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A Sociologist Re-reads Niebuhr's 'Christ and Culture'

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CHRIST AND CULTURE
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I entered seminary in the late 1970s describing myself as a "lapsed atheist". I had been raised without religion, but I was no longer sure. There, I encountered the writings of H. Richard Niebuhr. The quieter of the famous Niebuhr brothers, H. Richard convinced me to look to my experiences and to identify the root ways that I encounter my life. I did so, finding that I experience the world as a gift of unwarranted redemption. Out of the depths of darkness comes great light. Christianity's two root metaphors centre on this image. In the midst of a murderous foreign occupation, a baby is born who is the Light of the world. His death on a torture instrument after a blameless life is not the end of the story; instead, it gives way to the resurrection, showing us how love triumphs over despair. This is, I realised, how I my life has gone. I discovered myself to be a Christian, so I confirmed this with baptism and a new life.

By both profession and intellectual attitude, I remain a sociologist. Interestingly, it was Niebuhr's ethical work, particularly The Responsible Self,[2] that wrought my inner change, not his more sociological writing. His early Social Sources of Denominationalism[3] and Kingdom of God in America[4] contained good ideas but were sociologically passé. Radical Monotheism and Western Culture[5] was more analytically useful. Midway in time between these, I found Christ and Culture[6] to be written largely for theologically-oriented Christians and having little to say to social science. Yes, it provided a model to sort the various attitudes that Christians have had toward the societies in which they have lived, but it seemed unhistorical and too abstract for easy use. Its focus on doctrine did not help me with my sociological goal: to understand the multiple ways in which religion and society influence one another. Perhaps it was not intended to. It struck me, however, as a work designed to help Christians understand their own tradition, not an effort to produce a universal analytic tool. Yes, there are a lot of Christians in the world, but I sought a general theory rather than a set of categories drawn from – and largely only applicable to – a particular Protestant theological tradition. So I set Christ and Culture aside and moved on to other things.

That was over 30 years ago. Last year was the 60th anniversary of Christ and Culture's publication, and I encountered Niebuhr's work again, this time carrying with me both a deeper grasp of my own intellectual discipline and a more sophisticated sense of the religious life. I write this article to share my insights. I am now better prepared than I was then to read Christ and Culture as Niebuhr intended it, but I am also better prepared to question its usefulness. What does that

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[2] H. Richard Niebuhr, *The Responsible Self: An Essay in Christian Moral Philosophy* (New York: Harper & Row, 1963).

[3] H. Richard Niebuhr, *The Social Sources of Denominationalism* (New York: Meridian, 1929).

[4] H. Richard Niebuhr, *The Kingdom of God in America*. (Chicago: Willett, Clark & Company, 1937).

[5] H. Richard Niebuhr, *Radical Monotheism and Western Culture* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1960).

[6] H. Richard Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture* (New York: Harper, 1951).

volume now tell me, as a sociologist, about the relationship between "the church" and "the world"? What does it tell me as a man of faith about how I can best conceive of the connection between them?

The Five Types

Niebuhr famously proposed five ideal-types of relationship between "Christ" and "Culture" – by which he meant five different stances or modes of relationship that Christians have historically had toward the society around them. Following Ernst Troeltsch, on whose work he wrote his doctoral dissertation, Niebuhr saw these types as logical alternatives. Actual cases were almost always mixtures: he fully recognised the human ability to hold incompatible points-of-view at the same time. George Marsden usefully suggests that these types can be thought of as musical motifs: in any given place and time, one motif will likely be dominant, though others may be heard in the background.[7]

1. Christ Against Culture: this stance "affirms the sole authority of Christ over culture and resolutely rejects culture's claims to loyalty." In Niebuhr's words, "The counterpart of loyalty to Christ and the brothers is the rejection of cultural society; [in this stance,] a clear line of separation is drawn between the brotherhood of the children of God and the world."[8] Believers choose God and reject the world, often separating themselves from its influence.

