



## Christ and the Heavy Metal Subculture

### Applying Qualitative Analysis to the Contemporary Debate about H. Richard Niebuhr's *Christ and Culture*

Perry L. Glanzer  
Baylor University

#### Introduction

[1] H. Richard Niebuhr's famous typology from *Christ and Culture* continues to be the subject of spirited debate around its fiftieth anniversary (Gathje; Stackhouse). In fact, one could make a typology of the critics and supporters of Niebuhr's five famous motifs. Ethicists such as John Howard Yoder, Stanley Hauerwas, and William Willimon, claim we should reject Niebuhr's typology. George Marsden, a Reformed historian, maintains we should transform it. And James Gustafson believes we should continue to accommodate it with little modification. In fact, Gustafson would likely argue that even my ability to apply the typology to Niebuhr's critics and supporters is a reflection of its continued usefulness.<1>

[2] The above evaluators of Niebuhr's typology have tended to focus upon its value for understanding theological ideas or historical Christian movements. While such evaluations are important, I believe questions about the typology's continued usefulness could benefit from the application of sociological methods to the inquiry. Gustafson himself notes, "The typology also pertains to alternative central trajectories in ways of Christian living - not just ideas" (xxxiv). Since "ways of Christian living" are demonstrated in the midst of specific churches confessing Christ amidst specific cultures and subcultures, this essay attempts to examine Yoder, Marsden, and Gustafson's disagreements about Niebuhr's typology by applying a "reality test" that draws upon the methods of qualitative research. In the first section before the test, I briefly review the origins of this paper and the arguments. The second part of the paper will attempt to apply Niebuhr's typology to four different areas of interaction between a particular evangelical church and a particular subculture. After each attempted application, I evaluate the results in light of Marsden's and Yoder's critiques.

[3] Overall, I conclude that this reality test provides some support for Gustafson's claim that the typology can continue to illuminate the normative responses of Christians to culture. Nonetheless, Marsden's modifications can and should be taken into account when using Niebuhr's typology for descriptive sociological analysis of a church's response to a culture. However, when it comes to the important matters of understanding a Christian's normative reasoning versus merely categorizing normative responses, Niebuhr's typology becomes unsatisfactory and Yoder's approach proves much more illuminating.

#### A Brief History of the Test Case and the Arguments

[4] My test case draws upon qualitative research that I undertook in the mid 90s of a church and ministry called Sanctuary located in Torrance, California.<2> Sanctuary owed its existence to evangelical Christian rock bands, such as Stryper, who had embraced heavy metal music and used it both as a medium of entertainment and a witnessing tool at clubs and other concert venues. The evangelistic success of these bands resulted in numerous converts within the heavy metal subculture. However, when attempting to enter traditional churches, the converts complained of being ostracized from local churches whose members criticized their appearance, musical tastes, and behavior. Thus, various band members

approached Bob Beeman, an interim pastor at Palm View Assemblies of God church in Whittier, California about helping the new converts grow in their new faith. Soon he began meeting with both the band members and their fans on Sunday afternoons and in early 1985, Sanctuary, "The Rock and Roll Refuge," had its first formal meeting with the purpose of "reaching kids on the edge." This goal involved, according to Sanctuary's literature, "boldly going where no church has gone before."

[5] For a six-month period I attended worship services, educational classes, social events, and Christian band performances. In addition, I conducted interviews with almost all of the church pastors, deacons, and elders, as well as some of the members of the church. My analysis of the data attempted to discover how church leadership and members reconciled their community's evangelical Christian identity with the heavy metal subculture. During my analysis I found Niebuhr's typology extremely illuminating and employed it throughout my work. Yet, I also sensed that the typology seemed limited at some points that I could not articulate at the time.

[6] Later, I came across both the critiques of John Howard Yoder and George Marsden. John Howard Yoder's critique of Niebuhr's typology was passed around for decades as an unpublished paper before finally making it to the public eye in 1996. What I found especially important in Yoder's critique is how he found problems with the normative guidance the question produced. "What was wrong with the question as H. R. Niebuhr set it up was the very notion that 'Christ' as Niebuhr defined him . . . , and 'Culture' as Niebuhr defines that, are so predisposed by his own particular angles on the history of the problem that there can be no right answer," he wrote (82-83). Thus, Yoder rejected Niebuhr's typology and proposed an alternative that sets forth what "our cultural obedience to Christ's Lordship might mean" (84). The alternative draws upon the Biblical language of creation, fall, and redemption as well as the New Testament's language of principalities and powers. Yoder claimed that the Biblical concept of powers corrects Niebuhr's monolithic view of culture, because the writers understand that cultural creations such as powers can often express aspects of God's good creation, the effects of the fall, or elements of redemption. "Everything we call 'culture' is both in some way created and creative and positive, and in other ways rebellious and oppressive," he maintained (85). When and how particular aspects of culture demonstrate these qualities should be determined, according to Yoder, by "concrete situational discernment" (86). In other words, the church must discern how to affirm Christ's Lordship in the face of a value structure, or a power structure, or a meaning system, which may both evidence and deny that Lordship.

