Christianity and the Religious Culture
Theological Reflections on Sir Charles Snow's Rede Lecture

BRIAN HEENEY

SIR CHARLES SNOW's well-known Rede Lecture on *The Two Cultures and the Scientific Revolution*, delivered at Cambridge in 1959, has been the subject of heated and acrimonious debate, particularly since Dr. F. R. Leavis delivered his notorious Richmond Lecture in 1962[1] in which he attacked not only Snow's argument, but Snow himself.[2] But no part of the fame which Sir Charles' Lecture has achieved has been theological; and indeed the few words which the author devoted to "revealed religion" are not illuminating.[3] Nevertheless the main thesis of Snow's lecture, that modern Western society is tragically divided into two cultures, has genuine theological significance. The argument is best stated in the author's own words:

> I believe the intellectual life of the whole of western society is increasingly being split into two polar groups. When I say the intellectual life, I mean to include also a large part of our practical life, because I should be the last person to suggest the two can at the deepest level be distinguished. . . . Two polar groups: at one pole we have the literary intellectuals . . . at the other scientists, and as the most representative, the physical scientists. Between the two a gulf of mutual incomprehension—sometimes (particularly among the young) hostility and dislike, but most of all lack of understanding.[4]

These "two polar groups" Snow describes as "cultures."

Culture is a vague word and is used somewhat differently by everyone who takes it up. According to Richard Niebuhr it is the " 'artificial secondary environment' which man superimposes on the natural. It comprises language, habits, ideas, beliefs, customs, social organization, inherited artifacts, technical processes, and values."[5] Niebuhr goes on to describe the principal features of this "artificial secondary environment." Two are of special

1. *Two Cultures? The Significance of C. P. Snow* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1962).
2. "Snow is a portent. He is a portent in that, being in himself negligible, he has become for a vast public on both sides of the Atlantic a mastermind and a sage. . . . He doesn't know what he means, and he doesn't know he doesn't know. This is what his intoxicating sense of a message and a public function, his inspiration, amounts to." (*Ibid.*, p. 10.)
3. C. P. Snow, *The Two Cultures and the Scientific Revolution* (Cambridge: at the University Press, 1959), p. 6.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 3.
5. H. Richard Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture* (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1956), p. 32.

importance in considering the relationship between Christianity and modern culture.

Culture, in the first place, is *human achievement*: "the world so far as it is man-made and man-centred is the world of culture."[6] Culture is thus distinct from nature although rooted in nature. To quote Niebuhr again: "A river is nature, a canal culture; a raw piece of quartz is nature, an arrowhead culture; a moan is nature, a word cultural."[7] On the other hand culture is distinct from the activity of God (as this activity is understood in the Judaeo-Christian tradition) although acts of God towards man are always embodied in culture as well as incarnate in nature. Nature and Revelation are both *given*; culture is *man-made*. All three are intimately connected. I shall return to this point later.

The second important feature of culture is its *pluralism*. Snow's recognition of the fact of cultural pluralism is the central feature of his lecture, although his division of Western society into *two* cultures or "polar groups" is radically over-simple. Michael Yudkin, one of Sir Charles' more polite critics, observed this simplification. "Do those members of the traditional culture," wrote Yudkin,

> who do not specifically study literature, or music, or the fine arts enrich themselves by contact with them? Do they not, like the scientists, believe works of art to be irrelevant to their interests? There are, regrettably, dozens of cultures . . . even if the gap between the scientist and the non-scientist is probably the widest.[8]

Lionel Trilling made a similar observation in a recent article in the *Universities Quarterly*:

> Perhaps nothing in our culture is so characteristic as the separateness of the various artistic and intellectual professions. As between, say, poets and painters, or musicians and architects, there is very little discourse, and perhaps the same thing could be remarked of scientists of different interests, say biologists and physicists.[9]

Richard Niebuhr's remarks about cultural pluralism were made several years before Snow delivered his lecture. "No society," he wrote,

> can even try to realize all its manifold possibilities; each is highly complex, made up of many institutions with many goals and interweaving interests. . . . Culture is concerned with what is good for male and female, child and adult, rulers and ruled; with what is good for men in special vocations and groups, according to the customary notions of such good. . . . The values we seek in our societies and find represented in their institutional behaviour are many, disparate, and often incomparable, so that these societies are always involved in a more or less

