

MAKING
THE BEST
OF IT

FOLLOWING CHRIST
IN THE REAL WORLD



JOHN G. STACKHOUSE, JR.

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INTRODUCTION

“Who is Jesus Christ, for us, today?” This question, posed by Dietrich Bonhoeffer in the middle of the last century, continues to guide Christian ethical thinking as it focuses our attention on the essential matter of the Christian religion, the person of Jesus Christ.¹ The Christian faith is both *faith in* Jesus of Nazareth, the Christ (Messiah) of God, and also *faithfulness to* Jesus Christ. (This double meaning is in both the Hebrew and Greek words for “faith” in the Bible.) Christian faith simply is discipleship to Jesus Christ.

Who is it, then, who has this faith and practices this faithfulness? We do. Christians do. But not only Christians in general—*we ourselves* both as particular individuals and as particular groups in a particular moment, in this place and time, today. Thus the “us” of Bonhoeffer’s question whom I hope both to represent and to address in the present volume must be recognized as a particular kind of Christian: those living in North America, and then by extension those who live in similar modern, pluralistic societies—whether citizens of Frankfurt, Marseille, Edinburgh, Sydney, or Hong Kong. I expect this book will be of some use to Christians elsewhere, too, but I want to recognize that I cannot speak to everyone, for theology should not presume to speak timelessly and universally, but only as helpfully as possible in a particular context. So I aim to be useful to those who share important aspects of my own situation here in Vancouver, Canada.

1. Only Bonhoeffer aficionados will care, but I will observe that this question does not actually appear where it is always said to appear, namely, in Bonhoeffer’s famous letter to Eberhard Bethge of 30 April 1944 (*Letters and Papers from Prison*, ed. Eberhard Bethge, trans. Reginald Fuller, Frank Clarke, and John Bowden [New York: Macmillan, 1962 (1953)], 279). Indeed, I have not found this exact locution anywhere in my reading in Bonhoeffer, nor have I found any citation to it, other than this one, among the secondary literature I have read (even though Larry Rasmussen, an expert on Bonhoeffer, claims that “Bonhoeffer frequently puts it” in this form [Larry Rasmussen, “The Ethics of Responsible Action,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, ed. John W. de Gruchy (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 219]). Bonhoeffer, in fact, writes thus: “What is bothering me incessantly is the question what Christianity really is, or indeed who Christ really is, for us today.”

So Bonhoeffer starts where we all should start: with Jesus Christ, whose identity and mission constitute the heart of *our* identity and mission. And as we consider Christ, and then the whole Bible's testimony to God's work in the world, we confront a second, corollary question that I suggest also lies at the heart of the Christian religion: *Who are we, for Jesus Christ, today?*²

Answering this second question is the task of this book. The question is that of ethos, the character or nature of something or someone. We have come to think of ethics in terms of morality, of right and wrong. But following Jesus is not just a matter of discerning and practicing what is morally good, just as ethics derives from a more fundamental concept, the concept of essence, of what it is to *be* this or that. Thus medical ethics, at least traditionally, goes beyond bioethics to questions even of dress (lab coat or not), etiquette, advertising of services, and so on—that is proper to the profession of medicine in its several modes. Christian ethics, then, is not primarily about what to do rightly or wrongly, but fundamentally about what it is to *be Christian in the world*, what is proper to the profession and practice of Christian faith. Being Christian in the world is an identity, a motive, an agenda, and a posture, all of which lead into action. As Glenn Tinder puts it, albeit with the word “political” pointing toward the broader character of “cultural” in this phrase, “I believe that the primary political requirement of Christianity is not a certain kind of society or a particular program of action but rather an attitude, a way of facing society and of undertaking programs of action.”³

Dietrich Bonhoeffer's own discussion of this matter is therefore entitled *Ethik*.⁴ His countryman Paul Tillich is usually credited with inventing the term “theology of culture” for what in fact “ethics” used to denote in English and *Ethik* still denoted in German in the middle of the twentieth century: a comprehensive theological understanding of the world and of the Christian role in it.⁵ So this book is an ethics in the older sense and thus a theology of culture: a theology of

2. Bonhoeffer gives his own version of this question, albeit not quite the same one, on the opening page of *The Cost of Discipleship*: “What we want to know is . . . what Jesus Christ himself wants of us” (trans. R. H. Fuller [New York: Simon and Schuster, 1995 [1937]]).

3. Glenn Tinder, *The Political Meaning of Christianity: An Interpretation* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1989), 8.

4. See Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works*, vol. 6: *Ethics*, ed. Clifford Green, trans. Reinhard Krauss, Charles West, and Douglas Stott (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2005).

5. William Schweiker explains: “In various writings on the theology of culture, Paul Tillich noted that it is actually a contemporary version of what Friedrich Schleiermacher . . . meant by ‘ethics.’ According to Schleiermacher, ethics is the comprehensive and normative examination of culture and history aimed at providing orientation of life. . . . By the time Tillich was writing, that capacious conception of ethics had been lost to the focus on moral imperatives and generalized duties. . . . Insofar as that was the case, what should we call an analysis of human world-making and self-formation, especially if one is attentive to the religious

cultivation, of human activity on earth, of living out the primeval command of God to human beings: “Till the earth” (Gen. 2:15).⁶

This book is, indeed, a book of theology, as long as “theology” is here broadly understood. The word “theology” can mean at least four things: (1) the doctrine of God itself within the various topics of systematic theology: for example, the doctrine of Christ (Christology), the doctrine of salvation (soteriology), the doctrine of the church (ecclesiology), and so on—and therefore what theologians sometimes call “theology proper”; (2) any systematic account of some teachings on spiritual subjects: for example, the theology of the Book of Isaiah, the theology of Paul’s epistles, the theology of Augustine, the theology of the Roman Catholic Church; (3) the discipline of systematic, or sometimes “dogmatic,” theology, which integrates the various other disciplines of theological study (such as Biblical theology, philosophical theology, and historical theology) into a contemporary statement of Christian confession; and (4) reflection on any subject that is conducted with primary reference to the special revelation given to us in the person of Christ and in the Scriptures: thus one can speak of a theology of work, or a theology of art, or a theology of the family.

Theology of culture, therefore, is theology in the fourth, broadest sense: a God-centered understanding of culture shaped by what God has revealed to us about it. Whatever its level of sophistication, theology of culture asks simply this: What is the world? What is our identity and mission in the world? What, in short, is our vocation? *Who are we, for Jesus Christ, today?*

I have written this book because Christians in North America, but also in Britain, Europe, Australia, New Zealand, and other modern societies, typically encounter one or both of only two models of serious Christian engagement with the world and I think we need another—or, at least, most of us do. The one extant option is the option of cultural transformation, of totally reshaping society according to Christian values. This is the option espoused by the American

character of these activities? Tillich called it the theology of culture” (“Having@Toomuch.com: Property, Possession, and the Theology of Culture,” *Criterion* 39 [spring 2000]: 27).

6. Langdon Gilkey, a student of both Paul Tillich and Reinhold Niebuhr, comments from a different angle, that of the definition of “theology” rather than “ethics”: “The task of theology is no longer merely the elucidation of ‘doctrines’ from the sources of scripture and tradition, nor merely the effort to prove by reason the validity of Christian affirmations. It is now even more the interpretation of the mystery and travail of human existence, social history and personal history, by means of the symbols of Christian faith, to show that it is these symbols, and these alone, that make sense of the confusions of ordinary life. These theological changes, therefore, provide the ground not only of an innovative theological analysis of the entire scope of human existence, but of a new discipline as well, the theology of culture, or, better for Niebuhr, the theology of society” (*On Niebuhr: A Theological Study* [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001], 26). As different as Tillich or Niebuhr is from me theologically, we share this interest in theologically interpreting the world, the human place in it, and the role of the church in God’s economy.

religious right—and left. It is also expressed in the more refined accents of neo-Calvinism, the “world-formative” or “transformational” agenda of the tradition descending from Abraham Kuyper and Herman Bavinck in the Netherlands of the late nineteenth century and extended into the twentieth century via Herman Dooyeweerd, D. H. Th. Vollenhoven, and Hans Rookmaaker. A similar movement is the approach of conservative Roman Catholicism, which seeks in its own way to influence culture along Christian lines and ideally to transform it into a thoroughly Christian enterprise. Journals such as *First Things*, writers such as George Weigel and Richard John Neuhaus, and, indeed, popes John Paul II and Benedict XVI have articulated a Catholic agenda of pervading and ultimately dominating culture—with the help and guidance of the Holy Spirit.⁷ And liberation theologies, beginning with Gustavo Gutiérrez and James Cone, articulate their respective social-transformationalist visions.

The main alternative on offer is the response of holy distinctness, of a definite Christian community living in contradistinction to the rest of society and thus offering the beneficial example and influence of an alternative way of life. In popular religious culture this shows up in Protestant sectarianism, whether in the enclaves of fundamentalism, the burgeoning but self-consciously marginal congregations of Pentecostalism, or the traditional communities of Mennonites, Amish, and Hutterites. This option also has its sophisticated versions, particularly in the community of thought arising out of the writing of the Anabaptist ethicist John Howard Yoder and his Methodist epigone Stanley Hauerwas, and more recently out of the movement known as Radical Orthodoxy, identified with John Milbank, Catherine Pickstock, and others. Disgust with the religious right, and particularly with the comfortable alliance between evangelical Christianity and conservative politics, drives these Christians away from dubious cultural entanglements into fellowships of the dedicated that shine like cities on a hill above a plain on which Matthew Arnold’s confused armies war by night. From these places of integrity they offer what help they can to their neighbors while refusing any activity that would compromise their radical testimony to the gospel of new life.

One cannot help being impressed by the zeal, vision, and integrity of many Christians in one or another of these various traditions. Any auditor or reader who does not opt for one of them, however—whether “take it over” or “refuse all entanglements”—can be prompted by partisans to feel guilt over his compromise, to feel shame over her capitulation. *Serious* Christians, so we have been told, elect one of these and pursue it with single-minded confidence.

7. An epitome of such thinking can be found in George Weigel, “World Order: What Catholics Forgot,” *First Things* 143 (May 2004): 31–38.

