

Making all Things New: Thinking With and Beyond the Political Theologies of Reinhold
Niebuhr, Martin Luther King, Jr., and John Howard Yoder

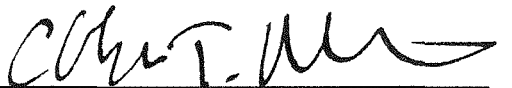
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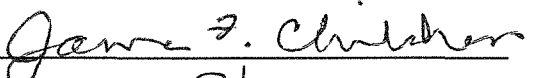
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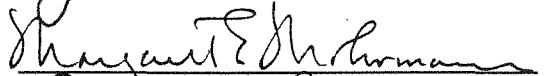
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ABSTRACT

This dissertation advances discussion about political ecclesiology in the United States. Scholarly reflection on the “church’s politics” abounds in Protestant social ethics, public theology, and feminist theologies. Yet, each field seems content to think through the issue alone, calling into question whether it has been explored satisfactorily, much less imaginatively. Given this lack of engagement, the dissertation hosts a conversation between these fields to develop a new kind of political theology.

It first draws on feminist thought to challenge the view that Niebuhr’s, King’s, and Yoder’s primary contributions to political theology come in the form of their stances on violence, thus rejecting overly-narrow identifications of Niebuhr as the Christian realist who condones the use of force, King as the nonviolent resister, and Yoder as the Christian pacifist who eschews resistance. It then allows Niebuhr, King, and Yoder to challenge feminist Protestant theologians to direct their insights on the political nature of theology toward more developed reflection on the “church’s politics,” lest feminist theology be consigned to the margins of Christian theology.

To do so, it identifies an “eschatological ethic” that runs through feminist, womanist, *mujerista*, and Latina theologies. Drawing particularly on the work of Kathryn Tanner, Monica Coleman, Serene Jones, and Mary McClintock Fulkerson, it uses this ethic to critique problematic dualisms such as public/private, *agape/eros*, and church/world that mar Niebuhr’s, King’s, and Yoder’s theological thinking, and to uncover valuable theological insights that other readings of Niebuhr, King, and Yoder

consistently fail to notice: Niebuhr's identification of the church as the site of judgment, King's emphasis not only on love and justice but also creativity, and Yoder's attention to 'tactical alliances' between church and world.

Having identified political ecclesiology as a lacuna in Protestant feminist thought, the dissertation then engages in constructive feminist development of Niebuhr's, King's, and Yoder's thought to sketch the contours of a political ecclesiology animated by "classical" thinkers *and* feminist insights. Such a theology understands politics through the rubric of "doing a new thing," and posits practices of repentance, creativity, and discernment as integral to the "church's politics."

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For my parents,
James and Cydelle Guth,
who surrounded me with books and with love

CHAPTER ONE: MAKING ALL THINGS NEW

I. Introduction: Contesting the Old to Make Way for the New

What is the political role of the church? Those of us in the North American context have heard no shortage of answers to this deceptively simple question. Within the last several decades alone we have witnessed the rise of the religious right as a formidable presence in United States politics, “culture wars” between traditionalists and modernists across denominational lines, and the emergence of a new evangelical movement interested in social justice and environmental issues. Every few weeks, a new book appears on the New York Times best sellers list laying out “God’s Politics,” describing the “Godly Republic,” or offering suggestions for “Closing the God Gap.” Despite these new phenomena, any commentator on American religion knows that the role of religion—and in particular, the role of Christian churches—in American political life is as old as the republic itself.¹

This dissertation turns to three of America’s prominent 20th century theologians—Reinhold Niebuhr, Martin Luther King, Jr., and John Howard Yoder—to explore what they might contribute to this age-old question. Niebuhr, King, and Yoder are well known for their views on the moral permissibility of violence and coercion, but their theological contributions to reflection on the political role of churches extend well beyond these familiar associations. Indeed, as I hope to show, placing these figures in conversation with recent North American feminist theologies yields some surprising new insights.

¹ The term “American” as I use it refers to the United States.

* * * *

In *The Irony of American History*, Reinhold Niebuhr offers the Christian gospel as a counter to the ironies of American history. Distinguishing irony from pathos, or that which elicits pity, and the tragic, which occurs when evil is consciously committed for the sake of good, Niebuhr describes irony as consisting of “apparently fortuitous incongruities in life which are discovered, upon closer examination, to be not merely fortuitous.”² To flesh this out, Niebuhr explains that irony is present

If virtue becomes vice through some hidden defect in virtue; if strength becomes weakness because of the vanity to which strength may prompt the mighty man or nation; if security is transmuted into insecurity because too much reliance is placed upon it; if wisdom becomes folly because it does not know its own limits—in all such cases the situation is ironic.³

Identifying each of these forms of irony within American history, Niebuhr argues that only the Christian interpretation of history, with its realistic understanding of both human limits and human possibilities, can overcome the tendency for virtue to turn to vice and wisdom to turn to folly. The Christian interpretation provides such an antidote because it possesses its own peculiar brand of irony that contests human categories, revealing that the gospel’s logic often runs counter to that of human beings.