6. *Ibid.*, p. 34.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 33.
8. F. R. Leavis and Michael Yudkin, *Two Cultures? The Significance of C. P. Snow, with an Essay on Sir Charles Snow's Rede Lecture* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1962), p. 34.
9. Lionel Trilling, "Science, Literature and Culture: A Comment on the Leavis-Snow Controversy," *Universities Quarterly*, XVII (December, 1962), 14.

laborious effort to hold together in tolerable conflict the many efforts of many men in many groups to achieve and conserve many goods.[10]

It would be a mistake to think that deep cultural divisions are modern phenomena, or that recognition of cultural pluralism is a contemporary development. It is no doubt true that the complexities of industrial society have produced more and different kinds of cultural division. But language is a basic element in culture; and recognition of the divisive effect of language barriers is very ancient. About a thousand years before the birth of Christ one of the writers of the book of Genesis not only observed the effect of linguistic pluralism, but ascribed this basic cultural fragmentation to God himself. According to the myth of the Tower of Babel God was distressed by man's pride in attempting to build a tower to the heavens:

> Then the Lord came down to look at the city and tower which human beings had built. The Lord said, "They are just one people, and they all have the same language. If this is what they can do as a beginning, then nothing that they resolve to do will be impossible for them. Come, let us go down, and there make such a babble of their language that they will not understand one another's speech."[11]

As we in Canada well know, the barriers of language still exist, although they have been much modified by popular education and simultaneous translation. But as Niebuhr, Snow, Yudkin, Trilling, and a host of others have noticed, cultural division not only persists but grows more complex as the age of specialization matures. We are all caught up in our specialties, unable to understand the specialities of others, and therefore prone to regard some at least of the other "cultures" with suspicion and resentment, or else to disregard them altogether.

In this complex pluralistic culture exists the Christian Church. To many people uncommitted by birth or tradition to the meaning and folk-ways of the Church, it appears to be but the principal element in yet another fragment of modern life, the religious culture. For the Church has all the characteristics of a culture according to Niebuhr's definition: it possesses distinctive "language, habits, ideas, beliefs, customs, social organization, inherited artifacts, technical processes and values." This identification becomes clear as soon as we examine the peculiar features of the Church culture in, for example, its Anglican form (the form which I know best): neo-Gothic church buildings; Elizabethan prayers; bad poetry set to bad music and played by a special ecclesiastical instrument; officials wearing quaint outfits in which the only gestures to the scientific age are the plastic round collar and the nylon surplice. The sermons and literature of the culture are encased in remote jargon and unimaginable imagery. This church culture is surely quite as incomprehensible to modern man as is the most erudite nuclear physics.

10. Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture*, p. 38.
11. Genesis 11:5–7.

To the ordinary plain man not already engaged by tradition or conversion in the Christian enterprise, caught up in a world of incomprehensible and often antagonistic specialties, the Church seems one among the many cultures. It is not clear to such a man what the religious culture *does*. The non-physicist is at least vaguely aware of the power of the world of physics for good or for ill; the non-electrician may appreciate his television set without knowing how it came to be or how to fix it; the non-teacher may be acutely aware of the value of education although he may find the jargon of the educationalist meaningless; the non-artist may enjoy a picture on his wall. But what good is the religious culture?

At one time, of course, the Church looked after education, poor relief, hospitals, old people, outcasts, and travellers. At one time the religious culture was in the vanguard of Western civilization as it overran dark continents. At one time too the Church easily and plausibly filled the gaps in secular knowledge with the word "God." But now the Church, by her own admission, is incapable of performing what have come to be thought of as the social functions of government. There are no more dark continents; and Church and State alike are wary of associating religion and power politics in the competition for spheres of influence abroad. Science has advanced so far that the scientist, Christian or otherwise, no longer has need of the God-hypothesis; indeed the Christian scientist rightly regards the introduction of God into the gaps of scientific knowledge as dishonest. On this point many theologians agree. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, for example, wrote in his cell in May 1944:

> Weizäcker's book on the world view of physics is still keeping me busy. It has brought home to me how wrong it is to use God as a stop-gap for the incompleteness of our knowledge. For the frontiers of knowledge are inevitably being pushed back further and further, which means that you only think of God as a stop-gap. He is also being pushed back further and further, and is in more or less continuous retreat.[12]

Stripped of its traditional social, imperial, and intellectual functions, what good is the religious culture now? The religious culture really confines itself to the practice of religion. The Church appears as a culture among other cultures; the religion it purveys is an optional interest for modern man, but not a very live or likely option. The Church as a sacred or religious culture seems boring and unimportant to many intelligent and critical people.