We must acknowledge immediately that the Bible itself can seem to focus on extremes, rather than on negotiated intermediate positions. David Martin, himself a professed Niebuhrian realist, remarks that “Christian language is of little help in the resolution of conflict, because it moves necessarily between the poles of alienation and reconciliation, loss and retrieval, ex-communication and communication, rather than political compromise and reasoned negotiation.”⁸

I think David Martin is right about most things, but I hope he is wrong about this assertion, because most of us live in a world that is grayer than these black-and-white options, and some of us earnestly want Biblical guidance for such living. Indeed, most of us make our way in a world in which success means asking for ten, hoping for eight, and settling for six. We experience compromise, disappointment, unexpected impediments, and unintended consequences.

When we garden (to draw on an ancient Biblical image), we industriously prepare the soil, select the plants, tend and protect them as best we can, and expect a harvest of flowers or fruit. But we know that pests will return, that some plants will not thrive, and that drought or flood might wipe out a year’s work in a week. Still, we don’t then withdraw into a hydroponic alternative in a nice, safe greenhouse. Likewise, when we build a dwelling, we plan carefully, budget appropriately, hire the most reputable workers we can find, and lay in the best materials we can afford. We set to work and something good comes of it, even though we inevitably encounter labor problems, cost overruns, defective materials, perhaps an earthquake. We don’t give up building or gardening, even though we know we will not achieve anything like the ideal.

So is there a theology to undergird and direct such life in the real world? Is there a legitimate, even commendable, theology—not of cultural conquest nor of cultural withdrawal, but of cultural *persistence*—that can inspire Christian vocation? There have been indeed such theologies, upon which we still can draw. And it is my hope to provide such a theology to help us answer both realistically and hopefully this central question: *Who are we, for Jesus Christ, today?*

This book comes in three parts. The first provides basic categories in which to consider the matters related to being Christian in the world today. After defining such fundamental terms as “church,” “world,” “Kingdom of God,” and “culture,” it proceeds to an exposition of H. Richard Niebuhr’s now-classic categories of “Christ” and “culture.” Niebuhr’s typology has not always been well understood, and it has been soundly criticized. It endures, however, as the touchstone for everyone discussing these things. And I believe it can be improved in several ways—none of which is more important than the rehabilitation of the “Christ in

8. David Martin, *Christian Language in the Secular City* (Aldershot, UK: Ashgate, 2002), 13.

paradox with culture” type that is clearly the option least well presented by Niebuhr and also the option with which I am most in sympathy in this book. I cheerfully recommend, however, that those readers not interested in this definitional discussion should proceed directly to the substantive parts of the book that follow.

From these preliminary matters, then, we turn in Part Two to examine three mid-twentieth-century figures from whom I have particularly profited in thinking about these things: C. S. Lewis, Reinhold Niebuhr, and Dietrich Bonhoeffer. I look at both their writings and their lives for clues—both positive and negative—about what it can mean to be Christian in our day. I do not hereby mean to imply that these three white, well-educated, middle-class, Western Christian men say all there is to say about these matters. Dorothy Day, Karl Barth, Martin Luther King Jr., Gustavo Gutiérrez, James Cone, Mother Teresa, Bob Goudzwaard, Vladimir Soloviev, Simone Weil, John Paul II, Jacques Maritain, Nikolai Berdyaev, Hans Urs von Balthasar, Jacques Ellul, and Wendell Berry represent just some of the diversity in the modern Christian conversation on these matters. And as globalization and modernization proceed apace, we will want to hear voices more varied still. I have been educated in the mainstream North American academy, however, and so I offer simply what I have found most valuable in formulating what I myself want to contribute to this conversation.

Moreover, George Steiner avers that “the best readings of art are art” rather than criticism *per se*.⁹ Inspired by that *bon mot*, albeit with gratitude to the many scholars from whose criticism I have indeed profited, I offer a reading of the ethical work of Lewis, Niebuhr, Bonhoeffer, and others, particularly by producing some of my own. In this light, I will not pause in the rest of the book to keep quoting Lewis, Niebuhr, or Bonhoeffer. I could do so indefinitely, but the book is not, after all, about them. It is instead about broad themes that they suggestively addressed and that I myself take up in Part Three.

In the third part, therefore, I offer a set of basic theological and ethical considerations. I begin by establishing the folly of relying on mere slogans in ethics and thus the need for theory that is both sound and sufficiently complicated for the subject matter. I then set out some methodological reflections on how to construct ethics in our time. I proceed to discuss the value of locating ourselves properly along the time line of the great Biblical narrative, and the dangers of mistaking our place on it. Then we will explore the nature of God’s mission in the world, and ours, and go on to trace out our callings, as humans and as Christians, in their multifold complexity. A series of principles and practices will emerge from, and

9. George Steiner, *Real Presences* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), 17.

complement, the foregoing fundamental ideas. I conclude with some overarching motifs to govern our being and acting in the world.

While the argument in this book is not directly linear, I trust that the book's unity will emerge if it is seen as an exercise in thematic recursion: from an initial statement of the problematic via H. Richard Niebuhr to an exposition of a number of aspects of that problematic in three key writers and then to an extended commendation of a particular model of cultural engagement. I intend, therefore, that the reader will close this book with a multiply reinforced sense of the global largeness of God's mission, the significance of our vocation, the hope of our destiny, and the nature of the reality we must negotiate in the meanwhile. With that sense, I hope that he or she will then be better motivated and equipped to do what God called the first man and woman to do with the world he had created: to make the best of it.

ONE



REAPPROPRIATING H. RICHARD
NIEBUHR'S *CHRIST AND*
CULTURE

Theological history has been made in Constantinople, Rome, Paris, and Berlin, of course, but also in Hippo, North Africa; in Wittenberg, Saxony; in Basel, Switzerland—and in Austin, Texas. For in 1949, the Austin Presbyterian Theological Seminary hosted Yale professor of ethics H. Richard Niebuhr to deliver a series of lectures. The book that emerged out of them, *Christ and Culture*, stands as a headwater of all subsequent discussion of the huge issues he addressed, providing a set of categories that have been criticized and modified, but not abandoned, for more than half a century.

Niebuhr wove these categories out of remarkably disparate materials, as is evident in the few he mentions in his acknowledgments: not only the Bible and Augustine's *City of God*, but also sociologist Ernst Troeltsch's *The Social Teachings of the Christian Churches*, historian Etienne Gilson's *Reason and Revelation in the Middle Ages*, and psychologist Carl Jung's *Psychological Types*.¹ He drew on his considerable knowledge of church history as well to furnish examples for his generalizations. The results of this groundbreaking work—both the categories and the examples—have since been soundly criticized but, I maintain, without invalidating his project and its abiding usefulness for us today.

DEFINITIONS

Before turning to Niebuhr's categories—his formulations of the various ways in which “Christ” could relate to “culture”—we should begin with defining the crucial terms themselves.

1. H. Richard Niebuhr, “Acknowledgments,” in *Christ and Culture*, expanded ed. with a new foreword by Martin E. Marty and a new preface by James M. Gustafson (San Francisco: Harper, 2001 [1951]), xi–xii.

Culture

One of the common understandings of “culture” associates it with refined living, sophisticated taste, and elite education. Opera, ballet, knowledge of wine and classical languages—these are marks of a cultured person. The roots of this definition lie in the early modern period, with the cosmopolitan sense of civilization that all right-thinking people were supposed to share. As counterpart to this understanding of culture—really, high culture—we have popular culture, marked in our time by supermarket tabloids, major feature films, mass consumer fads, and the like.²

In the nineteenth century, the definition of culture shifted, particularly as Germans, concerned to unite their various fragmented principalities into a single country, emphasized what was ethnically distinctive (and thus worthy of institutionalization in a nation-state) over against the reigning ideal of universal humanity espoused by the Enlightenment. The Germans pointed to what they characterized as their distinctive literature, philosophy, politics, music, and so on to demonstrate how different (and superior) their *Kultur* was from, say, that of the French or English. So “culture” became associated with ethnic diversity and particularly with its most elevated and characteristic expressions.³

Let’s pull back and consider a general sense of ethnic diversity as another important way to define culture. We speak of particular “societies”: that is, groups of human beings who conduct some kind of common life, whether in a state (Canadian society), a professional guild (the Society for the Scientific Study of Religion), or a service organization (the Cancer Society). We then characterize the common life of a given society as its “culture,” meaning how that society has organized itself and what it then does. We thus can speak of Arab culture, or the corporate culture of Microsoft, or even the culture of the homeless.

Such a definition moves out from the value-laden sense of high or low culture into a value-free analysis of what human beings, particularly or generally, do in the world. In this vein, Martin E. Marty has defined culture as “everything humans do to, and make of, nature.”⁴ Culture is *what is made*, therefore, as we

2. See the wonderfully opinionated essay by Martha Bayles, *Hole in Our Soul: The Loss of Beauty and Meaning in American Popular Music* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), esp. ch. 1.

3. See Kathryn Tanner, *Theories of Culture: A New Agenda for Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1997), 3–37.

4. Martin E. Marty, “Cross-Multicultures in the Crossfire,” in David A. Hoekema and Bobby Fong, eds., *Christianity and Culture in the Crossfire* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1997), 15. C. S. Lewis points to the ambiguities in this apparently straightforward term “nature”: “Nature is a word of varying meanings, which can best be understood if we consider its various opposites. The Natural is the opposite of the Artificial, the Civil, the Human, the Spiritual,

see in the related word group of “art,” “artifice,” “artificial,” “artisan,” and so on—that is, not natural, but cultured or cultivated. Thus a scientist cultures a bacterium and a farmer practices agriculture.

