General Introduction: Reexamining H. Richard Niebuhr

The ancient Christian paradox of church and world is one with which Helmut Richard Niebuhr (1894–1962) wrestled deeply, and often profoundly, over the course of his career as a prominent twentieth-century American theologian. Long before him, St. Luke demonstrated his awareness of it in his two-volume New Testament account of the life of Jesus and the early Christian church. More specific insights surfaced in the second-century *Epistle to Diognetus,* which asserted that "nowhere" do Christians "live in cities of their own" or "practice an eccentric way of life"[1] because, as the church father Tertullian (155–240) put it in addressing the provincial governors of the Roman Empire, they "sojourn with you in the world, abjuring neither forum, nor shambles, nor bath, nor booth, nor workshop, nor inn, nor weekly market, nor any other places of commerce."[2] Perhaps the best source for this paradox, however, has always been the Gospel of St. John, where Jesus prays to his Father

1. "The Epistle to Diognetus," in *The Apostolic Fathers in English,* 3rd ed., trans. and ed. Michael W. Holmes (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2006), 288–301.
2. Tertullian, "The Apology," in *Latin Christianity: Its Founder, Tertullian*, The Ante-Nicene Fathers 3, ed. Alexander Roberts, James Donaldson, and Arthur Cleveland Coxe (New York: Cosimo Classics, 2007), 17–60.

on behalf of his disciples, "They do not belong to the world, just as I do not belong to the world. Sanctify them in the truth; your word is truth. As you have sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world" (John 17:16–18 NRSV). On the basis of this text, Christians have tended to believe that as the Son of God, Jesus, who was not of the world, came into the world to reveal the truth about God. While here, he called disciples out of the world they were in, only to send them back into it for the purpose of carrying on the same saving mission for which he had come.

As the body of Christ, the church, therefore, is always to be *in* but not *of* the world. While the steps in this process of reasoning are logical ones, the concluding idea that it yields is not. To be *in* the world and at the same time not *of* the world are seemingly contradictory notions. Yet because both are in fact true, they form a paradox, two truths about the church that must be dynamically kept in tension with each other as it engages the world into which its Lord continues to send it.

H. Richard Niebuhr's insights into this paradox are reflected in the three major works for which he is still remembered. The first was published in 1929 as *The Social Sources of Denominationalism*. While it employed sociological analysis in order to explain the multitude of denominational divisions in American Protestantism, this book was also an exposé of a church that had repeatedly become *of* the world into which it had been sent. To him, it made no difference whether one looked at denominations in terms of class, region, nation, immigrant origins, or racial identity. All of them of were guilty of worldly accommodation.

His second major work, which came off the press in 1937, put greater emphasis on the opposite side of the paradoxical relationship between church and world. In *The Kingdom of God in America*, he combed through the records of America's religious past in search

of places where faith in God as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit had altered the surrounding world in which its churches had been at work. In the process, the book succeeded not only in bringing the Puritans, Jonathan Edwards, and the later evangelical revivalists out of the dark cellar to which secular historians had relegated them, but in helping encourage a subsequent generation of religious historians to give more extensive attention to the role of their theology in the shaping of American culture. Here he also chose to depict the church's relationship to the world as a "dialectical movement" that was expressed "in the direction toward God and the direction toward the world which is loved in God, in the pilgrimage toward the eternal kingdom and in the desire to make his will real on earth."[3]

Appearing in 1951, his book *Christ and Culture* outlined five distinct Christian attitudes toward the world. Between the two extremes of worldly (Christ *of* culture) and separatist (Christ *against* culture) types of behavior on the part of the church, he placed three mediating varieties, all of which sought to keep the church in its "in-but-not of" relationship with the world. The synthesist type (Christ *above* culture) commended the world for its civilized achievements, but still needed the church to point it to a godly center of value. The dualist type (Christ and culture *in paradox*) vested Christians with a double citizenship and called upon them to give allegiance to the church and to the state in each of these "two kingdoms." For the conversionist type (Christ *the transformer of* culture), the entire world, while corrupted by human sinfulness, remained the one sphere of divine activity, and for this reason proponents saw the church's mission as one aiding of its redemption by calling upon societies as well as individuals to turn away from their idolatries and to make God the focus of their faith. Frequent references to one or more

3. H. Richard Niebuhr, *The Kingdom of God in America* (New York: Harper & Row, 1937), xiv–xv.

of these same five categories on the part of contemporary church leaders and scholars seeking to explain the Christianity's present or past relationship to a particular society clearly attest to the enduring value of this important book.

