated and edited by J. Matthew Ashley (New York: Paulist Press, 1998), 65.
[216] Ibid., 71.

"Christ against culture" model and the "Christ of culture" model at either end, then the "Christ above Culture" model would be in the middle because it tries to balance the two extremes. The "Christ and Culture in Paradox" model would lie somewhere between the "Christ against culture" model and the "Christ above culture" model since it shares in features of both paradigms. Like the synthesist model, the paradox model tries to hold culture and faith together, but believes that the synthesist model is far too naive about human sinfulness and cultural progress.

The main conflict in the paradox model is not between Christ and culture, but rather between "the righteousness of God and the righteousness of self."[217] For the synthesist, human reason is fallible but not by nature misdirected. Culture can be improved through better reasoning and the Christian institutions are, at their core, beyond corruption. For the Christian Realist, however, when compared to the great holiness of God all human works are "sordid and depraved" and "pitifully inadequate."[218] The focus for this model is upon the great "act of reconciliation and forgiveness" of the cross and the unmerited grace that God gives to all people.[219] The synthesis model was about drawing culture up toward God. The paradox model is about consistently holding God and creation in a properly balanced tension. The Christian Realist neither emphasizes one over the other: grace *and* nature, sin *and* redemption, the sinner who is *simul justus et peccator* (to use Luther's phrase).

Godlessness is the essence of sin in this model. It is the "will to live without God, to ignore Him…to be independent and secure in one's self, to be godlike in oneself."[220] One can see here the anti-Modern ideology critique behind Niebuhr and Metz's theologies. Where the

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[217] Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture*, 150.
[218] Ibid., 152.
[219] Ibid., 150.
[220] Ibid., 154.

Modern synthesists wanted to emphasize the role of human reason and freedom, the Christian

Realist sees a tendency toward Godless self-reliance:

> As Christians we want to be the forgivers of sins, the lovers of men, new incarnations of Christ, saviors rather than saved…we try to give ourselves the assurance that we are on His side facing the rest of the world….[221]

But this belief that we can save ourselves through culture, even though also acknowledging the

aid of grace in this process, is ultimately wishful thinking. Reason in human affairs is never

separable from the human sinfulness that infects it with "egoistic, godless, perversion."[222]

Such a negative (though perhaps realistic) view of human nature, culture and reason may

at first lead to despair. But as H. Richard Niebuhr points out, after despair comes conversion

back to God, the sinner throwing himself upon God's mercy alone (rather than upon his own

abilities), and then the experience of "re-inscription" of the true law of God upon his heart.[223]

That is the paradox—the tension—inherent within this system. The law of God "in the hands of

men is an instrument of sin" because it can lead to pride and godless egoism, but the law "as

coming from God and heard from His lips is a means of grace."[224] This same process of spiritual

conversion is present in Metz's spirituality that also focusses on the Christian's poverty of spirit.

It is by understanding one's own sinfulness and how one has contributed to human suffering that

leads one to despair in one's own power and then, at last, to hope in God's power.

This model is certainly not a synthesis between faith and culture, but neither is it a

withdrawal from culture. That is the paradox, for the Christian is always a sinner in a sinful

world, yet redeemed by Christ. As Richard Niebuhr states:

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[221] Ibid., 155.
[222] Ibid., 156.
[223] Ibid., 157-158.
[224] Ibid., 157.

> In Christ all have become new, and yet everything remains as it was from the beginning. God has revealed Himself in Christ, but hidden Himself in His revelation; the believer knows the One in whom he has believed, yet walks by faith, not sight.[225]

There is always a gap between creation and God that humanity can never bridge. Like the "Christ against culture" model, there is great resistance to the attenuation of the gospel by cultural or synthesist Christians precisely because the Christian Realist wants to preserve God as one always set apart from creation.[226] Unlike the exclusionary model that promotes withdrawal into a perfect Christian society, the Christian Realist is under no illusion that he can escape culture or sin. Niebuhr sees signs of this model throughout the letters of Paul for whom humanity is stuck in its sin and no amount of culture can save it: "For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do."[227] Similarly, even the law of God is corrupted by sinful flesh, for "God has done what the law, weakened by the flesh, could not do," and sent his son in the "likeness of sinful flesh."[228]

Any analysis of Paul's understanding of the law and grace will be controversial, and Niebuhr offers one possible interpretation that fits with this presentation of the "Christ and culture in paradox" model. For example, Paul contrasts works that are "fruit of the spirit" with "works of the flesh."[229] Paul urges Christians to exhibit the fruit of the spirit, what Niebuhr calls the "ethics of regeneration and eternal life."[230] But at the same time, Paul still promotes a culturally-based ethics about such temporal matters as marriage and divorce, relations within families, adjudicating quarrels, preventing factions within the community, relations to non-

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[225] Ibid.
[226] Ibid., 157.
[227] Rom. 7:19.
[228] Rom. 8:2.
[229] Gal. 5:16-23.
[230] Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture*, 166.

Christians and obedience to the laws of the government.[231] Paul has two different sets of ethics because of the two different contradictory tendencies in life. Because the Christian is always vulnerable to sin, there must still be laws that govern behavior among sinners who need God's grace.

It is here that the view of the law for the Christian Realist is markedly different than for the other models. For the synthesist, the law functions positively because it can lead the human person to a real, though imperfect, happiness. But for Paul and other Christian Realists, the law has a negative function. The institutions even of Christian society are designed to prevent human beings from becoming more destructive than they might otherwise be.[232] The laws and culture are designed to keep some peace and order but cannot lead the human person to happiness or salvation. This is Reinhold Niebuhr's position in *Moral Man and Immoral Society*, for whom the highest moral ideal in society is justice because in a fallen world sometimes a society must use means such as "self-assertion, resistance, coercion."[233] For Reinhold Niebuhr, the individual person can and should strive toward the higher ideal of unselfishness, but like Paul, there are two parallel and paradoxical sets of laws because sin and grace are always in tension.

The obvious critique of the paradox model is that it takes sin *too* seriously. In today's post-Modern world, as we become more aware of the systemic injustice and historical oppression of the poor of the world, our theology must take sin seriously. Niebuhr, Metz and the others are correct in this point. But rather than throwing his hands up in despair, as one could argue Niebuhr does, Metz instead wants to focus theology back upon the sufferings of this world and to reassert the biblical belief that salvation history is very much tied up in the normal course of life.

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[231] Ibid., 164.
[232] Ibid., 165.
[233] Reinhold Niebuhr, *Moral Man*, 257.

By focusing on the suffering of others, "social power and political dominion" must "continually justify themselves anew in the face of concrete suffering."[234] Indeed, this is the difficult consolation offered by the Gospel to the rich and powerful.[235] The Gospel must challenge those who are apathetic toward this suffering and must pose the question to them of the extent to which they have caused suffering. Suffering is not merely a privatized, individual reality but a social and political one that demands a response by the Christian.

Metz begins to hint at the final model that Niebuhr deals with, "Christ the Transformer of Culture." In the paradox model, creation and the fall are almost indistinguishable, for sin seems to corrupt all of creation at the ontological level. For somebody like Paul, there can seem to be a desire to escape the body and a yearning for a new order of creation "in hope that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay."[236] This model also ignores the resurrection, which is precisely a raising up *of the flesh* to life with God. The resurrection returns material creation back to God; it does not abandon creation to sin. But for the Christian realist, material creation and human culture are so corrupted that the purpose of cultural institutions is primarily to restrain and limit sin's power. It is not a surprise, then, that a Christian Realist would also tend to be a conservator of the *status quo*.[237] Paul, for example, does not challenge slavery, the patriarchal character of the family or even the Roman government. Such transformation at the social level is instead the focus of the final transformational model.