Beyond this level of what we do is the level of the *meanings* a society gives to its various actions. Beyond what is made, then, we have the question “What do they make of it?” What are a society’s values? Why does it do what it does, and in what symbols does it encode its preferences, fears, and loves? Ultimately, what is the worldview that is being expressed in these meanings and activities?⁵ Thus, in the clever pun of Ken Myers, culture is “what we make of creation—in both senses of the word *make*.”⁶

In everyday speech, we often blur the difference between “society” and “culture,” using them as synonyms, and that’s usually fine in this conversation also. When Richard Niebuhr himself was addressing the question of Christ and culture, he meant not high culture but society at large, the broad cultural context in which Christians are making their way:

What we have in view when we deal with Christ and culture is that total process of human activity and that total result of such activity to which now the name *culture*, now the name *civilization*, is applied in common speech. Culture is the “artificial, secondary environment” which man superimposes on the natural. It comprises language, habits, ideas, beliefs, customs, social organization, inherited artifacts, technical processes, and values.⁷

and the Supernatural” (*The Abolition of Man: How Education Develops Man’s Sense of Morality* [New York: Macmillan, 1947], 80–81). Thus “nature” can mean the creation, the cosmos, the whole show; it can mean wild versus cultivated; it can refer to the subhuman creation (what we sometimes call our “environment”) versus humans; it can denote the original created state versus the fallen state; paradoxically, it can also be used for the fallen state versus the sanctified state; it can mean the essence of something in distinction from its nonessential or “accidental” qualities; it often means the ordinary state of something versus a perversion of it (“unnatural”)—and perhaps more. Having compiled this list of definitions, it is yet my hope that the pertinent definition of “nature” in each case will be evident from the context in what follows. But we will also see, in the last part of this book, that the ambiguity of “nature” does sometimes play an important part in certain key discussions in the theology of culture—such as any instance of arguing from “what is” to “what ought to be,” which might imply that nature is entirely good.

5. Lucien Legrand helpfully distinguishes what I have blurred together here: the *meanings* of the symbols, practices, and language of a society and the *values* of that society—what is variously *important* among all of these. See his *The Bible on Culture: Belonging or Dissenting?* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2000), xiv.
6. Quoted by Andy Crouch, “Interstate Nation,” *Christianity Today*, 10 June 2002, 55.
7. Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture*, 32. Niebuhr’s own footnote cites encyclopedia articles by James Harvey Robinson, Carl Brinkmann, and Bronislaw Malinowski, without directly citing the source for the quoted phrase in the quotation above.

This use of “culture” leads to yet another definition, namely, the dominant culture within a pluralistic society: the activities and values that characterize the majority. Thus it can make sense for a Japanese Christian to remark that Japanese culture is resistant to Christianity. She is speaking about broad and deep currents in her national culture that do not simply characterize everyone within it—they do not, obviously, characterize *her*, as a Christian herself—but that do in fact constitute the prevailing social context in which everyone in Japan must make his or her way. And it is this definition of “culture” that Niebuhr usually means in his book.

In this regard, finally, we need to remark on the fact that characteristic of modern society is the experience of *differentiation* of social sectors and groups, such that each individual negotiates a variety of societies, and thus cultures, all the time. These cultures normally share certain features, so they can be called subcultures of the dominant culture. But they can also be significantly different: the primary values of her office job (for example, producing a useful product and collecting a fair profit) are not the same as those of her athletic club (maximizing personal physical fitness), of her church (loving God, sharing life with other Christians, and serving the world), or of her work with a youth agency (providing a safe and encouraging relationship for a needy child). And as each individual in a given society brings to that society his or her experience in the other cultures in his or her life, that society also is somewhat variegated.

As Richard Madsen and his colleagues put it,

Every interpretation of a culture takes part in a “conflict of interpretations,” in Paul Ricoeur’s phrase, and this conflict characterizes, indeed, constitutes culture as a multi-vocal conversation and argument. It is a conversation about how we ought to live in accord with reality as it is, and how we ought to think about how to live.⁸

We thus have further reason to beware of any monolithic sense of a culture, even one of a relatively small society. And we must be aware instead of the need for each of us—indeed, for each society—to learn to identify and interact well with the variety of cultures with which we find ourselves in contact as we make our way in the world.

Niebuhr didn’t remark on it, but it remains true that there is no word in the Bible—in the languages of either Testament—for “culture.” Standard Bible

8. Richard Madsen et al., “Introduction,” in Richard Madsen, William M. Sullivan, Ann Swidler, and Steven M. Tipton, eds., *Meaning and Modernity: Religion, Polity, and Self* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), xii.

study reference texts do not include an entry on it. Instead, we should look to a word that overlaps with, but must not be simply identified with “culture”: “world.”

World

It is worth exploring the word “world” because it resonates so negatively for many Christians. They recall snatches of Scripture—“in the world you have tribulation,” “be not conformed to this world,” “the world has hated me, so it will hate you” (Jn. 16:33; Rom. 12:2; Jn. 15:18)—that together constitute a spiritual collage of darkness and danger. When it comes to relating to culture, “worldliness” is the chief category of capitulation. And this is hardly a recent phenomenon in Christian sentiment: John Bunyan’s pilgrim is nearly done in by the advice of Mr. Worldly-Wise and the blandishments of the world at Vanity Fair. So is the world always bad? And is it the same as culture? If so, then we can save ourselves any more theologizing and head for the hills.

The New Testament includes a range of words that are translated as “world” in English versions. The words *aiōn* (age) and *kairos* (time) have English equivalents in the sense of “the world of the dinosaurs” or “the world of Napoleon.” The word *gē* means “soil,” “land,” “earth,” and, by a similar derivation in English, “planet” (the way we speak of “the earth” or “Earth”). It is the root of our words “geology” and “geography.” Another word, *oikoumenē*, is sometimes combined with *gē* to mean “the inhabited world,” rooted as it is in *oikos* (house); thus a kind of household symbol extends to the whole household of humanity, so to say. The word *ktisis* and the expression *ta panta* are rendered “creation” or “the all,” and show up also in some translations as “world.” More familiar to English readers would be *kosmos*, which can mean the “whole of creation” or “the inhabited world,” and also a combination of these ideas: “the world of humankind.”

Clearly, then, only some of these uses of “world” are pertinent to our topic. Furthermore, while the Bible frequently speaks of the world negatively, it also refers to it neutrally or positively.

The New Testament in particular is replete with warnings about the world as an evil place, as a system of institutions, individuals, and values under evil dominion, with evil consequences. The world hates and persecutes Jesus and his disciples (Jn. 7:7; 15:18–19; 16:33; Jas. 4:4). It cannot receive the Holy Spirit (Jn. 14:17) and does not know the Father (Jn. 17:25; I Jn. 3:1). The world’s entire mentality is badly confused, especially about ultimate matters (Rom. 12:2; I Cor. 1:20–21). Indeed, the current world order is under the dominion of Satan and other evil powers (Mt. 4:8–9; Jn. 12:31; Gal. 4:3; Eph. 2:2; I Jn. 5:19). As such a deranged and

harmful entity, ultimately it will be condemned (I Cor. 11:32) and finally “pass away” (I Jn. 2:15–17). Thus in the few uses of the term, not surprisingly, the adjective “worldly” is bad (II Cor. 7:10; Tit. 2:12; Jude 19).

Yet again, however, the world sometimes is simply the earth or the inhabited world, a neutral thing, as in “a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered” (Lk. 2:1). Moreover, the original verdict of God on his creation of the world was that it was “very good” (Gen. 1:31), and his ultimate purpose for the world is salvation (Jn. 3:16–17; II Cor. 5:19; I Jn. 4:14).⁹ Therefore we cannot too quickly assume a straightforward (negative) answer to the question of how Christians are to relate to the world.

What, then, of any connection with the word “culture”? The words for world and the idea of culture clearly intersect in the sphere of human society, work, and meaning. The world is both what we’re given to work with and what we then make of it. So we will refer to Biblical passages in which “world” is used if they can cast light on our questions of society and culture. For the time being, we can proceed with an openness to see the world, and culture, as not necessarily and totally bad, but hardly as necessarily good, either. The world instead is in a complex condition that is explicable both in abstract terms and in the narrative of the Bible, both of which we will turn to presently.

Church

The word “church” can mean several things, ranging from a sacred building to a local congregation, an international denomination, and even the entire community of those saved by Jesus Christ. But its central definition comes from *ekklesia*, a gathering or assembly of those who have named Jesus as Lord and who join together to worship him, serve each other, and work with God in his mission to the world. In what follows, therefore, I will use the word in this central way: those who are committed as disciples of Jesus Christ and who band together as such. But sometimes I will mean simply the visible institution, the church as the society of those who nominally follow Jesus, however sincerely or insincerely they do so. I trust that context will make the pertinent definition clear.

9. I believe that this is my first use of personal pronouns for God in the present volume. I practice inclusive language for human beings, but for God I use masculine pronouns, as does the Bible and Christian tradition. As a feminist, I appreciate that this is a vexed issue, and I discuss some of the semantic and political questions here: “A Woman’s Place Is in... Theology?” appendix in *Finally Feminist: A Pragmatic Christian Understanding of Gender* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2005), 115–29. I ask for forbearance from readers who would prefer me to have made different choices on this question.

Kingdom of God

Jesus came preaching the Kingdom of God. Christians believe that God is always ultimately in control of the world, as God is the basis of all existence everywhere. It is not the case that Satan has somehow wrested control of this “silent planet” away from God and so must be paid off or conquered in order to free it from his grasp.¹⁰ To be sure, Satan does enjoy a limited sphere of influence over the world, as (we should remember in this respect) do human sovereigns, and each makes a certain amount of mischief.¹¹ As Tom Wright puts it, “In one sense God has always been sovereign over the world and . . . in another sense this sovereignty, this saving rule, is something which must break afresh into the world of corruption, decay and death, and the human rebellion, idolatry and sin which are so closely linked with it.”¹² There is nothing in the universe, however, that is not entirely dependent upon God’s sustaining power, moment to moment—including whatever intermediate princes there may be, whether diabolical or human rulers. (The book of Daniel speaks of all three kinds of “kingdoms,” and makes clear that “there is a God in heaven” [Dan. 2:28] who sees and supervises all, even as he allows subordinates a sometimes startling range of freedom.) So there is a fundamental sense in which the universe (and whatever lies beyond it) has always been, and always shall be, the realm of God, over which he exercises sovereignty.

In the Synoptic Gospels, however, we encounter a second definition of the Kingdom of God. Jesus proclaimed that “the kingdom of God is at hand” (Mt. 3:2). Jesus’ life inaugurated God’s direct and uncompromised rule on earth. The Kingdom of God is where, we might say, God’s ways are the way, and God’s rules are the rule. The Kingdom of God is where God’s judgment—which both assesses good and evil and restores them to their rightful places—has taken place, and *shalom* (peace, wholeness, and goodness) characterizes all things. The Kingdom of God is thus where God’s authority is joyfully embraced as legitimate and welcome.

