

Unintended aid: Resident Aliens at 25

by [Gary Dorrien](#) in the [October 1, 2014](#) issue

*In 1989, Stanley Hauerwas and William H. Willimon sparked a lively debate about church, ministry, and Christian identity with their book Resident Aliens: Life in the Christian Colony. Twenty-five years later, we asked several pastors and theologians to offer their perspective on the book and its impact. (Read all [responses](#).)*

*Resident Aliens* was almost a manifesto and perfectly timed. The context was the recent collapse of the Protestant mainline, and the authors were out to assign blame. A “tired old world” had ended sometime in the 1960s or 1970s, Hauerwas and Willimon said, and the church needed to understand itself as “a colony, an island of one culture in the middle of another.” Theologian John Howard Yoder never dramatized in this fashion, but he provided theological undergirding by stressing that Jesus espoused “a new peoplehood and a new way of living together.” The gospel is about the new aeon of the kingdom, Yoder argued. In the old order, sin and death ruled under the signs of vengeance and the state; in the new aeon, the rule of vengeance and the state were overthrown.

Asking how Christians should relate to politics and society, *Resident Aliens* gave Yoder’s answer: the gospel alternative to activist churches, which aim at social reform, and conversion churches, which focus on individual souls, is to form confessional communities of the cross that practice love of enemies, suffering for righteousness, and worshipping Christ in all things.

*Resident Aliens* quotably told church leaders to shed their Christendom consciousness and nostalgia. It knowingly said that seminaries produced young pastors lacking any idea of what their job was—to help congregations be the church. It quoted pastors who felt besieged by a culture that had turned against them. The book provided help by reviving social gospel arguments about the evisceration of kingdom Christianity in Constantinian Christianity—though the authors never put it that way, because denigrating “social activist churches” was central to their agenda. They also provided help by rightly stressing that churches are supposed to be formative communities—never mind that this too was a social gospel theme. *Resident Aliens* won attention by censuring modern churches for being lured into

social activism. This critique implicitly skewered the entire tradition of modern Christian social ethics, a critique Hauerwas confirmed in a slew of subsequent books.

But the dichotomy between the faithful church and the pagan everything else, borrowed from Yoder, was not what social ethics needed. It smacked of religious exclusivity and the conviction that other religions are false or worthless. It undercut Christian struggles for a just order and yielded indiscriminate broadsides against liberalism. It reduced the theology of the kingdom or commonwealth of God to a my-group binary, misrepresenting the gospel-centered faith preached by Walter Rauschenbusch and Martin Luther King Jr. Above all, it evaded the critical force of every liberation theology, claiming “nonviolent us” status distinguished from unrighteous others—a unitary claim masking the oppressions identified by liberation theologies.

*Resident Aliens* helped many pastors scale back to something they could preach and manage in a time of cultural fragmentation and upheaval, economic globalization, and looming ecological catastrophe. But Christian social ethics is supposed to propel you into that world, not rationalize your insularity.