In the transformational model there is a much more positive and hopeful outlook upon culture than one finds in the paradox model. One reason is that the follower of this model—what

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[234] Metz, *A Passion for God,* 110.
[235] Ibid.
[236] Rom 8:20-21.
[237] Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture*, 188.

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we can now call the conversionist—emphasizes God's creation at least as much as God's salvation on the cross. This positive outlook supports two other related ideas: that the human person is a co-worker with God the first creator, and that God's creative and ordering action has always been present within culture.[238] This positive view of creation affects one's Christology as well, for the incarnation of the Word becomes as important in salvation history as the Cross. The incarnation is continuous with God's creative work through the Word.[239] The resurrection, then, is not the rejection of creation but rather the glorification of it. Creation, incarnation and resurrection are distinct but interrelated moments in salvation history.

The conversionist tends not to believe that the fall corrupted creation at an ontological level. Sin and the fall is "entirely the action of man, and in no way an action of God's."[240] Human nature is misdirected, certainly, but it is still fundamentally good and the role of Christ is to convert human nature back to its originally created state. Unlike the Christian Realist, the focus is not on the replacement of creation by something new at the eschaton, nor is it the shedding of the body for a new life in the spirit, but rather it is a radical rebirth of creation in the present.

The history of salvation is portrayed as a dialogue between God and humanity. Niebuhr helpfully contrasts this view of history with the other models (referring to the Christian Realist as a "dualist"):

> For the exclusive Christian, history is the story of a rising Church or Christian culture and a dying pagan civilization; for the cultural Christian, it is the story of the spirit's encounter with nature; for the synthesist, it is a period of preparation under law, reason, gospel, and church for an ultimate communion of the soul with God; for the

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[238] Ibid., 193.
[239] Ibid.
[240] Ibid., 194.

dualist, history is the time of struggle between faith and unbelief, a period between the giving of the promise of life and its fulfillment. For the conversionist, history is the story of God's mighty deeds and of man's responses to them.[241]

The conversionist is more focused on the "eternal now" than are the other types of Christians. The present is always filled with the possibility of divine renewal and is not something that will happen only at the eschaton. Salvation is "spatial and not temporal," as the Lord is lifted up and will "draw all people" to himself.[242] Certainly, all theological models believe that salvation is both in the present and awaiting the Parousia. The question is one of emphasis. The dualist (Christian Realist) tends to hold sin and grace in such tension that the ultimate victory over sin awaits the second coming of the Lord. This is very true and a part of traditional Christian belief. The conversionist tends to emphasize the present reality of God's salvation over sin and death in the ongoing drama between God and humanity. This too is very true and a part of traditional Christian belief.

The Gospel of John is a good example of these themes that are present in the "Christ the Transformer of Culture" model. Creation is inherently good because its source is in Jesus, the Word, but it has been corrupted by sin. This corruption, however, is not the end of the story, for God sends his son that all might have life through him.[243] Jesus was not sent only to God's chosen people, but to the entire world and to all of creation. The "world" may have rejected the Son, but he does not give up and glorifies God even to the cross. This continuous dialogue between God and humanity exemplifies how Jesus is always present in the eternal now. Eternal life with God in the Spirit is possible in every living moment.[244]

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[241] Ibid., 195.
[242] Ibid., 195; Jn. 12:32.
[243] Jn. 3:16.
[244] Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture,* 201.

This idea that human culture can be transformed for the glory of God is present throughout the Gospel of John. The gospel uses Hellenistic concepts such as "logos" to communicate to the culture in that culture's own symbols and language. But it also re-interprets those symbols in the light of Christ and transforms their meaning.[245] It also uses the material world as a means of revealing who God is. Eating, drinking, wind, water, bread and wine are all symbolic of a deeper spiritual reality.[246] The wedding at Cana, the first of Jesus' signs, reveals his glory through the transformation of water into wine.[247] The material world is inherently good and Jesus redeems it and lifts it up to its true purpose, that of glorifying God. There is always a double reality in the Gospel: the surface level of events signified by the material world, and their deeper, spiritual reality that is hidden behind the material one.

The author of John certainly has many seemingly negative comments about the "world" and its rejection of the Son of God. For example, Jesus says to the Jewish leaders that their father is the devil and has put them in opposition to him.[248] This theme of the "world" rejecting Jesus begins at the prologue and runs throughout the gospel: "his own people did not accept him."[249] However, these verses must be put in the context of the theme of dialogue between God and humanity. Creation responds to Jesus by rejecting him, but Jesus' response is to offer himself for the world: "here is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!"[250] Jesus comes to lay down his life, and Caiaphas responds that it is better that one man should die than a whole nation.[251] Humanity consistently rejects Christ's offer of salvation. However, unlike the other

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[245] Iibd., 197.
[246] Ibid.
[247] Jn 2:1-12.
[248] Jn 8:44.
[249] Jn. 1:11.
[250] Jn.1:29.
[251] Jn. 11:50.

models, Jesus does not withdraw into his own pure community of disciples, nor does he suggest that the "battle" between him and the world is unwinnable in the present time. Rather, salvation is still possible by returning to proper relationship with God.

Like the "kingdom of God" metaphor in the other gospels, "eternal life" is the phrase used in the Gospel of John to talk about present communion with the Father and the Son through the Spirit.[252] Rather than focusing on the return of Christ on the last day, the author focusses on the giving of the Spirit to the Christian community after the resurrection: "and I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate, to be with you forever."[253] Once again, one can see that the focus in the Gospel is less upon the past or the future but upon the present moment that is already filled with God's glory. That glory may not be visible to most of the "world," but it is visible to those who possess the knowledge to see it.

The differences between the last three models that try to hold Christ and culture together are rather nuanced. The difference lies in how they see the role of Christ in transforming the culture.[254] For the synthesist, the transformation proceeds by adding Christ to a culture that is already good and supplementing the limited natural powers of reason. For the Christian Realist, Christ does not change the culture but rather helps the individual to live within an irrevocably immoral society. But on the continuum developed earlier, "Christ the Transformer of Culture" would lie between the synthesist model in the middle and the "Christ of culture" model at the end. The adherent to the transformational model agrees with the Christian Realist that culture is under God's rule, but he or she is closer to the cultural model because of the belief that Christians must still engage the culture in order to convert it to Christ. The focus is not so much

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[252] Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture,* 201.
[253] Jn 14:16.
[254] I am summarizing H. Richard Niebuhr here, 209.

on supplementing the natural powers of reason but upon re-directing a corrupted creation back to its original state. Salvation is salvation *in* the world, not salvation *from* the world.

Especially in a nation built upon the non-establishment of any Church, it is not at all clear how a Church seeking to order the whole of the temporal sphere could exert any amount of power over the national culture. The synthetic model, for example, presumes a social unification that has not been the case since the thirteenth century. The model cannot be imported wholesale into the contemporary Church. As such influential thinkers as Charles Taylor have pointed out, it was "virtually impossible not to believe in God" for much of the history of the Western world, but now such atheism is not only easy but even "inescapable."[255] In today's culture, the only power the Church has is through persuasion and appeals to reason.