This authority was fully evident in Jesus himself. Moreover, Jesus’ life, death, resurrection, and ascension mark the irreversible beginning of the end for evil

10. The classic survey of such themes is Gustav Aulén, *Christus Victor: An Historical Study of the Three Main Types of the Idea of the Atonement*, trans. Jaroslav Pelikan (New York: Macmillan, 1969). In our own time, C. S. Lewis’s *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe* (Harmondsworth, UK: Puffin, 1959 [1950]) doubtless has confirmed this idea in the imaginations of many readers, and the term “silent planet” comes from Lewis’s novel *Out of the Silent Planet* (London: Macmillan, 1943).

11. Michael Green, *I Believe in Satan’s Downfall* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1981).

12. N. T. Wright, *Scripture and the Authority of God* (London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 2005), 21.

everywhere and the beginning of the eternal reign of God on the earth God once made and has always cared for. This reign clearly has not begun in anything like its final fullness. The Kingdom of God is “already, but not yet,” here. It is the Christian hope, however, that it will come once and for all with the triumphant return of the one who inaugurated it. And, as the Jewish Scriptures prophesied of Messiah, “his kingdom shall have no end”—neither in time nor in space.

Greater clarity on this much disputed phrase, “the Kingdom of God,” can be gained by recognizing that other New Testament authors use different expressions for the same thing: John tends to use “eternal life” and Paul to use “salvation.” They doubtless are reflecting the early church’s mission to the Gentiles, for whom a phrase such as “Kingdom of God” might connect too closely with the particular Jewish hope for the political emancipation of the nation of Israel by a Davidic monarch, rather than with the universal offer of deliverance from the powers of this world and a blessed place in the next under the rule of God himself. Thus Jesus’ terminology, appropriate for his mission to the Jews as recorded in the Synoptics, is translated—under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit—into these other, more widely relevant terms.¹³

The Kingdom of God in this sense, therefore, means the coming of God’s salvation and the eternal life it brings—which is, indeed, experienced “already, but not yet,” by all those who put their trust in God, follow his ways, and look forward to his eventual renewal of all things.¹⁴

The Church and the Kingdom

What, then, of the relationship of “church” and “Kingdom of God”? The church is not coextensive with the Kingdom of God, and in two respects.

Negatively, we observe that there are individuals and groups within the visible, institutional church who do not, in fact, follow the way of Jesus. They are “wolves in sheep’s clothing” (Mt. 7:15), hypocrites, false prophets, simoniacs, and the like: those who enter the doors of the church and who take on themselves the name of Jesus without any serious intention of submitting to, much less furthering, the Kingdom of God. Moreover, we recognize that we ourselves, no matter the sincer-

13. See the passages in the Synoptics themselves that interchange terms: Mk. 9:43–47 par., 10:17–30 par.; Mt. 25:31–46. And also see Jesus’ discussion with Nicodemus for a similar interplay in Jn. 3.

14. A fine brief introduction to this complicated question can be found in Joel B. Green and Scot McKnight, *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1992), s.v. “Kingdom of God/Heaven.”

ity of our profession and the vigor of our practice, maintain pockets and episodes of infidelity in which we fail to maintain, much less extend, the Kingdom of God.

Positively, in the view of many Christians (sometimes called “inclusivists”), there are people beyond the church who have put God first in their lives and are serving him as best they can. They have not yet heard of Jesus and thus have not joined the church as self-consciously Christian disciples. By God’s justifying and renewing grace, however, they have responded in faith to the Holy Spirit’s testimony in their hearts and to whatever revelation God has brought to them in their particular circumstances. Thus they enjoy genuine Kingdom life and are cooperating with God to reform the world according to God’s values, however seriously their outlook and experience are compromised by their lack of exposure to the gospel of Christ and their lack of contact with the church.¹⁵

Furthermore, the influence of God’s Kingdom has been spreading, bit by bit, wherever individuals, groups, nations, and transnational realities have been influenced for the better. In our day, for example, the increased profile of universal human rights in national and international politics—with particular attention to women, children, and the poor (recognizing that women and children constitute most of the poor)—is an example of the spread of the influence of the Kingdom of God incognito, so to speak. It is obvious that the international order is far from Christian in its identity and conduct. In that crucial sense it is clearly *not* the Kingdom of God. Nonetheless, the Kingdom of God is partially and mixedly, but also really, present in the extension of these values into spheres previously not deeply shaped by them.

We see the marks of the Kingdom of God, then, wherever light penetrates darkness, wherever good makes its way against evil or inertia, wherever beauty emerges amid ugliness or vapidness, and wherever truth sounds out against error or falsity. And as we gladly recognize these marks, we also long for the complete manifestation of God’s reign in the return of his Son.

We thus imply a third distinction between church and Kingdom, which is nicely set out by Richard Bauckham:

Between Old Testament Israel and the eschatological Kingdom there lie two forms of society in which the Kingdom is only partially and in dif-

15. For a guide to the issues here, see my “Afterword: An Agenda for an Evangelical Theology of Religions,” in *No Other Gods Before Me? Evangelicals and the Challenge of World Religions*, ed. John G. Stackhouse Jr. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2001), 189–201.

ferent ways anticipated: the Church and the state. The Church, because it is a voluntary, not a political, community, ought to be able to live out the religious and moral demands of God in relationship to him *more* fully than Old Testament Israel could. . . . [Yet] the extent to which Israel, as envisaged in the law, provides a model for the *Church* must be qualified: the specifically political element in the model finds no realization in the Church. On the other hand, the norms for human life in political society which are expressed in the Old Testament law can to some degree be realized in other political societies. But this realization will be qualified by the fact that no political society, however much influenced by biblical faith, manifests, as a political society, the kind of wholehearted commitment to the God of Israel that the law demands.¹⁶

As Bauckham suggests, it is crucial to distinguish the church from the Kingdom and, for that matter, to be clear that the church stands in both continuity and discontinuity with Old Testament Israel. The political dimensions of human life embodied in the Old Testament people of God are not directly manifest in the voluntary, spiritual community of the New. Indeed, the church carries on those dimensions in the quite different mode of encouraging the state under which it lives and the broader society in which it lives to realize as many of the values of the Kingdom as they will—even as the church also reminds the state and the society at large that they are *not* the Kingdom, but are only ever a deeply flawed and conflicted approximation of the city to come.

With these definitions and qualifications in hand, then, let's proceed to consider how all of these relate to each other in the encounter of Christ, his church, and his Kingdom with the world and its culture.

REAPPROPRIATING THE TYPOLOGY OF *CHRIST AND CULTURE*

The Typology Itself

In his classic work *Christ and Culture*, H. Richard Niebuhr sets out a typology of ways in which the ideals of the Christian faith (Christ) can be related to the activities and values of a particular society (culture).

16. Richard Bauckham, *The Bible in Politics: How to Read the Bible Politically* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox, 1989), 29.

I. CHRIST AGAINST CULTURE

In this posture, culture is seen as hostile to the Christian faith, so Christians separate themselves from it.

Answers of the first type emphasize the opposition between Christ and culture. Whatever may be the customs of the society in which the Christian lives, and whatever the human achievements that society conserves, Christ is seen as opposed to them, so that he confronts men with the challenge of an either-or decision.¹⁷

Christians today might recognize forms of fundamentalist, Anabaptist, and Pentecostal Christianity in this option, with their denunciations of the world and their codes of morality formulated to guard against worldliness. Those who have left such traditions are often quick to condemn this option as extreme—which of course it is from a typological point of view, but they're speaking of real-world instances and using "extreme" as an epithet. Yet is this option so unthinkable in Nazi Germany? Stalinist Russia? Maoist China? What about in cultures such as some we know of from ancient times that were built around human sacrifice, whether the Canaanites who burned their children before their god Moloch or Mesoamerican civilizations drenched in multiple adult sacrifices? And consider contemporary North Korea, Iran, or Sudan. Are we sure that Christ is *not* standing against these cultures as interlocking institutions, values, and practices of ungodly and inhuman oppression?

We immediately encounter Niebuhr's claim that any one of his five options can be a plausible option in certain circumstances:

It is helpful . . . to recall that the repeated struggles of Christians with this problem have yielded no single Christian answer, but only a series of typical answers, which together, for faith, represent phases of the strategy of the militant church in the world.¹⁸

We cannot sympathetically understand these various options unless we can construe some circumstances in which they do appear plausible. I trust we can agree that, in the light of the real-world instances we have just considered, "Christ against culture" makes considerable sense.

II. CHRIST OF CULTURE

At the other end of Niebuhr's typology (though, confusingly, coming second in his exposition) is the situation of happy reinforcement of Christian values by a culture.

17. Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture*, 40.

18. *Ibid.*, 2.

In them Jesus often appears as a great hero of human culture history; his life and teachings are regarded as the greatest human achievement; in him, it is believed, the aspirations of men toward their values are brought to a point of culmination; he confirms what is best in the past, and guides the process of civilization to its proper goal.... In our time answers of this kind are given by Christians who note the close relation between Christianity and Western civilization, between Jesus' teachings or the teachings about him and democratic institutions; yet there are occasional interpretations that emphasize the agreement between Christ and Eastern culture as well as some that tend to identify him with the spirit of Marxian society.¹⁹

Another version of "Christ of culture" can be identified also, I suggest, if we consider "second-generation" societies, in the sense of societies sufficiently transformed by Christian values as to constitute an environment in which generations can grow up without any strong sense of conflict between Christ and culture. Puritan New England was such a place for many in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries. Czarist Russia might count as another. I myself have lived in three regions of North America that actually fit this type: west Texas, where people of my parents' social class worshipped at First Baptist Church and then dined with all the same folk at the country club afterward; northwestern Iowa, where Dutch-American Calvinists so dominated Sioux County that public schools were dismissed early to send children to catechism classes and the weekly church attendance averaged 90 percent of the county population; and southern Manitoba, where Mennonites sufficiently outnumbered anyone else that some small towns simply *were* Mennonite, from the mayor on down. "Christ of culture," therefore, shows up in quite a range of varieties.

