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**Public theology after *Christ and Culture*:
Post-Christendom Trajectories**

by Doug Hynd

Abstract

The assumptions and analysis underpinning H Richard Niebuhr’s influential *Christ and Culture* typology have been carried forward with his typology into much current work in public theology. This has resulted in an unquestioned, even if mostly implicit, commitment to a Christendom model and mindset in much of the resulting debate about Christian mission.

This paper offers a critique from the Anabaptist tradition of Christian public witness of the theological and sociological assumptions of *Christ and Culture* as they relate to Christian engagement and mission. This critique draws on the seminal work of John Howard Yoder and its more recent development by Craig Carter.

On the basis of this critique, the paper moves on to offer an alternative approach to mission and the transformation of culture after Christendom. The shape of this alternative post-Christendom approach is illustrated with reference to some radical trajectories of Christian intellectual critique and public witness in the late twentieth century.

Doug Hynd
Academic Associate
St Mark’s National Theological Institute
Canberra

Introduction: Why Niebuhr? Why public theology? Why now?

I started out during 2007 to explore the burgeoning debate on Christian engagement in Australian politics and policy making. That paper remains unfinished because I recognised the need to do some further thinking about the theological framework and typologies around the issue of Christian engagement in the public sphere.¹

That led me back to HR Niebuhr's *Christ and Culture* and to an exploration of the implicit assumptions underpinning his classification. Some questions that emerged include:

- Are some of the key assumptions underlying the typology empirically valid and normatively sustainable, particularly those related to:
 - Christology;
 - Culture; and
 - Christendom?²
- Is the typology still helpful when we are moving in Australia beyond the Christendom mindset?
- Can we re-imagine what cultural and social witness by the Christian movement might look like after Christendom?³

What follows is a first rough sketch of answers to those questions.

¹ This is one of a series of papers I am currently working on exploring the impact of Christendom and its unwinding in the Australian context informed particularly by Stuart Murray's *Post-Christendom: Church and Mission in a Strange New World* (Paternoster, 2004) and by Simon Barrow's columns and papers on the Ekklesia web site Papers in various stages of development include:

- *Getting Back to Jesus: Theology, Mission and Christendom*
- *Getting over the Christendom Mindset down Under: with a little help from Kevin Rudd, Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Pilgram Marpeck*

² Christendom as the rejection of the set of presumptions that the church should determine a world in which it is safe – Hauerwas as quoted by R A Markus *Christianity and the Secular* University of Notre Dame Press, 2006, p.91

³ The timing of the emergence of “public theology” as a category of theological research and discourse particularly across the English speaking world itself raises questions to those of a sociologically suspicious nature. Is public theology at least partially an attempt to maintain a space for Christian engagement in the public sphere without fully facing the impact of the unwinding of the Christendom settlement? This paper though it is not an attempt to explore the issue, has underpinning it a suspicion that the ghost of H.R.Niebuhr's classic **Christ and Culture** is haunting much of the work currently proceeding under the label of public theology. This haunting I suspect may be particularly characteristic of those nations where Christianity has been profoundly shaped by the Christendom settlement and its long deconstruction through the privatisation of religious faith at the hands of the nation-state.

H R Niebuhr – *Christ and Culture* – a classical typology

See Attachment A: Table 1 – Summary of the *Christ and Culture* typology

There is something rhetorically powerful about Niebuhr's *Christ and Culture* typology. I like many others found it appealing and attractive. It has become a classic and has been taken for granted by teachers of Christian ethics around the world over the past half century. As David Cunningham observes:

*The invention of such a straightforward device – enabling readers to classify much of Christian history and to sort out their own perspectives in the process – was a theological coup of epic proportions. ... In fact the book has such a strong hold on the collective mindset of those who study the issue that it can be difficult for many people to imagine thinking through the issue in any other form.*⁴

Despite finding the book initially compelling over the years I became increasingly uneasy over Niebuhr's Christ against Culture category. This unease found a focus when I read John Howard Yoder's paper "How H Richard Niebuhr Reasoned: A Critique of *Christ and Culture*"⁵

In the discussion that follows while I start with issues around Niebuhr's Christology and his definition of culture, these are a preliminary step towards identifying Niebuhr's largely tacit acceptance of the Christendom settlement.

