A contested classic: Critics ask: Whose Christ? Which culture?

by Peter R. Gathje in the June 19, 2002 issue

A book that one can barely escape reading on the way to earning a seminary degree is *Christ and Culture*, by H. Richard Niebuhr. Published in 1951, the book quickly became a classic. Its categories—such as "Christ against culture" and "Christ of culture"—have ever since been familiar reference points in the field of Christian ethics and in debates about how Christians and the church should engage matters of politics, society and culture.

The book has also had its vigorous detractors, however—especially of late. Critics argue that though Niebuhr presents with apparent neutrality a typology of five ways that Christians have related to culture, he subtly asserts his own liberal Protestant bias.

A sign of the polemical status of the book these days is James Gustafson's preface to the 50th-anniversary edition (published by HarperSanFrancisco). Gustafson, a leading Christian ethicist and former student of Niebuhr's at Yale, uses the occasion to scathingly attack those who have found Niebuhr's typology flawed or dangerously misleading. Drawing Gustafson's ire are theologians Stanley Hauerwas and William Willimon, church historian George Marsden, and the late Mennonite theologian and ethicist John Howard Yoder.

Yoder laid out the fundamental critique of Niebuhr in an unpublished essay of 1958 which circulated for years as a sort of underground document. (It was finally published in 1996 in *Authentic Transformation*: *A New Vision of Christ and Culture*, edited by Glen Stassen et al.) Hauerwas, Willimon and Marsden all draw upon Yoder's critique. Gustafson, for his part, says Yoder's essay "is laced with more ad hominem arguments and fortified with more gratuitous footnotes than anything I ever read by scholars in the field of Christian ethics."

Gustafson and other supporters of the book claim that Niebuhr's description of five types of Christian ethics elucidates various approaches to the "enduring problem" of

how Christians relate their loyalty to Christ to their other loyalties. In this view, *Christ and Culture* provides a straightforward introduction to the various approaches to Christian ethics and theological sources.

Niebuhr leads readers through the vastness of Christian history and theology by sketching five types that are compared in terms of consistency of theology and practice. Drawing on various representative people or churches, Niebuhr examines each type's approach to Christology, reason and revelation, evil and sin, law and love, church and state, and views of history. The first two types are the two extremes. Those who adopt the "Christ against culture" position reject culture as fallen, and see separation from it as necessary in order to give absolute loyalty to Christ. This type stands in sharp contrast to the culture. The "Christ of culture" type finds in Christ an affirmation of all that is good in culture. This type sees little or no difference between loyalty to Christ and the best a particular culture has to offer.

The next three types Niebuhr calls "the church of the middle." Of these, the "Christ above culture" type seeks a synthesis of culture with Christ so that grace perfects or builds upon culture. This type sees that the good in culture needs to be and can be properly ordered and completed by Christ. The "Christ and culture in paradox" type finds less continuity between culture and the Christian life. It keeps a critical distance from culture, and yet sees it as useful in the Christian life if kept within its appropriate bounds. This type sees a duality in which culture has a legitimate place in Christian life, but that place is not the Christian's heart or church; in those places Christ must rule.

Niebuhr's final type, "Christ transforming culture," remains critical of culture yet also enters into alliance with what it finds in culture that is capable of becoming part of ongoing work toward the kingdom of God. This type sees culture as the raw material that can be shaped by Christians according to the Christian vision of human life.

Niebuhr claimed that he did not seek to give a privileged place to one type over another, but to "define typical partial answers that recur so often in different eras and societies that they seem to be less the product of historical conditioning than of the nature of the problem itself and the meaning of its terms." His examination of the different types is meant to reveal the relative strengths and weaknesses of each. "In this way," Niebuhr wrote, "the course of the great conversation about Christ and culture may be more intelligently followed, and some of the fruits of the discussion may be garnered." In the book's conclusion he states "that neither extension nor

refinement of study could bring us to the conclusive result that would enable us to say, ‘This is the Christian answer.’”

Yoder argues, however, that “behind this posture of humble nonnormative objectivity . . . Niebuhr has so organized his presentation as to indicate a definite preference for ‘transformation.’” Niebuhr’s version of the “great conversation” omits criticism of the fifth type, and avoids giving specific criteria for and examples of the transformation this type purportedly seeks.

