

## ABSTRACT

Theopolitics: The Theological Lineage of Walter Rauschenbusch,  
Reinhold Niebuhr, and John Howard Yoder

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The story of twentieth-century political theology is often narrated as one of competing schools. Reinhold Niebuhr's Christian realism is described as a radical break from the social gospel liberalism of Walter Rauschenbusch. In turn, John Howard Yoder's communitarian theology is described as an alternative to Niebuhr's realism, while at the same time resisting the liberalism of Rauschenbusch's social gospel.

In this dissertation I renarrate the lineage of these figures by arguing that the political and ethical differences among them are predicated on more fundamental theological continuities. Contrary to standard narrations, I argue that Niebuhr adopts more of Rauschenbusch's theological outlook than is ordinarily assumed and that Yoder not only adopts aspects of Niebuhr's theology but also eventually offers a theopolitical vision that returns in certain ways to Rauschenbusch's social gospel. In contrast to narratives that focus on discontinuities, I argue that the story is more one of internal family squabbles within a relatively coherent theological tradition—a tradition that I call theopolitical liberalism. While offering different answers and emphases, all three figures

are united by a shared question that guides their work: How can Christian theology inform contemporary sociopolitical concerns?

I limit my discussion to three theological themes that have become defining for Yoder's project in particular: Christology, eschatology, and ecclesiology. By demonstrating how Yoder's treatment of these key themes has precedent in these earlier figures, I hope to provide the most compelling case for my renarration. In addition to renarrating this significant chapter of twentieth-century American Protestant theology, I conclude by considering some implications of the renarration for current discussions in political theology.

Theopolitics: The Theological Lineage of Walter Rauschenbusch,  
Reinhold Niebuhr, and John Howard Yoder

by

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A Dissertation

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## LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

<i>BT</i>	-	<i>Beyond Tragedy</i>
<i>CAWPR</i>	-	<i>Christian Attitudes to War, Peace, and Revolution</i>
<i>CSC</i>	-	<i>Christianity and the Social Crisis</i>
<i>CSO</i>	-	<i>Christianizing the Social Order</i>
<i>CWS</i>	-	<i>The Christian Witness to the State</i>
<i>DPR</i>	-	<i>Discipleship as Political Responsibility</i>
<i>FH</i>	-	<i>Faith and History</i>
<i>FN</i>	-	<i>For the Nations</i>
<i>ICE</i>	-	<i>An Interpretation of Christian Ethics</i>
<i>MMIS</i>	-	<i>Moral Man and Immoral Society</i>
<i>NDM</i>	-	<i>The Nature and Destiny of Man</i>
<i>OR</i>	-	<i>The Original Revolution</i>
<i>PJ</i>	-	<i>The Politics of Jesus</i>
<i>PK</i>	-	<i>The Priestly Kingdom</i>
<i>PWE</i>	-	“Peace Without Eschatology?”
<i>RK</i>	-	<i>The Righteousness of the Kingdom</i>
<i>RNCP</i>	-	“Reinhold Niebuhr and Christian Pacifism”
<i>RP</i>	-	<i>The Royal Priesthood</i>
<i>SGRW</i>	-	“To Serve Our God and to Rule the World”
<i>SSP</i>	-	“Sacrament as Social Process”

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I was warned that writing one's dissertation is an isolating experience, but I have had the good pleasure of discovering the opposite to be the case. I here wish to express my deep gratitude to the many people who have supported me throughout the writing process. First, I thank my director, Paul Martens, who not only has guided me throughout my time at Baylor but also first proposed that I write on Reinhold Niebuhr and John Howard Yoder. He later designed a seminar on the legacy of the Niebuhr brothers in which we read the towering figures in twentieth-century political theology, beginning with Walter Rauschenbusch and ending with Stanley Hauerwas. I thank John Roth for publishing my essay from that seminar in *The Mennonite Quarterly Review* and for granting me permission to incorporate materials from that essay into this dissertation.

I also thank the other members of my committee for the various ways they have contributed to this project. Jonathan Tran has stretched my thinking since my first seminar at Baylor and has pressed me to articulate the significance of my project. Roger Olson has been a reliable sounding board throughout my writing process and always offers incisive questions and helpful perspective. Stanley Hauerwas provided helpful feedback and encouragement early in the project and then later was gracious enough to make room on the itinerary of a prescheduled visit to join my committee; I thank him as well for his decades of thoughtful engagement with the issues and figures addressed in this dissertation, which has taught me much. Natalie Carnes and Bill Pitts also expressed interest in my work and generously accepted my request to serve on the committee.



Although I wrote my dissertation in earnest between autumn 2014 and spring 2016, this project was many years in the making. I thank Tim Erdel for introducing me to Yoder's work years ago in an undergraduate ethics course; Ted Koontz and Gayle Gerber Koontz for guiding my thinking on Yoder in their respective seminars at Anabaptist Mennonite Biblical Seminary; my Baylor theology professors Pete Candler, Barry Harvey, Dan Williams, and Ralph Wood for their mentoring and guidance; colleagues Mat Crawford, K C Flynn, Nate Lee, Brandon Morgan, Matt Porter, and Myles Wertz for their friendship and enriching conversations on the topics discussed herein; the Mennonite Historical Society for providing me a research grant in 2013 that allowed me to visit the Mennonite Historical Archives in Goshen, Indiana; the late Max Stackhouse for providing me assistance tracking down a copy of his 1964 dissertation on Rauschenbusch and Niebuhr; Harlan Beckley for helpful feedback on an early draft of Chapter Two; my Mennonite brethren Mark Baker, Bob Brenneman, Jamie Pitts, John Roth, and Ryan Schellenberg for helpful feedback on an early draft of Chapter Four; and Hope Fellowship Mennonite Church for their support and friendship.

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To Andrea, Wesley, and Liza

## CHAPTER ONE

### Introduction: The Story of Twentieth-Century Political Theology

*[Hauerwas and Yoder's] criticism of Christian Realism often provides a curious echo of the Realists' criticism of their liberal predecessors. Perhaps, as with Niebuhr's arguments against the Social Gospel, the continuity is greater than the critic would at first want to admit.*

—Robin Lovin

The story of twentieth-century American Protestant political theology is often narrated as one of competing schools.<sup>1</sup> First came the social gospel liberals who, from the turn of the century through World War I, attempted to “Christianize” society. Following World War I and lasting through World War II and the Cold War era were the Christian realists, who had the more sober goal of maintaining a “tolerable balance of egoisms” in society. Finally, in the wake of the Vietnam War, came the communitarians,<sup>2</sup> who gave

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<sup>1</sup> I use the term “political theology” somewhat loosely here for a tradition that often goes by the name “social ethics.” As I hope this dissertation demonstrates, the three figures discussed were not merely ethicists but were, in fact, theologians in their own right—ones who were deeply concerned about Christianity’s role in public or political life. *The Blackwell Companion to Political Theology*, edited by Peter Scott and William T. Cavanaugh (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2004), for example, has entries on Niebuhr and Stanley Hauerwas (though not Rauschenbusch or Yoder). In his essay “How to (Not) Be a Political Theologian” in his recent book, *The Work of Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2015), Hauerwas discusses the emergence of the term “political theology” and his own reservations about it. He begins with characteristic humor: “I have recently discovered I am numbered among those identified as ‘political theologians.’ I must be a political theologian because there is an article, a very good article by Rusty Reno, on my work in *The Blackwell Companion to Political Theology*. . . . Rusty Reno is a theologian of rare intellectual judgment, so I assume he must know what he is talking about, but I confess for me the idea that I am a political theologian will take some getting used to” (170). I suspect that for some the idea of Rauschenbusch and Yoder as political theologians may take some getting used to as well.

<sup>2</sup> The term “communitarian” is used more often by interpreters (or critics) of this group than as a self-descriptor. See, e.g., Gary J. Dorrien, *Soul in Society: The Making and Renewal of Social Christianity* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1995), 336–76; Jeffrey Stout, *Democracy and Tradition* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2004).

up on trying to transform society and argued instead that Christians should focus on their own distinctive narrative, ecclesial practices, and communal formation.

On this competing schools narration, each of these schools tends to be defined over and against the others. According to both Christian realists and communitarians, the social gospel liberals were “naively optimistic” in their attempts to establish the Kingdom of God on earth. According to both the social gospel liberals and the communitarians, the Christian realists sold out on Christian principles in order to engage pragmatically in the power politics of the nation-state. And according to both the social gospel liberals and the Christian realists, the communitarians were guilty of “ecclesiocentrism” and a resulting lack of concern for the well-being of civil society.

For this competing schools narrative, each of these schools has its hero (or villain, depending on who is telling the story). The hero of the social gospel liberals is Walter Rauschenbusch, whose 1907 book *Christianity and the Social Crisis* struck the conscience of the nation and galvanized support for the social gospel. The hero of the Christian realists is Reinhold Niebuhr, whose 1932 book *Moral Man and Immoral Society* sounded the death knell for the social gospel movement and ushered in the era of Christian realism. The hero of the communitarians—among other so-called postliberals<sup>3</sup>—is John Howard Yoder, whose 1972 book *The Politics of Jesus* paved the way for a new beginning in political theology that was distinctively Christian.

There is a certain amount of veracity to the competing schools narrative. It is certainly true that Rauschenbusch, Niebuhr, and Yoder stand out as major influences on

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<sup>3</sup> In *Another Reformation: Postliberal Christianity and the Jews* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2011), Peter Ochs discusses four American Protestant postliberals—George Lindbeck, Robert W. Jenson, Stanley Hauerwas, and John Howard Yoder—devoting a chapter to each.

social gospel liberalism, Christian realism, and communitarianism, respectively. Further, there is no denying that Niebuhr leveled harsh polemics against his social gospel forbearers, as Yoder did of Christian realists. And on certain ethical and political judgments, particularly those pertaining to international conflict, there are clear differences between these schools.

At the same time, the competing schools narrative tends to obscure more than it clarifies. First, by identifying each of these schools with its major proponent, this narrative obscures the diversity—including the racial and gender diversity<sup>4</sup>—within each of these schools. It thus has the effect of flattening the schools into relatively simplistic ethical positions. Second, and related to the first, this narrative tends to focus almost exclusively on the question of the appropriateness of violence for Christians. While this is certainly an important question—especially for a century marked by two world wars, the Holocaust, genocide, and imperial aggression—it is often made into *the* fault line for political theologians. One is either a pacifist or a just warrior, an absolutist or a pragmatist, an idealist or a realist, and so on. Finally, in the heat of such polemics, the more nuanced views of the main protagonists get distorted, and their relationships to each other thus are lost. While each of these issues deserves close analysis, the latter issue will be the focus of the present dissertation.

Recent scholarship has begun to correct the competing schools narrative by paying closer attention to the ways in which Niebuhr's Christian realism was an

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<sup>4</sup> For a helpful corrective to the narrative that highlights the role of black theologians in the social gospel movement, see Gary J. Dorrien, *The New Abolition: W. E. B. Du Bois and the Black Social Gospel* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2015).

extension of, rather than an alternative to, the social gospel movement. Gary Dorrien has argued persuasively that, although Niebuhr lobbed invectives against his liberal contemporaries, he did so from within the liberal tradition rather than from the outside.<sup>5</sup> According to Dorrien, “Reinhold Niebuhr belonged to the liberal tradition that he attacked. Many of his disciples strayed into forms of neo-orthodox theology and political neoconservatism that repudiated their roots in the social gospel, but he did not.”<sup>6</sup> In other words, on Dorrien’s reading, Niebuhr is better understood not as breaking from Rauschenbusch but as competing with his liberal contemporaries over the best way to advance Rauschenbusch’s legacy in their new context. Niebuhr worries that his peers have taken Rauschenbusch’s quest to establish the Kingdom on earth too vigorously and are thus guilty of being naively optimistic about human nature and the ways social structures operate. For Niebuhr, by contrast, the fight for social justice is a perennial one, and while the Kingdom provides the ideal for society, that ideal is always beyond our grasp. Following Dorrien, I argue that the differences between Niebuhr and Rauschenbusch are better narrated within the context of a shared “tradition,” which, borrowing from Alasdair MacIntyre, I define as “an argument extended through time in which certain fundamental agreements are defined and redefined.”<sup>7</sup> I thus argue that

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<sup>5</sup> Gary J. Dorrien, *The Making of American Liberal Theology: Idealism, Realism, & Modernity, 1900–1950* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2003). Dorrien argues that “Niebuhr, [John] Bennett, and [Paul] Tillich belonged more fully to liberal theology than to neo-orthodoxy, and that through their criticism and constructive theologizing they created new forms of liberal theology” (10).

<sup>6</sup> Dorrien, *Making of American Liberal Theology*, 435.

<sup>7</sup> Alasdair MacIntyre, *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1988), 12.

Niebuhr's disagreements with his social gospel predecessor were more of a family dispute than a clash of competing schools.<sup>8</sup>

Unlike his treatment of Niebuhr, Dorrien reads Yoder's criticisms of the liberal tradition as evidence of Yoder's status as an outsider to this tradition. Dorrien describes Yoder as "an Anabaptist evangelical" who believed that "the social ethics tradition was a seriously mistaken offshoot of liberal theology and the magisterial Reformation."<sup>9</sup> For Dorrien this makes Yoder's role marginal to the narrative. As with Dorrien, Stanley Hauerwas includes Niebuhr but not Yoder within the lineage of Rauschenbusch's liberalism. However, unlike Dorrien, on Hauerwas's narrative Yoder's outsider status makes him the hero of the story. Hauerwas sets up the story: "Prior to Yoder the subject of Christian ethics in America was always America. The more America became the democratic society that the social gospellers so desired, the more difficult it became to do ethics in a theologically candid manner. Chastened by the Niebuhrs, those trained in

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<sup>8</sup> Drawing in part on Dorrien's reading of Niebuhr, Christopher H. Evans includes Rauschenbusch, Niebuhr, and Martin Luther King, Jr. as his three major representatives of the tradition of twentieth-century Protestant liberalism. In his book *Liberalism without Illusions: Renewing an American Christian Tradition* (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2010), Evans writes, "For all the different historical contexts behind their careers and writings, Rauschenbusch, Niebuhr, and King articulated remarkably similar theological Premises" (2).

<sup>9</sup> Gary J. Dorrien, *Social Ethics in the Making: Interpreting an American Tradition* (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), 447. Given Dorrien's own reading of Niebuhr as continuing the liberal tradition despite his critical engagements with it, it is somewhat surprising that Dorrien reads Yoder's supposed criticisms of the social ethics tradition as evidence of a break from it. He goes on to describe Hauerwas as "an evangelical Methodist provocateur" who believed that "Yoder's Radical Reformationist critique was basically right, though Hauerwas had a more complex relationship with mainline social ethics" (ibid.). Despite these characterizations of Yoder and Hauerwas as standing primarily outside of the liberal social ethics tradition, he does to his credit conclude by noting: "Neoconservatism, however, was something very different from Hauerwas and Yoder" (ibid., 488).

ethics no longer sought to ‘Christianize’ the social order. Instead they pursued, in the name of love, a more nearly just political arrangement.”<sup>10</sup> But then, narrates Hauerwas,

Yoder comes into this territory from the sectarian badlands. He is the long hero standing up to the mob that is willing to secure justice through the anguished acceptance of violence. He insists that the christologically disciplined account of nonviolence displayed in *The Politics of Jesus* cannot be dismissed the way that liberal Protestant pacifism was. Also, Yoder’s account of nonviolence requires theologians to acknowledge that their work makes no sense abstracted from the church. In short, for Yoder both the subject and the audience of Christian ethics are Christians—the people who are constituted by that polity called church.<sup>11</sup>

In place of the theologically vacuous liberal tradition, Hauerwas suggests, Yoder offers a retrieval of a robust Christology and ecclesiology for Christian political theology.

I come to this narrative not primarily as a historian of liberal theology but as a theologian influenced by Yoder’s work. My initial exposure to the liberal Protestant tradition was mediated largely through Hauerwas’s account, which—as we have just seen—emphasizes the contrasts between, on the one hand, the liberal social gospellers and Niebuhrians and, on the other, Yoder.<sup>12</sup> However, reading my way into the tradition of Protestant liberalism backwards from the end of the twentieth century to the beginning, as it were, I have come to believe that Yoder’s theology developed in large part out his interaction with the tradition of liberal Protestantism—through Niebuhr’s writing in particular—to the extent that Yoder’s outlook is more indebted to this tradition than is typically acknowledged (by Yoder or his interpreters), and that the tensions within this

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<sup>10</sup> Stanley Hauerwas, “When the Politics of Jesus makes a difference,” *Christian Century* 110, no. 28, 13 October 1993, 982.

<sup>11</sup> Hauerwas, “When the Politics of Jesus makes a difference,” 982.

<sup>12</sup> Of course, Hauerwas himself nuances this account in various places. He offers a largely sympathetic treatment of Rauschenbusch, for example, in Stanley Hauerwas, “Walter Rauschenbusch and the Saving of America,” in *A Better Hope: Resources for a Church Confronting Capitalism, Democracy, and Postmodernity* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos, 2000), 71–107, 234–56.



tradition are reflected in tensions in Yoder's theological outlook, including discernable differences between his early and late theology. Thus, without reading Yoder with this tradition as a backdrop, one's understanding of his theology will be deficient at best and mistaken at worst. Indeed, Hauerwas himself asks rhetorically: "How could you understand [Paul] Ramsey, [James] Gustafson, and even Yoder if you had no sense of how their work was positioned in relation to the Niebuhrs?"<sup>13</sup> But although there have been a number of significant treatments of Yoder's theology, thus far no one has given sustained attention to the relation between Yoder and Niebuhr—and even less so to the relation between Yoder and Rauschenbusch. In this dissertation, I seek to fill that void.

There are a number of indispensable studies of Yoder's thought, including the major treatments of Yoder's relationship to his forerunners by Craig Carter, Mark Thiessen Nation, and Earl Zimmerman. However, these works focus primarily on Yoder's Mennonite mentors such as Harold Bender and Yoder's Basel professor Karl Barth.<sup>14</sup> They thus lack any serious engagement with the tradition of American Protestant liberalism. A number of works discuss Yoder's relationship to Reinhold Niebuhr and his brother H. Richard, although by and large Yoder is superficially treated as the "alternative" to "the Niebuhrs." For example, in his recent study of Yoder's "trinitarian

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<sup>13</sup> Stanley Hauerwas, "Christian Ethics in America (and the *Journal of Religious Ethics*): A Report on a Book I Will Not Write," in *A Better Hope*, 56. That Hauerwas at one time seriously considered writing the book on which he reports in this essay is evidenced by his application for a grant from the Louisville Institute for a book titled, *A History of Christian Ethics in the United States: From Walter Rauschenbusch to John Howard Yoder* (see <http://www.louisville-institute.org/Grants/abstract.aspx?id=711>), which for various reasons he never wrote.

<sup>14</sup> Craig A. Carter, *The Politics of the Cross: The Theology and Social Ethics of John Howard Yoder* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2001); Mark Thiessen Nation, *John Howard Yoder: Mennonite Patience, Evangelical Witness, Catholic Convictions* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2006); Earl Zimmerman, *Practicing the Politics of Jesus: The Origin and Significance of John Howard Yoder's Social Ethics* (Telford, PA: Cascadia; Scottdale, PA: Herald Press, 2007).

theology of culture,” Branson Parler begins with a chapter on “the Niebuhrs” but subsequently uses them as little more than a foil for Yoder, noting how Yoder “routinely criticizes” them and offers an “alternative” to their theological ethics.<sup>15</sup> Likewise, in his essay “Sorting the Wheat from the Tares,” Michael Cartwright concludes that between Yoder and Reinhold Niebuhr “we have two different narrative typologies, and two different ‘interpretations’ of Christian ethics based on very different conceptions of the relationship of the church, and eschatology, and the meaning of history.”<sup>16</sup>

Paul Martens’s book *The Heterodox Yoder* provides a notable exception to this trend. Martens identifies in earlier scholarship on Yoder a “regulative framework” for reading Yoder’s texts, which he argues inhibits one from fully appreciating the dynamics of Yoder’s work. According to Martens, this framework includes the following assumptions:

- (1) *The Politics of Jesus* is Yoder’s defining text.
- (2) Yoder never changed his mind or, expressed with more nuance, Yoder is a very logical and systematic thinker.
- (3) Yoder only wrote on topics that he was assigned.
- (4) To understand Yoder you must place his thought in its “proper historical context,” which is Anabaptism.<sup>17</sup>

By reading Yoder without assuming this framework, Martens is able to appreciate the complexity of Yoder’s relationship to Niebuhr in ways that earlier interpreters were not.

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<sup>15</sup> Branson Parler, *Things Hold Together: John Howard Yoder’s Trinitarian Theology of Culture* (Harrisonburg, VA: Herald Press, 2012), 39, 73.

<sup>16</sup> Michael G. Cartwright, “Sorting the Wheat from the Tares: Reinterpreting Reinhold Niebuhr’s *Interpretation of Christian Ethics*,” in *The Wisdom of the Cross: Essays in Honor of John Howard Yoder*, ed. Stanley Hauerwas, et al. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1999), 371.

<sup>17</sup> Paul Martens, *The Heterodox Yoder* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2012), 6–16.

On Martens's reading, although *The Politics of Jesus* has become Yoder's most well-known work, it is more of a transitional than defining document for Yoder; and although Yoder often wrote on assignment and was indebted to his Mennonite mentors, these observations do not nullify the fact that Yoder pursued his own questions and agenda, including his ongoing interaction not only with Mennonites and Barth but with Protestant liberals like Niebuhr.<sup>18</sup>

If the impact of Niebuhr's thought on Yoder has been underappreciated, even less attention has been paid to Yoder's connections to Rauschenbusch. In some ways this is understandable, since Yoder himself seems to have paid little attention to Rauschenbusch.<sup>19</sup> Still, there are indications that this relationship is ripe for further examination. In a 1990 essay, Reinhard Hütter notes a number of significant parallels between Rauschenbusch and Yoder before ultimately arguing that their similarities are overshadowed by their fundamentally different eschatologies, which are reflected in their divergent ecclesiologies.<sup>20</sup> In a 2009 essay, Martens counters Hütter's contrastive account of Rauschenbusch's and Yoder's respective eschatologies (and resulting ecclesiologies) by offering a reading of Yoder's theology that he develops further in *The Heterodox*

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<sup>18</sup> Martens, *Heterodox Yoder*, 21–23. See also Mark Neufeld, "Responding to Realism: Assessing Anabaptist Alternatives," *Conrad Grebel Review* 12 (1994): 43–62; David C. Cramer, "Realistic Transformation: The Impact of the Niebuhr Brothers on the Social Ethics of John Howard Yoder," *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 88 (2014): 479–515.

<sup>19</sup> In *Social Ethics in the Making*, Dorrien notes that "Yoder ignored thinkers . . . such as Rauschenbusch" (465). Indeed, besides a few glancing references, his only discussion of Rauschenbusch is in his class lectures published posthumously as *Christian Attitudes to War, Peace, and Revolution*, edited by Theodore J. Koontz and Andy Alexis-Baker (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos, 2009), 277–78.

<sup>20</sup> Reinhard Hütter, "The Church: Midwife of History or Witness of the Eschaton?" *Journal of Religious Ethics* 18 (1990): 27–54.

*Yoder*.<sup>21</sup> On Martens's reading, Yoder's work is best read "within the modern trajectory of theologians—including but not limited to Kant, Hegel, Harnack, Ritschl, and Rauschenbusch—with formally similar agendas."<sup>22</sup> Without discounting the importance of Bender and Barth on Yoder's thinking, Martens's work opens up a new avenue for examining Yoder's work within the liberal Protestant tradition.

The goal of this dissertation is to pursue and develop that avenue. For this task, I draw often and appreciatively from Martens's work on Yoder and Dorrien's work on the history of Protestant liberalism. In so doing, I hope secondarily to deepen Dorrien's reading of the relationship between Rauschenbusch and Niebuhr. This project contributes a focused and careful reading of key aspects of Rauschenbusch's and Niebuhr's theology in order to make the comparisons between the two and subsequently with Yoder's theology more concrete. The resulting reading not only compliments and at times challenges prior studies on Yoder's thought but also provides scholars of the liberal Protestant tradition a more nuanced understanding of how Rauschenbusch and Niebuhr relate—and how Yoder fits into that tradition. Finally, although I offer a narration of the tradition that at times differs from Hauerwas's narration mentioned above, I confess here at the outset that I am sympathetic to many of his concerns about the tradition. I thus hope that this dissertation can be used as a diagnostic for addressing Hauerwas's concerns, some of which I consider in Chapter Six.

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<sup>21</sup> Paul Martens, "Universal History and a Not-Particularly Christian Particularity: Jeremiah and John Howard Yoder's Social Gospel," in *Power and Practices: Engaging the Work of John Howard Yoder*, edited by Jeremy M. Bergen and Anthony G. Siegrist (Scottsdale, PA: Herald, 2009), 131–146. Martens's reading has been criticized in Mark Thiessen Nation, "The 'Ecumenical' and 'Cosmopolitan' Yoder: A Critical Engagement with *Nonviolence – A Brief History* and Its Editors," *Conrad Grebel Review* 29 no. 3 (Fall 2011): 73–87.

<sup>22</sup> Martens, *Heterodox Yoder*, 142.

In what follows I first describe Rauschenbusch's theology, drawing primarily from his four major works (Chapter Two). I then turn to major theological writings of Reinhold Niebuhr to demonstrate the ways in which he both develops and deviates from Rauschenbusch (Chapter Three). Following these expositions, I argue that Rauschenbusch and Niebuhr belong within the same theological family—what I am calling theopolitical liberalism—even as they put their theological and ethical emphases in different and sometimes contrasting places. Having laid that groundwork, I move to programmatic essays of Yoder's from the 1950s in order to demonstrate how his early interaction with Niebuhr involved adopting a number of Niebuhr's theological positions even as he attempted to distinguish his views from Niebuhr's (Chapter Four). I then turn to central essays from Yoder's late writings in order to demonstrate how Yoder's mature thought evolves in a direction that more deeply resonates with Rauschenbusch's emphases (Chapter Five). In Chapter Six I return to contemporary interlocutors in order to suggest some implications of my renarration for current discussions in political theology.

To begin to understand the complex connections between Yoder and his Protestant liberal forerunners, I focus throughout the dissertation on three theological themes: Christology, eschatology, and ecclesiology. While any number of theological doctrines would merit closer examination in these figures, I limit myself to these three not only in order to focus the project but also because these themes have come to define Yoder's thought.<sup>23</sup> As we saw above, Hauerwas takes them to be precisely what distinguishes Yoder from his liberal Protestant predecessors. By demonstrating how even

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<sup>23</sup> For example, Carter's *The Politics of the Cross* is organized around these three themes.

these themes find significant precedent in Yoder's predecessors, I trust that I will have made the strongest argument for Yoder's inclusion within the tradition of theopolitical liberalism that traces its lineage from Rauschenbusch through Niebuhr and into the present day.

Before proceeding I need to make two further comments, one about terminology and one about the figures themselves. On the first point, as already mentioned I have chosen to describe the lineage of Rauschenbusch, Niebuhr, and Yoder as *theopolitical liberalism*—a term that requires a bit of unpacking. As historian Christopher Evans notes, “Providing any concise definition of theological liberalism is extremely problematic, due to the fact that liberalism, like every theological tradition or movement, is far from monolithic.”<sup>24</sup> As with Evans, I use the term *liberalism* to describe not so much a discrete list of theological beliefs and approaches as “a living tradition that has reflected and responded to changing historical contexts.”<sup>25</sup> Nevertheless, the term is unhelpful if it does not have some content beyond a (contested) list of names.

In his definitive study of American theological liberalism, Dorrien defines theological liberalism “by its openness to the verdicts of modern intellectual inquiry, especially historical criticism and the natural sciences; its commitment to the authority of individual reason and experience; its conception of Christianity as an ethical way of life; its favoring of moral concepts of atonement; and its commitment to make Christianity credible and socially relevant to contemporary people.”<sup>26</sup> Within this broad definition,

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<sup>24</sup> Evans, *Liberalism without Illusions*, 5.

<sup>25</sup> Evans, *Liberalism without Illusions*, 32.

<sup>26</sup> Dorrien, *Making of American Liberal Theology: Idealism, Realism, & Modernity*, 3.

Dorrien identifies three approaches—evangelical, modernist, and personalist—each with its distinct emphases and various offshoots. Drawing on Dorrien’s definition and categories, my argument is that Rauschenbusch, Niebuhr, and Yoder represent a strand of the evangelical liberal approach. Unlike the modernist approach that adopts a naturalistic or scientific idiom and the personalist approach that adopts a philosophical one, the evangelical approach largely retains a gospel-centered, biblical idiom. While Rauschenbusch, Niebuhr, and Yoder interact at times with scientific or philosophical categories (Niebuhr more than the other two), all three tend to prefer using biblical language—particularly that of the Hebrew prophets and Gospels.

In order to further specify the particular strand of evangelical liberalism described in this dissertation, I have added the qualifying adjective *theopolitical*. As we will see in the following chapters, for each of these figures theology is intrinsically political. Theopolitical liberalism is thus defined by the following features: It views the contemporary relevance of Jesus primarily in terms of his ethical teaching and example, which are expanded into broader sociopolitical terms through the eschatological concept of the Kingdom of God. This concept is used primarily as a political ideal—understood broadly in terms of liberty, fraternity, and equality—to which the church witnesses and by which the church evaluates contemporary sociopolitical arrangements.

A final word regards the figures under discussion. I have chosen to focus on these three theologians because, as I noted above, each has become identified with a major school and has become a towering figure in twentieth-century political theology. It is thereby impossible to write on this tradition without analyzing their work. My decision to focus on these individuals was complicated, however, by revelations about Yoder’s

personal history.<sup>27</sup> As I have considered how to approach Yoder's work, I have learned much from interaction with a number of women who have thought deeply about Yoder's actions.<sup>28</sup> I have reflected elsewhere on the implications of Yoder's actions and will not repeat myself here.<sup>29</sup> Instead I will conclude by commending the approach taken by Malinda Berry, described in her "Statement on King & Yoder" that begins her dissertation: "As a feminist Christian, I am uneasy about drawing on and using these men as sources for my work knowing that they used patriarchal privilege to dominate others, especially women. I hold this tension by naming their failings, reading them critically, and striving to direct readers' attention to them not as exemplars, but as figures who contributed ideas to the public sphere of Christian theology and ethics that are worth learning from and adapting in light of their sins."<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> See Rachel Waltner Goosen, "'Defanging the Beast': Mennonite Responses to John Howard Yoder's Sexual Abuse," *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 89 (2015): 7–80.

<sup>28</sup> In particular, I have learned from personal interactions with Barbra Graber, Ruth Krall, Stephanie Krehbiel, Lisa Schirch, and Sara Wenger Shenk—as well as from their important writing on this subject. See, e.g., Lisa Schirch, "To the Next Generation of Pacifist Theologians," afterword to *John Howard Yoder: Radical Theologian*, edited by J. Denny Weaver (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2014), 377–95, which surveys writings by other women on this issue, including each of those listed in this note.

<sup>29</sup> See David Cramer, Jenny Howell, Paul Martens, and Jonathan Tran, "Theology and Misconduct: The Case of John Howard Yoder," *Christian Century* 131 no. 17, 20 August 2014, 20–23; Paul Martens and David Cramer, "By What Criteria Does a 'Grand, Noble Experiment' Fail? What the Case of John Howard Yoder Reveals about the Mennonite Church," *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 89 (2015): 171–93.

<sup>30</sup> Malinda Elizabeth Berry, "'This Mark of a Standing Human Figure Poised to Embrace': A Constructive Theology of Social Responsibility, Nonviolence & Nonconformity," PhD diss., Union Theological Seminary, 2013, vi. Although Rauschenbusch and Niebuhr's lives were free of major scandal, their writings have been criticized for at times displaying white patriarchal prejudices. In an otherwise enthusiastic endorsement of Rauschenbusch's legacy, William L. Pitts notes that "Rauschenbusch also left a legacy of ideas now considered negative, intolerant, or unjust," including forms of racism, jingoism, and sexism. See William L. Pitts, "*Christianity and the Social Crisis*: Rauschenbusch's Legacy after a Century," *Baptist History and Heritage* 41 no. 3 (2006): 43–44. For similar criticisms of Niebuhr, see, e.g., James H. Cone, *The Cross and the Lynching Tree* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2011), 30–64; Susan Nelson Dunfee, "The Sin of Hiding: A Feminist Critique of Reinhold Niebuhr's Account of the Sin of Pride," *Soundings: An Interdisciplinary Journal* 65 (1982): 316–27.



## CHAPTER TWO

### The Original Revolution: Walter Rauschenbusch's Social Gospel Theology

*Thus spoke the voice of realism at the turn of the century.*

—Reinhold Niebuhr

In the spring of 1891, a worn-out, twenty-nine-year-old Walter Rauschenbusch resigned from his pastorate at Second German Baptist Church near Hell's Kitchen in New York City and planned a trip to Europe to reconnect with family, seek a cure for his increasing hearing loss, and immerse himself in the intellectual climate of Germany. For nearly five years, Rauschenbusch had pastored the church, where he worked tirelessly on behalf of his predominantly working-class, tenement-dwelling, German-immigrant congregation. While his ministry was largely successful, it also took an emotional and physical toll on the young Rauschenbusch. He was especially troubled by the funerals he had to conduct for parishioners who often died as a result of overwork, malnourishment, and unsanitary living conditions. Such experiences led him to question the pietistic faith of his upbringing, which tended to separate questions of personal faith and conduct from the kinds of social issues he was confronted with on a daily basis.

His church refused his resignation and instead helped pay for his trip to Germany, which, as biographer Christopher Evans describes, proved to be of enormous significance for Rauschenbusch: "While his efforts to track down a cure for his hearing loss were unsuccessful, the trip jelled his growing social convictions around one central theological

concept: the kingdom of God.”<sup>1</sup> This concept provided a way for Rauschenbusch to unite his emerging social convictions with his inherited pietistic faith and would thus serve as the spine of Rauschenbusch’s sociopolitical theology for the rest of his career.<sup>2</sup>

Rauschenbusch made an initial attempt while in Europe to work out his emerging theology in a manuscript he titled, somewhat awkwardly, “Christianity Revolutionary.”<sup>3</sup> For a variety of reasons, Rauschenbusch never published this manuscript; it was later discovered and published posthumously by Max Stackhouse as *The Righteousness of the Kingdom*.

In this chapter I follow Stackhouse in taking *The Righteousness of the Kingdom* as the first sustained expression of Rauschenbusch’s theology, which he would go on to develop and refine for the book that made his name fifteen years later: *Christianity and the Social Crisis* (1907). In addition to these two works, I consider Rauschenbusch’s last two major works, *Christianizing the Social Order* (1912) and *A Theology for the Social*

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<sup>1</sup> Christopher H. Evans, *The Kingdom Is Always But Coming: A Life of Walter Rauschenbusch* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2010), 89. Evans’s excellent biography describes Rauschenbusch’s early ministry at Second German Baptist in the chapter “Beneath the Glitter” (45–73), from which I have drawn in the introductory paragraph. In his chapter “Social Salvation” (89–100), Evans offers an extended narration of Rauschenbusch’s trip to Europe and the impact it had on his thought. The two other major biographies on Rauschenbusch are Paul M. Minus, *Walter Rauschenbusch: American Reformer* (New York: Macmillan, 1988), and Dores Robinson Sharp, *Walter Rauschenbusch* (New York: Macmillan, 1942). Sharp was Rauschenbusch’s secretary for many years and so provides many firsthand accounts of events in Rauschenbusch’s life. Sharp’s biography also includes an introduction by famed preacher, Harry Emerson Fosdick, who writes that Rauschenbusch’s “conscious and unconscious disciples are uncountable, for he opened a new era in the thought and effort of American Christianity, and many who share it now have no idea how deeply indebted they are to Walter Rauschenbusch” (xiii).

<sup>2</sup> This image is taken from Rauschenbusch himself. In discussing the difference between systematic and biblical theology, he notes that the biblical theologian makes “the idea of the Kingdom the vertebral idea around which the other thoughts are grouped in a coherent organism.” See Walter Rauschenbusch, *The Righteousness of the Kingdom*, 2d. ed., edited by Max L. Stackhouse (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen, 1999), 99. (Hereafter, *RK*.)

<sup>3</sup> As Evans notes in *The Kingdom Is Always But Coming*, “Numerous scholars have cited this work under the title, ‘Revolutionary Christianity.’ However, Rauschenbusch used the title ‘Christianity Revolutionary,’ an indication that this was a work in progress” (93n39).

*Gospel* (1917). My task is to introduce the broad contours of Rauschenbusch's thought across these major works in order to provide a starting point from which to trace later developments in twentieth-century political theology in Reinhold Niebuhr's and John Howard Yoder's respective bodies of work.

As I observed in the previous chapter, Yoder scholars tend to minimize Rauschenbusch's importance as a theologian or to ignore him altogether. Stanley Hauerwas is one of the most sympathetic to Rauschenbusch among those who follow Yoder,<sup>4</sup> but even he judges that despite some initial similarities to Yoder, Rauschenbusch's "understanding of the Church as a witness to the kingdom of God was not sufficiently robust."<sup>5</sup> As opposed to Yoder's robust eschatology and ecclesiology, argues Hauerwas, "Rauschenbusch's inadequate ecclesiology was a correlative of his identification of the kingdom of God with progressive accounts of history that ironically meant his position could lead to the loss of the eschatological tension between Church and world that is a characteristic of Constantinianism."<sup>6</sup> Since such criticisms tend to haunt Rauschenbusch's work, my goal in this chapter is to reintroduce Rauschenbusch in his own voice. At the same time, a comprehensive treatment of Rauschenbusch—or any of these figures—lies beyond the scope of this dissertation. Instead, as stated in Chapter One, my more modest aim is to trace three theological threads that are woven throughout

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<sup>4</sup> See Stanley Hauerwas, "Walter Rauschenbusch and the Saving of America," in *A Better Hope: Resources for a Church Confronting Capitalism, Democracy, and Postmodernity* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos, 2000), 71–107, 234–56.

<sup>5</sup> Stanley Hauerwas, "Repent. The Kingdom Is Here," in Walter Rauschenbusch, *Christianity and the Social Crisis in the 21st Century: The Classic That Woke up the Church*, edited by Paul Rauschenbusch (New York: HarperCollins, 2007), 175. Unless otherwise noted, all references to *Christianity and the Social Crisis* are to this edition. (Hereafter, *CSC*.)

<sup>6</sup> Hauerwas, "Repent," 174.

the work of each figure: Christology, eschatology, and ecclesiology. As we will see, just as with Yoder, so too with Rauschenbusch these themes are closely intertwined in his political theology. For Rauschenbusch, Jesus is the initiator of the Kingdom, which is an eschatological ideal that is partially realized in the world as it is embodied proleptically and imperfectly by the church.

### *Jesus as the Initiator of the Kingdom*

The life and teachings of Jesus play a significant role in each of Rauschenbusch's major works as well as his smaller, more popular works.<sup>7</sup> Rauschenbusch begins his introduction to his first major work, *The Righteousness of the Kingdom*, with a word of caution: "It would be a mistake to represent Jesus merely as an ethical teacher. His purpose above all things was to make God known and loved among men. To leave the Father out of Christ's teaching is to blot the sun out of the day."<sup>8</sup> The concern that drives Rauschenbusch's work, however, is to avoid a different mistake, namely, of reducing Jesus to "merely a guide in mystical religion."<sup>9</sup> He argues that Jesus "came to found a new society on earth, and he laid down the principles of conduct which were to govern men [*sic*] in this new society. Nor did he regard this as a matter of secondary

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<sup>7</sup> For the purposes of this dissertation, I focus primarily on Rauschenbusch's major works, leaving aside discussion of his more popular works, including *For God and the People: Prayers of the Social Awakening* (Boston: Pilgrim Press, 1910); *Unto Me* (Boston: Pilgrim Press, 1912); *Dare We Be Christians?* (Boston: Pilgrim Press 1914); and *The Social Principles of Jesus* (New York: Grosset & Dunlap, 1916). It should be noted, however, that *For God and the People* and *The Social Principles of Jesus* were the most widely read during his lifetime, while his major works have been more influential on subsequent theologians and ethicists. On this point, see Stackhouse, "The Continuing Importance of Walter Rauschenbusch," in *RK*, 15.

<sup>8</sup> Rauschenbusch, *RK*, 63.

<sup>9</sup> Rauschenbusch, *RK*, 63.

importance.”<sup>10</sup> Indeed, according to Rauschenbusch, Jesus “frequently showed the ethical aspect was the one that mainly interested him” in doctrinal questions, although his teaching was admittedly fragmentary and ad hoc.<sup>11</sup> In the rest of the book, Rauschenbusch seeks to systematize the ethical principles of Jesus in order to understand their ongoing relevance for the church and society.

“Christianity is in its nature revolutionary,” Rauschenbusch proclaims in the opening of his first chapter.<sup>12</sup> He finds Jesus’s teaching in the line of the Old Testament prophets, who were themselves the revolutionaries of their day. Not only was Jesus in the line of the prophets; he was also the fulfillment of their messianic expectations, which Rauschenbusch describes as “a revolutionary hope.”<sup>13</sup> This hope was expressed by prophets such as Isaiah and a number of expectant Jews in Jesus’s day, as recorded in the early chapters of Luke’s Gospel. Drawing from these chapters, Rauschenbusch notes the “revolutionary tone” of the songs of Mary, Zechariah, and Simeon as well as the teachings of John the Baptist and Jesus himself. Indeed, according to Rauschenbusch, Jesus “expressly asserted” the “revolutionary character of his work.”<sup>14</sup> The political leaders of Jesus’s day rightly considered him a threat as he brought nothing less than “a

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<sup>10</sup> Rauschenbusch, *RK*, 63. Rauschenbusch, Niebuhr, and Yoder all tended to use masculine nouns and pronouns when referring to humanity in general (although Yoder began writing in a more gender-inclusive way later in life). Although I will not continue to flag such language or to alter direct quotations, when paraphrasing their writings I will do so in a gender-inclusive way whenever possible.

<sup>11</sup> Rauschenbusch, *RK*, 63.

<sup>12</sup> Rauschenbusch, *RK*, 70.

<sup>13</sup> Rauschenbusch, *RK*, 72.

<sup>14</sup> Rauschenbusch, *RK*, 74.

collision, an upheaval, a revolutionary movement” that could not be ignored by these political leaders.<sup>15</sup>

After establishing the revolutionary character of Jesus’s life and teachings, Rauschenbusch argues that this revolutionary spirit is continued by the rest of “the apostolic writings of the New Testament,” including not only books like James and Revelation but also the writings of Paul in which, Rauschenbusch concedes, “the revolutionary element is not so dominant.”<sup>16</sup> Nevertheless, he writes of Paul: “Very early men felt that he was attacking the principle of unity which held the Roman world together. It was not a mere misunderstanding when men accused him of turning the world upside down and of opposing Caesar by proclaiming Jesus as king. . . . At any rate the emperors soon came to feel the subversive power of these religious thoughts.”<sup>17</sup> Thus, rather than tempering Jesus’s revolutionary social vision, the rest of the New Testament reinforces it, albeit in different contexts and with differing terminology.

According to Rauschenbusch, the aim of Jesus’s revolutionary movement was nothing other than the establishment of the Kingdom of God. He writes that “Christ was the initiatory power of the Kingdom of God” and that, “as he initiated the movement, so he sustains it.”<sup>18</sup> However, the means by which Jesus initiated and sustained this movement were unexpected: from his temptations in the wilderness forward he decided not to use “official power” or “miraculous display” to advance his mission; nor would he

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<sup>15</sup> Rauschenbusch, *RK*, 76.

<sup>16</sup> Rauschenbusch, *RK*, 77, 78.

<sup>17</sup> Rauschenbusch, *RK*, 77, 78.

<sup>18</sup> Rauschenbusch, *RK*, 118.

“ally himself with that Messianic faction of his people which had hate for its motive and force for its means.”<sup>19</sup> Instead of relying on displays of power or force, Jesus relied on the “power indwelling in truth itself,”<sup>20</sup> which is displayed through Jesus’s teaching and personality. Rauschenbusch writes that Jesus’s “teaching would tend toward a reversal of values and a reconstruction of society” and that anyone training his judgment according to the judgment of Christ “will find that he is himself a revolutionist.”<sup>21</sup> But, more importantly for Rauschenbusch, “It is *the personality of Jesus Christ* in which the secret of his power lies.”<sup>22</sup> He notes that Jesus “was conscious of a relation both to God and to humanity in which he stood solitary, of a personality which transcended that of all other historical persons in value, and of a power to fulfill the entire past, to initiate a new era, and to give the ultimate realization to the aspirations of humanity.”<sup>23</sup>

Rather than “leap[ing] at once to the theological dogmas of the later church that assert the very highest things concerning the person of Christ,” Rauschenbusch “prefer[s] the slower method of historical study to build up in our minds some approximate conception of the greatness of Jesus.”<sup>24</sup> For the Apostle Paul, this greatness was expressed in the language of the “second Adam” and the proclamation of “Jesus as the glorified Lord of the world for whose exaltation the highest Messianic theology and the

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<sup>19</sup> Rauschenbusch, *RK*, 89.

<sup>20</sup> Rauschenbusch, *RK*, 91.

<sup>21</sup> Rauschenbusch, *RK*, 119, 121.

<sup>22</sup> Rauschenbusch, *RK*, 122, emphasis original.

<sup>23</sup> Rauschenbusch, *RK*, 123.

<sup>24</sup> Rauschenbusch, *RK*, 124.

wealth of Alexandrian philosophy scarcely furnished him adequate expressions.”<sup>25</sup> For the Gospel of John, it was expressed in the language of “the eternal Word made flesh.”<sup>26</sup> These different ways of testifying to the greatness of Jesus’s personality have been echoed down through the ages, observes Rauschenbusch, even by those “who have refused their consent to the doctrines of the church,” such as Spinoza, Goethe, and Strauss.<sup>27</sup>

The reason the personality of Jesus has had such an impact throughout history is that his teaching was not divorced from his life but was rather “personified,” “realized,” and “embodied” in his person.<sup>28</sup> Rauschenbusch writes of this personification of truth in Jesus:

If truth can find expression in human nature, then it has found expression in the most perspicacious, the most universal, and the most elastic language. It is the language common to the rich and the lowly. It is the language that holds good though the boundaries of many nations be traversed. It is the language which does not become fossilized with the lapse of time. The words of the Nicene Creed, its distinctions of person and substance, though recited so often in many churches, are meaningless babble to ninety-nine percent of those who hear it. Christ is just as intelligible to a church sexton to-day as he was to the porter that swept the hall in Nicea after the Council adjourned. “The Word made flesh” is the necessary condition of a truly universal religion, for no other expression of truth can serve for all classes, all nations, all times, and all grades of spiritual development. In Jesus we find all these requirements, and therefore his personality has that power over humanity which a luminous Shechina of God, dwelling in the midst of us, must have.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Rauschenbusch, *RK*, 124.

<sup>26</sup> Rauschenbusch, *RK*, 125.

<sup>27</sup> Rauschenbusch, *RK*, 125.

<sup>28</sup> Rauschenbusch, *RK*, 126.

<sup>29</sup> Rauschenbusch, *RK*, 127.



For Rauschenbusch, then, the truth of Jesus's teaching "was made directly intelligible by being incarnated in his life."<sup>30</sup> His life demonstrated the possibility of living out his revolutionary teachings in this world. "He alone has fully married the real and the ideal, the life here and the life beyond, the inward perfection and its steady reconstruction of the outward imperfection. No spirit soared so high, and none was more sensible and sane."<sup>31</sup> The force of his life compels a response to his radical teaching: either "denial" or "loyalty."<sup>32</sup> Rauschenbusch thus concludes his description of the person of Christ: "The less men acknowledge the sovereignty of brute force and the more they yield their willing loyalty to the spiritual power of character, the more will Jesus become King of humanity."<sup>33</sup> For Rauschenbusch Christology is not a theological abstraction but a summon to a way of life.

In many ways *Christianity and the Social Crisis* is a fifteen-year update of *The Righteousness of the Kingdom* after Rauschenbusch gave up the idea of publishing the earlier work. *Christianity and the Social Crisis* covers much of the same ground as *The Righteousness of the Kingdom* but does so through a tighter argument with a more logical flow.<sup>34</sup> Rauschenbusch once again begins his chapter on "The Social Aims of Jesus" with

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<sup>30</sup> Rauschenbusch, *RK*, 131.