The reality of the world today is one reason why *Gaudium et Spes* (*GS*) is such an important resource for examining more closely how the Church should relate to the culture in today's world. A respect for reason and culture is present throughout the document. As such, *GS* builds upon the "intelligible basis" that the synthetic model provides while responding to the cultural reality of its day.[256] *GS* presumes that human culture is good, that it can lead people toward God and that Christ is the goal of all cultures. It contains a positive view of creation, of culture and a firm belief that the human person is still perfectible in Christ. Communion with God is possible here and now, in the world. At the same time, the document acknowledges the presence of elements within all cultures that are sinful and must be redeemed by Christ. It is not naïve about the presence and power of sin.

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[255] Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap, 2007), 25.
[256] Niebuhr calls the synthetic model an "intelligible basis" for cooperation with nonbelievers, 143.

The document also builds upon the insights of the "Christ the Transformer of Culture" model. In particular, its use of the concept of dialogue is a fruitful lens to think about the relationship of the Church to culture today. Dialogue is a concept that runs throughout the document. As we have already seen, the conversionist model presumes that salvation history is a continual dialogue between humanity and God. God does not impose salvation upon creation. *GS* builds upon this characteristic of the divine-human drama to present the Church as a promoter of the conversion of culture through Christ.

Chapter 3, "an acknowledgement of history"

Bernard Lonergan stated that the meaning of Vatican II was the "acknowledgment of history."[257] Since the French revolution, the Church had been overtly hostile to much of the change occurring around it. Popes Pius VI, Gregory XVI, Pius IX, Leo XIII, Pius X, Pius XI and Pius XII were all united in their belief that the "task of the church in the modern world" was to restore the world back to Christ and to his Church.[258] This anti-Modernist movement of the Catholic Church was actually a cultural Christianity that sought to return the Church and the world to the thirteenth century. Church leaders had a difficult time recognizing that culture had changed so much that the medieval synthesis between the Church and culture was no longer possible. Its response was to withdraw from culture as much as possible by forming an alternate Catholic society within the larger Western culture.[259] This parallel society would both protect Catholics from the poison of modern forms of thinking and form a spiritual army to fight in the battle "to restore all things in Christ."[260] The Church had moved to a "Christ against culture" model while yearning to restore a "Christ above culture" model.

This institutional blindness to historical change was apparent in the preparatory schemas at Vatican II that continued to focus upon the Church (*ad intra*) at the expense of the Church's relationship to the world (*ad extra*). Even the title of the preparatory draft on the church, *De Ecclesia,* revealed this defensive and polemical approach. Cardinal Suenens, the Archbishop of Malines-Brussels, made a key intervention at the first session of the Council when he declared

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[257] Michael Paul Gallagher, S.J., *Clashing Symbols: An Introduction to Faith and Culture* (New York: Paulist Press, 1998), 36, who quotes Frederick Crowe, *Bernard Lonergan* (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1992), 98. The original quotation is in Bernard Lonergan, *Curiosity at the Center of One's Life: Statements and Questions of R. Eric O'Connor*, ed. J. Martin O'Hara (Montreal: Thomas More Institute, 1984), 426

[258] Joseph A. Komonchak, "Vatican II and the encounter between Catholicism and liberalism." *Catholicism and Liberalism: Contributions to American Public Philosophy*, eds. R. Bruce Douglass and David Hollenbach, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1994), 77.

[259] Ibid.

[260] This quote is from Pius X's encyclical *E Supremi* and is cited in Komonchak, 77.

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that the bishops should focus outward in addition to focusing inward. In that address the Cardinal

provided a methodological way forward for the Council by providing a program around which

both the internal and the external concerns could cohere. He also introduced the concept of

"dialogue" to describe relationships of the Church with its members and with the

world.[261] According to O'Malley, this intervention was foundational because it laid the

groundwork for the adoption of dialogical language throughout the documents.[262] Another

"across-the-board" issue that O'Malley identified at the Council was its acknowledgement and

engagement with social change.[263] These two themes, dialogue and change, would shape the

entire Council and run throughout its documents. They also reveal the shift from a "Christ

against culture" model to a "Christ the Transformer of Culture" model. This model is very much

at the center of *Gaudium et Spes (GS)*. In order to bring all of these threads together, it is helpful

to look at Henri de Lubac as representative of the *nouvelle théologie* movement just before the

Council, the Church's eventual acceptance of many of their principles at the Council and the

theological paradigm shift behind this change.

Joseph A. Komonchak states that this shift was a consequence of questioning the reigning

Neo-Thomism of the time. He particularly identifies Henri de Lubac and his book *Surnaturel* as

exemplary of a larger theological movement that would come to promote a "return to the

sources" (*ressourcement*) and the dialogue of theology with the contemporary world.[264] This

general movement, called *la nouvelle théologie* by its detractors, would be officially codified at

[261] James Gerard McEvoy, *Leaving Christendom for Good: Church-World Dialogue in a Secular Age* (New York: Lexington Books, 2014), 59; fn.8, 84.

[262] O'Malley, *What Happened at Vatican II*, 158.

[263] O'Malley, 299-305.

[264] Joseph A. Komonchak, "Theology and Culture at Mid-Century: The Example of Henri de Lubac," *Theological Studies* 51 (1990): 580.

Vatican II. In fact, many of these same theologians who were disciplined prior to the Council for promoting such ideas would attend the Council as theological experts.[265]

De Lubac's primary concern was that theology had separated itself from its "human roots…as if God was not the author of both nature and grace, and nature in view of grace."[266] This strict separation of nature and grace was reflected in the theological method itself. Apologetics became the mode of discourse for all encounters of faith and the world outside the Church with its "system of truths and precepts" whose only purpose was to defend the Church and her declared truths.[267] Theology itself, as the science of revealed truths, was no longer an "understanding of all reality *through the faith*."[268] In fact, to argue that the role of theology was to "display the inner intelligibility" of Christian doctrine and its ability to interpret all of reality was to risk being accused of confusing the natural and the supernatural realms.[269] What had begun under Aquinas as the synthesis between nature and God's grace (super-nature) that completed and brought nature to its fulfillment, evolved instead into a system in which the supernatural was shunted off into an independent realm whose custodian was the Church.[270] The Church's primarily role was to mediate grace from the realm of the supernatural into the realm of the natural. Thus, de Lubac wrote, there arose a "sort of unconscious conspiracy between the movement which led to secularism and a certain theology."[271] Secularism, the belief that the religious and political forces in society should be strictly separated, was reinforced—and perhaps

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[265] For example, Yves-Marie Congar, O.P., Marie-Dominique Chenu, O.P., Jean Daniélou, O.P., Jean Courtney Murray, S.J., Karl Rahner, S.J.. See O'Malley, *What happened at Vatican II,* 321-328.
[266] Komonchak,, "Theology and Culture at Mid-Century," 582, quoting Henri de Lubac, "Apologetics and Theology," *Theological Fragments* (San Francisco, Ignatius, 1989), 94-95.
[267] Ibid., 582.
[268] Ibid., 582-583, quoting de Lubac, *Theological Fragments*, 98.
[269] Ibid., 583.
[270] Ibid., 584.
[271] Ibid., 584, quoting Henri de Lubac, "Causes internes de l'atténuation et de la disaprition du sens du Sacré," *Théologie dans l'histoire: II. Question disputes et résistance au nazisme* (Paris: Desclée de Brouwer, 1990), 19.

even accelerated—on the side of the Church by this theological separation between the natural and supernatural spheres.