My own interest in this important feature of H. Richard Niebuhr's thinking exceeds the span of a church career that has taken me from seminary teaching to two parish pastorates, to a judicatory leadership position, and then back to adjunct teaching in another seminary setting. In the historiography course my graduate school program required me to take, the professor called upon me to write a paper comparing the work of Ernst Troeltsch and Niebuhr. I am still grateful for this assignment because it set the table for a doctoral dissertation that involved me in a closer examination of those features of Niebuhr's life that helped to shape his interpretations of America's religious history. My own religious upbringing served to pique my interest in researching his early years in the Evangelical Synod of North America, a small church body similar to my own Midwestern Lutheran denomination in terms of its German immigrant origins. Along the way, I even discovered that the religious lineage of my paternal grandfather, George W. Diefenthaler, was in fact German "Evangelical." The fact that he was born on July 4, 1878 and given the middle name "Washington" by his parents, moreover, has led me to believe that my grandfather's family was as eager as Niebuhr's to embrace the new world of America that had become their home. In my dissertation, I argued that over the course of his career, Niebuhr explored all five of the church-world relationship types that he ultimately set forth in *Christ and Culture*. With the assistance of Professor Timothy Smith and a postdoctoral fellowship at Johns Hopkins University, this work was transformed into *H. Richard Niebuhr: A Lifetime of Reflections on the Church and the World*, published by Mercer University Press.

Since then, controversy has erupted among scholars over the enduring value of Niebuhr's typology. The first salvo came in 1989 from Stanley Hauerwas and Will Willimon in their book *Resident Aliens*. As they provocatively put it, "We have come to believe that few books have been a greater hindrance to an accurate assessment of our situation than *Christ and Culture*."[4] The "situation" on their minds was the post-Constantinian world to which Christians had been awakened and in which churches were already struggling to find their bearings. While Niebuhr in fact shared the conviction of these authors that "God, not the nations, rules the world," and stated this at many points throughout his writings, they viewed him as a prime example of the Christendom, first brought into being by the Emperor Constantine in 313 CE, in which the church had consistently sought to make its faith credible to the prevailing culture in order to retain its position of privilege. In the last days of Christendom in America that followed World War II, Niebuhr could be just as critical as they were of the fusion of Christianity with right- and left-wing political agendas. And yet these two well-respected theologians pictured his Christ-the-transformer-of-culture model as the church that "liberal, mainline, American Protestantism aspired to be," one that "busied itself with making America a better place in which to live" and sought to transform "society into something of which Jesus might approve."[5]

In taking this position they shared the thinking of John Howard Yoder, one of the sharpest critics of Niebuhr's typology. Yoder had in fact stated his objections well before Hauerwas and Willimon but did not publish them until 1996, in an essay entitled "How H. Richard Niebuhr Reasoned." Put off by the weaknesses of his own Anabaptist

4. Stanley Hauerwas and William H. Willimon, *Resident Aliens: Life in the Christian Colony* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1989), 40.
5. Ibid., 39–43.

tradition highlighted in *Christ and Culture*, Yoder targeted Niebuhr's implicit assumptions, the criteria he employed for evaluating each of his types, and the logic of his presentation, all of which he was ready to regard as "demonic" because they deceptively predisposed readers to see the "superiority of the fifth position."[6] In addition, Yoder took issue with Niebuhr's "monolithic" view of culture, which in his estimation blinded Niebuhr to the diversity of cultural attitudes most any group might exhibit, and he chided him for failing to put Christ into the context of the robust New Testament confession of him as "Lord." Having said all of this, however, he provided no cogent reason to reject the conversionist model he accused Niebuhr of favoring, and his apologetic call for the church, out of obedience to its Lord, to set itself apart as an alternative culture in order to join Christ in liberating the world from the grip of demonic principalities and powers only seemed to confirm rather than repudiate Niebuhr's assessment of the separatist model.[7]

Yoder also seconded Hauerwas and Willimon's criticism of *Christ and Culture* "as a prime example of repressive tolerance."[8] Niebuhr insisted that the relative nature of everyone's intellectual constructs not only ruled out the possibility of making any of his five types the "last word," but kept all the others in play when it came to assessing church-world relationships in ever-changing contexts. To think otherwise would be usurping a position that belonged to God alone. "Tolerant equiprobabilism" was the derisive term Yoder coined for such thinking. To him, Niebuhr's appeal to God as only source of absolute certainty was a "diversionary" tactic he was using in order to avoid affirming any definite plan of action.[9] In the

6. John Howard Yoder, "How H. Richard Niebuhr Reasoned: A Critique of *Christ and Culture*," in *Authentic Transformation: A New Vision of Christ and Culture* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1996), 42–55.
7. Ibid., 71–76.
8. Hauerwas and Willimon, *Resident Aliens*, 41.