<sup>31</sup> Rauschenbusch, *RK*, 130.

<sup>32</sup> Rauschenbusch, *RK*, 131.

<sup>33</sup> Rauschenbusch, *RK*, 132.

<sup>34</sup> Gary Dorrien describes the difference between these two works well: "*Revolutionary Christianity* [that is, *The Righteousness of the Kingdom*] had patches of labored writing and clumsy connections, but all was smooth and sparkling in *Christianity and the Social Crisis*. The book enthralled readers with its graceful flow of short, clear sentences, its charming metaphors, and its vigorously paced argument." See Gary Dorrien, *The Making of American Liberal Theology: Idealism, Realism, & Modernity* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2003), 98. Indeed, while even the structure of *The Righteousness of the Kingdom* is awkward at times, that of *Christianity and the Social Crisis* is straightforward: Rauschenbusch begins with the Old Testament prophets (chap. 1), moves to the life and teachings of Jesus

the reminder that Jesus was neither “a social reformer of the modern type” nor simply “a teacher of morality” but came principally to reveal the Father and to “teach men to live as children in the presence of their Father, and no longer as slaves cringing before a despot.”<sup>35</sup> On the other hand, argues Rauschenbusch, “Whoever uncouples the religious and the social life has not understood Jesus.”<sup>36</sup> Indeed, for Rauschenbusch, Jesus stands on the shoulders of the Old Testament prophets who insisted on ethical rather than ceremonial religion: “The fundamental conviction of the prophets, which distinguished them from the ordinary religious life of their day, was the conviction that God demands righteousness and demands nothing but righteousness. . . . The prophets were the heralds of the fundamental truth that religion and ethics are inseparable, and that ethical conduct is the supreme and sufficient religious act.”<sup>37</sup> As with the prophets, Jesus rejected any separation between the religious and the social and instead “turned the full power of the religious impulse into the sluice of ethical conduct.”<sup>38</sup> Rauschenbusch sums up his view of Jesus’s ministry as follows:

Jesus, like all the prophets and like all his spiritually minded countrymen, lived in the hope of a great transformation of the national, social, and religious life about him. He shared the substance of that hope with his people, but by his profounder insight and loftier faith he elevated and transformed the common hope. He rejected all violent means and thereby transformed the inevitable conflict from the

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(chap. 2) and then on to the early church (chap. 3). These three chapters lay the foundation for Rauschenbusch’s Christian social ethic before he describes, first, how the church slowly lost Jesus’s revolutionary social vision (chap. 4); second, what the crisis facing society in his day entails (chap. 5); third, the many ways this crisis affects the church (chap. 6); and, fourth and finally, what readers can and should do about the crisis (chap. 7).

<sup>35</sup> Rauschenbusch, *CSC*, 41, 42.

<sup>36</sup> Rauschenbusch, *CSC*, 42.

<sup>37</sup> Rauschenbusch, *CSC*, 3, 6.

<sup>38</sup> Rauschenbusch, *CSC*, 58.

field of battle to the antagonism of mind against mind, and of heart against lack of heart. He postponed the divine catastrophe of judgment to the dim distance and put the emphasis on the growth of the new life that was now going on. He thought less of changes made *en masse*, and more of the immediate transformation of single centers of influence and of social nuclei. The Jewish hope became a human hope with universal scope. The old intent gaze into the future was turned to faith in present realities and beginnings, and found its task here and now.<sup>39</sup>

Given these revolutionary social aims, Rauschenbusch observes that Jesus “has been called the first socialist.”<sup>40</sup> In Rauschenbusch’s estimation, however, “He was more; he was the first real man, the inaugurator of a new humanity. But as such he bore within him the germs of a new social and political order. He was too great to be the Savior of a fractional part of human life.”<sup>41</sup>

Here in *Christianity and the Social Crisis*, as in *The Righteousness of the Kingdom*, Rauschenbusch paints a picture of Jesus as a nonviolent social and religious reformer. Standing on the shoulders of the Hebrew prophets, Jesus proclaims the revolutionary message of the Kingdom, in which religion and ethics are inseparable. For Rauschenbusch, Jesus is presented in the New Testament as Lord and Savior over every dimension of human existence: personal, social, and political. And, while Rauschenbusch does not reject later christological developments, he sidesteps ontological language in favor of the language of Jesus’s personality as an expression of God’s nature.

In the foreword to his follow-up work, *Christianizing the Social Order*, Rauschenbusch explains the impetus for writing it. In his previous book, *Christianity and the Social Crisis*, Rauschenbusch had laid emphasis on the social crisis of his day but had

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<sup>39</sup> Rauschenbusch, *CSC*, 53.

<sup>40</sup> Rauschenbusch, *CSC*, 72.

<sup>41</sup> Rauschenbusch, *CSC*, 72.

made short shrift of constructive proposals. Given the popularity of that book, Rauschenbusch was continually asked by readers: “What must we do? And what must we undo? What social ideal should guide us? What methods can we safely use in realizing it?”<sup>42</sup> He thus set out to write a follow-up book that would answer such questions, and the result was his nearly five-hundred page tome, *Christianizing the Social Order*. While the word “Christianizing” in the title of the book has led to much misunderstanding, Rauschenbusch attempts to preempt such misunderstanding by explicitly rejecting the idea of “putting the name of Christ into the Constitution of the United States” or trying “to set up a theocracy ruled by the Church and making Christian belief and worship a compulsory duty of citizenship.”<sup>43</sup> Rather, for Rauschenbusch, “Christianizing the social order means bringing it into harmony with the ethical convictions which we identify with Christ.” He explains,

We call this “Christianizing” the social order because these moral principles find their highest expression in the teachings, the life, and the spirit of Jesus Christ. Their present power in Western civilization is in large part directly traceable to his influence over its history. To the great majority of our nation, both inside and outside of the churches, he has become the incarnate moral law and his name is synonymous with the ideal of human goodness. To us who regard him as the unique revelation of God, the unfolding of the divine life under human forms, he is the ultimate standard of moral and spiritual life, the perfect expression of the will of God for humanity, the categorical imperative with a human heart.<sup>44</sup>

He continues, “But very many who do not hold this belief in a formulated way or who feel compelled to deny it, including an increasing portion of our Jewish fellow-citizens, will still consent that in Jesus our race has reached one of its highest points, if not its

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<sup>42</sup> Walter Rauschenbusch, *Christianizing the Social Order* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2010), vii. (Hereafter, *CSO*.)

<sup>43</sup> Rauschenbusch, *CSO*, 124.

<sup>44</sup> Rauschenbusch, *CSO*, 125.

crowning summit thus far, so that Jesus Christ is the prophecy of the future glory of humanity, the type of Man as he is to be. Christianizing means humanizing in the highest sense.”<sup>45</sup> Rauschenbusch’s chapter on Jesus is thus devoted to enumerating his moral principles or social ideals, of which he includes the following seven points:

- (1) Jesus repudiated force or bloodshed;
- (2) he widened the scope of human brotherhood beyond narrow nationalism, “jingo patriotism,” or racial prejudice;
- (3) he planted the seeds of democracy;
- (4) he devalued the plane of ceremonial religion and ecclesiasticism and emphasized instead “the plane of ethics inspired by the spirit of God” and “the domain of secular and ethical relations”;
- (5) he gave value to the ethical and religious life as an end in itself and not merely a means to material benefits;
- (6) he insisted on present duties over apocalyptic or utopian fantasies; and,
- (7) he presented a view of the Kingdom as both present and future.<sup>46</sup>

After listing and discussing these aspects of Jesus’s social Christianity, Rauschenbusch sums up his argument with a direct appeal to his readers: “The purpose of all that Jesus said and did and hoped to do was always the social redemption of the entire life of the human race on earth. If we regard him in any sense as our leader and master, we cannot treat as secondary what to him was the essence of his mission. If we regard him as the Son of God, the revelation of the very mind and will and nature of the Eternal, the obligation to complete what he began comes upon us with an absolute claim to

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<sup>45</sup> Rauschenbusch, *CSO*, 125.

<sup>46</sup> See Rauschenbusch, *CSO*, 58–66; direct quotes from 60, 62, 66.

obedience.”<sup>47</sup> As with his earlier works, so too here Rauschenbusch calls for loyalty to Jesus expressed through obedience to his mission of advancing the Kingdom. In the rest of the book he offers specific proposals for how to advance this mission in his contemporary American society, focusing primarily on the realm of economics.

The outbreak of World War I occurred between the publication of *Christianizing the Social Order* in 1912 and the publication of his last work, *A Theology for the Social Gospel*, in 1917. Rauschenbusch first presented the lectures that became *A Theology for the Social Gospel* less than a week after the United States entered the war.<sup>48</sup> If

*Christianizing the Social Order* is characterized by an overly optimistic tone and a focus on American economics, *A Theology for the Social Gospel* is decidedly more somber and written with the war and international affairs as the backdrop. Originally presented as four Taylor Lectures at Yale University, the published book was expanded into nineteen chapters, of which the fourfold structure can still be discerned. In the first part, Rauschenbusch aims “to show that a readjustment and expansion of theology, so that it will furnish an adequate intellectual basis for the social gospel, is necessary, feasible, desirable, and legitimate” (chapters 1–3).<sup>49</sup> In these chapters he makes the case that the “social gospel is the old message of salvation, but enlarged and intensified.”<sup>50</sup> He argues that “we need a theology large enough to contain the social gospel, and alive and

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<sup>47</sup> Rauschenbusch, *CSO*, 67.

<sup>48</sup> See Evans, *The Kingdom is Always But Coming*, 290.

<sup>49</sup> Rauschenbusch, *TSG*, 1.

<sup>50</sup> Rauschenbusch, *TSG*, 5.

productive enough not to hamper it.”<sup>51</sup> The impact of the social gospel, however, is “not destructive but constructive” of theology, as it presents us with a “union of religion and ethics.”<sup>52</sup> To his conservative critics, Rauschenbusch claims “that the social gospel imports into theology nothing that is new or alien.”<sup>53</sup> Nevertheless, in the remainder of the book he argues that the social gospel does indeed have a profound effect on the way one views a number of theological doctrines. He turns initially to the doctrines most affected by the social gospel, including, first, sin (chapters 4–9) and, second, salvation (chapters 10–14). He then concludes by taking up a number of other doctrines that will also be affected to a lesser or greater extent by the social gospel, including the doctrines of God, the Holy Spirit, revelation, the sacraments, eschatology, and the atonement (chapters 15–19).

Chapter 14 on Jesus, “The Initiator of the Kingdom of God,” serves as an important bridge between the preceding chapter on the Kingdom and the following one on God. Rauschenbusch admits at the outset that just as theologians “have always tried to make their christology match with their conception of salvation,” so too “the social gospel, without excluding other theological convictions, demands to understand that Christ who set in motion the historical forces of redemption which are to overthrow the Kingdom of Evil.”<sup>54</sup> While this focus on the historical and ethical aspects of Jesus’s life does not explicitly exclude other theological perspectives within the Christian tradition,

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<sup>51</sup> Rauschenbusch, *TSG*, 9.

<sup>52</sup> Rauschenbusch, *TSG*, 11, 14.

<sup>53</sup> Rauschenbusch, *TSG*, 23.

<sup>54</sup> Rauschenbusch, *TSG*, 147.

Rauschenbusch does contrast their approaches. The social gospel approach “is a return to the earliest messianic theology; whereas some of the other christological interests and ideas are alien importations, part of that wave of ‘Hellenization’ which nearly swamped the original gospel.”<sup>55</sup> The social gospel is “historically minded and realistic in its interests” and thus focused on “how the divine life of Christ can get control of human society,” whereas traditional approaches focus on speculative metaphysical questions about the relations among the members of the Trinity or between the two natures of Christ.<sup>56</sup> A virtue of the focus on the historical, ethical aspects of Christ’s life, argues Rauschenbusch, is its ecumenical quality: “The social gospel is believed by trinitarians and unitarians alike, by Catholic Modernists and Kansas Presbyterians of the most cerulean colour.”<sup>57</sup> The social gospel “may create a feeling of apathy toward speculative questions,” Rauschenbusch concedes, since it is “modern and is out for realities. It is ethical and wants ethical results from theology. It is solidaristic and feels homesick in the atomistic desert of individualism.”<sup>58</sup> Whereas “the old theology” made Christ into “an amorphous metaphysical conception which could be more briefly designated by an algebraic symbol,” the social gospel recovers “the realization that Jesus was actually a person, and not merely part of a ‘scheme of redemption.’”<sup>59</sup> Traditional theology tended to jump straight from the incarnation to the atonement and resurrection. “The social

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<sup>55</sup> Rauschenbusch, *TSG*, 147.

<sup>56</sup> Rauschenbusch, *TSG*, 147–48.

<sup>57</sup> Rauschenbusch, *TSG*, 148.

<sup>58</sup> Rauschenbusch, *TSG*, 148.

<sup>59</sup> Rauschenbusch, *TSG*, 148–49.



gospel would interpret all the events of his life, including his death, by the dominant purpose which he consistently followed, the establishment of the Kingdom of God.”<sup>60</sup> Traditional theology “has made the divinity of Christ a question of nature rather than character.”<sup>61</sup> The social gospel thinks “more of the spiritual processes of desire, choice, affirmation, and self-surrender within [Christ’s] own will and personality.”<sup>62</sup> Rauschenbusch summarizes: “To repeat: The social gospel is not primarily interested in metaphysical questions; its christological interest is all for a real personality who could set a great historical process in motion; it wants his work interpreted by the purposes which ruled and directed his active life; it would have more interest in basing the divine quality of his personality on free and ethical acts of his will than in dwelling on the passive inheritance of a divine essence.”<sup>63</sup>

In the rest of the chapter, Rauschenbusch describes the aspects of Christ’s personality by virtue of which “he became the initiator of the Kingdom.” This personality, Rauschenbusch argues, “was an achievement, not an effortless inheritance. His temptations and struggles were not stage-combats. At every point of his life he had to see his way through the tangle of moral questions which invited to errors and misjudgments; his clarity of judgment was an achievement. Not only in the desert but all the way he had to re-affirm his unity with the will of God and make all aims subservient

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<sup>60</sup> Rauschenbusch, *TSG*, 150.

<sup>61</sup> Rauschenbusch, *TSG*, 150.

<sup>62</sup> Rauschenbusch, *TSG*, 150.

<sup>63</sup> Rauschenbusch, *TSG*, 150–51.

to the Kingdom of God.”<sup>64</sup> Rauschenbusch describes Jesus overcoming the common religious temptations toward “mysticism, pessimism, asceticism, and other-worldliness” and instead binding himself “to a life of obedience and to the utter service of men.”<sup>65</sup> Jesus thus set aside ritual or ceremonial religion in favor of ethical religion that is realized “in acts expressing love and fellowship, or in breaking with the Kingdom of Evil.”<sup>66</sup> The personality of Jesus often has been lost from sight within the institutional church, argues Rauschenbusch, but it has survived on the margins in individuals like Tolstoy, who “received something of the mind of Jesus into his mind” so that “he became one of the prophetic figures of our age” and inspired a movement toward democracy and peace within Russia.<sup>67</sup> Rauschenbusch thus observes that “those religious movements in which the distinctive ideas and spirit of Jesus have broken forth again, have been the fruitful and prophetic movements in religion. Their power of attack can best be measured by the ferocity with which the Kingdom of Evil has trampled on them.”<sup>68</sup> Indeed, Jesus himself endured the full force of the Kingdom of Evil in his life and death, as Rauschenbusch describes in his concluding chapter on the atonement.

Rauschenbusch’s final chapter, “The Social Gospel and the Atonement,” provides something of a case study in his approach to Christology, as he sets out to understand the meaning and significance of the death of Christ from the perspective of the social gospel. He begins with a brief historical overview of traditional theological interpretations of

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<sup>64</sup> Rauschenbusch, *TSG*, 151.

<sup>65</sup> Rauschenbusch, *TSG*, 158, 159.

<sup>66</sup> Rauschenbusch, *TSG*, 158, 160.

<sup>67</sup> Rauschenbusch, *TSG*, 158, 165.

<sup>68</sup> Rauschenbusch, *TSG*, 158, 165.

Christ's death, describing the ransom view of the early church, the satisfaction view of Anselm, and the substitution view of the Reformers. He notes that all of these views are based on terms and analogies derived from the social realities of the times in which they were developed and that once the social realities change, the analogies break down and "the theories of the atonement based on them become artificial and unconvincing, and sometimes repulsive."<sup>69</sup> He then proposes to explore the meaning of the atonement from the dominant ideas of his day, namely, personality and social solidarity.<sup>70</sup>

Rauschenbusch sets up the problem as follows: "As Christian men we believe that the death of our Lord concerns us all. Our sins caused it. He bore the sin of the world. In

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<sup>69</sup> Rauschenbusch, *TSG*, 244.

<sup>70</sup> In *The Kingdom Is Always But Coming*, Evans notes Rauschenbusch's embrace of certain themes in the school of thought known as "Boston Personalism" that was gaining prominence around this time: "Rauschenbusch had long been attracted by this theology of personalism, a diffuse movement of liberal idealism associated with an array of early twentieth-century American theologians. At the center of the movement was Borden Parker Bowne, a professor of philosophy at Boston University. Reflecting many of the influences of German theological liberalism, Bowne and other personalist theologians emphasized that the nature of moral growth and development came through understanding how God's being embodied the attributes of human personality. . . . [By 1916] Rauschenbusch was becoming increasingly influenced by certain themes of this movement. Not only did personalism support Rauschenbusch's evolutionary view of social progress, but its underpinnings in late nineteenth-century German liberalism gave the tradition a strongly optimistic view concerning the ability of humanity to overcome the social forces opposing the kingdom of God" (280–281). Likewise, in her study of Rauschenbusch's thought, *Solidarity as Hermeneutic: A Revisionist Reading of the Theology of Walter Rauschenbusch* (New York: Peter Lang, 1992), Darlene Ann Peitz describes the idea of solidarity as having "its roots in the culture of his day" (74). She explains: "The idea of solidarity was mediated to Rauschenbusch through such currents of thought as Socialism and Darwinism and the reforming perspectives of Progressivism and the social gospel. However, his confrontation with the social conditions of poverty and oppression among those to whom he ministered during his eleven-year pastorate in New York City was decisive for his formulation of a social anthropology of solidarity. Confrontation with these conditions catalyzed Rauschenbusch's formulation of an anthropology of solidarity which would become the interpretive principle for his mediation of the Christian message to his own day and society" (74). On Peitz revisionist reading, "the idea of solidarity appears to lie at the very center of [Rauschenbusch's] hermeneutical project, controlling its interpretation," and it "can be seen to account for the major interpretive decisions of Rauschenbusch's work as a whole" (2). She cites Rauschenbusch's chapter on the atonement as an example of his hermeneutic of solidarity, concluding: "The principle of solidarity in the interpretation of the life and message of Jesus mediates a contemporary social understanding of the doctrine of the nature of God in relation to humankind and the doctrine of the atonement as saving event. The solidarity of Jesus with humankind shows the relation of God with humanity to be one of solidarity. The solidarity of Jesus with God shows Jesus' death, taken in connection with his initiation of the kingdom, to be [a] salvific event" (158).

turn his death was somehow for our good. Our spiritual situation is fundamentally changed in consequence of it. But how? How did he bear our sins? How did his death affect God? How did it affect us?”<sup>71</sup> He then sets out to answer each of these questions in turn. Regarding the first question, how Jesus can be said to have borne the sins of the world, Rauschenbusch dismisses the ideas of imputation or sympathy as based on individualistic conceptions of the atonement. For Rauschenbusch, “The solution of the problem lies in the recognition of solidarity.”<sup>72</sup> He describes each individual sin as contributing to or resulting from a larger matrix of “racial sin”—by which he means the collective sin of the human race. When organized, such sin takes on structural or institutional form, which Rauschenbusch calls “the Kingdom of Evil.”<sup>73</sup> When we say that Jesus bore the sins of humanity, then, we do not literally mean that he bore each individual sin but rather that “he did in a very real sense bear the weight of the public sins of organized society, and they in turn are causally connected with all private sins.”<sup>74</sup>

Rauschenbusch lists six kinds of sin—religious bigotry, the combination of graft and political power, the corruption of justice, the mob spirit, militarism, and class contempt—that collectively constitute the Kingdom of Evil and that Jesus bore collectively in his death. He explains: “We are linked in a solidarity of evil and guilt with all who have done the same before us, and all who will do the same after us. In so far

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<sup>71</sup> Rauschenbusch, *TSG*, 244.

<sup>72</sup> Rauschenbusch, *TSG*, 245.

<sup>73</sup> Rauschenbusch introduces and explains at greater length the idea of “The Kingdom of Evil” in *TSG*, 77–94. In *The Making of American Liberal Theology*, Gary Dorrien calls attention to the importance of this theme for Rauschenbusch in *A Theology for the Social Gospel*: “What was new and significant in his last work was its emphasis on sin, especially his neo-Ritschlian concept of the ‘kingdom of evil’” (121).

<sup>74</sup> Rauschenbusch, *TSG*, 246–47.

then as we, by our conscious actions or our passive consent, have repeated the sins which killed Jesus, we have made ourselves guilty of his death.”<sup>75</sup> The key to understanding the atonement is to view Jesus as bearing sin not through imputation but through solidarity.

Not only is solidarity the key to understanding the forces that put Jesus to death; it also helps us understand the significance of his death for both God and humanity.

Rauschenbusch writes, “The life of Jesus was a life of love and service. At every moment his life was going out toward God and men. His death, then, had the same significance. It was the culmination of his life, its most luminous point, the most dramatic expression of his personality, the consistent assertion of the purpose and law which had ruled him and formed him.”<sup>76</sup> Thus, in his death Jesus both adopts and reveals God’s attitude toward sin: “Within human limits Jesus acted as God acts. The non-resistance of Jesus, so far from being a strange and erratic part of his teaching, is an essential part of his conception of life and of his God-consciousness.”<sup>77</sup> In his death Jesus “set in motion a new beginning of spiritual life within the organized total of the race, and this henceforth pervaded the common life. This was the embryonic beginning of the Kingdom of God within the race.”<sup>78</sup> The effect of Jesus’s death on the cross is not to be understood forensically but rather through the logic of solidarity: “When men would learn to understand and love God; and when God could by anticipation see his own life appropriated by men, God and men would enter into spiritual solidarity, and this would be the only effective

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<sup>75</sup> Rauschenbusch, *TSG*, 259.

<sup>76</sup> Rauschenbusch, *TSG*, 261.

<sup>77</sup> Rauschenbusch, *TSG*, 263.

<sup>78</sup> Rauschenbusch, *TSG*, 265.

reconciliation.”<sup>79</sup> Jesus’s death cannot be understood in isolation from his life, which was devoted to obedience and loyalty to the Kingdom of God and thus to opposition to the Kingdom of Evil. Those who similarly devote themselves to the Kingdom of God are bound to Jesus in the solidarity of obedience and are thereby gathered together by Jesus into a new humanity. Rauschenbusch summarizes and commends his view:

This conception is free from the artificial and immoral elements inherent in all forensic and governmental interpretations of the atonement. It begins with the solidarity between God and Christ, and proceeds to the solidarity between God and mankind. It deals with social and religious realities. It connects the idea of reconciliation and the idea of the Kingdom of God. It does not dispense with the moral effort of men and the moral renewal of social life but absolutely demands both. It furnishes a mystic basis for the social revolution. It would be a theological conception which the social gospel could utilize and enforce.<sup>80</sup>

Rauschenbusch’s chapter on the atonement turned out to be one of the last things he wrote. His health declined rapidly in the months following the publication of *A Theology for the Social Gospel*, and he died the following summer of colon cancer at the age of fifty-six. We have thus seen that, from the opening chapter of his first work to the closing chapter of his last, the life, teachings, and death of Jesus remain decisive for Rauschenbusch’s theology. While not explicitly denying traditional theological claims about Jesus’s nature, he shifts the attention to the ways in which the historical Jesus’s actions, teachings, and “personality” reveal the ethical will of God. According to

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<sup>79</sup> Rauschenbusch, *TSG*, 265.

<sup>80</sup> Rauschenbusch, *TSG*, 267. Although I do not discuss Yoder’s reflections on the atonement from his lectures on Christology in this dissertation, it is noteworthy that he likewise appeals to the “logic of solidarity.” See John Howard Yoder, *Preface to Theology: Christology and Theological Method* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2002), 111, 306. Yoder’s criteria for an adequate doctrine of the atonement also echo Rauschenbusch’s closely: “So we want a view of the atonement that is not tied to an archaic worldview (like the descending into hell and the ransom theory). We want a view that is in history and not just in the mind of God or in some hypothetical heavenly courtroom. We want one that needs the resurrection, needs the incarnation, and needs all the language of the New Testament” (*Preface to Theology*, 307). For a fuller treatment of Yoder’s doctrine of the atonement, see Martens, *Heterodox Yoder*, 25–31.

Rauschenbusch this is a return from a Hellenistic way of understanding Christ, which focuses on metaphysical questions, to a Hebraic one, which has a more historical, social, ethical, and thus “realistic” orientation. At the same time, the life of Christ is presented by Rauschenbusch as the embodiment of the ideal for humanity, which can be broken down into a list of ethical principles: nonviolence, brotherhood, democracy, and so on. According to Rauschenbusch, those who are drawn to these principles might be said to bear the mind of Jesus regardless of what their theological beliefs may be. For Rauschenbusch, this is an asset, since it relativizes the importance of “speculative questions” and allows for people of all faiths and creeds to adopt the social principles of Jesus and thereby work together to advance the Kingdom in the world.

### *Eschatology as the Always But Coming Kingdom*

Rauschenbusch typically resisted the language of eschatology and apocalyptic, since it was used often in his day to discount Jesus’s social teaching or to support fanciful pictures of the end times.<sup>81</sup> Nevertheless, the doctrine of the Kingdom provides his entire theology with an eschatological orientation. In his study of the relationship between eschatology and ethics in the work of Rauschenbusch and Reinhold Niebuhr, Max Stackhouse notes that, although the concept of the Kingdom of God began for Rauschenbusch as “a rather vague generality, used for polemical purposes against the radical individualists of his day,” it “slowly . . . began to take shape and structure, becoming a consistent eschatological model for the interpretation of the present historical

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<sup>81</sup> Though as Rauschenbusch writes in a chapter on eschatology, “Theologians of liberal views are brief or apologetic when they reach eschatology. This situation is deeply regrettable. Perhaps no other section of theology is so much in need of a thorough rejuvenation” (*TSG*, 210).

realm.”<sup>82</sup> Stackhouse identifies *The Righteousness of the Kingdom* as the “most complete early step in this direction.”<sup>83</sup> Following Stackhouse’s lead, I here describe Rauschenbusch’s understanding of the Kingdom of God in *The Righteousness of the Kingdom* before turning to Rauschenbusch’s later articulation in *A Theology for the Social Gospel*. I discuss throughout the ways in which Rauschenbusch uses the Kingdom of God as an “eschatological model.”

I noted in the previous section on Christology that Rauschenbusch begins *The Righteousness of the Kingdom* by describing Jesus as a revolutionary, who stood in the line of the revolutionary Hebrew prophets; but I have not yet described why Rauschenbusch viewed the prophets as revolutionaries. In short, it was because of the eschatological orientation of their writing. Rauschenbusch writes of the prophets that they

were dreamers of Utopias. They pictured an ideal state of society in which the poor should be judged with equity and the cry of the oppressed should no longer be heard; a time in which men would beat their idle swords into ploughshares and their spears into pruning hooks, for then the nations would learn war no more. . . . No slight amelioration contented them, nothing but a change so radical that they dared to represent it as a repealing of the ancient and hallowed covenant and the construction of a new one. A proposal to abolish the Constitution of the United States would not seem so revolutionary to us as this proposal must have seemed to the contemporaries of the prophets.<sup>84</sup>

The Hebrew prophets were driven by a “Messianic hope,” which “was a revolutionary hope.”<sup>85</sup> Rauschenbusch describes this messianic hope as “the hope for the perfection of

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<sup>82</sup> Max L. Stackhouse, “Eschatology and Ethical Method: A Structural Analysis of Christian Social Ethics in America with Primary Reference to Walter Rauschenbusch and Reinhold Niebuhr” (PhD diss., Harvard University, 1964), 32–33.

<sup>83</sup> Stackhouse, “Eschatology and Ethical Method,” 33.

<sup>84</sup> Rauschenbusch, *RK*, 70–71.

<sup>85</sup> Rauschenbusch, *RK*, 72.



the theocracy.”<sup>86</sup> While he admits that the content of their visions varied, he argues that “this was common to them all, including John the Baptist; this belongs to the essence of the Messianic hope: the theocratic idea was at last to have its perfect realization in a Kingdom of God on earth, with the Messiah at its head, Israel as its dwelling-place and organ, and all the world as the sphere of its manifestation.”<sup>87</sup>

According to Rauschenbusch, Jesus adopted this revolutionary theocratic vision of the Kingdom of God and “inscribed [it] on the banner he raised.”<sup>88</sup> Yet, Jesus did not adopt it uncritically. As Rauschenbusch describes in the second chapter of *The Righteousness of the Kingdom* on “The Kingdom of God,” Jesus not only accepted it and strove to realize it but also elevated it by “contradicting some popular conceptions and developing others.”<sup>89</sup>

Rauschenbusch describes four specific ways that Jesus developed the messianic idea. He argues, first, that Jesus developed the messianic idea in the direction of *universality*. Whereas some of the earlier Hebrew prophets focused on national salvation, and other later prophets expanded the idea to incorporate surrounding peoples and even to inspire Jewish missionary activity, Jesus finally broke through the boundaries of nationality altogether by his teaching: “Faith and not Judaism qualified for the Kingdom. Unbelief and not uncircumcision disqualified for it.”<sup>90</sup> Rauschenbusch concludes, “We

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<sup>86</sup> Rauschenbusch, *RK*, 81.

<sup>87</sup> Rauschenbusch, *RK*, 81.

<sup>88</sup> Rauschenbusch, *RK*, 79.

<sup>89</sup> Rauschenbusch, *RK*, 81, 82.

<sup>90</sup> Rauschenbusch, *RK*, 83.

find, then, that the Kingdom of God, as Christ saw it, was not outwardly limited by the boundaries of any one nation.”<sup>91</sup>

Rauschenbusch argues, second, that Jesus developed the messianic idea in the direction of *spirituality*. By this Rauschenbusch does not mean that Jesus focused on the soul over the body or the inward over the outward. In fact, he explicitly argues: “There was nothing that Jesus resented so much as an attempt to divorce the inward from the outward.”<sup>92</sup> Instead, Jesus’s development was away from “the men who possessed temporal power and wealth and the ability of wielding the forces of this world.”<sup>93</sup> Instead of grasping for temporal power, Jesus focused on instilling a new idea into humanity.

Rauschenbusch writes,

Ideas and convictions are the enduring revolutionary forces. Changed institutions without changed convictions to uphold them from beneath are likely to slump together. . . . Righteous and God-fearing men and women are the material with which the progress of human society can be made enduring. The infusion of a new principle, a new conviction into the thought-life of humanity is the condition of every outward step in the organization of society. The perfect humanity must be a growth, building itself up by vital forces from within, like the chambered nautilus secreting its own shell.<sup>94</sup>

He thus concludes, “Every . . . step forward, every increase in mercy, every obedience to justice, every added brightness of truth would be an extension of the reign of God in humanity, an incoming of the Kingdom of God. The more men became saturated with the thoughts of Christ, the more they came to judge all actions from his point of view, the

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<sup>91</sup> Rauschenbusch, *RK*, 84.

<sup>92</sup> Rauschenbusch, *RK*, 86.

<sup>93</sup> Rauschenbusch, *RK*, 85.

<sup>94</sup> Rauschenbusch, *RK*, 86.

more they conformed the outward life of society to the advancing inward standard, the more would Christ be the dominant force in the world and all humanity would become the true theocracy.”<sup>95</sup>

Just as Jesus expanded the messianic idea in the direction of spirituality, so, third, Rauschenbusch argues that Jesus progressed prophetic thought by emphasizing *spiritual means* in bringing about the Kingdom.<sup>96</sup> As discussed in the previous section on Christology, Jesus viewed displays of power or force as inimical to the values of the Kingdom and instead relied on the “power indwelling in truth itself,” which was “multiplied by its exemplification in his life, by its attestation in his suffering, by the power of his personality, by the community of believers testifying to it, and by the influence of the Spirit of God on the minds of his hearers.”<sup>97</sup> Again, Rauschenbusch’s use of “spiritual” does not suggest “otherworldly”; rather, his point is that Jesus eschewed typical worldly means of violent coercion to advance the Kingdom.

Finally, Rauschenbusch argues that Jesus developed the messianic idea in the direction of *an increased recognition of the value of the individual personality*.<sup>98</sup> Jesus “taught that every man was personally responsible for his acceptance of the Messianic salvation,” and, in so doing, “Christ recognizes the separate value of the human personality.”<sup>99</sup> This point might seem to be in tension with his earlier emphasis on

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<sup>95</sup> Rauschenbusch, *RK*, 87–88.

<sup>96</sup> Rauschenbusch, *RK*, 88.

<sup>97</sup> Rauschenbusch, *RK*, 91–92.

<sup>98</sup> Rauschenbusch, *RK*, 95.

<sup>99</sup> Rauschenbusch, *RK*, 96–97.

universality, but, as Stackhouse explains, “this element of the idea of the ‘Kingdom of God’ is a necessary conclusion from the above tendencies in Rauschenbusch’s thought. If there is a universalism so that none is admitted to the Kingdom according to his particular group or nationality, but only on the basis of his spirituality, then the relationship of the individual to the collectivity must be a voluntary one.”<sup>100</sup> Stackhouse is quick to add: “This does not, however, undercut Rauschenbusch’s primarily collective orientation.”<sup>101</sup> The necessary correlative of true universalism for Rauschenbusch is that acceptance of the Kingdom must be uncoerced and voluntary.

Having described the ways Jesus developed and expanded the messianic idea, Rauschenbusch reiterates his main argument: “Jesus adopted the theocratic idea and professed himself to be the Messiah who was to bring it to its fulfillment. This adoption necessarily implied assent to the essential cord of the theocratic idea: the idea of an ideal human society, constituted according to divine laws and governed by God.”<sup>102</sup> According to Rauschenbusch, Jesus shared this ideal with the prophets, even as he expanded it.

From the foregoing discussion, we can begin to see the complex relationship between the doctrine of the Kingdom of God and eschatology in Rauschenbusch’s theology. As Stackhouse notes, “In systematic terms, the Kingdom of God is both an eschatological expectation and it is a present reality.”<sup>103</sup> Rauschenbusch acknowledges this tension: Unlike the prophets and John the Baptist for whom the “coming of the

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<sup>100</sup> Stackhouse, “Eschatology and Ethical Method,” 43.

<sup>101</sup> Stackhouse, “Eschatology and Ethical Method,” 43.

<sup>102</sup> Rauschenbusch, *RK*, 98.

<sup>103</sup> Stackhouse, “Eschatology and Ethical Method,” 68.

Messiah, the judgment, the destruction of the wicked, the erection of the perfect reign of God” were seen “as one event,” Jesus “emphasized the gradualness of it.”<sup>104</sup> The Christian is thus left in the tension between recognizing the slowness of the growth of the Kingdom and always being alert for its coming:

Though all experience tells us that it will not come immediately, yet we are to act as if it were coming immediately. How is that possible? How can we keep ourselves always in a state of tension? We can do it only by understanding the law of evolution in the Kingdom. It is always at hand. When Jesus taught, he said the Kingdom had come, signs of its actual presence were visible (Matt. 11, 3–5; 12, 28), some men were near it (Matt. 12, 34), some entering it (Matt. 21, 31), some in it (Matt. 11, 11). Yet on the other hand he bids his disciples seek it and pray for its coming. (Matt. 6, 10, 33.) It has come, it is coming. As God is in all three tenses, the God that was and is and shall be, so is the Kingdom behind which is the force of the living God. It is forever coming. Hence it is forever pressing.<sup>105</sup>

Here we find early glimpses of Rauschenbusch’s partially realized eschatology, which he reiterates in his famous lines near the close of *Christianity and the Social Crisis*: “At best there is always but an approximation to a perfect social order. The kingdom of God is always but coming.”<sup>106</sup> Yet, the systematic outworking of his eschatology and its relation to his doctrine of the Kingdom would have to wait until his final work, *A Theology for the Social Gospel*.

In *A Theology for the Social Gospel*, Rauschenbusch devotes a chapter to the Kingdom of God and another to eschatology. Since I have identified his doctrine of the Kingdom as itself an eschatological doctrine, I here treat both of these chapters in turn. Rauschenbusch begins his chapter on “The Kingdom of God” by arguing for the

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<sup>104</sup> Rauschenbusch, *RK*, 98.

<sup>105</sup> Rauschenbusch, *RK*, 109.

<sup>106</sup> Rauschenbusch, *CSC*, 338; cf. 251.

centrality of this doctrine: “If theology is to offer an adequate doctrinal basis for the social gospel, it must not only make room for the doctrine of the Kingdom of God, but give it a central place and revise all other doctrines so that they will articulate organically with it.”<sup>107</sup> Indeed, for Rauschenbusch, the doctrine of the Kingdom of God “is itself the social gospel.”<sup>108</sup> He elaborates: “To those whose minds live in the social gospel, the Kingdom of God is a dear truth, the marrow of the gospel, just as the incarnation was to Athanasius, justification by faith alone to Luther, and the sovereignty of God to Jonathan Edwards. It was just as dear to Jesus. He too lived in it, and from it looked out on the world and the work he had to do.”<sup>109</sup> However, over time, argues Rauschenbusch, “the doctrine of the Kingdom of God shriveled to an undeveloped and pathetic remnant in Christian thought,” which had a number of “far-reaching consequences” on theology, including:

- (1) the disappearance of the “distinctive ethical principles of Jesus”;
- (2) an exaggerated importance on “worship” and “sacramental actions” and weakened sense of “the ethical force of Christianity” and thus “the revolutionary force of Christianity”;
- (3) a loss of the “religious backing” for “the movements for democracy and social justice”;
- (4) a belittling of “secular life” in comparison to “church life”;
- (5) a disconnect between “the salvation of the individual” and “its relation to the task of saving the social order”; and,

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<sup>107</sup> Rauschenbusch, *TSG*, 131.

<sup>108</sup> Rauschenbusch, *TSG*, 131.

<sup>109</sup> Rauschenbusch, *TSG*, 131.

- (6) the deprivation “of the inspiration of great ideas contained in the idea of the Kingdom and labor for it.”<sup>110</sup>

One of Rauschenbusch’s driving theological concerns, as seen in the above list, is to reaffirm the unity of theology and ethics after they have been—to Rauschenbusch’s mind—illegitimately separated throughout the history of Christianity. The Kingdom of God is the doctrine that allows him to reaffirm this unity, as in this doctrine can be found the “distinctive ethical principles of Jesus,” the “ethical” and “revolutionary” forces of Christianity, and a renewed religious value placed on the “secular life” and “movements for democracy and social justice.” He thus concludes that “any systematic conception of Christianity must be not only defective but incorrect if the idea of the Kingdom of God does not govern it.”<sup>111</sup>

In the remainder of the chapter, Rauschenbusch offers suggestions on how to formulate the doctrine of the Kingdom of God in order to provide “a theology for the social gospel.”<sup>112</sup> He begins by emphasizing once again how the doctrine overcomes the separation between theology and ethics:

The Kingdom of God is divine in its origin, progress and consummation. It was initiated by Jesus Christ, in whom the prophetic spirit came to its consummation, it is sustained by the Holy Spirit, and it will be brought to its fulfillment by the power of God in his own time. . . . The Kingdom of God, therefore, is miraculous all the way, and is the continuous revelation of the power, the righteousness, and the love of God. The establishment of a community of righteousness in mankind is just as much a saving act of God as the salvation of an individual from his natural selfishness and moral inability. The Kingdom of God, therefore, is not merely ethical, but has a rightful place in theology. This doctrine is absolutely necessary to establish that organic union between religion and morality, between theology and ethics, which is one of the characteristics of the Christian religion.

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<sup>110</sup> Rauschenbusch, *TSG*, 133–37.

<sup>111</sup> Rauschenbusch, *TSG*, 138.

<sup>112</sup> Rauschenbusch, *TSG*, 138.

When our moral actions are consciously related to the Kingdom of God they gain religious quality. Without this doctrine we shall have expositions of schemes of redemption and we shall have systems of ethics, but we shall not have a true exposition of Christianity.<sup>113</sup>

Here again we find Rauschenbusch attempting to overcome false dualities within Christianity in order to provide “a true exposition of Christianity” in which the dichotomy between theology and ethics is overcome; the doctrine of the Kingdom provides him the means to do so. He writes that the Kingdom “embraces the whole of human life. It is the Christian transfiguration of the social order. The Church is one social institution alongside of the family, the industrial organization of society, and the State. The Kingdom of God is in all these, and realizes itself through them all.”<sup>114</sup> The Kingdom, for Rauschenbusch, is thus a wider concept than the church, although—as I discuss below—they are intimately connected.

One of the ways in which the doctrine of the Kingdom provides unity to Christianity is by providing “the teleology of the Christian religion.”<sup>115</sup> Rauschenbusch explains that the Kingdom “translates theology from the static to the dynamic. It sees, not doctrines or rites to be conserved and perpetuated, but resistance to be overcome and great ends to be achieved.”<sup>116</sup> As a dynamic reality, it is “both present and future” and thus “always coming, always pressing in on the present, always big with possibility, and always inviting immediate action.”<sup>117</sup> The Kingdom is “the supreme end of God,”

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<sup>113</sup> Rauschenbusch, *TSG*, 139–40.

<sup>114</sup> Rauschenbusch, *TSG*, 145.

<sup>115</sup> Rauschenbusch, *TSG*, 140.

<sup>116</sup> Rauschenbusch, *TSG*, 140.

<sup>117</sup> Rauschenbusch, *TSG*, 141.



described as “humanity organized according to the will of God.”<sup>118</sup> “Since the Kingdom is the supreme end,” Rauschenbusch reasons, “all problems of personal salvation must be reconsidered from the point of view of the Kingdom. It is not sufficient to set the two aims of Christianity side by side. There must be a synthesis, and theology must explain how the two react on each other.”<sup>119</sup> In his chapter devoted to eschatology, he attempts to do just that.

“Religion is always eschatological,”<sup>120</sup> Rauschenbusch observes in his chapter on “Eschatology.” As every developed religion has “some mythology about the future,” so too Christianity “needs a Christian eschatology.”<sup>121</sup> Rauschenbusch writes: “Any doctrine about the future of the race which is to guide our thought and action, must view it from distinctively Christian, ethical points of view, and must not contradict what is historically and scientifically certain.”<sup>122</sup> Thus, after surveying the diversity of eschatological perspectives offered in Scripture and Christian tradition, Rauschenbusch offers seven propositions of his own regarding the future of the human race. First, he notes that this topic “should have a larger place in practical Christian teaching.” “The great ethical issues of the future lie in this field,” Rauschenbusch writes, “and the mind of Christian men and women should be active there.”<sup>123</sup> Second, he argues that “God is in history,”

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<sup>118</sup> Rauschenbusch, *TSG*, 143, 142.

<sup>119</sup> Rauschenbusch, *TSG*, 144.

<sup>120</sup> Rauschenbusch, *TSG*, 208.

<sup>121</sup> Rauschenbusch, *TSG*, 208.

<sup>122</sup> Rauschenbusch, *TSG*, 208.

<sup>123</sup> Rauschenbusch, *TSG*, 223.

and, therefore, “all Christian discussions of the past and the future must be religious, and filled with the consciousness of God in human affairs.”<sup>124</sup> Such a perspective “involves a profound sense of the importance of moral issues in social life,” which “is the substance of all Hebrew and Christian eschatology.”<sup>125</sup> Third, Rauschenbusch proposes a “restoration of the millennial hope.”<sup>126</sup> While avoiding crass literalism regarding a one-thousand year reign, he argues that “the ideal of a social life in which the law of Christ shall prevail, and in which its prevalence shall result in peace, justice and a glorious blossoming of human life, is a Christian ideal.”<sup>127</sup>

Rauschenbusch argues, fourth, that “we must shift from catastrophe to development” regarding “the way in which the Christian ideal of society is to come.”<sup>128</sup> Such a shift, he argues, “is the most essential step to enable modern men to appreciate the Christian hope.”<sup>129</sup> Fifth, such a process “will have to utilize all constructive and educational forces in humanity”;<sup>130</sup> yet, on the other hand, sixth, “The coming of the Kingdom of God will not be by peaceful development only, but by conflict with the Kingdom of Evil.”<sup>131</sup> While a focus on education and gradual development is important,

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<sup>124</sup> Rauschenbusch, *TSG*, 223.

<sup>125</sup> Rauschenbusch, *TSG*, 224.

<sup>126</sup> Rauschenbusch, *TSG*, 223.

<sup>127</sup> Rauschenbusch, *TSG*, 224.

<sup>128</sup> Rauschenbusch, *TSG*, 225.

<sup>129</sup> Rauschenbusch, *TSG*, 225.

<sup>130</sup> Rauschenbusch, *TSG*, 226.

<sup>131</sup> Rauschenbusch, *TSG*, 226.

it does not “eliminate the possibility and value of catastrophes.”<sup>132</sup> An exclusive emphasis on continuous development would “estimate the power of sin too lightly.”<sup>133</sup>

Seventh and finally, Rauschenbusch argues that an “eschatology which is expressed in terms of historic development has no final consummation. Its consummations are always the basis for further developments. The Kingdom of God is always coming, but we can never say ‘Lo here.’”<sup>134</sup> The Kingdom of God is an ideal toward which Christians strive and which “happens all the time in instalments, like our own sanctification,” but it is never finally and fully realized.<sup>135</sup> Rather, “we are on the march toward the Kingdom of God, and getting our reward by every fractional realization of it which makes us hungry for more.”<sup>136</sup> As to the ultimate destiny of the human race, it “will come to an end in due time; the astronomical clock is already ticking which will ring in the end.”<sup>137</sup>

By describing eschatology in terms of historic development that has no final consummation, Rauschenbusch provides the explicit connection between eschatology and his doctrine of the Kingdom of God. For Rauschenbusch, the Kingdom of God is an eschatological ideal that is never fully realized but that serves as a perpetual standard

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<sup>132</sup> Rauschenbusch, *TSG*, 226.

<sup>133</sup> Rauschenbusch, *TSG*, 226.

<sup>134</sup> Rauschenbusch, *TSG*, 226.

<sup>135</sup> Rauschenbusch, *TSG*, 227.

<sup>136</sup> Rauschenbusch, *TSG*, 227.

<sup>137</sup> Rauschenbusch, *TSG*, 227. Rauschenbusch concludes the chapter with nine more propositions regarding the future of individuals after death, although he admits that at least some of them “are simply the play of personal fancy about a fascinating subject” (*TSG*, 238). I will leave aside his interesting suggestions on this matter from the present discussion.

toward which to strive and by which to critique current social systems. As Stackhouse explains: “The logic and structure of Rauschenbusch’s thought about the Kingdom of God is precisely the same as that used to analyze and evaluate modern society. Indeed, it is the model upon which the evaluation is based. In so far as the social system lends itself to the development of the integrated structure which Rauschenbusch sets forth in the eschatological formulations, it is approved; in so far as it diverts or inhibits developments toward the Kingdom of God, it is criticized and radical transformation is called for.”<sup>138</sup> As we will see in the following section, the church is the first social system to be subjected to Rauschenbusch’s eschatological analysis and evaluation. Since its very *raison d’être* is to embody and advance the Kingdom of God, the church is only truly alive for Rauschenbusch when and where this mission is lived out.

### *The Church as the Brotherhood of the Kingdom*

On July 9, 1892, less than a year after his return from Europe, Rauschenbusch hosted five other socially minded northern Baptist ministers at his New York apartment to form a group that would later go by the name of the Brotherhood of the Kingdom. This group’s activities primarily consisted of small gatherings at the family summer home of Rauschenbusch’s ministerial colleague, Leighton Williams, in which papers and books on social Christianity were discussed. Its achievements in social activism were modest, and it eventually collapsed as members pursued various other forms of social ministry and Rauschenbusch’s fame diverted his attention elsewhere.<sup>139</sup> Despite its inability to become

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<sup>138</sup> Stackhouse, “Eschatology and Ethical Method,” 81.