III. CHRIST ABOVE CULTURE

Both extremes of "Christ against culture" and "Christ of culture" recognize no tension between the two elements of "Christ" and "culture." The extreme options relate the two elements either by separation or by conjunction. Niebuhr then posed three intermediate alternatives that do, in fact, maintain some kind of tense relationship between Christ and culture. He called people in these three categories "synthesists, dualists, and conversionists," respectively.²⁰

In the first of these, a culture is viewed as being providentially supplied with good values and helpful institutions such that it is basically sound. Christ then arrives, so to speak, to both correct and especially to complement what is present in the culture:

19. *Ibid.*, 41.

20. *Ibid.*, 120.

True culture is not possible unless beyond all human achievement, all human search for values, all human society, Christ enters into life from above with gifts which human aspiration has not envisioned and which human effort cannot attain unless he relates men to a supernatural society and a new value-center.²¹

Thomas Aquinas is the great exemplar of this model, as

he combined without confusing philosophy and theology, state and church, civic and Christian virtues, natural and divine laws, Christ and culture. Out of these various elements he built a great structure of theoretical and practical wisdom, which like a cathedral was solidly planted among the streets and marketplaces, the houses, palaces, and universities that represent human culture, but which, when one had passed through its doors, presented a strange new world of quiet spaciousness, of sounds and colors, actions and figures, symbolic of a life beyond all secular concerns.²²

Christian theology teaches society truths it has not found, and would not find, on its own—notably the gospel story itself. Christian ethics brings specific and fundamental content to the extant ethos, as the great commandments of love for God and the neighbor are enshrined in the center of life. Christian vocation teaches God's call to stewardship of the earth. And Christian preaching offers forgiveness of sin and hope of citizenship in the New Jerusalem, filling out whatever truncated version is in place (e.g., the focus on spiritual emancipation found in Indian religions, or the emphasis on social harmony in Confucianism).

Niebuhr says this:

Culture discerns the rules for culture, because culture is the work of God-given reason in God-given nature. Yet there is another law besides the law rational men discover and apply. The divine law revealed by God through His prophets and above all through His Son is partly coincident with the natural law, and partly transcends it as the law of man's supernatural life. "Thou shalt not steal" is a commandment found both by reason and in revelation; "Sell all that thou hast and give to the poor" is found in the divine law only. It applies to man as

21. *Ibid.*, 42.

22. *Ibid.*, 130.

one who has had a virtue implanted in him beyond the virtue of honesty, and who has been directed in hope toward a perfection beyond justice in this mortal existence.²³

These last examples point to one of the zones of Christian engagement with the world in which this option has been most common: missionary work. Some missionaries have been so shocked at what they found in a particular culture that they have sought its eradication and replacement by Christianity—which, typically, they packaged with their own ethnic culture (English, French, Dutch, and so on). But many other missionaries have seen sufficient elements of truth, beauty, and goodness in a culture as to view the coming of the Christian gospel as a fulfillment of, rather than an alternative to, what was already there. The most fundamental instance of such a relationship, of course, would be the relationship of the distinctively Christian way as a fulfillment of Old Testament Israelite religion—an instance that Niebuhr himself doesn't happen to mention.

IV. CHRIST IN PARADOX WITH CULTURE

Niebuhr introduces this option with a criticism of type III and a corresponding compliment to type IV: the synthesists “do not in fact face up to the radical evil present in all human work. . . . [T]his objection is most effectively raised by the dualists,” that is, those who see “Christ and culture in paradox.”²⁴

Alas, type IV is arguably the least well presented option of Niebuhr's five.²⁵ Christians in this zone seem to be practicing a kind of Orwellian doublethink, as they serve two masters, two kingdoms, and two value systems: Christ and a not-so-Christian culture.²⁶ Under the general providence of God, who has ordained and who continues to supervise the structures and powers of earthly life, and particularly institutions such as family and government, Christians are to participate in, and contribute to, non-Christian or sub-Christian societies while (somehow) maintaining their ultimate allegiance to Christ:

23. *Ibid.*, 135–36.

24. *Ibid.*, 148, 149.

25. A significant attempt to correct this problem is made in Angus J. L. Menuge, ed., *Christ and Culture in Dialogue: Constructive Themes and Practical Applications* (St. Louis, MO: Concordia Academic, 1999).

26. The apostle Paul is explicated at length in this chapter of Niebuhr's *Christ and Culture* also, but it is a very Lutheran Paul (159–67). Cf. the revisionist understanding of Paul in New Testament studies introduced by N. T. Wright, *What Saint Paul Really Said: Was Paul of Tarsus the Real Founder of Christianity?* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1997).

To those who answer the question in this way it appears that Christians throughout life are subject to the tension that accompanies obedience to two authorities who do not agree yet must both be obeyed. They refuse to accommodate the claims of Christ to those of secular society, as, in their estimation, men in the second and third groups do. So they are like the “Christ-against-culture” believers, yet differ from them in the convictions that obedience to God requires obedience to the institutions of society and loyalty to its members as well as obedience to a Christ who sits in judgment on that society. Hence man is seen as subject to two moralities, and as a citizen of two worlds that are not only discontinuous with each other but largely opposed. In the *polarity* and *tension* of Christ and culture life must be lived precariously and sinfully in the hope of a justification which lies beyond history.²⁷

A paradox is an apparent contradiction that is resolvable at some other level by some sort of qualification. The proposition “Water is a gas, a liquid, and a solid” is an apparent contradiction, but the state of water depends on the temperature—the qualification that resolves the contradiction.²⁸ But Niebuhr never provides the resolving qualification, the scheme within which these apparent contradictions make a single sense. Thus the Christians in this mode seem not involved in a paradox so much as in a contradiction. They seem to compartmentalize their lives into certain duties to society and then certain other duties to Christ in a kind of social implication of the law/gospel dichotomy characteristic of Lutheran thought.

Niebuhr defends Luther himself from this charge and makes some interesting suggestions about Luther’s sense of Christian life in the world, which I shall take up later—both in my discussion of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who wrestled with his Lutheran heritage on these matters, and in my own affirmations in the last part of this book. But the Luther who, Niebuhr allows, does *not* think in a compartmentalizing way nonetheless is placed by Niebuhr among a fairly world-indifferent apostle Paul, a heretically world-denying Marcion, a complacently conservative Lutheranism, an almost nonsensically paradoxical Kierkegaard, a liberally compromising Troeltsch, and a schismatic Roger Williams. This wildly varying portrait gallery results in this model remaining the least clearly presented of the five.

27. Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture*, 42–43.

28. Science teachers among readers of this book will be glad to know that I did learn that the state of water depends also on pressure and other factors, not just temperature.

The rest of the present book is an attempt to recover, restate, and renew a version of this option.²⁹ So I will not linger over Niebuhr's odd failure to make this position more intelligible, let alone plausible. (It is an especially odd failure, however, when one considers that his own brother, Reinhold—to whom the book is dedicated—fits best into this category, as Richard's brief citation of Reinhold's *Moral Man and Immoral Society* attests. We will examine Reinhold as a resource for a dialectical approach to culture before long.)³⁰

V. CHRIST TRANSFORMING CULTURE

In this mode, Christians follow Christ, in the power of the Holy Spirit, to participate in God's mission of redeeming the world, bringing it back from its fallen state into blessed submission and thus into *shalom*. Sector by sector, institution by institution, and, yes, individual by individual, Christ transforms culture:

For the conversionist, history is the story of God's mighty deeds and of man's responses to them. He lives somewhat less "between the times" and somewhat more in the divine "Now" than do his brother Christians. The eschatological future has become for him an eschatological present. Eternity means for him less the action of God before time and less the life with God after time, and more the presence of God in time. Eternal life is a quality of existence in the here and now. Hence the conversionist is less concerned with conservation of what has been given in creation, less with preparation for what will be given in a final redemption, than with the divine possibility of a present renewal. . . . The conversionist, with his view of history as the present encounter with God in Christ, does not live so much in expectation of a final ending of the world of

29. Indeed, this book might properly be seen as an attempt to recover and articulate a more plausible version of this model, just as John Howard Yoder attempted to restate and to nuance what he liked to call the "radical" version of Christianity.

30. Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture*, 183 n. 30: "Among these dualisms that eschew parallelism or the compartmentalization of the moral life may be mentioned Reinhold Niebuhr's *Moral Man and Immoral Society*, 1932"; cf. Richard Niebuhr's listing of Reinhold among "Nikolai Berdyaev, Ernest [*sic*] Troeltsch, . . . Gogarten (the earlier), Emil Brunner, and perhaps . . . Karl Barth" as exemplars of this model in the previous essay that served as the basis for these lectures: "Introduction: Types of Christian Ethics," in *Christ and Culture*, lii. This essay was written originally in 1942. The relationship of the Niebuhr brothers was fraught with misunderstanding, even in (or perhaps especially in) their public work as theologians. At one point, Richard writes to Reinhold (about a book Reinhold had dedicated to *him*), "One reason we do not understand each other, as this book makes clearer than ever to me, is that our words mean different things to us" (personal letter quoted in Richard Wightman Fox, *Reinhold Niebuhr: A Biography* [Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1996 (1985)], 153).

creation and culture as in awareness of the power of the Lord to transform all things by lifting them up to himself.³¹

Calvin transforms Geneva from the Las Vegas of its day into the Reformation's first thoroughly reformed city. The English Puritans erect a Christian commonwealth in the next century, while some of their number travel to America to do the same there for decades longer. And Dutch leader Abraham Kuyper provides a stirring call to more recent Christians of this type as he announces the claim of Christ: "There is not one inch in the entire area of our human life about which Christ, who is Sovereign of all, does not cry out, 'Mine!'"³²

Christians in this mode have typically worked in one of three submodes: (1) converting individuals, who then will act Christianly in all things, infiltrating and influencing all sectors of society and converting others in turn, thus leading to a cumulative transformation of culture (this is the typical evangelical mode, exemplified in the preaching and career of Billy Graham, who saw the hope of America's future secured against Communism, sensuality, and other threats only by the progressive conversion of individuals); (2) constructing Christian institutions (whether schools, labor unions, news media, or political parties) as wholesome alternatives to the current options offered by other groups, in the hope that they will become sufficiently attractive and influential that successive sectors of society will be transformed by their influence (this is the Dutch neo-Calvinists' mode, which sometimes is known as "pillarization" because they provide Christian pillars of society other than those currently supporting it); and (3) conquering existing institutions with legitimate power, such as taking over businesses by buying stock, taking over legislatures by winning elections, taking over media by producing superior creative products, and so on (this is the mode of liberal Protestants, liberation theologians, the new religious right, Christian socialists, and still more otherwise disparate groups).³³

31. Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture*, 195.

