

Introduction

In “Paul’s Letter to American Christians,” Martin Luther King Jr. issues what is probably one of his lesser-known critiques of the church. Most students of King’s work are familiar with his condemnation of the church’s racial segregation. Many will also recall King’s searing prediction that if the church continues to conform to society’s injustices rather than to Christ, it will become “an irrelevant social club.”¹ But in this text, King imagines that the apostle Paul would attack American denominationalism:

Let me say something about the church. Americans, I must remind you, as I have told so many others, that the church is the Body of Christ. When the church is true to its nature, it knows neither division nor disunity. I am told that within American Protestantism there are more than two hundred and fifty denominations. The tragedy is not merely that you have such a multiplicity of denominations, but that many groups claim to possess absolute truth. Such narrow sectarianism destroys the unity of the Body of Christ. God is neither Baptist, Methodist, Presbyterian, nor Episcopalian. God transcends our denominations. If you are to be true witnesses for Christ, you must come to know this, America.²

1. Martin Luther King Jr., *Why We Can't Wait* (New York: Signet, 2000), 80.

2. Martin Luther King Jr., *Strength to Love* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1981), 140. For another well-known critique of American denominationalism, see H. Richard Niebuhr, *The Social Sources of Denominationalism* (New York: Meridian, 1957).

King identifies several problems related to denominationalism, but he focuses on how it can lead to divisiveness. King makes clear that the stakes of this problem are high: the discord that often results comes at the expense of church unity, threatening the very integrity of its witness. Like so many of King's perceptive analyses, this one remains as trenchant now as when he first spoke it. It poses a bold challenge for Christians to approach difference constructively.

But is King's critique of the church relevant for theologians and Christian ethicists? Although denominational divisions often inform work in academic theology, other divides are perhaps more salient. Most ethicists, for example, identify with one of the major approaches in twentieth- and twenty-first-century Christian ethics: synergy, realism, integrity, or liberation.³ These divisions run across denominational affiliations. They are perhaps less solidified than the various Christian denominations, but they do mark important differences.

As such, they are indispensable. Just as the various Christian denominations in America possess gifts and resources specific to their strand of the tradition, theologians of the various stances espouse diverse perspectives that can foster mutually critical and mutually enriching dialogue. But far too often, they do not. In just the manner King describes with the church, academic theologians often allow these differences to create discord. And just as King identified disunity as a threat to the integrity of the church's mission, so, too,

3. I take these ways of naming the "variations on the Christian stance" from Robin W. Lovin, *An Introduction to Christian Ethics: Goals, Duties, and Virtues* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2011), 45–66. The *synergy* stance characterizes theological work in the natural law tradition, broadly construed, that emphasizes and fosters collaboration between Christian and non-Christian conceptions of the good; the *integrity* or "witness" stance emphasizes the distinctiveness of Christian communities—especially their espousal of pacifism—amid the larger culture; the *realist* stance emphasizes the role of sin in human affairs and the moral ambiguity of all human action; and the *liberation* stance places front and center the preferential option for the poor and marginalized, emphasizing Christianity's role in liberating the oppressed. Lovin borrows the term *stance* from Catholic moral theologian Charles Curran.

divisiveness within Christian ethics often compromises our projects and sacrifices the resources our field possesses for addressing the challenges of our “communal moral life.”⁴

Indeed, one of the most common responses I hear (from groups ranging from the first-year college students who take my Christian ethics courses to meet their theology requirement to my non-Christian friends and colleagues) is that theology is irrelevant. It neither holds significance for their lives nor contributes to the common good. Although this attitude often results from prejudice and ignorance, it provides an opportunity for self-reflection. Do responses like these have anything to do with how we go about the theological task—and specifically, how we navigate differences marked by the intra-disciplinary boundaries of our field? A number of my own academic experiences lead me to suspect so. Allow me to share two.

Several years ago, I presented a paper at the feminist theologies section of an academic conference. The first thing that struck me about the session participants and the audience members was that we were predominantly white women. A white male feminist in attendance later commented to me that he felt as though he had been the unwelcome visitor at a club meeting. Apart from the identity politics operating in the room, I was also intrigued by the audience reaction to my paper. I had given a paper on the subfield of Christian ethics known as “public theology,”⁵ raising the question of why there

4. I borrow this phrase from Traci C. West. See “Constructing Ethics: Reinhold Niebuhr and Harlem Women Activists,” *Journal of the Society of Christian Ethics* 24, no. 1 (2004): 46.

5. I use “public theology” in a general sense to refer to theologians like Niebuhr, Yoder, and King who either played significant roles in American public life or whose theologies address the relationship between Christianity and politics, but it is also a term of art that refers to a particular conversation within twentieth-century American Christian ethics and theology. Prominent figures include David Hollenbach, Robin W. Lovin, Martin E. Marty, William Placher, Max Stackhouse, Kathryn Tanner, Ronald F. Thiemann, and David Tracy. In my judgment, feminist theology qualifies in a general sense as public or political theology, but very few self-identified feminist theologians explicitly engage conversations in so-called public

were not more feminist participants in this conversation, given that feminist theologies also address the relationship between Christianity and public life. A well-known feminist confessed that she had not engaged these conversations because she found public theology “boring.”

On another occasion, the context was somewhat reversed. I was speaking with a prominent nonfeminist theologian whose work addresses issues related to religion and public life. Again assuming a common set of interests between public theologies and feminist theologies, I asked him what he regarded as the most important contribution of feminist theologies to the wider field. His response—“nothing”—was as dismissive as the feminist’s.⁶

I have learned a great deal from both of these theologians. And, although I remain alarmed by how swiftly and confidently they dismissed each other’s fields, I suspect their motivations were good. Both are firmly committed to theology, deeply invested in its integrity, and keenly aware that theology profoundly affects people’s lives. Both would likely argue that the future of theology and the flourishing of human persons and all of creation are at stake, and I agree. But there was also something disturbing about how both of these theologians—despite shared interests—dismissed the other’s approach rather than engaging it to identify areas for mutual critique or even collaboration.

I share these examples not because these theologians stand out as exceptions; they are representative of how we are trained to do

theology. Exceptions include Linell E. Cady, Rosemary P. Carbine, Rebecca S. Chopp, Mary Doak, and Mary E. Hines. Public theology has also received renewed attention in the broader English-speaking world, including from feminist perspectives. See, for example, vol. 4 of the *International Journal of Public Theology* (2010); Elaine Graham, *Between a Rock and a Hard Place: Public Theology in a Post-Secular Age* (London: SCM, 2013); and *Public Theology and the Challenge of Feminism*, ed. Anita Monro and Stephen Burns (New York: Routledge, 2015).