<sup>139</sup> On the formation, organization, work, and ultimate disbanding of the Brotherhood of the Kingdom, see Evans, *The Kingdom Is Always But Coming*, 103–11. Rauschenbusch later wrote that “the

what its members may have hoped it would, the Brotherhood of the Kingdom was nothing less than the logical outworking of Rauschenbusch's ecclesiology, which he articulated in *The Righteousness of the Kingdom* and developed throughout his subsequent career. In this section, I describe the contours of Rauschenbusch's ecclesiology as it develops over his major works.

In the third chapter of *The Righteousness of the Kingdom*, Rauschenbusch discusses three "revolutionary forces which are to realize the revolutionary program" of the Kingdom of God: Christ, the Spirit, and the church.<sup>140</sup> I looked above at Rauschenbusch's description of Jesus as a revolutionary force, and he ultimately argues that "the idea of the glorified Christ and that of the Holy Spirit were for all practical purposes nearly identical to the early Christians" such that the first two forces may be regarded as "the twofold influence of the one force, the Logos of God, first by the perennial influence of the historical manifestation in humanity, and then by his abiding personal influence upon and in our own hearts."<sup>141</sup> What thus remains to be described is Rauschenbusch's understanding of the third force: the church.

Rauschenbusch writes that "Christ established the church, and this formation of a revolutionary community is essential to his work."<sup>142</sup> He elaborates:

Christ's purpose was the establishment and extension of the Kingdom of God, the regeneration of human society. To this end he established an organization which

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Brotherhood of the Kingdom, formed in 1893, was one of the earliest organizations of social Christianity in the country. Its earliest members were all Baptist radicals, but it chose the broadest interdenominational basis on principle, and the denomination thus gets no credit for an enterprise born of its best spirit" (*CSC*, 23).

<sup>140</sup> Rauschenbusch, *RK*, 118.

<sup>141</sup> Rauschenbusch, *RK*, 148, 149.

<sup>142</sup> Rauschenbusch, *RK*, 151.

was to be at the same time a realization of the Kingdom within its own limits and the instrument for its propagation. Within this society Christ reigns, here his laws prevail, and his Spirit is the governing force. And from this society in turn his assimilating and conquering forces go out to extend the territory of his dominion. If Christ's purpose had been merely the conversion of individuals, the formation of the church would have been useful but not essential. Because his purpose was the immediate establishment and extension of a Kingdom, a society was absolutely essential.<sup>143</sup>

In characteristic fashion Rauschenbusch proceeds to discuss four functions of this new society. The first is *to maintain and strengthen its own peculiar life*.<sup>144</sup> When Jesus was on earth, he was able to personally guide his disciples; but when he announced his departure, he gave the new commandment of brotherly love so that the church would serve “as a substitute for his personal presence.” Thus, writes Rauschenbusch, “The visible brotherhood stands in the place of the visible Christ.”<sup>145</sup> This first function of the church involves making it “possible for the individual to obtain an insight into a truth which he would never reach unaided” and to create “for its members a higher ethical standard than they would attain if unaided.”<sup>146</sup> Rauschenbusch cites in this regard “Christ's rule of church discipline” in Matthew 18:15–20 and his “invest[ing] the community with the power to forgive or retain sins” in John 20:22–23.<sup>147</sup> “The church in maintaining its own life,” Rauschenbusch writes, “is the nursery of Christian revolutionists.”<sup>148</sup>

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<sup>143</sup> Rauschenbusch, *RK*, 152.

<sup>144</sup> Rauschenbusch, *RK*, 152.

<sup>145</sup> Rauschenbusch, *RK*, 153.

<sup>146</sup> Rauschenbusch, *RK*, 154.

<sup>147</sup> Rauschenbusch, *RK*, 155.

<sup>148</sup> Rauschenbusch, *RK*, 157.

The second function of the church, according to Rauschenbusch, *is that of growth*.<sup>149</sup> While noting the “danger in all this . . . that it will be proselytizing and not discipling,” he argues that “as a general thing it is probably true that missionary zeal is an indication of life, and its absence an indication of decay.”<sup>150</sup> Rauschenbusch believes that the first function—internal maintenance—will always serve as a natural check on the second function: “If baptism, which Christ has placed at the door of the church, really means a putting off of many pleasant and luscious things and a joining possibly to the sufferings and the dying of Jesus (Rom. 6), then only he will ask for that initiation who has staked his all on Jesus Christ.”<sup>151</sup> Rauschenbusch contrasts his ecclesiology with that of “Broad Church thinkers.” For Rauschenbusch, “The church is a picked company of soldiers whose efficiency depends more on their quality than on their number.”<sup>152</sup> In contrast, “The Broad Church thinkers are entirely right in insisting that the church is to benefit not only a small circle of the elect but all men and the entire life of humanity. But they are wrong in thinking that this can best be accomplished by admitting everybody

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<sup>149</sup> Rauschenbusch, *RK*, 157.

<sup>150</sup> Rauschenbusch, *RK*, 158.

<sup>151</sup> Rauschenbusch, *RK*, 158. Later Rauschenbusch expounds on his understanding of baptism (and the Lord’s Supper) and its relationship to discipleship: “Of the existing acts of a ceremonial nature Jesus left none in existence as ceremonies. He instituted, however, two acts which are in a sense ceremonial, baptism and the Lord’s Supper. Each is the expression of an inward relation to the unseen Christ. The one is the bath of consecration, the other the meal of fellowship. The one gives conscious and public expression to the free act of the individual, by which he renounces his old life and stakes his all, for life and death, on Jesus Christ. The other is the common meal by which the Christian brotherhood remembers the free and loving death of its Master and re-affirms its spiritual fellowship with him, its dependence on him, and its loyalty to him. The one marks the inception, the other the continuation of the freely chosen discipleship. . . . So baptism and communion are the result of existing spiritual discipleship; but when thus used, they not only express but establish that discipleship” (269).

<sup>152</sup> Rauschenbusch, *RK*, 159.

into the church by baptism at birth.”<sup>153</sup> Rauschenbusch argues that such Broad Church thinkers “are in danger of repeating the error that has been committed ever since Constantine, of making the church co-extensive with the nation. It becomes almost a matter of course for the children of Christian parents to join the church when they reach a certain age.”<sup>154</sup> While Rauschenbusch is committed to a witnessing, missionary church, he does not allow the desire for growth to lead to lowering the standards of the community. This does not entail, however, that the church must become disengaged from society, as is often the charge made against so-called sectarian church models.<sup>155</sup>

Rather, Rauschenbusch argues that the third function of the church is *to influence society through its public witness*.<sup>156</sup> He writes, “Jesus did not join the Essene community that tried in solitude to live a pure and loving life. He founded a society which was to

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<sup>153</sup> Rauschenbusch, *RK*, 159.

<sup>154</sup> Rauschenbusch, *RK*, 159.

<sup>155</sup> Stackhouse observes that Rauschenbusch “uses a modified ‘free church’ ecclesiology to construct an organizational model of what might be called a ‘universalized, aggressive sect’” (“The Continuing Importance of Walter Rauschenbusch,” in *RK*, 39). In his study of the influences of Rauschenbusch’s thought, Donovan Smucker further describes Rauschenbusch’s “aggressive sectarianism,” writing that Rauschenbusch’s “Kingdom of God ethics originated in a very free and original appropriation of sectarian motifs. He did not have a compact typology of sectarian parties; he borrowed his sociology from the aggressive sects and his love ethic—without modification or qualification—from the peaceful Anabaptists. At times he lumped the Puritans together with the Anabaptists as belonging to the same general family of Christians. He accepted the imitation of Christ, discipleship, and Jesus literalism. While he made love primary (although at times synonymous with justice), placed the kingdom in history (as the sectarians do), and stressed the analogous effect of the Church on cultural institutions, he rejected any tendency toward withdrawal, emphasizing the transformation and Christianization of culture.” See Donovan E. Smucker, *The Origins of Walter Rauschenbusch’s Social Ethics* (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1994), especially his chapter “The Influence of Anabaptist Sectarianism,” 30–73; quote from 30. See also, Reinhart Müller, *Walter Rauschenbusch: ein Beitrag zur Begegnung des deutschen und des amerikanischen Protestantismus* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1957).

<sup>156</sup> Rauschenbusch, *RK*, 160 (my paraphrase). This is one of Rauschenbusch’s more convoluted sections; it certainly could have used some of the editorial polish of his later works. Unlike his other three points in this section, where he lists a specific “function” of the church, for this third point, he simply writes: “No organism, however, is destined by God to live unto itself.” His ensuing discussion clarifies what he means by this statement.



lead in the thick of the world a life higher than that of the world. Such a society must influence the general life about it, even if it should make no effort in that direction.”<sup>157</sup>

For Rauschenbusch, the question is not whether the church should influence society but rather how it should go about doing so. He notes that it is “the fashion at present to abuse the church for its conservative and reactionary influence on political and social progress,”<sup>158</sup> but he argues in response that one needs to distinguish between the institutional church and true Christianity: “If by ‘the church’ is meant the various ecclesiastical machines with titled and salaried hierarchies, then the church deserves much of the abuse that it gets. If, however, Christianity in fairness is taken as a spirit and life which has hovered like a tongue of fire over consecrated men and swayed the nations like a wind from heaven, then it must in fairness be conceded that the influence of Christianity on the race has been incalculable.”<sup>159</sup> Indeed, earlier he confesses that he does not “call everything Christianity which calls itself so.”<sup>160</sup> By Christianity, he means specifically “the Christianity of Jesus, which under the power of his Spirit has existed through the centuries, in various forms, always more or less despised, but always vital and energetic.”<sup>161</sup> Such Christianity, while always on the margins, “is a constructive power containing the creative principle of a new society” and thus “has been the most fertile parent of advanced social experiments.”<sup>162</sup> For Rauschenbusch, the church does

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<sup>157</sup> Rauschenbusch, *RK*, 160.

<sup>158</sup> Rauschenbusch, *RK*, 161.

<sup>159</sup> Rauschenbusch, *RK*, 161.

<sup>160</sup> Rauschenbusch, *RK*, 143.

<sup>161</sup> Rauschenbusch, *RK*, 144.

<sup>162</sup> Rauschenbusch, *RK*, 143, 146.

indeed seek to transform society into the ideal of the Kingdom, but it does so non-coercively through its public witness.

Rauschenbusch contrasts his model of the church/state relationship with three other models: (1) the church and state as co-extensive and synonymous; (2) the church as higher than the state and dominating it; and (3) the church as indifferent to the affairs of the state.<sup>163</sup> On Rauschenbusch's model there is between the church and state "a separation of the organizations and an interpenetration of influences."<sup>164</sup> While the church must disavow "all attempts to control the machinery of government or to fill its offices," Rauschenbusch argues that "it is free to influence the ethical conceptions of the people and to stimulate the people to righteous actions."<sup>165</sup> Indeed, for Rauschenbusch, "The church has the prophetic office in humanity."<sup>166</sup> He explains: "Because it is in contact with God, its conscience quickened, its ethical discernment clarified, its moral courage and energy strengthened, it is to be the teacher of society. It is to discern injustice where it is hidden to others by force of habit. It is to hear the sob of pain in the outcast classes whom others pass unheeded. It is to detect the sallow face of tyranny hiding behind the mask of patriotism and benevolence. Who is fit to do this if the church is not?"<sup>167</sup> Rauschenbusch warns, however, that "if it is to exercise this function, the church must be enlightened enough not to be hood-winked by ecclesiasticism of any sort. Above

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<sup>163</sup> See Rauschenbusch, *RK*, 162–68.

<sup>164</sup> Rauschenbusch, *RK*, 168.

<sup>165</sup> Rauschenbusch, *RK*, 168.

<sup>166</sup> Rauschenbusch, *RK*, 168.

<sup>167</sup> Rauschenbusch, *RK*, 168.

all it must have a standard of public ethics superior to that prevailing in politics.”<sup>168</sup> Only then can the church fulfill its prophetic office, as Rauschenbusch summarizes:

This we hold to be the duty of the church toward the collective life of humanity: by its keener sensibility to notice wrong and suffering where others do not see it and call attention thereto, by the guidance of the Spirit it is to have a clearer perception of ideal justice than others and impart this to society at large; by its superior moral daring it is to sustain the unpopular causes until they have become popular. It is to resist the materialistic and pessimistic tendencies of literature and philosophy by its pure spiritualism, and stimulate the idealism and the devotion to duty latent in men.<sup>169</sup>

Not only does the church serve a prophetic function in society through its teaching; Rauschenbusch argues, fourth and finally, that the church is *to lead society in action*.<sup>170</sup> He observes that the “splendid parole of the French Revolution: ‘Liberty, equality, fraternity,’ contains the social principles of the church.”<sup>171</sup> Yet Jesus “did not, like the revolutionary parties of today, wait with their realization for a distant future. He began straightway.”<sup>172</sup> Therefore, argues Rauschenbusch, “The maintenance of a true Christian community is itself a prophetic action.”<sup>173</sup> At the same time, “Christ’s body is Christ’s means of action.”<sup>174</sup> Thus, “when the church performs the office of a sound body, it will not only speak Christ’s thoughts but repeat his actions.”<sup>175</sup> Rauschenbusch

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<sup>168</sup> Rauschenbusch, *RK*, 170.

<sup>169</sup> Rauschenbusch, *RK*, 171–72.

<sup>170</sup> Rauschenbusch, *RK*, 172.

<sup>171</sup> Rauschenbusch, *RK*, 172.

<sup>172</sup> Rauschenbusch, *RK*, 174.

<sup>173</sup> Rauschenbusch, *RK*, 174.

<sup>174</sup> Rauschenbusch, *RK*, 174.

<sup>175</sup> Rauschenbusch, *RK*, 175.

cites the examples of hospitals, prison reform, care for the elderly and disabled, relief work, and education for minority groups as examples of the “prophetic purpose” of the work of the church. Such work not only alleviates or prevents immediate suffering but also “serves to bring society generally to the same humane position” as the church.<sup>176</sup> He continues:

The charities begun by the church are taken up by the state. At first hospitals were maintained only by private charities; now it is part of the functions of a municipality to care for the sick. Institutions for the blind and deaf are established or subsidized by state or county appropriations. The care of the strong for the weak of the community, at first voluntary, becomes compulsory. It was religious; it has become civil. The ethical standard of society has been raised by Christian action as well as by Christian thought.<sup>177</sup>

In sum, Rauschenbusch argues that, by maintaining and strengthening its own life, growing in number through its non-coercive witness, and serving a prophetic role in society by its teaching and action, the church is a “force of God in human history” for the advancement of the Kingdom.<sup>178</sup>

In reality, the institutional church has often failed in these functions and thus served as a regressive rather than progressive force, as Rauschenbusch details in *Christianity and the Social Crisis*. In its third chapter, “The Social Impetus of Primitive Christianity,” he describes the social practices and radical social vision of the early church, which closely mirror the vision of the church he presented in *The Righteousness of the Kingdom*. He writes, “The churches of the first generation were not churches in our

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<sup>176</sup> Rauschenbusch, *RK*, 176.

<sup>177</sup> Rauschenbusch, *RK*, 176. In a later chapter he adds: “It will not do for Christians to wait for society as a whole to reach a better life. They must anticipate the progress of society by private action and, by anticipating it, speed it on” (235).

<sup>178</sup> Rauschenbusch, *RK*, 176.

sense of the word. They were not communities for the performance of a common worship, so much as communities with a common life. They were social communities with a religious basis.”<sup>179</sup> These churches “had a rudimentary organization, as every human society is sure to have, but they had no official clergy distinct from the laity.”<sup>180</sup> They shared life and possessions in common and had common meals together. By its very existence, such an egalitarian, democratic society was bound to clash with the surrounding culture: “Christianity was not simply the culture of the faculty of love. It brought with it a strong leaven of democracy and protest which unsettled men. It created social unrest and carried disturbance in its train. . . . Thus the spirit of primitive Christianity did not spread only sweet peace and tender charity, but the leaven of social unrest.”<sup>181</sup> In the early church one finds “the germ of a new social life for humanity, the conception of a social morality based on love and worldwide in its obligation.”<sup>182</sup> Though by no means perfect, the early church continued the revolutionary Kingdom vision inaugurated in Jesus’s ministry.

In the following chapter, “Why Has Christianity Never Undertaken the Work of Social Reconstruction?” Rauschenbusch offers a critical reading of historical developments within the church away from its original revolutionary vision. He writes that “Christianity as a historical movement was launched with all the purpose and hope, all the impetus and power, of a great revolutionary movement, pledged to change the

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<sup>179</sup> Rauschenbusch, *CSC*, 99.

<sup>180</sup> Rauschenbusch, *CSC*, 100.

<sup>181</sup> Rauschenbusch, *CSC*, 109, 113.

<sup>182</sup> Rauschenbusch, *CSC*, 115.

world-as-it-is into the world-as-it-ought-to-be.”<sup>183</sup> Observing that the church seems to have failed to deliver on this pledge, Rauschenbusch details a number of historical developments as reasons why the church lost its original social outlook, including otherworldliness, asceticism, monasticism, sacramentalism, dogmatism, churchliness, dependence on the state, loss of its democratic vision, and the “lack of a scientific comprehension of society.”<sup>184</sup> He writes, “The otherworldliness, the asceticism and monastic enthusiasm, the sacramental and ritual superstitions, were all derived from contemporary religious drifts in heathen society. The dogmatic bent was acquired mainly from Greek intellectualism. The union of Church and State was likewise a reversion to ethnic religion.”<sup>185</sup> In all these ways and others, there had been a “deflecting influence of alien forces penetrating Christianity from without and clogging the revolutionary moral power inherent in it.”<sup>186</sup>

By Rauschenbusch’s lights there are new opportunities for change, which he details at length: “The otherworldliness of Christian desire is strangely diminished. . . . There is now room beside it for the social hope.”<sup>187</sup> “The ascetic and monastic ideal, which dominated Christian life for a thousand years or more, has disappeared almost completely.”<sup>188</sup> “Cereemonialism, which early clogged the ethical vigor of Christianity,

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<sup>183</sup> Rauschenbusch, *CSC*, 123.

<sup>184</sup> Rauschenbusch, *CSC*, 163.

<sup>185</sup> Rauschenbusch, *CSC*, 163.

<sup>186</sup> Rauschenbusch, *CSC*, 163.

<sup>187</sup> Rauschenbusch, *CSC*, 167.

<sup>188</sup> Rauschenbusch, *CSC*, 167.

was broken by the Reformation and is slowly dying out.”<sup>189</sup> “Christianity has grown less dogmatic. . . . Men and churches fellowship freely with little regard to doctrinal uniformity. One of the chief antisocial forces has therewith disappeared from Christianity, and the subsidence of the speculative interest has to that extent left Christianity free to devote its thought to ethical and social problems.”<sup>190</sup> “The brazen vessel of the Church was fatally cracked and broken by the Reformation, and its contents have ever since been leaking away into secular life. The State, the schools, the charitable organizations, are now doing what the Church used to do.”<sup>191</sup> “Modern Christianity everywhere tends toward the separation of Church and State. But when the Church is no longer dependent on the State for its appointments and its income and the execution of its will, it is by that much freer to champion the better order against the chief embodiment of the present order.”<sup>192</sup> “The intellectual prerequisites for social reconstruction were lacking formerly. They are now at hand. . . . We have the new sciences of political economy and sociology to guide us.”<sup>193</sup> In sum, “By great processes of self-purification the alien infusions in Christianity have been eliminated, and Christianity itself is being converted to Christ.”<sup>194</sup> Rauschenbusch does not view his project as something new; for him it is simply a recovery and renewal of the original revolutionary vision of the church,

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<sup>189</sup> Rauschenbusch, *CSC*, 168.

<sup>190</sup> Rauschenbusch, *CSC*, 168.

<sup>191</sup> Rauschenbusch, *CSC*, 169.

<sup>192</sup> Rauschenbusch, *CSC*, 169.

<sup>193</sup> Rauschenbusch, *CSC*, 170.

<sup>194</sup> Rauschenbusch, *CSC*, 171.

which had become obscured over the centuries by outside influences on the development of the church. After offering a declension narrative of the history of the church, he calls for the church to reawaken to its original social vision.

In *Christianizing the Social Order*, Rauschenbusch focuses his attention on the contemporary American church, describing the “social awakening” much of it had undergone since the publication of *Christianity and the Social Crisis* five years prior.<sup>195</sup> He recalls the years before the turn of the century “as a time of lonesomeness” for those advocating social Christianity, such as Washington Gladden, Josiah Strong, and Richard Ely.<sup>196</sup> But, he declares, “The social interest in the Church has now run beyond the stage of the solitary pioneer. It has been admitted within the organization of the Church.”<sup>197</sup> As evidence he notes that “the churches are officially seeking to get in touch with organized labor,” and “the denominations have begun to adopt formal declarations defining their attitude to the social problems.”<sup>198</sup> “As a crowning demonstration of the social awakening,” Rauschenbusch offers “the fact that the new social convictions have come near to getting lodgment in a creed.”<sup>199</sup>

After noting such gains for social Christianity within the churches, Rauschenbusch proceeds to evaluate various denominations according to their involvement in the social awakening. “Those who come after us will judge how well or

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<sup>195</sup> Rauschenbusch titles the first section of *CSO*: “The Social Awakening of the Churches.”

<sup>196</sup> Rauschenbusch, *CSO*, 9.

<sup>197</sup> Rauschenbusch, *CSO*, 11.

<sup>198</sup> Rauschenbusch, *CSO*, 12, 13.

<sup>199</sup> Rauschenbusch, *CSO*, 21.



ill we played our part,” he writes, “but whenever men hereafter write the story of how Christendom became Christian, they will have to begin a new chapter at the years in which we are now living.”<sup>200</sup> The ultimate criterion for whether the churches have become “Christian” for Rauschenbusch is whether or not they are morally progressive: “We realize so strongly that the Christian spirit is the most progressive of all moral forces that we are apt to forget that the Church in the past has been the most conservative of all institutions. It is venerable with age and it venerates its own venerability.”<sup>201</sup> By this criterion he judges that “Lutheranism has buried its ten talents in a tablecloth of dogmatic theory and kept its people from that share in the social awakening which is their duty and their right,” while Roman Catholicism, especially in Europe and South America, “set itself against the modernizing influences of democracy” and thus “became the stronghold of the reactionary elements.”<sup>202</sup> In contrast, “The American churches have always accepted heartily the principle of democracy on which our government is based and have invested it with religious sanction.”<sup>203</sup> Rauschenbusch’s question for American churches is whether they will “cover the existing order with the shield of their protection and call on their people in the name of God and religion to keep things as they are” or “take the side of the people and back the demands of social justice and fraternity in the name of Christ and the Gospel.”<sup>204</sup> On the answer to this question, he writes, “the fate of a nation

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<sup>200</sup> Rauschenbusch, *CSO*, 29.

<sup>201</sup> Rauschenbusch, *CSO*, 34.

<sup>202</sup> Rauschenbusch, *CSO*, 25, 38.

<sup>203</sup> Rauschenbusch, *CSO*, 37.

<sup>204</sup> Rauschenbusch, *CSO*, 36.

is rocking in the balance.”<sup>205</sup> In the rest of the book, Rauschenbusch provides a detailed program for how the church might go about siding with the people in their struggle for economic justice.

In *A Theology for the Social Gospel*, Rauschenbusch steps back from his immediate context to reflect theologically on the meaning and significance of the social gospel. When he turns his attention to the church, which he calls “the social factor in salvation,”<sup>206</sup> he explains that the church

offers Christ not only many human bodies and minds to serve as ministers of his salvation, but its own composite personality, with a collective memory stored with great hymns and Bible stories and deeds of heroism, with trained aesthetic and moral feelings, and with a collective will set on righteousness. A super-personal being organized around an evil principle and set on predatory aims is the most potent breeder of sin in individuals and in other communities. What, then, might a super-personal being do which would be organized around Jesus Christ as its impelling power, and would have for its sole or chief object to embody his spirit in its life and to carry him into human thought and the conduct of affairs?<sup>207</sup>

Rauschenbusch concedes that the actual church falls far short of such an ideal, but he nevertheless argues that “the importance of the social factor in salvation is clear from whatever angle we look at it.”<sup>208</sup> Despite acknowledgement of the church’s many failures, Rauschenbusch observes that a “fresh understanding of the indispensableness of the Church is gaining ground today in Protestant theology.”<sup>209</sup>

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<sup>205</sup> Rauschenbusch, *CSO*, 39.

<sup>206</sup> Rauschenbusch, *CSO*, 39.

<sup>207</sup> Rauschenbusch, *TSG*, 119–120.

<sup>208</sup> Rauschenbusch, *TSG*, 120.

<sup>209</sup> Rauschenbusch, *TSG*, 123.

Rauschenbusch discusses Schleiermacher, Ritschl, and American philosopher Josiah Royce as figures who have renewed the emphasis “on the indispensable importance of the Church in salvation.”<sup>210</sup> He endorses a “tacit condition . . . attached to all the high claims made by Professor Royce and others on behalf of the Church: If the Church is to have saving power, it must embody Christ. He is the revolutionary force within it. The saving qualities of the Church depend on the question whether it has translated the personal life of Jesus Christ into the social life of its group and thus brings it to bear on the individual.”<sup>211</sup> According to Rauschenbusch, “This conditional form of predicating the saving power and spiritual authority of the Church is only one more way of asserting that in anything which claims to be Christian, religion must have an immediate ethical nexus and effect.”<sup>212</sup> He notes that this conditional element “marks an essential difference between the claims made for the Church in Catholic theology, and the emphasis on the functions of the Church made in the social gospel. The Catholic doctrine of the Church made its holiness, its power to forgive sin, and the efficacy of its sacraments independent of the moral character of its priests and people; the social conception makes everything conditional on the spiritual virtues of the church group.”<sup>213</sup> He thus concludes: “The saving power of the Church does not rest on its institutional character, on its continuity, its ordination, its ministry, or its doctrine. It rests on the

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<sup>210</sup> Rauschenbusch, *TSG*, 125. In particular, he discusses at length Josiah Royce, *The Problem of Christianity* (New York: Macmillan, 1913; reprint edition, Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 2001).

<sup>211</sup> Rauschenbusch, *TSG*, 128.

<sup>212</sup> Rauschenbusch, *TSG*, 129.

<sup>213</sup> Rauschenbusch, *TSG*, 129.

presence of the Kingdom of God within her. . . . Unless the Church is vitalized by the ever nascent forces of the Kingdom within her, she deadens instead of begetting.”<sup>214</sup>

Having contrasted his social gospel ecclesiology with Catholic ecclesiology in his chapter on the church, he turns in his chapter on “Baptism and the Lord’s Supper” to the question of what the social gospel might have to say specifically about the sacraments. Although he doubts that the social gospel would add much, he takes the question on “as a challenge to thought.”<sup>215</sup> Just as the doctrine of the atonement served as a case study for his Christology, so too the sacraments here can be read as a case study in his ecclesiology.

Rauschenbusch begins with baptism: “When the act of baptism was initiated by John the Baptist and continued for a time by Jesus, it was not a ritual act of individual salvation, but an act of dedication to a religious and social movement. . . . Baptism was the dramatic expression of an inward consent and allegiance to the higher standards of life which were to prevail in the Messianic community. It was the symbol of a revolutionary movement.”<sup>216</sup> But, he writes, as Christianity “left its Jewish environment and was assimilated by Greek religion and social life,” baptism “was gradually filled with new meanings” and was thus “less and less a dedication to the coming Kingdom of God.”<sup>217</sup> The culmination of this change, for Rauschenbusch, was the spread of infant baptism. He writes: “Baptism had been the symbol of a revolutionary hope, an ethical act

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<sup>214</sup> Rauschenbusch, *TSG*, 129–130.

<sup>215</sup> Rauschenbusch, *TSG*, 179.

<sup>216</sup> Rauschenbusch, *TSG*, 197–198.

<sup>217</sup> Rauschenbusch, *TSG*, 198.

which determined the will and life of the person receiving it. It was now a ceremony performed on a babe to save it from the guilt and power of original sin and to assure its salvation in heaven in case of its death.”<sup>218</sup> According to Rauschenbusch, the social gospel can restore the earliest meaning to baptism by connecting it again with the Kingdom of God. “Contact with the Kingdom of God,” he concludes, “would restore baptism to its original ethical and spiritual purity.”<sup>219</sup>

Rauschenbusch then turns to the Lord’s Supper, which he argues also “has had a tragic history.”<sup>220</sup> He describes its original purpose as “the maintenance of the highest loyalty” to Jesus and the Kingdom and as a “fraternal meal in which the Christian group met in religious privacy to express its peculiar unity and coherence.”<sup>221</sup> During this time the Lord’s Supper was “connected with the realization of the social ideals and hopes of the Church.”<sup>222</sup> However, over time it “lost its meaning because it was in the hands of a body which had neither social outlook nor democratic emotions.”<sup>223</sup> It was not until the sixteenth-century Anabaptists, argues Rauschenbusch, that the original social meaning of the Lord’s Supper returned. He writes that “these poor proletarians, hunted by the tyrannical combinations of Church and State, Catholic and Protestant alike, returned to the original spirit of the Lord’s Meal and realized that Real Presence about which others

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<sup>218</sup> Rauschenbusch, *TSG*, 199.

<sup>219</sup> Rauschenbusch, *TSG*, 201.

<sup>220</sup> Rauschenbusch, *TSG*, 201.

<sup>221</sup> Rauschenbusch, *TSG*, 202.

<sup>222</sup> Rauschenbusch, *TSG*, 204.

<sup>223</sup> Rauschenbusch, *TSG*, 205.

wrangled.”<sup>224</sup> In line with the Anabaptists, the social gospel can “contribute to make the Lord’s Supper more fully an act of fraternity and to connect it again with the social hope of the Kingdom of God” by once again making it an act that affirms allegiance to Jesus and to his community of disciples.<sup>225</sup> Such emphases, Rauschenbusch concludes, “would be a challenge to the Church to realize its mission as the social embodiment of the Christ-spirit in humanity.”<sup>226</sup>

In his discussion of the sacraments, Rauschenbusch offers concrete examples of his ecclesiology at work. The church, for Rauschenbusch, is a radical fraternal society committed to advancing the ideals of the Kingdom on earth—a Brotherhood of the Kingdom. Entrance into this society is a voluntary act marked by baptism as an act of dedication. The social ideals of the community—fraternity, democracy, equality—are reinforced in the partaking of the Lord’s Supper, which reaffirms one’s commitment made in baptism. On Rauschenbusch’s account, the church lost its vitality when these practices lost their connection to their social and ethical moorings; but as their social and ethical significance is reaffirmed, the church can once again become “Christian.”

### *Conclusion*

In this chapter I have discussed Rauschenbusch’s thought under three headings: Christology, eschatology, and ecclesiology. As the discussion has demonstrated, these three threads are tightly intertwined in Rauschenbusch’s thought: Jesus initiated the Kingdom, and the church advances the Kingdom as it embodies the life of Christ; the

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<sup>224</sup> Rauschenbusch, *TSG*, 206.

<sup>225</sup> Rauschenbusch, *TSG*, 206.

<sup>226</sup> Rauschenbusch, *TSG*, 207.

social ideals of the Kingdom were taught by Jesus and personified in his life, and they serve as ongoing criteria for the church's own vitality.

As this chapter has shown, from the beginning of his career through the end, Rauschenbusch insisted on the indispensability of Jesus and the church within his political theology. Moreover, he argued explicitly in his final work that his cherished doctrine of the Kingdom of God “is not merely ethical, but has a rightful place in theology,” as it establishes “that organic union between religion and morality, between theology and ethics, which is one of the characteristics of the Christian religion.” By affirming the organic union between theology and ethics, Rauschenbusch views his project not as a reduction of the former to the latter but rather as an “expansion of theology” in which “the old message of salvation [is] enlarged and intensified.” He seeks in his work to repair the faulty logic that has led to the false separation of theology from ethics, often to the detriment of ethics. When considering any theological doctrine—Christology and the atonement, eschatology and the Kingdom of God, ecclesiology and the sacraments—his driving concern is to recover the doctrine's ethical and social significance that, in his judgment, has been lost or obscured by the theological eclipse of ethics. In short, he views his project as “not destructive but constructive.”<sup>227</sup>

In Chapter Five I discuss how Yoder reenacts a number of Rauschenbusch's theological moves—largely as a response to the political theology of Niebuhr. In order to set up that argument, I must first make a foray into Niebuhr's theology (Chapter Three) and the ways in which Niebuhr's theology influenced a young Yoder (Chapter Four). In

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<sup>227</sup> Each of the quotations in this paragraph are excerpts from Rauschenbusch's quotations already cited in this chapter; I have thus refrained from citing them again here.

the meantime the survey of Rauschenbusch's thought offered in the present chapter should provide enough of a foundation to be able to trace the ways in which Niebuhr's thought develops and diverges from Rauschenbusch's.



## CHAPTER THREE

### The Realist Turn: Reinhold Niebuhr's Interpretation of Christian Theology

*Niebuhr is, without much challenge, the most important American theological mind of the twentieth century.*

—John Howard Yoder

Reinhold Niebuhr's 1932 manifesto *Moral Man and Immoral Society* is often read as marking a radical break from the social gospel movement and, by extension, from Rauschenbusch's political theology.<sup>1</sup> The reality, however, is much more complex.<sup>2</sup> Niebuhr was indeed often critical of what he considered the "naïve optimism" of his liberal predecessors,<sup>3</sup> but his relationship with Rauschenbusch's thought in particular must be nuanced considerably. At the height of Rauschenbusch's career, the young Niebuhr was progressing through his studies—at Elmhurst preparatory school (1907–1910), Eden College (1910–1913), and Yale Divinity School (1914–1915)—and

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<sup>1</sup> Reinhold Niebuhr, *Moral Man and Immoral Society* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1932). (Hereafter, *MMIS*.)

<sup>2</sup> The complex relationship between Rauschenbusch's thought and Niebuhr's has been the subject of a number of previous studies, of which the most extensive is Harlan Beckley, *Passion for Justice: Retrieving the Legacies of Walter Rauschenbusch, John A. Ryan, and Reinhold Niebuhr* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1992). See also Stackhouse, "Eschatology and Ethical Method"; Anna M. Robbins, *Methods in the Madness: Diversity in Twentieth-Century Christian Social Ethics* (Carlisle, U.K.: Paternoster, 2004); Christopher Evans, "Ties that Bind: Walter Rauschenbusch, Reinhold Niebuhr, and the Quest for Economic Justice," *Soundings: An Interdisciplinary Journal* 95 (2012): 351–69; and Roger Dickinson, "Rauschenbusch and Niebuhr: Brothers Under the Skin," *Religion in Life* 27.2 (Spring 1958): 163–71.

<sup>3</sup> Reinhold Niebuhr, *An Interpretation of Christian Ethics* (New York: Meridian, 1956), 170. (Hereafter, *ICE*.)

apparently took little notice of Rauschenbusch's work.<sup>4</sup> However, during the following thirteen years of his pastorate at Bethel Evangelical Church in burgeoning Detroit, Niebuhr was struck by the plight of the industrial worker that had so impacted Rauschenbusch during his pastorate in Hell's Kitchen.<sup>5</sup> During this time Niebuhr appears to have first turned his attention to Rauschenbusch's writings.<sup>6</sup> As with Rauschenbusch, Niebuhr was critical of conservative Christians who separated their individual faith from

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<sup>4</sup> For the details of Niebuhr's education, see Charles C. Brown, *Niebuhr and His Age: Reinhold Niebuhr's Prophetic Role in the Twentieth Century* (Philadelphia: Trinity Press International, 1992), 12–20. Citing correspondence between Niebuhr and his Eden mentor, Samuel D. Press, during Niebuhr's first year at Yale, Brown notes: "The Social Gospel, as developed in America by Walter Rauschenbusch, was then current in seminaries such as Yale, but seems to have made no impression on Niebuhr, who made no mention of Rauschenbusch in any of his letters to Press" (17). Along with Brown's helpful biography, other major treatments of Niebuhr's life and times include Richard W. Fox, *Reinhold Niebuhr: A Biography* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1985); Jane Bingham, *Courage to Change: An Introduction to the Life and Thought of Reinhold Niebuhr* (New York: University Press of America, 1993); and Ronald H. Stone, *Professor Reinhold Niebuhr: A Mentor to the Twentieth Century* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1992). Cf. Reinhold Niebuhr, "Intellectual Autobiography," in *Reinhold Niebuhr: His Religious, Social, and Political Thought*, edited by Charles Kegley and Robert Bretall (New York: Macmillan, 1956), 1–23.

<sup>5</sup> Although, in *Passion for Justice*, Beckley helpfully notes some differences between their two ministry approaches: "Niebuhr, at age 23, entered the ministry in Detroit with decidedly different attitudes from those Rauschenbusch brought to the Second German Baptist Church in New York. Niebuhr was a self-described liberal imbued with what he would later remember as 'the mild moralistic idealism, which I had identified with the Christian faith.' Niebuhr did not come to Detroit to save souls. He was not averse to applying religion to social issues. . . . The Niebuhr who came to Bethel Church in Detroit was clearly like neither the young Rauschenbusch before Hell's Kitchen nor the mature Rauschenbusch who sided with the interests of the social movement" (192–93). Beckley goes on to contrast their ministry contexts as well: "Neither was Bethel an impoverished church in which Niebuhr would be shaken by ministering to the unemployed and families of children dying due to unhealthy conditions. It was a small middle-class congregation, which increased in size as Detroit grew. Its German-oriented congregation became more integrated into American culture and somewhat more oriented to reform under Niebuhr's tutelage. Unlike Rauschenbusch, Niebuhr did not need a first-hand engagement with poverty to evoke a passion for social reform. He was already convinced of the need for reform. The question was what kind of reform and how it could be achieved" (193).

<sup>6</sup> Brown identifies Charles D. Williams, bishop of the Episcopal Diocese of Michigan and mentor to Niebuhr in the early 1920s, as a possible influence on Niebuhr in this regard. Brown notes that Williams dedicated his book *The Christian Ministry and Social Problems* to Rauschenbusch and through preaching and advocacy applied the principles of Rauschenbusch's social gospel to social and economic issues in Detroit. When Williams died in 1923, Niebuhr wrote a eulogy in which he extolled Williams as a "prophet of a social gospel." Brown notes: "About this time, it appears, Niebuhr came to share Williams's appreciation of Rauschenbusch, buying and marking current editions of his *Christianity and the Social Crisis* . . . and *A Theology for the Social Gospel*." See Brown, *Niebuhr and His Age*, 24–25.

larger social issues. At the same time, he observed the limits of liberal Christians' attempts to "Christianize" the social order by appealing to the consciences of Christians. Niebuhr thus sought a form of Christianity that would avoid these errors, and the result is his Christian realism. Even after Niebuhr self-consciously distanced himself from his liberal predecessors, however, he still viewed Rauschenbusch as "the voice of realism at the turn of the century" and showed an ongoing appreciation for his work.<sup>7</sup>

In this chapter my goal is to describe the ways in which Niebuhr's political theology can be read in part as a critical appropriation of Rauschenbusch's by examining how Niebuhr treats the three theological themes discussed in the previous chapter: Christology, eschatology, and ecclesiology. As with the previous chapter on Rauschenbusch, my goal here is not to provide a comprehensive treatment of Niebuhr's theology; rather, my more modest aim is to observe the specific ways in which he develops and diverges from Rauschenbusch's thought on these themes.<sup>8</sup> My claim is not that Niebuhr is directly indebted to Rauschenbusch for the way he formulates his theological positions. Niebuhr clearly draws widely from Christian and classical sources and only occasionally mentions Rauschenbusch. My goal is rather to challenge the idea that Niebuhr's theology marks a radical break from Rauschenbusch's, as is so often assumed, by showing ways in which Niebuhr's theology is structurally similarly to

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<sup>7</sup> Reinhold Niebuhr, "Walter Rauschenbusch in Historical Perspective," in Reinhold Niebuhr, *Faith and Politics: A Commentary on Religious, Social and Political Thought in a Technological Age*, edited by Ronald H. Stone (New York: George Braziller, 1968), 34.

<sup>8</sup> For fuller treatments of Niebuhr's theology and ethics, see Robin W. Lovin, *Reinhold Niebuhr and Christian Realism* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995); Langdon Gilkey, *On Niebuhr: A Theological Study* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001); and Henry B. Clark, *Serenity, Courage, and Wisdom: The Enduring Legacy of Reinhold Niebuhr* (Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 1994).

Rauschenbusch's—even as Niebuhr creatively repurposes this structure for his own needs and contexts. As with Rauschenbusch, so too with Niebuhr I focus on a his major theological works, turning first to an exposition of his Christology.<sup>9</sup>

### *Jesus as the (Impossible) Ideal*

“Since Walter Rauschenbusch aroused the American church to the urgency of the social problem and its relation to the ethical ideals of the gospel, it has been rather generally assumed that it is possible to abstract an adequate social ethic for the reconstruction of society from the social teachings of Jesus.” So begins Reinhold Niebuhr’s 1932 essay “The Ethic of Jesus and the Social Question.”<sup>10</sup> Niebuhr’s initial judgment on such attempts to apply Jesus’s ethic directly is unsurprising to those familiar with his work: “Most of this energy has been vainly spent and has served to create as much confusion as light. There is indeed a very rigorous ethical ideal in the gospel of Jesus, but there is no social ethic in the ordinary sense of the word in it, precisely because the ethical ideal is too rigorous and perfect to lend itself to application in the economic

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<sup>9</sup> For a more extensive, although somewhat dated, treatment of Niebuhr’s Christology, see Paul Lehmann, “The Christology of Reinhold Niebuhr,” in *Reinhold Niebuhr: His Religious, Social, and Political Thought*, 252–80. In my judgment, Lehmann is not far from the truth with his claims regarding the centrality of Christology in Niebuhr’s work: “Christology is the leitmotiv of Reinhold Niebuhr’s theology” (253); “Christology is *pivotal*, not *peripheral*, in Niebuhr’s theology” (255, emphasis original); and “Christology is the key to the understanding and interpretation of his work” (275). According to Lehmann, Niebuhr’s Christology has not been adequately appreciated in large part because it is not situated within a larger trinitarian framework; specifically, Lehmann argues that a doctrine of the Holy Spirit is almost completely absent from Niebuhr’s work. Cf. J. M. Lochman, “The Problem of Realism in Niebuhr’s Christology,” *Scottish Journal of Theology* 11 (1958): 253–64.

<sup>10</sup> Reinhold Niebuhr, “The Ethic of Jesus and the Social Problem,” *Religion in Life*, Spring 1932, 198–208; reprinted in Reinhold Niebuhr, *Love and Justice: Selections from the Shorter Writings of Reinhold Niebuhr*, edited by D. B. Robertson (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1957), 29–40. Quote from the reprint, 29–30. All subsequent citations are to the reprint.

and political problems of our day.”<sup>11</sup> Niebuhr is quick to note: “This does not mean that the ethic of Jesus has no light to give to a modern Christian who faces the perplexing economic and political issues of a technological civilization.”<sup>12</sup> Niebuhr’s ensuing attempt to balance the relevance of Jesus’s ethic with its impossibility demonstrates both his continuities and his divergences from Rauschenbusch’s thought. As with Rauschenbusch, so too Niebuhr notes that Jesus “spoke of the Kingdom and not of salvation, and the Kingdom meant an ideal social relationship, even though he might emphasize that it proceeded from internal spiritual forces.”<sup>13</sup> Further, he concurs with Rauschenbusch that Jesus “regarded as a temptation the suggestion that he become a political leader or that he develop the political implications of the Messianic idea, and he resisted the effort to make him king.”<sup>14</sup> For Niebuhr, this implies that Jesus offered “an individual ethic in the sense that his chief interest was in the quality of life of an individual” and that he had a general “lack of concern for social and political issues.”<sup>15</sup> However, this does not suggest that no social ethic is implied in Jesus’s teaching. In fact, Niebuhr argues that “it is not difficult to draw conclusions in regard to the social ideal implied by [Jesus’s ethic of] disinterestedness.”<sup>16</sup> He even states the implied ethic straightforwardly: “In practical terms it means a combination of anarchism and

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<sup>11</sup> Niebuhr, “Ethic of Jesus,” 30.

<sup>12</sup> Niebuhr, “Ethic of Jesus,” 30.

<sup>13</sup> Niebuhr, “Ethic of Jesus,” 30.

<sup>14</sup> Niebuhr, “Ethic of Jesus,” 30.

<sup>15</sup> Niebuhr, “Ethic of Jesus,” 30.

<sup>16</sup> Niebuhr, “Ethic of Jesus,” 32.

communism dominated by the spirit of love.”<sup>17</sup> For Niebuhr, then, the issue is not so much that Jesus’s ethic lacks a social ideal as it is that Jesus’s ethic is too rigorous and perfectionist to offer a “basis for a social ethic that deals responsibly with a growing society.”<sup>18</sup> He thus reasons:

Those of us who believe in the complete reorganization of modern society are not wrong in using the ideal of Jesus as a vantage point from which to condemn the present social order, but I think we are in error when we try to draw from the teachings of Jesus any warrant for the social policies which we find necessary to attain to any modicum of justice. We may be right in believing that we are striving for a justice which approximates the Christian ideal more closely than the present social order, but we are wrong when we talk about achieving a “Christian social order.” The Barthians are quite right, I think, in protesting against the easy identification of the Kingdom of God with every movement of social reform and social radicalism that has prevailed in American Christianity in particular and in liberal Protestantism in general. Those of us who dissociate ourselves from the easy optimism of modern liberalism and who believe that a just society is not going to be built by a little more education and a few more sermons on love have particular reason to reorient our thinking in this matter so that we will not come forward with a social ethic involving the use of force and coercion and political pressure of every kind and claim the authority of Jesus for it.<sup>19</sup>

Despite developments in Niebuhr’s thought over the decades, it would not be much of an overstatement to say that his Christian realism is one long attempt to work out the implications of this paragraph from early in his career.

In contrast to exegetes who try to prove that “the teachings of Jesus are not incompatible with participation in national wars,” Niebuhr confesses that the “struggle for social justice” necessarily involves “the assertion of rights” and “the use of coercion,”

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<sup>17</sup> Niebuhr, “Ethic of Jesus,” 32.

<sup>18</sup> Niebuhr, “Ethic of Jesus,” 33.

<sup>19</sup> Niebuhr, “Ethic of Jesus,” 33.

both of which “are incompatible with the pure love ethic found in the Gospels.”<sup>20</sup> As such, the struggle cannot be justified “in purely Christian terms” but must be justified instead “by considerations of the social situation that we face and the human resources that are available for its solution.”<sup>21</sup> In other words, since the ideal of Jesus is unattainable in the realm of social conflict, compromises are unavoidable. This naturally raises the question: “In what sense, then, may we call ourselves Christian, or how do we hope to insinuate Christian and ethical values in the social struggle?”<sup>22</sup> Niebuhr answers his own question: “The simplest answer is that we believe that the highest ethical and spiritual insights may mitigate the social struggle on the one hand and may transcend it on the other.”<sup>23</sup> He explains:

The love ideal which Jesus incarnates may be too pure to be realized in life, but it offers us nevertheless an ideal toward which the religious spirit may strive. . . . The fact that in Jesus the spirit of love flowed out in emulation of God’s love, without regard to social consequences, cannot blind the eye to the social consequences of a religiously inspired love. If modern religion were really producing it, it would mitigate the evils of the social struggle. It would, to emphasize the obvious once more, not abolish the social struggle, because it would not approximate perfection in sufficiently numerous instances. The fight for justice in society will always be a fight. But wherever the spirit of justice grows imaginative and is transmuted into love, love in which the interests of the other are espoused, the struggle is transcended by just that much.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Niebuhr, “Ethic of Jesus,” 33, 34.

<sup>21</sup> Niebuhr, “Ethic of Jesus,” 34.

<sup>22</sup> Niebuhr, “Ethic of Jesus,” 36.

<sup>23</sup> Niebuhr, “Ethic of Jesus,” 36.

<sup>24</sup> Niebuhr, “Ethic of Jesus,” 38.

Thus, while he freely admits that compromises to the ethic of Jesus are necessary in the struggle for justice, Niebuhr's ethic is nonetheless intrinsically connected to his Christology.

