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Cultural Discipleship in a Time of God's Patience

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There was a time in the not-so-distant past when H. Richard Niebuhr's 1951 book, *Christ and Culture*, was treated as the standard study of the options for thinking about the relationship between Christian faith and cultural context. Several generations of Christians who have explored that relationship have made reference to Niebuhr's categories for sorting out their own thoughts about cultural involvement: Christ against culture, the Christ of culture, Christ above culture, Christ and culture in paradox, and Christ the transformer of culture.

Niebuhr's book has not exactly fallen off the sales charts, but there has been some slippage. Some of it has to do with a shift of focus from the general to the particular: in instead of spending much time on the notion of culture in general, contemporary explorations of religion and culture are more likely to concentrate on specific areas of cultural expression: film, popular fiction, hip-hop, politics, gender and the like. Furthermore, to the degree that there *is* a continuing Christian scholarly interest in very general questions about culture, the focus has in large part shifted away from culture as a generic phenomenon to a more nuanced exploration of intercultural and cross-cultural concerns—we are more likely these days to talk about Christ and *the cultures* than we are to focus on God's concern for culture-in-general

The fading influence of Niebuhr's discussion of the Christ-and-culture options cannot be attributed, however, simply to shifting foci. Niebuhr's book has also been subject to sustained critique during the past two decades by some scholars who do not see his past influence in wholly positive terms. In his recent exploration of Christ-and-culture topics from an evangelical perspective, for example, D. A. Carson—who expresses some appreciation for Niebuhr's typology—has helpfully pointed to points in Niebuhr's discussion where the argument tends to undermine historic orthodoxy, especially on the important issue of the unity of revealed truth in the Scriptures.[1]

Some others, however, have insisted that the whole Niebuhrian project is a dangerous one. Most prominent in this group is the late Mennonite theological John Howard Yoder, who argued that Niebuhr stacks the deck in favour of the transformationalist perspective, and in such a way that

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[1]   D. A. Carson, *Christ and Culture Revisited* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), pp. 40–4.

Niebuhr implicitly endorses certain culturally dominant values, ones that Yoder and others in the Anabaptist tradition see as inimical to faithful Christian discipleship.[2] This negative assessment of Niebuhr has been repeated by Stanley Hauerwas and William Willimon in their influential little book, *Resident Aliens: Life in the Christian Colony.*

It is this kind of critique that I will be reflecting upon here. Recently it has been developed at some length by Craig A. Carter, a Canadian evangelical scholar, in his book, published in 2006, *Rethinking Christ and Culture: A Post-Christendom Perspective.*[3] Carter builds and expands upon the Yoder perspective, offering a detailed alternative typology to what he sees as Niebuhr's highly defective classificatory scheme. The tone of Carter's discussion of Niebuhr is captured nicely in one of several endorsements that appear on the book's cover. 'H. Richard Niebuhr's days are numbered', writes Mark Nation. 'Or so one can only imagine. This carefully argued and well-written book should bring the curtains down on the more than fifty-year reign of Niebuhr's typology in *Christ and Culture*'.

My contention here is that we should not be too quick to pull down those curtains. While I have my own criticisms of the way Niebuhr makes his case at several points, I still think that his overall presentation of the issues of Christ and culture is a helpful one. Not only do his basic categories capture with rough accuracy the basic tendencies among Christians in their relationship with their surrounding culture, but I also am convinced that some modest version of his Christ transforming culture perspective—the one that he obviously endorses—is the right way to view things.

I will make my case here for a continuing—albeit nuanced—appreciation for Niebuhr's typology, by first by looking at this charge that Niebuhr's kind of perspective is not adequately 'post-Christendom'. Then I will set forth my own positive assessment of what I see as some key insights in Niebuhr's theological understanding of culture.

BEYOND 'CHRISTENDOM'

Terms such as 'postmodern', 'post-Enlightenment', and 'post-Christtendom' are used so frequently these days that they are sometimes treated as if they require little explanation. While there are important developments

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2   The place where Yoder lays his views about Niebuhr's overall treatment of culture is his essay, 'How H. Richard Niebuhr Reasoned: A Critique of *Christ and Culture*', in *Authentic Transformation: A New Vision*, ed. by Glen Stassen (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995), pp. 31–89.