6. This theologian later clarified that he meant “nothing” insofar as he regarded feminist theologies to be versions of theological liberalism.

theology. I share them because they raised for me in an especially clear way the motivating questions of this book: What would Christian ethics look like if we mobilized our differences for engagement rather than disengagement? How would Christian ethics benefit when done at the boundaries of our diverse perspectives rather than exclusively from within any one dedicated stance? Would doing so make any difference for the integrity of theology and its power to address complex moral problems?

Just as King saw church unity as essential to the vitality of the church's witness, it may be that how theologians approach projects of different perspectives bears directly on the impact of those projects in the world. My questions are thus versions of King's. They affirm the need for the methods of Christian theology to be in keeping with its end. As King asks in the letter, "I wonder whether your moral and spiritual progress has been commensurate with your scientific progress. . . . How much of your modern life can be summarized in the words of your poet Thoreau: 'Improved means to an unimproved end.'"⁷ As Christian ethicists, do we seek improved means to an unimproved end? Have we allowed the disciplinary structures of the academy to produce division at odds with our common search for truth? Or, as King might put it, have we allowed our theological progress to outstrip our moral progress? For King, only the practice of love is consistent with the end of love. Only "by uniting yourselves with Christ and your brothers through love will you be able to matriculate in the university of eternal life."⁸ In order for our guild to avoid becoming its own irrelevant social club, we must commit to engaging difference without succumbing to a divisiveness that betrays the integrity and power of our work.

7. King, *Strength to Love*, 138.

8. *Ibid.*, 144.

This book is thus an attempt to explore an alternative approach to the “denominations” of academic theology. I draw on Kathryn Tanner’s concept of Christian identity as participation in a “*genuine community of argument*”⁹ and her claim that “the distinctiveness of a Christian way of life is not so much formed *by* the boundary [of cultural forms] as *at it*”¹⁰ to argue that, rather than using our diverse approaches to dismiss each other, Christian ethicists should use them to identify sites for constructive work. Far from compromising the integrity of each stance, approaching academic boundaries this way actually strengthens them.

I do this by exploring the debate between “realist” and “witness” theologians in American¹¹ Protestant public theology about how Christianity best engages the world. As my opening anecdotes reveal, those in public theology often show little interest in dialoguing with feminist theologies. Nor do many feminist theologians seem eager to respond to contemporary witness and realist approaches within public theology or the work of three of America’s most influential public theologians whose work is foundational to these approaches—Reinhold Niebuhr, John Howard Yoder, and Martin Luther King Jr. (though there are notable exceptions to these generalizations).¹² This is not a problem specific to witness, realist, or feminist theologians, but I will use the debate, or lack thereof, between witness, realist, and feminist theologians on this particular topic as an example of a much larger problem within the field of

9. Kathryn Tanner, *Theories of Culture: A New Agenda for Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997), 123. I explain my use of this concept in the “Method” section of this introduction.

10. *Ibid.*, 115.

11. I use the term *American* narrowly to refer to the United States.

12. These exceptions include, but are not limited to, work in public theology by feminist theologians Linell E. Cady and Rosemary P. Carbine; engagement with postliberal/witness approaches by feminists Gloria Albrecht, Linell E. Cady, Debra Dean Murphy, and Amy Plantinga Pauw; as well as the appropriation of Niebuhr’s Christian realism by feminist Rebekah L. Miles.

Christian ethics. What is the cost of these missed opportunities for collaboration?

I demonstrate that such disengagement negatively affects both the legacies of three of America's most important Protestant public theologians and our ability to identify new lines of valuable inquiry. But also—and more importantly—I demonstrate the constructive possibilities that emerge when this segregation is ended. I focus on how the witness-realist dominance and the absence of feminist theologies in public theology affect the legacies of Niebuhr, Yoder, and King. I argue that the criticisms witness, realist, and feminist theologians level against each other helpfully identify sites for construction in the thought of these three figures. When developed, the resources at these sites give rise to possibilities that both contribute to Niebuhr's, Yoder's, and King's legacies *and* enhance the internal projects of witness, realist, and feminist theologians. Locating these spaces at the boundaries of their work reveals new trajectories for needed work in Christian ethics.

In short, this book is an attempt to demonstrate how the field of Christian ethics might benefit if it is conceived of as a “genuine community of argument” conducted “at the boundaries” of its diverse approaches. I advance this claim through a series of arguments that show the constructive potential of Niebuhr's, Yoder's, and King's legacies when approached at the boundaries of witness, realist, and feminist approaches. I focus on these figures not only because of their significance in American Protestant Christian ethics in the last century, but also because their legacies manifest the destructive impact of the witness-realist divide of the last half century in a particularly acute way.

The first strand of this argument is that feminist theologies are indispensable to Niebuhr's, Yoder's, and King's legacies. Reading these figures alongside various feminists and womanists enables me

to illuminate aspects of their thought that are obscured when approached only at the witness–realist boundary, namely: Niebuhr’s thought on the church, Yoder’s identification of feminism and “tactical alliances”¹³ with liberalism as constitutive of the church’s identity and mission, and King’s increasingly “feminist” and “womanist” account of love.

This reading, in turn, enables the second strand of my argument: doing Christian ethics at the boundaries identifies new agendas for Christian ethics. In this particular case, approaching the thought of Niebuhr, Yoder, and King at the boundaries of witness, realist, and feminist perspectives enables me to identify ecclesiology as a new agenda for realists, feminism as a new agenda for witness theologians, and creative maladjustment as a productive stance for all Christian ethicists.

The third strand of my argument is that doing Christian ethics at the boundary holds promise for the entire field. It is of course important to note the “boundaries” of my own study. This book engages most centrally with three approaches within Christian ethics that have been particularly influential in American Protestant theology of the last half century: witness, realist, and feminist theologies. There are many other important subfields and specific debates beyond the scope of this book. But far from limiting the significance of this study, demarcating the boundaries of its subject matter only serves to identify possible sites for additional engagement. Scholars in Catholic moral theology, for example, or scholars across theological ethics engaged in debates within natural law, virtue ethics, or any of the many topics outside of public theology, can also generate stronger projects by doing Christian ethics at the boundary.

13. John Howard Yoder, *The Priestly Kingdom: Social Ethics as Gospel* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984), 61.