[7] George Marsden appeared to agree with Yoder when he claimed at the fiftieth anniversary of H. Richard Niebuhr's original "Christ and Culture" lectures that Niebuhr's famous analysis "in its present form could be near the end of its usefulness" (18). Yet, unlike Yoder, Marsden held out hope that Niebuhr's categories could still be transformed into a helpful, but limited, tool for understanding the different ways Christians or specific Christian communities interact with the dominant culture or subcultures. Marsden's proposed transformation involved three things. First, he pointed out that Niebuhr's abstract category of "Christ" is inadequate and misleading. The fact is that every individual's or group's way of understanding Christianity and following Christ is itself a cultural product. He noted, "Properly speaking, we should frame the question as 'the culture of Christianity,' e.g., urban American Catholicism, 'and other cultures,' e.g., American urban political culture" (20). Second, Marsden emphasized that Niebuhr's undifferentiated use of the word "culture" must be refined and used "in more specific and discriminating ways" (21). For example, we need to talk about subcultures or particular cultural activities instead of the monolithic way Niebuhr talks about culture. This also seemed to be what John Howard Yoder had in mind when he stated:

There is no reason that what we should do about war, and about farming, and about epic poetry, and about elementary education, and about pornography, and about mothering, and about *heavy metal*, would gain by our trying to treat each of those segments of "culture" in the same way (83, italics added).

Finally, Marsden reiterated that Niebuhr's five categories are actually only motifs and not at all mutually exclusive. As Marsden noted, "Virtually every Christian and every Christian group expresses in one-way or another all five of the motifs" (21). Both of these critiques, I believed, brought to light weaknesses with Niebuhr's typology that I had sensed while attempting to apply the types to "actual ways of Christian living."

[8] Thus, I was intrigued to find that in the fiftieth anniversary edition of Niebuhr's *Christ and Culture* James Gustafson shot back at both critics. He dismissed John Howard Yoder's argument with one-sentence claiming that Yoder's argument "is laced with more *ad hominem* arguments and fortified with more gratuitous footnotes than anything I ever read by scholars in the field of Christian ethics" (xxiii). He also took Marsden to task by arguing that he was "ignorant of the method" (xxxi) of Niebuhr's book and

thus its purpose.

[9] Gustafson then set forth in what way he thought the typology should be evaluated: "The heuristic, that is, interpretive, illuminating power of the fivefold typology and of each type is the principal criterion by which to evaluate the expositions and analyses in each of the chapters and in the book as a whole" (xxx). What intrigued me most was that he also argued that the typology could not only illumine theological ideas but actual "ways of Christian living" (xxxiv). This illumination could still, Gustafson contends, provide normative guidance for responsible choices about ethical ideas and the Christian life.

[10] In this paper I have sought to revisit my research, interviews, and field notes to reevaluate the use of Niebuhr in my previous work in light of the present controversy. I seek to take Gustafson seriously by using qualitative research to determine whether Niebuhr's typology provides both descriptive and normative illumination of "ways of Christian living," whether it needs some modification for the illumination to be insightful or whether it should really be discarded. The next part of this paper reexamines my previous attempts to apply Niebuhr's categories to three important areas of interaction I observed. After a review of each attempt, I evaluate the application of Niebuhr's typology in light of Marsden and Yoder's critique.

## Identifying the Audience

[11] In her 1991 study of heavy metal subculture Deena Weinstein argued that heavy metal should be considered a subculture. She noted that heavy metal does not fit the label of a mass audience who more passively receive already interpreted music from the corporate economy. Neither is it related to folk culture that exists outside the corporate economy. At times, heavy metal has been described as a taste culture which Herbert Gans defines as consisting of "values, the cultural forms that express those values . . . and the media in which they are expressed" (10). Nonetheless, Weinstein argued that the concept of a subculture rather than taste culture is more appropriately applied to the social group identified with heavy metal music because it encompasses the activities and total lifestyle of its members and not just its values. Weinstein claims, "The metal audience is articulated into a subculture with a distinctive style and activities. It is constituted by its members, but is not fully their own" (98). In other words, it encompasses a "way of living."

[12] The clearest identifying mark of a heavy metal fan, according to Weinstein, was their look (126-30). A masculine style that includes long hair, blue jeans, and black heavy metal t-shirts was the dominant fashion. Long hair was an especially important fixture since it could not be easily attained and was a permanent brand of one's adherence to the subculture. Other optional fixtures included black boots and jackets, pins or tags, caps with logos, earrings, necklaces, spiked collars and bracelets, rings, died hair, and tattoos.

[13] Sanctuary's acceptance of the heavy metal look became one of the major ways it accommodated the subculture. One deacon noted, "I would say that the only thing different about our people is that they're more into rock and roll and long hair - I wouldn't say long hair - a different kind of look." I found two-thirds of the males in the directory sported long hair, and the head pastor, Bob Beeman (called Pastor Bob by the congregation), led the way by modeling long dark curly hair, earrings, three black leather bracelets, black jeans, a black t-shirt, and black boots with silver tips. One member claimed, "Gothics, people who wear black lipstick, black nails, hair, clothes, everything, if some of those walked into a regular church people would freak out. 'What is that? Aaah.' But they are accepted. I think that's what people want. People want acceptance not based on what they look like or what music they listen to."

