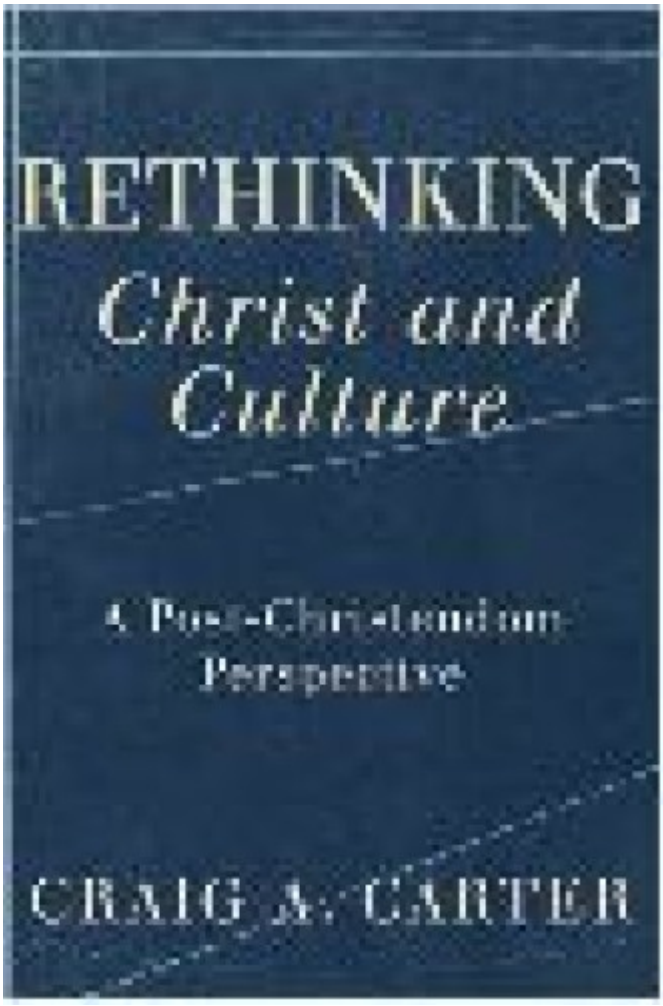
Rethinking Christ and Culture

reviewed by Keith Graber Miller in the October 30, 2007 issue

In Review



Rethinking Christ and Culture: A Post-Christendom Perspective

Craig A. Carter
Brazos

More than half a century after its publication, H. Richard Niebuhr's *Christ and Culture* still generates theological and ethical heat from its detractors, who are joined by

Craig Carter in this critique of Christendom and its embrace of violent coercion.

Carter, a professor of religious studies at Tyndale University College and Seminary in Toronto, clearly writes from a post-Christendom—but not a post-Christian—perspective. Niebuhr's ideal-type construct, he argues, was formulated with the unarticulated presupposition that Christendom, with its fusion of religious and political power, was "real, permanent, and on the whole a good thing." Because Niebuhr began with that distorted assumption, says Carter, the typology he constructed was truncated and theologically faulty.

The age of Christendom has passed, Carter argues, and the church needs to graciously accept its new situation as a "minority subculture within a pluralistic world." Christians need not lament this passing, he says, but should say amen to postmodernist and postcolonial attacks on the evils of Christendom and "get on with the task of sharing the good news that there is another way to live . . . that involves serving others rather than dominating, controlling, and exploiting them."

Carter acknowledges that *Christ and Culture* shaped several generations of seminarians, scholars and church leaders and that its influence was so pervasive that writers can refer to "Christ transforming culture" with the assumption that their audience will understand the allusion to Niebuhr's construct. Most of us who have had theological training in the past five decades can tick off Niebuhr's five categories with little thought: Christ against culture and Christ of culture at the two extremes, with the moderating positions of Christ above culture, Christ and culture in paradox and Christ transforming culture in between.

Niebuhr, says Carter, "told a very good story," one that made sense in his 1950s context—when Protestant churches were full and liberal Protestants had concluded that "even though the kingdom of God had been delayed, the New Deal was not a bad substitute, all things considered." Although we have not had a state church in the U.S., many people in the U.S. believed then and many still believe that the church has a key role in inspiring patriotism, maintaining public morality and giving religious legitimacy to the government. The church's 1950s location in the mainstream of U.S. life made Niebuhr's typology palatable and allowed for his easy dismissal of the Christ-against-culture type, which he saw as biblically faithful but ultimately inadequate and irrelevant.