The fourth strand of my argument is that the very integrity of theology and its power to address complex moral problems is at stake. While Tanner posits the “genuine community of argument” as a constitutive model for Christian community, it also provides a powerful model for academic theology—whose current structures more often reward the mobilization of academic boundaries for uncharitable criticism and disengagement from those with whom one disagrees. Rather, we should approach the boundaries in a spirit of humility and contrition, eager to learn and willing to offer constructive criticism and encouragement. Doing Christian ethics at the boundaries thereby provides a more constructive approach to difference—one that acknowledges its importance and uses it to enable more robust theologies across each stance. I begin by turning to the specific case of this study: debates within American Protestant public theology, particularly those relevant to the legacies of Niebuhr, Yoder, and King.

Christianity in Public Life: The Witness-Realist Debate

In recent decades, theologians of two stances have dominated discussions within Christian ethics over the role of the church in public life. On one side of these discussions are scholars working in the tradition of twentieth-century Swiss Protestant theologian Karl Barth. These theologians often identify themselves as “witness,” “postliberal,” or “integrity” theologians. Concerned about the accommodation of the church and its particularistic language and practices to non-Christian cultural forms, these scholars tend to emphasize the distinctive resources of the tradition. They stress the primacy of revelation, the role of the biblical narrative and church practices for the moral formation of Christian disciples, and the nature of the church as a distinctive polis that witnesses to the world.

As such, they ground their thinking about Christian politics in ecclesiology.¹⁴

On the other side are theologians working in the tradition of twentieth-century American theologian Reinhold Niebuhr. These theologians claim the label “realist.”¹⁵ Sharing the witness concern to distinguish Christian views from those of the wider culture, these scholars emphasize the critical relevance of Christian beliefs and practices to the political order and highlight the tradition’s invaluable, indeed superior, resources for identifying and addressing social, political, and economic problems. Rather than maintaining that Christian practices constitute their own particular politics, these scholars see a need for Christians to bring their distinctive views to bear on politics beyond the church. In contrast to the witness focus on ecclesiology, realists favor the doctrines of sin and anthropology, using them to underscore both the limits and the possibilities of Christian ethical action.¹⁶

Scholars of both schools provide compelling—and in some respects, compatible—accounts of Christian life in the world. But their differences have been more pronounced, and several irreconcilable differences do indeed exist at the heart of their proposals. They espouse different theories of truth (narrative theory¹⁷ versus moral realism), different stances toward the use of violence (pacifism versus

14. Representative works in this category include the work of John Howard Yoder; Stanley Hauerwas, *The Peaceable Kingdom: A Primer in Christian Ethics* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1983) and *With the Grain of the Universe: The Church's Witness and Natural Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2001); and William T. Cavanaugh, *Torture and Eucharist: Theology, Politics, and the Body of Christ* (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 1998).

15. I use the term *realist* exclusively to refer to theologians who identify as political realists.

16. Representative works in this category include the work of Reinhold Niebuhr; Robin W. Lovin, *Christian Realism and the New Realities* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008); Douglas F. Ottati, *Hopeful Realism: Recovering the Poetry of Theology* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2009); and William Schweiker, *Theological Ethics and Global Dynamics: In the Time of Many Worlds* (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2004).

17. I recognize that witness theologians may contest this description.

limited justification of force), and different political emphases (ecclesial versus extra-ecclesial). More often than not, these differences function less to orient conversation than to prevent it altogether.

So entrenched is the divide between these approaches that it structures the field of Christian ethics itself. The very act of locating one's work within "theological ethics" or "social ethics" signals one's loyalties. In other cases, subfields such as "public theology" have been polarized between the two perspectives. And, although less clear because of its proliferation of meanings, categories like "political theology" that originated in other contexts now seem to separate witness and realist territory from that of others, such as feminists and other liberationists.

Several recent works have turned to Augustine in an attempt to strike a middle ground between realist and witness approaches. All provide Christian proposals for political activity and better acknowledge feminist insights. As such, these accounts advance the discussion on numerous fronts. Three prominent accounts deserve special attention. Charles Mathewes's *A Theology of Public Life*¹⁸ charts a middle course between witness and realist approaches by arguing that political participation is itself a form of Christian discipleship, showing how public engagement enriches Christian faith. Eric Gregory's *Politics and the Order of Love*¹⁹ also seeks a balance, recognizing the importance of the liberal order for restraining sin but also emphasizing the centrality of love to political action. Finally, Luke Bretherton's *Christianity and Contemporary Politics*²⁰ combines a concern for the church's own politics with its

18. Charles Mathewes, *A Theology of Public Life* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

19. Eric Gregory, *Politics and the Order of Love: An Augustinian Ethic of Democratic Citizenship* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008).

20. Luke Bretherton, *Christianity and Contemporary Politics: The Conditions and Possibilities of Faithful Witness* (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010).

participation in politics beyond the church. All three manage to mediate between the witness-realist extremes and incorporate feminist contributions more thoroughly than previous witness and realist approaches.

Nevertheless, each of these accounts still leans too heavily to one side or the other of the witness-realist balance, and they fail to follow through on the feminist engagement their work invites. For all its merits, Mathewes's account remains overly individualistic at the expense of ecclesiology and relies heavily on an under-nuanced account of suffering that fails to satisfy feminist and womanist concerns. Gregory's account offers a valuable reclamation of love for politics but does not provide an accompanying ecclesiology that accounts for how this virtue is cultivated; nor does his proposal, for all its attention to feminist ethics of care, adequately treat the work of Christian feminists who offer valuable reconstructions of agape. Bretherton's account of Christian politics deftly handles the complexity of the church's relationship with local, national, and global realities but ultimately relies on an account of the church and worship that is overidealized, neglecting the potentially malformative impact of the church on its members' moral formation. While these significant accounts make progress, there is still critical work that needs to be done. But why does this work matter?

Theologians of American Public Life: Niebuhr, Yoder, and King

It matters because the legacies of three of America's most important Protestant public theologians—Niebuhr, Yoder, and King—are at stake. Witness theologians continually dismiss Niebuhr as a liberal whose apology for Christianity, far from displaying the relevance of the tradition to political realities, fundamentally compromises its distinctive witness. Realists respond by emphasizing the theological nature of Niebuhr's thought, but often fail to highlight his

ecclesiological credentials. Realists dismiss Yoder as politically irrelevant, and witness theologians only exacerbate the stereotype by casting Yoder in their antiliberal image. Despite his significance and influence, King is routinely overlooked by both realist and witness theologians. For their part, feminists do not show much interest in any of the three; nor do prominent witness or realist theologians fully appreciate the distinctive contributions of feminist theologies. Is there any hope for the legacies of these three figures so central to American Christian ethics?