In order to further illuminate the christological underpinning of his political theology, I here draw from two of Niebuhr's major theological works, *An Interpretation of Christian Ethics* (1935) and *The Nature and Destiny of Man* (1941/1943).<sup>25</sup> In each of these works, we can see how, on the one hand, Niebuhr concurs with Rauschenbusch in reading the significance of Jesus primarily in ethical rather than metaphysical terms, while, on the other hand, he diverges from Rauschenbusch in his understanding of how directly Jesus's ethic can be applied to contemporary social questions. In other words, we can observe how the basis for his ethical disagreements with Rauschenbusch are predicated on more fundamental theological agreements.

*An Interpretation of Christian Ethics* is a revision of Niebuhr's Rauschenbusch Memorial Lectures presented at Colgate Rochester Divinity School in 1934. In the preface to the 1956 edition of the book, Niebuhr notes that the book "was meant to express both the author's general adhesion to the purposes of the 'Social Gospel' of

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<sup>25</sup> In his introduction to a recent reprint of *An Interpretation of Christian Ethics* (Westminster John Knox, 2013), Edmund Santurri notes that, although Niebuhr later distanced himself from the book after it received criticism from Paul Ramsey, "most of what we now identify as the 'theological' in Niebuhrian 'Christian realism' is articulated with considerable subtlety and force in this relatively early work." Indeed, Santurri judges that it "may well be Reinhold Niebuhr's most important work in *theological ethics*" (ix, emphasis original). In his study of Niebuhr's theology, Langdon Gilkey regards *The Nature and Destiny of Man* and *Faith and History* as representative of "Niebuhr's mature theology" (Gilkey, *On Niebuhr*, 53). Stanley Hauerwas concurs, noting that Niebuhr's "only sustained theological reflections after *Nature and Destiny*" are *Faith and History* and *The Self and the Dramas of History*; Hauerwas judges that Niebuhr's "absence of theological curiosity . . . gives his later work a repetitious quality that borders on boredom" (Stanley Hauerwas, *With the Grain of the Universe: The Church's Witness and Natural Theology* [Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos, 2001], 117, n 10). Thus, although *Interpretation* is a somewhat early work, my focus on it and *Nature and Destiny* can be seen as broadly representative of his mature theology.



which Rauschenbusch was the most celebrated exponent, and to spell out some of the growing differences between the original social gospel and the newer form of social Christianity.”<sup>26</sup> As with Rauschenbusch, Niebuhr is critical of orthodox Christianity for making Christ so transcendent as to be irrelevant for social ethics; however, Niebuhr is likewise critical of liberal Christians for making Jesus so immanent that they attempt to apply his teaching to social ethics too directly. Niebuhr’s goal is to find a balance between the two, and he sets out the problem as follows: “The primary issue is how it is possible to derive a social ethic from the absolute ethic of the gospels. The gospel ethic is absolute because it merely presents the final law of human freedom: The love of God and the neighbor. A social ethic must be concerned with the establishment of tolerable harmonies of life.”<sup>27</sup> Niebuhr elaborates this point with reference to Jesus’s life and teaching in his chapter “The Ethics of Jesus,” in which he presents Jesus’s ethic as “the perfect fruit of prophetic religion.”<sup>28</sup> He identifies this ethic as the “ideal of love” and argues that it is relevant to every aspect of moral life and thus must not be confused with either “the ascetic ethic of world-denying religions nor with the prudential morality of naturalism, designed to guide good people to success and happiness in this world.”<sup>29</sup>

While the ethic of Jesus is relevant to every aspect of life, argues Niebuhr, it is too absolutist, perfectionist, rigorous, and uncompromising to be applied directly to social ethics. Jesus prohibits concern for one’s life, including one’s possessions and family. As

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<sup>26</sup> Niebuhr, *ICE*, 8.

<sup>27</sup> Niebuhr, *ICE*, 9.

<sup>28</sup> Niebuhr, *ICE*, 43.

<sup>29</sup> Niebuhr, *ICE*, 43.

such, “The effort to elaborate the religio-moral thought of Jesus into a practical socio-moral or even politico-moral system usually has the effect of blunting the very penetration of his moral insights.”<sup>30</sup> Niebuhr identifies Jesus’s teaching on nonresistance as a case in point: “When, for instance, liberal Christianity defines the doctrine of non-resistance, so that it becomes merely an injunction against violence in conflict, it ceases to provide a perspective from which the sinful element in all resistance, conflict, and coercion may be discovered.”<sup>31</sup> His choice of nonresistance here is not arbitrary; it becomes in his thought the paradigmatic expression of divine *agape* as represented by the Cross, which serves as the ultimate, though impossible, ethical norm.<sup>32</sup>

Niebuhr rejects the idea that Jesus offers an interim ethic based on an apocalyptic expectation of the imminent end of the world; nevertheless, he recognizes “an eschatological element in, and even basis for, the ethic of Jesus.”<sup>33</sup> Instead of compelling obedience to Jesus as a means of ushering in the eschatological Kingdom as Rauschenbusch argued, Niebuhr reasons that this eschatological element entails that the “ethical demands made by Jesus are incapable of fulfillment in the present existence of man.”<sup>34</sup> It thus offers “sources of criticism for a prudential social ethic which deals with

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<sup>30</sup> Niebuhr, *ICE*, 52.

<sup>31</sup> Niebuhr, *ICE*, 52.

<sup>32</sup> Niebuhr later contrasts his view of the norm of *agape* with that of Rauschenbusch: “Walter Rauschenbusch, who was not completely oblivious to the deeper dimensions of the New Testament norm, nevertheless occasionally equated it with the idea that ‘man is fundamentally gregarious and his morality consists in being a good member of his community.’” See Reinhold Niebuhr, *Faith and History: A Comparison of Christian and Modern Views of History* (London: Nisbet & Co., 1949), 200. (Hereafter, *FH*.) For a comparison between Niebuhr’s and Rauschenbusch’s respective conceptions of love (which largely confirms Niebuhr’s quote), see Beckley, *Passion for Justice*, 73–74.

<sup>33</sup> Niebuhr, *ICE*, 59.

<sup>34</sup> Niebuhr, *ICE*, 59.

present realities” rather than providing the immediate basis for a social ethic.<sup>35</sup> In other words, Jesus’s life and teaching present an impossible ethical ideal; but, as Niebuhr argues in a later chapter, “The Relevance of an Impossible Ethical Ideal,” its impossibility does not thereby render it irrelevant. Rather than viewing Christ as “the ideal man, whom all men can emulate, once the persuasive charm of his life has captivated their souls,” as Niebuhr finds characteristic of liberal Christianity, for him “the revelation of Christ, the God-man, is a revelation of the paradoxical relation of the eternal to history, which it is the genius of mythical-prophetic religion to emphasize.” He continues: “Christ is thus the revelation of the very impossible possibility which the Sermon on the Mount elaborates in ethical terms. If Christian orthodoxy sometimes tends to resolve this paradox by the picture of a Christ who has been stripped of all qualities which relate him to man and history, Christian liberalism resolves it by reducing Christ to a figure of heroic love who reveals the full possibilities of human nature to us. In either case the total human situation which the mythos of the Christ and the Cross illumines, is obscured.”<sup>36</sup> In contrast to both orthodox and liberal views of Christ, Niebuhr argues that according to prophetic Christianity, “Christ and the Cross reveal not only the possibilities but the limits of human finitude in order that a more ultimate hope may arise from the contrite recognition of those limits.” He explains: “Christian faith is, in other words, a type of optimism which places its ultimate confidence in the love of God and not the love of man, in the ultimate transcendent unity of reality and not in tentative and superficial harmonies of existence which human ingenuity may contrive. It insists, quite logically,

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<sup>35</sup> Niebuhr, *ICE*, 55.

<sup>36</sup> Niebuhr, *ICE*, 111.

that this ultimate hope becomes possible only to those who no longer place their confidence in purely human possibilities. Repentance is thus the gateway into the Kingdom of God.”<sup>37</sup> If Rauschenbusch stressed Jesus’s solidarity with humanity in order to underscore his role as the one who inaugurates a new humanity, Niebuhr here stresses Jesus’s uniqueness as the “God-man,” who reveals to humans the limits of their abilities to emulate him and thus their need for repentance and grace. Such is the relevance of the impossible ethical ideal, which Niebuhr elaborates further in his Gifford Lectures.

Five years after his Rauschenbusch Lectures, Niebuhr presented his Gifford Lectures at Edinburgh University in the spring and fall of 1939—later revised and published as his two-volume magnum opus *The Nature and Destiny of Man*.<sup>38</sup> These lectures are notable for the attention he gives to the Christian theological tradition, although, as with Rauschenbusch, Niebuhr has little time for the language of creedal orthodoxy, which he considers the error of trying to state the mysteries of the Christian faith in “metaphysical terms.”<sup>39</sup> Niebuhr writes of the christological controversies that they “end in the formula of Chalcedon and the Nicene creed in which the affirmation of Christian faith is made in defiance of Greek thought but within the limitations of Greek terms.”<sup>40</sup> As a result, “the Christian affirmation that God makes Himself known in history

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<sup>37</sup> Niebuhr, *ICE*, 112.

<sup>38</sup> For details about Niebuhr’s preparation for and delivery of the Gifford Lectures, an overview of *Nature and Destiny*, and an account of its initial reception, see Brown, *Niebuhr and His Age*, 68–94.

<sup>39</sup> Reinhold Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man* (hereafter, *NDM*), vol. 2, *Human Destiny* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1943), 60.

<sup>40</sup> Niebuhr, *NDM*, 2:60.

through Christ is partly obscured by the terms used to affirm it.”<sup>41</sup> The creeds, he writes, rely on “ontic terms” to express “a truth of faith, which can be expressed only symbolically.”<sup>42</sup> According to Niebuhr’s judgment, “All definitions of Christ which affirm both his divinity and humanity in the sense that they ascribe both finite and historical conditioned and eternal and unconditioned qualities to his nature must verge on logical nonsense. . . . But the logical nonsense is not as serious a defect as the fact that the statement tends to reduce Christian faith to metaphysical truths which need to be apprehended inwardly by faith.”<sup>43</sup>

For Niebuhr, as for Rauschenbusch before him, the significance of Christ is expressed better in ethical than in metaphysical terms. The significance of Christ is “as the norm of human nature [that] defines the final perfection of man in history.”<sup>44</sup> Niebuhr explains: “This perfection is not so much a sum total of various virtues or an absence of transgression of various laws; it is the perfection of sacrificial love. The same Cross which symbolizes the love of God and reveals the divine perfection to be not incompatible with a suffering involvement in historical tragedy, also indicates that the perfection of man is not attainable in history. Sacrificial love transcends history. It does not transcend history as thought transcends an act. It is an act in history; but it cannot justify itself in history.”<sup>45</sup> The fact that the perfect expression of sacrificial love or divine

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<sup>41</sup> Niebuhr, *NDM*, 2:60.

<sup>42</sup> Niebuhr, *NDM*, 2:60.

<sup>43</sup> Niebuhr, *NDM*, 2:61. For a fuller treatment of and response to Niebuhr’s criticisms of orthodox Christology, see Paul R. Kolbet, “Rethinking the Christological Foundations of Reinhold Niebuhr’s Christian Realism,” *Modern Theology* 26 (2010): 437–65.

<sup>44</sup> Niebuhr, *NDM*, 2:68.

<sup>45</sup> Niebuhr, *NDM*, 2:68.

*agape* leads to a violent death on a cross means for Niebuhr that the ethic of Jesus, while offering the perfect ideal, cannot be applied immediately to social ethics: “The final majesty, the ultimate freedom, and the perfect disinterestedness of the divine love can have a counterpart in history only in a life which ends tragically, because it refuses to participate in the claims and counterclaims of historical existence. It portrays a love ‘which seeketh not its own.’ But a love which seeketh not its own is not able to maintain itself in historical society.”<sup>46</sup>

Niebuhr once again uses nonresistance as a case in point: “For this reason the ethics of nonresistance as taught in the Sermon on the Mount is in perfectly consistent relation with the love symbolized in the Cross. Modern Christianity is wrong, however, in presenting this ethic as one which might, if generally practiced, become successful in history. It is even more mistaken if it declares that a non-violent participation in all the claims and counterclaims of historical social life preserves the essentials of the gospel ethic of nonresistance.”<sup>47</sup> The self-sacrificial norm of Jesus, as a “God-man,” is always beyond the grasp of any action within history, and so there is no “hope of history gradually purifying itself so that it will achieve this norm.”<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> Niebuhr, *NDM*, 2:72. Niebuhr is thus just as critical of liberal conceptions of Jesus as he is of orthodox ones. Elsewhere he writes: “Naturally the ascription of divinity to Christ is equally embarrassing in such systems of thought. This embarrassment is overcome by fitting Christ into some general scheme of the history of culture. He becomes the great teacher or exemplar of the moral ideal or either the anticipator or the culmination of the law of moral progress. His perfect love is regarded as a simple possibility for all men, if only they are able to recover knowledge of the ‘historical Jesus’ persuasiveness as a teacher of the law of love or his rigour as its law-giver. The moral complacency of modern culture is supported, rather than challenged, by a faith which thus brings Christ into a system of simple historical possibilities” (*FH*, 188).

<sup>47</sup> Niebuhr, *NDM*, 2:72n2.

<sup>48</sup> Niebuhr, *NDM*, 2:81.

Niebuhr is willing to acknowledge “that side of the Christian doctrine which regards the *agape* of the Kingdom of God as a resource for infinite developments towards a more perfect brotherhood in history,”<sup>49</sup> but he worries that those who try to apply Jesus’s *agape* ethic too directly to social affairs are forced to water it down in order to make it work as a prudential social strategy. In so doing, he argues, they both distort Jesus’s ethic and miss its intrinsically religious significance. Niebuhr writes:

The New Testament never guarantees the historical success of the “strategy” of the Cross. Jesus warns his disciples against a too sanguine historical hope: “In this rejoice not, that the spirits are subject unto you; but rather rejoice because your names are written in heaven.” In that warning we have a telling refutation of the utopian corruptions of Christianity. Whatever the possibilities of success for *agape* in history (and there are possibilities of success because history cannot be at complete variance with its foundation) the final justification for the way of *agape* in the New Testament is never found in history. The motive to which Christ appeals is always the emulation of God or gratitude for the *agape* of God.<sup>50</sup>

For Niebuhr, then, the basis for Jesus’s ethical ideal is necessarily theological. At the same time, by positing this ideal as beyond the realm of human possibility in history, Niebuhr opens up room for a prudential ethic that need not be theological. Niebuhr argues that, since the possibility of fulfilling Jesus’s ethic in history does not exist, “it is not even right to insist that every action of the Christian must conform to *agape*, rather than to the norms of relative justice and mutual love by which life is maintained and conflicting interests are arbitrated in history.”<sup>51</sup> This fissure between the ideal of Jesus and prudential social ethics thus makes room for Niebuhr to develop his Christian realism for which he is best known. As we will see in the next chapter, it is also this fissure that

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<sup>49</sup> Niebuhr, *NDM*, 2:85.

<sup>50</sup> Niebuhr, *NDM*, 2:87–88.

<sup>51</sup> Niebuhr, *NDM*, 2:88.

becomes one of the bases for Yoder's criticism of Niebuhr's social ethic. But before getting to Yoder, I must first describe how Niebuhr's eschatology and ecclesiology further illustrate the logic of his theology.

*Eschatology as Disclosure and Fulfillment of the Meaning of History*

In an essay on Niebuhr's theology, James Gustafson writes, "In my judgment the dominant overarching moral frame of reference in Niebuhr can be stated in terms of the tension between the ideal and the actual. . . . In this respect I think Niebuhr was very much an heir of the liberal Protestant social gospel tradition."<sup>52</sup> Indeed, as Max Stackhouse has argued, such a tension between the ideal and the actual is characteristic of both Rauschenbusch's and Niebuhr's eschatologically oriented ethical methodology.<sup>53</sup> In the previous chapter, we saw that Rauschenbusch held that humankind "will come to an end in due time; the astronomical clock is already ticking which will ring in the end." Thus, for Rauschenbusch, eschatology is not strictly about "the end" but is rather about the ideal of the Kingdom, which is always impinging on and standing in judgment over

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<sup>52</sup> James Gustafson, "Theology in the Service of Ethics: An Interpretation of Reinhold Niebuhr's Theological Ethics," in *Reinhold Niebuhr and the Issues of Our Time*, edited by Richard Harries (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1986), 24–45; quote from 34.

<sup>53</sup> Stackhouse, "Eschatology and Ethical Method." For an illuminating essay-length treatment of Niebuhr's eschatology, see Keith Ward, "Reinhold Niebuhr and the Christian Hope," in *Reinhold Niebuhr and the Issues of Our Time*, 61–87. After his exposition of Niebuhr's thought, Ward concludes: "It may be thought, and has sometimes been said, that Niebuhr's views merely reflection the ideology of American liberal democracy, with perhaps a tinge of well-controlled radicalism. I think that this would be unjust; and I have tried to show how they are rather implicit in a particular, and persuasive, interpretation of New Testament eschatology. The Christian hope which is set before us in the teachings and in the life of Christ requires us to commit ourselves positively to the social life of the world, without ever accepting its actual structures as satisfactory and without thinking that there is some perfect alternative. What it suggests is not a set of specific political doctrines . . . . But it does set before us a vision and a perspective, a matrix within which our political views must be formed . . . . It will not dictate to us what we should think. But it will teach us how we can hold firmly to a Christian hope without despair and without naivety, in a world in which the Kingdom is always both 'now and not yet'" (85–86).



the present. In his writing on eschatology, Niebuhr makes a similar distinction:

“Speculations based upon the second law of thermodynamics would seem to make the actual end of history certain but very remote. The certainty of an historical end may tempt all those to despair who find the meaning of life only in the historical process. Against such despair the Christian faith insists that the end as *finis* is not identical with the end as *telos*. The *telos* is in the Resurrection.”<sup>54</sup> As Harlan Beckley observes of

Rauschenbusch’s thought, we might say based on this quote that Niebuhr’s thought too is, “in the strictest sense, noneschatological.”<sup>55</sup> Niebuhr has very little concern for “the end” in terms of *finis*. As he famously writes in his Gifford Lectures, “It is unwise for Christians to claim any knowledge of either the furniture of heaven or the temperature of hell; or to be too certain about any details of the Kingdom of God in which history is consummated.”<sup>56</sup> For Niebuhr as for Rauschenbusch, eschatology provides not so much a picture of the conclusion of history as it does the structure for political theology—the tension between the ideal (the Kingdom) and the actual (contemporary society). This tension functioned differently for Niebuhr than it did for Rauschenbusch, but such differences should not obscure the arguably more fundamental structural similarity. Glimpses of this eschatological structure are present in Niebuhr’s earlier works, such as *An Interpretation of Christian Ethics* and even more so *Beyond Tragedy*—a collection of “sermonic essays” published in 1938.<sup>57</sup> But his fullest and most explicit treatment of

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<sup>54</sup> Niebuhr, *FH*, 268.

<sup>55</sup> Beckley, *Passion for Justice*, 56.

<sup>56</sup> Niebuhr, *NDM*, 2:294.

<sup>57</sup> Reinhold Niebuhr, *Beyond Tragedy: Essays on the Christian Interpretation of History* (London: Nisbet & Co., 1938). (Hereafter, *BT*.) Niebuhr characterizes the chapters of the book as “sermonic essays”

eschatology comes in the second volume of *Nature and Destiny* and his immediately following work, *Faith and History*, which Niebuhr once confessed is “but an elaboration of the second part of my Gifford Lectures.”<sup>58</sup> For our purposes, then, I draw primarily from the second volume of *Nature and Destiny*, while cross-referencing other works where further elaboration might prove particularly illuminating.<sup>59</sup>

Niebuhr begins the second volume of *Nature and Destiny* by distinguishing between “historical” and “non-historical” religions, the former of which he argues are “by their very nature prophetic-Messianic. They look forward at first to a point in history and finally towards an *eschaton* (end) which is also the end of history, where the full meaning of life and history will be disclosed and fulfilled.”<sup>60</sup> While Niebuhr finds messianic elements in “every culture in which history is taken seriously,” he argues that such a “prophetic-Messianic interpretation of history culminates in Hebraic religion, and more particularly in the prophetic-apocalyptic, as against the legalistic tradition, of

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in the preface (ix). The last three essays of the book, “Two Parables About Judgment,” “The Kingdom Not of This World,” and “The Fulfilment of Life,” are especially demonstrative of his eschatological orientation.

<sup>58</sup> Niebuhr, “Intellectual Autobiography,” 9. According to Stackhouse’s only slightly hyperbolic judgment, “Nearly all of the ideas found in Niebuhr’s *The Nature and Destiny of Man* are found in briefer form in his *Faith and History*” (“Eschatology and Ethical Method,” 172).

<sup>59</sup> In *A Passion for Justice*, Beckley carefully traces the development of Niebuhr’s thinking on the relationship between the ideal and the actual from the idealism of *Does Civilization Need Religion?* in the 1920s (192–200), to the realism of *Moral Man and Immoral Society* in the 1930s (200–209), to the more theologically reflective stage of *Nature and Destiny* in the 1940s (307–11), and finally to the pragmatism of his later writings in the 1950s and 60s (312–43). Beckley observes, nevertheless, that throughout these developments, “The tension between the ideal of love and the actual capacities of individual and collective agents remained his overarching theological and ethical frame of reference” (307). Indeed, Beckley argues, rightly in my view, that “Niebuhr was right when he claimed in the midfifties that his conservatism should not be confused with a devotion to the status quo. His continuing commitment to the tension between the ideal of love and the actual assured an uneasiness about American democracy and capitalism” (340).

<sup>60</sup> Niebuhr, *NDM*, 2:4.

Hebraism.”<sup>61</sup> In the prophet Amos, Niebuhr finds “the fountain source of the ethical-universalistic note in Hebrew prophecy,” which offers not only “a rejection of the nationalistic implications of Messianism in favor of a more universalistic conception” but also “more far-reaching criticism of all forms of optimistic Messianism.”<sup>62</sup> Thus, Hebrew prophecy “is the beginning of revelation in the history of religion,” as it offers “the first understanding of the fact that the real problem of history is not the finiteness of all human endeavors” but rather “the proud pretension of all human endeavors, which seeks to obscure their finite and partial character and thereby involves history in evil and sin.”<sup>63</sup> For Niebuhr, the prophets reveal that “all history is involved in a perennial defiance of the law of God,” which means that “the consummation of history cannot be a Messianic reign which helps the righteous to triumph over the unrighteous, or which resolves the conflicts of history in a reign of peace, or which abases the mighty and exalts the poor and the meek. The consummation of history can only be in a divine mercy which makes something more of history than merely recurring judgment.”<sup>64</sup>

According to Niebuhr, Jesus accepted certain aspects of Hebraic prophetic messianism, while reinterpreting and transforming it “in the process of negating and fulfilling it.”<sup>65</sup> Niebuhr argues that, as with prophetic messianism, Jesus rejected

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<sup>61</sup> Niebuhr, *NDM*, 2:16.

<sup>62</sup> Niebuhr, *NDM*, 2:23, 24.

<sup>63</sup> Niebuhr, *NDM*, 2:25.

<sup>64</sup> Niebuhr, *NDM*, 2:29.

<sup>65</sup> Niebuhr, *NDM*, 2:38.

“Hebraic legalism.”<sup>66</sup> Second, as with certain strands of prophetic messianism—but in distinction from others—Jesus rejected nationalistic particularism: “The story of the Good Samaritan obviously implies the rejection of nationalistic Messianism and the account of the temptation in the wilderness includes the rejection of the idea of a national triumph as a legitimate Messianic hope.”<sup>67</sup> For Niebuhr, however, this disavowal of nationalism was not “the final achievement of Jesus’ Messianism” but was merely one aspect of it. More significantly for Niebuhr was Jesus’s rejection of the standard view of Hebraic messianism in which ultimately “the righteous will gain victory over the unrighteous.”<sup>68</sup> According to Niebuhr, Jesus reinterprets messianism instead in terms of the “final enigma of history,” namely, “how the evil in every good and the unrighteousness of the righteous is to be overcome.”<sup>69</sup> Drawing from Jesus’s parable of the sheep and the goats in Matthew 25, Niebuhr argues that Jesus’s view of the final judgment rejects all forms of self-righteousness. Moreover, according to Jesus’s messianism, the Messiah came not to conquer the unrighteous and vindicate the righteous but instead to suffer. Niebuhr writes, “To declare, as Jesus does, that the Messiah, the representative of God, must suffer, is to make vicarious suffering the final revelation of meaning in history. But it is the vicarious suffering of the representative of God, and not of some force in history, which finally clarifies the obscurities of history and discloses the sovereignty of God over history.”<sup>70</sup> For Niebuhr, Jesus’s reinterpretation of

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<sup>66</sup> Niebuhr, *NDM*, 2:39.

<sup>67</sup> Niebuhr, *NDM*, 2:42.

<sup>68</sup> Niebuhr, *NDM*, 2:43.

<sup>69</sup> Niebuhr, *NDM*, 2:43.

<sup>70</sup> Niebuhr, *NDM*, 2:45.

messianism in terms of vicarious suffering is not only a stumbling block to the Jews and foolishness to the Greeks; it has been difficult even for Christians throughout history—from the very first disciples to the present day—to accept.

Finally, according to Niebuhr, Jesus reinterprets the prophetic understanding of the *eschata* by separating the “first coming” of the suffering servant from the “second coming” of the “triumphant Son of man.”<sup>71</sup> Jesus offers a “double affirmation that on the one hand the ‘Kingdom of God has come’ and on the other hand that ‘the Kingdom of God will come.’”<sup>72</sup> “The full implication of the double idea that the ‘Kingdom of God has come’ and that it is ‘coming,’” writes Niebuhr, “is that history is an interim.”<sup>73</sup> The meaning of history, for Niebuhr, is *disclosed* in the first coming—in Jesus’s life, death, and resurrection—but the meaning of history is not *fulfilled* until the second coming. In the interim, then, is “a continued element of inner contradiction in history” in which sin “is overcome in principle but not in fact.”<sup>74</sup> During this interim, continues Niebuhr, “Love must continue to be suffering love rather than triumphant love. This distinction becomes a basic category of interpreting history in all profound versions of the Christian faith.”<sup>75</sup> In the New Testament, there is the “sense that the final fulfillment impinges on the present moment, the feeling of urgency in regard to anticipating this fulfillment,”

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<sup>71</sup> Niebuhr, *NDM*, 2:48.

<sup>72</sup> Niebuhr, *NDM*, 2:47.

<sup>73</sup> Niebuhr, *NDM*, 2:48.

<sup>74</sup> Niebuhr, *NDM*, 2:49.

<sup>75</sup> Niebuhr, *NDM*, 2:49.

although this feeling is often expressed crudely in chronological terms.<sup>76</sup> For Niebuhr, biblical symbols of the *eschata*, such as the *parousia*, resurrection, and judgment, must be taken “seriously but not literally.”<sup>77</sup>

In contrast to the interim ethic of Albert Schweitzer, which Niebuhr considers “superficial rather than serious,” Niebuhr argues that viewing history as an interim between the first and second coming of Christ reveals the tensions between the ideal—“the absolute ethical and religious demands of the gospel”—and the actual.<sup>78</sup> This tension, however, does not mean that the ideal of the Kingdom is thereby irrelevant to history. Although admittedly not placing as strong of an emphasis as Rauschenbusch did on this point, Niebuhr at times is quite explicit about the ethical relevance of the Kingdom ideal:

There are no limits to be set in history for the achievement of more universal brotherhood, for the development of more perfect and more inclusive mutual relations. All the characteristic hopes and aspirations of Renaissance and Enlightenment, of both secular and Christian liberalism are right at least in this, that they understand that side of the Christian doctrine which regards the *agape* of the Kingdom of God as a resource for infinite developments towards a more perfect brotherhood in history. The uneasy conscience of man over various forms of social injustice, over slavery and war, is an expression of the Christian feeling that history must move from the innocence of Adam to the perfection of Christ, from the harmony of life with life in unfree nature to the perfect love of the Kingdom of God. The vision of universal love expressed by St. Paul in the words: “There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither bond nor free, there is neither male nor female, for ye are all one in Christ Jesus,” is meant primarily for the church. But it cannot be denied that it is relevant to all social relationships. For the freedom of man makes it impossible to set any limits of race, sex, or social condition upon the brotherhood which may be achieved in history.

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<sup>76</sup> Niebuhr, *NDM*, 2:49.

<sup>77</sup> Niebuhr, *NDM*, 2:50. For elaboration of his understanding of Christian doctrine as symbol or myth, see Reinhold Niebuhr, “As Deceivers, Yet True,” in *BT*, 1–24.

<sup>78</sup> Niebuhr, *NDM*, 2:50, 51.

Even the purest form of *agape*, the love of the enemy and forgiveness towards the evil-doer, do [*sic*] not stand in contradiction to historical possibilities. Penal justice can achieve more and more imaginative forms; and these more imaginative and generous treatments of the evil-doer can be historically justified by the reclamation of the criminal. But they cannot be initiated purely by considerations of their social value; for a considerable risk is always involved in such treatment.<sup>79</sup>

Taken in isolation, this quote seems to belie Niebuhr's usual criticisms of liberal optimism; however, his apparent optimism is tempered by his correlative claim that all developments toward the Kingdom are accompanied by increasing corruption. Niebuhr writes, "There is, however, no development towards larger realms of brotherhood without a corresponding development of the imperial corruption of brotherhood. There is, therefore, no historical development which gradually eliminates those sinful corruptions of brotherhood which stand in contradiction to the law of love."<sup>80</sup> Contrary to popular interpretations of Niebuhr, he is not averse to striving toward greater approximations of the Kingdom in history. Rather, his concern is that such efforts not be accompanied by a confusion of the ideal of the Kingdom with any particular social strategy that finds its justification in whether or not it works or can be validated in history. "The *agape*, the sacrificial love, which is for Christian faith revealed upon the Cross," writes Niebuhr, "has its primary justification in an 'essential reality' which transcends the realities of history, namely, the character of God. It does not expect an immediate or historical validation but looks towards some ultimate consummation of life and history."<sup>81</sup>

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<sup>79</sup> Niebuhr, *NDM*, 2:85–86.

<sup>80</sup> Niebuhr, *NDM*, 2:95–96.

<sup>81</sup> Niebuhr, *NDM*, 2:96. Even here, however, Niebuhr admits that, given the Christian doctrine of creation, one can still observe "validations of *agape* in actual history, in so far as concern for the other actually elicits a reciprocal response" (*ibid.*).

In *Nature and Destiny*'s penultimate chapter, "The Kingdom of God and the Struggle for Justice," Niebuhr attempts to work out the bearing of the eschatological ideal of the Kingdom on specific questions in political theology, including (1) the relationship between justice and love, (2) the relation of laws and principles of justice to the Kingdom ideal, (3) the relation of structures of justice to the Kingdom ideal, (4) the Christian attitude toward government, and (5) the role of justice in the world community. Again, Niebuhr notes that "no fixed limits can be placed upon either the purity or the breadth of the brotherhood for which men strive in history. No traditional attainment of brotherhood is secure against criticism from a higher historical perspective or safe from corruption on each new level of achievement."<sup>82</sup> In regards to the first question, then, Niebuhr argues that "the relationship of historical justice to the love of the Kingdom of God is a dialectical one." He explains,

Love is both the fulfillment and the negation of all achievements of justice in history. Or expressed from the opposite standpoint, the achievements of history may rise in indeterminate degrees to find their fulfillment in a more perfect love and brotherhood; but each new level of fulfillment also contains elements which stand in contradiction to perfect love. There are therefore obligations to realize justice in indeterminate degrees; but none of the realizations can assure the serenity of perfect fulfillment. If we analyze the realities of history in terms of this formula it will throw light on aspects of history which would otherwise remain obscure and perplexing; and will obviate mistakes which are inevitably made under alternative interpretations. Higher realizations of historic justice would be possible if it were more fully understood that all such realizations contain contradictions to, as well as approximations of, the ideal of love. Sanctification in the realm of social relations demands recognition of the impossibility of perfect sanctification.<sup>83</sup>

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<sup>82</sup> Niebuhr, *NDM*, 2:244–45.

<sup>83</sup> Niebuhr, *NDM*, 2:246–47. Cf. Rauschenbusch's use of the sanctification metaphor to describe his view of the kingdom (*TSG*, 227), noted in the previous chapter.



For Niebuhr, although full realization of eschatological ideal is infinitely deferred in history, there can nevertheless be partial fulfillments of it along the way. Again, contrary to popular understandings of Niebuhr, he does not view the ideal of the Kingdom as completely transcendent. Rather, given his dialectical understanding of the relationship between the Kingdom and historical justice, he can write that “the pinnacle of the moral ideal stands both inside and beyond history.”<sup>84</sup> Stated in terms of the second question, on relation between laws or principles of justice and the Kingdom ideal, Niebuhr writes that there is both a positive and negative relation between the two: “The positive relation of principles of justice to the ideal of brotherhood makes an indeterminate approximation of love in the realm of justice possible. The negative relation means that all historic conceptions of justice will embody some elements which contradict the law of love.”<sup>85</sup> According to Niebuhr, this dialectical relationship refutes the pessimism of those who exclude love from the realm of justice—which for Niebuhr includes both sectarians on the one hand and political realists like Luther and Hobbes on the other—and “the relativists who see no possibility of finding valid principles of justice, and the rationalists and optimists who imagine it is possible to arrive at completely valid principles, free from every taint of special interest and historical passion.”<sup>86</sup>

Turning to the third question, on the relation of the Kingdom to structures of justice, Niebuhr again argues that, as with principles of justice, so too structures of justice “invariably contain, according to our analysis, both approximations and contradictions to

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<sup>84</sup> Niebuhr, *NDM*, 2:247.

<sup>85</sup> Niebuhr, *NDM*, 2:256.

<sup>86</sup> Niebuhr, *NDM*, 2:256. On the refutation of pessimism, see *ibid.*, 249–51, 254.

the ideal of love.”<sup>87</sup> Structural justice at its best involves “an equilibrium of powers and vitalities,” but, argues Niebuhr, “no possible refinement of social forces and political harmonies can eliminate the potential contradiction to brotherhood which is implicit in the two political instruments of brotherhood—the organization of power and the balance of power.”<sup>88</sup>

Given the paradoxical relationship between love and justice, Niebuhr argues, fourth, that the Christian attitude to government must hold in balance two biblical conceptions of government: (1) government as a reflection of the divine majesty and (2) nations as “particularly subject to divine judgment and wrath because they oppress the poor and defy the divine majesty.”<sup>89</sup> According to Niebuhr, most of church history has tried to resolve this paradox in one or the other direction. He judges that “Paul’s very ‘undialectical’ appreciation of government in Romans 13 has had a fateful influence in Christian thought, particularly in the Reformation. But its influence was fortunately never able to extinguish the power of prophetic criticism upon the evils of government in Christian history.”<sup>90</sup> After quickly surveying various Christian approaches to government throughout church history, Niebuhr concludes with a reaffirmation of his dialectical approach:

Whatever may be the source of our insights into the problems of the political order, it is important both to recognize the higher possibilities of justice in every historic situation, and to know that the twin perils of tyranny and anarchy can never be completely overcome in any political achievement. These perils are expressions of the sinful elements of conflict and dominion, standing in

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<sup>87</sup> Niebuhr, *NDM*, 2:265.

<sup>88</sup> Niebuhr, *NDM*, 2:265, 258.

<sup>89</sup> Niebuhr, *NDM*, 2:269.

<sup>90</sup> Niebuhr, *NDM*, 2:271.

contradiction to the ideal of brotherhood on every level of communal organization. There is no possibility of making history completely safe against either occasional conflicts of vital interests (war) or against the misuse of the power which is intended to prevent such conflicts of interest (tyranny). To understand this is to labor for higher justice in terms of the experience of justification by faith. Justification by faith in the realm of justice means that we will not regard the pressures and counter pressures, the tensions, the overt and the covert conflicts by which justice is achieved and maintained, as normative in the absolute sense; but neither will we ease our conscience by seeking to escape from involvement in them. We will know that we cannot purge ourselves of the sin and guilt in which we are involved by the moral ambiguities of politics without also disavowing responsibility for the creative possibilities of justice.<sup>91</sup>

Far from commending a straightforwardly Constantinian approach in which political engagement is divinely sanctioned, as he finds in Paul and the Reformers, Niebuhr offers a more subtle dialectic approach in which all attempts at establishing justice are morally ambiguous—thus calling those who pursue justice to perpetual contrition and reliance on mercy.

Finally, turning from the national to the international, Niebuhr observes that “we face all the old problems of political organization on the new level of a potential international community.”<sup>92</sup> And, while the details may vary, Niebuhr’s general approach is consistent: “The new world must be built by resolute men who ‘when hope is dead will hope by faith’; who will neither seek premature escape from the guilt of history, nor yet call the evil, which taints all their achievements, good.”<sup>93</sup> He thus concludes, “There is no escape from the paradoxical relation of history to the Kingdom of God. History moves towards the realization of the Kingdom but yet the judgment of God is upon every new

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<sup>91</sup> Niebuhr, *NDM*, 2:284.

<sup>92</sup> Niebuhr, *NDM*, 2:285.

<sup>93</sup> Niebuhr, *NDM*, 2:285–86.

realization.”<sup>94</sup> Here we find a distinctly Niebuhrian take on an old Rauschenbuschian theme: the Kingdom as “always but coming.”

Niebuhr begins *Nature and Destiny*’s concluding chapter, “The End of History,” by distinguishing, as he does in *Faith and History*, between the “end” as *finis* and as *telos*:

Everything in human life and history moves towards an end. By reason of man’s subjection to nature and finiteness this “end” is a point where that which exists ceases to be. It is *finis*. By reason of man’s rational freedom the “end” has another meaning. It is the purpose and goal of his life and work. It is *telos*. This double connotation of end as both *finis* and *telos* expresses, in a sense, the whole character of human history and reveals the fundamental problem of human existence. All things in history move towards both fulfillment and dissolution, towards the fuller embodiment of their essential character and towards death.<sup>95</sup>

For Niebuhr, as we have already seen, this “fundamental problem of human existence” lies in the fact that “history as we know it is regarded as an ‘interim’ between the disclosure and the fulfillment of its meaning.”<sup>96</sup> Throughout *Nature and Destiny*, he has attempted “to establish the Kingdom of God as it *has come* in Christ means a disclosure of the meaning of history but not the full realization of that meaning. That is anticipated in the Kingdom which *is to come*, that is, in the culmination of history.”<sup>97</sup> According to the Christian faith, argues Niebuhr, there is “an *end* in which history’s incompleteness and corruption is finally overcome,” which is expressed in “New Testament symbolism” in terms of the *parousia* or return of Christ, the last judgment, and the resurrection.<sup>98</sup>

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<sup>94</sup> Niebuhr, *NDM*, 2:286.

<sup>95</sup> Niebuhr, *NDM*, 2:287.

<sup>96</sup> Niebuhr, *NDM*, 2:288.

<sup>97</sup> Niebuhr, *NDM*, 2:288, emphasis original.

<sup>98</sup> Niebuhr, *NDM*, 2:288, 290, emphasis original.

Regarding the first symbol, the *parousia*, Niebuhr writes that the “vindication of Christ and his triumphant return is . . . an expression of faith in the sufficiency of God’s sovereignty over the world and history, and in the final supremacy of love over all the forces of self-love which defy, for the moment, the inclusive harmony of all things under the will of God.”<sup>99</sup> Of the last judgment, Niebuhr writes that it “expresses Christianity’s refutation of all conceptions of history, according to which it is its own redeemer and is able by its process of growth and development, to emancipate man from the guilt and sin of his existence, and to free him from judgment.”<sup>100</sup> Finally, of the resurrection, he writes that it “embodies the very genius of the Christian idea of the historical,” as it indicates that “the meaningfulness of history is the more certainly affirmed because the consummation of history as a human possibility is denied. The resurrection is not a human possibility in the sense that the immortality of the soul is thought to be so.”<sup>101</sup> In each of these New Testament symbols, then, Niebuhr finds a rejection of human attempts to achieve individual and social redemption by their own devices—to establish the Kingdom through human striving. Instead, they teach the Christian to rely on “the mercy and power of God” to overcome the contradictions of history.<sup>102</sup>

Having thus interpreted the New Testament symbols of the *eschata*, Niebuhr concludes the chapter—and his entire *magnum opus*—by reflecting on “the end and the

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<sup>99</sup> Niebuhr, *NDM*, 2:290.

<sup>100</sup> Niebuhr, *NDM*, 2:293.

<sup>101</sup> Niebuhr, *NDM*, 2:295.

<sup>102</sup> Niebuhr, *NDM*, 2:297.

meaning of history” and on history’s “unity and diversity.”<sup>103</sup> “If there are partial realization of meaning in history, as well as corruptions and distortions,” he writes,

it ought to be possible to discern them from the vantage point of the true end. For this reason a Christian interpretation of human destiny requires one further view of the meaning of history in the light of what is believed about the character of the ultimate consummation. If the final consummation fulfills, rather than annuls, historical meaning, the real content of this meaning must be illumined by the light of faith. Furthermore it must be possible to gain some insight into the character of the sinful corruptions of meaning, particularly since they are mostly derived from the error of regarding partial realizations as the final fulfillment.<sup>104</sup>

Although he notes that it is impossible for “finite minds” to reach such a vantage point, he nevertheless believes that an effort can be made “to comprehend the meaning of history from the standpoint of the Christian faith.”<sup>105</sup> From this vantage point, he considers the history of civilizations and cultures, individuals, and, finally, the “process of history as a whole.”<sup>106</sup> Regarding the first two, he argues that it is impossible for the individual to discern meaning in the complexities of history, yet from the standpoint of faith one can still affirm that “history is meaningful, even if it should be impossible to discern any unity in its continuing processes.”<sup>107</sup> This affirmation leads to his third consideration, the process of history as a whole, which for Niebuhr can only be properly understood eschatologically: “history as such represents a total realm of coherence which requires comprehension from the standpoint of its ultimate *telos*.”<sup>108</sup>

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<sup>103</sup> Niebuhr, *NDM*, 2:299, 301.

<sup>104</sup> Niebuhr, *NDM*, 2:299.

<sup>105</sup> Niebuhr, *NDM*, 2:300, 301.

<sup>106</sup> Niebuhr, *NDM*, 2:301.

<sup>107</sup> Niebuhr, *NDM*, 2:307.

<sup>108</sup> Niebuhr, *NDM*, 2:313.

Niebuhr agrees with modern interpretations of history as “growth,” but he argues that “growth” does not necessarily mean “progress.”<sup>109</sup> Returning to New Testament eschatological symbols, he posits “the Antichrist” as representative of the idea that the “most explicit denial of the norm of history must be expected in the most ultimate development of history.”<sup>110</sup> Thus, while there is growth in history, this includes growth in both good and evil, although the latter is parasitic on the former:

The final evil is thus dependent upon the final good. Either it consciously and explicitly defies the Christ, in which case it requires Christ as a foil; or it is a lesser good, claiming to be the ultimate one, in which case it requires Christ as a cloak. The one form is the Antichrist of the sinners and the other the Antichrist of the righteous. But in either case the force of the Antichrist, though parasitic and negative in origin, is so positive in effect, and so stubborn in purpose that no force, immanent in history, is capable of encompassing its defeat. The Antichrist who appears at the end of history can be defeated only by the Christ who ends history.<sup>111</sup>

From the standpoint of New Testament eschatology, then, history is neither meaningless nor capable of redemption or fulfilment through its own processes. Niebuhr thus concludes that the Christian faith must reject “the idolatrous pursuit of false securities and redemptions in life and history.” Instead,

By its confidence in an eternal ground of existence which is, nevertheless, involved in man’s historical striving to the very point of suffering with and for him, this faith can prompt men to accept their historical responsibilities gladly. From the standpoint of such a faith history is not meaningless because it cannot complete itself; though it cannot be denied that it is tragic because men always seek prematurely to complete it.

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<sup>109</sup> Niebuhr, *NDM*, 2:315.

<sup>110</sup> Niebuhr, *NDM*, 2:316.

<sup>111</sup> Niebuhr, *NDM*, 2:319. Cf. Niebuhr, *FH*: “The Christian faith expects some of the most explicit forms of evil at the end of history. But nothing can happen in history to shake the confidence in the meaning of existence, to those who have discerned by faith the revelation of the ultimate power and love which bears and guides men through their historic vicissitudes” (154).

Thus wisdom about our destiny is dependent upon a humble recognition of the limits of our knowledge and our power. Our most reliable understanding is the fruit of “grace” in which faith completes our ignorance without pretending to possess its certainties as knowledge; and in which contrition mitigates our pride without destroying our hope.<sup>112</sup>

For Niebuhr, then, the *eschaton*—the Kingdom of God—involves the disclosure and fulfillment of the meaning of history. But because this fulfillment lies beyond history, it can neither be achieved nor fully known through human striving. Rather, in this “interim” period, the Christian must be content to rely on faith and hope in Christ to complete history, while nevertheless striving to attain greater measures of love and justice in the world. As we will see below, this is an apt description of Niebuhr’s view of the role of the church.

### *The Church as the Saving Remnant*

The most common criticism of Niebuhr’s ecclesiology is that he simply does not have one. So, for example, in his own Gifford Lectures, Hauerwas writes that “in neither his ethics nor his theology did Niebuhr provide an account of the church.”<sup>113</sup> This

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<sup>112</sup> Niebuhr, *NDM*, 2:321. Cf. Niebuhr, *FH*: “There are provisional meanings in history, capable of being recognized and fulfilled by individuals and cultures; but mankind will continue ‘to see through a glass darkly’ and the final meaning can only be anticipated by faith. It awaits a completion when ‘we shall know even as we are known’. There are provisional judgments upon evil in history; but all of them are imperfect, since the executors of judgment are tainted in both their discernments and their actions by the evil which they seek to overcome. History therefore awaits an ultimate judgment. There are renewals of life in history, individually and collectively; but no rebirth lifts life above the contradictions of man’s historical existence. . . . Whether dealing with the Alpha or the Omega of history, with the beginning or with the end, the Christian faith prevents provisional meanings, judgments, and fulfillments from becoming ultimate by its sense of a final mystery of divine fulfillment beyond all provisional meanings. But it does not allow this ultimate mystery to degenerate into meaninglessness because of its confidence that the love of Christ is the clue to the final mystery” (243–44).

<sup>113</sup> Hauerwas, *With the Grain of the Universe*, 137. Hauerwas goes on to qualify this statement slightly, noting that Niebuhr was, “despite his role in the American political establishment, embedded in the language and practices of the church. And though he gave this church little status in this theology, it nonetheless often allowed him to speak and act in a manner at odds with his theoretical commitments” (138).



criticism was alive in Niebuhr's day as well. At the close of a 1956 volume of essays devoted to Niebuhr's work, Niebuhr responds to critics (friendly and otherwise) and there addresses directly the issue of his seeming lack of ecclesiology. In an essay earlier in the same volume, William John Wolf observes that Niebuhr's theological anthropology offers an account of human lostness and salvation in "social-historical as well as individual" terms that were absent in both the Reformation and counter-Reformation. Noting that this is a significant achievement, Wolf then avers, "At this very point of his greatest contribution there is a critical omission in Niebuhr's social picture of redemption," namely, he omits an account of "the Church which the New Testament presents as God's instrument for continuing his atoning work in Christ."<sup>114</sup> In response to Wolf's essay, Niebuhr writes that "Professor Wolf makes some very telling criticisms on peripheral points which I must heartily accept."<sup>115</sup> However, after conceding a number of points to Wolf, he raises one objection: "I am not so sure that I would want to accept his criticism of my attitude toward the Church without at least a motion of defense." Niebuhr continues:

I think I have increasingly recognized the value of the Church as a community of grace which, despite historic corruptions, has the "oracles of God," as St. Paul said about Israel. The Church is the one place in history where life is kept open for the final word of God's judgment to break the pride of men and for the word of God's mercy to lift up the brokenhearted. Inasmuch as this has been only a growing recognition, Professor Wolf's criticism is justified. But when I see how much new evil comes into life through the pretension of the religious community, through its conventional and graceless legalism and through religious fanaticism,

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<sup>114</sup> William John Wolf, "Reinhold Niebuhr's Doctrine of Man," in *Reinhold Niebuhr: His Religious, Social, and Political Thought*, 248.