De Lubac saw the crux of the theological separation beginning in the sixteenth century with Cajetan's interpretation of Aquinas. In short, Aquinas always viewed the human soul as possessing a "natural desire for the beatific vision."[272] However, starting in the sixteenth century, there arose a "materialization of spirit" which conceived of the human soul as simply another "nature" with its own proportionate desires.[273] Much like the body has natural desires for food and procreation, so too the soul has natural desires for intellection and rational investigation. Reason was a natural power, not a supernatural one, and therefore it could never reach the desire for the beatific vision by itself. Such a desire must come from outside of the soul and outside the natural world. There was a definitive break between the "natural" powers of the soul and the "supernatural" powers which must be added to the soul by God's grace.

De Lubac saw this philosophical evolution as understandable, for Aquinas never succeeded in combining Aristotle's conception of the soul as "spiritual nature" with the Patristic understanding of the soul as the "image" of its creator. For Aristotle, spiritual nature was analogous to physical nature and the soul was its own "center of properties and a source of strictly delimited activity."[274] For the Patristic theologians, however, the human soul was not at all like the body, but rather always open to the infinite, striving to fulfill its true nature as the likeness (image) of God.[275] For Aristotle, then, the idea that the soul could "naturally" seek what was beyond its own powers was absurd. All natures possess ends that are attainable by their own

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[272] Ibid., 585.
[273] Ibid.
[274] Ibid., 588, quoting Henri de Lubac, *Surnaturel: Études historiques* (Paris: Aubier, 1946)*, 434-435.
[275] Ibid., 587.

intrinsic powers. For the Patristic theologians who were not limited by such an understanding of "nature," the idea that the soul was created to seek a supernatural end beyond its intrinsic powers was not absurd at all. De Lubac was not critical of Aquinas for siding with the Patristic thinkers by identifying the desire for the beatific vision within the human soul. The problem for de Lubac was that the stricter Aristotelian understanding of "nature" upon which Aquinas based his theology provided a philosophical opening for subsequent theologians to reduce the desires of the soul to what could be accounted for by its natural powers that sought only an end proportionate to its delimited nature.

Cajetan and other later thinkers posited a hypothetical condition of the human person which they called "pure nature." This condition of "pure nature" described the human person before the addition of supernatural grace. This philosophical construction allowed them to stress the human person's natural powers over and against the supernatural. These philosophical and theological bifurcations of reality between the natural and the supernatural became part of the larger cultural shift during the Enlightenment, the rise of secular nation-states and the birth of science as a secular discipline. The Church, theology and the supernatural became more and more separate from reason, secular political institutions and empirical investigations of reality. This theological split between nature and super-nature contributed to the development in general of secularized constructions of the human world that also presumed a separation of nature and grace.[276]

According to de Lubac, theology had neglected Aquinas' insight that the human person, as made "in the image and likeness of God," already possessed a desire for the beatific vision.

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[276] Ibid.

The human person at creation is already a graced being.[277] There is no "pure nature" in need of perfection by external grace. De Lubac rejected an ontological dualism that strictly separated reality into nature and super-nature: "the whole natural order…is already penetrated by a supernatural."[278] This insight that God already graces the natural world from its creation would be foundational for many theologians such as Karl Rahner in the twentieth century.

De Lubac was also critical of a medieval focus on dialectical theology that stressed the use of reason and argumentation over the Patristic understanding of theological language as symbolic of a deeper reality: "symbolic inclusions became dialectical antitheses."[279] The role of reason in dialectical theology was solely to demonstrate the existence of God and to support the defense of the Church and her doctrines in apologetical discourse with those outside the Church. Theology, on the other hand, was the investigation of sacred, revealed truths and had little to do with the secular world. Another bifurcation arose within the Church, this time between sacred theology and profane apologetics.[280]

If de Lubac is correct, then the secularization of society was accelerated by a theological dualism that separated the world into the realm of the "sacred" and the "profane." This dualism supported much of Catholic anti-modernism during the long nineteenth century and pushed the Church to interpret historical events in very negative ways. For example, as Komonchak points out, the Church conflated what he calls "doctrinaire liberalism" with "political liberalism."[281] "Political liberalism," as promoted by John Courtney Murray who identified it primarily with the

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[277] Ibid., 587.
[278] Ibid., 594, quoting Henri de Lubac, "Causes internes," 20.
[279] Ibid., 590, quoting Henri de Lubac, *Corpus Mysticum: L'Eucharistie et l'église au moyen âge: Étude historique* (Paris: Aubier, 1944), 248.
[280] Ibid.
[281] Komonchak, "Vatican II and the encounter between Catholicism and liberalism," 85-86.

Anglo-Saxon liberal tradition, merely sought to separate the church and the political state.[282] It

was not inherently anti-religious. On the other hand, "doctrinaire liberalism" was a totalizing

ideology that understood the separation of the church and the state *also* to imply the "irrelevance

of religion to the public order and the sole right of the state to control all aspects of public

life."[283] This kind of liberalism was often associated with European liberalism and the Catholic

persecutions that occurred in post-revolutionary France. As de Lubac lamented, this total

secularization of society was a natural consequence of the growing autonomy of politics,

economics and culture in general from the dictates of religious authorities. And he showed that

this process of secularization had begun in the centuries immediately after Aquinas.

What Murray distinguished was the difference between the separation of the church and

the state from the separation of the church and the society.[284] Murray always believed that the

Church had an important public role in forming the "social consensus" that undergirded any

society. He described the "social consensus" in the following way:

> It is an ensemble of substantive truths, a structure of basic knowledge, an order of
> elementary affirmations that reflect realities inherent in the order of existence...This
> consensus is the institutional a priori of all the rationalities and technicalities of
> constitutional and statutory law. It furnishes the premises of the people's action in history
> and defines the larger aims which that action seeks in internal affairs and in external
> relations. [285]

This basic agreement within the culture is constitutive of any society that wants to achieve

human flourishing. These rational influences are passed down in society as its patrimony, as its

basic agreement of what is true, and it is these truths about which people in society can then

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[282] Ibid., 85.
[283] Ibid., 86.
[284] Ibid., 89.
[285] John Courtney Murray, *We Hold These Truths: Catholic Reflections on the American Proposition,* (New York: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2005) 27.

argue. It is an achievement both of reason and of experience. People must live together on the basis of these truths from generation to generation.

Barbarism threatens when people cease living together "according to reason, embodied in law and custom, and incorporated in a web of institutions" that reveal rational influences.[286] This reason manifests in morality, politics and religious convictions that guide society. When reason ceases to unite society under a common agreement, then society instead falls under the rule of force and fear, economic interests and technological domination.[287] Fundamental questions of values and reality then become secondary to faith in the democratic processes themselves: "all issues of human life…are to be regarded as, or resolved into, political issues and are to be settled by…majority vote."[288] Murray fears that the basic philosophical and moral differences at that point will no longer be publicly adjudicable because faith in reason will have collapsed.[289]

Many American thinkers believe that our society has reached the point at which the "social consensus" no longer functions as a unifying feature of public American life. Instead, any claims to transcendent norms are merely matters of personal decisions, and any attempt to impose such norms upon society is a breach of the secular nature of civil life. This "naked public square," as Richard John Neuhaus described it, must remain a space for people of all faiths and no faith.[290] Religious claims should remain privatized and separate from the larger social sphere. Metz and other critics of modernism, however, point out that economic concerns have silently become the prevailing ideology of Western society. The human person is merely an object, a cog

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[286] Ibid., 30.
[287] Ibid.
[288] Murray, 192.
[289] Komonchak, "Vatican II and the encounter between Catholicism and liberalism," 92.
[290] Ibid., 93.

in the machine of technological process. One's value is instead based upon how efficiently a person contributes to the goals of economic and technological "progress."