One hopes so—their legacies are also critical to the entire field of Christian ethics. All wielded significant influence within American Christianity during their lives and produced bodies of work that continue to feature prominently in public, ecclesial, and academic debate. Their enduring influence suggests not only the importance of their work but also its potential to set the terms of conversation for decades to come.

Each also represents a major position, broadly construed, in twentieth-century and contemporary (especially Protestant) Christian ethics. Niebuhr is arguably the most important figure in Christian realism, a theological movement originating in the early twentieth century. Among its other important contributions, Christian realism emphasizes the role of sin in human affairs, challenging the social gospel's optimistic belief in the inevitability of human progress. Yoder represents Christian witness, the branch of Christian ethics that emphasizes—especially in its espousal of pacifism—the distinctiveness of Christian communities amid the larger culture. And King, in his embrace of social gospel convictions about the relevance of Christian faith to social matters and in his anticipation of liberationist themes, offers a composite position between the social gospel of the early twentieth century and contemporary liberationists. Focusing on these figures provides a

broadly representative portrait of future paths in contemporary Protestant Christian ethics.

Moreover, the work of each of these theologians exists in profoundly ambivalent but potentially productive relationship with that of feminists, whose diverse perspectives are so vital and important yet are often marginalized. Elements of Niebuhr's, Yoder's, and King's thought seem at once resonant and discordant with some of the central concerns of feminist thought. Yet, with the exception of Niebuhr, there is a dearth of feminist dialogue with these figures. How does this lack of engagement affect not only the legacies of Niebuhr, Yoder, and King, but also the entire field?

One of the most common criticisms witness theologians make of Niebuhr is that he lacks an ecclesiology. Niebuhr's own contemporaries frequently articulated this criticism,²¹ but it is also made by theologians like Yoder, whose work spanned the later part of Niebuhr's career and continued after Niebuhr's death. Yoder claims not only that Niebuhr's theology is, in the first instance, anthropology, but also that he lacks attention to central theological doctrines like the resurrection, the Holy Spirit, and ecclesiology.²² Contemporary postliberals repeat the refrain. Subtitles in two recent articles put it clearly but, as I will argue, perhaps too cleverly: "Why Christian Realism May Not Be Quite as Theologically Serious as It May Appear,"²³ and "Reinhold Niebuhr's Ecclesiology, or Lack Thereof."²⁴ The claim has become so commonplace that it seems

21. For a discussion of criticisms from Niebuhr's contemporaries, see Gary Dorrien, *Social Ethics in the Making: Interpreting an American Tradition* (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), 238.
22. John Howard Yoder, "Reinhold Niebuhr and Christian Pacifism," *Memmonite Quarterly Review* 29 (April 1955): 116.
23. Samuel Wells, "The Nature and Destiny of Serious Theology," in *Reinhold Niebuhr and Contemporary Politics: God and Power*, ed. Richard Harries and Stephen Platten (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 83.
24. William T. Cavanaugh, "A Nation with the Church's Soul: Richard John Neuhaus and Reinhold Niebuhr on Church and Politics," *Political Theology* 14, no. 3 (2013): 391.

to operate more as shorthand (enabling postliberals to identify their ideological perspective) and less as any substantive argument about Niebuhr's work. Equally troubling, because of their own focus on politics, realists themselves do not effectively highlight Niebuhr's ecclesiological insights. Several studies seek to reclaim Niebuhr's theological contributions but few attend to Niebuhr's thought on the churches. By and large, realists fail to respond adequately to witness caricatures, leaving Niebuhr's ecclesial contributions underemphasized.

Of course, witness theologians are in some sense correct. It is true that Niebuhr focuses on the politics of the state and does not devote himself to developing a full-blown ecclesiology. Nevertheless, he does discuss the church. The quick dismissals that appear with nearly every mention of Niebuhr's name in witness circles may usefully signal the writer's theological loyalties, but they prevent the appreciation of Niebuhr's potential contribution to ecclesiology. This is a substantial theological loss, as Niebuhr's reflection on the church can be developed to enhance not only his own legacy but also contemporary witness and realist theologians' own projects. In fact, Niebuhr's insights on the church are desperately needed in current ecclesiological reflection. His emphasis on the role of Christianity in fostering self-criticism and in the practices of the church in cultivating humility and hope both contribute to realism in the form of ecclesiology and offer welcome antidotes to the overconfident and idealized expressions of the church's political mission promulgated by witness theologians.

Yoder also loses when it comes to the witness–realist debate. Although many witness theologians take Yoder's work as their point of departure, their antipathy to liberalism and to feminism²⁵ depart from key elements of Yoder's account of Christian politics as well as its relationship to extra-ecclesial politics. Equally unfortunate, realists

tend to underappreciate the extra-ecclesial politics for which Yoder's account calls. Their emphasis on the politics of the state leads to mistaken claims that Yoder renounces politics altogether when, in fact, he eschews only one political option: the use of force. As with Niebuhr, the polarization between witness and realist theologians obscures the issues. Witness theologians have posited a Yoder who is not only postliberal but also antiliberal. Realists have not appreciated the extra-ecclesial resistance to systemic violence for which Yoder's account calls. Neither group fully appreciates Yoder's challenge to its perspective. My reading of Yoder challenges witness theologians to take up the issue of feminism as part and parcel of the pacifist politics of the church and to honor the confluences that sometimes obtain between Christianity and liberalism. It also bids realists to recognize the distinctive contributions of the church to "secular" politics.

The fierce debate also impoverishes an appreciation of King's continuing contributions. Although there are increasing numbers of studies on King's theology, the majority of scholarly studies on King provide historical treatments of his work as an activist in the civil rights movement, focusing on King as a political leader who led a national movement for social change. Despite his self-identification as a Baptist preacher—one who led the Southern Christian Leadership Conference and mobilized black churches during the civil rights movement—King is regularly referred to as a politician.²⁶ When it comes to witness and realist theologians, King is either praised in passing as a "heroic figure" or simply neglected. It is odd that King does not garner more attention from both groups of theologians. King is, after all, the quintessential Christian witness in the very sense that witness theologians emphasize. But King's embrace of

25. For example, Stanley Hauerwas, perhaps the best-known theologian to claim Yoder's legacy, both positions his own project over against liberalism and dismisses feminist theologies as versions of liberalism.