[14] The reasoning behind the accommodation derived from the Bible.<3> Interviewees cited Scriptures that emphasized the importance of a person's heart over his or her appearance to justify their church's practice. For example, one deacon related:

You don't have to have long hair to come to our church. It's just that our church was the first to actively promote, "If you have long hair it's OK to come to our church," so we wound up with a bunch of people with long hair. Now they have shaved half a head and spiked up, green, purple, red, gray, and it doesn't matter because we've got a real understanding of the target of what God is looking at. Nobody said it any better than David after dancing in front of the ark of the covenant until his clothes fell off, and he told [Michal]: "Look chick, God looks on the heart. God doesn't look on the outward appearance."

The ideal normative Christian practice, they argued, would be to accept everyone into the community no matter what his or her appearance.

[15] Yet, it would be a mistake to claim that Sanctuary merely accommodated the heavy metal subculture, because there were also areas of synthesis and transformation as well as paradoxes and points of resistance. For example, despite the above interviewee's statement that "you don't have to have long hair to come to our church," words and deeds sometimes enforced a different type of dress code. I rarely saw people in formal or semi-formal clothes at church services, and shorthaired types were in the minority (on one occasion I was asked by one of the interviewees when I was going to let my hair grow long). Once the person who gave the announcements wore a tie in the worship service and explained that he was wearing "non-Sanctuary wear" because somebody had challenged him to wear a suit. Since the last time he wore a suit everyone pelted him with trash, he decided to compromise and wear a green tie. While Sanctuary accommodated heavy metal dress to transform hearts, it also served as a model of Christ against a more formal Christian culture. As one deacon noted, "If you wear a shirt and tie to Sanctuary, Pastor Bob will say, 'Thanks for coming. Leave the tie at home because God looks at the heart and man looks at the outward appearance.' In Galatians, I Sam 16:7 - you come to church the way you are because God looks at the inner person. That's our philosophy." It was an odd statement. One is to dress casually because it does not matter how one dresses according to God. The importance of accommodating the heavy metal look became almost a sacred norm at Sanctuary. When asked about what one might expect regarding the future of Sanctuary, one deacon quipped, "Definitely not short hair."

[16] An area of synthesis pertained to heavy metal band logos on t-shirts. Weinstein claimed, "Heavy metal bands more than any other band use logos" (27). Often the logos had a thick, jagged typeface that signifies energy and power, the colors red and black, and iconography from gothic horror tales or heroic fantasies. The church synthesized this norm by making t-shirts, car window stickers, and dog tags with its logo printed on them. On the logo, the letters comprising "Sanctuary" were thick and jagged (see [www.sanctuaryinternational.com](http://www.sanctuaryinternational.com)), and for the letter T, a Viking sword was used. Below the title, the phrase "The Rock and Roll Refuge" was painted in blood red. Many of the Sanctuary members also wore Christian heavy metal band t-shirts.

[17] An area of paradox and resistance concerned female members. In heavy metal subculture, females had two basic fashion options. They could dress in male fashion (jeans or t-shirts) or what Deena Weinstein termed "male fantasy" (short skirts, spandex, and halter tops) (134). Most of the females at Sanctuary copied male fashion by wearing jeans, black t-shirts, and boots, but there were some dressed in more revealing styles linked to the "male fantasy" look. Chris, one of the pastoral staff explained: "There are times . . . girls come in wearing stuff that is a little risqué for your average church, but what do you do? You kick them out? You just have to sit there and go, 'Oh well,' because that is the people you want in church." Again, an appeal to the Bible was often used to justify accepting the immodestly dressed women. As one elder related:

There are some people who do need to work on their appearance - a desire to dress in a sexually, provocative manner. If you say to people, "Change the way you dress," that's a contradiction of Scripture, because I'm sure out of the 3000 people added to the Kingdom on the day of Pentecost there were several people who say, "That person needs to change the way they look before he or she becomes a Christian." That's not the way it was handled. They believed that once that person was baptized into Jesus Christ . . . the Holy Spirit would do a work on them.

So were there any lines drawn as far as dress? Yes, according to one pastor involved with the worship band. "We [the worship band] modified our look a little bit. The Spandex was kind of out. It was a controversy."

[18] Overall, as Gustafson might note, Niebuhr's *original* categories can help one understand Sanctuary's response to the heavy metal subculture with regard to appearance. But some of Marsden's clarifying points help this illumination. As Marsden notes, Christians and churches usually demonstrate elements of all five responses. Furthermore, churches themselves express aspects of culture. Sanctuary recognized this point by rejecting elements of the evangelical Christian subculture in the name of Christ and accommodating and synthesizing the heavy metal subculture - to a point. Ultimately, it still resisted some aspects of heavy metal subculture's norms of dress or held them in paradox.

[19] Yet, even Marsden's revised Niebuhrian categories have a limitation. Although he claims his revised categories "provide a workable way to think about our attitudes toward these questions and to help evaluate what our attitude should be" (21-22). In reality, the categories do not illumine how church members reasoned about the appropriate normative stance. In this case, using the Yoderian alternative makes sense. One can argue that Sanctuary members understood the dressing practices and values of the evangelical church as fallen because of the preoccupation with external appearance. Sanctuary members then sought to discern what Christ's lordship over what Christians wear means when reaching out to

people associated with the heavy metal subculture. They tried to demonstrate "concrete situational discernment." Christ's lordship in light of dress and appearance, both within Christian culture and outside it, was really the important obsession for church members. Overall, this simple Yoderian analysis appears both normatively more revealing as well as closer to the actual views of church members.