<sup>115</sup> Reinhold Niebuhr, "Reply to Interpretation and Criticism," in *Reinhold Niebuhr: His Religious, Social, and Political Thought*, 437.

I am concerned that my growing appreciation of the Church should not betray me into this complacency.<sup>116</sup>

In other words, Niebuhr does indeed have a working ecclesiology, albeit a largely negative one. As with Rauschenbusch before him, Niebuhr views his role largely as a prophet *to* the church, given its many historic and contemporary abuses. Yet, whereas Rauschenbusch directed his ire largely at the historic orthodox church, Niebuhr is critical of both the historic orthodox and the contemporary liberal church. His positive account of the church, which emerges later in admittedly truncated fashion, attempts to avoid the abuses he finds in the orthodox church on the one hand and the liberal church on the other.

In *An Interpretation of Christian Ethics*, Niebuhr devotes a chapter each to criticism of the orthodox and the liberal church regarding their respective approaches to the “field of politics and economics.”<sup>117</sup> According to Niebuhr, “a socially imperiled generation will have both the inclination and the right to dismiss profound and ultimate interpretations of life which are not made relevant to the immediate problems of social justice.”<sup>118</sup> “Unfortunately,” confesses Niebuhr, “the relation of Christianity to the problems of politics and economics has not been a particularly fortunate or inspiring

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<sup>116</sup> Niebuhr, “Reply to Interpretation and Criticism,” 437.

<sup>117</sup> Niebuhr, *ICE*, 127. It should be noted that Niebuhr is using “orthodox” in a loose way to denote the church establishment from Constantine through the Reformation and to the present day (liberal churches excluded); he therefore has neither the Eastern Orthodox Church nor western churches that adhere to creedal orthodoxy particularly in mind, although both would certainly fall under the larger umbrella of “orthodoxy” as Niebuhr is using it. His use of the term “liberal,” on the other hand, is more circumscribed and, as we will see, refers primarily to American Protestant proponents of the social gospel.

<sup>118</sup> Niebuhr, *ICE*, 128.

one.”<sup>119</sup> In Niebuhr’s judgment, secular political theories “have contributed more to a progressive reassessment of the problems of justice with which politics deals than either orthodox or the liberal Christian thought.”<sup>120</sup> In particular, the orthodox church has been given to an “undue pessimism” to which the liberal church has responded with an “undue sentimentality.”<sup>121</sup>

Turning first to the historic orthodox church, Niebuhr argues that, although it has been “comprised, on the whole, of the classes which dominated their social orders,” its failure to adequately address economic and political injustices cannot “be explained purely in terms of the economic and social interests which drove the historic Church into a position of social conservatism.”<sup>122</sup> Rather, there was a more fundamental flaw in its theological reasoning: “Orthodox Christianity was so well aware of the fact of sin that it saw in the ideal of love only an ultimate criterion by which all human social achievements are revealed in their imperfections.”<sup>123</sup> While Niebuhr agrees that this is one function of the love ideal, he argues that the flaw in the orthodox church is its failure “to derive any significant politico-moral principles from the law of love.”<sup>124</sup> As a result, the church “destroyed a dynamic relationship between the ideal of love and the principles of justice. The social principles of orthodox Christianity have, consequently, been

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<sup>119</sup> Niebuhr, *ICE*, 128.

<sup>120</sup> Niebuhr, *ICE*, 129.

<sup>121</sup> Niebuhr, *ICE*, 128.

<sup>122</sup> Niebuhr, *ICE*, 130–31.

<sup>123</sup> Niebuhr, *ICE*, 131.

<sup>124</sup> Niebuhr, *ICE*, 131.

determined by ideals of justice which were informed by reverence for the principle of order rather than by the attraction of the ideal of love.”<sup>125</sup>

But by creating such a stark dichotomy between the absolute ideal of love and the relative principles of justice, the church, in Niebuhr’s judgment, unwittingly became a defender of the status quo: “the Christian church could insist in the same breath on the freedom and equality of all men before God and on the rightfulness of slavery as God’s way of punishing and controlling a sinful world. The principle of equality was thereby robbed of its regulative function in the development of the principles of justice. It was regulated to a position of complete transcendence with the ideal of love. The consequence was an attitude of complacency toward whatever injustices in the economic and political order had become historically established.”<sup>126</sup> Niebuhr concedes that the church’s teaching on equality before God did, in some instances, raise it to a higher ethic than that of the state, yet he nonetheless concludes that “the Church usually capitulated in the end to the lower standards which it failed to challenge in the state.”<sup>127</sup> In particular, by emphasizing Paul’s teaching in Romans 13 on being “subject” to governing authorities at the expense of Jesus’s teaching that his disciples are not to be like the “kings of the Gentiles,” the orthodox church, according to Niebuhr, lost its vital connection to prophetic religion and in its stead created a self-serving amalgamation of pessimistic, pietistic, and perfectionistic elements in the church’s approach to the state.

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<sup>125</sup> Niebuhr, *ICE*, 131.

<sup>126</sup> Niebuhr, *ICE*, 133.

<sup>127</sup> Niebuhr, *ICE*, 133.

The pessimistic motif views government as “justified as an instrument of God to prevent the world from falling into anarchy.”<sup>128</sup> While Niebuhr judges that such a view “is logical enough,” he argues that its “logic manages not only to express an excessive fear of chaos,” but it also “neatly dismisses the Christian ideal from any immediate relevance to political issues.”<sup>129</sup> Niebuhr thus offers the rather damning conclusion—especially given the geopolitical realities in the mid-1930s—“that fascism is really the unfortunate fruit of Christian pessimism. The theory that government is justified mainly by the negative task of checking chaos is held in common by both fascism and Christian orthodoxy. It may be that the political principles of the former are, at least partially, derived from the latter.”<sup>130</sup>

The pious motif, which Niebuhr argues “wrought its worst havoc from the day of Constantine to the rise of modern democracy,” adds to the pessimistic motif “an unwarranted aura of sanctity” around the existing government.<sup>131</sup> He notes that “Protestant orthodoxy supported the divine right of rulers more unqualifiedly than did Catholicism,” yet he judges that “the total weight of both types of orthodoxy was on the side of whatever ruler had established himself, no matter by what means, since piety regarded his power as derived from God.”<sup>132</sup> While he acknowledges that there are exceptions to this rule within the tradition, including Calvin in certain passages, he nevertheless finds that “the unhealthy fatalism and the perverse idea that an evil ruler is a

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<sup>128</sup> Niebuhr, *ICE*, 140.

<sup>129</sup> Niebuhr, *ICE*, 140, 141–42.

<sup>130</sup> Niebuhr, *ICE*, 142.

<sup>131</sup> Niebuhr, *ICE*, 142.

<sup>132</sup> Niebuhr, *ICE*, 143.

divine punishment upon an evil people . . . run as a constant refrain through all orthodox Christian thought, both Catholic and Protestant, and prove to what degree historic Christianity has been an atrophied prophetic religion in which the force of piety was not properly balanced by a force of spirituality; and the idea of the world as God's creation by the idea of the judgment of God upon the world.”<sup>133</sup> Niebuhr observes that from Calvin to the Confessing Church in Germany, Christian disobedience to the state was considered to be justified at the point when the state rose up against God by either explicitly rejecting God's law or attributing godlike status to itself. However, Niebuhr argues that this line “is not enough to establish a dynamic relation between Christianity and politics. A church which refrains from practically every moral criticism of the state and allows itself only an ultimate religious criticism of the spiritual pretensions of the state must logically end in the plight in which the German Church found itself.”<sup>134</sup>

Finally, Niebuhr notes a third motif in the teaching of the orthodox church regarding its relation to the state: “Christian perfectionism was often added to theories which were informed by an undue pessimism on the one hand and an uncritical piety on the other, and its introduction made confusion worse confounded.”<sup>135</sup> While pessimism and piety gave the state virtual immunity from criticism by the church, the “perfectionist” ethic of Jesus was enjoined on those who suffer the state's injustices in order to keep them from rebelling or resisting. Niebuhr cites Luther as a particularly egregious example of such duplicity, which he finds pervasive in orthodox teaching:

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<sup>133</sup> Niebuhr, *ICE*, 144.

<sup>134</sup> Niebuhr, *ICE*, 145.

<sup>135</sup> Niebuhr, *ICE*, 145.

This gratuitous introduction of the principle of non-resistance from a perfectionist ethic into a political ethic of compromise (an idiosyncrasy not only in Luther's thought but in the whole history of orthodoxy), creates the suspicion of a conscious adjustment to class interest. This is particularly true of Luther because no theologian understood the impossibility of the law of love in a world of sin better than he. If some of the political ineptness of Christian orthodoxy must be explained in terms of honest confusions derived from Christian pessimism and Christian piety, the introduction of perfectionist ideas into politics for the purpose of reinforcing counsels of submission to injustice smells of dishonesty. Perhaps it may be regarded as a symbol of the degree to which Christianity became the witting as well as the unwitting toll of class interests.<sup>136</sup>

Despite such harsh criticism, Niebuhr does not think that the orthodox church lacks resources for constructive engagement with the state. Rather, he argues, "Historic Christianity is in the position of having the materials for the foundation and the roof of the structure of an adequate morality. But it is unable to complete the structure."<sup>137</sup> In order to complete the structure, it needs to add "walls," namely, "the moral actions and ideals which are fashioned by the application of religion's ultimate insights to all specific situations."<sup>138</sup>

One might think that the liberal church provides just such "walls," but not so, says Niebuhr. "The effort of the modern Church," he writes, "to correct the limitations of the orthodox Church toward the political order has resulted, on the whole, in the substitution of sentimental illusions for the enervating pessimism of orthodoxy."<sup>139</sup> Whereas the

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<sup>136</sup> Niebuhr, *ICE*, 145.

<sup>137</sup> Niebuhr, *ICE*, 149.

<sup>138</sup> Niebuhr, *ICE*, 149.

<sup>139</sup> Niebuhr, *ICE*, 153. Niebuhr's argument against sentimental liberalism—secular and Christian—is a recurring theme throughout his work. Indeed, one of his most sustained criticisms of the church is his collection of essays published shortly before the United States' entrance into World War II: Reinhold Niebuhr, *Christianity and Power Politics* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1940). There he elaborates his argument against the liberal church made earlier in *Interpretation*. He begins his essay, "The War and the American Churches," for example, with this trenchant criticism: "The Christian Church of America has never been upon a lower level of spiritual insight and moral sensitivity than in this tragic age

pessimism of the orthodox church led to resignation toward the political and economic order, the optimism of the modern liberal church led it to insist “upon the direct application of the principles of the Sermon on the Mount to the problems of politics and economics as the only way of salvation for a sick society.”<sup>140</sup> According to Niebuhr, such optimism about the perfectibility of society and human nature had the unintended consequence of discouraging “interest in the necessary mechanisms of social justice.”<sup>141</sup> But, argues Niebuhr, “The purely moralistic approach of the modern Church to politics is really a religio-moral version of *laissez-faire* economics. . . . The plutocracy of America has found the faith of the liberal Church in purely moral suasion a conveniently harmless doctrine just as it appropriated Jeffersonian and *laissez-faire* economic theory for its own purposes, though the theory was first elaborated by agrarian and frontier enemies of big business.”<sup>142</sup>

Niebuhr gives credit to “the wing of the liberal Church which has sought to interpret the ‘social gospel’” for being “usually realistic enough to know that justice in the social order could only be achieved by political means, including the coercion of groups which refuse to accept a common social standard.”<sup>143</sup> He nevertheless faults a number of the social gospel’s major proponents—Shailer Mathews, Gerald Birney Smith,

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of world conflict. Living in a suffering world, with its ears assailed by the cries of the miserable victims of tyranny and conflict, it has chosen to identify the slogan ‘Keep American out of the War’ with the Christian gospel” (33).

<sup>140</sup> Niebuhr, *ICE*, 153.

<sup>141</sup> Niebuhr, *ICE*, 155.

<sup>142</sup> Niebuhr, *ICE*, 155.

<sup>143</sup> Niebuhr, *ICE*, 153.



Francis Peabody, Francis McConnell, E. Stanley Jones, though notably *not* Rauschenbusch—for trying “to interpret the law of love in terms which would rule out the most obvious forms of pressure for the attainment of justice.”<sup>144</sup> The rhetorical flourish with which Niebuhr describes such approaches is as masterful as it is devastating:

The sum total of the liberal Church’s effort to apply the law of love to politics without qualification is really a curious medley of hopes and regrets. The Church declares that men ought to live by the law of love and that nations as well as individuals ought to obey it; that neither individuals nor nations do; that nations do so less than individuals; but that the Church must insist upon it; that, unfortunately, the Church which is to insist upon the law has not kept it itself; but that it has sometimes tried and must try more desperately; that the realization of the law is not in immediate prospect, but the Christian must continue to hope.<sup>145</sup>

Niebuhr judges: “These appeals to the moral will and this effort to support the moral will by desperate hopes are politically as unrealistic as they are religiously superficial.”<sup>146</sup> He tempers this criticism when referring to those Christian liberals in “the left wing of the social gospel movement”—and here he does mention Rauschenbusch specifically—who, in his judgment, “have not been as oblivious to the mechanics of justice as the main stream of Christian liberalism.”<sup>147</sup> Nevertheless, he faults even this group on one point: its *a priori* rejection of the use of violence in the social struggle. His problem is not with nonviolence per se but rather with the “confusion of pragmatic with perfectionist scruples,” which in his judgment is “the natural consequence of the lack of clarity in

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<sup>144</sup> Niebuhr, *ICE*, 156; cf. 156–63.

<sup>145</sup> Niebuhr, *ICE*, 156; cf. 161.

<sup>146</sup> Niebuhr, *ICE*, 156.

<sup>147</sup> Niebuhr, *ICE*, 166.

liberal thought about the ethic of Jesus.”<sup>148</sup> As we saw in our section on Niebuhr’s Christology, he views Jesus’s ethic as absolute and unattainable and thus not directly applicable to social, political, and economic issues. With regard to the issue of violence in particular, he is not averse to nonresistant churches who witness to the ideal of love nor to churches that endorse a pragmatic pacifism as a means of “mitigating the struggle between contending forces, by insinuating the greatest possible degree of social imagination and intelligence into it and by providing the best possible means of arbitration so that violent conflict may be avoided.”<sup>149</sup> Rather, his concern is that these forms of pacifism not be confused so that religious pacifism does not claim too much for itself in the political sphere and pragmatic pacifism does not claim for itself religious justification. In other words, his concern is that a particular social-political-ethical option not be identified with the gospel ethic or the Kingdom ideal. His famous critique of pacifism, therefore, cannot be separated from his general critique of the liberal church’s confusions over Christology and eschatology—and the confused ecclesiology that results.<sup>150</sup>

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<sup>148</sup> Niebuhr, *ICE*, 166.

<sup>149</sup> Niebuhr, *ICE*, 169.

<sup>150</sup> Niebuhr’s most direct statement of this critique is his essay, “Why the Christian Church Is Not Pacifist,” in *Christianity and Power Politics*, 1–32. Cf. Niebuhr, *MMIS*, chap. 9, “The Preservation of Moral Values in Politics,” in which Niebuhr distinguishes between religiously motivated nonresistance and politically motivated nonviolence, using Gandhi as an example of the latter. There he also famously predicts the use of nonviolent techniques as necessary for the success of the civil rights movement: “The emancipation of the Negro race in America probably waits upon the adequate development of this kind of [nonviolent] social and political strategy. It is hopeless for the Negro to expect complete emancipation from the menial social and economic position into which the white man has forced him, merely by trusting in the moral sense of the white race. It is equally hopeless to attempt emancipation through violent rebellion” (252).

Given his criticisms of both the orthodox and the liberal church, it should not be surprising that Niebuhr's constructive ecclesiology is relatively modest. In *Faith and History*, we find Niebuhr's most explicit discussion of his vision of the church. There he writes, "Ideally the Christian community is 'saving remnant' which calls nations to repentance and renewal without the false belief that any nation or culture could finally fulfill the meaning of life or complete the purpose of history."<sup>151</sup> He elaborates this view in the book's final chapter, "The Church and the End of History":

The Christian church is a community of hopeful believers, who are not afraid of life or death, of present or future history, being persuaded that the whole of life and all historical vicissitudes stand under the sovereignty of a holy, yet merciful, God, whose will was supremely revealed in Christ. It is a community which does not fear the final judgment, not because it is composed of sinless saints but because it is a community of forgiven sinners, who know that judgment is merciful if it is not evaded. If the divine judgment is not resisted by pretensions of virtue but is contritely accepted, it reveals in and beyond itself the mercy which restores life on a new and healthier basis.<sup>152</sup>

Even here Niebuhr is quick to note that the empirical church often fails to live up to this ideal. He continues,

Ideally the church is such a community of contrite believers. Actually the church is always in danger of becoming a community of the saved who have brought the meaning of life to merely another premature conclusion. It is in danger of becoming a community of the righteous who ask God to vindicate them against the unrighteous; or, even worse, who claim to vindicate God by the fruits of their own righteousness. In that case the church loses the true love of Christ, which is the fruit of a contrite heart, by claiming that love as a secure possession.

In short, the church is always in danger of becoming anti-Christ because it is not sufficiently eschatological. It lives too little by faith and hope and too much by the pretensions of its righteousness.<sup>153</sup>

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<sup>151</sup> Niebuhr, *FH*, 261.

<sup>152</sup> Niebuhr, *FH*, 270.

<sup>153</sup> Niebuhr, *FH*, 270.

Making an oblique reference to Barthians, Niebuhr notes that there is “a modern form of eschatological Christianity, particularly upon the European continent, which goes to the length of disavowing the Christian’s responsibility for the weal of the world in its frantic flight from the moral pretension of the pharisaic church.”<sup>154</sup> For Niebuhr, however, eschatology does not justify Christian noninvolvement in worldly affairs. Instead, writes Niebuhr,

Ideally the faith and hope by which the church lives sharpens rather than annuls its responsibility for seeking to do the will of God amid all the tragic moral ambiguities of history. This faith and hope are the condition of a true love “which seeketh not its own”. They are conditions for a courageous witness against “principalities and powers”, which is untroubled by punitive strength in the hands of these powers and which does not mistake the judgment of the church as an historic institution for the final judgment of God.<sup>155</sup>

When the church is missing this eschatological orientation, argues Niebuhr, it “seeks to vindicate itself by the virtue of its martyrs and its saints.”<sup>156</sup> Further, it “claims to be itself the end of history, the fulfilment of history’s meaning, [and] seeks to prove the truth of its message by the continuity of its traditions, the ‘validity’ of its order and the solidity and prestige of its historic form.”<sup>157</sup> According to Niebuhr such attempts are futile “because the ‘godless’ are always able to find for every martyr and saint in the church, a score of pious frauds, or religiously inspired bigots or self-righteous Pharisees,” and the “traditions and continuities by which the church seeks security before the final judgment can be proved by any rigorous scholarship to be more dubious than the church admits.”<sup>158</sup>

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<sup>154</sup> Niebuhr, *FH*, 270–71.

<sup>155</sup> Niebuhr, *FH*, 271.

<sup>156</sup> Niebuhr, *FH*, 271.

<sup>157</sup> Niebuhr, *FH*, 271.

<sup>158</sup> Niebuhr, *FH*, 271.

But, more importantly, such attempts are wrongheaded, argues Niebuhr, because they mistakenly equate the church with the Kingdom of God itself.

In contrast, Niebuhr writes that the church “is that community where the Kingdom of God impinges most unmistakably upon history because it is the community where the judgment and the mercy of God are known, piercing through all the pride and pretensions of men and transforming their lives.”<sup>159</sup> It is therefore necessarily eschatologically oriented. “The church,” writes Niebuhr, “as well as the individual Christian, must live by faith and hope if it would live by love; for it, as well as the individual, is involved in the ambiguities of history. If it pretends to transcend them absolutely, rather than by faith and hope, it is subjected to the more terrible judgment.”<sup>160</sup>

Such an eschatologically oriented church, Niebuhr continues, “must be sacramental.”<sup>161</sup> For Niebuhr the sacraments are eschatological acts that symbolize both the possession and dispossession of “the final virtue and truth”—both participating in but not pretending to have achieved the *agape* of Christ.<sup>162</sup> In the act of baptism, writes Niebuhr, the “Christian participates sacramentally and by faith in Christ’s dying and rising again; but he must be admonished that he should walk in that newness of life which is ostensibly his assured possession.”<sup>163</sup> Likewise, Niebuhr describes the Lord’s Supper as “filled with this eschatological tension,” since “in this sacrament the Christian

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<sup>159</sup> Niebuhr, *FH*, 271.

<sup>160</sup> Niebuhr, *FH*, 272.

<sup>161</sup> Niebuhr, *FH*, 273.

<sup>162</sup> Niebuhr, *FH*, 273.

<sup>163</sup> Niebuhr, *FH*, 273.

community lives by a great memory and a great hope.”<sup>164</sup> He continues: “The present reality is different because of that memory and hope. What lies between the memory and the hope is a life of grace, in which the love of Christ is both an achieved reality in the community, and a virtue which can only be claimed vicariously. The Christian community does not have the perfection of Christ as an assured possession. It will show forth that love the more surely the less certain it is of its possession.”<sup>165</sup> He notes, for example, that according to Galatians 3:28 the church “knows nothing of class or race distinctions,” but nevertheless “there is no community of grace in which there are not remnants and echoes of the world’s pride of race and class.”<sup>166</sup> The church must therefore contain a certain amount of “sacramental agony” and “eschatological tension” in its practice of the sacraments, knowing that “the Christian community is always involved in having and yet not having the final truth and grace.”<sup>167</sup> The sacraments themselves, argues Niebuhr, “may be the instruments of the final pretension of various fragments of the church” and may “easily degenerate into a magic which gives an unrepentant heart an even cheaper security before the final judgment than any simple moralism.”<sup>168</sup> Yet, this possibility of abuse is not justification for disuse. While the truly catholic church must acknowledge such abuses and show “a considerable degree of patience with the periodic rebellions in the Christian community against sacramental piety,” it will nonetheless try

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<sup>164</sup> Niebuhr, *FH*, 273.

<sup>165</sup> Niebuhr, *FH*, 273.

<sup>166</sup> Niebuhr, *FH*, 274.

<sup>167</sup> Niebuhr, *FH*, 274.

<sup>168</sup> Niebuhr, *FH*, 274.

to “persuade the advocates of unmediated grace that these historic means are as necessary as they are perilous.”<sup>169</sup>

In sum, Niebuhr’s view of the truly catholic church is one that disavows the pretension of fully possessing the final truth. For, while the church “is indeed promised that the gates of hell shall not prevail against [it],” argues Niebuhr, “the church which has that security cannot be any particular church with all of its historic admixtures of the grace of Christ and the pride of nations and cultures. The secure church is precisely that community of saints, known and unknown, among whom life is constantly transformed because it is always under the divine word.”<sup>170</sup>

#### *Conclusion: From Rauschenbusch to Niebuhr*

As noted in Chapter One, there is a growing scholarly awareness of the deep continuities between Rauschenbusch and Niebuhr. This chapter contributes to that literature a close examination of Niebuhr’s Christology, eschatology, and ecclesiology in order to demonstrate his continuities and discontinuities with Rauschenbusch. By way of conclusion, it might be helpful to draw together more succinctly some of the comparisons and contrasts between Rauschenbusch and Niebuhr on these three themes.<sup>171</sup>

Regarding Christology, we have seen that both Rauschenbusch and Niebuhr view Jesus’s person and teaching as fulfilling and transforming the messianic expectations of the Hebrew prophets. They agree that, as with the prophets, Jesus insisted on an ethical

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<sup>169</sup> Niebuhr, *FH*, 274, 275.

<sup>170</sup> Niebuhr, *FH*, 275.

<sup>171</sup> Each of the quotations in the following paragraphs are excerpts from Rauschenbusch’s and Niebuhr’s quotations already cited in this and the previous chapter; I have thus refrained from citing them again here.

religion as opposed to a speculative, metaphysical one. In this sense, they both affirm a Hebraic over a Hellenistic Christology (although their distinction between the two may at times rest on now-outdated scholarship). For Rauschenbusch, creedal Christology may not be strictly incoherent, but it is “meaningless babble to ninety-nine percent of those who hear it.” Niebuhr takes this criticism even further, arguing that the metaphysical or ontic christological categories of the creeds “verge on logical nonsense.” But for both thinkers creedal orthodoxy simply misses the true significance of Jesus’s life: He serves as the ultimate norm or ideal for humanity as well as the revelation of the love of God. And while Niebuhr is more insistent on this point than Rauschenbusch, for both this norm is exemplified precisely in Jesus’s nonresistance. Rauschenbusch writes that the “non-resistance of Jesus, so far from being a strange and erratic part of his teaching, is an essential part of his conception of life and of his God-consciousness,” while Niebuhr writes that “the ethics of nonresistance as taught in the Sermon on the Mount is in perfectly consistent relation with the love symbolized in the Cross.”

Rauschenbusch and Niebuhr differ on how directly relevant Jesus’s life and teachings are for contemporary social questions. While neither views Jesus as, in Rauschenbusch’s words, “a social reformer of the modern type,” Rauschenbusch is much more sanguine than Niebuhr about the possibility of applying the “social principles of Jesus” to contemporary questions. This difference rests in part on their respective interpretations of Jesus’s social ethic. While Niebuhr follows Rauschenbusch in concluding that Jesus’s ethic suggests “a combination of anarchism and communism dominated by the spirit of love,” Niebuhr finds such an ethic impossible to embody, especially on a large scale. For Rauschenbusch, solidarity with Jesus may involve



suffering and self-denial, but for Niebuhr the way of the cross symbolizes complete self-negation. Thus, for Rauschenbusch, Jesus's ethic was "revolutionary," as it planted the seeds of the Kingdom among humanity that would grow slowly over time into a more just and equitable society. For Niebuhr, Jesus's ethic is an "impossible possibility" that both guides and stands in judgment over all human striving toward justice; as such, "Christ and the Cross reveal not only the possibilities but the limits of human finitude in order that a more ultimate hope may arise from the contrite recognition of those limits." Rauschenbusch's Jesus demands discipleship; Niebuhr's compels contrition.

Rauschenbusch and Niebuhr concur, second, that the focus of Jesus's teaching was the eschatological reality of the Kingdom of God. Rauschenbusch argues that the Kingdom is "the marrow of the gospel," while Niebuhr states that Jesus "spoke of the Kingdom and *not* of salvation."<sup>172</sup> They both view Jesus's ideal of the Kingdom as a development and, at times, a correction of the eschatological, messianic expectations of the Hebrew prophets. For both, the Kingdom is an ideal of universal brotherhood that transcends racial, ethnic, and national boundaries. For neither Rauschenbusch nor Niebuhr is the Kingdom achievable through human effort, nor is it fully realizable in human history. Rauschenbusch thus writes that eschatology has "no final consummation" but that the Kingdom is "always but coming." Niebuhr uses the language of "paradox" to describe how history "moves towards the realization of the Kingdom but yet the judgment of God is upon every new realization." Eschatology, then, for both Rauschenbusch and Niebuhr is to be understood in terms of the *telos* of history rather than its *finis*. This *telos*, in Rauschenbusch's words, is "humanity organized according to

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<sup>172</sup> Emphasis added.

the will of God,” and for Niebuhr it is nothing less than the “ideal of love.” They agree that this eschatological ideal is only partially and never fully realizable in history. It thus serves as both the ultimate goal for humanity and the standard against which all human achievements are to be judged. As Rauschenbusch writes, “At best there is always but an approximation to a perfect social order.” And while Niebuhr affirms that there “are no limits to be set in history for the achievement of more universal brotherhood,” he nevertheless also argues that there can be “no historical development which gradually eliminates those sinful corruptions of brotherhood which stand in contradiction to the law of love.” Both utilize the analogy of sanctification to describe the approximations or partial realizations of the ideal within history. For both eschatology is a hermeneutical lens for understanding the present rather than a description of a future reality.

Rauschenbusch’s and Niebuhr’s eschatologies differ from each other primarily in two respects. First, whereas Rauschenbusch views history as a conflict between the Kingdom of God and the Kingdom of Evil in which development of the former means equal and opposite diminishment of the latter, Niebuhr sees evil as parasitic upon good such that advancement of the Kingdom of God in history entails corresponding growth of the possibility of evil. Rather than seeing the Kingdom of God and the Kingdom of Evil in a zero-sum conflict, Niebuhr uses the symbol of the Antichrist to describe how good and evil are always inextricably intertwined in history.

Second, and related to the first, they differ on the implications of the fact that the Kingdom is never fully realizable in history. For Rauschenbusch this entails that Christians are always “on the march toward the Kingdom of God, and getting our reward by every fractional realization of it which makes us hungry for more.” The impossibility

of achieving the eschatological ideal in history in no way detracts from the pursuit of it. For Niebuhr, on the other hand, the fact that the eschatological ideal is unattainable in history means that compromises are unavoidable and necessary in order to establish relative justice in a fallen world. Direct attempts to achieve the ideal are not only misguided but also tainted with self-righteousness. These differences lead, finally, to differences in their respective ecclesiologies.

When judged in relation to the ideal exemplified in Jesus's life and symbolized by the eschatological Kingdom, the Christian church is seen by both Rauschenbusch and Niebuhr to have fallen short of its purpose. They both view the historic orthodox church as by and large a regressive rather than progressive force in society. In Rauschenbusch's words, "the Church in the past has been the most conservative of all institutions," which for Rauschenbusch is due to a number of "alien" influences adopted by the church: otherworldliness, asceticism, monasticism, sacramentalism, dogmatism, and so on. For Niebuhr, the church's conservatism is due to a combination of pessimism and piousness with regard to the state and the preaching of a perfectionist ethic to individuals suffering under the injustices of the state. Niebuhr extends his criticism to include the liberal church and its sentimental approach to political, economic, and social issues.

For both Rauschenbusch and Niebuhr, the church is not an end in itself, although it is essential for the inbreaking of the Kingdom. The church is oriented eschatologically and as such serves a prophetic role in society. Rauschenbusch speaks of the church's "prophetic office in humanity," while Niebuhr describes the church's "courageous witness against 'principalities and powers.'" For Rauschenbusch, the church is "the social

factor in salvation”; for Niebuhr, it is the “‘saving remnant’ which calls nations to repentance and renewal.”

Niebuhr diverges from Rauschenbusch in how to conceive of the church’s prophetic function. For Rauschenbusch, the church is described as “a picked company of soldiers” with the specific mission from its founder to advance the Kingdom on earth by leading society in word and action. The church is “a constructive power containing the creative principle of a new society,” “the most fertile parent of advanced social experiments,” and “the germ of a new social life for humanity”; and “by the guidance of the Spirit it is to have a clearer perception of ideal justice than others and impart this to society at large.” The sacraments, for Rauschenbusch, are thus acts of initiation and allegiance to the revolutionary brotherhood of the Kingdom.

For Niebuhr, the church is instead “a community of contrite believers” that acknowledges that it “does not have the perfection of Christ as an assured possession.” It is a community that knows that it falls short of the perfect ideal of love and must practice forgiveness as it relies on grace and mercy. The sacraments for Niebuhr are means of grace that symbolize the participation in, but not achievement of, the love of Christ.

In sum, we have seen that Rauschenbusch’s and Niebuhr’s respective approaches to these three central theological themes bear a number of deep similarities, despite differences in how they work out the significance of these themes. Contrary to the common caricatures that pit them against each other, this chapter has attempted to demonstrate that Niebuhr’s theology is in significant continuity with Rauschenbusch’s. Rather than representing competing theological schools, Rauschenbusch and Niebuhr

represent two options within the same tradition of theopolitical liberalism. As I hope to show in the next two chapters, this is a tradition that includes Yoder as well.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### Yoder the Realist: Yoder's Early Encounter with Niebuhr's Theology

*An adolescent is never so clearly his father's child as in the way he chooses to prove his independence.*

—John Howard Yoder

In the spring of 1949, a twenty-one-year-old John Howard Yoder arrived in north-eastern France to begin an assignment with the Mennonite Central Committee, the relief agency of the Mennonite Church. Instead of beginning his post-collegiate ministry in the pastorate as had Rauschenbusch and Niebuhr before him, Yoder was charged with overseeing homes for children made orphans in World War II. The effect must have been similar: Yoder witnessed firsthand the human suffering caused by structural evil. In addition to caring for orphans, Yoder was given the assignment of sharing the “peace testimony” to French Christians and Mennonites in particular who had experienced the ravages of war.<sup>1</sup>

By all accounts Yoder's eight years in Europe were some of the most formative of his life. Yoder took up a number of dialogue partners during his time in Europe,

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<sup>1</sup> Yoder received this assignment directly from his Goshen College mentor, Harold S. Bender, as quoted in Albert N. Keim, *Harold S. Bender, 1897–1962* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1998), 458. The details of Yoder's years in Europe are described in Nation, *John Howard Yoder*, 16–21; Zimmerman, *Practicing the Politics of Jesus*, 70–100. Cf. Mark Thiessen Nation's foreword to John Howard Yoder, *The Original Revolution: Essays on Christian Pacifism* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 2003 [original, 1971]), 1–5. (Hereafter, *OR*.) Sections of this chapter—the introduction, in particular—borrow material from David. C. Cramer, “Realistic Transformation: The Impact of the Niebuhr Brothers on the Social Ethics of John Howard Yoder,” *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 88 (2014): 479–515. Many thanks to *Mennonite Quarterly Review* editor John Roth for permission to incorporate some of that material here.

including European pacifists like André Trocmé,<sup>2</sup> ecumenical leaders in the World Council of Churches, and his own Basel professors—notably Karl Barth and Oscar Cullmann. Yet arguably the most significant and enduring engagement he began during his time in Europe was, ironically, with an American theologian: Reinhold Niebuhr. It is quite likely that Yoder had been reading Niebuhr’s writings throughout his time in Europe, if not before, but he did not begin addressing them in earnest until his last few years in Europe.<sup>3</sup> Yoder’s first major scholarly article—aside from a 1949 article on an Amish shunning case in Ohio<sup>4</sup>—was his 1954 piece “Reinhold Niebuhr and Christian Pacifism,” in which Yoder briefly summarizes Niebuhr’s general approach to political theology before discussing and critiquing his essay “Why the Christian Church Is Not Pacifist.”<sup>5</sup> Later that year Yoder wrote a piece in the *Christian Century* on the Second Assembly of the World Council of Churches, “Let Evanston Speak on War!” which was

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<sup>2</sup> Yoder was clearly impressed by Trocmé early on, as he described him favorably in his 1952 “Report on French FOR Conference,” despite his stated disagreements with Trocmé’s “Gandhian nonviolence.” By the time he wrote *The Politics of Jesus*, Yoder admitted that his chapter “The Implications of the Jubilee” “is adapted freely, with the author’s permission, from André Trocmé, *Jésus-Christ et la révolution non-violente* (Geneva, 1961), since published in English as *Jesus and the Nonviolent Revolution* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1973).” See John Howard Yoder, *The Politics of Jesus: Vicit Agnus Noster*, 2d ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1994), 60n1. (Hereafter, *PJ*.)

<sup>3</sup> Yoder biographer Mark Thiessen Nation shared with me in personal conversation that, as a high school student in the 1940s, Yoder once went to hear Niebuhr speak at a lecture in Ohio, which would suggest that Yoder was interested in Niebuhr’s work prior to his time in Europe.

<sup>4</sup> John Howard Yoder, “Caesar and the *Meidung*,” *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 23 (April 1949): 76–98.

<sup>5</sup> John Howard Yoder, “Reinhold Niebuhr and Christian Pacifism,” Heerewegen Pamphlet 1 (Zeist, The Netherlands, 1954); later published as “Reinhold Niebuhr and Christian Pacifism,” *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 29 (April 1955): 101–117. (All subsequent references are to the latter version; hereafter, RNCP.) This essay was first presented at a seminar on “Modern Theological Thought and Its Criticism of Nonresistance” held at the International Conference Center, Heerewegen near Zeist, The Netherlands, May 11–14, 1953 (101). Cartwright notes that, although Niebuhr never responded directly to Yoder, he was sent a copy of Yoder’s essay and acknowledged having received it. See Cartwright, “Sorting the Wheat from the Tares,” 371n55. Zimmerman summarizes Yoder’s article in *Practicing the Politics of Jesus*, 57–60.

published directly following Niebuhr's essay "Co-existence or Total War?"<sup>6</sup> Although these two pieces are not directly related, their juxtaposition—by coincidence or shrewd editing<sup>7</sup>—highlights their interconnectedness. Niebuhr writes of "idealists" who "do not understand that it is not possible to be both pure and responsible,"<sup>8</sup> while Yoder writes of "the misrepresentation of pacifism" as "unrealistic optimism—optimism about man's goodness, as to love's being a 'simple possibility,' as to the ease of solving problems in human relations"<sup>9</sup> and chastises "today's self-styled 'realists'" for "deny[ing] in effect that the power of the resurrection concerns history in our time in any ultimate way."<sup>10</sup>

Yoder also had some involvement in drafting the document *Peace is the Will of God*, submitted to the Evanston Assembly by the Continuation Committee of the Historic Peace Churches. When Niebuhr and Angus Dun were asked to respond, they wrote "God Wills Both Justice and Peace"—to which Paul Peachey, with the help of Yoder and others on the Continuation Committee, then responded with "God Establishes Both Peace and Justice."<sup>11</sup> Finally, after Niebuhr publicly blasted Yoder's teacher Karl Barth in his

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<sup>6</sup> Reinhold Niebuhr, "Co-existence or Total War?" *Christian Century* 71, no. 33, 18 August 1954, 971–73; John Howard Yoder, "Let Evanston Speak on War!" *Christian Century* 71, no. 33, 18 August 1954, 973–74. Niebuhr wrote again two issues later, "Our Dependence Is on God: An Undelivered Address at the Evanston Assembly of the World Council," *Christian Century* 71, no. 35 1 September 1954, 1034–37. For a summary of Yoder's piece, see Zimmerman, *Practicing the Politics of Jesus*, 89–90.

<sup>7</sup> *The Christian Century* long took a pacifist editorial stance and in the 1930s clashed with Niebuhr on precisely this point. See Elesha J. Coffman, *The Christian Century and the Rise of the Protestant Mainline* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 111–21.

<sup>8</sup> Niebuhr, "Co-existence or Total War?" 973.

<sup>9</sup> Yoder, "Let Evanston Speak on War!" 974.

<sup>10</sup> Yoder, "Let Evanston Speak on War!" 974.

<sup>11</sup> Historic Peace Churches and the Fellowship of Reconciliation, *Peace is the Will of God: A Testimony to the World Council of Churches* (Amsterdam: J. H. De Bussy, 1953); Agnus Dun and Reinhold Niebuhr, "God Wills Both Justice and Peace," *Christianity and Crisis* (June 13, 1955), 75–78; Paul Peachey, et al., "God Establishes Both Peace and Justice," in *On Earth Peace: Discussions on War/Peace Issues Between Friends, Mennonites, Brethren and European Churches 1935-1975*, ed. Donald F.



1957 *Christian Century* essay “Why is Barth Silent on Hungary?”<sup>12</sup> Yoder and a number of Barth’s English-speaking students collectively wrote a vigorous response, which was also published in the *Century* along with a patronizing reply by Niebuhr as “Barth on Hungary: An Exchange.”<sup>13</sup> Niebuhr ended his reply with possibly his only direct words to Yoder on record: “Perhaps I might offer a parting word of advice for the young and ardent disciples [of Barth], and that is that there is no substitute for common sense, even for theologians, whether budding or eminent.”<sup>14</sup>

During this time Yoder also wrote one of his most important essays, “Peace Without Eschatology?”<sup>15</sup> As Michael Cartwright explains in his introduction to a reprint of this essay, “Although the name Reinhold Niebuhr does not appear until near the end of this essay, Niebuhr’s writings are clearly in view. Here Yoder can be seen working with

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Durnbaugh (Elgin, IL: Brethren Press, 1978), 108–121. These three pieces were published together in Historic Peace Churches and the Fellowship of Reconciliation, *The Christian and War: A Theological Discussion of Justice, Peace and Love* (Amsterdam: J. H. De Bussy, 1958). The first piece was also reprinted as “Peace is the Will of God,” in Douglas Gwyn, George Hunsinger, Eugene F. Roop, and John Howard Yoder, *A Declaration on Peace: In God’s People the World’s Renewal Has Begun* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1991), Appendix A, 53–78. For more details on this exchange, see Zimmerman, *Practicing the Politics of Jesus*, 92–93.

<sup>12</sup> Reinhold Niebuhr, “Why is Barth silent on Hungary?” *Christian Century* 74, no. 4, 23 January 1957, 108–110.

<sup>13</sup> James C. Cox, John Howard Yoder, Albert J. Meyer, Marion W. Conditt, and Paul L. Maier, “Barth on Hungary: An Exchange; From Dr. Barth’s Seminar in Basel,” *Christian Century* 74, no. 15, 10 April 1957, 453–454; Reinhold Niebuhr, “Barth on Hungary: An Exchange; From Dr. Niebuhr in New York,” *Christian Century* 74, no. 15, 10 April 1957, 454–55. For more details on this exchange, see Zimmerman, *Practicing the Politics of Jesus*, 84–86.

<sup>14</sup> Niebuhr, “Barth on Hungary,” 455.

<sup>15</sup> John Howard Yoder, “Peace Without Eschatology?” (hereafter, PWE), in *Royal Priesthood: Essays Ecclesiastical and Ecumenical*, edited and with an introduction by Michael G. Cartwright (Scottsdale, PA: Herald, 1998), 143–167. (Hereafter, *RP*.) Cartwright writes in his editorial introduction to this article that it was first presented at a study conference at Heerenwegen, Zeist, The Netherlands, in May 1954 (143), which would put its composition within a year of “Reinhold Niebuhr and Christian Pacifism,” which was first presented at the same conference a year earlier in 1953. “Peace Without Eschatology?” was first published as a 1959 Concern pamphlet and later republished as “If Christ Is Truly Lord,” in *OR*, 52–84. (All subsequent references are to the version in *RP*.)

some of the same issues that he addressed in ‘Reinhold Niebuhr and Christian Pacifism.’”<sup>16</sup> Throughout the essay Yoder attempts to stake out a properly eschatological perspective for addressing ethics, and along the way he contrasts this perspective with various forms of “Constantinianism.” While Yoder clearly has Niebuhr in view when he criticizes forms of ethics that take “realism” or “responsibility” as starting points, he also follows Niebuhr closely in his critiques of “social gospel theology.”<sup>17</sup> Indeed, one of the most striking things about Yoder’s criticism of social gospel liberalism in this essay is its reliance on—or at least strong parallels with—Niebuhr’s analysis. It is not even clear from the text whether Yoder had read anything by social gospel theologians—to say nothing of Rauschenbusch in particular<sup>18</sup>—or is simply rehearsing Niebuhr’s criticisms of them.

These early essays suggest that the beginning of Yoder’s scholarly career was shaped in large part by interaction with Niebuhr’s thought. Moreover, while Yoder’s interaction with Niebuhr on the specific topics of war and pacifism are clearly conflictual from the start, these early essays demonstrate that the relationship between their theological approaches is more complex than is often assumed. Much later, in his course lectures on “Christian Attitudes to War, Peace, and Revolution” that he offered regularly from the late 1960s to just before his death in 1997, Yoder devoted a lecture to “Reinhold

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<sup>16</sup> Michael Cartwright, editorial introduction to *PWE*, in *RP*, 143.

<sup>17</sup> Yoder, *PWE*, 160.

<sup>18</sup> Yoder rarely mentions Rauschenbusch in his writings and only interacts with him at any length in a lecture on “Liberal Protestant Pacifism,” later published in *Christian Attitudes to War, Peace, and Revolution*, edited by Theodore J. Koontz and Andy Alexis-Baker (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos, 2009), 271–84. (Hereafter, *CAWPR*.) There Yoder’s comments are relatively favorable, and he is careful to distinguish the social gospel “in its popularized form” from “the depth of Rauschenbusch’s version” (278).

Niebuhr's 'Realist' Critique" of pacifism, followed by a lecture on "Mennonites after Niebuhr," before finally turning to a lecture on his own position, "Biblical Realism and the Politics of Jesus."<sup>19</sup> What is interesting about the way Yoder organizes these lectures is that he distinguishes himself from other "Mennonites after Niebuhr," yet the way he describes the views of other post-World War II Mennonites has clear resonances with his own views in the early 1950s. Yoder notes in his lecture on "Mennonites after Niebuhr" that one would be mistaken to think that "the thought of Niebuhr was *directly causative* in leading separatist Mennonites to take a 'withdrawn' position." He clarifies, "It is rather that in the 1940s the intellectual and cultural power of Niebuhr's reformulation drove bright young Mennonite thinkers into an updating of the older dichotomous analyses, despite the fact that their education and general socialization in American culture would have otherwise predisposed them to outgrow that separatism. . . . Thus the analysis for which Reinhold Niebuhr was the best spokesman came to be the dominant analysis in Mennonite thought, without his ever being recognized as its source when Mennonites were explaining themselves to themselves."<sup>20</sup> Ironically, this updated dichotomous analysis is precisely the kind Yoder exhibits in his own attempts to explain his Mennonite position to other Mennonites in the early 1950s, as much of his European correspondence at that time indicates.

In May 1950, Yoder wrote a reply to a letter he received from a Mennonite friend in America, Edgar Metzler, who had written to describe a Detroit Conference on the

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<sup>19</sup> See Yoder, *CAWPR*, chaps. 18–20. The editors of the volume note that Yoder taught this course consistently from 1966 to 1997, while the published version is drawn mostly from transcribed lectures from 1983 (*ibid.*, 9–12).

<sup>20</sup> Yoder, *CAWPR*, 306–7, emphasis original.

Church and War organized by the pacifist Fellowship of Reconciliation (FOR). Metzler had mentioned that many Mennonites, including himself, were beginning to rethink their views on “non-violence” in light of “labor-management conflicts.”<sup>21</sup> In reply, Yoder writes, “What the new light on non-violence is I’d have to know before commenting on it. The term itself deals with means and not ends and thus can’t be judged in itself. My only insistence would be that non-violent resistance, even though non-violent, is still resistance, and thus the opposite of nonresistance. The Bible doesn’t say resist non-violently, it says resist not.” He continues, “The other reason for my distrust of nonviolence is the way its proponents interpret [it] as chiefly an effective instrument of social struggle. I can’t imagine Jesus leading a nonviolent rebellion against Rome any more easily than I can imagine him leading a bloody one, and there’s a big difference between being crucified because men can’t stand to have God around and threatening to starve to death for the truth, or being assassinated by a political opponent. Non-violent nonresistance, or perhaps even noncooperation, would be an entirely different question.” Yoder thus concludes, “If the change in viewpoint is simply the conviction that the present Mennonite way out on unions is inadequate, I’ve been arguing that with [Guy] Hershberger since ’45. But neither a Ghandian strike nor a CIO strike nor a communist strike nor FOR decentralisation seems to me much better. And if I’m not called, as a Christian, to help settle a non-loving struggle between Hitler and Roosevelt, called war, I don’t see how I’m called to help settle a morally identical fight between Walter Reuther

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<sup>21</sup> Letter from Edward [Metzler] to John Howard Yoder, 14 May 1950, Box 205, 1950s Folder, J. H. Yoder Papers, 1948–1997, HM1–48, Mennonite Church USA Archives – Goshen, Goshen, Indiana.

and Henry Ford, or between John Lewis and the Operators' Association."<sup>22</sup> Here we see Yoder exhibiting the same kind of strongly separationist stance that he will later critique in others.

A year later, after reading a pair of articles written by a Mennonite friend, Paul Peachey, in a denominational magazine, *The Mennonite*, Yoder wrote Peachey a scathing letter. Peachey had argued that the failure of the *Landeskirche* or national church model had validated the Anabaptist vision. In response, Yoder argues that the failure of one does not prove the success of the other. Instead, writes Yoder, "if you are looking for sociological-historical validity, *both* Anabaptism and the *Landeskirche* concept are *disproved*, both failed."<sup>23</sup> He continues, "They failed because the world is sinful. And that, theologically, is where I disagree with your analysis. In the sinful world, the right position is not historically valid. The perfect life led to the Cross, and so would perfect discipleship. The fact that they didn't survive, that they were historically disproved, is a result of the fact that biblically they were right." Yoder worries that both Peachey and defenders of the national church "base [their] positions not on exegesis but on extra-biblical sociology." After articulating other problems he finds with Peachey's argument, Yoder concludes by reiterating his initial point: "It fits here to repeat that an interest in a sociologically validated position, in an attitude recognized by the world as a valid one, is itself conformism contrary to the Anabaptist attitude. If the Biblical position of unlimited obedience were going to be historically validated within history there'd be no need for

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<sup>22</sup> Letter from John Howard Yoder to Edward [Metzler], 22 May 1950, Box 205, 1950s Folder, J. H. Yoder Papers.