26. See, for example, the back cover of *Reinhold Niebuhr and Contemporary Politics*.

extra-ecclesial politics distances him from these scholars. King's involvement in extra-ecclesial politics and pursuit of justice would also seem to earn him favor among realists, and yet his dedication to nonviolence distinguishes his exercise of extra-ecclesial politics from that of realists who make concessions for occasional justified use of force.

Yet, as with Niebuhr and Yoder, King's theological reflection and practice provide especially important insights for witness and realist theologians alike. King's own attention to the triple evils of racism, materialism, and militarism are deeply needed as correctives to current witness political ecclesiologies, most of which continue to overlook these problems. Although witness theologians have taken up important issues related to capitalism and consumerism, racism and nonmilitary forms of violence such as the systemic violence of sexism remain among the challenges their ecclesiologies continue to ignore. Similarly, King serves as a reminder to realists of the importance of the church and its formative practices in sustaining extra-ecclesial politics, especially with regard to enabling the "possibility" part of what Niebuhr referred to as the "impossible possibility" of love in politics. As with Niebuhr and Yoder, the polarization between witness and realist theologians detracts from King's important contributions.

Feminist Contributions

Given their focus on Christian politics, witness and realist theologians' neglect of feminist theologies and feminist theologians' tendency to avoid weighing in on discussion in public theology strike one as particularly odd. Of all theologians, feminists provide some of the most careful, nuanced work reflecting on the relationship between the theological and the political. If any group of theologians demonstrates the redundancy of the monikers "public theology" and

“political theology,” it is feminist theologians. Throughout the rich variety and diversity of feminist work lies a well-demonstrated and shared theme: all theology is political. Contemporary feminist work builds on the indispensable work of pioneering feminist and womanist theologians²⁷ whose work highlights the importance of theological language and its role in shaping cultural and social norms; the negative import of theological concepts on women’s identity and agency; the complicated inter-workings of theology and social and political organization; and the relationship between theology and socio-economic and political categories. In essence, feminist and womanist theologians expand the conception of what constitutes theology. Their work demonstrates the power of theology to influence political realities that shape people’s daily lives. Without their significant contributions, understanding of the myriad ways in which theology is always already “political theology” would be severely impoverished.

And yet, prominent witness and realist accounts of Christian politics rarely engage this work, and feminists rarely engage conversations in public theology. Eager to distinguish their postliberal theologies from theological liberalism, witness theologians often reduce the diversity of feminist theologies to versions of theological liberalism. Feminist theologies, so the claim goes, are really just liberal theologies in another key:²⁸ they import Enlightenment reasoning into Christian theological reflection; they smuggle non-Christian vocabulary, concepts, and norms into their supposedly theological work; they do social, political, and economic analysis and pass it off as theology. Another version of this criticism

27. See, for example, the work of Katie G. Cannon, Mary Daly, Beverly W. Harrison, Elizabeth A. Johnson, Rosemary Radford Ruether, Letty M. Russell, Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, and Delores S. Williams.

28. See, for example, Stanley Hauerwas, “Failure of Communication or A Case of Uncomprehending Feminism,” *Scottish Journal of Theology* 50, no. 2 (1997): 234.

charges that feminist theologians have yet to do actual constructive work, that feminist theology is simply critique.²⁹ In short, feminist theologies are just not theological enough.

If witness theologians dismiss feminists altogether, realists tend to be more receptive. But they often subsume feminist work under their own conceptual rubrics. Rather than focusing on distinctive feminist characteristics, realists sometimes regard various feminisms as different forms of realism.³⁰ This move highlights important synergies between these approaches, but it underemphasizes the particularly feminist aspects of feminist work. The lack of engagement with the important work of a variety of feminists and womanists is unfortunate. Not only does it detract from these theologians' contributions and stymie new lines of work, it overlooks the significant resources of a diversity of feminist theologies to mediate the witness–realist divide.

Rather than focusing on issues related to the public accessibility of Christian truth claims, questions about the moral permissibility of force, and whether Christians should focus on ecclesial or extra-ecclesial politics, feminist accounts tend to examine the ethical impact of Christian truth claims and feature broader conceptions of violence and politics than realist and witness theologians. This concern for how Christian truth claims affect the most vulnerable of persons, attention to the systemic violence of sexism, racism, and classism, and broad conceptions of what counts as political enables feminists to sidestep the intractable debates that consume witness and realist

29. For an excellent discussion of such claims, see Rachel Muers, "Doing Traditions Justice," in *Gendering Christian Ethics*, ed. Jenny Daggars (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars, 2012), 7–22.

30. Robin W. Lovin, for example, identifies feminists Jean Bethke Elshtain and Catherine Keller as proponents of various realisms in *Christian Realism and the New Realities*, 28–37. I do not disagree with this characterization; I merely note that it underemphasizes Elshtain's and Keller's distinctively feminist commitments.

theologians, revealing the value of their approaches to public theology.

But feminists rarely engage discussions in public theology or those involving the work of Niebuhr, Yoder, and King. This is especially unfortunate, since reading the theologies of Niebuhr, Yoder, and King alongside those of various feminists and womanists not only illuminates new possibilities for the legacies of Niebuhr, Yoder, and King within Christian ethics but also contributes to the projects of feminist, realist, and witness theologians alike.

Granted, there are good reasons for this lack of engagement. Although there will be a need for feminist critique of tradition as long as the sin of sexism persists,³¹ feminists have their own agendas. They do not need to be limited to exposing sexism in the work of “seminal” figures in the tradition. Despite my own focus on Niebuhr, Yoder, and King, I find compelling the arguments of many feminists that Christian ethics must move beyond studies of the lone male figure.³² In one sense, my study participates in this highly contested move. But in another sense, my focus on these figures is not just about three male theologians, but the whole field of Christian ethics. As theologian Kathryn Tanner has argued, feminist theologies wield the most significant influence on the larger field and increase their own legitimacy when they reconfigure oppressive uses of the tradition to liberating ends.³³ My work takes just such an approach by identifying “feminist” trajectories in the legacies of Niebuhr, Yoder, and King,

31. Muers, “Doing Traditions Justice,” 7–8.

32. See, for example, West, “Constructing Ethics,” 37; and “Gendered Legacies of Martin Luther King Jr.’s Leadership,” *Theology Today* 65 (2008): 44; Rachel Muers, “Bonhoeffer, King, and Feminism: Problems and Possibilities,” in *Bonhoeffer and King: Their Legacies and Import for Christian Social Thought*, ed. Willis Jenkins and Jennifer M. McBride (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2010), 33–42.