## The Music

[20] The second core element or "master emblem" that identified the heavy metal subculture was obviously the music, and one of Sanctuary's distinctive traits was that its members fully accommodated heavy metal music. They used it in the church's worship services, evangelistic concert outreaches and other band performances. Sanctuary members believed that their accommodation of particular musical genres could not be refuted on the basis of Scripture. As one interviewee argued:

When you plunge into the word of God and try and refute this vehicle of music with Scripture, it can't be done. People will try and say it's the beat; it has an adverse effect on the beat of the heart when the downbeat of the music is on the two and the four, instead of the one and the three, and it messes up the heart. There is no scientific documentation for that at all.

Sanctuary members also used Scripturally-based pragmatic arguments to justify its use. As one a concert promoter argued, "It doesn't matter the vehicle. . . . It's like Paul spoke of in the New Testament, 'I begot you with guile,' but what does it matter, you're in the kingdom. If I can get a kid to come to a concert who would never go to a church . . . and he gets saved, what does it matter how I got him?"

[21] Although the music itself was accommodated no matter what the form, the same could not be said for heavy metal lyrical themes. Most lyrical themes of heavy metal music draw from what Weinstein calls the Dionysian and Chaotic strands of pagan myth:

Dionysian experience . . . is embodied in the unholy trinity of sex, drugs and rock and roll. The Dionysian is juxtaposed to a strong emotional involvement in all that challenges the order and hegemony of everyday life: monsters, the underworld and hell, the grotesque and horrifying, disasters, mayhem, carnage, injustice, death and rebellion. Both Dionysus (the Greek god of wine) and Chaos (the most ancient god, who precedes from itself) are empowered by the sonic values of the music to fight a never-ending battle for the soul of the genre and to join together in combat against the smug security and safety of respectable society (35).

In the songs Sanctuary members wrote and performed in church and at local concerts, they largely rejected these themes. Yet, at times they also synthesized and transformed some of the chaotic lyrical themes in heavy metal. Apocalyptic images from Daniel and Revelation and references to the battle between good and evil, as well as Ecclesiastical allusions regarding hopelessness and meaninglessness of life, were prominent. This is not surprising since Weinstein also claimed, "Heavy metal's major source for its imagery and rhetoric of chaos is religion, particularly the Judeo-Christian tradition" (39). As will be discussed in further detail in the section on concert rituals, the Christian bands transformed these themes by redefining the sacred and profane in Christian terms and giving the songs a distinctly Christian message.

[22] Marsden's transformed Niebuhrian categories again prove descriptively illuminating in this area since the response to heavy metal music was multi-faceted. Nonetheless, once again Niebuhr's categories in any form provide less illumination about the members' normative views. The reason why Sanctuary members accommodated heavy metal music was simply because Scripture gives no reason for believing that music, apart from its lyrics, can be fallen. For Sanctuary, every musical genre expresses God's good creation and does not need redemption. Heavy metal music with bad lyrics can be redeemed simply by redeeming the lyrics. In other words, the best way to understand how church members reasoned about how Christians should respond to different musical genre derives from the overarching Biblical narrative of creation, fall and redemption and what the Bible says (or does not say) about the powerful practice of creating music.

## The Bands: Metal Gods, Priests, Evangelists or Something Else?

[23] In Weinstein's study, she observed that heavy metal bands played a vital role in the subculture, because they were the mediators between the music and the audience (8-9). The bands acted as priests (Weinstein called them "metal gods") not only during the religious service of the subculture (the concert), but also with their lives. As Weinstein described it:

From the point of view of the artist, heavy metal is a career that in its fullest realization becomes a vocation. This vocation includes total devotion to the music and deep loyalty to the youth subculture that grew up around it and from which the artist himself came. . . . Seen as an occupation, heavy metal is a serious and demanding struggle of committed and ambitious people who are also identified with and often devoted to a hedonistic life-style that reaches its peak in Dionysian ecstasy (60).

Sanctuary's response to the cultural role of heavy metal bands displayed the usual complex dynamic. It accommodated the bands' important priestly role as mediators of the music, but the community also sought to reject the idolatrous aspects of the band while transforming the very nature of the band's vocation and synthesizing certain marketing and identifying elements of heavy metal culture.

[24] For Sanctuary, the basic expression of what Christian bands did and what secular bands did was similar. For example, one band member noted:

I think that the actual nature of the bands is to get out in the world and play. . . . That's how Stryper started. They did the Troubadour, the Roxy's, the Whisky, and Gazzarri's. They've done the circuit just like a lot of our bands do. That's the purpose of a band to play music - to go into clubs.

Although Sanctuary's metal bands accommodated this practice, they interpreted and expressed their motives and mission differently. I found that they used two types of language with roots in either creation or redemption. For example, the following interviewee used both:

I think some bands are called to churches. But for the most part the desire that a lot of our guys have is to get out into the world. There's nothing like it. God calls us to be creative with our ministry and creative with our lives. If we're going to be a light to people, you got to have something different about us. Like the Bible says, they'll know us because of our love. They also may know us because we rock hard . . . and we're great people and we have good music.