2. The Christ of Culture: in this stance, says Niebuhr, men and women "hail Jesus as the Messiah of their society, the fulfiller of its hopes and aspirations, the perfecter of its true faith, the source of its holiest spirit." "They feel no great tension between church and world, the social laws and the Gospel …, the ethics of salvation and the ethics of social conservation or progress. On the one hand they interpret culture through Christ, where those aspects that are most like Jesus are given the most honor. On the other hand, they interpret Christ through culture, selecting from his teaching that which best harmonizes with the best in [their] civilization."[9] This is not exactly "henotheism", a concept that Niebuhr introduced later in Radical Monotheism to indicate the worship of society. It is, however, close to this, as this stance frequently interprets existing social arrangements as God's Will.

Niebuhr presents these first two types as opposites, one rejecting, the other praising the society in which Christians live. The other three stand somewhere between these, though the three do not form a continuum.

3. Christ above Culture: this stance, like the first, is built around an opposition, but not a permanent one. Holy God stands against sinful humans, and human disobedience is usually expressed in loyalty to a particular culture as opposed to the universal God. This does not, however, make culture evil; instead, culture is good because God ordained it. When people obey God, then, culture helps them attend to His will. As Niebuhr put it, people taking this stance "cannot separate the works of human culture from the grace of God, for all those works are possible only by grace. But neither can they separate the experience of grace from cultural activity; for how can men love the unseen God in response to His love without serving the visible brother in human society?"[10] They do not worship their culture, but they worship God through it – and they keep these two in the right Christian order.

4. Christ and Culture in Paradox: like the previous stance, this one seeks to combine "loyalty to Christ and responsibility for culture". However, alongside their cooperation, people taking this position see a simultaneous conflict. In Niebuhr's view, this captures the tension between Christ and culture found in the Bible, for "man is under law, and yet not under law but grace; he is sinner, and yet righteous… [he is the recipient of both] divine wrath and mercy." [11] Combining service to God and service to the world is here seen as more difficult, albeit desirable.

5. Christ the Transformer of Culture: this stance ultimately maintains a "hopeful view toward culture", not for what it is but for the possibility of its transformation. Transformation is not a human accomplishment, but instead marks "a transformed human life in and to the glory of God" through the grace of God.[12] Christians taking this position focus on the possibilities of social betterment through human effort, but they recognise that this effort is not theirs alone. God has a hand in this work, says Niebuhr; this stance maintains hope, through Christ, that the world's cultures can be redeemed. Like the Christ Against Culture stance, this stance says that the world needs redemption; unlike that stance, this one hope that such redemption is possible.

Criticisms

Though clear, plausible, and certainly influential, Niebuhr's views have come in for some significant criticisms, both from historians and from theologians. George Marsden summarised several of these in an address commemorating the 50th

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[7] George Marsden, "Christianity and Cultures: Transforming Niebuhr's Categories," *Insights: The Faculty Journal of Austin Seminary* 115, no. 1 (1999): 4-15.

[8] Niebuhr: *Christ and Culture,* 45, 47-48.

[9] *Ibid.,* 83.

[10] *Ibid.,* 119.

[11] *Ibid.,* 146, 157..

[12] *Ibid.,* 191, 196.

anniversary of the 1949 lectures in which Niebuhr originally laid out his argument.[13] Three criticisms stand out. One has to do with the over-generality of Niebuhr's core terms; a second has to do with his ideal-typical method; the third has to do with the degree to which Niebuhr's book remains embedded in its time and milieu – late 1940s post-WWII America.

