Religion and Culture: Theological and Sociological Reflections

It is just over 50 years since the publication of that seminal book by H. Richard Niebuhr, Christ and Culture. *The book has just been translated into Thai and to celebrate the fact, the Institute of Religion, Culture and Peace, Payap University held an international conference in Chiang Mai, northern Thailand in June 2007.*

Niebuhr's Themes

Niebuhr wrote *Christ and Culture* partly as a brief history of theology. He argues that one of the major underlying themes of theology through the centuries is the envisaged relationship between Christ and culture. Hence, theologies may be categorised in terms of the ways they deal with this theme. Niebuhr categorises various theologies under the following headings:

1. Christ against culture
2. Christ in culture
3. Christ above culture
4. Christ and culture in paradox
3. Christ transforming culture.

Perspectives of Religion and Culture in Asia

The conference had a broader approach than that of Niebuhr. It recognised that the issues identified in 'Christ and culture' apply to other religions as well. Hence the conference took place in the context of inter-religious dialogue. We listened not only to Christian theologians, but Buddhist, Islamic and Hindu scholars reflect on the theme.

There was a widespread feeling among the speakers that Niebuhr's categories are not adequate for contemporary societies. In most locations we are faced with the plurality of cultures and the globalization of cultural expression in ways that Niebuhr could not have imagined only 50 years ago. At one level, religion is always part of culture, but it relates to other aspects of culture in a variety of ways: sometimes positively, sometimes negatively.

The Buddhist and Islamic scholars had poignant arguments. The Thai Buddhist scholar, the Venerable Phra Paisal Visalo, reminded us that religion is being used to resist globalisation. People fear that their local cultures are being marginalised and that they are at risk of losing their identity. They appeal to religion as the basis for their uniqueness, and, sometimes, to justify their use of violence in the preservation of their culture.

He noted how religion is often used to sanction violence and the use of power by one group in attempting to control another. It is also used to support consumerism which contributes to cultural violence, he said.

Yet, religion also has the potential for developing a culture of non-violence and reconciliation. It can provide the basis for helping us see each other as brothers and sisters. The enemy, Visalo said, was not human beings, but our conceit and selfishness. Those who are committed to religion should unite in advocating compassion, courage and wisdom to overcome conceit, greed and violence. In doing so, religion must seek to dismantle the structural evils embedded in our cultures.

Maznah Binti Mohamad, a sociologist from Singapore, spoke about the current popularity of Islam and the development of Islamic states. She suggested that, in some ways, it was a response to the failures of colonialism. Colonialism had not produced good results. People were not confident that democracy was the answer. So often colonialism and the forms of democracy they had experienced had led to cultures of corruption and division in society where some suffered at the expense of others.

Islamic states and cultures were seen as bulwark against corruption, for Islamic leaders would be seen as being held accountable by their religious identification. People believed, she said, that Islam would lead to a more unified society, a better disciplined society, and a society which would give greater and more equitable benefits in terms of welfare to the members of society.

Christ and Culture

Prof Peter Phan, an American-Vietnamese theologian well-known to Australian Catholic theologians, pointed out that it is now clear we live in a post-Christendom era. The ideals of Christ relating to a predominant culture no longer make sense.

Prof. Peter Phan at the Religion and Culture conference

Phan also questioned the notion of 'Christ' in 'Christ and culture'. He argued it has become increasingly clear that every culture must develop its own Christology. Further 'Christ' must now be understood in the context of a plurality of religions. How can Christ be seen as the transformer of culture when the cultutre is predominantly Buddhist or Islamic?
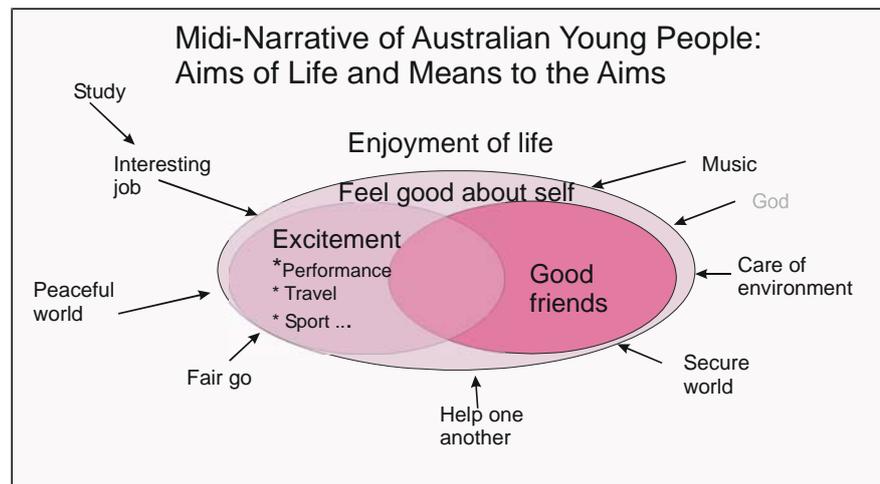
Phan suggested that, instead of the language of Christendom, we should use the language of the 'reign of God'. Christian mission must focus on being a 'witness to the reign of God' which is already present in the midst of people we serve rather than imposing a Christian culture. All places are imbued with God's presence. The task of mission is not to bring a new culture, but to name the reality of God's reign. Christian mission must take place through dialogue. In that dialogue we should recognise we all have 'multiple belongings', drawing from a variety of cultures and traditions, and, for many, even religions.