The focus on the redemptive or evangelistic purposes of the bands received primary attention. For example, Sanctuary bands might be formed less out of a love of heavy metal or the desire to express a God-given gift or creative impulse than out of a desire to reach the kids in the subculture. The evangelism and outreach pastor shared about one experience:

Yeah, there were some guys who got together and didn't even like that style of music at all. But they knew that is where the kids are. They said, "They like this speed metal stuff that has the moshing. Can we do this?" And they did it. They got some respect as a speed metal band.

[25] Two tensions were apparent in this area. First, some interviewees observed Christians seeking to use their talents for various fallen purposes (e.g., money or fame) or embracing the hedonistic ends of the vocation. A member of Triple Ace, a southern rock band shared:

We've even had some musicians, although they said that ministry was their main purpose, their actions showed otherwise. It's not going to work out. It happens in a lot of bands. A lot of people like to go up and play and have people clap at them and stuff. Not that we don't like it, but if that's their motivation.

Second, there were some who thought that the bands' mission must be first and foremost redemptive and should not focus primarily on bringing their creative abilities to perfection. In addition, they wondered whether a band member's vocation as understood by popularity within the heavy metal culture could be accommodated since it involved an issue of Lordship. As one member remarked, "The mature bands are on fire for God. . . . Like Precious Death, one of the things that they are there to do - the main thing - is witnessing. Telling the kids about Jesus Christ. . . . But other bands, like I said. They want to be the next Christian Deep Purple . . . it won't happen." In other words, members believed that understanding the vocation of a band as witnessing is what kept a band from compromising. Seeking to merely bring their creative talents to perfection would likely lead a Christian band to failure or marginalization. As one deacon shared, "In order to make a living in the music business, you got to give the people what they want. All the people out there who pay for records and stuff, they don't pay to hear the gospel preached. They pay to hear about worldly things."

[26] Since the Christian bands associated with Sanctuary attempted to transform their purpose, they often rejected the marketing tactics of secular bands. For example, since fame and fortune were not their ends,

instead of playing with popular bands to gain name exposure, they played concerts that cost less and reached their specific target audience. One member described how his band rejected an offer to open up for a popular band because it required paying \$2000. Instead, they preferred playing Sunday nightclub spots where a band may pay a deposit of \$50, and if 20 people come they received the \$50 back. He reasoned, "I figure if I have \$2000 I can pay an awful lot of Sundays. . . . Hopefully, there will be a lot of people there. Christians may bring their friends who they can't get to come to church, but they will come to bars."

[27] The bands also synthesized other elements. According to heavy metal convention, bands avoided using a member's name for the group and instead often use ominous names with religious allusions (33). Sanctuary bands adopted this practice by using names such as Vengeance, Die Happy, Precious Death, Mortification, Sacred Warrior, and Gorgitation of the Pure. Album names such as Psycho Surgery, Stay of Execution, Life in the Grave, and Renaissance by Death also demonstrated this process.

[28] Again when it comes to describing the Christian bands' interaction with the subculture, Niebuhr's categories still provide illumination although Marsden's revisions must be applied. Yet, Yoder's categories function better than the revised Marsden-Niebuhrian option in understanding the normative dimension. Sanctuary band and church members wanted their bands to reject the temptation to become "metal gods" or priests and the lifestyle that went with the vocation. In other words, they understood the practice of most heavy metal bands as fallen and sought to redeem it. What is interesting is that they usually understood redemption as using heavy metal solely for evangelistic purposes instead of bringing the music to new creative heights.

## Community Rituals

[29] Weinstein described the heavy metal concert as the crucial unifying event for the fan and the vitality of the subculture. By bringing together the audience, the band, and the music, the heavy metal concert became a critical cultural ritual in her eyes. Using Durkheimian analysis, Weinstein compared the heavy metal concert to a religious worship event because it was a place where community was formed and the sacred was experienced. She wrote,

From a sociological perspective, the ideal heavy metal concert bears a striking resemblance to the celebrations, festivals, and ceremonies that characterize religions around the world. . . . The ecstasy, representations of the community to itself, the strong solidarity felt within the audience, and the bonds of mutual appreciation expressed by band and audience resemble features of religious festivals. . . . They are experienced as sacred, in contrast to the profane, everyday world. The sacred takes place in its own sacred time (reversible, indefinitely repeatable) and place, where *ens realissimum*, the greatest reality, is found (232).

The heavy metal concert became a worship service to the Dionysian and Chaotic gods replete with the singing, icons, monetary sacrifice, high priests, celebratory rituals, religious tokens, and other signs of religious practice.

[30] The importance of the concert as a unifying religious event in the heavy metal subculture created tensions with Sanctuary's worship. Sanctuary opposed the heavy metal subculture's pagan worship. Yet, it would be simplistic to describe this rejection as merely Christ or Christianity against heavy metal culture.

### *The Worship Service*

[31] Sanctuary's worship service, like most low-church evangelical services consisted of two major elements: worship and preaching (with a few announcements and the offering). A full band led the worship with drums, two guitars, a base, keyboards, and six vocalists. They usually performed two sets of music with the first incorporating a heavy metal style and the second closer to lite metal. One interviewee explained how the synthesis accommodated the musical tastes of the people:

For some people it just draws them here. "What, a rock and roll church, I'll check it out." But [to others] I think it shows that people at Sanctuary are being who they are. They like rock n' roll. They're playing rock n' roll music. That's showing reality. You don't have rock n' rollers six days a week listening to Bach on Sunday. You know what I'm saying. . . . People are being who they are on Sunday as they usually are six days a week. The music may draw some people. The reality draws more. When people drawn by the music see the reality, they stay.