"Concluding Unscientific Postscript" to his book, Niebuhr had in fact stated that his understanding of God as the ultimate reality to whom persons of faith might look for guidance kept his thinking from becoming "relativistic." It required one to stand within a larger human community and to enter into dialogue with other present and past interpreters of church-world relationships. It also encouraged the making of specific decisions, albeit humbly and as a confession of one's own faith.[10] Yet Yoder remained bold enough to charge Niebuhr with thinking that he had found "a way to eat his cake and have it too." In keeping with the tolerant, inclusive, and pluralistic outlook of his "Ivy League graduate school culture," his use of "divine transcendence" to forbid anyone else's claim to the truth actually served to put himself in a better position to have the "last word."[11]

At about the same time, Glen H. Stassen and D. M. Yeager served to moderate Yoder's hefty barrage of criticisms. Both sought to interpret the meaning of Niebuhr's conversionist model in light of some of his other writings on the subject of church and world. Their major criticism was that Niebuhr was reluctant to spell out a "specific" set of ethical principles or "concrete" courses of action that might flow from this model. Yeager in particular upbraided him for his failure to prophetically address instances of oppression, violence, and abuse of power during the years following the publication of *Christ and Culture*.[12] In an article in 1946, Niebuhr had stated that the "mind of Christ" was the church's "norm," one that it set forth as a confession of its faith and expressed in codes of conduct. But when the church "substitutes for the person of Christ some set of

9. Yoder, "How H. Richard Niebuhr Reasoned," 81.
10. H. Richard Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture* (New York: Harper & Row, 1951), 230–56.
11. Yoder, "How H. Richard Niebuhr Reasoned," 82.
12. See D. M. Yeager, "The Social Self in the Pilgrim Church," and Glen H. Stassen, "Concrete Christological Norms for Transformation," in *Authentic Transformation: A New Vision of Christ and Culture* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1996), 91–126, 127–89.

metaphysical or legal propositions," to him it had "begun to lose its character as church and to become a dogmatic or legal society."[13] Nevertheless, Stassen saw this as a deficiency in need of correction. Taking his cue from Yoder, he proceeded to list seven "bedrock normative practices" for the church to follow in order to bring the incarnate reality of Christ to the attention of the world.[14]

In 1999, on the fiftieth anniversary of the lectures at Austin Presbyterian Seminary on which Niebuhr based *Christ and Culture*, the American religious historian George Marsden stated somewhat provocatively that Niebuhr's "analysis in its present form could be near the end of its usefulness." In his assessment of Niebuhr, however, he sought to provide a positive answer to the question embedded in the original title of his lecture, "Can These Categories Be Saved?" For one thing, he pointed out that Niebuhr's book had appeared during the period immediately following World War II; in the midst of the debates then taking place over the future of Western civilization, he was attempting to counter those "secularists" who viewed Christianity as a foe rather than a friend in the shaping of a better future for the world. In answer to the "multiculturalist" objections to the book, he also stressed that Niebuhr was writing in the "consensus" era of American history, when "building a healthy and unified mainstream culture" was the chief objective. In response to critics who emphasized that Niebuhr's categories were "historically inadequate," moreover, Marsden stated his belief that they could be salvaged if they were not seen as mutually exclusive. "Virtually every Christian and every Christian group expresses in one way or

13. H. Richard Niebuhr, "The Norm of the Church," *The Journal of Religious Thought* 4 (Autumn–Winter 1946–1947): 10–11.

14. Stassen, "Concrete Christological Norms," 164–67. His list of "bedrock practices" include: 1) not judging, but forgiving, healing, and breaking down barriers that marginalize or exclude; 2) delivering justice; 3) evangelism, preaching the gospel and calling for repentance and discipleship; 4) nonviolent transforming initiatives; 5) love of enemy; 6) mutual servanthood; and 7) prayer.

another," as he put it, "all five of the motifs." Furthermore, he felt that adding more categories to the celebrated typology was unnecessary because the five Niebuhr had originally proposed remained "extremely useful analytical tools" as long as one recognized the "complexity of any real historical subjects."[15]