In this context, Phan suggested Christ might be seen as the *reconciler of culture*. Christ presents to us the option of being neither Jew nor Greek, neither free nor a slave, neither man nor woman. Christ can help us reconcile the categories of contemporary life, reconciled with one another and with God.

Culture and the Midi-Narrative

At the level of individuals and small communities, other issues emerge in examining the dynamic of Christianity and culture. My contribution to the conference was to compare Thai and Australian youth cultures and to reflect on the

Midi-Narrative of Australian Young People: Aims of Life and Means to the Aims

meaning of these comparisons for Niebuhr's work.

In a study of youth culture in the UK for the Church of England, Savage et al. develop the concept of a 'midi-narrative'. They distinguish 'midi-narrative' from 'meta-narrative'. The meta-narrative, they said, is a story on a grand scale about how the world works, but a midi-narrative is a story about personal life. In relation to the midi-narrative, the authors say:

The world view of our young people operates on a more modest scale of the here and now, rather than something beyond. Yet it is not an individualistic, mini-narrative. It is communal on a small scale (me, my friends, and my family): a midi-narrative (p.38).
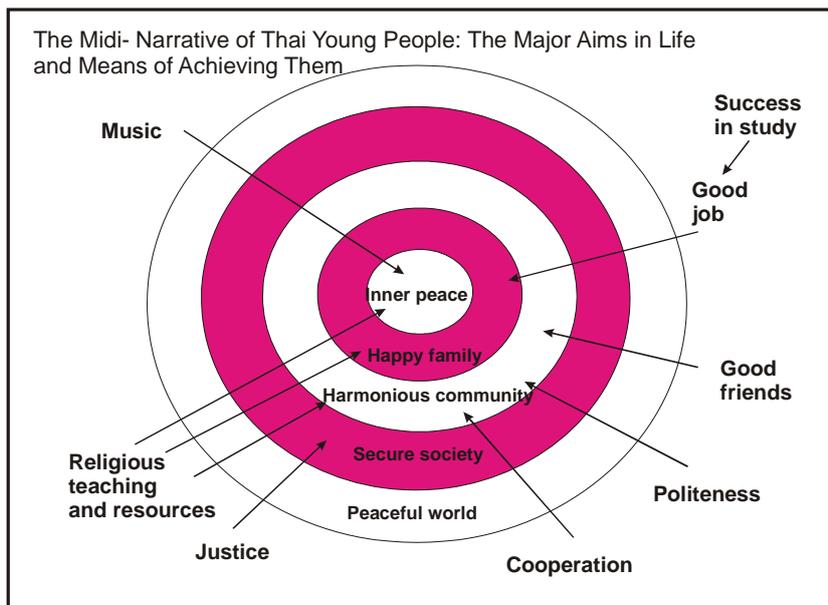
They summarise the midi-narrative for English young people in these ways:

My aim to be happy will be realized through me being myself, and connecting to others and the universe (without harming them). As I do this, I will create a meaningful and happy life. If we all make this individual effort (everyone's own responsibility), each person's happiness will sum into a corporate experience of unity and enjoyment.

... Bad things can happen in real life ... but each of us is surrounded by resources of family and close friends who love us unconditionally. The popular arts provide us with valuable resources: information, choice, creativity. (p.39)

The midi-narrative of young people in Australia can be drawn from the values they affirm. I think the midi-narrative is not just about personal life, but how personal life fits into the social context. In this country, the midi-narrative is fundamentally about enjoying life. Enjoyment means feeling good about oneself. It also means having enjoyable relationships with friends and family. Young people talk about the importance of hanging out with their friends. For many young people, enjoyment is not so much *what* one does but *who* one does it with. Having some exciting times in life, some memorable experiences, from time to time, is also a major component.

For most young people, the long-term means to ensuring that one has an enjoyable life is successful study and finding employment – with interesting things to do, nice people to work with, and enough time and money to do enjoyable things with one's friends and family.

The Midi- Narrative of Thai Young People: The Major Aims in Life and Means of Achieving Them

Christians, or the spiritual powers inherent in the Buddha images for the Buddhists. At times, many Thai people also turn to spirits for assistance. Special spirits such as Rama V and Kuan Yin have become important sources of assistance (Ekachai, p.189).

Theology of Christianity and Culture

Sociologically, it is inevitable that as children learn about religious faith, they will understand it in relation to other aspects of life and culture. Growing up we learn what the world is like through our parents. Many aspects of our world are contained in the very structures of our language.