Pluralist, liberal democracy is now the primary political arrangement of societies around the world. Such regimes are built upon fundamental, non-negotiable values of human rights, equality, the rule of law and democracy. But because there is no longer a "social consensus" as Murray envisioned it, the justifying reasons for sharing these values are no longer common across individuals in society. The secularized culture actively resists any imposition of private moral or religious perspectives. There exists a plurality of these reasonable but incompatible perspectives, what John Rawls calls "comprehensive doctrines."[291] He argues that, because of the secularization of liberal democracies, the state must be neutral toward these perspectives. As long as these perspectives share fundamental liberal values, these individuals can still engage with one another from their diverse perspectives by forming together what Rawls calls an "overlapping consensus" of such comprehensive doctrines.[292] A Christian's comprehensive doctrine is much different than a Muslim's or an atheist's, but even though their justifying reasons are incompatible, the fact that each perspective can support a shared understanding of fundamental liberal values unifies society.

Even though Rawls uses the term "consensus," he means something very different from Murray's use of that term. Murray believed that the natural law that was knowable through human reason could form the basis of the social consensus in a pluralist society. For Murray, then, there would be basic agreement on the fundamental truths about reality and morality. Rawls

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[291] The quotation is from John Rawls, *Political Liberalism* (New York: Columbia, 1993), xvi, and is cited in McEvoy, 170, upon whom I base my summary Rawls.
[292] McEvoy, 171.

presents a much thinner view of consensus. He drastically limits the scope of the consensus to the fundamental liberal values of human rights, equality, democracy and the rule of law. He is indifferent to the substance of one's deepest convictions. Rawls only cares that there is a minimum set of shared values to ensure a minimal level of cohesion within society. Religious claims remain privatized and outside the realm of the public sphere. In *Gaudium et Spes*, the Council fathers will promote the alliance of the Church with these liberal values identified by Rawls. However, they will reject Rawlsian privatization of religion and instead promote the influence of the Gospel in the public sphere. At the same time, the Church will affirm the autonomy of the political sphere. Instead, they will embrace a dialogical model of communication that allows the Church to find its place in the world as an active participant in pluralist, liberal democracies.[293] This dialogical style will enhance the Church's credibility in a religiously diverse world and, in so doing, will enhance the Church's ability to bring the Gospel to bear upon Modernity's excesses, disvalues and false idols.

Niebuhr's typology is helpful in this analysis of the Church's reaction to these larger cultural forces. How one understands the connection between the natural and supernatural, between nature and grace, will influence how one views the relationship between faith and culture. If culture is corrupt at the ontological level, then the Church has a duty to resist it lest the Christian endanger his or her soul. In this light, the preservation of a *societas perfecta* of the church during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries makes sense. The Church rejected a culture that it saw as hostile, as taken over by "doctrinaire liberalism" that had no place for religious claims. However, as is the case with all sectarian groups, it did not wholly reject the culture. As Komonchak has observed, even while the Church was highly critical of the nation-state, it also

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[293] Ibid., 170.

borrowed many of its organizational features such as centralization and bureaucracy. For example, it defined the primacy of the pope at Vatican I in terms of modern monarchical models and revised its Code of Canon Law accordingly.[294] The Church formed an alternate society with an anti-liberal ideology. Catholic organizations and movements ensured that Catholics were immunized from the poison of a godless society. In its rejection of the surrounding culture, it was modeling part of the "Christ against culture" paradigm.

But the tendency of the community in the "Christ against culture" model is to believe that God is only present within the community and that the culture has been left to the powers of the antichrist. Culture in this model is irredeemably godless. But the Church rejected this extreme implication of the "Christ against Culture" model that separated God the creator from God the redeemer and sanctifier of creation. Instead, the Church could not help but approach the issue from the very Catholic "Christ above culture" paradigm. The Church retreated from culture not to abandon it but to repair it. By forming its own ideal society based upon the proper use of human reason, it could then create properly Catholic institutions: hospitals, schools, colleges, clubs and societies, youth organizations, Catholic-run businesses, and a "flourishing" Catholic press.[295] It formed a parallel society, modeled a great deal upon the surrounding culture, but a purified and properly religious one. It was in many ways the medieval society in miniature, a model of how the Church desired to remake the larger culture and also an instrument of that cultural rejuvenation. God was still present in God's creation. Human reason and its culture may have gone too far in one direction, but it was redeemable. Creation remained ontologically good

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[294] Komonchak, "Vatican II and the encounter between Catholicism and liberalism," 78.
[295] See Massa, 3.

and grace could still build upon nature. The Church's job was to sweep away much of the accreted cultural dust.

Typologies are necessarily artificial attempts to model ambiguous reality. The categories are leaky and no one person or school of thought completely fits within one type. This is certainly the case for the American Catholic Church preceding Vatican II. As de Lubac had already identified, much of Western culture had long ago separated the sphere of the supernatural from temporal concerns. The Church mirrored this dualism both in theological method and in theological content. Its theological dualism helped to place the Church in an adversarial role with culture, somewhere on Richard Niebuhr's spectrum between the synthesist model in the center and the exclusionary model at the far end. It also shared aspects with the paradox model. It believed that society was godless and had gone off the rails due both to the sins of liberalism and also of communism (which Pius IX had condemned as early 1864 in the encyclical *Quanta Cura*).[296] Both political systems failed because they placed reason above revelation and humanity above God. In its skepticism of reason and human progress, the Church shared much with Christian Realists such as Reinhold Niebuhr and Metz. Reinhold Niebuhr rightly cautioned that the Modern focus on reason, science and technological progress had not necessarily made the world a more humane place. Sin was always going to enter into social arrangements and culture would never be able to save itself. Society had rejected both the proper role of God and of God's Church. Human rationality, run amok, had led to anti-religious, relativistic chaos.

The Church could not accommodate a culture that had lost God's grace when it rejected the role of the Church as its guiding light at the French Revolution. But the Church did not hold

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[296] Massa, 60.

nature and grace in tension until the eschaton, as if in a waiting room (to use Metz's image).[297]

Like Metz, the Church desired to change the culture, to place the world back on the right track. But its preferred method of returning to medieval "Christendom" was no longer possible. The institutional Church of the 1950's was blind to many of the cultural and social changes that made such a synthetic model impossible. As Herberg points out, after World War II and the GI Bill Catholics became more educated, affluent and socially respectable. Catholicism was now a legitimate expression of the American Way of Life. The ghettoized, "father knows best" mentality of the "Christ above culture" no longer fit the social reality.[298] However, instead of moving more toward a paradox model, the Church instead embraced the conversionist model of "Christ the Transformer of Culture" at Vatican II.

It remains open question as to why the Church moved toward the conversionist model rather than the paradox model. One reason might be that the belief that "grace perfects nature" was so ingrained in the Catholic worldview that it did not allow for the metaphysical split between nature and grace that the paradox model presumes. In the paradox model, sin is so corrupting of creation that the Christian's ultimate hope is in salvation at the eschaton. Reinhold Niebuhr and others did seek to change the culture, but they were always aware of the limits of their attempts. Sin's corruption is too deep. It can ever be uprooted entirely in history. But in its attempt to take sin seriously, the paradox model often focuses almost completely upon Jesus' salvific action on the cross but pays little attention to the Incarnation and to Christ's resurrection of the flesh. There is a very sharp dualism between nature and grace, creation and salvation. However, for a Catholicism that grounds God's grace in the material reality of sacraments, such

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[297] Metz, *A Passion for God*, 84.
[298] Massa, 99-100.

a sharp distinction between creation and grace is much more difficult to maintain. To quote de Lubac again, "the whole natural order, not only in man but in man's destiny, is already penetrated by a supernatural which works upon him and draws him on."[299] God's grace is present in and through material reality, and even though we must take sin seriously, there is always room for God's grace to manifest itself in the world. The Christian realist is very pessimistic about sin's power in creation; the conversionist is very optimistic about God's power in creation.