3   Craig A. Carter, *Rethinking Christ and Culture: A Post-Christendom Perspective* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2006), pp. 61–3, 66–8.

that are highlighted by the use of these labels, there is also a danger that they can become rhetorical tools that mask some important distinctions and nuances. This is certainly the case with 'post-Christendom', That label is frequently used interchangeably with 'post-Constantinian', pointing to the serious drawbacks for the witness of the church that occurred when the Emperor Constantine, having converted to Christianity, aligned the church so closely with political power that Christian identity and citizenship in the empire were virtually indistinguishable.

Craig Carter's critique of Niebuhr's perspective makes much of what Carter insists is Niebuhr's uncritical endorsement of the Christendom context for understanding the cultural task of the Christian community. Indeed, like John Howard Yoder, Carter sees the presumption of Christendom as so pervasive in the way Niebuhr makes his case that Niebuhr's categories as such must be rejected in favour of a very different way of setting up the options.

The discussions these days about 'Christendom' and 'post-Christendom' are important ones. They have inspired many helpful explorations of what it means for Christians in North America and Europe to embrace a 'missional church' theology. The theologian who has inspired much that is associated with this theological perspective is the late Lesslie Newbigin, who served for many years as a missionary in India. His reflections, upon returning to the North Atlantic context, about the role of the church in culture were telling. If there was ever a 'Christian' culture in the West, he argued, it no longer exists—'the *corpus Christianum* is no more'.[4] We are now 'post-Christendom' and the church today—wherever the church is called to serve the Lord—must engage in the kind of sustained 'missionary encounter with our culture' that will require of us 'the courage to hold to and to proclaim a belief that cannot be proved to be true in terms of the axioms of our society'.[5]

This is an insightful analysis, and it should not surprise us that a book like Niebuhr's *Christ and Culture*, written over a half-century ago and presupposing some different cultural 'axioms', would see the actual contours of the larger culture quite differently than we do today. Niebuhr was a representative of an older form of liberal American Protestantism that prospered at a time when the liberal churches thought of themselves as 'mainline', and even as constituting something like a Christian 'establishment' in their cultural contexts. Today things have moved in a very different direction.

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[4]   Lesslie Newbigin, *Foolishness to the Greeks: The Gospel and Western Culture* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986), p. 101.

[5]   Newbigin, *Foolishness*, p. 148.

I have no problem, then, with critics who say that we have to revise Niebuhr here and there if we are going to have a useful understanding of Christ and culture in our post-Christendom context. I do worry, though, about what some of these critics identify as the features of Christendom that they insist on rejecting. Craig Carter, for example, in his critique of Niebuhr takes Niebuhr to task for assuming that Christians can work within the existing political power structures to achieve certain social goals. And even worse from Carter's perspective is the fact that Niebuhr does not simply reject the use of violence as always incompatible with the demands of Christian discipleship. [6]

Now, there is nothing new about Christian disagreements on these matters. The question of what it means for a Christian to be a citizen of a nation, and the question of the moral legitimacy of the use of violence— these questions were the subjects of passionate debates, especially between Calvinists and Anabaptists, at the time of the Reformation, and the debates have continued to our present day. The Anabaptist perspective has been given new life in recent years, particularly because of the influence of Stanley Hauerwas, whose writings have had considerable influence, both among evangelicals, who are attracted to the strong Christocentric themes in his perspective, and in the broader Christian community, where many are disillusioned with liberal theology. When *Time* magazine ran a series in 2001 featuring the people who, according to the magazine's researchers, were considered to be the most influential in their fields of leadership, Hauerwas, who teaches at Duke University, was awarded the title 'America's Best Theologian'.

Hauerwas, following his Mennonite mentor, John Howard Yoder, refuses to accept any definition of properly formed cultural reality that is not grounded directly in the redemptive ministry of Jesus. The Way of Jesus is the exclusive normative reference point for the moral life. This means that the Kingdom of Jesus Christ embodies economic, political and social norms that are so antithetical to the patterns of collective life in the larger human culture that Christians are required, in effect, to create an alternative culture. Thus the Anabaptist-type call for the formation of a Kingdom community living in separation from the practices of the larger human community, especially those practices that are closely aligned with the political assumptions of secular thought.