Christology in *Christ and Culture*

Christology is a central issue for Yoder in his critique of *Christ and Culture*. That Yoder argues that Niebuhr's Christology is inadequate, should not be particularly surprising as it was a key issue in Yoder's *The Politics of Jesus*, where he tackled the standard mainstream arguments as to why Jesus could not or should not be normative for Christian ethics, an argument that had both Reinhold and H Richard Niebuhr in view.

According to Craig Carter who has summarised and expanded Yoder's argument on this point:

The Christ of Christ and Culture... is a docetic Christ who is not really embedded firmly in history. The Jesus of the Gospels is a flesh and blood, Jewish, human being who thinks like a Jew, knows the Jewish Scriptures inside out and preaches and teaches about the Kingdom of God in an effort to reinterpret (within a tradition) the meaning of messiahship. As the overwhelming consensus of Third Quest [\[17\]](#) New Testament scholarship is making clear, Jesus did not so much "reject" his culture as he "reinterpreted" the Scriptures and brought together previously unconnected strands of the tradition to define a new kind of Messiah and a new vision of the

⁴ Cunningham *Christian Ethics: The End of the Law* p.107

⁵ In Glen H Stassen, D M Yeager & John Howard Yoder *Authentic Transformation: A New Vision of Christ and Culture* Abingdon Press, 1996, pp.31-89. The book also contains some important theological and ethical discussion by Glen Stassen on the question of transformation.

Kingdom.... Jesus was in dialogue with, but clearly different from, the Sadducees and Herodians, the Pharisees, the Essenes and the Zealots.[18] ⁶

Recent New Testament scholarship to which Carter is referring has helped us locate Jesus in his specific political, social context in a way that enables us to move beyond Niebuhr's abstract "Christ and give us account of a Jesus who took specific stands on the pressing issues of his day."⁷

The issue of Culture in *Christ & Culture*

The distinguished church historian George Marsden gives substantial weight to Yoder's criticism of the abstractness of Niebuhr's category of "Christ" and acknowledges that ... *if we are to continue to use the Christ and culture language, we have to do it with a warning label that using the term "Christ" as opposed to culture can be misleading. The Christ and culture juxtaposition may reinforce the tendency of Christians to forget that their own understanding of Christianity is a cultural product.*⁸

The issue of the characterisation of culture is a critical issue for the typology. According to Yoder, Niebuhr uses culture almost indiscriminately as equivalent to "anything people do together", including everything from language to warfare. Having defined culture in this monolithic way. Niebuhr then turns around and criticizes "Christ against culture" advocates for not being consistent in their anti-worldly profession. They may reject Niebuhr says the pleasures of sex and of wealth, renounce learning and the fine arts, and refuse to participate in civil government or warfare, but they inevitably adopt some other cultural forms, such as language, learning of earlier eras, or agriculture. Tertullian comes in for particular attention on this score.

On Yoder's view this discrimination in responding differently to different dimensions of culture is precisely what Christians should be doing. Nothing reprehensible or inconsistent about it.

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)⁹.

⁶ Craig Carter "The Legacy of an Inadequate Christology: Yoder's Critique of Niebuhr's *Christ and Culture*" *Mennonite Quarterly Review* July 2003

<http://www.goshen.edu/mqr/pastissues/july03carter.html> The implications of a docetic Christology are substantial and highly deleterious as Carter notes.

⁷ Some examples of scholarship that enable us to ground Jesus in the reality of early first century Palestine:

- John Howard Yoder *The Politics of Jesus and Beyond the Jewish Christian Schism*.
- Thomas Yoder Neufeld *Recovering Jesus: The Witness of the New Testament*
- Alan Storkey *Jesus and Politics: confronting the Powers*

⁸ Marsden in a lecture to celebrate the fiftieth anniversary of the lectures that became *Christ & Culture* "Christianity and Cultures: Transforming Niebuhr's Categories"

⁹ Yoder, "How H. Richard Niebuhr Reasoned: A Critique of *Christ and Culture*," 69.

Further:

- the comprehensiveness of Niebuhr's categorisation of culture means that the political arrangements of the contemporary era can be lost sight of and taken for granted as normative. There is an inherently conservative bias built into a typology which has a unified comprehensive characterisation of culture.
- By postulating two distinct realms, one of culture that is distinguished from the fundamental religious commitment that is summarised under the category of "Christ", is a way of seeing that has only become possible in the modern age., for as Cunningham points out ... *only in modernity do people begin to imagine a "separate" realm of religious life that could be set apart at least theoretically from everything else that happens.*¹⁰

We need to be clear then that whatever we think we are doing in developing and applying typologies such as Christ and culture, the people and movements we are analysing might well be justified in failing to recognise themselves as being properly accounted for in our analysis.