32. Quoted in James D. Bratt, *Abraham Kuyper: A Centennial Reader* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1998), 488. I thank Hans Boersma for this citation, and for some helpful guidance regarding neo-Calvinism.

33. This list of "transformationists" shows that Oliver O'Donovan is mistaken when he says, "What matters is not to be *for* Christendom or *against* it—what earthly point could there be in either of these postures?" (*The Desire of the Nations: Rediscovering the Roots of Political Thought* [Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1996], ix). If one is intent on using social power to effect broad cultural change, it matters quite a bit whether one is for or against Christendom as an ideal. Indeed, O'Donovan later defines this ideal in a way that any normal transformationist would approve: "it is the idea of a confessionally Christian government, at once 'secular' (in the proper sense of that word, confined to the present age) and obedient to Christ, a promise of the age of his unhindered rule" (*ibid.*, 195).

In this last mode, it is interesting to see that this option actually connects with the apparently contradictory “Christ against culture” posture: Christians can be thoroughly against the current culture and thus either separate from it or try to take it over. The close connection between these two modes helps explain why American fundamentalism, for one important example in contemporary Christianity, has oscillated between these two approaches to American culture: they are not, in fact, so far apart.³⁴

Given this sketch of Niebuhr’s scheme, then, let us proceed to both understand and appropriate it for our present purposes. I want to make clear that this is what I am doing—harvesting some insights from Niebuhr, rather than defending his whole book or even expounding it thoroughly. There is much more to Niebuhr’s book than his typology, and it is both rich and problematic. I am going to leave aside all but the typology itself, as it is the typology that is particularly valuable in my own constructive project and a critical discussion of other matters would only distract from that. Nonetheless, a discussion of the criticisms of the typology itself does illuminate several important themes.

Lessons from the Typology—and Its Critics

The first kind of criticism we can notice is the charge that Niebuhr’s categories are wrong. What is “Christ” and what is “culture” in this scheme? Some have suggested that “Christ” really means “Christianity” or “the church,” and “culture” really means “the world” or “the dominant powers and ethos of society,” so Niebuhr’s very terms need changing.

I’m not so sure they do, as long as we realize what Niebuhr is attempting with these categories. Niebuhr is discussing a kind of fundamental tension for

34. For more on H. Richard Niebuhr’s categories and American fundamentalism, see George Marsden, “Christianity and Cultures: Transforming Niebuhr’s Categories,” *Insights* 115 (Fall 1999): 11–12. In this regard, I recall a personal conversation in which Marsden remarked that the tension between “sect” and “church” is most acute for Calvinists, whose outlook makes compromise so difficult. (Marsden’s article is an unusually moderate, insightful, and constructive response to Niebuhr’s work, and does not deserve the opprobrium dished out by Niebuhr’s former student and apologist James Gustafson in his preface to the fiftieth edition of *Christ and Culture*, xxi–xxxv.) I recall John Howard Yoder’s saying that the Swiss Brethren, the early Anabaptists in sixteenth-century Zurich, tried in fact to lead a reformation of that city—contrary to the sectarian separatism that characterized them later. Indeed, Yoder maintains, it was only upon losing the power struggle with Ulrich Zwingli’s party that they then developed their “Christ against culture” posture, versus the “Christ transforming culture” mode in which they had originally sought cultural dominance. (I regret not having a formal citation for this remark, but I heard Yoder say this in a lecture at Northwestern College during a campus visit in 1989, and I discussed it with him the next day.)

the church: the tension between its fidelity to Christ (the ideal of Christian faith) and its posture toward the society from which the church is drawn and in which it must make its way.³⁵ How, then, does the church best construe the relationship between those two elements of its life in the world? Since that question, I believe, is Niebuhr's main concern, it would actually confuse the situation to substitute "church" or "Christianity" for "Christ," since that would be to drop out the first element of the three-element relationship: Christ—church—culture.

Yes, the church is itself a society that has its own culture, as some have pointed out—as if Niebuhr, a disciple of Ernst Troeltsch and a careful sociological interpreter of the church, didn't recognize that fact. Indeed, his book is precisely about how the church should be relating to the other societies/cultures with which it has to interact, under the Lordship of Christ. Yes, we must also recognize that the church is always culturally embedded within and interpenetrated by other cultures, and so is never able to access "Christ" as an ideal without the interference of the filtering, bias, and motives of particular cultures—again, as if this would be news to one of midcentury America's more clear-eyed observers of the church in the (real) world.³⁶ And yes, there are subcultures within dominant cultures with which we have to interact—even multiple subcultures in a modern, pluralistic society. All of this would not be news to Niebuhr, nor does it invalidate his program. Niebuhr correctly realizes that the key question for the church is how it is to relate its basic loyalty to Christ with its life in the world, a question that goes back through church history to Augustine's extensive musings on the cities of

35. Niebuhr opens *Christ and Culture* by describing it as an "essay on the double wrestle of the church with its Lord and with the cultural society with which it lives in symbiosis" (xi).

36. Moreover, this embeddedness and interpenetration is not bad only—it is, in fact, generically human: Christians speak German or Swahili or Urdu, not "Christian"; Christians dress and play and think and love according to particular extant cultural patterns, albeit patterns that, ideally, come under the scrutiny and refinement of the Holy Spirit. Cf. the ancient, anonymous *Letter to Diognetus*: "For Christians cannot be distinguished from the rest of the human race by country or language or customs. They do not live in cities of their own; they do not use a peculiar form of speech; they do not follow an eccentric manner of life. . . . Yet, although they live in Greek and barbarian cities alike, as each man's lot has been cast, and follow the customs of the country in clothing and food and other matters of daily living, at the same time they give proof of the remarkable and admittedly extraordinary constitution of their own commonwealth. They live in their own countries, but only as aliens. They have a share in everything as citizens, and endure everything as foreigners. Every foreign land is their fatherland, and yet for them every fatherland is a foreign land" (in Cyril C. Richardson, ed. and trans., *Early Christian Fathers* [New York: Macmillan, 1970], 216–17). And Richard Mouw reminds us that it is in our particularity, including our national identities, that we will enter the New Jerusalem as per Isaiah 60 (*When the Kings Come Marching In: Isaiah and the New Jerusalem* [Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1983]).

God and of man, and the New Testament's own teachings on the matter—right back to Jesus discussing what is God's and what is Caesar's (Mt. 22:21 par.).

What does Jesus want us to do? That is really Niebuhr's question, and so his categories serve us well as a truly exhaustive list of basic possibilities. (One cannot imagine a Christian considering a "Christ below culture" option, for instance.)

The second, and quite crucial, matter to get clear is that Niebuhr intends to offer us a *typology*, not a *taxonomy*. A typology is a kind of pure intellectual construct, a setting out of the logical possibilities in a situation. Niebuhr does this in terms that relate "Christ" and "culture." Yet many readers have not understood the difference between typology and taxonomy and have thus both misunderstood and unfairly criticized Niebuhr's project. James Gustafson is right to say in Niebuhr's defense,

It is...a mistake to interpret *Christ and Culture* as a taxonomy of Christian theological ethical literature. The typology is an ideal construct of ideas, not generalizations about literature.... The distinction between an ideal-typical and a taxonomic purpose (and they readily get mixed or confused) is this: ideal types are ideal constructs of ideas along a clearly stated axis by which particular aspects of issues of literature are illumined. The purpose of taxonomy is to develop headings about generalizations from a variety of literature which shares similarities.³⁷

A taxonomy is a classification of things as they actually are, in all their specificity: what to call, and how to relate, that red singing thing here, that white sleeping thing there, and that patterned crawling thing over yonder. Linnaeus came up with the general scheme we now use: kingdom, phylum, class, order, genus, species, and variety. So we can speak of the first creature as a cardinal, the second as a Siamese cat, and the third as a diamondback rattlesnake.

A typology offers a set of abstract possibilities in a particular zone, whether or not they describe anything in the real world as such. Such a typology might be "red birds," "blue birds," "green birds," and so on, even though no birds in reality are entirely red, blue, or green. A useful typology helps us notice things. For example, as a child discusses the locomotion of birds, she might easily equate being a bird with flying. But when her teacher sets out some abstract possibilities,

37. Gustafson, preface to *Christ and Culture*, xxx. John Howard Yoder spends a great deal of time barking up this tree, alas, which seriously compromises the value of much of his provocative essay, "How H. Richard Niebuhr Reasoned: A Critique of *Christ and Culture*," in *Authentic Transformation: A New Vision of Christ and Culture*, ed. Glenn H. Stassen, D. M. Yeager, and John Howard Yoder (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1996), 31–89.

such as “birds fly,” “birds walk,” “birds swim,” “birds remain motionless,” she then recalls birds such as penguins and ostriches that do not fly. She also notices that flying birds sometimes walk, and some of them swim. And she then observes birds motionless, especially when brooding. The typology helps her see more clearly what was already there but perhaps easily overlooked.

Furthermore, a typology can open up the imagination of creatures with self-determination, such as ourselves, to possibilities heretofore unexplored. It can help us move beyond what *is* the case to what *could be* the case by expressing the options we currently have before us in clear, abstract categories. “Human beings travel over the earth by various means—walking, swimming, riding or being towed by animals, using machines”—but what about the abstract category of space travel? Why not travel off the earth as well as on it?

Niebuhr's typology helps us in both these ways: in analyzing real-world patterns of church life and in considering possibilities for that life that might be concealed by our extant, circumscribed categories. We might well feel that the only cultural options are fight or flight, while Niebuhr provides us with three more alternatives.

Niebuhr deploys his typology to lift up aspects of the complex thought and life of various prominent individuals and movements in church history. And here we come to the third major zone of criticism, namely, the application of Niebuhr's types to real-world examples.

