

Title: Things Hold Together: John Howard Yoder's Trinitarian Theology of Culture

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## **ABSTRACT**

Theologies of culture often focus on either Christ or creation as their primary source, to the exclusion of the other. At best, this approach is incomplete because it does not account for the continuity between creation and redemption. At worst, it posits a divide not simply between Christ and creation, but between persons of the Trinity, presuming contradictory moral and cultural norms issuing from different persons of the Trinity. John Howard Yoder is often depicted as a representative of a Christocentric and creation-deficient approach to culture. Against that faulty representation, this dissertation argues that Yoder advocates a Trinitarian theology of culture that upholds the continuity and coherence between God's work in creation and in redemption.

To see why Yoder can be characterized as Trinitarian, his thought must be placed in the context of his engagement with the Niebuhrs, as well as Nicea and Chalcedon. For Yoder, Scripture leads us to the conclusion that Jesus' humanity makes him directly relevant to culture and Jesus' divinity directly connects him to creation. Inasmuch as the creeds are faithful translations of Scripture, they also lead to this conclusion. Yoder's focus on Christ does not come at the expense of his doctrine of creation, for he contends that humans were created to exercise Christ-like power and that Powers were created to be dynamic servants of peace and flourishing. Moreover, the power unleashed in Jesus restores and re-establishes the politics of creation in that God's original intentions for human life are revealed and validated in Jesus. This does not include sword-bearing, which is not rooted in prelapsarian creation but in postlapsarian preservation. God's providential allowance for the sword must not be confused or conflated with God's creative and redemptive will. Finally, Yoder argues that true cultural transformation depends on the pioneering work of the Spirit and the in-breaking kingdom of God. The practices of the church will inevitably overflow and have transformative effects not only in the church but also in all human culture. The dissertation concludes with implications of Yoder's contention that creation and redemption must cohere in our theology of culture.