First, Marsden criticised Niebuhr for dichotomizing the terms "Christ" and "Culture", forgetting that there is no clear-cut line between them. For Niebuhr, Christ stands outside history, as a beacon guiding the faithful. Yet, said Marsden, particular Christians' understandings of Christ are culturally and historically conditioned. Thus Christians in different times and places have heard Christ's call differently and have acted toward the world out of these different understandings. To use a current example, late 20th and early 21st century Christians recognise such social sins as racism, sexism, and classism, which were not on the intellectual radar of even their most perceptive 18th century co-religionists[14]. The Gospels speak movingly of Jesus' compassion for the poor and the excluded. Contemporary Christians see Christ calling them to attend to these matters, in a way that their predecessors, conditioned by a more bigoted culture, could not. Niebuhr's earlier books show that he realised this, yet his reification of "Christ" in <u>Christ and Culture</u> plays down this understanding.

The same is true of his reification of the term "culture". Marsden wrote that "the problem is that Niebuhr uses culture almost indiscriminately as equivalent to 'anything people do together.' So it includes everything from language to warfare."[15] Mennonite theologian John Howard Yoder correctly noted that culture – or "civilization", Niebuhr's alternate term – is much more complex than this. In a 1996 critique of Niebuhr's approach, he wrote:

> 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).[16]

No group of Christians has a monolithic attitude toward all such aspects of cultural life. How can Niebuhr then categorise groups as taking, for example, the Christ Against Culture stance, when they embrace so much of the culture in which they live?

Marsden claimed that Niebuhr would likely affirm this criticism. Marsden called for a changed terminology from "Christ and Culture" to "Christianities and Cultures" as a step toward greater clarity. Moreover, he wrote, "we are talking about the teachings of Christianity or what it means to follow Christ" in various cultural settings. "We always need to ask what general culture or sub-culture we are talking about and further what specific aspect of that culture is our matter of concern."[17] Niebuhr neglected this, to the detriment of his model..

I shall deal with the issue of Niebuhr's ideal-typical method more briefly. The main criticism stems from the near impossibility of assigning any one person, group, or movement to just one of Niebuhr's types. Yoder, for example, complained that Mennonites could as easily be assigned to the Christ the Transformer of Culture category as to Christ Against Culture, where Niebuhr put them.[18] What use is a set of concepts that fails to differentiate adequately between the stances that people actually take? Historians, particularly, have found Niebuhr's system overly schematic and relatively useless for gauging the historical record.

Here too, Marsden suggested a gentle rethinking of Niebuhr's intent. Extending the analogy between ideal-types and musical themes, he wrote that "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."[19] He argued that Niebuhr's typology could still be useful, so long as it is not rigidly applied.

What about the third issue: Niebuhr's own cultural particularity? Like all scholars, Niebuhr was shaped by his time and place. America after World War II was a country that had defeated one totalitarianism (Nazi Germany) only to find itself faced with another, the Soviet Union. The U.S. economy was still recovering from the Great Depression with its legacy of social need. Races were segregated, women were denied jobs, and ultimate questions of fairness remained to be settled.

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[13] The lecture was delivered on February 2, l999, at the Austin Theological Seminary, Austin, Texas (published as Marsden, "Christianity and Cultures").

[14] E.g., United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, *Brothers and Sisters to Us: U.S. Catholic Bishops Pastoral Letter on Racism* (1979).

[15] Marsden, "Christianity and Cultures", 9.

[16] John Howard Yoder, "How H. Richard Niebuhr Reasoned: A Critique of Christ and Culture," in *Authentic Transformation:' A New Vision of Christ and Culture*, edited by

Glen H. Stassen, D.M. Yeager and John Howard Yoder (Nashville: Abingdon Press. 1996). 69.

[17] Marsden, "Christianities and Cultures", 8, 10.

[18] Yoder, "How H. Richard Niebuhr Reasoned".

[19] Marsden, "Christianity and Cultures", 11.

Niebuhr wrote with these issues in mind, seeking to probe the degree to which Christianity could be a moral basis for mid-century American civilisation. He wrote for educated Christians, urging them to think about their attitudes towards the society in which they lived. Marsden was ultimately sympathetic to this quest to plumb the possibilities of Christian moral engagement.