Gustafson counters that “Niebuhr can prefer the transformationist type” since “the comparison with others shows that it is one of many” and his comparative work “gives him a critical perspective on his preference.”

Hauerwas and Willimon argue that the very way in which Niebuhr states the “problem” of Christ in relationship to culture reflects Niebuhr’s biases toward the transformationist type. Also, Niebuhr’s expressed commitment to respecting the plurality of answers to the “Christ and culture” question inevitably leads him to favor the transformationist type. As Hauerwas and Willimon state in *Resident Aliens*, “Since Niebuhr could appreciate the ‘rightness’ of all the types of churches he described . . . his own pluralism underwrote the implicit assumption that his position (pluralism) was superior to other, more narrow ecclesiology.”

Niebuhr had an explicit concern to be fair and impartial in defining terms, stating the problem and evaluating the types. But did Niebuhr set himself an impossible task? How does one give a “neutral” definition or understanding of Christ? How does one give an understanding of culture that does not reflect one’s own view of what qualifies as “culture” and what does not? Echoing Alasdair McIntyre, critics of Niebuhr’s project may rightly ask, “Whose Christ? and what culture?”

Niebuhr’s underlying liberal theological assumptions are evident as he seeks to somehow distill out from historical particularity the essential characteristics of “Christ” and of “culture.” Christ, for Niebuhr, is one who “points away from all that is conditioned to the Unconditioned” and who “is the moral mediator of the Father’s will toward men.” This is a Christ, say the Yoderian critics, who lacks any specific ethical teaching or practices. Glen Stassen points out: “The farther the book goes, the less specific it gets about the ethics of the New Testament Jesus. . . . Nowhere does the chapter on transformationism indicate Christ’s ethics or practices. The result is that readers may be convinced to call themselves transformationists

without committing themselves to any specific ethics." In short, Niebuhr is working with a liberal Protestant notion of Christ, a Christ who provides little more than the ideal of self-sacrificial love (expressed as an intention), along with the concept of theocentrism (expressed as a critique of all temporal values as incomplete).

Additionally, Yoder charges that the "culture" in *Christ and Culture* is understood in a misleadingly monolithic way. Culture, Niebuhr writes, "is that total process of human activity and that total result of such activity"; therefore "we cannot escape culture any more readily that we can escape nature." As a result of this definition, says Yoder, when Niebuhr talks of culture it must (if those who represent a type are to be consistent) be withdrawn from in totality, transformed in totality, accommodated to in totality, or be stood above or in paradoxical relation to in totality.

Critics further complain that even though Niebuhr recognizes a pluralism within culture, the types are defined by how they relate to values that are not simply "culture" but rather are culturally dominant. It turns out that to be responsibly engaged in transforming culture means being responsive to the values and concerns of the cultural elite (much like the ones who Gustafson describes as finding the book helpful). This stance provokes Hauerwas and Willimon's charge that Niebuhr ends up justifying "what was already there—a church that had ceased to ask the right questions as it went about congratulating itself for transforming the world, not noticing that in fact the world had tamed the church."

So is the book a fair and balanced discussion of the various types of Christian responses to culture, or is it an argument for the transformationist type that looks suspiciously like Niebuhr's own form of liberal Protestantism? Perhaps in either case the book can still serve, as Niebuhr himself hoped it would, as a starting point for discussing the Christian life and its relation to various aspects of human life, including institutions such as the state and the economy.

One can certainly be critical of *Christ and Culture* without being dismissive of the book. Marsden, in a speech at Austin Theological Seminary marking 50 years since Niebuhr had given the lectures there which later became *Christ and Culture*, argues that a careful reading reveals that "Niebuhr's five categories can be extremely useful analytical tools." Yoder himself wrote, "It continues to be worthwhile to read Niebuhr carefully. . . . The more a text is treated as a 'classic,' the more it matters that we be critically aware of its unspoken axioms, its tacit biases and lacunae, and

the way it directs and diverts attention.”

Yoder takes seriously Niebuhr’s own insistence on the particularity of all theological and ethical positions. In that spirit readers may continue to find the book useful, even as they take note of Niebuhr’s own type of liberal Protestantism.