33. Kathryn Tanner, “Social Theory Concerning the ‘New Social Movements’ and the Practice of Feminist Theology,” in *Horizons in Feminist Theology: Identity, Tradition, and Norms*, ed. Rebecca S. Chopp and Sheila Greeve Davaney (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997), 189–90.

and by demonstrating the indispensability of feminist theologies in doing so.

But focus on the lone male authority is far from the only problem feminists might identify with these particular figures. Given the reform-oriented nature of feminist scholarship, feminists may find it difficult to engage figures whose personal lives seem at odds with their own best insights. Perhaps Niebuhr is a partial exception. Unlike Yoder and King, Niebuhr did not personally behave in denigrating ways toward women, and there is, after all, a good deal of feminist response to his work. But there is also increasing evidence that Niebuhr's wife Ursula may have been the unacknowledged coauthor of much of his work,³⁴ as well as criticism that Niebuhr's privilege prevented him from registering the important work being done by black female contemporaries in Harlem.³⁵ Although Yoder identifies Jesus as a feminist and argues for the centrality of gender egalitarianism to Jesus' ministry, his focus on pacifism as a refusal of state violence prevents him from fully developing these aspects of his pacifist position. Moreover, Yoder's pervasive sexual violence against women calls into question his commitment to feminism as part and parcel of Christian mission.³⁶ King's legacy presents problems of both

34. See Rebekah Miles, "Uncredited: Was Ursula Niebuhr Reinhold's Coauthor?" *Christian Century* 129, no. 2 (January 25, 2012): 30–33.

35. West, "Constructing Ethics."

36. Yoder's pervasive sexual violence is documented in the January 2015 issue of the *Mennonite Quarterly Review*. For a historical narrative of Yoder's case, see Rachel Waltner Goossen, "Defanging the Beast: Mennonite Responses to John Howard Yoder's Sexual Abuse," *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 89, no. 1 (January 2015): 7–80. According to Goossen, mental health professionals who worked with Yoder estimate that he violated more than 100 women (10–11). I take up the difficulties Yoder's complex legacy raises in my forthcoming article, "Doing Justice to the Complex Legacy of John Howard Yoder: Restorative Justice Resources in Witness and Feminist Ethics," *Journal of the Society of Christian Ethics* 35, no. 2 (Fall/Winter 2015). For additional discussion of Yoder's abusive behavior and his theological legacy, see Ruth Elizabeth Krall, *The Elephants in God's Living Room, Volume Three: The Mennonite Church and John Howard Yoder, Collected Essays*, <http://ruthkrall.com/downloadable-books/volume-three-the-mennonite-church-and-john-howard-yoder-collected-essays/>; David Cramer, Jenny Howell, Jonathan Tran, and Paul Martens, "Scandalizing John Howard Yoder," *The Other*

theoretical content and concrete practice. Despite championing civil rights, King not only failed to address the evil of sexism, he himself failed to treat women as equals in both his professional and personal life.

For these reasons, and perhaps others, it is understandable if feminists choose to avoid these figures. But in my view, these discrepancies make engagement between these figures and feminists more, not less, valuable. And, as I hope to show, reading these figures alongside various feminists and womanists charts new territory beyond the witness-realist divide.

Method: Doing Christian Ethics “at the Boundary” through a “Genuine Community of Argument”

Following King’s insight that one cannot reach improved ends without improved means, I argue that the method of theology is just as important as the content. As such, I will use theologian Kathryn Tanner’s work in *Theories of Culture* to guide my methodological

Journal, July 7, 2014, <http://theotherjournal.com/2014/07/07/scandalizing-john-howard-yoder/> and “Theology and Misconduct: The Case of John Howard Yoder,” *Christian Century* 131, no. 17 (August 20, 2014): 20–23; Gerald W. Schlabach, “Only Those We Need Can Betray Us: My Relationship with John Howard Yoder and His Legacy,” [GeraldSchlabach.net](http://www.geraldschlabach.net/2014/07/10/only-those-we-need-can-betray-us-my-relationship-with-john-howard-yoder-and-his-legacy/), July 14, 2014, <http://www.geraldschlabach.net/2014/07/10/only-those-we-need-can-betray-us-my-relationship-with-john-howard-yoder-and-his-legacy/>; Mark Oppenheimer, “A Theologian’s Influence, and Stained Past, Live On,” *New York Times* (October 11, 2013): A14; Mark Thiessen Nation, with Marva Dawn, “On Contextualizing Two Failures of John Howard Yoder,” *Anabaptist Nation Blog*, September 23, 2013, <http://emu.edu/now/anabaptist-nation/2013/09/23/on-contextualizing-two-failures-of-john-howard-yoder/>; and Kate Tracy, “Christian Publisher: All of Top Theologian’s Books Will Now Have Abuse Disclaimer,” *Christianity Today*, December 18, 2013, [http://www.christianitytoday.com/gleanings/2013/december/publisher-john-howard-yoder-books-abuse-women-mennonite.html?paging=off](http://www.christianitytoday.com/gleanings/2013/december/publisher-john-howard-yoder-books-abuse-women-mennonite.html?paging=off;); and “Yoder Suspended,” *Christian Century* 109, no. 24 (August 12, 1992): 737–38. For the original reporting of the offenses, see Tom Price’s five-part series in *The Elkhart Truth*: “Theologian Cited in Sex Inquiry” (June 29, 1992): B1; “Theologian’s Future Faces a ‘Litmus Test’: Yoder’s Response to Allegations Could Determine Standing in the Field” (July 12, 1992): B1; “Theologian Accused: Women Report Instances of Inappropriate Conduct” (July 13, 1992): B1; “A Known Secret: Church Slow to Explore Rumors Against a Leader” (July, 14 1992): B1; “Yoder Actions Framed in Writings” (July 15, 1992): B1; and “Teachings Tested: Forgiveness, Reconciliation in Discipline” (July, 16 1992): B1.

approach. I do so for two reasons: 1) Tanner's concept of Christian identity as constituted by participation in a "*genuine community of argument*"³⁷ highlights the importance of debate among those who disagree but also the need for this debate to be conducted in a manner consistent with Christian aims; and 2) her identification of Christian distinctiveness as being formed "not so much . . . *by the boundary as at it*"³⁸ helpfully identifies my own methodology.