Yoder and other Mennonite critics have been less forgiving.[20] They argue that Niebuhr exalted a theologically limited image of Christ, one at odds with Nicene orthodoxy. In Yoder's presentation of Niebuhr's view, Jesus points away from this world to the Father, who alone is absolute and worthy of worship. He quotes Niebuhr, who wrote, "In his single-minded direction toward God, Christ leads men away from the temporality and the pluralism of culture."[21] Craig Carter wrote that this portrait of Christ

> ignores his teaching, his example, his call to discipleship, his promise of the Spirit, his atoning death and resurrection, and his Great Commission to his disciples. Niebuhr's view of Christ has no place for the Lordship of Christ and the community of disciples who live under that Lordship in joyous anticipation of the full coming of the reign of God.[22]

The problem, said Carter, is that Niebuhr substituted a Christ who is outside of culture for a Jesus who was embedded it in.

> "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.[23]

Nicene Christianity recognised both the full humanity and the full divinity of Christ. Niebuhr, wrote Yoder and Carter, recognised only the latter. To their minds, his oversimplified the Christian tradition so much as to misunderstand the real task Christians face vis-à-vis their socio-cultural milieux.

A Sociological View

As I noted above, I am a sociologist, not a theologian. Re-reading Christ and Culture, I am still struck by the degree to which it is written for Christians alone, not for everyone. I am also struck by the degree to which it presumes the acceptance of Barthian neo-orthodoxy. Despite its apparent openness – stemming from its

presentation of the five different types as all legitimate Christian ways of interacting with the world, albeit with flaws – it speaks as if *ex cathedra* about Christ's teachings in a way that closes more doors than it opens. (I admit to having little patience with theological arguments about Christ's nature, including Yoder's and Carter's; my own theological calling takes a more experiential road.)

Be that as it may, of what use might Niebuhr's typology be to sociology, as it seeks to understand the roots of religious action? How might it help us understand the choices that Christians make in their engagement (or non-engagement) with the social world? In answering this question, let me begin by reviewing the closest current analogue to Niebuhr's types in the sociological toolkit: our descriptions of the differences and similarities between churches, sects, denominations, and esoteric groups.

The distinction between "churches" and "sects" is rooted in Max Weber's division between two kinds of religious belonging: by birth and by decision. Some people are born into religions; other people convert, choosing their religions based on their inner needs. Weber called the first "churches" and the latter "sects", showing that the sects pursue personal holiness more thoroughly than the typical born-into-a-religion person would find compelling.

Through a complex process of intellectual development carried out by many sociologists over several decades,[24] this ultimately led to what sociologists call "the church/sect/denomination typology": a two dimensional field on which any religious group can be placed.

The dimensions are defined as follows (see Figure One). Running 'east' and 'west' is a line along which groups can be placed according to the degree of tension the group displays vis-à-vis its social environment. Those falling toward the left-hand end of the line have relatively low tension with society; those falling toward the right have higher tension. (This distinguishes those groups that seek to live in peace with, manage, change, or improve the social order – on the left – and those groups that would gladly let it go to hell in a hand-basket, on the right.) Running 'north' and 'south' is a second line along which groups can be placed according to the degree to which they accept or reject the legitimacy of other groups. Those to the 'north' believe that they have a monopoly on religious truth; those to the 'south' believe that other religious groups possess a measure of religious truth, some almost as great as their own. The result is the following diagram, which should be

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[20] Yoder, ""How H. Richard Niebuhr Reasoned"; Craig A. Carter, "The Legacy of an Inadequate Christology: Yoder's Critique of Niebuhr's Christ and Culture," Mennonite Quarterly Review 77, no. 3 (July 2003) 387-401; Craig A. Carter, *Rethinking Christ and Culture: A Post-Christendom Perspective* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Brazos Press, 2007). See also D.A. Carson, *Christ and Culture, Revisited* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm B. Eerdmans, Publishers, 2008).

[21] Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture*, 39.

[22] Carter, "Legacy", 391.

[23] *Ibid.*, 392.