This is a powerful perspective, from which I have learned much. It certainly exposes the confusions that can result from a simple-minded application of Niebuhr's categories. One might be inclined, for example, to treat the Amish as a clear case of Christ against culture convictions. But

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[6]   Carter, *Rethinking*, p. 62.

Hauerwas's perspective suggests that the Amish might better be thought of as creating an *alternative* culture. They certainly do not reject farming—rather, they transform the typical patterns of farming. Nor do they reject technology as such, insisting instead on alternative technologies: the horse-drawn buggy is as much a piece of transportation technology as an SUV!

Furthermore, the present day Anabaptists and their fellow pilgrims are right to call us to account for the ways in which we often identify Christian discipleship with specific political programs and ideologies. The church's record in aligning itself with political power, and in freely giving its blessing to various military campaigns, is not a noble one.

For all of that, though, I am not ready to concede that the solution for Christian disciples is to abandon all efforts to employ the political means available to us as citizens to pursue Christian goals. Nor am I convinced that a thoroughgoing pacifism is mandated for Christian disciples. I will not argue these matters here, but I can at least point out that the late great missionary-theologian Lesslie Newbigin, himself—as I have already noted—one of the leading thinkers in shaping the call for a 'post-Christendom' Christian witness in the West, and who provided us with lengthy critiques of the Constantinian heritage, nonetheless refused simply to reject everything that was associated with the Constantinian arrangement. 'Much has been written', he observed, 'about the harm done to the cause of the gospel when Constantine accepted baptism, and it is not difficult to expatiate on this theme. But could any other choice have been made?' The Constantinian arrangement emerged, Newbigin argued, in a time of spiritual crisis in the larger culture, and people 'turned to the church as the one society that could hold a disintegrating world together'. What should the church have said in response? asked Newbigin. Should it simply 'have refused the appeal and washed its hands of responsibility for the political order?' This is not to ignore the ways in which Christians 'fell into the temptation of worldly power', he quickly added. But do we really think that the cause of the Gospel would have been better served 'if the church had refused all political responsibility, if there had never been a 'Christian' Europe?' Newbigin's own answer: 'I find it hard to think so'.[7]

I agree with Newbigin, and I am convinced that his historical observation applies nicely to our own cultural situation. We live in a time of cultural crisis, and our obligation is to reflect carefully on how we can contribute to at least partial and temporary remedies for the ills that plague us. And this is where I dissent from the 'post-Christendom' approach advocated by Carter and others. The Anabaptist perspective which informs

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[7]   Newbigin, *Foolishness*, pp. 100–1.

their critique of Niebuhr offers, as I see it, inadequate resources for us to pursue the mandate delivered by the prophet Jeremiah to ancient people of Israel, when they found themselves newly exiled as 'resident aliens' in the city of Babylon: 'seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the Lord on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare' (Jer. 29:7).

To be sure, my Anabaptist friends would have a stern rebuke for me at this point. I am taking it for granted, they would argue, that God judges us on the basis of how 'effective' we can be at making good things happen in the world. But this is not the Way of Jesus, they would tell me. To be his disciples is not to worry about effectiveness but about faithfulness. In a much-quoted phrase, Stanley Hauerwas says that the church does not *have* a social ethic, it *is* a social ethic. The primary Christian ethical task is for believers to '*be* a particular kind of people' so that both 'we and the world [can] hear the [Christian] story truthfully'.[8]

I appreciate this emphasis on what we *are*, as opposed to what we *do*. But I am not prepared to give up on striving for effective political action in the world—in the standard worldly sense of 'political'. Indeed, I think that one of the reasons why Lesslie Newbigin could offer a somewhat different assessment of Constantinianism than we find in the Anabaptist critics is precisely his identification with the situations of Christians in the Two-Thirds World

A few years ago, while visiting in mainland China with a small group of Fuller Seminary faculty members, we engaged in a dinner discussion one evening with members of a provincial government's office for regulating religious affairs. When they discovered that two members of our group were psychologists, the government officials—all of them members of the Communist party—began to share some candid concerns about trends in urban centres. While the introduction of a free market system was beneficial in many ways, they observed, there were also some negative trends that were occurring: a rising divorce rate, increasing intergenerational conflict in families, and a rise in the number of suicides. 'We are not equipped to provide the necessary mental health services', they told us. They went on to express the desire to have the church offer this sort of outreach—'but the churches are not equipped to do it either', they said. They wondered whether Fuller Seminary could provide the training of faith-based marriage and family counselling in China. We are now actively doing this.