Most people seem (to Niebuhr) to fit nicely in just one category (e.g., Albrecht Ritschl and most of the rest of the nineteenth-century German liberal tradition in the category “Christ of culture”), while others fit in more than one and thus show up in more than one chapter (Augustine and the apostles Paul and John are the three who do so explicitly, while Niebuhr allows that Martin Luther also is “too complex to permit neat identification of an historic individual with a stylized pattern”).³⁸ Niebuhr himself cautions us that “when one returns from the hypothetical scheme to the rich complexity of individual events, it is evident at once that no person or group ever conforms completely to a type.”³⁹ Niebuhr's scheme thus reminds us of two more crucial ideas in this discussion.

38. Paul shows up in several chapters, and John chiefly in two—if one takes him to be the author of both I John (which Niebuhr exposits under type I) and the gospel bearing his name (which Niebuhr exposits under type V). Augustine, however, is confined to the “Christ transforming culture” type—even in the index—while Niebuhr does allow that “the dualistic motif is strong in Augustine” in the “Christ and culture in paradox” chapter (169), and lists the affinity of aspects of Augustine's thought with other models (207–8). Quakers appear as both representatives of “Christ against culture” and, in later periods, of “Christ of culture” (56–57). The characterization of Luther is on p. 170.

39. Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture*, 43–44.

First, it is not just that historical individuals and groups happen not to be so consistent that they fit entirely into one category. Rather, it is natural and appropriate that Christians will take one stance toward some aspects of a culture and another stance toward other aspects of a culture. John Howard Yoder puts this particularly well in this oft-cited passage:

Some elements of culture the church categorically rejects (pornography, tyranny, cultic idolatry). Other dimensions of culture it accepts within clear limits (economic production, commerce, the graphic arts, paying taxes for peacetime civil government). To still other dimensions of culture Christian faith gives a new motivation and coherence (agriculture, family life, literacy, conflict resolution, empowerment). Still others it strips of their claims to possess autonomous truth and value, and uses them as vehicles of communication (philosophy, language, Old Testament ritual, music). Still other forms of culture are *created* by the Christian churches (hospitals, service of the poor, generalized education, egalitarianism, abolitionism, feminism).⁴⁰

Yoder and others have understandably bristled at the way Niebuhr departs from his own deployment of his typology *as a typology* when he seems to use it as a taxonomy on Anabaptists and others in the category of “Christ against culture.” Having set out their position in typological terms and adduced some historical examples to illustrate it, he then chides those historical individuals and movements for inconsistency: “the radical Christians are always making use of the culture, or parts of the culture, which ostensibly they reject”—such as the philosophy and science of the day, and language itself.⁴¹ Nor, Niebuhr continues, can they do otherwise: “They cannot separate themselves completely, therefore, from the world of culture around them, nor from those needs in themselves which make this culture necessary.”⁴²

40. Yoder, “How H. Richard Niebuhr Reasoned,” 69. Martin E. Marty offers a similar observation from his Lutheran vantage point: “Calvin and his cohorts embody ‘Christ Transforming Culture’ impulses in respect to politics. Luther meanwhile needs to post a dualism, ‘two kingdoms.’ One of them always displays the way ‘the demonic pervades the structures of existence.’ However, when it comes to affirming images in church building, the arts, and music, it is Luther who is the culture-affirmer.... He minimizes the dualism there and sees possibility in converting at least some aspects of the culture” (foreword to Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture*, xviii).

41. Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture*, 69. Yoder returns to this criticism several times in his “How H. Richard Niebuhr Reasoned.”

42. Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture*, 73.

Yoder and company, however, would simply agree with these observations as truistic. But they would go on to reply that this charge of inconsistency is the result of applying a pure type to an utterly, which is to say ludicrously, consistent extreme. Are the Amish supposed to avoid the very roads built by the “English”? Are these separatists supposed to invent their whole language, dress, familial relations, and so on out of whole cloth—cloth without any element, let alone pattern, of the world? This sort of criticism is itself inconsistent in two respects: Niebuhr seems ruthlessly critical of this type in a way he doesn’t criticize any other, and he does so by confusing taxonomy with typology.

Perhaps one thing more should be said on this matter, however. Perhaps Niebuhr’s critique is more searching than has been acknowledged by his Anabaptist critics. For one might well ask just how “unspotted by the world” is *anything* taken from it. Buttons versus zippers seems like a silly Amish controversy to most outsiders, but buttons can be made entirely by the community, while zippers implicate the community in external—indeed, international, and perhaps exploitative—trade. Language itself is of course an encoding of values, and many of those values will not be Christian, even if Christians do, as Yoder suggests, try conscientiously to strip language of “claims to possess autonomous truth and value.” Can one use a racist or sexist epithet, for example, in anything other than a value-laden way? Can one use “he” and “man” nowadays as generic references to human beings without implying a stance on certain matters of gender?

Perhaps, for all its faults, Niebuhr’s point is worth making. Yes, the Anabaptist criticisms remain. But Niebuhr’s typology, and even his own inconsistent application of it in this instance, at least can remind us of just how subtle and complex is the question of distinguishing “Christ” from “culture” for every Christian person and group. The typology also can help us analyze varieties of cultural stances within an apparently homogeneous group, such as the spectrum of Anabaptist models of cultural engagement and disentanglement ranging from urban Mennonites to Amish colonies.

Having considered, then, the first idea that groups do not, and should not, fit nicely and always into one or another scheme, we turn to a second, complementary idea, which is pointed out by George Marsden. It is that individuals and groups demonstrate that one or another of Niebuhr’s categories does describe their *dominant* mode of engagement:

By usually speaking as though his ideal types characterize real historical figures, [Niebuhr] leaves the impression that each Christian or group can be adequately typed by one or the other of the cultural attitudes. To correct this misleading

impression, what we need to emphasize is that the categories are simply, as Niebuhr himself acknowledges, leading motifs. A motif should be seen as a dominant theme with respect to some specific cultural activities. It suggests a musical analogy. A dominant motif may be subordinated in one part of a symphony while another takes over. Identifying a dominant motif in a particular Christian group toward some specific cultural activity should not lead to the expectation that this group will not adopt other motifs toward other cultural activities.⁴³

Most birds really do fly most of the time (albatrosses), while others swim most of the time (ducks), and some walk most of the time (emus). A typology thus can keep us from oversimplification of two sorts, whether mistaken generalizations (“All birds fly”) or excessive complication (“Birds move in lots of different ways and some differently than others”). Niebuhr’s scheme both helps us see more complexity in our subjects than we might otherwise see and helps us discern the fundamental postures of individuals and groups.

One final qualification here is made by Niebuhr himself:

Many a Protestant who has abandoned the Ritschlian answer is attracted to Thomism without being tempted to transfer his allegiance to the Roman church, while in Anglican thought and practice his system is normative for many; on the Christ-culture issue the lines drawn among Christians cannot be made to coincide with the historic distinctions among the great churches.⁴⁴

What Niebuhr says about Thomism is true about other models in other contexts: some Reformed Christians live more in type IV than in type V (Marsden himself, a conservative Presbyterian, advocates type IV at the end of his essay on Christ and culture); some Pentecostals, whom one might assume are in type I, are busy in type V; and we have seen how various groups that historically would be identified with type I (Baptists, Mennonites) or type V (Calvinists) in certain places in America are comfortably practicing type II. Niebuhr’s typology thus helps us again, as it provides us categories to discern this kind of complexity in the real world, where labels (“Mennonite,” “Calvinist”) can easily mislead us into assumptions (Mennonite = type I, Calvinist = type V) that do not match the facts.

43. Marsden, “Christianity and Cultures,” 10.

44. Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture*, 129.

The fourth major zone of criticism centers on Niebuhr's obvious preference for the last of his five types, the "transformation" option.⁴⁵ Many readers have remarked on how this is the one of the five that comes in for the least criticism—indeed, it is hard to discern any criticism at all, and there is no section of critique at the end to parallel those in the other chapters. Other readers have noticed that the placing of this scheme at the end of his book "loads" the discussion toward it as a kind of natural and satisfying end point, its virtues played off the deficiencies of the others, even though it is, in fact, somewhere in the middle of Niebuhr's scheme, with types I and II being the limits between which the others are located. One might remark, finally, that Niebuhr's choice of examples for each category tends to tilt the discussion toward the last two options. His midcentury Protestant audience was not likely to be inspired by the likes of Tertullian and Tolstoy (type I), Peter Abelard and Albrecht Ritschl (type II), or Clement of Alexandria and Thomas Aquinas (type III).⁴⁶ They would certainly be impressed by Paul and by Luther, portrayed in type IV. But then Niebuhr enlists Augustine, Calvin, John Wesley, and Jonathan Edwards for type V, which ought to have impressed particularly his original audience of Presbyterian seminarians. Indeed, the one risk Niebuhr takes in this regard is concluding with a commendation of F. D. Maurice, the nineteenth-century British Christian socialist whose views might not have squared immediately with Texan Christian political instincts of a century later.

45. An irresponsible reading of Niebuhr—irresponsible theologically, hermeneutically, and ethically—occurs in what has been, alas, a popular book: Stanley Hauerwas and William H. Willimon, *Resident Aliens: Life in the Christian Colony* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1989), 40–43. No one who has read this far in the present volume can interpret my remarks as an uncritical apologetic for Niebuhr. Criticism is entirely in order. But Hauerwas and Willimon caricature Niebuhr. Indeed, they do so in so many ways that I cannot linger over them all. A few might suffice to illustrate the point: "Niebuhr set up the argument as if a world-affirming 'church' or world-denying 'sect' were our only options' [we have seen that Niebuhr does not do that, but rather affirms several options as plausible], as if these categories were a faithful depiction of some historical or sociological reality in the first place [which, we have also seen, is what Niebuhr does *not* do in setting out a typology]." Hauerwas and Willimon go on to cast Niebuhr as an unwitting apologist for midcentury America in toto, including its bombing of Hiroshima. Hauerwas and Willimon are demonstrably intelligent and well-meaning men who might simply have been carried away by zeal. But readers ought to be on their guard against the tissue of misrepresentations of Niebuhr and his project in these few pages (40–43).