[32] The odd reality also produced a large number of tourists or curiosity seekers, as one pastor explained: "We've had close to 15,000 people come through our doors. And out of the 15,000 people, probably 600 of them have made Sanctuary their home. Sometimes you can get up to 25 visitors per week." Because of so many visitors, the leaders of Sanctuary sought to communicate that the church service should not be equated with the chaotic and hedonistic heavy metal concert. A church flyer stated, "Sanctuary is not a concert. We're a church and a family for rockers and children on the edge. We're here for those who don't fit in anywhere else."

[33] Yet, the heavy metal concert experience permeated the church service. For example, the worship leaders often asked for the crowd's response (e.g., "Is everyone happy to be here?") or prompted them to engage in "concert" behavior (e.g., "Scream if you love Jesus"). In addition, the congregation usually stood, clapped, and screamed at the end of the songs. Occasionally, a well-known Christian heavy metal band would play for the congregation.

### *Concerts and Clubs*

[34] Sanctuary members also transformed the heavy metal concert experience through forming and supporting Christian bands that performed at both regular concerts and secular clubs. At the concerts or clubs, the bands combined heavy metal music, Christian lyrics and entertainment in the hopes of transforming the club/concert experience from a celebration of hedonism and chaos to an outreach for Christ.

[35] For example, I attended a Gothic rock concert (a style of music characterized by its focus on death, darkness, and hopelessness) put on by one of the church's bands at a Hollywood club. The Christian band named Gorgitation of the Pure purposely opened up before an anti-Christian gothic band called Christian Death (they sold t-shirts of Jesus shooting up with the statement on the back, "Acid rain is piss from God"). As Gorgitation of the Pure started to play, the lead singer (Alan) emerged with a skull mask and the head skeleton of a cow around his neck. During one of the songs, Alan held a knife in his hand while he danced around. The lyrics I understood referred to themes such as suicide, death, Satan, and demons, as well as Jesus Christ.

[36] In the middle of the concert, the Sanctuary drama team came on stage and performed an enactment of a girl committing suicide with speed metal in the background. After not finding her name in the book of life, she was escorted off stage by a couple of hideous looking demons. As the actors went off stage, Alan stood up and yelled/sang, "Do you want to go to hell? Satan, he's a liar." Then he went into a song that spoke about Jesus' love. Finally, before the last song, Alan shed his black clothing and donned a white robe, took some red dye and painted a red cross on the robe. He started the song by lifting his head to the sky and yelling/singing something about the Messiah.

[37] Ultimately, the band transformed the heavy metal concert into an evangelistic crusade by accommodating heavy metal music and the gothic look, synthesizing certain elements of the concert ritual, transforming the lyrics and adding its own drama. The heavy metal culture seemed willing to accommodate Christian bands as long as they still honored the music.

[38] At some of these concerts, a ritual took place known as moshing. Members described moshing as "ring around the rosy adult style," "a mild form of slam dancing," or "football with no purpose." Or as one interviewee said, "People go around in a circle, and they bump people, and it's fun. They high step it and wear the big boots." Some Christians not associated with Sanctuary contended that moshing might not be compatible with Christianity (Van Pelt: 21). Sanctuary members, however, believed moshing could be accommodated because "if we say that moshing is wrong we've just alienated the group of moshers." In addition, they claimed that it was the motive and not the action that might make it wrong. One girl argued, "As far as the pit, if you're in there going, 'Hate, hate, hate, kill, kill,' I think you need to step out of the pit and relax. I don't see anything wrong with the pit. It's not going against God; it's not separating you from God. Someone may be able to prove me wrong . . . just as long as you're not in there with a complete wrong heart." Members of Sanctuary also noted the potential for transforming the ritual of moshing itself into a Christian witness:

When it first came out, it's, no you can't do it. But if you don't do it the kids wouldn't come. So you got to have a [mosh] pit. They do this stuff, and the kids see a difference even in the Christian kids. They think this is different. People don't get hurt out there, and they help you up. They have fun, and when they get done we see people like a kid that came into the concert, and one of the people from the church will go out and they'll be friends after that and start talking. They'll be able to talk and share the gospel and invite them to church because now they're friends. They've



moshed together, and it's a bonding thing.

Sanctuary members' attitude toward moshing was in many ways typical of its approach to the heavy metal cultural elements. If members did not see adequate Scriptural grounds for rejecting it, they accommodated it. In addition, they even sought to synthesize it with Christian elements or transform it. However, the paradox remained in that the activity may become fallen if a person's motives become corrupted. With this particular activity, the response of the church members depended on the motives and manner of moshing and could be placed in any of Niebuhr's five analytical categories. Again, Marsden's revised Niebuhrian analysis provides insight into the complexity of Sanctuary's response. Overall, Sanctuary rejected the hedonistic worship but accommodated elements of the heavy metal concert as well as apocalyptic lyrical themes, synthesized them with its own church worship and evangelistic outreaches, and ultimately sought to transform the sacred concert event and place it under Christ's lordship.