Cunningham's point suggests that a much less comprehensive typology that does not presume a necessary totalising dichotomy and focuses analysis around a limited issue or behavioural stance by a faith community might well be more appropriate – say for example the acceptance or non-acceptance of coercive violence by the governing authorities to further the aims of the Christian community.

Christendom in *Christ and Culture*

Consideration of the monolithic character of culture in the typology brings to the surface an implicit assumption about the normativeness of a Christendom . Yoder notes in his discussion of the monolithic and autonomous character of culture in Niebuhr that ... *the state is prototypical, if not pre-eminent as representative of "culture"*.¹¹ If we look at those Niebuhr is most critical of in his discussion, the criticism swings around their critical stance on participation in government and engagement in war.

In discussing the need to openly account for the axioms that Niebuhr has chosen, beyond the monolithic character of culture Yoder notes that a key axiom in *Christ and Culture* is ... *the assumption that the state or even the violence of the state is pre-eminently representative of culture, so that pacifists who reject that are described as being, against culture "as such" or as a whole (even though they are in act affirmative about agriculture, the arts, marriage, communication and social justice).* *H Richard Niebuhr does not make the state (or war) nearly as important for his whole system as does his brother Reinhold ... yet in his portrayal of both Tolstoy and Tertullian it is their challenging the Empire (Roman or Russian) and its wars which best exemplify the "against culture" posture.*¹²

Marsden makes a further assessment that is broadly supportive of Yoder's argument. *While Niebuhr had no illusions about building the Kingdom of God on earth. he*

¹⁰ Cunningham p.107 – William Cavanaugh has provided a powerful historical account of the separation of the political from the religious in his article "Afire Strong Enough to consume the House"

¹¹ Yoder p.56 op cit

¹² Yoder pp.51-52 "How H Richard Niebuhr Reasoned: A Critique of *Christ and Culture*"

favored a unified civilization to which Christian influences could make positive contributions.

In the context of this debate, Niebuhr begins by addressing accusations that Christianity has no positive contribution to make to civilization or culture (he uses the two terms more or less interchangeably).¹³

Yoder takes this point further in arguing that for Niebuhr:

The first, and perhaps the most important basic implicit assumption, all the more important because it is not brought to the surface consciously, is that it is the responsibility of the ethicist to stand within the “mainstream” of his own religious civilization. This is exemplified superficially by Niebuhr’s lack of any serious attention to free church strategies with Christendom since the Reformation or to dissenters since Tertullian. It is said more deeply in his unargued assumption of the necessity of managing society from the top and his identification of political control with “culture”. Tolstoy was in favour of story-telling, the novel, the folk tale, the arts, the family, the village, the school, the restoration of peasant crafts, and heavy labour in the fields, but because he rejected the sword and criticized the Tsar he is pigeonholed as a radical anticulturalist. The government becomes exemplary for all of culture.¹⁴

Alternative models and practices of Christ and Culture

Marsden draws attention to the obvious point that the typology was a product of a particular time and place. *The theological and cultural questions that Niebuhr took for granted in the post-World War II era were vastly different from those today. ... To what extent can categories generated in that context be relevant to ours?*

What happens when we make explicit the question of the acceptance or rejection by the church of the use of violent coercion as a key marker in identifying a commitment to the Christendom settlement?

Craig Carter has developed an alternative approach to analysing the engagement by the church with issues of culture with use of a typology according to whether the church accepts the use of violent coercion. He does not clearly address the issue of the multi-dimensional character of culture. While this limits its value in some respects it still is helpful in getting some idea of what happens when the Christendom axiom is made explicit in the typology.

Carter’s typology does have the benefit of shifting our focus to the church as the embodiment of Christian engagement with culture. In the table that follows I have tried working with an abbreviated form of his classification and in my amendments to Carter’s typology I have added some additional examples, particularly from the Catholic tradition, and in the process have become aware of how protestant Carter’s language and assumptions are.

I have introduced the typology here simply to help us see what happens when we explicitly take account of the Christendom settlement instead of implicitly accepting it as normative as Niebuhr does.

¹³ Marsden

¹⁴ Yoder p.66

We should note that given widespread engagement by Christian organizations in witness lobbying and direct action the willingness of some individuals or groups to use violence (some direct action against abortion clinics) has pushed this issue beyond the question of willingness to use state sanctioned force to achieve desired social goals.