[24] Recounted by William H. Swatos, Jr., "Church-Sect Theory", *Encyclopedia of Religion and Society*, William H. Swatos, Jr., ed. (Walnut Creek, CA: Al¬tamira Press, 1997).

considered not as a set of four boxes but as a field on which various groups can be located, depending on where they fall on each dimension.[25]
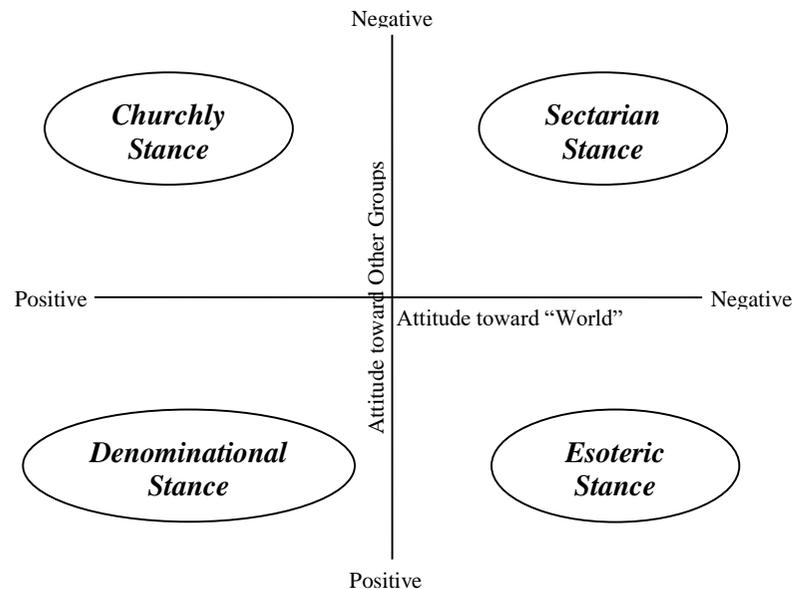

Figure One

Aficionados will notice that I have renamed the lower right-hand corner "Esoteric" instead of the usual "Cultic". Sociologists have lost the terminological war over the word "cult", which the news media have turned into a term of abuse. "Esoteric" captures the sense that some religious groups seek personal enlightenment rather than engagement with the world, but are perfectly willing to acknowledge that there are many paths to the divine. Theosophists and anthroposophists among the early 20th century spiritual seekers and New Age groups in the contemporary world are good examples of this trend.[26]

The term "sect" has similar negative connotations in a few quarters, mainly among those who have not encountered this typology's usefulness. Here, it labels those groups that live at relatively high tension with their social surroundings but see themselves as the only path to salvation. It describes a set of attitudes but does not judge them.

No group is fixed in one place on this diagram. Indeed, specific groups can have different stances in different times and places. To borrow an example from Meredith McGuire,

> We can classify the Roman Catholic organization as churchly relative to 13th century French society; relative to U.S. society in 1940, however, [it] was more sectarian because it neither accepted nor was fully accepted by society. … Later in the United States, especially after Vatican II, the Roman Catholic organization appears to have become increasingly denominational, because it is more accepting of and accepted by society and it is more tolerant of other groups' claims to legitimacy.[27]

This diagram is a powerful conceptual tool. Sociologists find that they can predict groups' attitudes and choices based on knowing their current position on these two dimensions.[28] Not being based in theology, it can be used across religious divides; thus it makes sense to speak of Hindu or Buddhist sectarian and denominational groupings. It can also be usefully applied to political groups as well as to religious ones (e.g., sectarian Trotskyites), because its two dimensions – tension and grants of legitimacy – have no overt religious content.