[39] Yet, a Marsden-Niebuhrian analysis also becomes a bit strained, because it fails to illumine the theological rationale behind that response. In the fundamental dynamic behind Sanctuary's approach, the worship of Christ serves as the clarifying motif, and the redemption of the fallen practice of worship (or fallen humanity) becomes the primary focus. Sanctuary sought to worship another God besides chaos or the Dionysian trinity of drugs, sex, and rock and roll. Thus, it is easier and much more illuminating to argue that the heavy metal rituals such as the concert experience and moshing are powerful practices that Sanctuary believed could be fallen but could also be understood as creative or redemptive forms of bonding, worship, and outreach.

## The Church Transformed

[40] Although Sanctuary sought to transform the heavy metal subculture, the subculture also influenced and transformed Sanctuary. The most obvious example concerned its very existence. Near the end of my research, the pastor and elders at Sanctuary made a surprising announcement. They decided to transform the church into a ministry. The pastor and many of the leaders planned to move to Nashville, Tennessee to set up ministry headquarters for Sanctuary International (see [www.sanctuaryinternational.com](http://www.sanctuaryinternational.com)). There they would discontinue founding specific churches and run an international ministry.

[41] I had already sensed the reasons behind this decision during my interviews. Heavy metal and its subculture was something that one often outgrows with life changes (Weinstein, 110-11). Thus, as the members of Sanctuary grew older, their association with the heavy metal subculture changed. Members were conscious of a tension between those who desired to be on the edge and those who hoped to settle down. A younger girl expressed concern about the possible mellowing out of the Sanctuary congregation:

One thing about Sanctuary is that when it first started they took people right off the street. Everybody was young. Everybody was right out of the scene and everybody was right out of the world. One thing about Sanctuary now is that a lot of people are growing up. A lot of them are getting married. They're getting settled down. They're getting mellow. It's not the same as it used to be . . . Sanctuary should always be on the edge - always reaching for those kids.

The leadership also wanted to continue reaching kids on the edge and had "resolved" this problem by encouraging older, married couples to go to other churches. As one of the associate pastors acknowledged, there are problems with staying on the edge: "I hope we're always in tune and never get too old, because now we have to drag ourselves to the concert. I'm getting older. I used to be able to survive on four hours sleep and go to all the shows. I can't do that anymore."

[42] Eventually, the leadership faced the reality, however, that the church could not stay young. As a result, they decided that Sanctuary would be more effective as a ministry than an actual church. As their web site explains:

When Sanctuary first started, we were a Church. Throughout the years, as we became more of an International ministry, we began to focus on other things. Today, we no longer have organized churches. Instead, we have Sanctuary sponsored Bible Study Home Groups all over the world. . . . [Now] we are a ministry. We have learned over the years that, since our outreach is to the people on the brink, we were not able to successfully accommodate the needs of growing families. We found ourselves at a juncture. We could either grow with our families and lose the "edge," or we could stay committed to doing what we believe God called us to do. Since there are so many churches devoted to family growth, we decided to associate ourselves with them ([www.sanctuaryinternational.com](http://www.sanctuaryinternational.com)).

In the end, the nature of Marsden's culture changed Sanctuary from an actual church into a ministry within what it perceived as the universal church. In this case, Sanctuary did not merely accommodate culture; it was transformed by it.

[43] One distinct advantage of Marsden's revised categories is that it helps descriptively illuminate the fact that the relationship between Christian cultures and other subcultures can go both ways. This was clearly the case with Sanctuary. As a church formed to reach one particular subculture, it absorbed the limitations of that subculture's practices. Recognizing this weakness, Sanctuary leaders transformed their church into a ministry. Of course, one might argue that the church leaders, by transforming the church into a ministry, also accommodated an element of Protestant subculture and its approach to ecclesiology.

[44] Despite the descriptive illuminating power of Marsden's categories it is unclear that normative illumination is added. How is one to evaluate the transformation of a particular Christian subculture by the culture? Again, Yoder's approach provides a better framework for illumination of the leaders' normative reasoning. For example, although Sanctuary leaders formed the church in response to the corrupt practices of evangelical churches, Sanctuary leaders eventually realized that the heavy metal subculture was actually corrupting or limiting their own church practices. Recognizing this weakness, Sanctuary International now seeks to transform the originally corrupted practices of churches by reach members of this subculture and accept and redeem them by bringing them under Christ's lordship within existing churches.

## Conclusion

[44] Are H. Richard Niebuhr's *Christ and Culture* categories still useful after fifty years? Gustafson is correct to note that they provide illuminating insight into actual ways of Christian living. Yet, Marsden's proposed modifications are certainly needed to make Niebuhr more amenable in analyzing the actual practices of a church. For instance, it is clear that when analyzing Sanctuary, we cannot talk about culture in a monolithic way but must recognize that Sanctuary is a segment of evangelical subculture that sought to transform the heavy metal subculture. In addition, it is obvious that Sanctuary, in the name of Christ but as a particular expression of evangelical Christian culture, exhibited all five of the responses to the heavy metal subculture. The church members rejected certain elements of heavy metal such as the subculture's celebration of drugs, sex, and alcohol. They accommodated many elements associated with the look and lifestyle of the audience as well as the music. They synthesized the music, logos, band marketing methods, song themes, and rituals with their own Christian lyrics, phrases, bands, themes, and rituals. They held various elements in a paradox such as the religious nature of the heavy metal concert and the evangelistic heavy metal concert. Finally, they sought to transform certain attitudes and lifestyle habits of the heavy metal audiences, the heavy metal band's purpose, the music's lyrics, and the function and meaning of heavy metal rituals. In other words, my research confirms Marsden's point that all five of these reactions exist within a Christian subculture's interaction with another particular subculture.