Carter sets out to rehabilitate the Christ-against-culture type, though not simply by casting his lot with that Niebuhrian category. One of the problems with *Christ and Culture*, he says, is that Niebuhr lumped together disparate movements such as those of desert hermits, Benedictines, Jesuits, Hutterites, small Brethren groups and several varieties of Mennonites, along with Tolstoy, who served as the primary exemplar of the "against" folks. This distorts the historical reality of who those groups were, says Carter; even more problematic is that Niebuhr made this one type do triple or quadruple duty—a move that destroys the integrity of the type.

James Gustafson asks a key question in his preface to the 50th anniversary edition of *Christ and Culture*. A former student of Niebuhr's, he says that the ideal-typical method Niebuhr employed should be judged not on the basis of whether every figure Niebuhr mentioned fits the assigned category, but on whether the types help illuminate choices that are made in Christian ethics. But Carter insists that critiques by Gustafson and others involve precisely this sort of judgment: they disagree over the heuristic value of Niebuhr's typology, in which "more is obscured than is illuminated, particularly by the Christ against culture type."

Not surprisingly to those who have followed debates about *Christ and Culture* over the past 40 years, Carter draws extensively on the thought of Mennonite social ethicist John Howard Yoder. Carter wrote his doctoral dissertation on Yoder's theology and social ethics (it was published by Brazos as *The Politics of the Cross* in 2001). For several decades a mimeographed but unpublished copy of Yoder's critique of *Christ and Culture* had circulated among faculty and students at Associated Mennonite Biblical Seminary, where Yoder taught for many years. That piece, "How H. Richard Niebuhr Reasoned: A Critique of *Christ and Culture*," finally appeared in 1996 in *Authentic Transformation*: *A New Vision of Christ and Culture* (Abingdon), coauthored by Glen H. Stassen, D. M. Yeager and Yoder. Prior to the publication of that volume, Seventh-day Adventist pastor and scholar Charles Scriven had drawn extensively on Yoder's unpublished paper and other works for his book *The Transformation of Culture*: *Christian Social Ethics After H. Richard Niebuhr* (Herald, 1988).

One hears strong echoes of Yoder and of Yoder's teacher Karl Barth in Carter's charge to the post-Christendom church to keep church and state separate and to follow Jesus in rejecting violence, challenging the powers and embracing God's self-revelation in Jesus rather than holding natural theology to be the criterion of truth. In Carter's third chapter, his most explicit critique of Niebuhr's argument, he

acknowledges his indebtedness to Yoder. In his later, more constructive chapters, he gives a nod to another Mennonite ethicist, Duane K. Friesen.

Ultimately Carter does not throw out Niebuhr's basic grid; rather, he conflates and expands it, then draws a new line in the typological sand. His "Post-Christendom Typology of Christ and Culture" includes six categories—three Christendom types and three non-Christendom types. The former include Christ legitimizing culture, Christ humanizing culture and Christ transforming culture. Christ transforming culture and Christ humanizing culture also appear as the first and second of the non-Christendom types, followed by the final category, Christ separating from culture. With these three non-Christendom types Carter fleshes out and expands on the various forms of Niebuhr's "against" type.

The core difference between the Christendom and non-Christendom types is that the Christendom types "accept the necessity of the church endorsing, requesting, or joining in violent coercion," and the non-Christendom types do not. Although Carter's approach shares many affinities with those of the Anabaptists who have shaped his theology, he says that he is not willing to label his approach an Anabaptist perspective; instead, he positions himself "within the mainstream theological tradition as a Nicene theologian." At first blush, Carter's embrace of Nicea might seem odd to some readers, given his thoroughgoing critique of Constantine and of Constantine's oversight of the Council of Nicea in 325.

In his concluding chapter Carter moves the debate from the tension between Christ and culture to a choice between Jesus and Constantine. These two historical figures, he says, represent and embody two different kinds of Messiah; two different views of discipleship, power and the cross; and two different concepts of eschatology and the church. The fourth-century church made the "deal with the devil" that Jesus had rejected in his desert temptations.

"Somebody else can run the government, fight the wars, and struggle for power, money, and fame," says Carter. "Christians have better things to do. We need to imitate our Lord and strive to live lives of forgiveness, reconciliation, and service to the poor." Such words might convince Niebuhr and those who follow him that they were right all along about those "against" types. But those earlier dismissed by Niebuhr will find solid and nuanced grounding in this critical appraisal of Niebuhr's typology.