Inevitably, religious faith needs to be understood from within a cultural framework. For young Australians, individualistic, consumeristic and experiential assumptions are deeply rooted in popular culture. Hence, there is a strong tendency for faith to be expressed within those. There will inevitably be a tendency for faith to be formulated in a way that makes sense within the midi-narrative. Indeed, unless it is seen as relevant to that midi-narrative, it is likely to be regarded as irrelevant or peripheral to personal life. Hence, in Australia, faith slips into the role of providing a resource which can contribute to an individual's life of enjoyment.

For young Thais, the dominant midi-narrative is about a peaceful and harmonious existence. Religion is seen as contributing to that by providing teaching which shows how one can have inner peace and happiness and how one can live life in harmony with others.

On the other hand, the traditions of faith cannot be reduced to any particular cultural expression.

In the short-term, when things do not go well, people turn to their friends and family. They also turn to music and sport, and sometimes, to God.

Young Australians are aware that their ability to achieve an enjoyable life is dependent, at least to some extent, on the society in which they live. Above all, they want a peaceful world. They also want a world in which people help each other. On a decreasing scale of importance, they also affirm the idea of a society in which everyone has a fair go, which is environmentally sustainable and secure.

It was interesting to see that the values that we asked about in the national study of young Australians were very similar whether they attend church or not. The only difference was in the importance of a spiritual life. One of the challenges for young people is that religious faith, spirituality and God are largely irrelevant to the dominant midi-narrative. Hence, many see them as largely irrelevant to their lives, or, at best, a resource that they can call on in times of need.

The dominant midi-narrative in Thailand is somewhat different from that in Australia. At the centre of the midi-narrative is a different understanding of enjoyment. It is not seen so much as something active or exciting, but for young Thais, the heart of the 'good life' is inner peace, a sense of inner harmony and well-being. The good life also means happy and harmonious relationships with one's family and the people around you, amongst whom you live and work. This sense of peace and harmony is achieved through respecting one's elders and those elders providing support. There is a similar relationship with employers. They must be obeyed and respected. On the other hand, they have a duty of care to and support for their employees.

Religion fits into the dominant midi-narrative. It is seen as providing explicit ways of life that can contribute to peace, harmony and happiness through practices such as making merit and meditating. Religion also provides rules for social interactions and shows how they can occur in a peaceful and harmonious way. Secondly, religion is seen as a powerful force for good, whether this be God for the

They always stand over against the culture. They become a means whereby a culture or any way of life can be critiqued. Hence, one also sees those who take faith seriously showing some differences in the ways they live from those who take it less seriously. In terms of young Christians, this is evident in relation to their higher ranking of 'spirituality' itself.

Among the Thai Christians, a higher rating was given to helping others while Buddhists gave a lower rating to excitement, possibly because of the influence of their religious traditions. On the other hand, there was a lot of commonality between their values. Both placed greatest importance on peace and harmony in the world, followed by society, and then among friends and finally in the self.

Returning to Niebuhr's categories, we find that Christianity in both Thailand and Australia reflects something of 'Christ in culture'. In each place, we find some evidence that the Christian faith is expressed within the culture, the values and the midi-narrative of the youth culture. At the same time, 'Christ' is sometimes rejected because the Christian faith is seen as foreign to culture. Those churches that are successful in attracting young people today are those which use contemporary cultural forms in their expressions of faith and worship.

While a comprehensive theological consideration of the relation of Christ to culture is beyond the scope of this article, the sociological data suggests there is a complexity of issues that need to be taken into account. To use theological language, if Christ is not presented in the popular idiom, in other words, 'of culture', then Christ will often be seen as irrelevant. He will be a stranger, an outsider, not touching the lives and the modes of expression of people – as is true for many churches around the world which have become frozen in a culture of the past.

On the other hand, Christ offers something new within the cultural context. He offers a new way of life, a new way of operating, a new relationship with God. To that extent, Christianity must always be 'over against culture', not in terms of the superficial forms of expression such as language and music, but in terms of the way of life.

Too often, I believe, the Church has sought to find its identity in its distinctive external forms, such as music, architecture and the format of church services, rather than in its ability to offer a new way of living within the culture. The essence of ministry, I believe, means turning this common pattern on its head. Christ appears within culture to offer an alternative way of life.

This dynamic is potentially true in all religions and cultures. Religions will inevitably be shaped by the cultures in which they find themselves. Indeed, they must relate to the ways of life and the goals of life, in order to be seen as relevant. Cultural forces will always seek to morph the religion in such a way that the religion is entirely absorbed by the culture. Yet, religious traditions transcend every cultural expression. As such, they provide a basis for critiquing culture and offering alternative ways of life.

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References:

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NOTE: It is expected that plenary presentations from the Religion and Culture Conference will be placed on the website: http://isrc.payap.ac.th/conference2007.