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[8]   Stanley Hauerwas, *Peaceable Kingdom: A Primer in Christian Ethics* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1983), p. 100; emphasis mine.

Given the political realities of China, there is no way that this kind of service can occur without Christians closely aligning themselves with government regulations and policies. Is cooperating with the political powers in this case a 'Constantinian' arrangement? If it is, my inclination is to say, 'So be it'.

And as Christians in places like China seek theological guidance for their cooperative efforts in a larger culture shaped by non-Christian ideologies, the more basic theological issues of Christ and culture loom large. What norms should guide us in these cooperative activities? How do we view the continuities and discontinuities between Christian thought and non-Christian worldviews? What do we have in common with other human beings, whether or not they share our most basic convictions?

CREATION AND FALL

Here we must face the question of moral epistemology. The present day defenders of the Anabaptist position in ethics insist that the Way of Jesus must be the sole reference point for shaping our patterns of Christian discipleship. This became very clear to me in an extensive dialogue that I engaged in during the 1970s with John Howard Yoder—both in public debates and in various publications. Some of our debates focused on the sorts of practical issues that one would expect a Calvinist and a Mennonite to disagree about, such as whether consistent non-violence is a Christian obligation and whether a Christian can legitimately serve as an agent of government. But each of us realized that these issues could never really be settled apart from addressing a more fundamental issue, one which Yoder once described succinctly in one of our public exchanges: On questions of culture, he observed, 'Mouw wants to say, "Fallen, but *created*," and I want to say, "Created, but *fallen*."'

For Yoder, the appeal to the Way of Jesus as the sole normative reference point for guidance in cultural discipleship is necessitated by the fact that, as he sees it, there is no other reference point available to us under present sinful conditions. Specifically, he rejects the sort of appeal that people like me want to make to an original normative ordering of creation that all human beings still have some sort of access to.

Yoder's basic problem with this perspective stems from his assessment of what theologians have traditionally labelled 'the noetic effects of sin'. Not only has the fall unleashed principalities and powers that have seriously perverted God's original design for the creation, but it has also distorted our own human ability to detect any of that original design that might otherwise still be discernible to us.

We are left in a desperate condition, then, where our only recourse is to follow what the New Testament explicitly reveals as the Way of Jesus. All other sources for moral-cultural discernment will only perpetuate our sinful rebellion. In the Way of Jesus we are given clear guidance for the restructuring of our communal life in accordance with Kingdom norms. And this is not a pattern that we can hope to implement on any large scale in the contemporary world. It is only possible where human beings have covenanted together to live in conformity to the demands of radical discipleship. Thus the Christian community is called to live in anticipation of a new order that is yet to come in its fullness. In doing so we are manifesting, in Yoder's own words, 'the preserving patience of God toward a world that has not yet heard of its redemption'.[9]

A big concern that I have about this kind of perspective is that it does not leave much room for exploring commonalities with people who profess very different worldviews than the one we embrace as Christians. And Stanley Hauerwas, for one, explicitly acknowledges this. He has been willing, for example to follow his counter-cultural convictions to the point of questioning whether Christians can even legitimately use terms like 'justice' and 'peace' in addressing issues of public policy. The assumption that Christians can assume a common core of meaning that we share with non-Christians when we employ such language, Hauerwas insists, is fundamentally misguided. These terms can have no meaning, he argues, 'apart from the life and death of Jesus of Nazareth'—it is only the biblical witness to Jesus' ministry that 'gives content to our faith'.[10]

This does not give, for example, Chinese Christians much encouragement in dealing with the opportunities—however limited—they are presently being offered to actively 'seek the welfare' of their larger culture. And it is interesting to note that Hauerwas has been receiving some criticism lately from ethicists who have been influenced by his writings, but who worry that he has begun to concede too much to the possibility of a common language. Robert W. Brimlow highlights some comments in Hauerwas's writings where Hauerwas seems to allow for some sort of 'translation' of particularistic Christian language into terms that make sense to non-Christians. These concessions, argues Brimlow, blunt the force of Hauerwas's emphasis on radical discipleship.[11] Brimlow calls

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[9] John Howard Yoder, *The Politics of Jesus: Vicit Agnus Noster*, 2nd edn (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), p. 141.