46. Niebuhr's exposition of the types is biased even more strongly toward type V in that he uses heretics as examples of three of the other types, beyond those listed above, the orthodoxy of some of whom would of course be contested: Montanism for type I, Gnosticism for type II, and Marcion for type IV. It has been widely observed, by the way, that Niebuhr's characterization of Gnosticism is itself largely off the mark: see, for example, Yoder, "How H. Richard Niebuhr Reasoned," 36–37.

Yet let us also take Niebuhr at his word when he remarks affirmatively that different cultures can require different stances.⁴⁷ It is because this is, in fact, a good point to make that I provided what I hope are more plausible examples of each type in the discussion above. However much one might champion one of the intermediate types as perhaps the most common or most typical or most realistic stance for Christians to assume most of the time, I affirm that Christians have faced certain extreme situations in which “Christ against culture” or even “Christ of culture” makes sense, despite Niebuhr’s obvious antipathy toward them.

As we have remarked, furthermore, not only can it be appropriate for Christians to take different stances on different aspects of the same culture, but it typically *is* appropriate. Again, the evangelical tradition is an interesting case in point, exploiting as it has for more than two centuries the latest in communications and organizational technologies to preach a traditional message—whether George Whitefield deploying the dramatic arts of the theater of his time and John Wesley developing a sophisticated network of Methodist fellowship groups, or nineteenth-century evangelists formulating “New Measures” of church architecture (the “anxious bench” on which those who were spiritually questing could sit, and the tents that let the evangelists set up wherever they liked, with or without local clerical support), or Jerry Falwell using a state-of-the-art television studio to broadcast, of all things, *The Old-Time Gospel Hour*.⁴⁸ What is true of evangelicals has also been true of Roman Catholics, whether Matteo Ricci exploiting Confucianist traditions in which to present his Christian teaching in sixteenth-century China or John Paul II appearing on stadium JumboTrons around the world as a Catholic Billy Graham in the late twentieth century. In fact, since cultures are not monolithic, to adopt just one stance toward everything is to refuse the responsibility to think carefully about which stance is the best in this or that instance.

The last point I want to make, however, is one that Niebuhr implies, if he doesn’t say it outright. I think it is well worth considering as a way of making

47. Niebuhr addresses questions of cultural relativity in his opening and closing sections of *Christ and Culture*: see 2, 39–40, 232, 234–41, 249–53. Indeed, almost his last sentence is as follows: “To make our decisions in faith is to make them in view of the fact that no single man or group or historical time is the church; but that there is a church of faith in which we do our partial, relative work and on which we count” (256).

48. Martin E. Marty and Scott Appleby were among the first to remark on fundamentalists being only *selectively* conservative and *selectively* anti-modern: Martin E. Marty and R. Scott Appleby, eds., *Fundamentalisms Observed* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991); and Martin E. Marty and R. Scott Appleby, *The Glory and the Power: The Fundamentalist Challenge of the Modern World* (Boston: Beacon, 1992).

some sense of what we see in Christian history, namely, Christian individuals and groups ranged on more than one side of a controversial issue. To be sure, sometimes Christians disagree because one side is just wrong—motivated by greed, pride, stupidity, and so on. And sometimes both sides are wrong. But I want to suggest that sometimes both sides might be right.

In some orthodox circles there is an invocation of the law of non-contradiction as a kind of logical razor meant to carve away all options but one in a dispute. Yet our world is not always that neatly divisible into right and wrong.

Let us take the vexed question of war, for example. I want to suggest that there have been times in which Christians have properly gone to war. Recent examples would include the fight against Nazi Germany, the fight to stop ethnic cleansing in the former Yugoslavia, and the fight to keep the Taliban from power in Afghanistan. War is something God ordered his people to undertake in the Old Testament. War is something God himself will undertake in the Second Coming of Christ. Most Christians through most of the centuries have understood war to be the “awful option” to deal with evil when all other means have failed.

Yet war is clearly not Christ's ideal. He is the Prince of Peace who himself suffered and died unjustly in order to redeem the world from its various wars—within the human soul as well as without. And the Biblical vision of our destiny is that of the “peaceable kingdom,” without any more conflict (Isa. 2:2–4; 11:6–9). Furthermore, even a “just war” is fraught with danger—not only the obvious physical dangers of injury, death, loss of loved ones, and waste of resources, but also the dangers of pride, jingoism, bloodlust, atrocity, and vengeance.

How, then, to keep warriors humble, to keep violence to a minimum, to affirm that war is a regrettable, temporary measure, fit only for our badly topsy-turvy world until Jesus returns to set things straight? Even more difficult, how to both prosecute a war and simultaneously testify to God's ultimate desire for peace? If the former task is difficult, the latter seems impossible—simply contradictory. How can a group of people both fight a war and bear witness against war?

The law of non-contradiction won't help us here. If undertaking war is right, then opposing options are wrong, and conscientious objectors are resisting the will of God. If radical peacemaking is right, then no wars must be fought, ever, and most Christians through most of history have been terribly, bloodily disobedient.

But what about another possibility? If the “whole counsel of God” on this matter is, in fact, impossible for one group to live out, why not instead consider that God has called most Christians in a society to wage war—most, in order to

maximize resources for the struggle—and yet also called some other Christians to maintain a witness of radical peacemaking and a prophetic voice against the evils of war?⁴⁹

Niebuhr himself makes this point:

The radically Christian answer to the problem of culture [he means type I] needed to be given in the past, and doubtless needs to be given now. It must be given for its own sake, and because without it other Christian groups lose their balance. . . . If Romans 13 is not balanced by I John, the church becomes an instrument of state, unable to point men to their transpolitical destiny and their suprapolitical loyalty; unable also to engage in political tasks, save as one more group of power-hungry or security-seeking men.⁵⁰

Niebuhr goes on to criticize this option as “inadequate” to accomplish the work of God in the world, and I will do the same in Part Three. But while I agree with Niebuhr that this stance does not position Christians to say and do all that must be said and done in the world, I am suggesting, perhaps more forcibly than he did, that Christians in this mode and in these circumstances might be *entirely in the will of God—for them, at that time*. I say this because my main point is that in some cases no single stance says and does all that must be said and done, and therefore more than one posture might be necessary to cumulatively bear witness to the broad scope of God’s word and will in a complex matter. Niebuhr affirms this sort of pluralism in similar language as he testifies to his “conviction that Christ as living Lord is answering the question [of cultural engagement] in the totality of history and life in a fashion which transcends the wisdom of all his interpreters yet employs their partial insights and their necessary conflicts.”⁵¹

49. David Martin makes this point as well: “In my view, the radical peace witness acts to inject a powerful idea into the public mind but has mainly to be carried by small separatist groups because it is incapable of generalization to the state as such” (*Reflections on Sociology and Theology* [Oxford: Clarendon, 1997], 135).

50. Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture*, 68. He also refers to F. D. Maurice’s involvement with Christians of various types in the Christian Socialist movement and suggests that Maurice would have remarked that “no Christian thought can encompass the thought of the Master, and that as the body is one but has many members so also the church” (229). I am extending these suggestive thoughts of Niebuhr in a direction I trust he himself would judge plausible.

51. *Ibid.*, 2. He says something similar at the beginning of his “Concluding Unscientific Postscript,” in *Christ and Culture*, 231–32. And he published a related version of these sentiments more than a decade earlier: “The invisibility of the catholic church is due not only to the fact that no one society or nation of Christians can represent the universal but also to the fact that no one time, but only all times together, can set forth the full meaning of the movement towards the eternal and its created image” (*The Kingdom of God in America* [New York: Harper, 1959 (1937)], xv).

I highlight this point because most readers seem to conclude that the thrust of his book is so strongly toward type V as to make it not just the best option but simply normative.

Certainly this conjecture that more than one option can be affirmed in a given instance is a possibility around which lurk the perils of relativism and of a lazy refusal to confront conflict among Christians. Certainly this idea could be used to avoid hard decisions among difficult options.⁵² At this point, all I am asserting is that it is a plausible possibility in at least some cases. Put a little more strongly, I think it makes sense of a fundamental historical reality: Christians of obvious good sense and good faith have disagreed about lots of things, and it's not clear to me, at least, that one side or another was always just wrong. I recognize that I have placed a kind of bracket around these views, thus undercutting their claim to represent God's truth entirely and clearly. Indeed, I recognize that I am implicitly resolving the paradox in this example in favor of a just-war position that is held in a vital kind of check by a vigorous peace witness. But I have done so with sincere appreciation of both sides' moral seriousness and theological integrity. Such an outlook cannot possibly please everyone, of course, and especially not purists of any one option. But I hope it is at least a viewpoint worth considering, and we shall revisit this viewpoint in Part Three.

If Niebuhr's typology, therefore, can help us see that different cultures can prompt different stances by Christians and that different aspects of the same culture can prompt different stances by Christians, then perhaps it can help us see that different aspects of the same culture can prompt different stances by different Christians. This conclusion is indeed paradoxical. It is only the first of several that will take me the rest of this book to set out.

Thus I conclude my project of defending Niebuhr's basic typology as a still-useful guide to many issues.⁵³ I shall use it occasionally in the remainder of this volume. And I shall spend the last part of this book suggesting that Niebuhr's odd type IV—"Christ in paradox with culture"—is worth another, better look. I shall be recommending a kind of hybrid of types IV and V. Let us consider the phrase now common in consideration of the Kingdom of God: "already, but not yet." It seems to me that we can see two of Niebuhr's types as various versions of an "already" motif: "Christ of culture" and "Christ above culture." We can also see "not yet" as characteristic of "Christ against culture." Niebuhr's fifth type,

52. Yoder accuses Niebuhr of exactly these sins: "How H. Richard Niebuhr Reasoned," 79–83.

53. For an example of the abiding relevance of Niebuhr's typology, see Michael W. McConnell, Robert F. Cochran Jr., and Angela C. Carmella, eds., *Christian Perspectives on Legal Thought* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2001).

“Christ transforming culture,” does maintain, at least temporarily, the tension of “already, but not yet.” But only Niebuhr’s fourth type, “Christ in paradox with culture,” maintains the full and abiding tension of “already, but not yet”—itself literally a paradox.

Thus I will offer in what follows a new version of the Christian Realism usually associated with Niebuhr’s brother, Reinhold. But I see it qualified through the life and work of both C. S. Lewis and Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who are, along with Reinhold, the subjects of Part Two.