<sup>23</sup> Emphasis original.

Eschatology in the biblical message.”<sup>24</sup> Along with the separationist stance exhibited in his earlier letter, in this letter Yoder further indicates that part of Anabaptist identity is its disavowal of historic validation.

As these examples illustrate, Yoder’s views in the early 1950s—as with those of many of his Mennonite peers at the time—were quite Niebuhrian, even as he took the inverse position on political involvement as Niebuhr. Yoder accepts at face value Niebuhr’s distinction between nonresistance and (Gandhian) nonviolent resistance and assumes that Christians should accept the former and reject the latter. Drawing on the very language Niebuhr used—as we saw in the previous chapter—Yoder argues that in a sinful world the way of the cross is “not historically valid.” At this time very early in his career, Yoder accepts Niebuhr’s judgment that Jesus’s ethic is not immediately applicable to social questions—world wars and labor disputes—and that those committed to following Jesus therefore must be apolitical. To argue otherwise, according to Yoder, would be “conformism contrary to the Anabaptist attitude.” The way of the cross, Yoder argues in Niebuhr’s language and categories, is not validated in history but only eschatologically.

While it is unclear whether in the early 1950s Yoder had adopted Niebuhr’s categories consciously or not, it is clear that by the 1970s Yoder explicitly acknowledges the role Niebuhr played in his formulation of “the politics of Jesus.” In his lecture on “Biblical Realism and the Politics of Jesus,” Yoder notes that the “Niebuhrian analysis . . . has opened new questions” in biblical studies: “We will not ask, does Jesus teach

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<sup>24</sup> Letter from John Howard Yoder to Paul Peachey (CC: H. S. Bender), 18 May 1951, Box 42, Folder 6, H. S. Bender Papers, Mennonite Church USA Archives – Goshen, Goshen, Indiana.

pacifism? Niebuhr takes that for granted. Instead we will ask whether, according to the biblical accounts, Jesus's pacifism was apolitical."<sup>25</sup> Yoder's resulting account of a "political" Jesus is a direct response to Niebuhr (and an indirect response to Yoder's own early acceptance of Niebuhr's categories). Yoder describes the encounter between Niebuhr's critique of pacifists and "the critique of Niebuhr by the Jesus of the New Testament witness" not simply as an ethical one but rather as "a total theological encounter."<sup>26</sup> The goal of the remainder of this chapter is to describe how this theological encounter impacted Yoder's early articulation of his theology, especially those theological categories that would become central to his project: Christology, eschatology, and ecclesiology.

While Yoder interacted off and on with Niebuhr's thought throughout his career,<sup>27</sup> I focus here specifically on his early writing, where his interaction with Niebuhr is the most concentrated. In particular, I focus on two early texts mentioned above in which Niebuhr figures prominently: "Reinhold Niebuhr and Christian Pacifism" and "Peace Without Eschatology?" Following a discussion of these early essays, I then briefly trace the development of Yoder's thought through his 1972 classic, *The Politics of Jesus*. In the next chapter, I turn to other, later texts in order to describe Yoder's mature theological positions on these three themes and compare them with Rauschenbusch's ways of articulating them described in Chapter Two. My argument ultimately is that, after his early interaction with Niebuhr, Yoder's mature views reflect Rauschenbusch's quite

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<sup>25</sup> Yoder, *CAWPR*, 309.

<sup>26</sup> Yoder, *CAWPR*, 317.

<sup>27</sup> See, e.g., John Howard Yoder, review of *Niebuhr and His Age: Reinhold Niebuhr's Prophetic Role in the Twentieth Century*, by Charles C. Brown, *Modern Theology* 10 (1994): 114–116.

closely. Before making that case, I must first describe Yoder's early encounter with Niebuhr in more detail.

### *Jesus as the Ultimate Ethical Norm*

As mentioned above, Yoder's first major scholarly essay was his 1954 treatment of Niebuhr's theological ethics, "Reinhold Niebuhr and Christian Pacifism," written while he was still in Europe. Yoder begins his essay with a striking claim: "There can be no doubt that Reinhold Niebuhr's theology is the principle system of thought with which to come to grips if we on the Continent wish to consider pacifism as found in America today."<sup>28</sup> He explains,

Niebuhr's importance has two aspects for us as pacifists. First, as the foremost American leader of what has been named the "new-orthodox" theology, he represents for us a movement of thought which is both vigorous and popular, which is likely to influence our own thought as well as that of those to whom we wish to bring our peace witness. Secondly, Niebuhr matters to us because he talks to us. He addresses himself to the question of pacifism and nonresistance not once but several times, using it in fact as the clearest case of the essential problem of all Christian ethics, namely, how to bring down to earth the "impractical" teachings of Jesus.<sup>29</sup>

While Yoder's essay is ostensibly an exposition and analysis of Niebuhr's essay "Why the Christian Church Is Not Pacifist," his treatment of Niebuhr goes beyond mere analysis of Niebuhr's critique of pacifism to an encounter with Niebuhr's general theological approach. This includes an exposition and evaluation of Niebuhr's Christology.

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<sup>28</sup> Yoder, RNCP, 101.

<sup>29</sup> Yoder, RNCP, 101.



Yoder notes that Niebuhr “accepts fully the belief that in the New Testament Jesus reveals the absolute normativeness of the law of love of the kingdom of God as final and authoritative revelation of what is ethically ultimate. Not only does Niebuhr give general assent to the rightness of love, but he also agrees with us in defining that love in particular as the Sermon on the Mount defines it, as self-giving, non-retaliating, non-calculating, as mirroring the gracious love of God for the unworthy and disobedient sinner.”<sup>30</sup> Yoder considers Niebuhr’s view of Jesus’s ethic as “a great step forward”—even beyond the view of Niebuhr’s contemporary and Yoder’s teacher Barth—and as offering “a great service to truth” in dialogue between pacifists and nonpacifists.<sup>31</sup>

Yoder then describes how for Niebuhr the love ethic of Jesus “is not proposed as being first of all an effective social policy. It is not nonviolent resistance chosen pragmatically in preference to violence because of its greater effectiveness in the struggle for existence or for progress; it is rather nonresistance, unconditional obedience to the nature of love, making no promises of effectiveness. The ultimate expression of this ethic is the cross, and Christ’s ‘obedience unto death, even the death of the cross,’ was the utter opposite of a calculating pragmatic choice of means.”<sup>32</sup> Yoder describes how for Niebuhr Jesus serves as the absolute norm, but “the demands of Jesus’ nonresisting love must be balanced against the impossibility of our ever executing them.”<sup>33</sup> He then explains how on Niebuhr’s view the norm still has relevance as a principle of both indiscriminate and

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<sup>30</sup> Yoder, RNCP, 105.

<sup>31</sup> Yoder, RNCP, 105. Whereas Barth uses familiar episodes in the gospel narrative to dispute whether Jesus was completely nonresistant (e.g., Jesus’s cleansing of the temple), Niebuhr and Yoder agree that Jesus was nonresistant but disagree on the implications of this for the Christian life.

<sup>32</sup> Yoder, RNCP, 105.

<sup>33</sup> Yoder, RNCP, 105.

discriminate criticism of ethical alternatives, although due to the reality of sin, it will always be an impossible possibility.

Yoder takes issue with Niebuhr's reasons for rejecting pacifism, but in doing so he also reveals fundamental agreements between Niebuhr and himself—agreements that Yoder acknowledges “are significant.”<sup>34</sup> Among the most significant is his agreement with Niebuhr that “nonresistant love is taught by the New Testament” and that such love “is the ultimate ethical norm.”<sup>35</sup> In explaining this agreement, Yoder even specifies his agreement with Niebuhr's interpretation of nonresistant love, noting that it “is true that nonviolence and nonresistance are not identical, and that nonviolent resistance as represented by Gandhi's disciples is a means of coercion in class, race, or party struggle. This is not to deny that it often is, and could always be, the better means of struggle, but the pragmatic grounds of nonviolent pacifism and the religious grounds of nonresistant pacifism should be distinguished.”<sup>36</sup> Yoder also accepts Niebuhr's distinction between individual Christian ethics and political ethics. “The Christian,” writes Yoder, “who has spiritual resources for unselfish and rational action, cannot expect of societies, which have not such resources and make no claim to be fully disinterested, a Christian degree of unselfishness and love. This is the drawback in any attempt to derive a social and political strategy from individual Christian ethics, and although Niebuhr formulates this

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<sup>34</sup> Yoder, RNCP, 111.

<sup>35</sup> Yoder, RNCP, 111.

<sup>36</sup> Yoder, RNCP, 111.

observation differently in *Moral Man and Immoral Society*, his thesis has a degree of validity.”<sup>37</sup>

Yoder goes on to articulate a number of ethical and philosophical problems he has with Niebuhr’s thought, and he criticizes Niebuhr’s theology for a number of omissions. Yet despite these criticisms, Yoder notably maintains the same general picture of Jesus that Niebuhr offers. His differences with Niebuhr are not over how to view the life and teachings of Jesus; they are rather over whether the Christian can and should be expected to follow Jesus’s life and teachings. In other words, he generally adopts Niebuhr’s picture but then goes on to argue that Niebuhr fails to draw the proper ethical conclusions from this picture.

Yoder lays out his picture of Jesus more explicitly in his essay “Peace Without Eschatology?” There Yoder describes Jesus as consistently resisting the temptation to get involved with the affairs of government and the “violent means [that] were offered him.”<sup>38</sup> Instead, according to Yoder, Jesus “struck at the very institution of human justice with his ‘Who made me a judge over you?’ and even into the intimacy of the family circle with his ‘not peace but a sword!’”<sup>39</sup> For Yoder, then, “it is of utmost significance to be aware that human community (as it exists under the sign of the old aeon) was far from being Jesus’ central concern.”<sup>40</sup> Instead, argues Yoder,

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<sup>37</sup> Yoder, RNCP, 111.

<sup>38</sup> Yoder, PWE, 147.

<sup>39</sup> Yoder, PWE, 147.

<sup>40</sup> Yoder, PWE, 147. I discuss Yoder’s distinction between aeons in the section on Yoder’s eschatology below. In a footnote to this quote added in the 1970 reprint of this essay for *The Original Revolution* (and all subsequent reprints), Yoder writes: “This paragraph uses the word ‘political’ to designate the structures of human community ‘under the sign of the old aeon,’ which was the predominant usage in theological conversation at that time. The rest of this book is committed to a more contemporary

Jesus' interest was in people; the reason for his low esteem for the political order was his high, loving esteem for concrete people as the object of his concern. Christ is *agape*; self-giving, nonresistant love. At the cross this nonresistance, including the refusal to use political means of self-defense, found its ultimate revelation in the uncomplaining and forgiving death of the innocent at the hands of the guilty. This death reveals how God deals with evil; here is the only valid starting point for Christian pacifism or nonresistance. The cross is the extreme demonstration that *agape* seeks neither effectiveness nor justice and is willing to suffer any loss or seeming defeat for the sake of obedience.

But the cross is not defeat. Christ's obedience unto death was crowned by the miracle of the resurrection and the exaltation at the right hand of God. . . . Effectiveness and success had been sacrificed for the sake of love, but this sacrifice was turned by God into a victory that vindicated to the utmost the apparent impotence of love.<sup>41</sup>

This passage, which contains language that is quintessentially Yoderian, is at the same time quintessentially Niebuhrian. Recall Niebuhr's description of the significance of the cross, quoted in the previous chapter. There we saw that Niebuhr accepted that "the ethics of nonresistance as taught in the Sermon on the Mount is in perfectly consistent relation with the love symbolized in the Cross." He simply rejected—as Yoder does here—that "this ethic [is] one which might, if generally practiced, become successful in history."<sup>42</sup> For Niebuhr, as for Yoder after him, "The New Testament never guarantees the historical success of the 'strategy' of the Cross." Instead Niebuhr argues that the way of the cross may or may not have historical successes, but "the final justification for the way of *agape* in the New Testament is never found in history. The motive to which Christ appeals is

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and more helpful usage, in which the work and will of Christ should be spoken of as 'political' in the most proper sense of this term, i.e., as having to do with the *polis*, the common life of human beings. While the writer strongly prefers his contemporary usage, the difference between what is said in the rest of the book by accepting the characterization 'political' and what is said in the above (1954) passage by rejecting the word differ only semantically" (ibid., 147n3). In this chapter and the next, however, I will argue that this change is substantive and not "only" semantic.

<sup>41</sup> Yoder, *PWE*, 147–48.

<sup>42</sup> Niebuhr, *NDM*, 2:72n2.

always the emulation of God or gratitude for the *agape* of God.”<sup>43</sup> As we will see below, Yoder follows Niebuhr in ultimately finding eschatological rather than historical vindication of the way of the cross, as disclosed proleptically in the resurrection of Jesus; although as we will also see, they differ on the implications of this for Christian action. But for now we can simply observe that at this time in Yoder’s writing, his picture of Jesus is largely consistent with that presented by Niebuhr before him.

### *Eschatology as Fulfillment of the New Aeon*

During his early interaction with Niebuhr’s work, Yoder begins to develop not only his Christology but also his eschatology, as we find especially in “Peace Without Eschatology?” Yoder begins this essay with the Niebuhrian observation that “Christian thought in the decades prior to the second World War was strongly influenced by thinkers and preachers who hoped for ‘the brotherhood of man’ just around the corner and who, therefore, thought they had no time to waste on eschatology.”<sup>44</sup> Yoder notes that “for all their down-to-earth social concern and their avoidance of date-setting, these optimists and believers in man also had an eschatology. Their simple confidence that they could be sure of the meaning of life was in itself a doctrine of what is ultimate—i.e., an eschatology—though a questionable one, being in part unconscious and not directly based on Christian foundations.”<sup>45</sup> This is because, for Yoder, “There is no significance to human effort and, strictly speaking, no history unless life can be seen in terms of ultimate goals. The

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<sup>43</sup> Niebuhr, *NDM*, 2:87–88.

<sup>44</sup> Yoder, *PWE*, 144.

<sup>45</sup> Yoder, *PWE*, 144–45.

*eschaton*, the ‘Last Thing,’ the End-Event, imparts to life a meaningfulness that it would not otherwise have.”<sup>46</sup> Again, while there is no mention of Niebuhr here, this description of eschatology closely follows Niebuhr’s view that the meaning of history is found in the ultimate consummation of history, as we saw in the previous chapter. Yoder makes this point explicit: “This is what we mean by eschatology: a hope that, defying present frustration, defines a present position in terms of the yet unseen goal that gives it meaning.”<sup>47</sup> He distinguishes between *apocalypics*, which he views as a “preoccupation . . . with prediction for the sake of prediction,” and *eschatology*, “whose concern as we have defined it is the meaning of the *eschaton* for present history.”<sup>48</sup> According to Yoder, the Bible is much more concerned with the latter—“with the meaning that the future has for the *present*”<sup>49</sup>—than it is with the former.

Yoder offers pacifism as a “singularly apt example of the eschatological mode of thought.”<sup>50</sup> According to Yoder, peace is not the immediate outcome of a pacifist stance; rather, peace “describes the pacifist’s hope, the goal in the light of which Christians act, the character of Christian actions, the ultimate divine certainty that lets the Christian position make sense; it does not describe the external appearance or the observable results of Christian behavior.”<sup>51</sup> He spends the bulk of the essay describing peace with

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<sup>46</sup> Yoder, *PWE*, 145.

<sup>47</sup> Yoder, *PWE*, 145.

<sup>48</sup> Yoder, *PWE*, 145.

<sup>49</sup> Yoder, *PWE*, 145, emphasis original.

<sup>50</sup> Yoder, *PWE*, 145.

<sup>51</sup> Yoder, *PWE*, 145.

and without eschatology. The former, following the New Testament, “sees our present age—the age of the church, extending from Pentecost to the Parousia—as a period of the overlapping of two aeons.”<sup>52</sup> Yoder explains:

These two aeons are not distinct periods of time, for they exist simultaneously. They differ rather in nature or in direction; one points backward to human history outside of (before) Christ; the other points forward to the fullness of the kingdom of God, of which it is a foretaste. Each aeon has a social manifestation: the former in the “world,” the latter in the church or the body of Christ. The new aeon came into history in a decisive way with the incarnation and the entire work of Christ. Christ had been awaited eagerly by Judaism for centuries; but when he came he was rejected, for the new aeon he revealed was not what people wanted. Jesus’ contemporaries were awaiting a new age, a bringing to fulfillment of God’s plan; but they expected it to confirm and to vindicate their national hopes, prides, and solidarities. Thus Christ’s claims and kingdom were to them scandalous.<sup>53</sup>

As with Niebuhr so too for Yoder Jesus’s life and death was the revelation of the meaning of history. For Yoder, “that new thing revealed in Christ was [his] attitude toward the old aeon, including force and self-defense.”<sup>54</sup> Whereas many Jews in Jesus’s day and before were nationalistic in their eschatology, “Jesus revealed that the contrary was the case: the universality of God’s kingdom contradicts rather than confirms all particular solidarities and can be reached only by first forsaking the old aeon.”<sup>55</sup> Yet, while Jesus revealed the meaning of history, ultimately, writes Yoder, “The consummation will mean the fulfillment of the new aeon and the collapse of the old.”<sup>56</sup> For Yoder, then, “The consummation is first of all the vindication of the way of the

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<sup>52</sup> Yoder, *PWE*, 145.

<sup>53</sup> Yoder, *PWE*, 146–47.

<sup>54</sup> Yoder, *PWE*, 148.

<sup>55</sup> Yoder, *PWE*, 149.

<sup>56</sup> Yoder, *PWE*, 150.

cross.”<sup>57</sup> This is what “peace with eschatology” means: “Nonresistance is right, in the deepest sense, not because it works, but because it anticipates the triumph of the Lamb that was slain.”<sup>58</sup> Here again we find Yoder turning to eschatological validation for contemporary ethical norms for the Christian.

Yoder writes that between the incarnation and the consummation is a time of “tension between two aeons, tension that will be resolved by the triumph of the new in the fullness of the kingdom of God.”<sup>59</sup> Turning from the role of the Christian to the role of the state, then, Yoder argues that during this in-between time there is still a “providential purpose of the state, that of achieving a ‘tolerable balance of egoisms’”—a phrase that Yoder notes is “borrowed with gratitude from Reinhold Niebuhr.”<sup>60</sup> The Christian thus has the special ability to offer “prophetic witness to the state,” Yoder writes, since “only a clearly eschatological viewpoint permits a valid critique of the present historical situation and the choice of action that can be effective.”<sup>61</sup> To develop how this might work in practice, Yoder relies on the contemporary work *Christianity, Diplomacy, and War* by Herbert Butterfield, a British historian who, Yoder concedes, is “not a pacifist but an honest historian.”<sup>62</sup> Butterfield approves of limited war or what

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<sup>57</sup> Yoder, *PWE*, 151.

<sup>58</sup> Yoder, *PWE*, 151.

<sup>59</sup> Yoder, *PWE*, 151.

<sup>60</sup> Yoder, *PWE*, 153.

<sup>61</sup> Yoder, *PWE*, 157.

<sup>62</sup> Yoder, *PWE*, 159. See Herbert Butterfield, *Christianity, Diplomacy, and War* (New York: Abingdon-Cokesbury, 1953). Incidentally, more than just an honest historian, Butterfield was himself a devout Protestant Christian who was not shy about his faith’s impact on his work. In 1965–67, he gave the prestigious Gifford Lectures at Glasgow University on “Human Beliefs and the Development of Historical



Yoder considers “police action” with the goal of maintaining “proximate justice” in order to allow for the “leavening effect” of the “byproducts of Christianity”—“ideals of brotherhood, of honesty, of social justice, or the abundant life”—to play their role in making “the world, even the old aeon, immensely more tolerable.”<sup>63</sup> The church’s prophetic witness to the state thus amounts to calling the state to ensure that the “good are to be protected, the evildoers are to be restrained, and the fabric of society is to be preserved, both from revolution and from war.”<sup>64</sup> Such criteria, suggests Yoder, “would condemn all modern war, not on the basis of perfectionist discipleship ethics, but on the realistic basis of what the state is for”<sup>65</sup>—which for Yoder, following Niebuhr, is simply to provide “a pragmatic, tolerable balance of egoisms [that] can become more or less tolerable.”<sup>66</sup> According to this paradigm, argues Yoder, “It would even be possible to speak of a limited doctrine of progress.”<sup>67</sup> As with Niebuhr, however, Yoder rejects utopianism in favor of incremental advancements toward greater justice: “To define the point of infinite tolerability would be to define the kingdom; it cannot be done in terms of the present situation. Thus the prophet, or the prophetic church, speaks first of all God’s condemnation of concrete injustices; if those injustices are corrected, new ones may be tackled. Progress in tolerability may be achieved . . . but only in a limited degree and in

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Writings” and “Historical Writings and Christian Belief” (unpublished; for a brief description, see [www.giffordlectures.org/Author.asp?AuthorID=32](http://www.giffordlectures.org/Author.asp?AuthorID=32)).

<sup>63</sup> Yoder, *PWE*, 160, 159.

<sup>64</sup> Yoder, *PWE*, 159.

<sup>65</sup> Yoder, *PWE*, 160.

<sup>66</sup> Yoder, *PWE*, 160.

<sup>67</sup> Yoder, *PWE*, 159.

specific areas, and the means of progressing is not by defining utopias but by denouncing particular evils and inventing particular remedies.”<sup>68</sup>

In sum, as with Yoder’s early Christology, we can see striking similarities between Yoder’s early eschatological framework and Niebuhr’s. Both view the eschaton as offering an interpretive framework for the present. Neither equates the state with the Kingdom of God; instead Yoder follows Niebuhr in viewing the role of the state pragmatically as achieving a “tolerable balance of egoisms.” Nevertheless, from the eschatological perspective of the Christian faith, they both find it possible to offer guidance to the state on matters of relative social justice. They differ, of course, on the extent to which state violence might be acceptable in establishing justice. This difference is mostly one of degree, however, since Yoder agrees with Butterworth that limited warfare or police action might be an acceptable means of the preserving function of the state. Yoder’s main difference with Niebuhr at this time, then, is not christological or eschatological but ecclesiological.

### *The Church as Bearer of the Meaning of History*

When Yoder turns to theological disagreements with Niebuhr in his essay “Reinhold Niebuhr and Christian Pacifism,” his “most significant objection of all against Niebuhr” is that “Niebuhr derives his ethics from the fact of man’s predicament, and the Bible derives not only ethics, but everything, from the fact of God’s redemption.”<sup>69</sup> Yoder thus focuses mostly on what he finds lacking in Niebuhr’s account, namely,

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<sup>68</sup> Yoder, *PWE*, 160.

<sup>69</sup> Yoder, *RNCP*, 115.

treatments of the doctrines of Christ's resurrection, the church, regeneration, and the Holy Spirit. Yoder contrasts the New Testament view of these doctrines with those of Niebuhr: "Although the New Testament understands the cross only in light of the resurrection, Niebuhr speaks of the cross repeatedly, of the resurrection of Christ not at all, and of the resurrection of the body only as a mythological symbol for the fact that the superhistorical triumph of the good must also somehow involve history. . . . Whereas the Bible speaks of our 'resurrection with Christ' as opening new ethical possibilities, grace is for Niebuhr primarily the way to have peace in spite of our continuing sin."<sup>70</sup> Yoder continues,

In the Bible, the bearer of the meaning of history is not the United States of America, nor Western Christendom, but a divine-human society, the church, the body of Christ. In view of Niebuhr's interest in history it is surprising that the concept of the church is quite absent from his thought; when he mentions the word "church" it is only to criticize the medieval synthesis of Catholicism. This omission is highly significant for understanding what is wrong with Niebuhr's social ethics. For the body of Christ differs from other social bodies in that it is not less moral than its individual members. . . . Thus the thesis of *Moral Man and Immoral Society* falls down in the crucial case, the only one which is really decisive for Christian ethics.<sup>71</sup>

As we saw in the previous chapter, Niebuhr neither views the United States nor Western Christendom as "the bearer of the meaning of history," and he is not entirely silent on the concept of the church either. Nevertheless, the difference between Yoder's ecclesiology and Niebuhr's is clear. For Yoder, the church is an alternative society with resources for ethical action unavailable to "unregenerate society"<sup>72</sup>—including regeneration and the

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<sup>70</sup> Yoder, RNCP, 115.

<sup>71</sup> Yoder, RNCP, 115.

<sup>72</sup> Yoder, RNCP, 116.

Holy Spirit—whereas, as Yoder observes of Niebuhr, “the church as distinguished from society has no significant place in his ethical thought.”<sup>73</sup> The distinction between church and world is thus crucial for Yoder’s critique of Niebuhr at this point. Yoder basically agrees with Niebuhr’s ethic for the state (with some important qualifications) but argues that this ethic is not appropriate for the church—that is, with regenerated, committed disciples of Jesus.

Given the omissions Yoder observes in Niebuhr’s thought, he follows that rather than appreciating the difference it makes that Christian ethics is *Christian*, Niebuhr ends up “attempting to construct a Christian ethics for unregenerate society.”<sup>74</sup> In contrast, on Yoder’s view the church is empowered by the Holy Spirit to follow the teaching and example of Jesus:

The acceptance of the *cross*, i.e., the full cost of utter obedience to the loving nature of God, is the path to the accomplishment in history, not of perfection, but of action which can please God and be useful to men. The triumph of love over sin is not reserved for some Platonic realm (such as Niebuhr’s “superhistory”) where the eschatological judgment takes place. Sin is vanquished every time a Christian in the power of God chooses the better instead of the good, obedience instead of necessity, love instead of compromise, brotherhood instead of veiled self-interest. No insistence on “maintaining the tension” between the good and the possible, whether derived from systematic considerations or sociological observation, can change this reality. That this triumph over sin is incomplete changes in no way the fact that it is possible, and that if God calls us to deny ourselves, accept suffering, and love our neighbors, that too is possible. This possibility passes by the way of the cross, and therefore is “foolishness to the Greeks and a scandal to the Jews, but to them that believe it is the wisdom of God and the power of God.”<sup>75</sup>

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<sup>73</sup> Yoder, RNCP, 116.

<sup>74</sup> Yoder, RNCP, 116.

<sup>75</sup> Yoder, RNCP, 116–17; quoting 1 Cor. 1:23–24.

While this quote carries rhetorical force against Niebuhr and shows Yoder to be more sanguine than Niebuhr about the possibilities of Christians following Jesus's example, it must be recalled that Niebuhr himself did not deny this possibility absolutely. He believed that all actions are tainted with sin, but he nevertheless allowed for the possibility of Christians choosing a vocation of strict obedience to Jesus as a witness to the world. His argument was simply that one cannot both choose this vocation and be involved in the compromises that are inevitable in attempts to establish relative justice or a "tolerable balance of egoisms" in society. The latter, argues Niebuhr, always involves some level of coercion and thus runs contrary to the *agape* of Jesus. In arguing here for the possibility of Christians following the example of Jesus, Yoder does not counter Niebuhr's point but in some ways seems to assume it. In order to challenge Niebuhr's argument that the Christian cannot both follow Jesus and be involved in political compromises, Yoder must offer an account of how the nonresistant church can influence "unregenerate society."

In "Peace Without Eschatology?" Yoder takes up this challenge but not before elaborating the ecclesiology that he only hinted at in his previous essay. For Yoder, the church is the continued presence of Christ in the world: "The same life of the new aeon that was revealed in Christ is also the possession of the church, since Pentecost answered the Old Testament's longings for a 'pouring out of the Spirit on all flesh' and a 'law written in the heart.' The Holy Spirit is the 'down payment' on the coming glory, and the new life of the resurrection is the path of the Christian now. But before the resurrection there was the cross, and Christians must follow their Master in suffering for the sake of

love.”<sup>76</sup> The problem with those who seek “peace without eschatology” is that they “would identify church and world, or fuse the two aeons in the present age without the act of God whereby evil is removed from the scene. This means a confusion between the providential purpose of the state . . . and the redemptive purpose of the church, the rejection of egoism in the commitment to discipleship. This confusion leads to the paganization of the church and the demonization of the state.”<sup>77</sup> Yoder famously calls this fusion of church and state “Constantinianism,” which, as we have seen, is an arrangement that both Niebuhr and Rauschenbusch before him found problematic as well. For Yoder, this confusion goes back to the religions of the ancient Middle East, which worshiped “a god whose significance was not ethical but ceremonial.”<sup>78</sup> In contrast to this view, the Old Testament prophets, argues Yoder, “proclaimed YHWH’s ethical requirements.”<sup>79</sup> But after the fusion of church and state that is symbolized in the figure of Constantine, writes Yoder,

The church is no longer the obedient suffering line of the true prophets; it has a vested interest in the present order of things and uses the cultic means at its disposal to legitimize that order. The church does not preach ethics, judgment, repentance, separation from the world; it dispenses the sacraments and holds society together. Christian ethics no longer means the study of what God wants of us; since all of society is Christian (by definition, i.e., by baptism), Christian ethics must be workable for all of society. Instead of seeking sanctification, ethics becomes concerned with the persistent power of sin and the calculation of the lesser evil; at the best it produces puritanism, and at the worst simple opportunism.<sup>80</sup>

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<sup>76</sup> Yoder, *PWE*, 148.

<sup>77</sup> Yoder, *PWE*, 153.

<sup>78</sup> Yoder, *PWE*, 153.

<sup>79</sup> Yoder, *PWE*, 153.

<sup>80</sup> Yoder, *PWE*, 154.

Yoder pushes his critique of Constantinianism further by turning common arguments against “sectarianism” on their head and arguing that “the real sectarianism, in the biblical sense of unchristian divisiveness, was the formation of churches bound to the state and identified with the nation. And on the other hand, some so-called ‘sects,’ notably the sixteenth-century Anabaptists, the seventeenth-century Quakers, the eighteenth-century Moravians, and the nineteenth century Open Brethren, were by their freedom from such ties, by their mobility and their missionary concern, by their preference of simple biblical piety and obedient faith to creedal orthodoxy, the veritable proponents of ecumenical Christianity.”<sup>81</sup> Yoder thus states that “we must proclaim to every Christian that pacifism is not the prophetic vocation of a few individuals but that every member of the body of Christ is called to absolute nonresistance in discipleship and to abandonment of all loyalties that counter that obedience, including the desire to be effective immediately or to make oneself responsible for civil justice.”<sup>82</sup>

At the same time, Yoder has changed his mind about the appropriateness of the church offering ethical counsel to the state. In his letter to Metzler from 1950, he found no basis for the Christian to “help settle a non-loving struggle” between political leaders; just a few years later, after interacting with Niebuhr’s writings, he now finds a basis for the church to be involved in political affairs by offering a direct “witness” to the state—the contents of which were described briefly in the previous section. Yoder now accepts the view expressed “in contemporary ecumenical and neo-orthodox or ‘chastened-liberal’

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<sup>81</sup> Yoder, *PWE*, 156.

<sup>82</sup> Yoder, *PWE*, 156.

circles” that the church has a “responsibility” for society, though he disagrees with Niebuhr on what that responsibility is. For Niebuhr and his ilk, “Christians have a responsibility for the protection of their good neighbors against their bad neighbors.”<sup>83</sup> Yoder recognizes “the sincerity and the consistency of this viewpoint and the honest realism that its proponents demonstrate,” even agreeing that it “coincides with the biblical view of the police function of the state under the lordship first of YHWH, then of Christ.”<sup>84</sup> But then he counters: “That is precisely our objection to it; this view, based on a realistic analysis of the old aeon, knows nothing of the new. It is not specifically Christian and would fit into any honest system of social morality. If Christ had never become incarnate, died, risen, ascended to heaven, and sent his Spirit, this view would be just as possible, though its particularly clear and objective expression may result partly from certain Christian insights.”<sup>85</sup>

Yoder’s main problem is not that Niebuhr’s ethic endorses the use of force and violence; it is rather with Niebuhr’s ecclesiology, which leads “to a confusion as to the agent of Christian ethics.” Yoder explains: “Since the distinction between the church and world is largely lost, the ‘responsible’ church will try to preach a kind of ethics that will work for non-Christians as well as Christians.”<sup>86</sup> But according to Yoder this attitude merely reveals a “preference of the old aeon to the new and the identification of the church’s mission and the meaning of history with the function of the state in organizing

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<sup>83</sup> Yoder, *PWE*, 161.

<sup>84</sup> Yoder, *PWE*, 161, 162.

<sup>85</sup> Yoder, *PWE*, 162.

<sup>86</sup> Yoder, *PWE*, 162.



sinful society.”<sup>87</sup> In contrast, Yoder argues that “it is clear in the New Testament that the meaning of history is not what the state will achieve in the way of a progressively more tolerable ordering of society but what the church achieves through evangelism and through the leavening process.”<sup>88</sup> Again, as we saw in the previous chapter, Niebuhr explicitly rejects the idea that the meaning of history is found in any particular ordering of society or even in human progress toward justice. Nevertheless, in his argument that Christians must “accept their historical responsibilities,” Niebuhr does blur the lines of the dichotomy between church and world that Yoder finds in the New Testament. At the same time, after interacting with Niebuhr, Yoder’s ecclesiology has shifted so that he, too, now argues that the church has certain responsibilities to society. This shift marks a subtle but important development from his earlier sharply dichotomous view—a development that will continue for the rest of his career.

*From Discipleship as Political Responsibility to The Politics of Jesus*

Thus far in this chapter we have seen that, although Yoder’s interaction with Niebuhr on the questions of war and pacifism was conflictual from the start, these ethical differences were predicated on a number of striking theological similarities. At this early stage, Yoder follows Niebuhr’s Christology when he writes that “Christ is *agape*; self-giving, nonresistant love” and describes Jesus as having a “low esteem for the political order” due to his “high, loving esteem for concrete people as the object of his concern.” We saw that Yoder, as with Niebuhr, views the cross as the supreme revelation of God’s

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<sup>87</sup> Yoder, *PWE*, 163.

<sup>88</sup> Yoder, *PWE*, 163.

*agape* for humanity and thus as the disclosure of the meaning of history. Likewise, we saw that Yoder adopts Niebuhr's general eschatological framework. Yoder, as with Niebuhr, views the eschaton as the interpretive framework for the present. From this shared framework, they both criticize earlier social gospel theology for its supposed optimism regarding the possibility of ushering in the Kingdom of God on earth rather than accepting that the state has the more limited preserving function of establishing "a pragmatic, tolerable balance of egoisms." Yoder's most significant difference with Niebuhr regards the role of the church within this shared framework. They both reject the "Constantinian" arrangement, and Niebuhr even allows for the role of a prophetic, nonresistant minority; but Yoder parts from Niebuhr by arguing that this prophetic role is not for a select few but is rather for the church universal, as it witnesses to life in the new aeon. Yoder initially accepted Niebuhr's view that this witness is by definition "apolitical"—since, in their shared view, politics entails coercion. However, in "Peace Without Eschatology?" he rethinks this view and argues that there can be a limited role for the nonresistant church in witnessing to the state.

It is clear that Yoder was not satisfied for long with the way he formulated his response to Niebuhr's challenge in "Peace Without Eschatology?" As Yoder admits in his lectures on "War, Peace, and Revolution," interacting with Niebuhr challenged him to return to the New Testament with a new set of questions—in particular whether it is proper to consider Jesus's pacifism apolitical. At this early stage, his answer still follows Niebuhr's affirmative, but this agreement will not last for long. In a pair of essays delivered in Germany in 1957—subsequently published in 1964 as *Nachfolge Christi als Gestalt politischer Verantwortung* and later translated and published as *Discipleship as*

*Political Responsibility*<sup>89</sup>—Yoder presents the same basic description of the state in the New Testament as he had in his earlier essays. However, within this essentially dualistic framework, Yoder signals some significant shifts in his thinking that result from his study of contemporary New Testament scholarship, including the work of C. H. Dodd, Maurice Goguel, Vincent Taylor, and Yoder’s Basel teacher Oscar Cullmann. Noting the “disunity, or for that matter helplessness of Christians with respect to politics,” Yoder asks: “Does the command to follow Jesus apply for the Christian also in the realm of politics?”<sup>90</sup>

Yoder mentions Niebuhr as an exemplar of the negative answer to this question: “Reinhold Niebuhr declares that the human Jesus is of no relevance for the content of our ethics, since Jesus as a truly prophetic spirit never intended to provide a social ethic; as a result our national life needs to be determined from pagan notions of justice, which we get from the Greco-Roman tradition.”<sup>91</sup> This description is somewhat misleading since, as we saw in the previous chapter, Niebuhr argued that Jesus is not of *direct* relevance for social ethics, though he held that Jesus’s ethic does offer a basis for both discriminate and

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<sup>89</sup> John Howard Yoder, *Discipleship as Political Responsibility*, translated by Timothy J. Gedder (Herald: Scottdale, PA: 2003). (Hereafter, *DPR*.) Originally published in German as John Howard Yoder, *Nachfolge Christi als Gestalt politischer Verantwortung* (Basel, Switzerland: Agape Verlag, 1964). The acknowledgement from the first edition offers the following note from the publishers about the book’s provenance: “Both of the essays in this book originated in 1957. The first, concerning the state in the New Testament, was presented at the Thomashof Bible Center (near Karlsruhe, Germany) on March 17, 1957, at a convention of the International Mennonite Peace Committee. The second, concerning following Christ as a form of political responsibility, was delivered in Iserlohn (Germany) on July 29, 1957, as the opening address at a theological conference convened for the sake of dialogue between representatives of the German State Church and representatives of the so-called ‘Historic Peace Churches’ (the second Puidoux-Conference)” (*DPR*, 15).

<sup>90</sup> Yoder, *DPR*, 51, 52.

<sup>91</sup> Yoder, *DPR*, 52.

indiscriminate criticisms of social policies. Yoder also overstates his case when he writes that “Niebuhr is to be given a great deal of credit for admitting the non-christian character of this approach.”<sup>92</sup> Again, we saw in the previous chapter that Niebuhr actually argued that questions of social justice cannot be solved “in *purely* Christian terms.”<sup>93</sup> Nevertheless, Yoder is clearly distancing himself from Niebuhr when he offers a relatively unqualified affirmative answer to the question of whether it is possible to follow Jesus in the realm of politics. As we will see, by distancing himself from Niebuhr, Yoder begins to sound increasingly like Rauschenbusch.

As with both Niebuhr and Rauschenbusch, Yoder stresses the ethical aspects of Jesus’s life over “abstract concepts which are correct and useful, but which do not yet tell us how we are to act in the world.” Such concepts, Yoder claims, “need to be filled with the historicity of Jesus Christ.”<sup>94</sup> Thus, argues Yoder, “According to the New Testament, Jesus’ death was not some kind of metaphysical experience in itself, as some theories of atonement claim; rather it was a perfect ethical act, the highpoint of Christ’s obedience.”<sup>95</sup>

On the question of “whether Jesus was a political person at all,” Yoder draws from contemporary New Testament scholarship to portray Jesus as “from beginning to end, a political person.”<sup>96</sup> As opposed to what Yoder calls “edifying exegesis,” Yoder

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<sup>92</sup> Yoder, *DPR*, 52.

<sup>93</sup> Emphasis added.

<sup>94</sup> Yoder, *DPR*, 54.

<sup>95</sup> Yoder, *DPR*, 58. Yoder cites Hebrews 5:8ff. and Philippians 2 in this context.

<sup>96</sup> Yoder, *DPR*, 54, 57.

follows contemporary “political exegesis” in order to demonstrate that Jesus’s temptations were, in fact, political; his teaching on the Kingdom was the most “politically colored word he could have chosen”; “his deeds were of highest political relevance”; his triumphal entry into Jerusalem was “a large-scale political demonstration”; and, perhaps most importantly, “the cross of Christ was a highly political experience.”<sup>97</sup> Thus, argues Yoder, “At the same time both highly political in his kingdom message and also to outward appearances non-political in his rejection of the most readily available political means of setting up his kingdom, he died (just as we die today) because people were not willing to recognize (as we also do not want to recognize) that ‘political’ does not always mean ‘governmental.’”<sup>98</sup> As this quote indicates, Yoder argues that just as Jesus’s cross was “the cost of his obedience in the midst of a rebellious world” so too his disciples should expect to suffer as a result of their participation with Christ: “It will be no different for us.”<sup>99</sup>

Once Yoder introduces the language of “politics” into his vocabulary, it is only a matter of time before that language becomes the primary grid through which he interprets all three of the theological themes we have been considering. In his 1964 text, *The Christian Witness to the State*, he writes, “The church is herself a society. Her very existence, the fraternal relations of her members, their ways of dealing with their

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<sup>97</sup> Yoder, *DPR*, 57, 55, 57, 56, 60.

<sup>98</sup> Yoder, *DPR*, 57.

<sup>99</sup> Yoder, *DPR*, 57.

differences and their needs are, or rather should be, a demonstration of what love means in social relations.”<sup>100</sup> For Yoder, this is now best explained in the language of politics:

In modern usage the application of the term *political* to the state rather than to the church is so well established that it cannot be combatted. It leads to a distortion, however, for in biblical thought the church is properly a political entity, a *polis*. In both biblical languages the word *church* (*qahal*, *ekklesia*) refers originally to a deliberative assembly of the body politic. Though the disparagement of the cultic and the priestly elements in the old covenant has gone too far in some recent theology, it does remain true that biblical language about Christ and the church is more political (kingdom, Messiah, New Jerusalem, *politeuma*) than cultic. In this root sense, therefore, the church is more truly political, i.e., a truer, more profoundly ordered community, than is the state.<sup>101</sup>

Although he here applies political language to the church, Yoder still retains a (modified) dichotomy between church and state or secular society. He thus writes that the demonstration of the church “cannot be transposed directly into non-Christian society, for in the church [this demonstration] functions only on the basis of repentance and faith; yet by analogy certain of its aspects may be instructive as stimuli to the conscience of society.”<sup>102</sup> Yoder mentions the church’s “egalitarian thrust,” its “sober realism about the temptations of power and the persistence of sin in the life even of the righteous,” and its

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<sup>100</sup> John Howard Yoder, *The Christian Witness to the State* (Herald: Scottdale, PA: 2002), 17. (Hereafter, *CWS*.) This book was not published until 1964, but, as the foreword to that edition written by the Institute of Mennonite studies director, Cornelius J. Dyck, notes: “Most of the material in this study was first prepared and brought together in 1955 as a work paper in preparation for a study conference on ‘The Lordship of Christ Over Church and State’ held in July of that year in Puidoux, Switzerland. It was reworked as part of a study assignment given to Mr. Yoder by the Institute of Mennonite Studies in 1958–1959, with the collaboration of an advisory group . . . . The text is maintained largely in the form which arose through this communal study process” (ibid., 4). Yoder begins the book with a quote from “Peace Without Eschatology?” after which he writes: “This pamphlet is fundamentally an exposition of the claim made in the paragraphs quoted above; namely, that it is possible for the Christian or the Christian church to address to the social order at larger or to the state criticisms and suggestions concerning the way in which the state fulfills its responsibility for the maintenance of order” (ibid., 5). At the same time, he begins to distance himself a bit from his earlier essay when he notes, for example, that his argument “is a corrective, not to the position sketched there, but to its language” (ibid., 22n6).

<sup>101</sup> Yoder, *CWS*, 17–18.

<sup>102</sup> Yoder, *CWS*, 17.

consensus decisionmaking as examples of Christian practices that might have secular analogies.<sup>103</sup> In addition, he notes that a “creative impulse should radiate from the church’s services to the larger community” that might result in secular institutions, such as schools and hospitals. The church, argues Yoder, has often been “the ‘pilot’ creating experimentally new ways of meeting social needs which, once their utility has been proved, can be institutionalized and generalized under the authority of the secular powers.”<sup>104</sup> Through these and other ways, suggests Yoder, “there must be through the years a sort of moral osmosis, whereby the secular world finds itself recognizing certain general moral values to which it has no spiritual or logical commitment.”<sup>105</sup>

As in “Peace Without Eschatology?” the basis for this analogy between church and society is eschatological. Yoder writes that “the church and the reign of Christ will one day be englobed in the same kingdom. That kingdom will mean the victory of the church and the overcoming of the world; as anticipation of that consummation it is possible for the potentially victorious order to testify to the potentially vanquished order concerning the absolute norm which is valid for both and in contradiction to which the world will never succeed in building even a stable temporal order.”<sup>106</sup> Indeed, this is the basis for the ability of the non-resistant Christian to “witness” to the statesperson, despite their differing convictions.

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<sup>103</sup> Yoder, *CWS*, 18–19.

<sup>104</sup> Yoder, *CWS*, 19.

<sup>105</sup> Yoder, *CWS*, 20–21.

<sup>106</sup> Yoder, *CWS*, 17.

Yoder cites Niebuhr as precedent for the use of “middle axioms” or concepts that “translate into meaningful and concrete terms the general relevance of the lordship of Christ for a given social ethical issue”—although the term “middle axiom” itself did not originate with Niebuhr.<sup>107</sup> Yoder’s use of middle axioms as a means of “mediat[ing] between general principles of Christological ethics and the concrete problems of political application” beckons back to the “primary issue” Niebuhr raised in *An Interpretation of Christian Ethics*: “how it is possible to derive a social ethic from the absolute ethic of the gospels.”<sup>108</sup> As with Niebuhr, Yoder notes, “Since Christian social critique finds its standards in the kingdom of God—for there are no other standards—the logical conclusion of their consistent application would be the Kingdom”; also following Niebuhr, he continues, “but the whole reason for our present discussion is the fact that the Kingdom is not an available possibility, lying beyond both the capacities and intentions of fallen society.”<sup>109</sup> Middle axioms, then, allow the Christian to draw from the standard of the Kingdom, the absolute ethic of the gospels, in order to address contemporary issues.

Yoder’s explication of middle axioms often sounds strikingly Niebuhrian:

In the action of the Christian social analyst, attempting to apply his middle axioms to the changing contemporary scene, we shall expect that his judgments will usually coincide with the best informed secular analysis. . . . We can explain theological evaluations which by and large are confirmed by the most objective of those who analyze similar problems on common-sense grounds. . . .

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<sup>107</sup> Yoder, *CWS*, 32. Cf. *CWS*, 33n3 for reference to Niebuhr’s use. In *Social Ethics in the Making: Interpreting an American Tradition* (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), Gary Dorrien credits John C. Bennett for developing “the theory of ‘middle axioms’ that Niebuhr partly adopted” (3); Max Stackhouse also notes James Luther Adams frequent use of the theory (“Eschatology and Ethical Method,” 11).

<sup>108</sup> Niebuhr, *ICE*, 9.

<sup>109</sup> Yoder, *CWS*, 39.



Christian realism about the nature of man and the state will first of all insist on the impossibility of the “crusade.” . . . The interest of peace is not best served by domination of the world even by an utterly benevolent nation, such as each of the major contenders in our day pretends to be, but rather by a controlled balance of power.<sup>110</sup>

To those accustomed to reading Yoder’s thought as rival to Niebuhr’s, such wholesale use of Niebuhr’s categories in this quote can seem strange. However, as we have seen, Yoder himself was never wholly critical of Niebuhr. In his early essay on Niebuhr, Yoder noted significant agreements between Niebuhr and himself before proceeding to criticisms. The same is true of *The Christian Witness to the State*. Toward the end of the book, Yoder lists eight approaches to “the intellectual problem of relating the needs of statesmanship to the standards of the gospel.”<sup>111</sup> Aside from his own proposed view, the only other individual thinker that he includes in his list is Niebuhr, whom he introduces as “without a doubt” the “contemporary thinker who has given the most careful attention to the subject we are dealing with.”<sup>112</sup> He describes how Niebuhr is able to “synthesize these otherwise irreconcilable views” and “has actually solved some of the problems raised by the other views.”<sup>113</sup> Indeed, Yoder’s own proposal follows Niebuhr’s approach closely, with one major exception that we have already noted: Yoder, unlike Niebuhr, maintains a sharp distinction between the church and world and allows for the standards of the world to be less than those of the church. Yoder thus writes: “The individual citizen or statesmen in the world of unbelief cannot see through the wall that separates

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<sup>110</sup> Yoder, *CWS*, 45.

