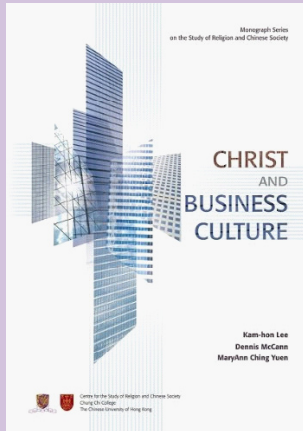


CHRIST AND BUSINESS CULTURE

By Kam-Hon Lee, Dennis McCann, and MaryAnn Ching Yuen



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A Book Review by Kwok Tung Cheung

The authors of this volume suggest that a behavioral typology based on a view of Christian relational ethics and negotiation styles may enable Christian executives to reflect critically on ethical behavior and guide their thoughts toward more effective responses to ethical challenges.

Integrity is the foundation of business. But in a marketplace that is highly competitive and sometimes hostile to moral aspirations, how are Christian executives to remain faithful to their Christian values? *Christ and Business Culture* by Lee, McCann, & Yuen reports the results of a research project that spanned more than a decade. It is a very interesting and valuable book. The analysis is derived from the interviews of 119 Christian executives in Hong Kong with respect to 539 critical incidents that illustrate how they responded when they sensed their integrity was on the line. Of particular challenge are those from mainland China, to which Hong Kong, a former British colony, was handed back in 1997.

The timing of this study means there were apparent British influence and Western values behind the business practices of the interviewees, some of whom also received their education in the West before their return to Hong Kong. Meanwhile, the China market had been opening up and, unfortunately, it came with widespread corruption. This created ethically challenging environments for the interviewees who have Christian values. In this sense, this book can easily prove to be the best of its kind for Western Christian readers who want to do business in China or to know what is going on there.

The study makes use of Niebuhr's framework on Christ and culture¹, and also the Negotiation Styles Framework in the negotiation literature (cf. Lewicki, et. al.²). When putting these two frameworks together, the

authors claim, the new integrated framework enabled them to understand the Christian executives' responses to ethical challenges and their implications for profitability.

Five behavior types are identified in the Negotiation Styles: Avoiding, Yielding, Integrating, Compromising, and Dominating. Corresponding to them are the five types in the Niebuhr typology: Christ against business culture, Christ of business culture, Christ above business culture, Christ and business culture in paradox, and Christ the transformer of business culture. Interestingly, the authors treat both as virtually equivalent and the book is predominantly written in terms of Niebuhr's typology after Chapter 6.

In addition, the authors would go beyond the empirical or descriptive framework to draw normative implications, such that the book may serve as "an empirical study as well as a pastoral guidebook, both academic and practical" (p. 20)³. Therefore, Chapters 5 and 6 are on the findings of positive science and Chapters 7 to 11 on the normative reflection for each type.

The theoretical construct of the book, however, has obvious drawbacks. First, it is not clear that negotiation styles can exactly map onto Niebuhr's typology. For example, Yielding is mapped onto Christ of culture. The concept of Yielding implies that the agent knows that some practice is not to his/her best interests but he/she still accepts it. Christ of culture, quoting Niebuhr in the book, is "recognition of a fundamental agreement between Christ and culture" in which "Jesus often appears