[10] Stanley Hauerwas and William Willimon, *Resident Aliens: Life in the Christian Colony* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1989), p. 23.

[11] Robert W. Brimlow, 'Solomon's Porch: The Church as Sectarian Ghetto', in *The Church as Counterculture*, ed. by Michael L. Budde and Robert W. Brimlow (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2000), p. 115.

Hauerwas to return to an uncompromising insistence that Christian 'are called to the margins; we are called to be weak and separate and to view ourselves as such. We therefore must turn our back on all that is incompatible with the Gospel'.[12]

John Howard Yoder himself acknowledged on occasion the need for a larger moral perspective than is available in an exclusive reliance on the Way of Jesus. At one point in his major work, *The Politics of Jesus*, he expresses the need to draw on a wider variety of resources. We cannot hope to gain 'a specific biblical ethical content for modern questions', he says, without also making use of 'broader generalizations, a longer hermeneutic path, and insights from other sources'.[13]

CULTURE AND CREATION

It is significant, I suggest, that these Anabaptist thinkers hedge a bit on the claim that the New Testament witness to the Way of Jesus is our only resource for understanding God's guidance for the task of cultural discipleship. As I see things, it is important to see the Way of Jesus against the background of the purposes that shaped God's original creative activity. In that sense, what Jesus taught and did cannot be isolated from the designs of the good creation. With the necessary aid of biblical spectacles we can still discern vestiges of the original created order. No matter how perverse the processes and products of cultural formation have become, human beings still work within the structures of the good creation.

This is what Abraham Kuyper was getting at when he boldly (and a bit too triumphantly) proclaimed that the incarnation was not a project in moral and cultural innovation:

> Can we imagine that at one time God willed to rule things in a certain moral order, but that now, in Christ, He wills to rule it otherwise? As though He were not the Eternal, the Unchangeable, Who, from the very hour of creation, even unto all eternity, had willed, wills, and shall will and maintain, one and the same firm moral world-order! Verily Christ has swept away the dust with which man's sinful limitations had covered up this world-order, and has made it glitter again in its original brilliancy... [T]he world-order remains just what it was from the beginning. It lays full claim, not only to the believer (as though less were required from the unbeliever), but to every human being and to all human relationships.[14]

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[12]   Brimlow, 'Solomon's Porch', p. 123.
[13]   Yoder, *Politics of Jesus*, p. 187.
[14]   Abraham Kuyper, *Lectures on Calvinism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1931), pp. 71-2.

I have already noted that while Yoder acknowledges the fact of an original unfallen creation, he does not allow for ways in which an understanding of that pre-fallen state of affairs can guide us in our present pursuit of cultural discipleship. The good creation has been so distorted by rebellion—both human and angelic—that its original patterns are no longer discernible. And even if some aspects of the original design are still intact, we should not trust our capacity to discern them. We are left, then, with what has been clearly revealed to us: the Way of Jesus.

Niebuhr, on the other hand, does want us to look to the good creation as a reference point for cultural guidance. He not only offers us a rather comprehensive definition of culture as such, but he sees cultural formation as an extension of God's creating designs. Here is Niebuhr's definition: 'culture', he tells us, 'is the 'artificial, secondary environment' which man superimposes on the natural. It comprises language habits, ideas, beliefs, customs, social organization, inherited artefacts, technical processes, and values'.[15]

It is telling, I think, that Niebuhr's contemporary critics typically launch their critiques of Niebuhr without attending to this definition that he offers. They rather quickly focus instead on some selected features of culture, such as coercive politics, military violence, and the nature of power arrangements, proceeding to argue that any sort of attempt to 'transform' these cultural phenomena inevitably compromises the church's witness.