More directly the perceived loss of the church's social power and the automatic priority of Christian views in determining the social agenda has become a significant issue in pluralist societies and the tone and form of the debates have reflected this perception. Examples might include the debate over same sex civil unions and the rhetoric of Australia as a Christian country.

Table 2 - Alternative typology of Christ and Culture

Type	Christendom Types (accept violent coercion)			Non-Christendom types (reject non-violent coercion)		
	Christ legitimising culture	Christ humanising culture	Christ transforming culture	Christ transforming culture	Christ humanising culture	Christ separating from culture
Examples	Theodosius I Crusades German Christians	Luther Pietism Revivalism Billy Graham	Augustine Columbus Cromwell	William Penn (Society of Friends) Martin Luther King Jr Desmond Tutu Jean Vanier Micah Project World Vision	Mother Teresa Mary McKillop Catholic orders Mennonite Central Committee Christian Peacemaker Teams	Antony of Egypt Monastic orders Amish
View of Christ	Symbol of the ruling powers of society	Unattainable yet relevant ideal	Lord of the cosmos	Lord of the cosmos	Inaugurating a new community	Lord of the church
Teaching of Jesus	Denial of Christ while using rhetorically as a cultural symbol to unify society	Applicable only to personal life – person/vocation dualism	For all society and should be imposed by force if necessary	For all society but should not be imposed by force but preached by word and deed	For the church only – directly but motivates loving service for society that may have spill over effects	For the church only

Abbreviated and adapted from Craig Carter *Rethinking Christ and Culture: A Post Christendom Perspective*

Table 2. Post Christendom typology of Christ and Culture p.113

Another approach to typology of Christian engagement has been developed by Duane Friesen, who wishes to move beyond the totalising dualism of Niebuhr's approach.

Instead of beginning with an abstract definition of Christ, he suggests that we move towards an embodied Christology that places Christ in the centre of his Jewish culture in first century Palestine. Christ is the concrete presence of God in the world of culture. We cannot then place Christ over against culture but as embodying a cultural vision in a specific time and place.

Friesen also notes a significant weakness in is how Niebuhr understood the "world" as it was discussed in the New Testament. Contrary to Niebuhr the "world" is not culture as a whole but culture and human life as it is estranged from God and alienating humanity from the pattern for full human flourishing¹⁵.

Friesen, like Yoder is arguing for patterns of discrimination rather than Niebuhr's dualistic for and against as our only options in responding to the cultural and social choices that we face. The trouble with dichotomies is that they polarise us and stifle our imaginative faculties from exploring all the other possibilities that might break open our existing stalemates.¹⁶

Friesen offers the following list of possible responses by the church to differing elements of its surrounding culture that might in fact be held simultaneously.

- Opposition
- Agreement
- Neutrality
- Going beyond dominant cultural norms
- Creative alternative institutions
- Revitalisation of existing cultural arenas
- Relativising cultural practice in the light of a higher principle
- Compromise
- Conversion

This is less a typology for high level analysis than a guide to action and reflection at a local community level and is for that reason a more practical tool than Niebuhr's typology which encourages high level analysis but little leverage and guidance for action at the local level.

The perennial problem according to Friesen is not the relationship between Christ and culture but between cultural visions – how the cultural vision of life referred to as the good news of the gospel can be brought into relationship with other cultural visions. Friesen agrees that Niebuhr assumes a Christendom model and is biased in favour of those churches and Christians that have sought to be integrally connected with the major institutions of the dominant culture.

¹⁵ Friesen p.58, This is part of a larger work on an Anabaptist Theology of Culture as a project that is in itself challenge to Niebuhr

¹⁶ Cunningham p.108

According to Friesen ... *a much more adequate model for the church will come out of the “sect” or “believers church” tradition. This is especially the case in our secularised and pluralistic world.*¹⁷

An alternative trajectory of anti-political politics - Cultural Transformation from the margins

The *Christ and Culture* typology has tended to marginalise grass roots Christian movements for social and cultural change and those that have rejected the necessity for violent coercion and close alignment with the powers that be.

Another line of approach in assessing the ongoing value of *Christ and Culture* as a typology is to apply an empirical test. Are there interesting examples of thinkers, practitioners and movements that are engaging society in culturally transformative ways that would tend to fall within the category of Christ against culture?

