

From world war to cold war, liberalism to liberationism

by [Gary Dorrien](#) in the [June 16, 1999](#) issue

Building a Protestant Left: *Christianity and Crisis Magazine, 1941-1993.*

By Mark Hulsether. University of Tennessee Press, 416 pp.

In 1941, ten months before America entered World War II, Reinhold Niebuhr launched *Christianity and Crisis* magazine for the specific purpose of attacking the near-pacifist anti-interventionism of the *Christian Century*. Having made his reputation in the 1920s as the *Century's* fount of social and political opinions, Niebuhr set out to create a mainline Protestant alternative to the *Century*. For the next 25 years, *C&C* defined the politics of a dominant Christian realism in American Protestant ethics, principally through the voices of Niebuhr and John Bennett. Niebuhr and his associates made the case for a "vital center" politics that was strongly anticommunist, stoutly committed to an expanding American welfare state, and decidedly harder-edged than the social gospel liberalism it dethroned.

C&C wore its establishment credentials proudly. It identified with the northeastern mainstream of the Democratic Party. It invoked the "we" of mainline American Protestantism interchangeably with the "we" of America. Niebuhr towered over the field of Christian ethics, advised government officials, and appeared on the cover of *Time* magazine.

In the 1960s, however, with America's debacle in Vietnam and the rise of powerful liberationist and protest movements, Christian realism lost much of its prestige, and *C&C* struggled to cope with the times. Niebuhr opposed the war but also disliked the new social movements, which denounced the cold-war legacy of Christian realism. A group of right-leaning Niebuhrians led by Paul Ramsey, Ernest Lefever and Michael Novak became neoconservatives, condemning the protest movements for their Third Worldist anti-Americanism and cultural radicalism. One group of *C&C* insiders led by Bennett and Roger Shinn sought to accommodate Christian realism to the moral and political concerns of the new social movements. On their left, *C&C* insiders such as Harvey Cox and Richard Shaull increasingly argued that the future belonged to liberation theology.

By 1970 it was clear that the future of *C&C*, at least, belonged to advocates of liberation theology and their allies. Under a succession of editorial teams, *C&C* protested that the realities addressed by Niebuhrian realism had been defined almost exclusively by white male government-connected elites. The new *C&C* advocated democratic socialism and nuclear disarmament; it sought to make sense of the world from the perspectives of oppressed blacks, women, Third World liberationists and their allies. In the 1980s, *C&C* increasingly featured liberationist writing by gays and lesbians. Long before then, Niebuhr's family had insisted that his name be removed from the journal's masthead.

The later *C&C* persistently sought to bring to national and world issues a prophetic religious perspective from "the underside of history." Managed by a professional journalistic staff in its later years, it was chronically short on subscription and advertising revenue and often short on morale. In 1993, a year after Mark Hulsether completed his doctoral dissertation on the magazine's history, *C&C*'s directors and staff announced its termination, perhaps prematurely.

Building a Protestant Left is an updated version of Hulsether's dissertation. Trained in theology, American studies and cultural criticism, Hulsether presents a detailed and discerning account of *C&C*'s establishment-realism years, its redefinition in the 1960s and its subsequent career. He clearly establishes his own leftist perspective on this story, but reports that his respect for the accomplishments of Niebuhr's generation grew with his exposure to them. Though he emphasizes the differences between the magazine's early establishment-realism and its later postmodernism and liberationism, Hulsether also recognizes, to his credit, that *C&C* maintained certain continuities.

Bennett is the key figure of continuity. Hulsether notes that Bennett's steadfast commitment to social justice, his internationalism, and his openness to multiple understandings of "realism" marked *C&C* at its best. He also allows that these qualities make it impossible to assess the magazine's career without resorting to its trademark "on the one hand . . . on the other hand" mode of expression, which Hulsether conveniently labels the "X-hand, Y-hand" technique. The Niebuhrians were too deeply dialectical and ironical to submit to one-dimensional categorical judgments of any kind.

Hulsether's judgments are amply supported and well argued. He gives a thorough description of the magazine's early career, emphasizing its identification with the

Democratic Party establishment and its very cautious support of the civil rights movement. He provides a good account of the magazine's internal debates in the 1950s over American-Soviet coexistence and the ethics of nuclear deterrence, which were warm-ups for the schisms of the 1960s. Closer to his own experience, he adeptly handles the most complicated part of the narrative, devoting successive sections to the magazine's coverage of feminism, sexual ethics, gay rights, black theology, Latin American liberationism, postmodernism and neoconservatism. Hulsether gives special mention to Cornel West's wide-ranging cultural criticism as well as the magazine's important debates on racist feminism, in which he strongly suggests that Susan Thistlethwaite and Delores Williams overplayed the charge of racism.