[45] Using Marsden's second modification to Niebuhr's categories also provides greater illumination but it also creates an interesting problem. It is true that when discussing Sanctuary's practices it may be better to speak about Christianity and other cultures or "the culture of Christianity and other cultures." For example, it is helpful to identify evangelical Christian culture's norms regarding external appearances and heavy metal culture's views. The problem is that Sanctuary clearly believed there must still be a norm to judge both of them. Of course, Marsden recognizes this point when he argues:

With Niebuhr we still want to say that we are talking about the teachings of Christianity or what it means to follow Christ and that these have some transcendent reference. But we also need to emphasize more clearly that we have these spiritual treasures in earthen vessels (20).

However, this means Marsden's clarifications really produce three sets of categories. The tension is not between the culture of Christianity and other cultures but between Christ, particular Christian subcultures and other cultures or subcultures - all of which creates more of a muddle. Marsden anticipated this result, but he still believed the categories are helpful:

But the very point is that we will be even more in a muddle without some such categories with which to talk about these complexities. . . . Such analytical categories help us to begin to sort out these complexities. They provide a workable way to think about our attitudes toward these questions and to help evaluate what our attitude *should* be. . . . Moreover, these classifications, or some combination of them, might be helpful in establishing rules of thumb for thinking about how we should characteristically relate to some particular types of cultural activities (21-22, italics added).

Certainly, his clarification produces more accurate illumination, but a different approach could possibly reduce the muddle.

[46] Moreover, in this case neither Niebuhr's original categories nor Marsden's revisions provide the illumination of a Christian's normative reasoning on the subject or actual normative guidance that Gustafson or Marsden think that they can. Yoder's approach provides less muddle and more normative illumination about the normative reasoning. This fact may also result in it providing more contemporary normative guidance. As Yoder notes:

The standard of consistency by which we test whether various positions taken by various Christians, or by one Christian at different times, are consistent, is not ultimately the abstract logic with which the historian or the ethical analyst at his desk reviewing the classics distills out of any given set of decisions some general principles which seem logically to underlie them all. . . . The consistency which counts is the concrete community process of discernment, as that community converses, in light of the confession "Christ is Lord," about particular hard choices (73-74).

[47] The fact that Sanctuary members worshipped a different Lord is what determined how they responded to some core aspects of the heavy metal subculture. While Marsden's revised Niebuhrian categories may help delineate a Christian subculture's different normative responses to certain segments of another culture (e.g., music, clothing, etc.) and are descriptively illuminating, the categories' actual usefulness for illuminating the normative decision making of Christian communities may be limited. The Yoderian alternative that draws upon the overarching Biblical narrative of creation, fall, and redemption, a Biblical understanding of idolatry, and conversation about what it means to confess Christ as Lord is not only much more useful in this case, but also reflects the language of the Christian community. Further qualitative research would be needed, however, to confirm whether, when it comes to "ways of Christian living," Niebuhr's categories are enlightening primarily of normative responses and not the normative reasoning of Christians.

## Bibliography

Gans, Herbert J.

1974 *Popular Culture and High Culture*. New York: Basic Books.

Gathje, Peter R.

2002 "A Contested Classic." *Christian Century* 119 (June 19): 28-32.

Gustafson, James M.

2001 "Preface: An Appreciative Interpretation," xxi-xxxv. In *Christ and Culture*. Expanded Fiftieth Edition. H. Richard Niebuhr. San Francisco: HarperSan Francisco.

Hauerwas, Stanley, and William H. Willimon

1989 *Resident Aliens*. Nashville: Abingdon.

Marsden, George.

2000 "Christianity and Cultures: Transforming Niebuhr's Categories." *Christian Ethics Today* (December): 18-24.

Niebuhr, H. Richard.

2001 *Christ and Culture*. Expanded Fiftieth Edition. San Francisco: HarperSan Francisco.

Stackhouse, John G., Jr.

2002 "In the World, But . . ." *Christianity Today* (April 22): 80-81.

Van Pelt, Doug.

1989 "Mosh for the Master? Now that Christians Are Playing Thrash Metal, It's Time to Ask, 'Is Christian Music Getting Out of Control?'" *Contemporary Christian Music* (February): 20-21.

Weinstein, Deena

1991 *Heavy Metal: A Cultural Sociology*. New York: Lexington Books.

Yoder, John Howard

1996 "How H. Richard Niebuhr Reasoned: A Critique of Christ and Culture." Pp 31-90 in *Authentic Transformation: A New Vision of Christ and Culture*. Glenn Stassen, D. M. Yeager, and John Howard Yoder. Nashville: Abingdon.

~~~~~  
*JRS Home*  
~~~~~