When the fiftieth anniversary of *Christ and Culture* in 2001 became the occasion for the publication of a new edition of the book, other scholars weighed in on the side of Niebuhr. In his foreword, Martin Marty lauded the book as a "classic"—not only because one could not go back to a thought world that existed prior to Niebuhr without confronting his typology and recognizing the marks it had left but also because the circle of persons finding it useful for evaluating the relationship between religion and society had been broadened to include scholars of other world religions and the growing number of self-identified Christians not connected with any church. He also stated that instead of "imposing straitjackets, building silos, or hermetically sealed containers" in order to confine and define the Christian writers whom he selected to support each of his types, Niebuhr had in fact created five "zones" designed to illustrate how Christians wrestle with a dominant culture.[16]

In his preface, subtitled "An Appreciative Interpretation," James Gustafson—a student, colleague, and friend of Niebuhr—took more direct aim at the critics. His chief target was Marsden, who, in attempting to "save" Niebuhr's categories, had in Gustafson's estimation retained the same wrong assumptions as those who were trying to discount their value. Gustafson argued that judgments about the "historical adequacy" of Niebuhr's work were beside the point because it was never Niebuhr's intention to write a history of

15. George Marsden, "Transforming Niebuhr's Categories," *Insights: Faculty Journal of Austin Seminary* 115, no. 1 (Fall 1999): 4–15.

16. Martin E. Marty, "Foreword," in H. Richard Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2001), xiii–xix.

Christian theological ethics. His "ideal types" were in fact "heuristic devices to enable readers to understand materials and issues to which they refer." Gustafson, moreover, saw Niebuhr as a teacher who wanted to show the readers of the book, as he did his students, *how* rather than *what* to think about church-world relationships by encouraging them to thoughtfully compare various historical options. In addition, he asserted that Niebuhr's "undogmatic mind" remained one that "after careful consideration, could persuasively but undramatically articulate his theological and ethical judgments." According to Gustafson, when Niebuhr's real purpose was properly understood, the book could also enable one to locate the church-world positions of vocal critics such as Hauerwas and Yoder and consider the possible implications in light of the other types.[17]

More recently, conservative evangelical scholar D. A. Carson put forth his evaluation of the Niebuhr typology in his *Christ and Culture Revisited*. Rather than launching a frontal assault, he found reasons to side with earlier critics in viewing Niebuhr's types as "mutually-exclusive choices" that pointed to "Christ-the-transformer of culture" as the one Niebuhr intended to prescribe. Like Yoder, he deemed Niebuhr's *Christ* to be "sub-biblical" and his concept of *culture* to be in need of sharper definition. He also shared Hauerwas and Willimon's contempt for the "intolerance of tolerance," which the relativism that governed Niebuhr's thinking about them could easily reinforce. In place of Niebuhr's fivefold paradigm, moreover, Carson proposed a single "holistic" model for assessing church-world relationships grounded in what he regarded as the "great turning points in redemptive history" as these were set forth on the pages of the Old and New Testaments.[18] Niebuhr would have probably

17. James M. Gustafson, "Preface: An Appreciative Interpretation," in H. Richard Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2001), xxi–xxxv.
18. D. A. Carson, *Christ and Culture Revisited* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), 1–58.

flagged Carson's paradigm as a form of biblicism because it made a book rather than God the object of faith. To Niebuhr, the Bible functioned as a "dictionary" that enabled one to interpret more precisely the ways in which God was continuing to reveal himself in the public and private experiences of contemporary life.[19] Carson acknowledged that different features of his biblical paradigm might receive greater emphasis in certain historical and cultural contexts. Nevertheless, for him all of his "turning points" remained "non-negotiables."[20]

Other participants in this debate over the value of Niebuhr's *Christ and Culture* could be cited, but the ones I have highlighted appear to be of three types: critics (Hauerwas and Willimon, Yoder, and Stassen), defenders (Marty and Gustafson), and fixers (Marsden and Carson). Like Niebuhr, I am mindful of the hazards of constructing typologies and acknowledge that some of his analysts might fit in more than one category. But it is their differing perspectives on Niebuhr and their lively discussion of his ideal types that serve to confirm the enduring quality of his work. The debate has prompted me to assemble this collection in order to give Niebuhr more of a chance to speak for himself. Most of the aforementioned scholars, despite their differences, recognize the need to investigate the larger corpus of Niebuhr's thoughts in order to achieve a more complete picture of his approach to church-world relationships. While some have attempted to do this, all have tended to ignore his formative years as a budding scholar and church leader in the Evangelical Synod of North America. With this book, I am hoping to help correct this deficiency.

19. See, for example, H. Richard Niebuhr, "Reformation: Continuing Imperative," *The Christian Century* 77 (March 2, 1960): 250.
20. Carson, *Christ and Culture Revisited*, 59–65.