Hulsether's closing section is likely to stir the most reaction. Why did the magazine's last caretakers put it to death? Did C&C have to die in 1993? Hulsether's answer, after years of studying "X-hand, Y-hand" editorials, is yes and no. C&C could have survived, but not without serious changes. Unlike the *Christian Century*, C&C had no chance of living off its subscription and advertising revenue.

Hulsether rounds up all but one of the magazine's related problems. C&C never found a major benefactor, its income from advertising dropped to 3 percent at the end, it had little foundation support, it had no formal connection to an academic institution after it separated from a reeling Union Seminary in the 1970s, it waxed hot and cold in the fund-raising department, it suffered debilitating staff breakups in the 1960s and 1980s, its rent and postage costs soared in the 1990s, it maintained a professional staff of nonacademics whose salaries consumed 45 percent of the budget, it lost much of its local constituency with the downsizing of church bureaucracies in the 1980s, it made little use of desktop computers, and, in its last years, the contents of the magazine became less interesting, with dumbed-down articles that bored much of its traditional academic and clerical constituency.

Besides voicing a strong assent to the last problem, I would add to the list one item that Hulsether in his exhaustive study never mentions: C&C became virtually incapable of speaking about personal faith. The magazine was always highly politicized, of course; through most of its career, C&C ran the risk of seeming an inferior version of the *Nation*. In its last years, however, it was. Aside from two or three articles by Dorothee Sölle, I cannot remember an article in the later C&C that I found spiritually inspiring.

The very idea of writing about personal faith became something to sneer at in the magazine's prevailing culture. This was not an inevitable byproduct of its radical turn. *Sojourners* and the *Witness* are no less radical than the later *C&C*, but both are much more religious. There was a time when *C&C* staffers could plausibly object that their magazine was more academic, but not in its later years. On one occasion I wrote an article for *C&C* on family politics that drew upon recent work in object-relations psychology and spiritual theology. Shortly before it was published, an editor called to inform me that it would not contain, "of course, all that stuff about God."

Its various problems notwithstanding, *C&C* was a treasure. The magazine's burial left a void that I, along with Hulsether, keenly regret. His account of its demise heightens my sense of grief. *C&C* was chronically in crisis, and Hulsether rightly notes that it stayed alive for a half-century mostly on the strength of various editors' devotion to it, notably Bennett, Shinn, Wayne Cowan, Robert Hoyt, Margaret O'Brien Steinfels and Leon Howell.

Judging from Hulsether's account, however, it is hard to avoid the impression that *C&C*'s last team of professional staff overidentified the magazine with themselves, and that its directors either allowed themselves to be rushed to judgment or overidentified the magazine with its Union Seminary-Interchurch Center locale, or both. *C&C* ended suddenly, with barely any warning. A single "emergency appeal" for money was issued on March 2, 1993, by Leon Howell, who had already informed the magazine's executive committee that he planned to retire. *C&C* folded less than a month later.

Its caretakers ruled out the possibility of changing from a (generally) biweekly to a monthly format and gave little consideration to structural changes of any kind. No serious effort was made to acquire a new institutional sponsor, though the magazine obviously needed one. No serious effort was made to downsize the staff and shift some responsibilities to an editorial collective, though *C&C* clearly could not afford a professional staff that consumed nearly half the budget in salaries. Hulsether reports that *C&C*'s inflexibility on the latter score ended its only serious negotiation with a prospective sponsor—a seminary that made a curtain-call offer.

For its first 30 years, like many journals, *C&C* stayed in business by rooting itself in an academic institution and conducting its editorial business as an editorial collective. In the age of desktop publishing, a bit more flexibility and imagination

surely could have extended the magazine's second life. Even at the end, *C&C* had a stable core of 13,000 subscribers. One doesn't have to be as despairing as Hulsether about the current situation to recognize that the fields of contemporary theology and social ethics are poorer today without it.

Hulsether notes that various neoconservative journals, such as *First Things*, employ Niebuhr's strategy of working within the prevailing system, but in their case, this requires trashing Niebuhr's ideals of social justice. For liberals "from the more staid wing of *C&C*'s old constituency," he observes, the *Christian Century* remains a viable option. For counterculturalists "with relatively low demands for academic sophistication," *Sojourners* fills a need. For others, he concludes, counting himself, the religious landscape is barren: "Who can blame them for defecting to religious apathy or turning toward various academic venues less engaged with public religion?"

On that very *C&C*-like note, *Building a Protestant Left* ends. No Protestant left is being built. Hulsether looks back on the *C&C* of the 1980s with the kind of nostalgic glint that many Niebuhrians reserved for the *C&C* of the 1940s. To his credit, his account is sufficiently appreciative to make both reactions plausible. *Building the Protestant Left* is a thorough reminder of the complex intellectual legacy that *Christianity & Crisis* sustained in its unlikely career.