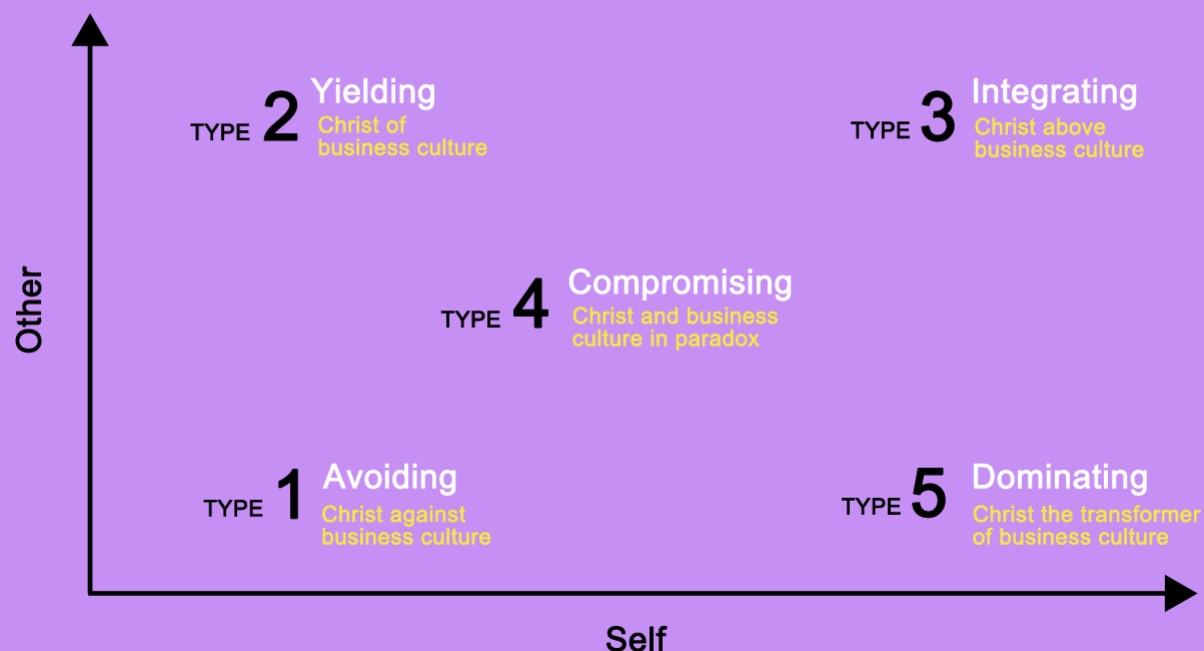
as a great hero of human culture history” and in Jesus “the aspirations of men toward their values are brought to a point of culmination” (p. 41). To Niebuhr, Christ and culture are thought to be so converged that, roughly speaking, you are very ethical and Christian when you follow the practices in the culture. It does not therefore make much sense to say that the Christian businessperson in this case “yields” to the business culture, as if some Christian ideals were sacrificed.

A similar concern is found in Type 5, Christ the transformer of culture/Dominating. In this idea, human institutions and customs in a culture are seen as fallen and in need of redemption. Human culture should become “a transformed human life in and to the glory of God” (p. 196). If the fallen business culture is transformed for the glory of God, it will be restored to its original state of creation without evils like greed and injustice. But the idea of Dominating in negotiation is that the two parties wind up in a win-lose situation. Why is the business culture losing when it is transformed and restored to its original beauty, e.g., market efficiency, equitable distribution of resources, etc.? Negotiation theory sees the loser as one of the negotiating parties but not the system. In this sense it cannot capture the idea of Christ the transformer of culture.

This raises the question about the nature of business culture. In the discussion about Christ and business culture, does business culture refer to the essential practices in free market capitalism, or the particular customs and practices in dealing with, e.g., corrupt Chinese, which is a major theme of the book? These two may invite totally different treatments. As Logue shows, belief in free market capitalism may serve as grounds against bribery, primarily because bribery hurts market efficiency⁴. Accordingly, if a Christian businessperson is convinced that free market capitalism is the best way to do business and to promote common good in the world, she would refuse to pay bribes. On the one hand, this is Type 1, Christ against culture/Avoiding, but on the other, this means following the laws and regulations for free market capitalism, which should then be Type 2, Christ of culture/Yielding!