But Niebuhr begins at a more basic stage, offering a vision of cultural formation as something that human beings form, in his words, as 'the 'artificial, secondary environment'' that we add to the primary creation. And this human-produced layer includes such basic things as language, customs, social arrangements and tools.

This comports well with the 'cultural mandate' theology that has been a central theme in Reformed theology's understanding of God's creating purposes for human beings. In his book *The Calvinistic Concept of Culture*, Henry Van Til contends that human cultural activity, 'that activity of man, the image-bearer of God, by which he fulfils the creation mandate to cultivate the earth, to have dominion over it and to subdue it', is not an incidental feature of our created nature. Rather, '[i]t is an expression of man's essential being as created in the image of God, and since man is essentially a religious being, it is expressive of his relationship to God, that is, of his religion'.[16]

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[15]   H. Richard Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1951), p. 32.

[16]   Henry R. Van Til, *The Calvinistic Concept of Culture* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2001), p. xvii.

Here is how that works out as an interpretation of the creation story in Genesis 1. On this way of reading the story, while the command to 'Be fruitful and multiply' is about having babies, the mandate to 'fill the earth and subdue it, [having] dominion over' the non-human creation—these latter instructions are about the cultural 'filling' of what God has already created. God placed Adam and Eve, says Van Til, in the natural environment that he had prepared—a Garden containing animal and vegetative life—with the understanding that human beings would fashion a 'secondary environment', a cultural one, out of those primal materials.

We can imagine, then, a scenario of this sort for the first pair of humans. On their first day together, they decided that they would clear away one small area of the Garden as their domestic space, and Adam begins brushing away leaves and twigs with his hands. 'No, try this', Eve says to him, and she breaks a large branch off a nearby tree, and strips it of some of its smaller branches. She then uses it to create a clear space on the ground. 'See', she says, 'we can use this. Let's call it a *rake*. And you be the one who uses it today and then after that we'll take turns every other day clearing away the leaves and twigs.'

In that brief transaction several projects of cultural formation have already taken place, of the sort that Niebuhr points to in his definition. Eve has created a piece of technology: out of raw nature she has fashioned a tool. Then she has given it a name—'rake'—thus articulating a rudimentary labelling system. She has also outlined a pattern of social organization for distributing labour—'we'll take turns'—as well as setting up a schedule. In all of this she has added several things to the primary Garden environment that the Creator has designed, thus developing 'the artificial, secondary environment' that Niebuhr postulates.

Nor, on this view, has the centrality of cultural formation been in any way diminished by the entrance of sin into the creation. Under fallen conditions the question becomes one of cultural obedience versus cultural disobedience. Our chief end, as the old catechism puts it, is 'to glorify God and to enjoy him forever'. But rebellious humanity distorts and perverts cultural activity. This can be seen clearly as the Genesis story unfolds. In the pre-fallen state, technological innovation was a good thing. It was one of the ways in which human beings lived out their mandate to glorify God in all that they do. But when, in Genesis 11, sinful people decided to 'build ourselves a city, and a tower with its top in the heavens', so as 'to make a name for ourselves' (v. 4), we have a clear example of technology gone awry.

But the distortions brought about by sin have not irreparably damaged the good creation. The situation is not one of a total obliteration of God's original designs. Niebuhr is eloquent on this point, as he states what I take

to be one of the most important insights of his book. Because of sin, he says, our 'culture is all corrupted order rather than order for corruption... It is perverted good, not evil; or it is evil as perversion and not as badness of being'.[17]

Earlier I reported a comment that John Howard Yoder once made about our differences. He saw me as saying, 'Fallen, but *created*', at points where he was inclined to say, 'Created, but *fallen*'. This was a helpful way of putting the contrast, and it captures the way in which these two different ways of viewing the relationship between created and fallen culture leads to two quite different dispositions in approaching cultural phenomena.

Whatever the shortcomings of H. Richard Niebuhr's scheme for setting forth the possible dispositions in this area, he was rightly pointing the way for how to engage in some important conversations about Christian faith and cultural engagement. We still need to look to him for that kind of guidance.

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[17]   Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture*, p. 194.