This strength, however, is simultaneously a weakness. This schema is built around two dimensions of the relationship between the group and outsiders. It is thus an external, abstract measurement of group characteristics rather than capturing what group members think they are doing. In this sense, it is very different from Niebuhr's typology. Leaving aside the aforementioned criticisms – and they do not affect this point – Niebuhr began with what group members think. He compared their attitudes about the proper role that Christians should play in the world, which he categorised into to five logically different possibilities. He started with theology, described how group members apply that theology to their worldly work, and weighed the results. This approach takes religion seriously, albeit at the cost of being unable to apply his types outside of a Christian context.

Sociology can, I think, learn something useful here – and on two levels. First, Niebuhr's types remind us that religious contents matter. Yes, we can predict human behaviour if we know something about the tension a particular group feels toward its social surroundings and the degree of legitimacy it grants to others in its social field. How much more could we predict, though, if we knew what exactly the group

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[25] This diagram is based on Meredith McGuire, *Religion: The Social Context*, 5th edition. (Belmont, California: Wadworth Publishers, 2002), 151. McGuire notes that not only will different groups hold different stances, but also individuals within groups may hold different stances than their co-religionists. Thus an individual in a largely sectarian group may have a more denominationally oriented attitude than most of her or his fellows.

[26] Paul Heelas and Linda Woodhead, "The Spiritual Revolution: Why Religion is Giving Way to Spirituality" (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 2005).

[27] McGuire, *Religion: The Social Context*, 158.

[28] For example, anthropologist Mary Douglas used a modified form of this system to predict the tendencies of sectarian political groups to turn against their own former members. Mary Douglas, *Natural Symbols* (London: Barrie & Jenkins, 1973).

members thought about their situation? Would it not help us to know what those group members see as the right way to order their worldly action?

Take, for example, two groups located at the same spot on the church/sect/denomination diagram at a given point in time. Would we not expect different outcomes, were we to know that one group sees its role as opposing mainstream culture and the other sees its role as transforming it? The first would likely withdraw into itself, perhaps creating a religious enclave, as the Old Order Amish have done in the rural United States. The second would likely move outwards, engaging with society in order to transform its patterns. This was the route that late 18th century Quakers took, as they emerged from their quietist period and worked to abolish slavery. Theology makes all the difference here. Niebuhr's types (suitably corrected) could prove a very useful sociological tool.

They would do so, of course, only for Christians. Indeed, given Niebuhr's Barthian starting point, they would best do so for Protestants. I leave the working out of this matter to theologians, who have the background to handle the details. Jewish, Muslim, Hindu, Buddhist, and other theologians (I use that word with some trepidation) would have to work out the parallel details for their own religious traditions. This would provide sociology with valuable new tools for social analysis.

The second lesson that sociology can take from Niebuhr's work is a bit more complex. It arises from the same fact: that the church/sect/denomination schema can be used regardless of the specific religious content of the groups involved. This seems unproblematic, until one realises the oddity of the matter. How strange to study religion as a social phenomenon, using tools for which everything that really matters about religion is ignored! As I noted, one can use the church/sect/denomination schema with political groups just as easily as with religious ones. This, in effect, puts political beliefs and religious beliefs on an equal footing. It treats them as the same sort of thing. Fine; on some level they are. But treating religious beliefs as an adjunct to organizational attitudes misses the point of what religion is all about. Religions are not just social organizations whose members happen to hold transcendent views about the world. They are not, at root, in the same class as football clubs, parent-teacher associations, town governments, and the like, albeit with a bit of supernatural frosting on their organizational cakes. To treat them as if they were – and unfortunately much sociology of religion does so – is to miss what makes religion special. Theology is not just an extra; it is central to the religious enterprise. This is not the case for political movements, football fans, PTAs, or town governments. Niebuhr's typology, for all its faults, reminds us of this important fact.