Another confusion of business culture is in Type 5, Christ the transformer of culture. The culture that is being transformed or converted here should be human institutions and customs in business. Therefore, we should expect the stories to have the following two elements: (a) the interviewee insists on doing what Christian ethics requires, and (b) the institutions and customs in business in question are eventually redeemed or

Integrated Framework



Source: Kam Hon Lee. Illustration by See-ming Lee/SML Universe

improved. However, more than half of the examples in Chapter 11 on Type 5 lack the second element.

For example, the first incident reported is about a Christian who decided not to give bribes and instead to rely on God's providence, which at the end, he believes, protected him from becoming less competitive. There is no indication that he attempted to change the corrupt business practice and culture. In another example, the authors told of a Christian businessperson evangelizing in China. Yes, there is conversion, but not a conversion of the business culture.

A final issue with the theoretical framework relates to the authors' claim that there is no priority among the five types of responses, that they are "equally effective witnesses for Christ" (pp. 36-37, 258), and "the same Christian executive may make different choices when handling different incidents" (p. 256). In the concluding chapter, the authors even give an example of the same person, a toy manufacturer, displaying at various times all five different responses when interacting with the same party, a customs office in China (pp. 256-258).

According to Niebuhr, different types in his analysis are characterized by different schools of theological thoughts in church history. It is not easy to judge all of them. Therefore one cannot say, as the authors claim, "This is the Christian answer" (p. 231).

Given that the Niebuhr typologies have been turned into types of responses pertaining to different situations, the book's approach appears capricious and borders on situational ethics.

The toy manufacturer, without giving Christian ethics any serious thoughts, acted in a way he thought to be a faithful response to a situation. That may be the

real reason why he switched among types when expedient. This probably is not the reason that Niebuhr had in mind for choices among his typology, although he believes that a theologian may display some degrees of different types of behavior.

In fact, that a person easily changes behaviors under different situations could be an indication of a lack of character, or spiritual principles in this case. Some scholars have argued that the concept of character may have no scientific ground in social psychology⁵. Many studies have shown that a person may act in certain ways due to implicit situational cues, regardless of their usual characters.

It may be helpful to point out that a study similar to *Christ and Business Culture* has been done for American Christian (Evangelical) CEOs by Nash⁶. Nash classifies the CEOs into three types, namely the Generalists who think that there is no conflict between faith and business practices; the Justifiers who think that being religious and ethical is always good business; and the Seekers who think that there are such conflicts and they seek to find solutions all the time. Nash also concludes that there is a covenantal ethic displayed by many of these CEOs. Though her approach was less sophisticated than Niebuhr's typology, the line-up of the stories in the classification is more convincing.

The concerns with the theoretical approach aside, *Christ and Business Culture* provides a unique window for many to learn about the day-to-day struggles of Christian businesspeople in Hong Kong and China. The stories speak for themselves and many in business can relate to what is being said in the book. This is a book that will appeal to Christians, whether they are scholars or in the marketplace.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Kwok Tung (Daniel) Cheung teaches in the Department of Philosophy, University of Dayton, Ohio. A Hong Kong native, Dr. Cheung specializes in business ethics and epistemology, with interests in metaphysics, ethics and Christian philosophy. Dr. Cheung received his Ph.D. from Indiana University, Bloomington.

Notes

¹ H. Richard Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture*. New York, NY: Harper & Brothers. 1951.

² Roy J. Lewicki, David M. Saunders and John M. Minton, *Essentials of Negotiation*, second edition. Boston: Irwin/McGraw-Hill. 2001.

³ All page numbers cited refer to *Christ and Business Culture*.

⁴ Niles C. Logue, "Cultural Relativism or Ethical Imperialism? Dealing with Bribery Across Cultures" (2005). Accessed <http://www.cbfa.org/Logue.pdf>

⁵ See for example, John Doris, *Lack of Character: Personality and Moral Behavior*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002, and Gilbert Harman, "No Character or Personality," *Business Ethics Quarterly* 13(1) (2003): 87-94.

⁶ Laura L. Nash, *Believers in Business*. Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson. 1994.