<sup>111</sup> Yoder, *CWS*, 60.

<sup>112</sup> Yoder, *CWS*, 66. The other six views he discusses are Medieval, Classical Lutheran, Calvinist/Puritan, Liberal Pacifist, Jehovah’s Witnesses, and Traditional Amish-Mennonite.

<sup>113</sup> Yoder, *CWS*, 67.

him from the world of faith. Therefore the point at which the norm of *agape* is understandable and relevant to him is not the top of the scale on his side of the barrier of unbelief. Looking directly up he can see only a cloud, within which he fears there might lie an ideal demand for self-sacrifice, which he understands as suicide, i.e., not a meaningful alternative.”<sup>114</sup> Thus Yoder proposes using middle axioms in which “the norm is formulated for him in pagan terms (liberty, equality, fraternity, education, democracy, human rights).”<sup>115</sup>

Such a proposal is not so much a rejection of Niebuhr’s view, then, as it is an adaption of it to account for Yoder’s ecclesial difference. Yoder concludes the book by noting the “striking,” though only “apparent” agreements “between the Niebuhrian and Mennonite positions” and argues that “the mandate for a position different from both, not a mere inconsistent mixture of both but recognizing additional dimensions, has been the subject of the entire pamphlet.”<sup>116</sup> While Yoder writes off an earlier generation of Mennonites for the “psychological defensiveness” and “intellectual subservience” displayed in their acceptance of Niebuhr’s arguments, he neglects to note in this context the extent to which his own position is conditioned by Niebuhr’s logic.<sup>117</sup> He concludes his book by arguing that, rather than choosing a side in preexisting debates, “the wiser

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<sup>114</sup> Yoder, *CWS*, 72–73.

<sup>115</sup> Yoder, *CWS*, 73.

<sup>116</sup> Yoder, *CWS*, 89.

<sup>117</sup> As Yoder writes near the conclusion of the book in another context: “An adolescent is never so clearly his father’s child as in the way he chooses to prove his independence” (*CWS*, 88). In this context Yoder is describing how contemporary ecumenical thought on social ethics follows much of the logic of pietism, despite the former’s explicit repudiation of the latter.

approach is to question the definitions.”<sup>118</sup> As Yoder continues to wrestle with the questions and terms bequeathed to him by Niebuhr—which up till now he has largely accepted—that is precisely the approach he will take.

In his most famous work, *The Politics of Jesus*, Yoder abandons his earlier view that Jesus was concerned with “people” and not “politics.” Yoder now criticizes those who read Jesus as offering a “radical personalization of all ethical problems” in which “the ethic of Jesus [has] no intention to speak substantially to the problems of complex organization, of institutions and offices, cliques and power and crowds.”<sup>119</sup> In place of the disjunction between personal and political, he now tests “the hypothesis that the ministry and the claims of Jesus are best understood as presenting to hearers and readers not the avoidance of political options, but one particular social-political-ethical option,” and unsurprisingly he argues in the affirmative: “Jesus is, according to the biblical witness, a model of radical political action.”<sup>120</sup>

Once again, Niebuhr serves as a backdrop for Yoder’s argument. With a clear nod to Niebuhr, Yoder writes that his goal is “to let the Jesus story so speak that the person concerned with social ethics, as accustomed as such a person is to a set of standard ways to assume Jesus not be relevant to social issues, or at least not relevant *immediately*, can hear.”<sup>121</sup> In contrast to Niebuhr’s argument that Jesus’s ethic is too absolute to serve as a

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<sup>118</sup> Yoder, *CWS*, 90.

<sup>119</sup> Yoder, *PJ*, 6.

<sup>120</sup> Yoder, *PJ*, 11, 2.

<sup>121</sup> Yoder, *PJ*, 2, emphasis original. Yoder makes this connection explicit in a footnote: The wide visibility of the question dealt with in this book goes at least to the writings of the brothers Niebuhr in the 1930s; yet it reaches a new height of intensity in the current of ecumenical thought on political ethics” (*PJ*, 3, n.4).

model for social ethics, Yoder sets out “to sketch an understanding of Jesus and his ministry of which it might be said that such a Jesus would be of direct significance for social ethics” and that such an ethic is “not only relevant but also normative for a contemporary Christian social ethic.”<sup>122</sup> Thus, even in Yoder’s most well-known work, we find him continuing to wrestle through the questions and categories inherited from Niebuhr. We might even say that *The Politics of Jesus* marks the culmination of Yoder’s interaction with Niebuhr, while also serving as a springboard for his later writings. In that sense, I think it is best to view this work as a pivot in Yoder’s career rather than the definitive statement of his political theology.

### *Conclusion*

In this chapter I have attempted to complicate the common reading of Yoder as marking a radical break from Reinhold Niebuhr’s theology. While they certainly had a number of disagreements, I have sought to demonstrate that these disagreements were predicated on more fundamental theological continuities. Indeed, their disagreements are so poignant precisely because of the consonance between their thought. I have examined Yoder’s earliest works to show that, although Yoder disagreed with Niebuhr’s rejection of pacifism, he nevertheless developed his own theological views in interaction with Niebuhr’s, which led to a number of striking similarities. In the 1950s Yoder agrees with Niebuhr that Jesus is best understood as apolitical and that the church therefore must translate Jesus’s message into political terms in order to speak to the statesperson in a way that she could understand. As Yoder develops this view, he adopts the same category

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<sup>122</sup> Yoder, *PJ*, 11.

earlier used by Niebuhr, that of middle axioms, in order to describe how this translation process might take place. At this point Yoder still agrees with Niebuhr that Jesus's ethic, as with the eschatological ideal of the kingdom, is not directly applicable to the social order and thus requires being translated into "pagan terms" in order to be understood.

In making his case for the *direct* political relevance of Jesus's life and teaching in *The Politics of Jesus*, Yoder distances himself further from the positions that he had earlier shared with Niebuhr in "Peace without Eschatology?" and *The Christian Witness to the State*. Nevertheless, even at this stage, the question that motivates Yoder's project remains the one raised by Niebuhr in the 1930s: how to relate Jesus's ethic to a contemporary social ethic. As Yoder continues to wrestle with this question in his later years, the answers he offers will sound increasingly like those offered by Rauschenbusch, as we will see in the next chapter.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### Looping Back: Yoder's Social (Ethics as) Gospel

*His conscious and unconscious disciples are uncountable, for he opened a new era in the thought and effort of American Christianity, and many who share it now have no idea how deeply indebted they are to Walter Rauschenbusch.*

—Harry Emerson Fosdick

There is little doubt that the publication of John Howard Yoder's *The Politics of Jesus* in 1972 marks a turning point in the narrative of twentieth-century political theology. The question this chapter seeks to answer is the direction in which it turned. Was the christological, eschatological, and ecclesial approach offered by Yoder a turn in a new direction that signaled a move away from the tradition of liberal Protestantism? Or was it a return to a position already taken up in that tradition? Certainly these alternatives are presented here too starkly. It is internal to the nature of theological inquiry and theological speech to build on what has come before, while contributing something new to the discussion. Perhaps instead of stark alternatives, then, the question is better posed in terms of emphases.

In the case of Yoder's political theology, the emphasis has tended to land on the newness of Yoder's position—at least relative to what came before it in the tradition of Protestant liberalism. Yoder himself argued in the introduction to *The Politics of Jesus* that he was doing little more than recovering the New Testament view of Jesus as understood by the prevailing New Testament scholarship of his day. Yet, that strategic argument did little to dissuade readers from appreciating the way Yoder's creative use of

those sources marked an alternative to the options in political theology on offer at that time, which Yoder describes in the introduction to the book. Indeed, the way Yoder lays out the options there is designed to emphasize the newness of what will follow in the remainder of the book. As Yoder describes in the preface to the first edition, “What the present volume offers is a late ripening, in the field of ethics, of the same biblical realist revolution, in which precisely ecclesiology and eschatology come to have a new import for the substance of ethics.”<sup>1</sup> In particular, as we saw in the previous chapter, he seems intent on distinguishing his approach from that of Reinhold Niebuhr, who would have just died the year before publication and whose influence arguably would have loomed even larger in the field of political theology than it does today.<sup>2</sup>

As Gary Dorrien notes, by situating his argument over against both orthodox readings that ignored Jesus’s social ethic and modern thinkers who denied Jesus had a social ethic, Yoder “ignored thinkers who did not fit this picture, such as Rauschenbusch.”<sup>3</sup> But ignoring such thinkers is different than rejecting them. In this chapter I argue that by self-consciously attempting to distance himself from Niebuhr, Yoder formulates a theological outlook that closely resembles Rauschenbusch’s. In the previous chapter, I argued that Yoder’s early political theology arose in part out of

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<sup>1</sup> John Howard Yoder, *The Politics of Jesus*, 2d ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1994), x. (Hereafter, *PJ*.)

<sup>2</sup> Niebuhr’s name appears three times in the footnotes to the introduction, including once in the epilogue to the introduction added in the second edition (3n4; 5n9; and 18n37). Yoder also makes glancing references to Niebuhr’s theological ethics in the text itself, such as when he refers to “a set of standard ways to assume Jesus not to be relevant to social ethics, or at least not relevant *immediately*” (2), or when he speaks of those who insist on developing a social ethic based on “what is ‘relevant’ and what is ‘effective’” and on being “‘realistic’ and ‘responsible’” (8).

<sup>3</sup> Gary Dorrien, *Social Ethics in the Making: Interpreting an American Tradition* (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), 465.

interaction with Niebuhr's thought, from which Yoder inherited a number of theological categories while at the same time attempting to distancing himself from some of Niebuhr's ethical positions. I traced the development of Yoder's thought from his early writings in the 1950s through the publication of *The Politics of Jesus* in 1972, showing ways that Yoder adopted some of Niebuhr's theological categories while reacting against others. In this chapter I turn to Yoder's later writings of the 1980s and 1990s to demonstrate the ways in which Yoder's distancing himself from Niebuhr ultimately results in his mature political theology "looping back" in a number of ways to Rauschenbusch's.

In his essay "The Authority of Tradition," Yoder speaks of tradition not as a "handing-on process" or "family tree" but rather as a process of "perpetual reform" or "looping back" to what came before in order to offer a "midcourse correction" in the present.<sup>4</sup> Following this understanding of tradition, my argument is less about the direct influence of Rauschenbusch on Yoder (of which little can be found) and more about the ways that Yoder's "midcourse correction" formally parallels corrective moves made earlier by Rauschenbusch. Yoder indirectly acknowledges this connection in his description of his "looping back" project: "Within the last century, and for many of us within the generation, there has been a fundamental paradigm shift in the readiness to see the Gospel story in particular, and the biblical revelatory story in general, as social and political."<sup>5</sup> As we saw in Chapter Two, this "fundamental paradigm shift" was the impetus behind Rauschenbusch's formulation of the social gospel a century prior to

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<sup>4</sup> John Howard Yoder, *The Priestly Kingdom: Social Ethics as Gospel* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984), 65, 69. (Hereafter, *PK*.)

<sup>5</sup> Yoder, *PK*, 70–71.



Yoder's comment. Read in this light, Yoder's "midcourse correction" to twentieth-century Protestant liberalism can be understood as rejuvenating an earlier option within this tradition rather than offering a radical break from the tradition altogether.

As I described in the previous chapter, *The Politics of Jesus* is the culmination of nearly two decades of wrestling with the thought of Niebuhr, who argued that Jesus was an apolitical figure. For the remainder of his career, Yoder continues to develop the book's main thesis—"that Jesus is, according to the biblical witness, a model of radical political action"<sup>6</sup>—but his subsequent developments are not constrained by a need for consistency with positions taken in the *The Politics of Jesus* or writings prior to it. Turning our attention to Yoder's later work, I now discuss an essay on each of the theological themes under consideration. For Yoder's mature Christology, I discuss his essay "But We Do See Jesus"; for his mature eschatology, I discuss his essay "To Serve Our God and to Rule the World"; and for his mature ecclesiology, I discuss his essay "Sacrament as Social Process." Following my discussion of these essays, I describe the broader contours of Yoder's mature political theology emerging out of these essays.

### *Jesus as a Model of Radical Political Action*

In the fall of 1980, Yoder gave the keynote address for a conference at Bluffton College on the theme "Is there a Believers' Church Christology?" Originally titled "That Household We Are," the essay was later expanded into one of his major essays in *The Priestly Kingdom*, "But We Do See Jesus: The Particularity of Incarnation and the

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<sup>6</sup> Yoder, *PJ*, 2.

Universality of Truth.”<sup>7</sup> His provocative reflections in this essay have thrust it into the center of debate among Yoder scholars over how to understand his work. For example, although Mark Thiessen Nation and J. Denny Weaver disagree strongly over how to understand Yoder’s relationship to classic orthodox theology and the ecumenical creeds, they each derive support for their respective readings in this essay.<sup>8</sup> Despite disagreement over how to understand this essay, there seems to be consensus that this essay is central to Yoder’s Christology.

In the essay, one of the few in which he steps back to reflect on his theological methodology,<sup>9</sup> Yoder reflects on what it might mean to articulate a “specifically Christian witness” in the context of contemporary “pluralism/relativism.”<sup>10</sup> After quickly dismissing six common strategies, Yoder turns to the New Testament to find “an ancient paradigm” for proclaiming particular truths publicly.<sup>11</sup> Surveying five New Testament passages,<sup>12</sup> Yoder concludes that they share “a syndrome or deep structure,” despite

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<sup>7</sup> John Howard Yoder, “‘But We Do See Jesus’: The Particularity of Incarnation and the Universality of Truth” in *PK*, 46–62. For more background on this paper, see J. Denny Weaver, ed., *John Howard Yoder: Radical Theologian* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2014), 4–5, 66–67.

<sup>8</sup> Mark Thiessen Nation, “The Politics of Yoder Regarding *The Politics of Jesus*: Recovering the Implicit in Yoder’s Holistic Theology for Pacifism,” in *Radical Ecumenicity: Pursuing Unity and Continuity after John Howard Yoder*, edited by John C. Nugent (Abilene, TX: Abilene Christian University Press, 2010), 51n9; id., “The ‘The ‘Ecumenical’ and ‘Cosmopolitan’ Yoder: A Critical Engagement with *Nonviolence – A Brief History* and Its Editors,” *Conrad Grebel Review* 29 no. 3 (Fall 2011): 76–77; Weaver, *John Howard Yoder*, 4–5.

<sup>9</sup> For a posthumous collection of such essays, which includes this one, see John Howard Yoder, *A Pacifist Way of Knowing: John Howard Yoder’s Nonviolent Epistemology*, edited by Christian E. Early and Ted Grimsrud (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2010).

<sup>10</sup> Yoder, *PK*, 46, 47.

<sup>11</sup> Yoder, *PK*, 49.

<sup>12</sup> The prologue to the Gospel of John (1:1–14); The Epistle to the Hebrews; the Epistle to Colossians; the first vision of the Apocalypse (Rev. 4:1–5:4); and the hymn recorded in Philippians 2.

being written independently of each other.<sup>13</sup> In each of these passages, argues Yoder, the author

- (1) “becomes quite at home in the new linguistic world, using its language and facing its questions”;
- (2) “places Jesus above the cosmos, in charge of it”;
- (3) concentrates “upon being rejected and suffering in human form, beneath the cosmic hierarchy, as that which accredits Christ for his lordship”;
- (4) calls the reader “to enter into . . . the self-emptying and the death—and only by that path, and by grace, the resurrection—of the Son”;
- (5) affirms “what later confession called preexistence, co-essentiality with the Father, possession of the image of God, and the participation of the Son in creation and providence” as that which stands “behind the cosmic victory, enabling it”; and
- (6) proclaims that “the writer and the readers of these messages share by faith in all that that victory means.”<sup>14</sup>

For Yoder, this process of entering into another’s linguistic world does not make that world “the definitional category, which the church comes along to join up with, approve, and embellish with some correctives and complements.”<sup>15</sup> “The Rule of God is the basic category,” he writes. “The rebellious but already (in principle) defeated cosmos is being brought to its knees by the Lamb. The development of a high Christology is the natural cultural ricochet of a missionary ecclesiology when it collides as it must with whatever cosmology explains and governs the world it invades.”<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Yoder, *PK*, 53.

<sup>14</sup> Yoder, *PK*, 53.

<sup>15</sup> Yoder, *PK*, 54.

<sup>16</sup> Yoder, *PK*, 54.

Yoder calls the approach he finds in these apostolic samples “evangelical,” by which he means that the messenger brings good news to its host culture: “The message cannot remain in the ghetto because the good news by its very nature is for and about the world. The good news is not information which will remain true even if people in a ghetto celebrate it only for themselves; it is about a community-building story for which the world beyond the ghetto is half of the reconciling event.”<sup>17</sup> As the bearers of good news go out into their host culture, the question for Yoder is not about whether to use the language of the host culture but rather “how in the transition to render anew the genuine pertinence of the proclamation of Christ’s Lordship, even in a context (*particularly* in a context) where even the notion of such sovereignty is questionable.”<sup>18</sup>

When moving from the language worlds of the apostolic writers to “the language world of pluralism/relativism,” Yoder argues that we should not ask “whether we can translate into our time from theirs the notion of preexistence or of the participation of the Son in creation.” “That,” he claims, “would be to contrast the rules of the two language worlds instead of finding a message to express within both.”<sup>19</sup> While the contemporary Christian will still want to proclaim that “Jesus is Messiah and Lord,” the question for Yoder is: “how do you say that in pluralist/relativist language?”<sup>20</sup> He answers that “we shall not ask whether Christianity, or Jesus, or anything, is absolute or unique or

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<sup>17</sup> Yoder, *PK*, 55.

<sup>18</sup> Yoder, *PK*, 56, emphasis original.

<sup>19</sup> Yoder, *PK*, 56.

<sup>20</sup> Yoder, *PK*, 56.

universal in some way that could be supported, kept dry about the waves of relativity.”<sup>21</sup>

Instead he asks: “What then can we do to transpose faithfully into a self-contained immanent frame the equivalence of the ‘Christ is Lord’ claim, in some continuity with what it meant in the first-century context, where all parties to the conversation lived in cosmologies with the top open for transcendent validation?”<sup>22</sup>

After considering a number of possible approaches, Yoder offers his proposal:

For our world it will be in his ordinariness as villager, as rabbi, as king on a donkey, and as liberator on a cross that we shall be able to express the claims which the apostolic proclaimers to Hellenism expressed in the language of preexistence and condescension. This is not to lower our sights or to retract our proclamation. It is to renew the description of Christ crucified as the wisdom and the power of God. This is the low road to general validity. It frees us from needing to be apologetic in either the popular or the technical sense. It thereby frees us to use any language, to enter any world in which people eat bread and pursue debtors, hope for power and execute subversives. The ordinariness of the humanness of Jesus is the warrant for the generalizability of his reconciliation. The nonterritorial particularity of his Jewishness defends us against selling out to *any* wider world’s claim to be really wider, or to be self-validating.<sup>23</sup>

Yoder’s argument, expressed quite poignantly in this passage, is that in the contemporary pluralist/relativist world, the way to speak of Jesus is by transposing Christological claims into immanent, historical, ethical categories. He holds that these statements about the humanness of Jesus can carry a functionally equivalent message to that which was expressed by the apostles in the Hellenistic language of “preexistence and condescension.”

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<sup>21</sup> Yoder, *PK*, 56–57.

<sup>22</sup> Yoder, *PK*, 57.

<sup>23</sup> Yoder, *PK*, 62, emphasis original.

But the issue is not merely one of updating the prior Hellenistic language into more contemporary language. According to Yoder, “Reality always was pluralistic and relativistic, that is, historical. The idea that it could be otherwise was itself an illusion laid on us by Greek ontology language, Roman sovereignty language, and other borrowings from the Germans, Moors, and the other rulers of Europe.”<sup>24</sup> In other words, it is not only valid to speak of Jesus in immanent, historical, ethical categories in a contemporary context; that always has been the only valid way to speak of Jesus. It is fitting that Yoder should thus conclude: “The real issue is not whether Jesus can make sense in a world far from Galilee, but whether—when he meets us in our world, as he does in fact—we want to follow him. We don’t have to, as they didn’t then. That we don’t have to is the profoundest proof of his condescension, and thereby of his glory.”<sup>25</sup> The “real issue” for Yoder’s mature Christology thus turns out to be the same as Rauschenbusch’s fundamental Christological question that we observed in Chapter Two: Will one respond to the Galilean prophet with denial or loyalty? As with Rauschenbusch, so too for Yoder all questions of Christ’s nature and preexistence, though not entirely dismissed as irrelevant, have nevertheless been relativized and relegated to a secondary status behind the sociopolitical question. Whereas in his earliest writings Yoder had insisted on the uniqueness of Jesus and the community that formed around him, he now eschews language of uniqueness and attempts instead to transpose the meaning of Christ’s lordship into a contemporary immanentist political idiom that is accessible to those living in a postmodern or relativistic society.

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<sup>24</sup> Yoder, *PK*, 59.

<sup>25</sup> Yoder, *PK*, 62.

### *Eschatology as Apocalyptic Vision of History*

In January of 1988, Yoder gave the presidential address to the Annual Meeting of the Society of Christian Ethics at Duke University. His address “To Serve Our God and to Rule the World” was published in the 1988 *Annual for the Society of Christian Ethics* and reprinted in *The Royal Priesthood*.<sup>26</sup> In this essay Yoder invokes the language of “apocalyptic” in place of “eschatology,” although elsewhere he uses these terms almost interchangeably. For example, in a pair of essays on eschatology from this same period—“Armaments and Eschatology” and “Ethics and Eschatology”<sup>27</sup>—Yoder focuses almost exclusively on the apocalyptic genre. As we saw in the previous chapter, in his early essay “Peace Without Eschatology?” Yoder had described apocalyptic as “preoccupation . . . with prediction for the sake of prediction” and eschatology as concerned with “the meaning of the *eschaton* for present history.” In his essays on eschatology from the late 1980s, he has blurred that distinction significantly. He mentions that biblical scholars debate how to define and distinguish “the concepts of prophecy, apocalyptic, and eschatology” but reasons that making such distinctions is not his role as an ethicist.<sup>28</sup> Instead, he elects to “use the still courser metaphor of ‘vision’” to describe the role of the “ancient seers” of biblical apocalyptic.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> John Howard Yoder, “To Serve Our God and to Rule the World,” *The Annual for the Society of Christian Ethics 1988* (Georgetown University Press, 1988): 3–14; reprinted in *RP*, 127–40. Subsequent references are to the *RP* edition of this essay (hereafter, SGRW).

<sup>27</sup> John Howard Yoder, “Armaments and Eschatology,” *Studies in Christian Ethics* 1 (1988): 43–61; John Howard Yoder, “Ethics and Eschatology,” *Ex auditu* 6 (1990): 119–28.

<sup>28</sup> Yoder, “Armaments and Eschatology,” 47.

<sup>29</sup> Yoder, “Ethics and Eschatology,” 119, 120.

Throughout the essay Yoder focuses on the vision recorded in Revelation 5:7–10 of the Lamb breaking the seal of the scroll. He reflects at length on what it means “to see history doxologically,” as “in the metaphor of this cultic vision.”<sup>30</sup> He describes doxology as “a way of seeing; a grasp of which end is up, which way is forward”<sup>31</sup> and speaks “first of the cosmic story as the apostolic seer saw it, and only derivatively of an ethic which we might distill out of it.”<sup>32</sup> For Yoder, ethics “always is and always properly should be in the service of some cosmic commitment or other.”<sup>33</sup>

True to Yoder’s typical form, the essay proceeds by way of nine points regarding what it means “to see history doxologically.”<sup>34</sup> First, to see history doxologically, according to Yoder’s reading of Revelation 5, “meant for John’s addresses that their primordial role within the geopolitics of the *Pax Romana* was neither to usurp the throne of Nero or Vespasian, Domitian or Trajan, nor to pastor Caesar prophetically, but to preserve in celebrating the Lamb’s lordship and in building the community shaped by that celebration.”<sup>35</sup> According to Yoder, the early church viewed themselves as participating in the rule of the Lamb in their present time rather than awaiting a Christian takeover of the Roman Empire or the catastrophic end of the world. They were “concerned with the present age,” writes Yoder. “Our strophe [Rev. 5:7–10], the ‘new

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<sup>30</sup> Yoder, SGRW, 128.

<sup>31</sup> Yoder, SGRW, 129.

<sup>32</sup> Yoder, SGRW, 129.

<sup>33</sup> Yoder, SGRW, 129.

<sup>34</sup> J. Alexander Sider adopts this line for the title of his book *To See History Doxologically: History and Holiness in John Howard Yoder’s Ecclesiology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2011).

<sup>35</sup> Yoder, SGRW, 130.



song' elicited by the work of the Lamb, describes the seer's present, the same age in which people of every tribe and tongue are being called into a new community. It is not about a future, either organic and therefore distant, or imminent and therefore catastrophic. It has to be taken as a statement about their own time, the late first or early second century, and about what they were then involved in doing."<sup>36</sup> For these early believers, Christ's lordship—and the believers' participation in Christ's kingly rule—was a statement about the present, not merely the future. Yoder writes that it "is quite possible to 'demythologize'" such affirmations or to "translate or transpose that language into the form of a statement understandable to moderns," though he contends that that is not the concern of his essay.<sup>37</sup> Yoder is attempting to describe how the original author and addressees would have understood the apocalyptic vision; though, as we will see below, he eventually does turn to its concrete meaning for his modern audience.

To see history doxologically, second, "is to be empowered and obligated to discern, down through the centuries, which historical developments can be welcomed as progress in the light of the Rule of the Lamb and which as setbacks."<sup>38</sup> Yoder argues that, since "not all historical movement is forward," "there must be criteria, themselves part of history yet discernable within it, whereby to discriminate between the setbacks and the steps forward."<sup>39</sup> These criteria, argues Yoder, come through the events of Christ's life and death: "The image of a slaughtered Lamb is no empty cipher; it is the code reference,

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<sup>36</sup> Yoder, SGRW, 131.

<sup>37</sup> Yoder, SGRW, 132.

<sup>38</sup> Yoder, SGRW, 132.

<sup>39</sup> Yoder, SGRW, 132.

utterly transparent to John's addressees, to the simple narrative substance of the work and the words—not the words without the work nor the work without the words—of that particular Palestinian populist, in all of his Jewishness and all of his patience.”<sup>40</sup> Here we see a link between Yoder's mature Christology and his mature eschatology. It is in the recognition of Jesus's “ordinariness as villager, as rabbi, as king on a donkey, and as liberator on a cross” that one can begin to discern the meaning and direction of history.

To see history doxologically means for Yoder, third, “to appropriate as did Jesus the full and patent ambivalence of the Jewish experience with the usability of majesty, whether Canaanite kingdoms or Mesopotamian empires, as instruments of Divine rule.”<sup>41</sup> For Yoder this ambivalence is rooted in the Jewish tradition and becomes solidified with the prophet Jeremiah and the diaspora existence of the Jews. “*In this respect* there was then nothing original about the political stance of Jesus in the Gospels,” writes Yoder, “or of John or his addressees in the Apocalypse.”<sup>42</sup> What was new for Christians was that they incorporated Gentiles into their community and that they viewed the principalities and powers under Christ's lordship—not that they accepted minority status as in some sense normative. For Christians, as for Jews in Babylon, the acceptance of minority status came with the mandate for “ordinary cultural creativity” or, in the words of Jeremiah, the mandate to “work for the good of the country.”<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> Yoder, SGRW, 133.

<sup>41</sup> Yoder, SGRW, 133.

<sup>42</sup> Yoder, SGRW, 134, emphasis original.

<sup>43</sup> Yoder, SGRW, 134.

Yoder argues, fourth, that to see history doxologically “is to learn to claim for the Gospel its share of credit for the democratizing thrusts which have created in North Atlantic societies more space for political dialogue than ever or anywhere before.”<sup>44</sup> With this point Yoder shifts from describing the meaning of the hymn in Revelation 5 for its addressees to describing its implications for modern Christians. While noting that the Enlightenment contributed to the development of modern democracy, Yoder credits a number of nonviolent “sectarian” Christian groups—including the sixteenth-century Anabaptists and later Quakers such as William Penn—with helping to “shape society” in the direction of democracy.<sup>45</sup>

Yoder continues with contemporary application in his fifth point: “To discern our moral setting doxologically is to learn to derive behavior from Good News, not from the concern for justification.”<sup>46</sup> Yoder’s concern is that social ethics and gospel—“good news”—not be separated: “The ascription of blessedness is inseparable from the proclamation of the Kingdom’s imminence.” “That action is right which fits the shape of the Kingdom to come,” he adds. “Moral validation is derived from the imminent Kingdom which Jesus announces, not from the righteous state of affairs our action promises to bring about.”<sup>47</sup>

For Yoder, ethics is a form of “proclamation or celebration,” that is, a form of doxology. He thus reasons, sixth, that to see history doxologically “is to see the present in

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<sup>44</sup> Yoder, SGRW, 135.

<sup>45</sup> Yoder, SGRW, 136.

<sup>46</sup> Yoder, SGRW, 136.

<sup>47</sup> Yoder, SGRW, 136.

its liturgical setting,” and relatedly, seventh, “to own the Lamb’s victory in one’s own time.”<sup>48</sup> Doxological vision is for Yoder a form of moral discernment, especially for the minority community. Yoder mentions Martin Luther King Jr. and the civil rights movement as an example of how “progress in history is borne by the underdogs.” He writes, “It took the churches of the underdogs to move the churches and the synagogues of the comfortable—and then only some of them—to support the most modest steps toward the most elementary public morality in matters of race.”<sup>49</sup>

Since not all movements for peace and justice are successful, Yoder argues, eighth, that to read history doxologically “means that the criterion most apt for validating a disposition, a decision, an action, is not the predictable success before it but the resurrection behind it, not manipulation but praise.”<sup>50</sup> By making this argument, Yoder is not surrendering the argument for effectiveness over to the pragmatists or consequentialists. For Yoder, “the error is not in thinking teleologically but in being naively or manipulatively determinist.”<sup>51</sup> The resurrection is thus a validation of the view that the universe is not a deterministic, closed system.

Finally, to read history doxologically is “not *Shadenfreude*, rejoicing that somebody got what they had coming,” nor is it “trend-watching.”<sup>52</sup> Rather, it is the moral

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<sup>48</sup> Yoder, SGRW, 136, 137.

<sup>49</sup> Yoder, SGRW, 137.

<sup>50</sup> Yoder, SGRW, 137–38.

<sup>51</sup> Yoder, SGRW, 138.

<sup>52</sup> Yoder, SGRW, 138, 139.

discernment of “the Holy Spirit, discerned as the unity of the entire body.”<sup>53</sup> It is to “celebrate, as we participate in the priestly role and kingly rule by watching our words.” Yoder concludes, “This is our share, modest but irreplaceable, in the public—yea the cosmic—victory that is already assured.”<sup>54</sup>

Paul Martens notes that although Yoder’s 1988 essay “appears to follow in the eschatological strain of ‘Peace Without Eschatology?’” its focus on seeing history doxologically “shifts from attention to the eschaton as something in the future toward attention to Jesus’ lordship in the present.”<sup>55</sup> Indeed, as Martens also notes, Yoder’s distinction between two aeons in his essay from the 1950s is noticeably absent in his 1988 essay. Recall from our discussion in the previous chapter that in “Peace Without Eschatology?” Yoder had followed Niebuhr in describing the present as a time of “tension between two aeons” in which the state—as a product of the old aeon—still serves a providential role of maintaining a “tolerable balance of egoisms” so that the church can live as a foretaste of the new aeon. There he argued that the “new aeon came into history in a decisive way with the incarnation and the entire work of Christ,” that the new aeon has a distinct “social manifestation” from the old aeon, and that “human community (as it exists under the sign of the old aeon) was far from being Jesus’ central concern.” Yoder specifically criticized liberal social gospelers for trying to establish “peace without eschatology”—that is, for attempting to “fuse the two aeons.” Similarly, he criticized Niebuhrian realism for basing its “realistic analysis of the old aeon” and thus

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<sup>53</sup> Yoder, SGRW, 139.

<sup>54</sup> Yoder, SGRW, 140. Following this final line, Yoder quotes Revelation 5:13–14 without any further commentary.

<sup>55</sup> Martens, “Universal History and a Not-Particularly Christian Particularity,” 137.

for not being specifically Christian enough: “If Christ had never become incarnate, died, risen, ascended to heaven, and sent his Spirit, this view would be just as possible, though its particularly clear and objective expression may result partly from certain Christian insights.”<sup>56</sup>

Yet what Yoder had described as vices of social gospel liberalism and Niebuhrian realism in the 1950s, he now claims as virtues of his own approach. In place of a “tolerable balance of egoisms,” he now speaks in terms of “progress in history,” “shap[ing] society,” and “democratizing thrusts”—all of which are reminiscent of Rauschenbusch’s language of the Kingdom discussed in Chapter Two. In place of the “new aeon [coming] into history in a decisive way with the incarnation and the entire work of Christ,” Yoder now speaks of large continuities between the political stance of Christ and that of the exilic Jews. In place of language of hope being validated by the “*eschaton*, the ‘Last Thing,’ the End-Event,” Yoder now speaks of “moral validation [as] derived from the imminent Kingdom which Jesus announces.” Such statements mark a move away from Yoder’s earlier Niebuhrian outlook described in the previous chapter toward one that shares much more affinity with Rauschenbusch’s outlook described in Chapter Two. In the conclusion to this chapter, I compare Yoder’s theology with Rauschenbusch’s more directly. But before doing so, I must first describe Yoder’s mature ecclesiology.

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<sup>56</sup> Each of the quotations in this paragraph are excerpts from quotations cited in the previous chapter; I have thus refrained from citing them again here.

*The Church as the New World on Its Way*

Yoder gave a series of five Stone Lectures at Princeton Theological Seminary in February 1980.<sup>57</sup> Throughout the 1980s, Yoder continued to rework the ideas of his Stone Lectures—particularly the last two on “Sacrament as Social Process” and “Body Politics”—so that by February 1986 he would give a reworked lecture at Duke Divinity School on “Sacrament as Social Process: Christ the Transformer of Culture.”<sup>58</sup> Although this short essay has not received as much attention as some of Yoder’s other essays, it marks a significant moment in Yoder’s thinking—as evidenced by his subsequent presentations of it at Boston University in April 1987, Eden Theological Seminary in October 1987, and Bangor Theological Seminary in February 1988; his publication of it in *Theology Today* in 1991 and *The Royal Priesthood* in 1994<sup>59</sup>; his numerous cross-references to his other contemporary writings on similar themes in his footnotes; and his expansion of the essay into his short book *Body Politics* in 1992.<sup>60</sup>

Yoder sets up the problem of the essay as “the interrelationship of worship and morality” or “liturgy and ethics,” explaining that most accounts try to build some kind of

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<sup>57</sup> For the title of each lecture, see Yoder, *Royal Priesthood*, 381. For the location of published versions of these lectures—or essays similar in content—see John Howard Yoder, *Karl Barth and the Problem of War & Other Essays on Barth*, edited by Mark Thiessen Nation (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2003), 149n1.

<sup>58</sup> John Howard Yoder, “Sacrament as Social Process: Christ the Transformer of Culture,” *Theology Today* 48 no 3 (April 1991): 33–44; reprinted in Yoder, *Royal Priesthood*, 359–73. (All subsequent references are to this latter version; hereafter, SSP.)

<sup>59</sup> The significance of the essay’s republication in *The Royal Priesthood* should not be overstated, however, since, as we already have noted, Michael Cartwright was primarily responsible for selecting the essays included in that volume.

<sup>60</sup> John Howard Yoder, *Body Politics: Five Practices of the Christian Community before the Watching World* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1992 [original, Nashville, TN: Discipleship Resources, 1992]). This paragraph has drawn on information from Michael Cartwright’s editorial introduction to the essay in *Royal Priesthood*, 359–60.

bridge between the two.<sup>61</sup> He then proposes a “simpler account” in which no bridge is necessary.<sup>62</sup> The rest of the essay takes a straightforward form. First, he describes five New Testament practices—fraternal admonition, the universality of charisma, the Spirit’s freedom in the meeting, breaking bread (or Eucharist), and induction into the new humanity (or baptism)—each of which concerns “*both* the internal activities of the gathered Christian congregation *and* the ways the church interfaces with the world” and thus “exemplifies a link between ecclesiastical practice and social ethics that is usually undervalued or ignored.”<sup>63</sup> Yoder then describes for each practice the “underlying meaning given in the action itself” before discussing nine “implications for ethics of these five practices” and concluding with a discussion of why these practices are rightly called “evangelical” or good news.<sup>64</sup>

Yoder calls these practices “social-ethical ritual[s]” or “models of social-ethical creativity” and emphasizes that they “can be spoken of in social process terms easily translated into nonreligious terms.”<sup>65</sup> The first can be spoken of in terms of “conflict resolution,” “conscious raising,” “reconciliation,” and “discernment”; the second as “the empowerment of the humble and the end of hierarchy in social process”; the third as

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<sup>61</sup> Yoder, SSP, 360–61.

<sup>62</sup> Yoder, SSP, 361.

<sup>63</sup> Yoder, SSP, 361, emphasis original.

<sup>64</sup> Yoder, SSP, 368, 369, 373.

<sup>65</sup> Yoder, SSP, 366, 372, 364.



“democracy”; the fourth as “family, “socialism,” and “an act of economic ethics”; and the fifth as “egalitarianism.”<sup>66</sup>

The nine ethical implications of these practices can be listed briefly as follows:

- (1) Each of them . . . is a wholly human, empirically accessible practice—nothing esoteric.<sup>67</sup>
- (2) All of them are practices that constitute the believing community as a social body. To see them in operation we need to do sociology, not semantics or philosophy.<sup>68</sup>
- (3) Each of these practices can function as a paradigm for ways in which other social groups might operate. These forms are derived from and illuminated by reference to specific components of the faith stance of the first century’s messianic synagogues, yet they are accessible to the public. People who do not share the faith or join the community can learn from them.<sup>69</sup>
- (4) The reason for their paradigmatic accessibility to others and their translatability into other terms is that they are not “religious” or “ritual” activities at bottom. They are by nature “lay” or “public” phenomena.<sup>70</sup>
- (5) These practices are enabled and illuminated by Jesus of Nazareth, who is confessed as Messiah and Lord. They are part of the order of redemption, not of creation. . . . That by no means makes them less public. It makes them more realistic about sin and more hopeful about reconciliation.<sup>71</sup>
- (6) None of these practices makes the individual the pivot for change. . . . No trust is placed in the individual’s changed insights (as liberalism does) or on the believer’s changed insides (as pietism does) to change the world.<sup>72</sup>

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<sup>66</sup> Yoder, SSP, 364, 368, 369.

<sup>67</sup> Yoder, SSP, 369.

<sup>68</sup> Yoder, SSP, 369.

<sup>69</sup> Yoder, SSP, 369.

<sup>70</sup> Yoder, SSP, 370.

<sup>71</sup> Yoder, SSP, 370–71.

<sup>72</sup> Yoder, SSP, 371.

- (7) None of these five practices was revealed from above or created from scratch; each was derived from already existing cultural models. . . . Yet in the gospel setting they have taken on new meanings and a new empowerment.<sup>73</sup>
- (8) It is hard to link this picture with our guild's standard meta-ethical discussions of consistent moral discourse.<sup>74</sup>
- (9) The apostolic model transcends some other dichotomies as well [i.e., revelation or redemption versus reason, Catholic versus Protestant, H. Richard Niebuhr's five types, radical versus liberal].<sup>75</sup>

Yoder concludes with a reflection on how these practices qualify as “evangelical” in the etymological sense of being both “good” and “news.”<sup>76</sup> He writes that each of these practices “tells the world what is the world’s own calling and destiny, not by announcing either a utopian or a realistic goal to be imposed on the whole of society, but by pioneering a paradigmatic demonstration of both the power and the practices that define the shape of restored humanity. The confessing people of God is the new world on its way.”<sup>77</sup> Here again we find a subtle but significant shift from his earlier perspective as described in “Reinhold Niebuhr and Christian Pacifism,” “Peace Without Eschatology?” and *The Christian Witness to the State*.

Recall that for his proposed model in *The Christian Witness to the State*, Yoder drew two columns—one labeled “Faith not Presupposed” and the other labeled “Faith a Presupposition”—with a thick line between them; above the “Faith not Presupposed” column is a cloud, whereas above the “Faith a Presupposition” column is “Agape”; and a

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<sup>73</sup> Yoder, SSP, 371.

<sup>74</sup> Yoder, SSP, 371–72.

<sup>75</sup> Yoder, SSP, 372.

<sup>76</sup> Yoder, SSP, 372.

<sup>77</sup> Yoder, SSP, 372.

spring crosses between the two columns to help pull up the nonbeliever's ethical conduct through the use of "middle axioms."<sup>78</sup> Yoder's explanation of this diagram and the use of middle axioms bears quoting here at length:

The individual citizen or statesman in the world of unbelief cannot see through the wall that separates him from the world of faith. Therefore the point at which the norm of *agape* is understandable and relevant to him is not the top of the scale on his side of the barrier of unbelief. Looking directly up he can see only a cloud, within which he fears there might lie an ideal demand for self-sacrifice, which he understands as suicide, i.e., not a meaningful alternative. The point at which *agape* becomes meaningful for him is rather the point at which the "spring" representing the relevance of love operating from within the realm of faith goes out of his sight through the wall. At this level the norm is formulated for him in pagan terms (liberty, equality, fraternity, education, democracy, human rights). . . . It will be observed that these norms—or, to use the earlier term, middle axioms—are expressed with no embarrassment in pagan terms, even though it is insisted that the ultimate ground for their validity is the love of Christ; in fact, that they do not even exist except as a reflection or projection of the relevance of that love.<sup>79</sup>

There are some obvious similarities between this description of "middle axioms" and Yoder's later "practices," which have caused many to conflate the two.<sup>80</sup> On both models the main concern is how the church can provide an ethical witness to the unbelieving world. On both models he unabashedly utilizes "pagan" or "nonreligious" terminology, such as "democracy" and "equality." On both the ultimate norm for the Christian is *agape* or the gospel.

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<sup>78</sup> Yoder, *CWS*, 72.

<sup>79</sup> Yoder, *CWS*, 72.

<sup>80</sup> See, e.g., John Patrick Koyles, *The Trace of the Face in the Politics of Jesus* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2013), 126. Cf., however, Martens, *Heterodox Yoder*, which describes "Yoder's own theorizing about how particular social actions become the most basic defining feature of messianic Christianity and how they replace middle axioms as the best mode of communication between an 'in-group' and outsiders" (117).

Upon closer inspection, however, there are stark differences between the two models as well. Imagine Yoder trying to graphically portray his “practices” in the late 1980s. Starting from his 1964 proposed model, he would first have to do away with the “wall” or “barrier” that “the world of unbelief cannot see through” and “that separates him from the world of faith.” The practices are “empirically accessible”; there is “nothing esoteric” about them. They “function as a paradigm for ways in which other social groups might operate.” “People who do not share the faith or join the community can learn from them.” Along with the removal of the wall, the cloud too would need to be eliminated. Rather than seeing the practices of the “restored humanity” “as suicide, i.e., not a meaningful alternative,” the person who does not share the faith might find them completely “reasonable” due to “their paradigmatic accessibility to others and their translatability into other terms”; these practices are “by nature ‘lay’ or ‘public’ phenomena” rather than esoteric “‘religious’ or ‘ritual’ activities.” Finally, the middle axioms themselves would have to go. Although Yoder’s commendation of practices for their ease of “translatability into other terms” has the ring of middle axioms, he cannot mean “translatability” in the sense of reformulating Christian terms into pagan ones for the simple reason that there is no need for *language* at all. The church practices just *are* their secular equivalents. Yoder could not be clearer on this point than in his discussion of the Eucharist:

What the New Testament is talking about in “breaking bread” is believers actually sharing with one another their ordinary day-to-day material substance. It is not the case, as far as understanding the New Testament accounts is concerned, that, in an act of “institution” or symbol making, God or the church would have said “let bread stand for daily sustenance.” It is not even merely that, in many settings, as any cultural historian would have told us, eating together already stands for values of hospitality and community formation, these values being distinguishable from

the signs that refer to them. It is that bread is daily sustenance. Bread eaten together *is* economic sharing.<sup>81</sup>

Yoder thus contrasts his account from a “rationalistic or Zwinglian understanding of symbol,” which “says that a symbolic act has a ‘meaning’ distinguishable from the act itself and that, for certain purposes, it is in fact helpful to disentangle the ‘meaning’ from the act.”<sup>82</sup> Rather than serving as a middle axiom, then, the practice is just what Yoder calls it: a “model” or “paradigm.”

This is not to say that there is no distinction between the church and the unbelieving world. But the distinction is not one of opaque walls that have to be spoken across using middle axioms. Rather, the distinction is one of progress: “The confessing people of God is the new world on its way.” Graphically displayed, this model would look more like a sloping arrow pointing toward the Kingdom with the church toward the top and the unbelieving world toward the bottom, looking up at the church as its pioneer, model, or paradigm of the Kingdom. This does not mean, however, that the unbeliever necessarily has to move up the slope. In fact, Yoder is quite clear that most will not. He thus concludes the essay with these poignant words: “The credibility of that which is both ‘good’ and ‘news’ consists precisely in its vulnerability, its refusability. That weakness marks all five of the incarnational processes I have been describing. They are not ways to administer the world; they are modes of vulnerable but also provocative, creative presence in its midst. That is the primordial way in which they transform culture.”<sup>83</sup>

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<sup>81</sup> Yoder, SSP, 365, emphasis original.

<sup>82</sup> Yoder, SSP, 365.

<sup>83</sup> Yoder, SSP, 373.

We thus find that, as with his Christology and eschatology, there are subtle but significant developments in Yoder's ecclesiology between the 1950s and 1980s. In his polemic against Niebuhr in the 1950s, Yoder had emphasized the otherness of the church. There he had described the regenerate life of the Christian as "opening new ethical possibilities." He described the church as the "bearer of the meaning of history." He criticized "Constantinianism" for attempting to make "Christian ethics . . . workable for all of society" and Niebuhrian realism for confusing "the *agent* of Christian ethics." "Since the distinction between the church and world is largely lost," wrote Yoder, "the 'responsible' church will try to preach a kind of ethics that will work for non-Christians as well as Christians."<sup>84</sup> In the 1980s, by contrast, Yoder emphasizes the pioneering role of the church in society. Rather than bearing the meaning of history, the church discerns the meaning of history in the world. Rather than the church having a unique ethic for regenerate Christians, the church pioneers new models that the world can adopt. Rather than witnessing to the society through middle axioms, the church transforms culture through its practices.

In each of these developments, Yoder can be seen moving in the direction of Rauschenbusch. Indeed, Yoder and Rauschenbusch have the same motivation for their ecclesiology: to remove the distinction between liturgy and ethics so that the practices of the church can serve as a pilot, pulpit, and paradigm for the world. Such is the ecclesial expression of both Rauschenbusch's social gospel and Yoder's description of "social ethics as gospel," as he subtitled *The Priestly Kingdom*.

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<sup>84</sup> Each of these quotations were cited in the previous chapter; I have thus refrained from citing them again here.

*From The Priestly Kingdom to For the Nations*

Yoder's mature political theology—seen in these central essays from the 1980s—continued to solidify in the 1990s, culminating in his final work, *For the Nations: Essays Evangelical and Public*. However, due in part to the fact that Yoder approved reprints of some of his early essays and books in the 1990s, many scholars have assumed that Yoder must not have deviated from his early views and that his mature approach to these themes is little more than elaboration of his early approach.<sup>85</sup> It thus might be helpful to briefly survey the places in his later writings and reprints in which Yoder steps back to reflect on his work. In the introductions and prefaces to his major works and reprints from *The Priestly Kingdom* in 1984 to *For the Nations* in 1997, Yoder consistently expresses ambivalence about some of his earlier work—and especially about how his work has been understood by friends and critics who take his arguments from *The Politics of Jesus* to be definitive of his position. Whereas his interpreters have tended to read Yoder's late work in light of his early work, Yoder advocates the inverse strategy. While he does not overtly reject his early writings, he does argue that they should be reinterpreted in light of his mature views.