It reminds us of something else, as well. So far I have talked about the importance of paying attention to religious belief, but this involved some slight-of-hand. Reading Niebuhr carefully, we find that belief is not central to <u>Christ and Culture</u>. It is not central to the five types he outlined, for they are, at base, not distinguished by different belief systems. No, what distinguishes them is ethics: the choice of how to act in and toward the social world. <u>Christ and Culture</u> set out five ideal-types of action, which guide Christians to act in the world in five modally different ways. Christians can (1) oppose 'culture', (2) embrace it, (3) honour it while honouring God more, (4) hold God and culture in tension, or (5) seek to transform culture along the lines that faith teaches them they should. Belief is not the central issue, here; ethical action is. Yes, right action and right belief go together, but Niebuhr's typology is about the former, not the latter. This is an important lesson for sociologists to learn, as we try to understand the lives of religious people. What religious people <u>do</u> with their lives matters as much or more as what they believe. Ethics is central, not peripheral, to the religious life.

Time and Place?

There is one more issue to consider: the question of whether Niebuhr's five categories, developed for mid-20th century Euro-America, work in other times and places. Like all human inspirations, this typology is product of culture. Is a set of categories developed for a White-run, elite-oriented, institutionally integrated society still useful in our present multi-polar, multi-cultural world?

The U.S. is certainly a different place than it was when Niebuhr wrote sixty years ago. Though it has long been seen as "a nation of immigrants",[29] just 6.9% of the population in 1950 was foreign born. By our latest census (2010), this had almost doubled (to 12%). Add in the 11% with at least one foreign-born parent, and nearly one in four Americans is either a first or a second generation resident. That is a huge demographic shift and a huge jump in cultural diversity. In a partially related shift, our politics have become more bitter, frequently pitting good Christians against one another in the so-called "culture wars".[30] Christians differ fundamentally about how society should be run, and they are not shy about denigrating each other as they do so. This did not used to be the case.

The world has also changed. The advent of electronic communications, cheap transportation, and a global economy has eroded borders as never before. Afe

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[29] The phrase comes from the title of a short book by then-senator John F. Kennedy, *A Nation of Immigrants*, (New York: Anti-Defamation League 1959). The sentiment, however, is longstanding.

[30] James Davidson Hunter, *Culture Wars: The Struggle to Define America*, (New York: Basic Books, 1991).

Adogame and I recently outlined some of the effects this has had on religions:[31] in general, religious interactions are more diverse, more complicated, and more fraught with difficulties than when Niebuhr constructed his typology. They are also embedded in more complex cultural milieux. Just to take one example: a 2 kilometre walk down Barking Road in the Newham section of East London confronts one with scores of different religious and ethnic groups living and worshipping cheek-by-jowl – Christian, Hindu, Moslem, Sikh, and so on from many different countries.[32] Yet, these groups have few points of institutional contact or even relationship with one another. They mostly live in different social and mental universes. As Salman Rushdie put it, "it is part of the [present] metropolitan experience that things do not belong together but do live side-by-side – that you can live upstairs from [the Ayatollah] Khomeini".[33] In this light, Niebuhr's wish to develop a unified Christian moral response to his society now seems passé, perhaps even quaint.

Already in 1950 it was important to recognise – which Niebuhr did only insufficiently – that Christianity is itself embedded in socio-cultural patterns. It is far more important to recognise this now. As Marsden put it,

> The importance of underscoring this warning becomes clearest if we think of the cross-cultural exchanges involved within world Christianity. British Anglicans and African Anglicans, for instance, may differ in many ways that are shaped by their cultures, despite the formal similarities of their creeds. Western Christian missionaries inevitably bring with them the Gospel message, but it is already embedded in Western cultural forms. So missionary work is not simply a matter of bringing Christ to an alien culture, it also always involves a cultural dialogue and an exchange between two cultures. The two cultures learn from each other and the mission is shaped by "Christ" only as part of this cultural exchange.[34]

Marsden neglected to mention that missionary work is no longer one way. Nigerian churches send representatives to Germany and the United Kingdom while exchanging them with Brazil and South Africa.[35] Christians throughout the Global South share resources, ministries, and personnel.[36] Transnational and multi-polar religious connections are the new norm.