Many of the documents at Vatican II can be used to support this argument that a "Christ the Transformer of Culture" model underlies much of the Church's theology behind its engagement with culture. For the sake of space, however, I will only focus on one of the most important documents, *Gaudium et Spes* (*GS*).[300] Immediately, *GS* rings with hope when it states at the beginning:

> The joys and hopes, the grief and anguish of the people of our time…are the joys and hopes, the grief and anguish of the followers of Christ as well. Nothing that is genuinely human fails to find an echo in their hearts.[301]

It places the Church in solidarity with global humanity. There is a broad and deep Christian humanism that consistently highlights the dignity of the human person and the importance of human freedom and responsibility: "nothing that is genuinely human fails to find an echo" in the heart of the Church.[302] This openness to humanity is further reinforced when the document declares that the Church's mission is "reading the signs of the times" and "interpreting them in light of the Gospel."[303] These examples show how differently the Church has positioned itself

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[299] Komonchak, "Theology and Culture at Mid-Century," 594, quoting Henri de Lubac, "Causes internes," 20.
[300] All citations from *GS* are by paragraph number from Austin Flannery, O.P, *Vatican Council II: The Basic Sixteen Documents* (Northport, NY: Costello Publishing, 1996).
[301] *GS*, 1.
[302] Komonchak, 82; *GS,* 1.
[303] *GS*, 4.

vis-à-vis culture since the anti-Modernist crisis. The Church no longer sees itself as an adversary of the surrounding culture. At the same time, it does not engage the culture wholesale, but discerns what is from God. This "reading of the signs of the times" sets up a dynamic between the Church and the culture that is appreciative of many cultural achievements. It does not presume that evangelization and cultural transformation only goes one way from the Church to the world.

One way this reciprocal dynamic is apparent is in the document's many uses of the word "dialogue" (*dialog)* and the word "conversation" (*colloquium*). Dialogue is a conversation of deep listening in which one party does not seek to dominate or win an argument. The goal in a dialogue is that each side of the conversation understands the other person's perspective. Dialogue assumes that both sides of the conversation can learn from each other. Similarly, in the dialogue between the Church and culture both sides have something to learn from each other. The Church hopes that through mutual understanding it can persuade individuals in the culture to embrace the values of the Gospel. At the very least, it can contribute to human flourishing by positively affecting the orientation and development of society as a whole.

The Church wishes to enter into "dialogue" with humanity in order to shine the light of the Gospel and to supply humanity with the "saving resources" of the Church.[304] Human achievements do not "rival the creator," but are "signs of God's goodness and the fulfillment of his mysterious design."[305] This is clearer later in the document, where the authors state that the Church can receive a "great variety of help" both from individuals and from society as a

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[304] Ibid., 3.
[305] Ibid., 34.

whole.[306] This help from outside the Church includes the concepts and languages with which to

adapt the Gospel message, experts in the world who can propose solutions to social problems and

aid from the modern "evolutions of social life" which help the Church to understand its own

constitution better.[307] In a remarkable statement, the authors declare that the Church "depends on

things outside itself" and especially upon people who contribute to the development of the

human community at the level of family, culture, economic and social life, and national and

international politics.[308] No longer is the Church its own perfect society, complete unto itself.

The Church needs the positive developments of culture which themselves are also part of God's

mysterious plan. At the same time, *GS* is not naïve about the role of sin in human culture. It

states, "good and evil intermingle," that "the whole of human history has been the story of dour

combat with the powers of evil."[309] Yet, at the same time, the Church accepts that "progress can

contribute to humanity's true happiness" even though these human activities must be "purified

and perfected" by the Paschal mystery.[310] The mission of the Church in the world is to work with

these good elements of the culture, to purify them by the Gospel and to direct them toward their

ultimate, transcendent end.

      The document also takes great pains to address the modern issue of secularization in the

culture. Rather than creating an either/or relationship to culture, the Council Fathers began to

make distinctions. A certain amount of autonomy was indeed part of God plan:

> Many of our contemporaries seem to fear that a close association between human activity
> and religion will endanger the autonomy of humanity….If by autonomy of earthly affairs
> is meant the gradual discovery, utilization and ordering of the laws and values of matter

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[306] Ibid., 40.
[307] Ibid., 44.
[308] Ibid.
[309] Ibid., 37.
[310] Ibid.

and society, then the demand for autonomy is perfectly in order: it is at once the claim of humankind today and the desire of the creator….because the things of the world and the things of faith derive from the same God.[311]

Rather than culture being all good or all bad, it is a mix. Freedom in the world and obedience to God are compatible because both are part of God's plan for creation.

The Council Fathers began to distinguish between "doctrinaire liberalism" which had no room for God and "political liberalism" which merely preserved the autonomy of the political sphere from the ecclesial: "the political community and the Church are autonomous and independent of each other in their own fields."[312] Thus, the Council refused to commit itself to any one culture, political, economic or social system.[313] The Church supports any social system that best promotes the Gospel's values in society. This acceptance of political liberalism would be fully embraced by *Dignitatis Humanae* (authored by John Courtney Murray). *Dignitatis Humanae* would embrace not only political liberalism but also religious freedom. Ratzinger, calling the document a "counter-syllabus" in reference to Pius IX's *Syllabus of Errors*, realized that this was the Church's repudiation of its adversarial stance during the long nineteenth-century.[314] At Vatican II the Church finally surrender its vision "Christendom" and had to find another way to effect cultural conversion in the light of the Gospel.

At the heart of *GS* is a belief in the perfectibility of culture and the human person by Christ. For this reason, "Christ the Transformer of Culture" model should instead be called the "Christ the Converter of Culture" model. Transformation can imply that what was present before no longer exists after a change. Conversion, however, is more about re-direction, taking what is

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[311] Ibid., 36.
[312] Ibid., 76.
[313] Ibid., 42.
[314] Komonchak, *Vatican II and the encounter between Catholicism and liberalism,* fn. 14, 97.

good and orienting it back toward God. Indeed, the concept of dialogue demands such a viewpoint because dialogue is not about the imposition of one's opinion by force or coercion. It involves mutual sharing, understanding, and deep listening.

The purpose of dialogue is to continue the incarnational mission of Christ. As James McEvoy points out, the theme of dialogue with the world was not new in *GS* but was first highlighted by Paul VI in his 1964 encyclical *Ecclesiam Suam*. Paul VI then pushed for the term's inclusion in the final drafts of *GS*.[315] In that encyclical, Paul VI states that just as God had initiated a "dialogue of salvation" with humanity, so too does the Church enters into a dialogue with humanity in order to continue that same work of salvation.[316] This incarnational theme is echoed in *GS* when it states that the Church wishes only to "carry on the work of Christ…who came into the world to bear witness to the truth…."[317] God the Father sent his Son to be with humanity and to continue the dialogue of salvation that began with Adam and Eve. This relationship of extended conversation and interaction with God is a major theme in salvation history and is a defining characteristic in Niebuhr's typology: "For the conversionist, history is the story of God's mighty deeds and of man's responses to them."[318] The conversionist model seeks the transformation of society, both of individuals and of institutions.