The "genuine community of argument" is Tanner's answer to the question of Christian identity. Relying specifically on postmodern cultural theory, Tanner argues that Christian identity is not constituted by shared beliefs or practices, appeals to tradition, or rules, but rather by participation in a "genuine community of argument" about the meaning of Christian identity. Contrary to modern views of tradition as either stores of material that are interpreted differently in different contexts or deposits that change gradually over time, Tanner argues that the task of interpreting those materials, not tradition, provides the common denominator among those who claim Christian identity. In her words, "It is not the sharing of a particular account of their interpretation or organization that makes one a Christian. . . . What makes for Christian identity is the fact that such *investigation* is viewed as crucial, not *agreement* on its outcomes."³⁹ It is important to note that this "argument" is not limited to verbal expressions but includes Christian practices, such as the sacraments.

Although some may view this account as leaning too heavily on procedural criteria for defining Christian identity at the expense of common substantive content, it offers a particularly fruitful and theologically robust approach to handling the different stances that

37. Tanner, *Theories of Culture*, 123.

38. *Ibid.*, 115.

39. *Ibid.*, 125.

mark the field of Christian ethics. Tanner's emphasis on investigation over agreement is perhaps most important for my purposes because it highlights not agreement on final outcomes but the character of engagement required. Because it does not aim for uniformity of belief, Tanner's account honors the diversity of belief that obtains, for example, between the witness, realist, and feminist theologians considered here, and emphasizes the virtues needed to prevent that diversity from becoming divisive. She posits the need for the genuine community of argument to be "marked by mutual hearing and criticism among those who disagree, by a common commitment to mutual correction and uplift, in keeping with the shared hope of good discipleship, proper faithfulness, and purity of witness."⁴⁰

Tanner's concept also proves to be a fitting mediator between witness and realist theologians because her work locates the distinctiveness of Christian belief in neither the ecclesially embodied countercultural witness of witness theologians nor the "relevance" of Christian insights to secular politics of realist theologians. Rather, for Tanner, "the distinctiveness of a Christian way of life is not so much formed *by* the boundary as *at* it," as Christians negotiate their identity in relation to "cultural materials shared with others."⁴¹ This means that Christian identity is "no longer a matter of unmixed purity, but a hybrid affair established through unusual uses of materials found elsewhere."⁴² In highlighting both the distinctiveness of Christian identity and its use of common cultural materials, Tanner's account strikes a balance between postliberal and liberal understandings of how Christianity relates to the wider culture. Her theology reflects the postliberal bent of the so-called Yale School, but also features valuable liberal insights without buying into the deficiencies of liberal

40. *Ibid.*, 123–24.

41. *Ibid.*, 115.

42. *Ibid.*, 152.

accounts of Christianity's relationship to culture. It assumes, with postliberals, a conception of Christianity as a distinctive culture, but refuses, with liberals, the postliberal conception of this cultural boundary as so firm that it produces a distinctively pure Christian culture that shares little with the wider culture. It assumes, with liberals, that Christianity will share much of the same cultural materials with others, but refuses, with postliberals, to understand these common sources as undermining the distinctiveness of Christian identity. Despite their different accounts of how Christian identity interacts with the surrounding culture, Tanner argues that both postliberals and liberals make the mistake of positing an internally formed Christian identity that is then either in countercultural or in correlative identity with the cultures with which it interacts.

Because of these strengths, I use her concept as a model to host a conversation between witness and realist theologians that honors both the witness emphasis on the church and its practices as its own political option and the realist emphasis on extra-ecclesial politics. Using witness, realist, and feminist critiques to identify potential sites for construction "not so much . . . *by* the boundary as *at* it," my study locates spaces for needed work in Christian ethics. It thereby refigures the theological contributions of Niebuhr, Yoder, and King for new purposes while strengthening witness, realist, and feminist theologians' own agendas.

In my judgment, it is just this kind of engagement that we academic theologians too often fail to manifest in our work. Our stances are meant to promote movement but often they become immobilizing. They prepare us to respond to the "play" at hand but not the play that comes from a direction we cannot already anticipate. This is not to say that the boundaries that mark the playing field of Christian ethics are not useful. Indeed, I want to be clear: I

am not arguing that we should seek to transcend these boundaries. My proposal depends on the existence of boundaries and celebrates the differences they mark. We necessarily employ a variety of intradisciplinary labels to categorize and understand the diverse range of theological approaches that comprise our fields. These labels help identify methodological perspectives and name motivating questions; they delineate common features of certain theological frameworks or schools and clarify their relationship to those of other schools. They enable me, for example, to refer meaningfully to Niebuhr as a Christian realist, or to identify a dearth of dialogue between feminists and Yoder, or to describe the hybrid nature of King's theological thought. In short, these categories orient and enable our work.

These categories prove valuable not only for naming the variety of positions and schools within theology and ethics but for *creating* them. They serve the important function of securing the space for scholars of traditionally marginalized perspectives to do their work. We have "feminist theology," "womanist ethics," "*mujerista* theology," "Asian theologies" and so on in part because we can name these fields as such. It is no surprise that theologians and ethicists from these perspectives often champion the "power of naming"; without this power, one does not exist. Just as the God of Genesis 1 creates by separating and by naming, theologians name themselves and their areas of expertise into existence. We need these boundaries. The differences they name enable us to appreciate other points of view and to understand our own more clearly. It is not the boundaries, then, that are the problem, but rather approaches to the boundaries that succumb to divisiveness.

Indeed, these same categories can function in less than helpful ways. They can be used to misidentify or mischaracterize theological positions, obscuring rather than illuminating a thinker's approach and perspectives. When I describe King as belonging to the social gospel

tradition, for example, I neglect his indebtedness to and innovations on Christian realism; and perhaps more important, I obscure his primary grounding in African-American church traditions and his critique of racism. Moreover, in describing him as a liberationist, I overshadow feminist, womanist, Latina, and Asian theologians who more fully embody or explicitly identify with this tradition. The very category of liberation, like that of “feminist theologies,” conceals significant differences among its adherents.

Other unproductive uses of these categories appear across our theological and ethical endeavors in the academy. While these categories are often mobilized quite purposefully to signal a theological or ideological commitment—to make a theological point—they can simultaneously function as conversation stoppers. Presumably, “theological ethicists” describe themselves as such to distinguish their starting points from the theologically inadequate ones of “social ethicists.” But theologians also often mobilize these categories intentionally to relieve themselves of the burden of engaging with those with whom they disagree. In my experience, the distinctions between “liberal theology” and “postliberal theology,” and “public theology” and “feminist theology,” often function this way. But even if one does not intend such use, it is difficult to avoid less-than-productive consequences.