In his introduction to *The Priestly Kingdom*, Yoder notes, “Ever since *My Politics of Jesus* [sic], and to a lesser extent in response as well to my even earlier booklets on Reinhold Niebuhr, on Karl Barth, and on *The Christian Witness to the State*, I have seen my views described, often by interpreters intending to be quite friendly, in ways that

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<sup>85</sup> For more on this point, see Martens, *Heterodox Yoder*, 8–13.

seemed to me to be beside the mark.”<sup>86</sup> In particular, Yoder expresses his “discomfiture” that his early writings are open “to be misinterpreted by others as though one represented a ‘pure type’ which they can use as a foil” rather than hearing him “as an interlocutor.”<sup>87</sup> Writing about *The Priestly Kingdom*, Yoder resists interpreting “the vision projected in this collection of essays about the foundations of Christian social ethics” as “sectarian,” “Mennonite,” or “radical.”<sup>88</sup> Rather, he writes that “these essays should be understood as addressed to Christians in general,” since “their appeal is to classical catholic Christian convictions properly understood.”<sup>89</sup> For Yoder, this appeal involves the three theological categories we have been considering: Yoder bases his appeal in Christology or “the authority of Jesus”;<sup>90</sup> he describes the form of his position in eschatological terms as “historically oriented . . . in that what it holds to be the common Christian calling is a project: i.e., a goal-oriented movement through time”;<sup>91</sup> and he presupposes an ecclesiology in which “the church precedes the world epistemologically . . . as well as axiologically,” though he is quick to note that “the obedient Christian community” can become “an instrument for serving and saving the larger culture” without “a compromise or a dilution of the fidelity of [its] radical commitment.”<sup>92</sup> As the title of the book

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<sup>86</sup> Yoder, *PK*, 1.

<sup>87</sup> Yoder, *PK*, 1.

<sup>88</sup> Yoder, *PK*, 6, 8.

<sup>89</sup> Yoder, *PK*, 8, 9.

<sup>90</sup> Yoder, *PK*, 9.

<sup>91</sup> Yoder, *PK*, 3.

<sup>92</sup> Yoder, *PK*, 11.



suggests, Yoder seeks to demonstrate how “the people of God in present history live from and toward the promise of the whole world’s salvation.”<sup>93</sup>

The second edition of *The Politics of Jesus* and a major collection of Yoder’s essays, *The Royal Priesthood: Essays Ecclesiastical and Ecumenical*, both appeared ten years later in 1994. As the latter volume was edited and compiled by Michael Cartwright, Yoder does not contribute any reflections in that volume. He does author a new preface for the second edition of *The Politics of Jesus* in which he resists offering “an overall accounting for ‘how my mind has changed in a quarter-century’” or “respond[ing] in detail to criticisms of particular passages.”<sup>94</sup> Instead he simply notes: “There are of course numerous points where my original statement in the 1972 text would need to be corrected or retracted. There are others where it would be fitting to defend it against misinterpretations or to argue it further against interlocutors who understand it correctly but disagree.”<sup>95</sup> He also offers an epilogue to each chapter in which he briefly comments on developments in scholarship relevant to his work since its original publication, which for the most part he finds to support—or at least not to undermine—his primary original thesis, namely, that Jesus is a model of radical political action.

Finally, in his introduction to his 1997 work *For the Nations*, Yoder again disavows the “sectarian” label used to describe his stance by critics and friends.<sup>96</sup> Yoder

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<sup>93</sup> Yoder, *PK*, 12.

<sup>94</sup> Yoder, *PJ*, viii.

<sup>95</sup> Yoder, *PJ*, viii.

<sup>96</sup> He specifically notes in this context Stanley Haurwas’s appropriation of his work in *Against the Nations* and *Resident Aliens*; see John Howard Yoder, *For the Nations: Essays Evangelical and Public* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 3n6. (Hereafter, *FN*.)

argues that such labeling “routinely has led to misunderstanding and misrepresentation” and that “the present book seeks to correct for that.”<sup>97</sup> He insists that his attempt to offer a non-sectarian, public witness “is not a new project on my part.” Rather, referring to “Peace without Eschatology?” and *The Christian Witness to the State*, Yoder continues, “In 1955 I began expositing how followers of Jesus, who in fact are an outvoted minority almost everywhere, can and should address to the wider society, including the state, and to persons exercising power within it, the invitation, as good news, to participate, in their own best interest, in the cosmic meaning of the sovereignty of their risen Lord.”<sup>98</sup> How Yoder articulates this project has changed over the years, however, as he also notes. He contrasts *For the Nations* with *The Royal Priesthood* published three years prior by noting that the earlier book “brought together texts, some of them old, mostly once published though now out of print, the reprinting of which editor Michael Cartwright judged would have some continuing value for history or to fill out the outlines of my position.” “For that reason,” he continues, “it was fitting that someone other than I should select and interpret them, as Professor Cartwright generously did.”<sup>99</sup> In contrast, *For the Nations* mostly includes more recent essays that Yoder himself selected to represent his current approach. While Yoder concedes that “the corpus of older writings in *The Royal Priesthood* can be seen as fitting within a vision of the mission of the Christian community some call ‘sectarian’ or describe as standing ‘against the nations,’” he

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<sup>97</sup> Yoder, *FN*, 4.

<sup>98</sup> Yoder, *FN*, 4–5.

<sup>99</sup> Yoder, *FN*, 5.

comments that the essays collected in *For the Nations* “are intentionally devoted to demonstrating the wrongness of that characterization of my stance.”<sup>100</sup>

In arguing that even the essays from *The Royal Priesthood* should not be understood as “sectarian,” Yoder cites his 1980 essay, “Why Ecclesiology Is Social Ethics,” included in the volume. He notes that its “date of origin should suffice to certify that the thesis of the present book [*For the Nations*] does not represent a change of conviction on my part.”<sup>101</sup> While he argues for consistency of thought across his corpus, then, he seems most intent on claiming those writings following *The Politics of Jesus* as representative of his mature views. Following Yoder’s lead, in this chapter I have focused on Yoder’s programmatic essays from the 1980s as the beginning of his late works, noting that there is both continuity and discontinuity between these texts and his early works discussed in the previous chapter.

The essays in *For the Nations* highlight both the continuities and developments in Yoder’s thought. With the exception of one essay, “The Original Revolution” (originally a sermon preached in Buenos Aires in 1966), each of the essays in the volume were originally written or presented in the years after the publication of *The Politics of Jesus*. The first three essays were each written and presented in the 1990s and collectively set the stage for the rest of the book. In these essays Yoder develops the themes we have discussed above that coalesce into Yoder’s mature theological outlook.

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<sup>100</sup> Yoder, *FN*, 6.

<sup>101</sup> Yoder, *FN*, 6.

In the first essay, “Firstfruits: The Paradigmatic Public Role of God’s People,” which was first presented in 1992 at the inauguration of the Institute for the Study of the Public Good at Christian Theological Seminary in Indianapolis,<sup>102</sup> Yoder discusses how to contribute to the public good from a particular perspective in a pluralistic context. After first delineating a number of ways one might understand the word “public,” Yoder discusses approaches to this question by H. Richard Niebuhr and Karl Barth before turning to his own approach. In an early lecture “The Social Gospel and the Mind of Christ,” H. Richard Niebuhr laid out Jesus’s “fourfold strategy” to social engagement.<sup>103</sup> While Yoder finds the self-confidence of Niebuhr’s reading of Jesus striking,<sup>104</sup> he commends Niebuhr for describing “‘the way things work’ in social-process terms accessible to any observer.” He continues, “Nothing about this ‘strategy’ is private or particular. If you had asked Jesus why this is the right strategy, he would (according to Niebuhr) have said, ‘acceptance of the kingdom of God.’ Yet that construal in faith terms is not needed for the strategy to be clear, to be true to the facts of the case, or to work.”<sup>105</sup>

Yoder then turns to Karl Barth’s *Church Dogmatics* IV/2 in which Barth lists six ways in which “the order of the faith community constitutes a public offer to the entire

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<sup>102</sup> Yoder, *FN*, 15n1. Interestingly, Yoder notes that the other guest speaker at the event was Max Stackhouse, whom we have referenced numerous times for his work on Rauschenbusch and Niebuhr.

<sup>103</sup> Yoder, *FN*, 21, 22.

<sup>104</sup> Yoder notes that the brothers Niebuhr share a high confidence “to have for the first time got Jesus right.” Yoder distinguishes himself from the Niebuhrs thusly: “My reading of who Jesus was and what he meant is much like theirs, but I differ from them in assuming that I need to justify it by using the tools of historical reading” (*FN*, 22n13).

<sup>105</sup> Yoder, *FN*, 23.

society.”<sup>106</sup> Rather than using the language of “analogy” as he had done in his earlier pamphlet *Christian Community and Civil Community*, in the *Dogmatics* Barth chooses the language of exemplarity. On Barth’s view, as Yoder summarizes, “The faith community and the human community are connatural; each is human, historical, social.”<sup>107</sup> Therefore, there need not be analogy between the church and the civil community; rather, the practices of the church function as a paradigm for the civil society. “What believers are called to is no different from what all humanity is called to.”<sup>108</sup>

Taking his cue from H. Richard Niebuhr’s and Barth’s respective lists, Yoder offers his own list of five church practices that serve a paradigmatic function for civil society. Here he borrows explicitly from his discussion in “Sacrament as Social Process” (discussed above), which he expanded into the pamphlet *Body Politics*.<sup>109</sup> Yoder summarizes:

So by my count there are five sample civil imperatives within the vision of the first Christians:

- egalitarianism as implied by baptism into one body,
- socialism as implied in the Eucharist,
- forgiveness,
- the open meeting, and
- the universality of giftedness.

If we were to settle down together to work at the common life of our town or our country, each of my five marks of the healthy corporate life would give us plenty to do, as would the earlier suggestions from Niebuhr and Barth.<sup>110</sup>

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<sup>106</sup> Yoder, *FN*, 27.

<sup>107</sup> Yoder, *FN*, 27.

<sup>108</sup> Yoder, *FN*, 24.

<sup>109</sup> Yoder writes, “I repeat here, with apologies for not being more original, the gist of a description I shared in *Theology Today* [i.e., SSP] a while back” (*FN*, 29; cf. 29n27).

<sup>110</sup> Yoder, *FN*, 33.

Noticeably absent from Yoder's list is nonresistant suffering or nonviolent enemy love. He thus raises the question whether this one point, unlike the others, might be "opaque to the outsider."<sup>111</sup> Unlike in *Christian Witness to the State*, where he had argued in the affirmative,<sup>112</sup> Yoder now refuses to concede the opacity of the wisdom of the cross to the watching world: "That power is weak and weakness strong is no poetic paradox; it is a fact of life. What recent ecumenical thought calls 'the epistemological privilege of the poor,' what Roman Catholic texts call God's 'preferential option for the poor,' what Tolstoy meant much earlier when he said that the oppressed are the bearers of the meaning of history, is not poetry but serious social science."<sup>113</sup> Drawing on his discussion of Revelation 5 in "To Serve Our God and to Rule the World," Yoder concludes by arguing that "to participate in the work of Christ can be described in the first vision of John not only as 'serving God (what priests do)' but also as 'ruling the world (what kings do).'"<sup>114</sup> For Yoder this means that "believers together are not called out of but sent into the real (public) world where sacrifice and sovereignty happen."<sup>115</sup>

Yoder elaborates his paradigmatic or exemplarist ecclesiology in his next essay, "The New Humanity as Pulpit and Paradigm," before taking an unexpected turn in his third essay, "See How They Go with Their Faces to the Sun." As an ethicist best known for his articulation of "the politics of Jesus," Yoder bases the paradigmatic model of the Christian community not on Jesus's life and ministry but on that of the exilic Jews in the

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<sup>111</sup> Yoder, *FN*, 34.

<sup>112</sup> See Yoder, *CWS*, 72 (quoted above in this chapter).

<sup>113</sup> Yoder, *FN*, 35.

<sup>114</sup> Yoder, *FN*, 36. Yoder cites his essay, "To Serve Our God and to Rule the World," in n. 44.

<sup>115</sup> Yoder, *FN*, 36.

time of Jeremiah. Yoder argues that the *galuth* or exile was not so much a punishment—much less a temporary setback from the normative monarchy—as it was a permanent calling or vocation for the Jews. Yoder takes Jeremiah 29:7 to describe the “real mission of the scattered Jews”: “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.”<sup>116</sup> Instead of enumerating a list of gospel imperatives or Christian practices, Yoder goes back further for his paradigm: “Somewhere, some time, in the Jeremianic setting, there arose what I claimed above was the most fundamental sociological innovation in the history of religions, namely, the culture of the synagogue.”<sup>117</sup> In place of Yoder’s five practices of the Christian community, Yoder enumerates six marks of the exilic Jewish communities:

- (1) they derived their identity in a shared text;
- (2) they made reading and singing this text the basis of their “worship”;
- (3) they lacked a priesthood or hierarchy;
- (4) they maintained international unity among the diaspora community through intercommunication;
- (5) they maintained freedom and flexibility of philosophical systems, since “the ground floor of identity [was] the common life itself, the walk, halakah, and the shared remembering of the story behind it”; and,
- (6) they were not dependent on “drives toward cultural homogeneity, political control, or autarchy.”<sup>118</sup>

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<sup>116</sup> Yoder, *FN*, 65.

<sup>117</sup> Yoder, *FN*, 65.

<sup>118</sup> Yoder, *FN*, 58–59.

Given the “enormous flexibility and creativity” of this social posture, Yoder raises the question: “Is there anything nonnegotiable in the dispersed minority’s witness? Anything untranslatable?”<sup>119</sup> He immediately answers his own question: “Of course there is; it is that there is no other God. . . . That anti-idolatry message is not bad but good news. It can free its hearers from slavery to the powers that crush their lives.”<sup>120</sup>

This ethical monotheism, rooted in the Jewish prophets, follows closely in the line of Rauschenbusch’s articulation of the social gospel, as described in Chapter Two. As with Rauschenbusch, so too Yoder suggests that this vision can be replicated in society even by those who may not share the theological underpinnings for it. He thus concludes his essay by asking: “Is there something about this Jewish vision of the dignity and ministry of the scattered people of God which might be echoed or replicated by other migrant peoples, like the expatriate Chinese around the edge of Asia or the Indians in East and South Africa? Might it give hope to other refugees, like the Armenians who were scattered in the 1920s? To other victims of imperial displacement, like African Americans? To the victims of the most recent horrors of Rwanda or the Balkans?”<sup>121</sup> While he makes these observations in the interrogative form here, in a now famous passage from a 1991 essay he offers his answer:

These new answers to the political problematic are so strong and so pertinent, that they can be effective politically; i.e., they can “work,” even when their bearers do not avow their historic derivation from Jesus and from the rejection of the Constantinian temptation. . . .

Gene Sharp can exposit, in terms of profane social science, the reason the anticonstantinian way of Jesus “works.” In other words: once the idea has been let loose in history, it enables an unprecedented vision of the people as bearers of the

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<sup>119</sup> Yoder, *FN*, 76.

<sup>120</sup> Yoder, *FN*, 76–77.

<sup>121</sup> Yoder, *FN*, 78.



meaning of history. What is this new idea? It is the humanism of the image language of Genesis, rejecting any image of the divine except the macro one of the human race as such and the micro one of the martyred Jew Jesus. Gandhi can translate this vision into Hindu. Martin Luther King can reformulate it in a unique fusion of Black Baptist hope and the American dream. Lech Walesa can do it in Catholic Polish. Nor is its pertinence, once discovered, limited to those who share the believing cosmology from which it sprang. Gene Sharp can distill it out of the faith setting and translate it into Ivy League social science. It works even for people who have not studied it or who do not believe in it. How can this be? The reason is that what is known, when human life is conformed to the image of God in Jesus, is not a knowledge experiment, but a revelation of the way things really are. The cruciform life “works” because it goes with the grain of the cosmos.<sup>122</sup>

This “new idea” that Yoder finds in the person of Jesus and in the exilic Jews before him bears striking resemblance to that most cherished doctrine of Rauschenbusch’s: the Kingdom of God. To conclude I spell out more explicitly the ways in which Yoder’s mature political theology reflects Rauschenbusch’s.

### *Conclusion: Returning to Rauschenbusch*

In this chapter I have described Yoder’s late writings from the years following his most famous work, *The Politics of Jesus*. I have argued that prior to *Politics* Yoder’s theology was heavily indebted to Niebuhr, while in later years he set out in new directions that bear greater resemblance to Rauschenbusch’s theology.<sup>123</sup>

As with both Rauschenbusch and Niebuhr before him, Yoder eschews speaking of Jesus’s significance in ontological or metaphysical terminology, whether that of Christ’s

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<sup>122</sup> John Howard Yoder, “Politics: Liberation Images of Christ,” in *Imaging Christ: Politics, Art, Spirituality*, ed. Francis A. Eigo, O.S.A. (Villanova, PA: The Villanova University Press, 1991), 164. The final line of this quote was used in the title of Stanley Hauerwas’s Gifford Lectures, published as *With the Grain of the Universe*. When Yoder’s essay was reprinted in John Howard Yoder, *The War of the Lamb: The Ethics of Nonviolence and Peacemaking*, edited by Glen Stassen, Mark Thiessen Nation, and Matt Hamsher (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos, 2009), 165–180, the editors changed the original word “cosmos” to “universe” (179).

<sup>123</sup> Unless otherwise noted, each of the quotations in the following paragraphs are excerpts from Yoder’s quotations already cited in this chapter; I have thus refrained from citing them again here.

“natures” or of his “preexistence.” Instead, Yoder seeks out a contemporary equivalent way of speaking of Jesus’s Lordship in an immanent frame of reference. For Yoder, as for Rauschenbusch, this means emphasizing the political and social relevance of the historical person Jesus of Nazareth. And rather than following Niebuhr in presenting Jesus as an absolute ethical norm that the nonbeliever would consider suicidal and unrealistic as Yoder had previously done, he now reflects Rauschenbusch’s presentation of Jesus as a model of radical political action, whose approach can be commended to and understood by believer and nonbeliever alike.

Whereas Yoder had previously followed Niebuhr in describing eschatology in terms of a future ideal or new *aeon* that provides hope in the present, the post-*Politics of Jesus* Yoder describes eschatology, as did Rauschenbusch before him, in terms of “the imminent Kingdom which Jesus announces.” Eschatology is less about a future reality as it is about an apocalyptic vision of history. In light of the criteria provided by the imminent Kingdom, one is “empowered and obligated to discern, down through the centuries, which historical developments can be welcomed as progress in the light of the Rule of the Lamb and which as setbacks.” This, for Yoder, is what it means “to see history doxologically.”

Finally, whereas Yoder’s early writings emphasize the otherness of the church in contrast to what he saw as Niebuhr’s confusion of church and society, in these late writings Yoder shifts his emphasis to the continuities between the practices of the church and certain developments in society. Yoder now sees the church as “the most fertile parent of advanced social experiments,” to borrow a line from Rauschenbusch.<sup>124</sup>

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<sup>124</sup> Rauschenbusch, *RK*, 146.

Moreover, as with Rauschenbusch, Yoder is leery of even using the term “church” in reference to the community of Christ-followers—and this for two reasons. Yoder and Rauschenbusch are in agreement, first, that much of the historical church has not followed the example of Jesus or the ideals of the Kingdom. At the same time, they are in agreement, second, that many people who do not profess Jesus as Lord nevertheless implicitly follow his ideal. As Yoder writes, the ideal of Jesus can be “distill[ed] . . . out of the faith setting” and translated into various other faith or nonfaith settings. The young Yoder had criticized Niebuhr for an ethic that was not “specifically Christian” and that therefore “would fit into any honest system of social morality.” In his later years, Yoder stresses the continuity of Jesus’s ethic with that of Jeremianic Jewish communities and commends this shared ethic precisely for its translatability into other belief systems. Whereas the young Yoder stressed the foolishness of the way of the cross to the unbeliever, the mature Yoder emphasizes instead that the “cruciform life ‘works’ because it goes with the grain of the cosmos.”

These tensions and developments in Yoder’s thought can be helpfully understood in the context of the various tensions within the theopolitical tradition of Rauschenbusch and Niebuhr. Drawing on MacIntyre’s notion of a tradition, which we noted in Chapter One, we can thus identify theopolitical liberalism as an argument extended through time in which certain fundamental theological agreements are defined and redefined. As we will see in the next chapter, this is an argument that continues into the present.

## CHAPTER SIX

### Conclusion: Political Theology in the Twenty-First Century

*As odd as it may seem, . . . I hope it is clear that I count Reinhold Niebuhr as a friend I could not do without. I would have loved to have known him, though I suspect he would have overwhelmed me.*

—Stanley Hauerwas

In this dissertation I have argued that the theological continuities among Walter Rauschenbusch, Reinhold Niebuhr, and John Howard Yoder are significant enough to merit considering their lineage a tradition in its own right—rather than a history of competing schools as is often assumed. Though they provide differing answers, their projects are shaped by a shared question or project. To state it in Niebuhr’s language, they all seek to answer “how it is possible to derive a social ethic from the absolute ethic of the gospels.”<sup>1</sup> For all of them, the absolute ethical norm is found in the life of Jesus and has its political manifestation in the eschatological Kingdom, which is heralded by the church. They provide various answers on the extent to which it is possible for the church and society to embody the gospel norm, but none of them believes that it is possible for the Kingdom to be realized fully on earth. For Rauschenbusch, this entails that the church’s fight to advance the Kingdom will always be an uphill battle; for Niebuhr, it entails that the church must make ethical compromises to seek relative justice while relying on God’s grace and forgiveness; for Yoder, it entails that the Christian community will always speak from a minority posture within society.

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<sup>1</sup> Niebuhr, *ICE*, 9.

In Chapter One I proposed viewing the lineage of Rauschenbusch, Niebuhr, and Yoder as a particular theopolitical subset of the wider tradition of American Protestant liberalism. But a curious fact mentioned in that chapter still remains to be addressed, namely, that there is typically a certain level of antipathy between liberal theologians and adherents to Yoder's theology. Those who self-identify as Protestant liberals—particularly those who identify with Rauschenbusch, Niebuhr, or both—do not typically identify with Yoder, while those who identify with Yoder's theology tend to be averse to Protestant liberalism. Epithets like “sectarian” and “tribalist” are used by liberals to describe Yoderians, while words like “Constantinian” and even “liberal” itself are used by Yoderians to deride liberals. Based on the findings of this dissertation, I would argue not only that this need not be the case but even more so that these two groups could benefit from interaction with each other. I conclude, then, by attending to contemporary discussions, which provide insights into what motivates the division between these groups and ways to address this division.

As mentioned in Chapter One, the foremost interpreter of American theological liberalism, Gary Dorrien, has argued for the inclusion of Niebuhr within the lineage of Protestant liberalism. Dorrien notes that on “conventional interpretations . . . Niebuhr plays a role in the history of American liberal Christianity, but mostly as an outside debunker.”<sup>2</sup> On Dorrien's revisionist reading, despite the fact that Niebuhr wrote many sharp invectives against his liberal peers that “made ‘liberal’ a sneer word among

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<sup>2</sup> Gary J. Dorrien, *The Making of American Liberal Theology: Idealism, Realism, & Modernity, 1900–1950* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2003), 9.

theologians,” he was not a figure of the neo-orthodox revolt against liberalism but was instead what Dorrien calls a “neoliberal.”<sup>3</sup> Dorrien describes the stakes of his reading:

This interpretive issue affects the entire question of how the past seventy-five years of American theological liberalism should be understood. If liberal theology is defined as Progressivist idealism and evolutionary immanentism, and if the Niebuhrian revolt is viewed wholly as an attack on liberalism from an alternative theological standpoint, then theological liberalism has barely existed in the United States since World War II; only fragments of it remain today. On my reading, however, liberal theology remained a significant theological tradition in the 1940s and 1950s . . . because the towering theologians of mid-century America—Niebuhr and Tillich—creatively renewed the liberal tradition through their critical and reconstructive engagements with it.<sup>4</sup>

In this dissertation I have offered a reading of Rauschenbusch’s and Niebuhr’s theology that largely reinforces Dorrien’s reading. In Chapter Three I argued that in the midst of Niebuhr’s criticisms of his liberal contemporaries, there emerges a constructive theopolitical account that builds on Rauschenbusch in a number of significant ways, which I described in the conclusion to that chapter.

When Dorrien turns his attention to Yoder, however, he drops his sense of irony and reads Yoder’s criticisms of liberalism as straightforward evidence that Yoder stands outside of the tradition. In his massive three volume history of American Protestant liberalism, Dorrien describes Rauschenbusch as “the greatest figure of early-twentieth-century Protestantism” and Niebuhr as one of the “towering theologians” who “creatively renewed the liberal tradition,” but he makes no mention of Yoder.<sup>5</sup> Elsewhere, Dorrien

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<sup>3</sup> Dorrien, *The Making of American Liberal Theology: Idealism, Realism, & Modernity*, 435.

<sup>4</sup> Dorrien, *Making of American Liberal Theology: Idealism, Realism, & Modernity*, 10.

<sup>5</sup> Dorrien, *Making of American Liberal Theology: Idealism, Realism, & Modernity*, 5, 10. See also, Gary J. Dorrien, *The Making of American Liberal Theology: Crisis, Irony, and Postmodernity, 1950–2005* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2006).

rightly describes Yoder as “more complex than the typical rendering of him as a Mennonite sectarian suggested,” but he nevertheless reads Yoder as an “Anabaptist evangelical” for whom “the social ethics tradition was a seriously mistaken offshoot of liberal theology and the magisterial Reformation.”<sup>6</sup> Dorrien views the divide between liberals and Yoder as primarily one over ethics:

The social gospelers and Niebuhrians assumed a situation of majority control; thus, when something happened in American society, they felt “responsible” for it, even for results that were partly evil. Yoder judged that Reinhold Niebuhr differed from the social gospelers chiefly in acknowledging that some of the things they took responsibility for were hurtful to others and to some degree selfish. That didn’t stop Niebuhr from hitching Christian ethics to violence and selfishness, Yoder protested. For Niebuhr, moral responsibility required one to employ as much violence and self-interest as necessary to bring about the lesser evil. For Yoder, the way of Christ was a different way, one that accepted the consequences of the suffering love of Christ in bad situations, disposing no capacity to impose one’s preference.<sup>7</sup>

But just as Dorrien rejects equating liberalism with “Progressivist idealism and evolutionary immanentalism” that would preclude Niebuhr, might we not also reject equating liberalism with the assumption of “majority control” that precludes Yoder? If Niebuhr is to be considered a “neoliberal” for continuing the tradition while criticizing its

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<sup>6</sup> Gary J. Dorrien, *Social Ethics in the Making: Interpreting an American Tradition* (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), 474, 447.

<sup>7</sup> Dorrien, *Social Ethics in the Making*, 470. Lurking in the background of Dorrien’s reading of Yoder is Dorrien’s recognition of Yoder’s influence on Hauerwas, whom Dorrien considers an anti-liberal isolationist. Dorrien writes of Hauerwas that he has “a distinctive kind of isolationism, which shares more with activist strains of the Mennonite and Brethren traditions than with traditional Christian sectarianism. . . . Building on Yoder’s ecclesiology, Hauerwas makes a strong claim that the church is called to be faithful to its identity as the living manifestation of the peaceable kingdom. For him, however, as for Yoder, this calling precludes any acceptance of a moral responsibility to work with non-Christians to create a just social order in a pagan world.” Dorrien concludes, “This insistence on dichotomizing the world between Christians and pagans marks the essential difference between Hauerwas’s theology and progressive social Christianity.” See Gary J. Dorrien, *Soul in Society: The Making and Renewal of Social Christianity* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1995), 359. I address Hauerwas’s relationship to this tradition below.

idealism and immanentalism, might we consider Yoder a “neo-neoliberal” for continuing the tradition while criticizing its assumption of majority control?

Drawing on Dorrien’s definition of liberalism, Christopher Evans argues that “what characterizes liberal theology is that it is a heritage that takes cultural engagement seriously.”<sup>8</sup> By this admittedly broad definition, Yoder’s entire corpus fits squarely within this tradition. As we saw in our chapters on Yoder, his lifelong question was how Christians might “witness to the state” (Chapter Four) or “seek the welfare of the city” (Chapter Five). Yoder simply argues that the best way to engage culture is to renounce the need for majority control. But as we saw in Chapter Two, this is little different than Rauschenbusch himself. While Rauschenbusch at times could fall into triumphalist language (e.g., “Christianizing”), he was insistent that the best way for the church to engage culture was through “a separation of the organizations and an interpenetration of influences” between church and state in which the church disavows “all attempts to control the machinery of government or to fill its offices” and instead focuses on its “prophetic office in humanity.”<sup>9</sup> Yoder’s mature ecclesiology is thus largely a retrieval of Rauschenbusch’s precisely at a time when majority control can no longer be assumed in American society.

A fact widely observed by commenters on American religious life is that mainline Protestantism has been in numerical decline for decades after experiencing its “heyday”

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<sup>8</sup> Christopher H. Evans, *Liberalism without Illusions: Renewing an American Christian Tradition* (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2010), 6.

<sup>9</sup> Rauschenbusch, *RK*, 168.



between the 1940s and 1960s.<sup>10</sup> If the assumption of majority control is an essential feature of Protestant liberalism, then—to paraphrase Dorrien’s line above—theological liberalism has barely existed in the United States since the Vietnam War; only fragments of it remain today. On the other hand, if we consider the assumption of majority control as more of a product of its time than an essential feature of the tradition, then Yoder’s theology might help liberals like Dorrien and Evans in their attempt to renew this American tradition in a post-Christendom context. Rather than viewing Yoder as an outsider to the tradition, he can be viewed—criticisms and all—as a voice within the tradition calling it back to its gospel-centered roots. After all, Dorrien’s characterization of Yoder as an “Anabaptist evangelical”—though intended to signal Yoder’s outsider status—is just as apt of a description of Rauschenbusch himself.<sup>11</sup> Those liberals today who are intent on reviving Rauschenbusch’s social gospel for the twenty-first century may be surprised to find Yoder to be an ally in that task.<sup>12</sup>

If liberals have tended to ignore Yoder or exclude him from their tradition, some followers of Yoder have been grateful for the compliment. Craig Carter, for example, has criticized those who read Yoder’s work as standing within the “liberal tradition in which

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<sup>10</sup> Evans, *Liberalism without Illusions*, 23. For more on this period of American religious history, see the fascinating study by Elesha J. Coffman, *The Christian Century and the Rise of the Protestant Mainline* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013).

<sup>11</sup> See, e.g., Donovan E. Smucker, *The Origins of Walter Rauschenbusch’s Social Ethics* (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1994), chap. 4, “The Influence of Anabaptist Sectarianism,” 30–73.

<sup>12</sup> See, e.g., Christopher H. Evans, ed., *The Social Gospel Today* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2001); Walter Rauschenbusch, *Christianity and the Social Crisis in the 21st Century* (New York: HarperOne, 2007).

we find such movements as the social gospel and liberation theology,”<sup>13</sup> and Mark Thiessen Nation concurs that Yoder should not be read as having “come to embrace a ‘social gospel’ not unlike Walter Rauschenbusch.”<sup>14</sup>

I submit that such objections are based on a fundamental misunderstanding of the liberal tradition and Rauschenbusch’s social gospel in particular. Here Yoder’s own words on how to understand Rauschenbusch’s social gospel liberalism are instructive. In his lecture on “Liberal Protestant Pacifism,” Yoder notes that Rauschenbusch is “usually misunderstood by people who read liberalism from the other end” of the twentieth century. He explains:

They see in Protestant liberalism unbelief about the Bible and skepticism about clear truth. Walter Rauschenbusch was an evangelist and the son of a German Baptist evangelist. . . .

Rauschenbusch has come to be the symbol of the social gospel. He is the one who gave currency to that phrase. But the name did not mean then what it has come to mean in later polemics; he did not disconnect the gospel from the roots of biblical preaching, or from accountability in church history, or from serious systemic analysis of how bad the world is, or from the call to individuals to open their hearts to forgiveness. Rauschenbusch was an inner-city evangelist who became concerned for the shape of society out of his commitment to personal evangelism.<sup>15</sup>

As discussed in Chapter One, Rauschenbusch’s work by and large has been neglected by Yoder scholars. But this neglect has led some scholars to unwittingly

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<sup>13</sup> Craig A. Carter, “The Liberal Reading of Yoder: The Problem of Yoder Reception and the Need for a Comprehensive Christian Witness,” in *Radical Ecumenicity: Pursuing Unity and Continuity after John Howard Yoder*, edited by John C. Nugent (Abilene, TX: Abilene Christian University Press, 2010), 87.

<sup>14</sup> Mark Thiessen Nation, “The ‘Ecumenical’ and ‘Cosmopolitan’ Yoder: A Critical Engagement with *Nonviolence – A Brief History* and Its Editors,” *Conrad Grebel Review* 29 no. 3 (Fall 2011): 75.

<sup>15</sup> Yoder, *CAWPR*, 277. Yoder notes that “Rauschenbusch also studied Anabaptist origins. He was the first to dig out from the sources and translate into English the important letter that Conrad Grebel wrote to Thomas Müntzer in 1524” (ibid., 277n9).

reproduce Rauschenbusch's arguments in their attempt to distance Yoder from social gospel liberalism. For example, in a 2010 essay, Branson Parler challenges Martens's "social gospel" reading of Yoder directly.<sup>16</sup> "Contra Martens," Parler contends that "Yoder ought to be read as an 'expansionist' rather than a reductionist with respect to the sacraments and worship" and that "Yoder will not allow liturgy to be conceived as something separate from the everyday life of the church." Parler reasons that "this is a good thing to the extent that it prevents dichotomies between worship and ethics, theology and sociology, liturgy and life."<sup>17</sup> Central to Parler's expansionist reading is the idea that "Yoder's thought is best comprehended, not by importing the binary logic of theology/sociology, worship/ethics, liturgy/life, cult/culture, church/politics, or sacred/secular into our reading of his work, but by seeing how Yoder helps deconstruct those binaries from the inside out," since, on Parler's reading, Yoder "rejected the sacred/secular dualism that permeates contemporary discussions of these topics."<sup>18</sup>

After discussing Yoder's writings on the sacraments, Parler offers two guidelines for reading Yoder: (1) readers should acknowledge that "liturgy and ethics, theology and sociology, are not two distinct and different things, but two aspects of the same thing"; and, (2) readers should "take Yoder as an expansionist (not a reductionist or antagonist) except in areas where we have very good textual or contextual reasons to do otherwise."<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Branson Parler, "Spinning the Liturgical Turn: Why John Howard Yoder Is Not an Ethicist," in *Radical Ecumenicity*, 173–91.

<sup>17</sup> Parler, "Liturgical Turn," 173.

<sup>18</sup> Parler, "Liturgical Turn," 179.

<sup>19</sup> Parler, "Liturgical Turn," 179–180, emphasis original.

Parler thus concludes that “rather than seeing Yoder as a mere ethicist, focusing on ethics or sociology at the expense of theology or liturgy, he should be seen as breaking down the false barriers between liturgy and ethics, liturgy and life. Beyond these barriers, Yoder calls us to see how our life practices are always already oriented either toward or away from God’s kingdom, either moving with or against the grain of the universe.”<sup>20</sup>

Parler’s reading may well get at the intent behind Yoder’s writing. But ironically, in his defense of Yoder against Martens’s social gospel reading, Parler offers a paradigmatic Rauschenbuschian understanding of the relationship between theology and ethics. Recall that in *A Theology for the Social Gospel* Rauschenbusch argues that he is offering an “expansion of theology” and that the doctrine of the Kingdom of God establishes “that organic union between religion and morality, between theology and ethics, which is one of the characteristics of the Christian religion.”<sup>21</sup> Indeed, Dorrien notes that “liberal theology as a whole was defined by its refusal to place the sacred and secular in irreconcilable opposition.”<sup>22</sup> Far from distinguishing Yoder’s theology from social gospel liberalism, then, Parler’s arguments place Yoder squarely within that tradition.

Similarly, Nation quotes a footnote from *The Politics of Jesus* in order to argue that Yoder’s “intention” there was to offer a “corrective” to individualistic, pietistic readings of Jesus and that Yoder thus left much “implicit” in his “holistic, biblically

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<sup>20</sup> Parler, “Liturgical Turn,” 185.

<sup>21</sup> Rauschenbusch, *TSG*, 1, 140.

<sup>22</sup> Dorrien, *Making of American Liberal Theology: Idealism, Realism, & Modernity*, 10.

rooted theology.”<sup>23</sup> Nation wonders, however, if “in the early twenty-first century, many Christians influenced by Yoder (or similar views) are not in fact committing the very reverse error (of social reductionism) that Yoder wanted to avoid (which is not to argue for a return to the error of seeing the relevance of Jesus only in terms of individualistic pietism).”<sup>24</sup>

Nation’s argument about Yoder and his followers closely mirrors that of Rauschenbusch’s first biographer, Dores Sharp. Recognizing that “later adherents of the ‘social gospel’ came practically to identify religion with social ethics and social improvement,” Sharp insists that “when Rauschenbusch and other earlier thinkers use the words ‘social gospel’ they were simply *adding* the concept of the good news of the redemption of society to the received concept of the redemption of individual souls. In other words, they were adding a *social* gospel to the *individual* gospel already in the minds of all evangelical Christians. There were not, in their thinking, two gospels at all, but one gospel with two phases, in both of which they earnestly believed, but one of which they felt had been too much neglected.”<sup>25</sup> This argument, too, is based in Rauschenbusch’s own words to that effect in the opening pages of *A Theology for the Social Gospel* that we examined in Chapter Two.

In other words, as with Parler, Nation may be right about Yoder’s corrective intentions, but that observation still does not distinguish Yoder’s theology from Rauschenbusch’s social gospel. What is more important than intentions is the way the

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<sup>23</sup> Mark Thiessen Nation, “The Politics of Yoder Regarding *The Politics of Jesus*: Recovering the Implicit in Yoder’s Holistic Theology for Pacifism,” in *Radical Ecumenicity*, 37, 38.

<sup>24</sup> Nation, “The Politics of Yoder Regarding *The Politics of Jesus*, 45.

<sup>25</sup> Dores R. Sharp, *Walter Rauschenbusch* (New York: Macmillan, 1942), 192, emphasis original.

logic or structure of their theology develops. If my general argument—that the logic of Yoder’s mature theology largely reflects the logic of Rauschenbusch’s theology—holds, then adherents to Yoder’s theology would do well to pay closer attention to Rauschenbusch and his followers.

I have argued that the logic of both Rauschenbusch’s theology and Yoder’s mature theology transposes Christology, eschatology, and ecclesiology into a contemporary sociopolitical idiom that is accessible to anyone. Whether such transposition is done as an “expansion” or “corrective” of their received theological categories, the end result does not merely add something new to the received theological categories but ends up transposing those categories into new theopolitical ones.<sup>26</sup> Having done so, it is then difficult to convince the next generation that the old theological categories are relevant any longer, as Sharp and Nation both acknowledge happened to the generation of social activists following Rauschenbusch and Yoder, respectively. This does not mean that Rauschenbusch’s and Yoder’s correctives were unneeded in their respective contexts; it simply means that those adherents to Yoder’s theology who have concerns about liberalism might be able to use Rauschenbusch and his legacy as a resource for making sense of Yoder’s legacy.

One theologian who is intimately familiar with both Yoder’s theology and the tradition of American Protestant liberalism is Stanley Hauerwas. I want to conclude by turning attention more directly to how he fits into the narrative I have told. Hauerwas has made many contributions to the fields of Christian theology and ethics in his career that

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<sup>26</sup> For further argument along these lines, see Paul Martens, “How Mennonite Theology Became Superfluous in Three Easy Steps: Bender, Yoder, Weaver, and the Trajectory of Anabaptist Distillation,” *Journal of Mennonite Studies* 33 (2015): 149–66.

now spans half a century, yet to many he is known for his polemics against liberalism and his promotion of Yoder's theology. The extent to which Hauerwas rejects liberalism and relies on Yoder is often exaggerated—sometimes by Hauerwas himself but more often by critics. Nevertheless it is worth considering why Hauerwas finds liberalism—in this case American Protestant liberalism—problematic and how my inclusion of Yoder within this tradition might affect how Hauerwas's relationship to the tradition is understood.

In his book *Against the Nations: War and Survival in a Liberal Society*, Hauerwas argues that through liberal accommodation of Christianity to American society, “theological convictions have lost their intelligibility.”<sup>27</sup> Hauerwas explains that “Christianity is in that awkwardly intermediate stage in Western culture where having once been culturally established it is still not yet clearly disestablished. Such a situation still makes liberalism seem attractive both as a pastoral and social ethical strategy.”<sup>28</sup> In his chapter “On Keeping Theological Ethics Theological,” Hauerwas recounts his “version of the development of Christian ethics since the advent of the Social Gospel” in order to explain how the social ethics tradition got itself into the predicament he identifies.<sup>29</sup>

Hauerwas begins with Rauschenbusch and his social gospel peers, who “thought they discovered an old truth that had been lost through centuries of Christian accommodation with the status quo—namely that the essential characteristic of the

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<sup>27</sup> Stanley Hauerwas, *Against the Nations: War and Survival in a Liberal Society* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1992), 6.

<sup>28</sup> Hauerwas, *Against the Nations*, 8.

<sup>29</sup> Hauerwas, *Against the Nations*, 10.

Christian religion is its insistence on organic unity between religion and morality, theology and ethics.”<sup>30</sup> Then came Reinhold Niebuhr, who Hauerwas notes “continued to be essentially a liberal theologian.”<sup>31</sup> While Niebuhr appeared to break with his social gospel forebears, Hauerwas argues that he in fact “continued their most important theological and social presuppositions. Like them he assumed that the task of Christian ethics was to formulate the means for Christians to serve their societies, particularly American society.”<sup>32</sup> Hauerwas notes, however, that “many secular thinkers accepted his anthropology and social theory without accepting his theological presuppositions.”<sup>33</sup> And over time “Christian ethics thus became the attempt to develop social strategies which people of goodwill could adopt even though they differed religiously and morally.”<sup>34</sup>

According to Hauerwas, “The recent history of Christian ethics has largely been the story of the attempt to work out the set of problems bequeathed to us by the social gospel and the Niebuhrs.”<sup>35</sup> And for Hauerwas the main problem can be summarized thus:

As [American] society increasingly becomes secular, Christians, insofar as they endeavor to remain political actors, must attempt to translate their convictions into a nontheological idiom. But once such a translation is accomplished, it becomes very unclear why the theological idiom is needed at all. . . . The more theologians seek to find the means to translate theological convictions into terms acceptable to the nonbeliever, the more they substantiate the view that theology has little of

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<sup>30</sup> Hauerwas, *Against the Nations*, 28.

<sup>31</sup> Hauerwas, *Against the Nations*, 31.

<sup>32</sup> Hauerwas, *Against the Nations*, 31.

<sup>33</sup> Hauerwas, *Against the Nations*, 31.

<sup>34</sup> Hauerwas, *Against the Nations*, 32.

<sup>35</sup> Hauerwas, *Against the Nations*, 34.



importance to say in the area of ethics. It seems that the theologian is in a classical “no win” situation.”<sup>36</sup>

Hauerwas argues that the way to keep theological ethics theological is to index them to the church:

It is my suspicion that if theologians are going to contribute to reflection on the moral life in our particular situation, they will do so exactly to the extent they can capture the significance of the church for determining the nature and content of Christian ethical reflection. . . . For Christian beliefs about God, Jesus, sin, the nature of human existence, and salvation are intelligible only if they are seen against the background of the church—that is, a body of people who stand apart from the “world” because of the peculiar task of worshipping a God whom the world knows not.<sup>37</sup>

Thus, for Hauerwas, “when asked to say something theological, especially when the questioner is seeking to understand the ethical significance of religious convictions, we should perhaps not say with [James] Gustafson ‘God,’ but ‘Church.’”<sup>38</sup>

It is precisely at this point that Hauerwas credits Yoder. On Hauerwas’s narration, Yoder rides in from the “sectarian badlands” to require “theologians to acknowledge that their work makes no sense abstracted from the church” and to remind them that “both the subject and the audience of Christian ethics are Christians—the people who are constituted by that polity called the church.”<sup>39</sup> Hauerwas thus makes it his task “to promote the reading of *The Politics of Jesus* because it helps us locate our loves as Christians in the catholic faith.”<sup>40</sup> He explains, “Yoder needs to be read in the tradition of

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<sup>36</sup> Hauerwas, *Against the Nations*, 38.

<sup>37</sup> Hauerwas, *Against the Nations*, 42.

<sup>38</sup> Hauerwas, *Against the Nations*, 43.

<sup>39</sup> Stanley Hauerwas, “When the Politics of Jesus makes a difference,” *Christian Century* 110, no. 28, 13 October 1993, 982.

<sup>40</sup> Hauerwas, “When the Politics of Jesus makes a difference,” 982.

liberal Protestantism not only because he helps us recognize the strengths of that tradition, but also because he helps us see why that tradition has come to an end (which accounts for why he remains something of an outcast in mainstream Protestant theology).”<sup>41</sup> For Hauerwas, therefore, Yoder’s main contribution to the tradition of Protestant liberalism is to sound its death knell.

In the kind of irony that Niebuhr would relish, however, a number of recent interpreters of Hauerwas’s theology have argued that it displays certain hallmarks of Protestant liberalism and that Hauerwas therefore “may in important respects be that tradition’s heir.”<sup>42</sup>

In a recent response to one such interpretation of his work, Hauerwas rightly identifies a number of places where he has “written not only about God but about the difference God makes or should make in our lives.”<sup>43</sup> He admits that he is “not a systematic theologian” and that he attempts “to avoid theology becoming beliefs abstracted from how we are to live.”<sup>44</sup> He continues, “I have never attempted, nor will I ever attempt, to provide an account of the Trinity or of the Incarnation as an end in itself. I have learned much from those who have engaged in speculation on how the one God can be three, but I have not understood that to be my task.”<sup>45</sup> Instead, writes Hauerwas,

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<sup>41</sup> Hauerwas, “When the Politics of Jesus makes a difference,” 982–83.

<sup>42</sup> John Webster, “Ecclesiocentrism,” *First Things* 246 (October 2015): 55. Cf. Nicholas M. Healy, *Hauerwas: A (Very) Critical Introduction* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2014), 44; R. R. Reno, “Stanley Hauerwas,” in *The Blackwell Companion to Political Theology*, edited by Peter Scott and William T. Cavanaugh (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2004), 314; Evans, *Liberalism without Illusions*, 154.

<sup>43</sup> Stanley Hauerwas, *The Work of Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2015), 276.

<sup>44</sup> Hauerwas, *Work of Theology*, 270.

<sup>45</sup> Hauerwas, *Work of Theology*, 270.

“My ‘ethics’ is where I do theology, because it is in those contexts that you can show how the web that is theology is constantly changing given the problems facing the church.”<sup>46</sup> Indeed, for Hauerwas “the logic of belief and the logic of living out our beliefs are inseparable, particularly for considerations of what it means to claim what we believe is true.”<sup>47</sup>

On the face of it, interpretations of Hauerwas as the heir of Protestant liberalism seem absurd in light of Hauerwas’s sustained polemics against liberalism. And Hauerwas is certainly right to identify the many ways in which his writing is distinguishable from this tradition. Yet I wish to suggest that the narrative offered in this dissertation may help explain why some have observed a liberal streak in Hauerwas’s work. As we saw in the cases of Niebuhr and Yoder, sharp polemics against aspects of the tradition can sometimes mask even deeper resonances with the tradition. Moreover, as I have argued that Yoder’s theopolitical approach provides not so much a way out of the tradition as a looping back to its roots in Rauschenbusch, we might identify Hauerwas’s indebtedness to Yoder as one of the very reasons some interpreters identify Hauerwas as standing within the tradition. In his description of how he views the relationship between theology and ethics, Hauerwas is closer in spirit to his Protestant liberal forebears than his rhetoric at times suggests. Observing this connection is not necessarily to agree with Hauerwas’s critics that his theological approach is mistaken or deficient. It is simply to note that in as much as Hauerwas has championed Yoder’s theology, Hauerwas may ultimately be remembered not as the theologian who announced the death of American Protestant

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<sup>46</sup> Hauerwas, *Work of Theology*, 273.

<sup>47</sup> Hauerwas, *Work of Theology*, 269.

liberalism at the end of the twentieth century but as the one who showed that tradition a way forward for the twenty-first.

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