As a distinct element in modern pluralistic culture the Church has been subjected to searching scrutiny by an imposing array of critics. Matthew Arnold's century-old attack on the Victorian Nonconformist ethic in *Culture and Anarchy* exceeds most others in readability and wit. But more modern social critics are not lacking, and their conclusions are made plausible by their use of sociological techniques. To cite three examples, *The Suburban*

12. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison* (London: Fontana Books, 1959), p. 103.

Captivity of the Churches,[13] *Crestwood Heights*,[14] and *The Noise of Solemn Assemblies*[15] all contain examinations of the modern North American religious culture. Despite the contrary evidence of statistics,[16] such studies emphasize the insignificance of religion. In *The Causes of World War Three*, C. Wright Mills wrote:

To understand the pivotal decisions of our time, it is not necessary to consider religious institutions or personnel or doctrine as independent forces. Neither preachers nor the religious laity matter; what they do and what they say can be readily agreed with and safely ignored. By most of those who do matter, and those who do decide, it is taken as irrelevant Sunday chatter, or it is used as an instrument of their own altogether secular purposes. . . . The average ministerial output is correctly heard as a parade of worn-out phrases. It is generally unimaginative and often trivial. As public rhetoric it is boring and irrelevant. As private belief, it is without passion. In the world of the West, religion has become a subordinate part of the overdeveloped society. . . . With such a religion, ours is indeed a world in which the idea of God is dead. But what is important is that this fact in itself is of no felt consequence. . . . Whatever malaise and exaltation, whatever bewilderment . . . most men now . . . have little to do with religion. They are neither pro-religious nor anti-religious; they are simply areligious.[17]

Wright hints at why religion continues to thrive in America despite its intrinsic weakness. Peter Berger, a Christian sociologist and the author of *The Noise of Solemn Assemblies*, is more explicit:

Religion supports and guarantees the value system of the community, and "going to church becomes a kind of moral life-insurance policy." . . . The religious institution does not . . . generate its own values; instead, it ratifies and sanctifies the values prevalent in the general community. . . . Usually the most that can be said is that the church members hold the same values as everybody else, but with more emphatic solemnity.[18]

Theologians, of course, approach the religious culture from a different angle. But most of them are fully aware of the absurdity and futility of much in modern church culture; for they too buy and read paperbacked books by sociologists; and, more important, they too have eyes to see and ears to hear. The sociologists' job is to *expose* the nature of contemporary religious culture; the theologians' job is to *judge* the religious culture, to compare it with primitive Christianity, and to compare the biblical view of religion with the practice of religion in the contemporary church culture. The task of theological criticism is comparatively straightforward; the next step, theological reconstruction, is fraught with problems.

13. Gibson Winter, *The Suburban Captivity of the Churches* (New York: Macmillan Paperback, 1962).
14. J. R. Seeley, R. A. Sim and E. W. Loosley, *Crestwood Heights* (Toronto: Univ. of Toronto Press, 1956).
15. Peter L. Berger, *The Noise of Solemn Assemblies* (New York: Doubleday, 1961).
16. See, Robert Clyde Johnson (ed.), *The Church and Its Changing Ministry* (Philadelphia: The General Assembly of the United Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A., 1961), p. 1.
17. C. Wright Mills, *The Causes of World War Three* (London: Secker and Warburg, 1959), pp. 150f.
18. Berger, *The Noise of Solemn Assemblies*, pp. 40f.

Consider the Old Testament first. The anti-religious strain in the Old Testament prophetic writings is unmistakable and uncompromising. The judgment of God upon the peoples of Israel and Judah was quite as much a judgment of their genuinely religious culture as it was of their blatant idolatry or of their rulers. In Amos we find this oracle:

> I hate, I spurn your feasts,
> And I take no pleasure in your festal gatherings.
> Even though you offer me burnt offerings,
> And your cereal offerings, I will not accept them;
> And the thank-offerings of your fatted beasts I will
> not look upon.
> Take away from me the noise of your songs,
> And to the melody of your lyres I will not listen.
> But let justice roll down like the waters,
> And righteousness like a perennial stream.[19]

And in the first chapter of the book of Isaiah we find this:

> Of what use is the multitude of your sacrifices to me,
> says the Lord;
> I am sated with the burnt-offerings of rams and the fat
> of fed beasts;
> In the blood of bullocks and lambs and he-goats
> I take no delight.
> . . . Bring no more worthless offering: the odour of
> sacrifice is an abomination to me.
> New moon and sabbath, the holding of assemblies—
> Fasting and festival I cannot endure.
> Your new moons and your appointed seasons, my whole
> being hates;
> They are a burden upon me; I am weary of bearing
> them.
> So, when you spread out your hands, I will hide my
> eyes from you;
> Even though you make many a prayer, I will not listen.[20]

The judgment of the New Testament on the contemporary religious culture of Judaism is no less severe. According to the gospels Christ was in continual conflict with the religious element in Judaism, and indeed it was this religious element which bore the principal responsibility for his crucifixion. He who had broken the religious law by healing on the Sabbath, who had incurred the wrath of the Pharisees because he ate with "irreligious people and tax-collectors,"[21] was condemned by the religious leaders for undermining the sacred culture.

Of course the relationship between Christ and the religious culture into which he was born was far more complex than this. But it is true that Christ not only failed to conform to the religious culture of his time; he challenged it.

19. Amos 5:21–24.
20. Isaiah 1:11–15.
21. Mark 2:16.

With these things in mind modern theologians have produced some rather startling judgments of church culture. Over a century ago F. D. Maurice wrote to his friend Charles Kingsley concerning Froude's recently-published *Nemesis of Faith*:

The book is good for this, it brings us to the root of things, and there is nothing or there is God. It is good for this, it shows that God must come forth and do the work for us, and that all the religions we make for ourselves, whatever names we give them, are miserable mutilated attempts to fashion Him after our image. . . . What is his admirable sketch of Newmanism and its effects but a declaration of this truth? . . . Yes! *Religion against God. This is the heresy of our age.*[22]

Alec Vidler, after experiencing the American religious culture in 1947, compared it with the English church culture of Maurice's own time. "That religiousness," wrote Dr. Vidler of the Victorian church culture,

all that business and efficiency in organizing religious services and activities, served, I am sure, as a cushion against the hard impact of the living God. Our churches were like comfortable and well-managed religious clubs, in which we felt nicely at home, in which we felt good, in which we even wanted to be better.

In the middle of the twentieth century, while American religion flourishes, English religion is breaking down. And the breakdown, thinks Vidler, is wholly salutary.

As the cushion of religion, with which we were able to keep God at a respectable distance, collapses, we are beginning to turn to our Bibles in quite a fresh frame of mind, and its mighty words about the majesty and the wrath and the mercy of God, which in the old days of security we had got pleasantly muffled, are piercing us with their terror and their glory.[23]

Of course it was Dietrich Bonhoeffer who coined the phrase "religionless Christianity"[24] and who wrote of the necessity of separating the Christian Faith from what he described as its religious "garment"[25] (in Snow's terms, its religious culture). Bonhoeffer's few remarks have sparked great theological enthusiasm. In a publication of the World Council of Churches called *Laity*, for example, a Dutch theologian recently wrote:

Religion has no place in the baggage we take on our journey to "tomorrow". . . . Twenty centuries ago it was once for all left behind and became definitely outdated. After the Cross there was no more future for religion; it was filed in the Past Historic. It is utterly pointless to attempt to take it out again or try to refurbish it for further use. We can with a clear conscience disregard religion and any relics of it which still remain to remind us of it may be shown up as something which has really had its day.[26]

---

22. Frederick Maurice (ed.), *The Life of Frederick Denison Maurice* (London: Macmillan, 1884), vol. I, pp. 517f. (My italics.)
23. Alec R. Vidler, *Essays in Liberality* (London: S.C.M. Press, 1957), p. 172.
24. Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*, p. 91.
25. *Ibid.*, p. 91.
26. J. C. Hoekendijk, "On the Way to the World of Tomorrow," *Laity* (August, 1961), p. 12.

The upshot of all this theologizing is that Christianity cannot be equated with the religious or church culture, the religious fragment of culture, the distinct sacred element in our pluralistic culture. The observations of the sociologists (which really just fortify the observations of concerned non-sociologists) show that the attempt to contain Christianity within a sacred culture-fragment fails in one of two ways: it either blocks out the prophetic-critical element in Christianity, converting it into a pietistic expression of current social values, or it kills Christianity altogether because religion unrelated to life is essentially boring and purposeless.