Overview of the Chapters

In chapter 1, I detail the witness–realist debate that has dominated Christian ethics in recent decades. I assess both the indispensable contributions made to Christian ethics by these scholars and the problems in their accounts that might be addressed by constructive conversation between feminist theologies and Niebuhr, Yoder, and King. Witness accounts contribute a valuable emphasis on the importance of the church and its practices for ecclesial politics. But

their overidealized ecclesiologies fail to grapple with the complex interrelationships between “church” and “world,” thereby neglecting extra-ecclesial politics and the church’s response to and complicity in racism and sexism. The main contributions of realist accounts reside in their thoughtful reflection on the need for extra-ecclesial political participation, the relevance of Christianity to politics, and the need to pay explicit attention to possibilities and limits. But these accounts often undervalue the importance of the church as its own particular arena for moral formation and political witness. The chapter then explores the significant contributions of recent “new Augustinian” interventions, valuing the advances of these accounts beyond the witness-realist impasse and their incorporation of feminist insights—while also noting missed opportunities for further conversation with feminist theologies. Finally, it inquires into the ability of feminist and womanist theologies to illuminate new paths in Christian ethics.

Chapter 2 offers a witness- and feminist-inspired appropriation of Reinhold Niebuhr’s thought on the church. The chapter begins by highlighting significant points of connection between witness and feminist theologians. It argues that despite their apparent differences, witness and feminist theologians make many of the same formal critiques of Niebuhr’s work, including a shared substantive critique that Niebuhr rejects the moral potential of religious communities. Treating their criticisms as invitations to explore the potential of Niebuhr’s thought to contribute to the work of theologians across the stances of Christian ethics, I attempt to provide a charitable exegesis of Niebuhr’s theology that renders it more amenable to witness and feminist agendas. Might Niebuhr’s thought possess resources that could be developed into an account of the church and its moral capacities that would honor the insights of both witness and feminist theologians? What would the character of such a community be?

What virtues would its members embody? How would they act? Highlighting thematic similarities between Niebuhr's discussion of churches and theologian Kathryn Tanner's thesis that Christianity, and particularly belief in divine transcendence, possesses the capacity to create "self-critical cultures," I develop Niebuhr's reflection on the nature and role of the church into a Niebuhrian account of churches as self-critical cultures who engage in formative practices of contrition that cultivate the virtues of humility and hope, giving rise to creative ethical action. This account contributes to realism by detailing a potential realist ecclesiology. It also contributes to witness and feminist theologies by correcting the overidealism prevalent in witness ecclesiologies and the tendency of feminist interpreters to appropriate Niebuhr's thought outside of explicitly ecclesial frameworks.

Chapter 3 uses realist and feminist criticism and witness appropriations of Yoder to argue that feminism is a vital form of Christian political witness. I argue against common realist contentions that Yoder neglects extra-ecclesial politics, showing that he rejects only one political option: the use of violence. I then argue against feminist and womanist critiques that understand Yoder's interpretation of "revolutionary subordination" as an endorsement of women's oppression, and prominent witness tendencies to espouse hostilities toward both feminism and liberalism. I show that Yoder's theology posits feminism as integral to Christian identity and encourages tactical alliances between Christianity and liberalism. Indeed, Yoder's account features striking points of connection with certain feminist theologies, including shared conceptions of Christianity as a culture, shared conceptions of their respective theologies as Christian projects of retrieval, and shared conceptions of the church's vocation as entailing countercultural witnesses of peace. I then argue that despite prominent witness claims to Yoder's legacy,

it is feminists and womanists whose work—while certainly not doing so intentionally—best develops Yoder’s pacifist vision. Feminist analysis of nonmilitary forms of violence by Gloria Albrecht and Linda Woodhead, recent feminist work on trauma by Cynthia Hess, Serene Jones, and others, and recent womanist attention to “the cultural production of evil” and gender injustice in black churches by Emilie M. Townes, Marcia Y. Riggs, and Kelly Brown Douglas can all be seen as expanding and developing Yoder’s account of Christian pacifism.

In chapter 4, I address the neglect of King by witness, realist, and feminist theologians alike. I first demonstrate convergences between a variety of feminist and womanist reconstructions of agape (including those of Beverly W. Harrison, Carter Heyward, Linell E. Cady, and Patricia Hunter) and a transformation of King’s own conception of love from the standard Protestant accounts that emphasize disinterestedness, nonreciprocity, and self-sacrifice to one akin to feminist reconstructions of love as passionate, mutual, and community-forming. Moreover, the “creative” nature of this love as King describes it resonates with an emphasis on the creative power of love in work by Monica A. Coleman, Karen Baker-Fletcher, and other womanists. This account not only yields new agendas for those committed to King’s legacy, it also contributes meaningfully to witness, realist, and feminist theologies. Witness theologians might find that King challenges them to address questions of race as well as conceptions of extra-ecclesial politics consistent with their own emphasis on witness. Realists might find themselves challenged to attend to the importance of the church as a sphere of moral formation that funds extra-ecclesial politics. And finally, while not exonerating King from his failure to address sexism, the chapter challenges feminists and womanists to recognize King as a theopolitical ally whose work features “feminist” arcs.

Contributions

Each chapter uses witness, realist, and feminist criticism to identify sites of construction in the thought of Niebuhr, Yoder, and King that, in turn, strengthen each stance's own internal agenda. Moving beyond the polarization between Christian ethicists over the role of Christianity in public life in recent decades, this study affirms the importance of both ecclesial and extra-ecclesial politics to the Christian vocation. It embraces the importance of ecclesiology and particular church practices while challenging overidealistic accounts of church that neglect both extra-ecclesial political action and pervasive forms of nonmilitary violence such as racism, sexism, classism.

The collaboration I initiate by placing witness, realist, and feminist theologians in a "genuine community of argument," and by identifying new agendas for Christian ethics "at the boundary" of their approaches, also offers new readings of Niebuhr's, Yoder's, and King's relevance to public theology. In each chapter I address the dismissal, misinterpretation, or neglect of these figures among contemporary postliberals, realists, and feminists. But perhaps most importantly, I do so while enhancing the internal vitality of each stance, thus demonstrating the substantive benefits of a methodological approach that privileges constructive engagement with difference. Such an approach ensures that Christian ethicists are not only modeling productive ways to engage difference but also enhancing the potential of their work to meet current moral challenges.