

The wrong preferential option: Resident Aliens at 25

by [Miguel De La Torre](#) in the [October 1, 2014](#) issue

*In 1989, Stanley Hauerwas and William H. Willimon sparked a lively debate about church, ministry, and Christian identity with their book Resident Aliens: Life in the Christian Colony. Twenty-five years later, we asked several pastors and theologians to offer their perspective on the book and its impact. (Read all [responses](#).)*

To be a resident alien is to live on the border. Borders signify the existential reality faced by those, like myself, who have been resident and illegal aliens. Regardless of where we live, how long we have lived there, or how we or our ancestors came to find ourselves within the United States, we live on the borders. To be a resident alien in the United States is to constantly live on the border between power and disenfranchisement, between privilege and dispossession, between whiteness and color. In this in-between space of borders, we confront economic exploitation and political marginalization.

As one who once actually was a resident alien, I wonder if Hauerwas and Willimon have any clue as to what it means to occupy that space. They do violence to real resident aliens like myself when they appropriate our social location without recognizing how the foreign Constantinian Christian culture from which they feel alienated is specifically constructed to privilege the particularity of their race, class, and gender. They romanticize “not belonging” to a dominant culture that historically and continuously revolves around them. Those in the center who self-identify as aliens of the center are able to confuse an unapologetic conviction of the truth of the Christian narrative with a Eurocentric interpretation of what that truth might be.

While those of us who pursue a liberative Christian approach intently listen to the matrix of marginalized voices who occupy the space of alien in a postmodern world, the authors of *Resident Aliens* wish to return us (despite their protestation) to a sectarian premodern world which protects their place while providing religious justification for ignoring the gospel’s plea to engage in social justice with those who are the real resident aliens. The authors advocate for a moral vision that provides a virtuous way of conduct which ignores complicity with the social structures that cause oppression. This complicity is further masked through an ecclesiology that

makes a preferential option for the church, rather than for the aliens.

This vision of church fails to deconstruct the power dynamics embedded in the type of church attended by Euro-Americans of relative privilege like the authors, thus providing little if any hope for the salvation of the dispossessed, disinherited, and disenfranchised—the real resident aliens. Not to engage in the praxis of transformation is a choice to reinforce the status quo which benefits the authors.

If, as Hauerwas and Willimon claim, “the political task of Christian is to be the church rather than to transform the world,” then all marginalized groups, not just us resident aliens, need to be very concerned, for this is a church whose actions have historically accommodated and justified every immoral form of human exploitation, from massacres to war, from slavery to colonialism. We are called instead to a praxis that challenges, subverts, or undermines the oppressive structures reinforced by the very same Eurocentric Christian vision the authors want us to adopt.