It is probably true that few theologians are now willing to defend religion as good in itself, and that most Christian thinkers are seriously disturbed about the common identification of Christianity with the religious culture. But reconstruction is far more difficult than criticism, as the current debate centring on the Bishop of Woolwich's book *Honest To God* amply demonstrates. "If we reach the stage of being radically without religion," wrote Bonhoeffer, "what does that mean for Christianity?"[27] Bonhoeffer did not live to pursue the question. And the reconstruction of Christianity has not taken place. Partly, no doubt, this is because cultural religion (in North America at any rate) still thrives; partly, perhaps, it is because the issue is not quite so clear as the more extreme anti-religious Christian theologians have made out.[28]

Thus far the discussion of Christianity and the religious culture has been based on the fact of cultural pluralism, a characteristic of modern Western society stressed and popularized by Sir Charles Snow. At this point, on the threshold of a theological reconstruction that has not happened, it may be useful to consider another feature of modern culture which was mentioned earlier: its *man-centredness.*

Culture, wrote Richard Niebuhr, is "an artificial secondary environment" created by *human achievement.* This is true of the religious element in culture as it is true of the political or artistic or scientific elements. Religion is the response *of man* to a superhuman controlling power.

But Christianity claims to be something quite other than human achievement: something which is neither man-made nor man-intended.[29] Christ was *given* to man by God: an unsolicited and largely unrecognized gift. He was given to man, not in his religious culture alone, but to man in his wholeness, in all the fragmented parts of his culture. In Christ, in the Christian dimension *above* culture, we believe that mankind can be united at a supercultural level; mankind can achieve a unity which is impossible at the cultural level, at the level of human achievement. It is possible to do

27. Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*, p. 91.

28. William Temple made much the same point in far less extreme fashion. "The farmer," he wrote, "who cares for his land and neglects his prayers is, as a farmer, co-operating with God; and the farmer who says his prayers but neglects his land is failing, as a farmer, to co-operate with God. It is a great mistake to suppose that God is only, or even chiefly, concerned with religion." (*Daily Readings from William Temple*, comp. Hugh C. Warner (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1948), p. 177.)

29. Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture*, p. 34.

this, of course, only if we refrain from confining Christ to that shrinking fragment of human culture we call "religion."

Christianity is above culture; and to forget this in the enthusiasm of religious devotion is fatal. But equally fatal is the attempt to *leave* Christ above culture. Just as God became incarnate in natural man in order to be understood by natural men, so he must be found in culture, in all the various cultures and not just the religious one, if he is to be understood by cultured man. This discovery of Christ in culture *is* a work of human achievement: it is the work of every Christian in every age in whatever fragment of culture he finds himself, domestic, scientific, literary, professional, artistic, or technical. It cannot be done in church.

And yet a person consciously engaged in this difficult and exciting enterprise may feel himself drawn—perhaps for the first time—towards the corporate practice of religion itself. For the task of finding Christ in the fragments of human culture is an isolated and lonely job in the post-Christian world; and it is a very demanding job. The searcher may come to find in the Church not the irrelevant ecclesiastical Jesus he saw there before, but the focused presence of the Person he has begun to discover in his own bit of secular culture. For as this discovery occurs it brings with it a demand for response, a demand for repentance, thought, and action which can hardly fail to propel the discoverer towards the forgiving community, the grace-full community, however much that community may seem wrapped-up in obscure religious custom, devoted to odd practices, and separated from ordinary life.

In this way the Christian is forced back to religion, but with an entirely new perspective, possessed of a deep loyalty to Christ sustaining a critical, even sceptical, intellect free to exercise judgment on the religious culture itself. "Increasingly I hear Christians agonizing about their involvement in the churches," writes one such Christian layman:

> So often it seems to encumber their task in the world; so often the churches seem only to invite assistance in maintenance of the churches as principalities; so often the vast potential of the American churches is squandered officiously; so often the established leadership of the churches are preoccupied with ecclesiastical banalities. I am just about persuaded that there are only two places left to enjoy and serve God: one is when a Christian is, so to speak, alone in his life and work in the world, and the other is when now and then he gathers with other Christians to celebrate the presence of God which each and all of them have known in their common lives in the world, when he and the others gather at the Holy Communion.[30]

30. William Stringfellow, "Comments by a North American Layman," *Laity* (August, 1961), p. 20.