An account of a tradition of what Robert Inchausti describes as “Subversive orthodoxy” can stand on its own as evidence of the cultural relevance of the outside voice.¹⁸ In his chapter on ‘Antipolitical Politics’ Inchausti includes the following figures:

- Dorothy Day
- Thomas Merton
- Martin Luther King Jr
- E F Schumacher
- Wendell Berry

In his choice Inchausti has produced a list of thinkers and activists committed to transformation from the bottom up, a recovery of the local and community level of action rather than imposition from above. None of these could be seriously accused of withdrawal from the wider society or as rejectors of culture.

With respect to the broader field of what Inchausti terms ‘Macrohistorical Criticism’ his list of thinkers comprises:

- Marshall McLuhan
- Northrop Frye
- Jacques Ellul
- Ivan Illich
- Rene Girard

Many of the subversive trajectories identified in Inchausti’s narrative had a tense relationship with the institutional church and while many of them were/are distinguished in academia they mostly come from outside the traditional theological faculties. These theorists have engaged themselves in a variety of projects towards transformation of culture and society while representing at the same time a fundamental challenge to reigning academic, institutional and political orthodoxies,

¹⁷ Friesen pp.62-63

¹⁸ Robert Inchausti *Subversive Orthodoxy: Outlaws, Revolutionaries and Other Christians in Disguise* Brazos Press, 2005

often in severe tension with established forms of the Christian church yet clearly identified as in actively identified as Christians.¹⁹

Inchausti in closing his discussion offers a challenge to Niebuhr's assumption that to be outside the mainstream was to become marginal to the issue of cultural engagement and shaping.

A religious worldview – indeed a Christian worldview – need not blind one to contemporary realities; indeed it should lead one to even greater objectivity and critical distance from the fashions, fads and assumptions of our day.

... We now know that the so-called absolutes of Christianity lie outside any particular cultural expressions of them, and yet paradoxically those same "absolute" can only be embodied in those relative expressions. This makes modern Christian thinkers paradoxicalists by definition. On the one hand they see through all world mythologies as products of particular times and yet at the same time they acknowledge a transcultural Absolute that unites all of humanity in a shared participation with the divine. In other words religious modernists (or postmodernists, if you prefer) never lose sight of the fact that they are in this world but not of it, inside prevailing descriptions of reality but not defined by them.²⁰

Why does it matter and where do we go?

In summary I would argue that *Christ and Culture* while it is a tool of historical interest, should be retired as a tool from the field of public theology for the following reasons:

- It disengages Christian ethics and mission from the specific character of Jesus in his life, teaching ministry, death and resurrection.
- Its Christendom assumptions blind us to the significance of the subversive Christian traditions and movements that have been critical to bringing social and political change to our culture.
- It's totalising dualism limits our imaginations to a wide range of possible options beyond acceptance and rejection across the wide variety of issues and contexts faced by the church in living the good news.
- It is not helpful because it is predicated on a Christendom mindset while in Australia we are living in a time and place after Christendom It is not helpful in terms of helping us make the incremental issue by issue judgement as to how we should respond and does not provide a graduated menu of possible options
- It involves a commitment to organised religious institutions whereas what we need now is disorganised religion or perhaps better a Christian movement for active and compassionate engagement that is not confined within the realm of the "religion".

¹⁹ As another example see the extended discussion between Roman Coles and Stanley Hauerwas on the practice of radical democracy that covers an exploration of the transformational character of local activity. Yoder, Rowan Williams, Jean Vanier and L'Arche and Ella Baker (SNCC) all play a key role. Here the sectarian and local is the heart of the project for social and cultural transformation.

²⁰ Inchausti pp.190-1

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Table 1 – Summary of the *Christ and Culture* typology

Types	Extreme	Extreme	Mediating	Mediating	Mediating
Classification	Christ against culture <i>(rejection)</i>	Christ of culture <i>(assimilation)</i>	Christ above culture <i>(synthesis)</i>	Christ and culture in paradox <i>(dualism)</i>	Christ the transformer of culture <i>(conversion)</i>
Stance	Christianity and culture are in opposition	Christ and the highest expressions & aspirations of culture are in agreement	There is both continuity & discontinuity between Christ & culture	There is paradoxical tension between Christ & culture	Culture is sinful yet it can be turned to Christian purposes
Historical representatives	Tertullian Tolstoy	Basilides Valentinus	Early Apologists Aquinas	Luther Roger Williams	Augustine Calvin FD Maurice
Examples	Monastic & sectarian groups	Cultural Protestantism of the 19 th Century	Catholic tradition	Forms of Lutheranism	Puritanism Social gospel