Marsden was right, however, to note that such transnational exchanges make Christianity's cultural embeddedness unmistakably clear. In cross-cultural contacts, there is no *a priori* way to say that one group is right and another is wrong. Each has its culturally grounded interpretation of Scripture, and each ought to assume that part of this interpretation embodies cultural differences. Truth arises from careful, patient dialogue between these points of view. It also arises from self-reflection. Each party must examine itself, to see which parts of its stance is universally Christian and which comes from particularistic culture attitudes. This calls for great sensitivity and for great dialogue. European and American Christians have as much to learn from this as anyone.

There is a good analogy for this in the culturally different approaches that various churches have to liturgy and worship. For example, services that would thrill an American Baptist might bore an African Baptist, despite their theological agreement; the former might be uncomfortable with the depth of congregational engagement that the latter find normal. Neither liturgical style is universally 'better'. With practice, though, each group of Christians can come to appreciate the other style's strengths. Gerardo Marti's Worship Across the Racial Divide shows how American congregations are currently working on this issue.[37] Cross-cultural conversation about how Christians should respond to different socio-cultural worlds is equally difficult, but perhaps even more important.

Craig Calhoun recently made a similar comment about the importance of interreligious dialogue. In his words,

> Where really basic issues are at stake, it is often the case that mutual understanding cannot be achieved without change in one or both of the parties. By participating in relationships with one another, including by

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[31] James V. Spickard and Afe Adogame, "Africa, the New African Diaspora, and Religious Transnationalism in a Global World." *Religion Crossing Boundaries Transnational Religious and Social Dynamics in Africa and the New African Diaspora*. (Leiden, E.J. Brill 2010) 7-20.

[32] See Greg Smith, "East London is No Longer Secular: Religion as a Source of Social Capital in the Regeneration of East London." *Rising East: The Journal of East London Studies* 4, no. 3 (1999) 24-53. Greg Smith, "Global Systems and Religious Diversity in the Inner City: Migrants in the East End of London." *International Journal on Multicultural Studies* 2, no 1 (2000) 16-39.

[33] Lisa Appagnanesi and Sara Maitland, *The Rushdie File,* (London: Fourth Estate/Institute of Contemporary Arts, 1990), 8. Ayatollah Khomeini issued a famous *fatwah* that called

on good Muslims to kill Salman Rushdie for supposedly blaspheming Islam in his novel The Satanic Verses.

[34] Marsden, "Christianity and Cultures", 8.

[35] André Corten and Ruth Marshall-Fratani, eds., *Between Babel and Pentecost: Transnational Pentecostalism in West Africa and Latin America*, (London: E. Hurst & Co, 2001).

[36] Philip Jenkins, *The Next Christendom: The Coming of Global Christianity*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002); Donald E. Miller and Tetsunao Yamamori, *Global Pentecostalism: The New Face of Christian Social Engagement*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007).

[37] Gerardo Marti, *Worship Across the Racial Divide: Religious Music and the Multiracial Congregation*, (New York, Oxford University Press, 2012).

> pursuing rational mutual understanding, we open ourselves to becoming somewhat different people.[38]

Niebuhr erred in presenting Christianity as if it were a fixed, culture-free matter. His typology led us to imagine that our main task was to choose the 'right' attitude to take toward the socio-cultural world around us. Today, it is more accurate to say that we have two tasks. Not only must we choose how to relate to that socio-cultural world but we must also come to recognise the cultural lenses through which we grasp the Christianity that we hope will be our guide. We need to see beyond these lenses' particularity. Otherwise, we could miss Christ's universal message.

That is why cross-cultural dialogue is so important. We learn who we are as Christians by encountering others whose Christianity appears, on the surface, to be different from our own. It is only by encounter, dialogue, and self-reflection that we learn what it is that God calls us to do.

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[38] Craig Calhoun, "Secularism, Citizenship, and the Public Sphere", in *Rethinking Secularism*, edited by Craig Calhoun, Mark Juergensmeyer, and Jonathan Van Antwerpen. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 86.