In 1929, well before the appointment to the Yale Divinity School faculty that would give him a platform for addressing all of mainline American Protestantism, Niebuhr told members of his German-immigrant church body that "ultimately the problem of church and world involves us in a paradox; unless the church accommodates itself to the world it becomes sterile inwardly and outwardly; unless it transcends the world it becomes indistinguishable from the world and loses its effectiveness no less surely." The relationship between the two was one he also chose to depict in dynamic terms: "The rhythm of approach and withdrawal need not be like the swinging of the pendulum, mere repetition without progress; it may be more like the rhythm of the waves that wash upon the beach; each succeeding wave advances a little farther into the world with its cleansing gospel before that gospel becomes sullied with the earth."[21] As his first two books, *The Social Sources of Denominationalism* and *The Kingdom of God in America*, more clearly demonstrate, Niebuhr understood that the church was inevitably shaped by the world it set out to shape, and in some cases even succeed in shaping. Many of America's religious historians continue to employ this hermeneutic in order to adumbrate our past and thereby help us identify a preferred pathway into the future.[22]

Over the course of his career, the terminology Niebuhr employed to describe this paradox became progressively more nuanced. Already in *Social Sources*, he recognized that from a sociological standpoint the church could become as worldly as the world into which it was being sent. Subsequently, in *Kingdom of God*, he drew a distinction between Christianity as movement and as institution, stating that the

21. H. Richard Niebuhr, "The Church in the Modern World," *The Keryx* 20 (May 1929): 10, 29.
22. See, for example, Nathan O. Hatch, *The Democratization of American Christianity* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1989); Mark A. Noll, *America's God: From Jonathan Edwards to Abraham Lincoln* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002); and Grant Wacker, *America's Pastor: Billy Graham and the Shaping of a Nation* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap, 2014).

"true church is not an organization but the organic movement of those who have been 'called out' and 'sent.'"[23] By the time he wrote *Christ and Culture*, he had abandoned this terminology altogether. For *world*, he substituted *culture*, which he defined as the realm of human activity. Despite its godless ways, the *world* to him was still God's creation and the object of his redemption. Furthermore, the term *Christ* permitted him to separate more clearly those features of the *church* that made it as corruptible as its culture from the gospel message it was called to bring to that culture's attention.[24] In spite of Niebuhr's change in terminology, I have chosen to use the terms *church* and *world* on all the pages that follow, as I am principally interested in keeping the focus on his profound understanding of the paradoxical nature of their relationship.

The existential character of so much of what Niebuhr said about church-world relationships also motivates this book. His deep faith in a transcendent God, whom he believed was also omnipresent in the world, made every event potentially revelatory. Therefore, it is helpful to examine at least some of his responses to key events in the world and the church during his lifetime. Niebuhr did not see himself as a professional historian. Instead, he brought his considerable historical knowledge to bear on his assessments of contemporary developments. Nor did he fit the "ivory tower" academic stereotype. Niebuhr's chief commitment was always to the church of his day. Hence, I have purposely selected writings in which he was addressing church members, both lay and clergy.

I also need to say a word about the process of choosing documents for this collection. To keep the book within the established

23. Niebuhr, *Kingdom of God in America*, xiv.
24. On the basis of his other writings, Niebuhr would acknowledge that human understanding of Christ and the gospel are also subject to corruption, and that for this reason, these same truths must remain subject to correction. See H. Richard Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture*, 11–39.

parameters, I needed to make some hard choices. There were also theological gems that I would like to have included but did not because they have been published or republished elsewhere. I direct the attention of all interested parties to William Stacy Johnson's fine collection of chiefly unpublished Niebuhr documents, *H. Richard Niebuhr: Theology, History, and Culture*, and to Kristine A. Culp's *"The Responsibility of the Church For Society" and Other Essays by H. Richard Niebuhr*. In addition, two other criteria drove my choices. One was that I wanted to present documents that illustrate the context in which aspects of Niebuhr's church-world thinking developed in each of the three major periods in his adult life: formative years in the Evangelical Synod (1914–1929), the decade of the Great Depression (1930–1940), and World War II and its aftermath (1941–1962). The other was that I wanted to inject an element of variety into the selection of Niebuhr's writings in terms of their theological density.

Finally, I respectfully disagree with Hauerwas and Willimon's assessment of Niebuhr, and more particularly his book *Christ and Culture*, as a relic of the Christendom era that has now passed away. The writings of H. Richard Niebuhr I have chosen will demonstrate to readers that in some ways, he was a Christian thinker who was ahead of his time with respect to the applicability of the age-old paradox of church and world. Not only that, but in the epilogue I will make a case for inviting him to the table for conversations about the challenges facing the post-Constantinian church in the twenty-first-century world of North America.