In the synthesist model, the content of history was relatively meaningless. It was the stage upon which the Church acted. The Church's mission was to apply the principles of the Gospel to social institutions and practices. Grace was extrinsic to creation, something added to nature in

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[315] McEvoy, 73, citing Ricardo Burigana and Giovanni Turbanti, "The Intersession: Preparing the Conclusion of the Council," *History of Vatican II*, eds. Giuseppe Alberigo and Joseph Komonchak (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2004), 527.
[316] Paul VI, *Ecclesiam Suam*, par. 70, August 6, 1964, http://w2.vatican.va/content/paul-vi/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_p-vi_enc_06081964_ecclesiam.html, accessed 18 April 2017.
[317] *GS*, 3.
[318] Ibid., 195.

order to bridge the gap between creation and God. If *GS* had only presented dialogue as a one-way conversation about what the Church could offer the world, then one could make the argument that the synthesist model of bridging the gap between creation and God was still partially in the background. Christendom's goal was the merging of the secular and religious spheres in order "bring the whole of humanity under the law of Christ."[319] During the anti-Modernist movement in the Church, the Church was reflexively against social developments because it already possessed the answers and only needed to impose them upon society.

This polemical stance is abandoned by *GS* for a greater appreciation of how God has always been responsive to humanity's particular historical circumstances. History is an intrinsic dimension of the way God and the Church acts in the world.[320] Just as the Incarnation is always particular to a time and place, so too must the Church continue to be responsive to humanity's particular circumstances and its particular questions. The emphasis in *GS* on "reading the signs of the times," which comes directly from John XXIII's 1963 encyclical *Pacem in Terris*, arises from a belief that history and grace are intrinsic to the nature and mission of the Church. "Reading the signs of the times" is a tool by which the Church incarnates itself into every culture. It is a method of interpreting historical events "in the light of the Gospel" in order to "answer the ever recurring questions which people ask about the meaning of this present life and the life to come" and to do so in "language intelligible to every generation."[321] God's grace is already present in the history of cultures. The Church desires to enter into that work and to work

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[319] Ibid., 64.
[320] Ibid., 77.
[321] *GS,* 4.

with that divine grace. The Church acts in history in this way because this is the way that God acts in history.[322]

De Lubac recognized how much secularization and theology had worked together to place God's grace outside of the everyday realities of history and human life. Such an ontological scheme easily supported a synthesist model in which grace built upon a graceless nature. However, as de Lubac pointed out, Aquinas never believed that there was a state of "pure nature" in which grace was not yet present. This theological insight undergirds the approach of the Council Fathers who affirm that social unity and cooperation are clear signs of the "faith and love" founded upon the Holy Spirit.[323] The Spirit of God is active and present in modernity, and it is present even before any action of the Church. Grace is an intrinsic part of creation and all human cultures. The Church's mission is not to add grace to a godless culture, but to respond to the grace already present.

Following Charles Taylor, McEvoy identifies three primary ways that the "social imaginary" changed during the transition from the medieval to the modern period: the rise of the modern economy, the rise of popular sovereignty (democracy) and the rise of the public (secular) sphere.[324] The bishops accepted these profound cultural changes, though not uncritically, at the Council. They admitted that the modern capitalist economy could improve the common good as long as human dignity continued to be respected and fostered.[325] They accepted democracy as "fully in accord with human nature," and they accepted the secular autonomy of the State as

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[322] McEvoy, 77.
[323] *GS*, 42.
[324] McEvoy, 82-83.
[325] *GS*, 63.

important in a pluralist society.[326] These were fundamental shifts away from the synthesist model and toward the new dialogical paradigm.

This paradigm hews very close to Niebuhr's conversionist model because it seeks to change culture from the inside. The Church's mission is to enter into a mutual dialogue with the culture, recognizing where the Spirit is already present, and to interpret particular historical circumstances in the light of the gospel. This paradigm presumes that both the Church and the world can learn something valuable from each other, and that God's grace is already present in both spheres. Rather than a conflictual relationship, the Church wants to work with the culture to build up God's kingdom both as a society and as individuals in need of their own personal conversion back to Christ. This conversion must be accomplished through persuasion and witnessing to the Gospel rather than through political and social control. Far from only critiquing modernity as a "dictatorship of relativism," the Church seeks to embrace the parts of modernity that are good (regulated capitalism, democracy, political liberalism) while rejecting those parts that harm the dignity of human beings (exploitation, oppression, ideological liberalism).

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[326] *GS* 75-76.

Conclusion, an "echo in their hearts"

The Church today cannot expect to return to a model of medieval Christendom. It also cannot embrace either extreme on Richard Niebuhr's continuum. It can neither completely withdraw from culture nor capitulate entirely to it. The Church must both be prophetic when necessary but also engage the culture. Niebuhr's "Christ the Transformer of Culture" (conversionist) model is the way that the Church has chosen to strike this balance. The other option of Christian Realism suffers from a dualism that separates the concerns of the individual moral life from the concerns of social ethics. In the paradox model, culture and every human heart is so corrupted by sin that the best one can hope for is an individual conversion. The sinner realizes that he or she must fall upon God's mercy. Any hope of moral change at the social level, however, is misguided at best. Laws and social order exist merely to tame the sinful impulses of humanity, not to build up the kingdom of God on earth. The Kingdom of God will reign when the sovereign Lord comes at the end of time with his unmerited salvation for humanity. For somebody like Reinhold Niebuhr, we must live in the tension between grace and sin, this world and the next.

GS, however, lifts up a Christian humanism that is both fully Christian and fully human. It is in the "mystery of the Word made flesh that the mystery of humanity truly becomes clear."[327] All human beings see their dignity and true vocation in the light of the Incarnation. And if the Incarnation is the ideal model of the human person, then it is also the ideal model for a Church that seeks to enter into the lives of all human persons. The Church offers Christ as the

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[327] *GS*, 22.

answer to their "recurring questions about the meaning of this life and the next."[328] By engaging the culture, the Church can both remain relevant and speak with a prophetic voice.

GS tries to remain realistic about sin while acknowledging the victory of the resurrected Jesus over sin and death. It points out the many challenges to human flourishing that the cultural changes have produced. Culture is always ambiguous and the same cultural achievements that the Council embraced also can be causes of great suffering in society: economic inequality, war, violence and consumerism. It recognizes that Jesus is both the Lord of creation and the Master who taught his disciples that the kingdom of heaven was at hand.[329] But it is precisely as the Risen One that Jesus has already conquered sin and death. Even though Christian hope looks forward to God's final victory over sin and death, "it is a mistake to think that...we are entitled to evade our earthly responsibilities."[330] If the resurrection of the flesh means anything, it means the salvation of humanity in the world and not from the world.

The contrast with Christian Realism must be nuanced. Proponents of the paradox model such as Niebuhr did not deny salvation in the present world—the human person is both always a sinner and justified. If anything, *GS* is far too optimistic about the cultural situation and ignores the limitations of human nature in transforming culture. Niebuhr is very clear that human self-interest and egoism will always prevent cultures from achieving perfect justice and perfect love. Christian Realism acknowledges the presence of sin in the world and in the human person. It emphasizes that complete salvation can only come at the eschaton when Christ is "all in all" and has fully conquered sin. There is not as much sense in the paradox model that God is already at

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[328] Ibid., 4.
[329] Mt. 3:2.
[330] *GS*, 43.

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work through the Spirit in creation. The Paschal mystery of Jesus' life, suffering, death and resurrection has already transformed the order of creation and thus gives hope for the world's further transformation in the future.

GS pushes a strong interaction with culture that comes from a desire within the Church to break out of its nineteenth-century isolationist mentality and to work across religious boundaries with people of other faiths or even with people of no faith. *GS* recognized that the Holy Spirit offers to "all the possibility of being made partners, in a way known to God, in the paschal mystery."[331] Christians are encouraged to "gladly cooperate" with others who are working toward the same objectives.[332] Once again, the Council calls upon the use of dialogue as individual Christians guide others in a spirit of "mutual charity" and with a "genuine concern for the common good above all."[333] In a pluralist culture, it is vital that the Church work with and reach out to people of other faiths and, especially, to atheists and agnostics who more and more make up a larger proportion of the population. They too are made in the image of God and must be engaged in a spirit of charitable dialogue.

Dialogue is the means through which a diverse people can develop a common life. Through this shared conversation people can identify their shared humanity and their shared identity that unites them into a community. They develop a common life that is necessary for the social cohesion which holds democratic societies together.[334] But because the Church has also granted autonomy to the political sphere, it can no longer promote this cohesion by determining

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[331] Ibid., 22.
[332] Ibid, 43.
[333] Ibid.
[334] McEvoy makes this point, 173.

social arrangements itself. It must instead become an active participant alongside others, contributing to the development of a pluralist social order.[335]

Pope Francis has promoted the deep listening that dialogue requires by urging that clergy (and really all Christians) live with the "odor of the sheep."[336] He has consistently encouraged the Church to go to the margins, to be a Church "that is poor and for the poor."[337] He keeps calling the Church to listen to the poor, to accompany the poor, to advocate for the poor. And he indicts the affluent world, such as when he declared in his apostolic exhortation, *Evangelii Gaudium*, that economies of "exclusion and inequality" kill people.[338] This is a prophetic and unpopular stance to take in the Western world where consumerism, capitalism and free markets are deeply rooted aspects of the culture. Such a culture anesthetizes its people to the suffering of the poor:

> The culture of prosperity deadens us; we are thrilled if the market offers us something new to purchase and in the meantime all those lives stunted for lack of opportunity seem a mere spectacle; they fail to move us.[339]

Francis is engaging the culture in the way *GS* laid out. He looks at the signs of the times, sees where the Gospel still needs to call the culture to repentance and speaks out against the sin. He is

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[335] Ibid.

[336] Pope Francis, Homily at Chrism Mass, March 28, 2013, http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/homilies/2013/documents/papa-francesco_20130328_messa-crismale.html, accessed 18 April 2017.

[337] Quoted in Joshua J. McElwee, "Pope Francis: I Would Love a Church that is Poor," *National Catholic Reporter* (March 16, 2013), https://www.ncronline.org/blogs/francis-chronicles/pope-francis-i-would-love-church-poor, accessed 18 April 2016.

[338] Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, November 24, 2013, http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20131124_evangelii-gaudium.html, accessed 18 April 2017, par. 53.

[339] Ibid., par. 54, cited in Kristin Heyer, "'An Echo in their Hearts': The Church in Our Modern World," *New Theology Review* 28.2 (March 2016): 36.

not withdrawing from the world, nor does he think action in this world is futile because sin is far too entrenched in society. He is calling the culture to greater conversion toward God.

This prophetic stance is particularly apparent around the issue of immigration. With the campaign and now election of President Donald Trump, the issue of illegal and undocumented immigration has come back to the forefront of the national consciousness. In 2013 Pope Francis presided at Mass at Lampadeusa upon an altar made of the wood of a ship that sunk while carrying immigrants across the sea. He attacked a "globalization of indifference" that ignores the plights of refugees and immigrants around the world.[340] He called Western cultures to recognize their complicity in this social injustice and to enter into a deeper solidarity with the migrants and refugees. This deeper solidarity, this ability to allow their suffering to "echo in their hearts," is a key part of this dialogue with culture.[341] True dialogue requires deep listening, discerning the signs of the times, reflection, repentance and action to build up a more just world.

The conversionist model is very different from the cultural model at the extreme end of Niebuhr's continuum. The cultural Christian uncritically baptizes whatever the cultural values are in the moment. In today's world, many Westerners easily ignore the victims of free-market capitalism and unequal trade policies. The conversionist Christian, however, must discern cultural values that are always ambiguous. Capitalism has lifted billions of people out of poverty since the beginning of industrialization. However, it has also led to the impoverishment and death of billions more. By itself, without the guidance of the values of a proper Christian

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[340] Heyer, 35.
[341] *GS*, 1.

humanism, society will not by itself seek the common good. Christians must be prophetic and stand up against the reigning cultural ideologies.

These cultural ideologies—in this case free-market capitalism and a general hostility toward immigrants—can become enshrined into the American Way of Life. Often, our "civil religion" can usurp our Christian values. A majority of Catholics who voted, after all, supported Trump despite his anti-immigration rhetoric.[342] Francis' decision to challenge American and European immigration policies is a direct attack upon this kind of capitulation to the culture. Like his predecessors, Francis accepts much that modernism has to offer, while providing prophetic critiques that may disrupt political harmonies.

Trump's general "America First" nationalism is an example of the potential danger of civil religion. Civil religion, as a unifying force within society, is a necessary component in any political community. Individuals must feel a common bond to each other if they are to live together productively and in peace. However, if Christianity does not challenge the reigning cultural values, then it too can easily slip into the "Christ of Culture" model that has been so problematic in American history. This was often the case for mainline Protestant churches whose religious rhetoric was so often used for political ends. America was God's chosen nation, a city upon a hill destined to spread democracy and freedom westward and then eventually around the globe. But as Pope Francis and others have pointed out, these cultural values that go unquestioned are often also the sources of great injustice and suffering.

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[342] The Pew Research Center exit poll data suggests about 52% of Catholics who voted supported Trump. Gregory A. Smith and Jessica Martinez, "How the Faithful Voted: A Preliminary 2016 Analysis," Pew Research Center, November 9, 20116, http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2016/11/09/how-the-faithful-voted-a-preliminary-2016-analysis/, accessed April 18, 2017.

H. Richard Niebuhr refuses to declare that one of his models is better than another. But it is clear that the conversionist model is the best model for today's liberal, pluralist society. The Church must constantly balance both being in the culture so that it can effectively speak to the culture with maintaining a prophetic tension with that culture. Such conflict will inevitably upset some members of the Church for whom the reigning cultural values are self-evidently correct. But the Christian's ultimate loyalty must be to Christ, not to any culture, political leader or social arrangement. The "Christ the Transformer of Culture" model is never at home with being wholly "inside" or wholly "outside" the culture.

Herberg realized that after World War II, the "American Way of Life" had become religiously pluralized. For the first time in the nation's history, Catholics were no longer fighting to be considered true Americans. The institutional Church had withdrawn into its own immigrant enclaves, but at the same time it shared the general cultural ideology that he labelled the "American Way of Life." This shared cultural understanding allowed the Church to be more and more integrated into the culture to the point that in 1960 the country elected the first Catholic President. By the end of Vatican II, the Church was no longer a nation of immigrants and, like their Protestant counterparts, Catholics had moved into the suburbs as their incomes increased.[343] The danger for the Church was no longer a sectarian withdrawal from the culture but rather a wholesale capitulation to it. The Church is called to be both "inside" the culture but also "outside," at the center but also at the margins of society. The "Christ the Transformer of Culture" model is one way the Church has chosen to engage liberal social order in a way that avoids both sectarianism and a complete loss of its distinctive religious identity.

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[343] Massa, 99.

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