To be sure, the irony Niebuhr posits as central to the gospel is a different kind of irony. It is not the unwitting irony of an American nation that fails to see its own vices on account of its pretensions to virtue, but the embrace of a redemptive irony that views all historical achievement in its proper perspective. Niebuhr argues that what the world calls success, the gospel characterizes as “involved in failure on the ultimate level,” and what

² Reinhold Niebuhr, *The Irony of American History* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1952), viii.

³ *Ibid.*, viii.

the world calls failure, the gospel deems an “ironic success.”⁴ For example, to demonstrate the first, Niebuhr notes that “Christ is crucified by the priests of the purest religion of his day and by the minions of the justest, the Roman Law...” and that “The Savior came ‘not to call the righteous but sinners to repentance.’”⁵ In other words, those who seem the most successful according to the world’s standards—the religious and political authorities—commit what the Christian tradition sees in truth as ultimate failures. And those who seem utter failures—sinners—receive the ultimate gift of divine love. Clearly, worldly success does not translate simply and surely into ultimate success.

Nor does ultimate success guarantee worldly success. If the world takes ultimate failure to be success, it is also the case that what the world often characterizes as failure, the gospel characterizes as success:

If the pretension of wisdom may issue in foolishness, the final wisdom, which is ‘withheld from the wise,’ may be ‘revealed unto babes.’ There may be a wholeness of view among the simple which grasps ultimate truths, not seen by the sophisticated. The ‘rich fool’ is excoriated because he tries to gain complete security for the future; and the poor are blessed. The kingdom of heaven is likened unto a feast and extended to the ‘maimed, the halt, and the blind’ (Luke 14:15-24)... The Christian faith is centered in a person who was as ‘the stone which the builders rejected’ and who became the ‘head of the corner.’ The sick are preferred to the healthy, as the sinners are preferred to the righteous.... The poor are blessed and a ‘woe’ is pronounced upon the rich for the same reason.⁶

Niebuhr provides these examples as evidence of “the Christian preference for an ironic interpretation” of history.⁷ This interpretation positions irony at the heart of the Christian

⁴ Ibid., 160-161.

⁵ Ibid., 160.

⁶ Ibid., 161-162.

⁷ Ibid., 167.

gospel, suggesting not only that human categories are limited and finite, but that they are not God's categories. Even more to the point, it suggests that God's redemptive activity turns present reality on its head. As Niebuhr puts it, the gospel will "shake the false islands of security which men have sought to establish in history in the name of the Gospel."⁸ For Niebuhr, the gospel confronts any human attempt to determine what constitutes success and failure with an ultimate logic that calls our efforts at control and mastery into question.

* * * *

From his jail cell in Birmingham, Alabama on April 16, 1963, Martin Luther King, Jr.—the very picture of worldly failure and ironic success—wrote a letter to the white clergy of Birmingham. Responding to their claim that his theological and political activities in Birmingham were "unwise and untimely," King appeals to the gospel to challenge the familiar categories the white clergy employ in their criticisms.⁹ When charged with being an outside agitator, King responds that "Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere."¹⁰ When charged with breaking the law, King cites the difference between civil law and moral law. When charged with creating tension, King criticizes those "who prefer a negative peace which is the absence of tension to a positive peace which is the presence of justice."¹¹ When charged with extremism, King says,

⁸ Reinhold Niebuhr, *Faith and History: A Comparison of Christian and Modern Views of History* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1949), 243.

⁹ Martin Luther King, Jr., *Why We Can't Wait* (New York: Harper & Row, 1963; reprint, New York: Signet Classic, 2000), 64.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 65.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 73.

though I was initially disappointed by being categorized as an extremist, the more I thought about the matter, I gradually gained some measure of satisfaction from the label. Was not Jesus an extremist for love? ... Was not Amos an extremist for justice? ... Was not Paul an extremist for the Christian gospel?¹²

King replies, in effect, “You say that I am an outsider, but I belong here; you say that I am breaking the law, but I seek to obey God’s law; you say that peace is the absence of tension, but peace is the presence of justice; you say to wait, but the time is now.” In each response, King challenges the white clergy to see things differently, to view things not from their own perspective but from the perspective of the gospel, and to change their minds. Indeed, it is fitting that the chapter preceding King’s letter from Birmingham jail in *Why We Can’t Wait* is an article titled “Negro Revolution;” because a revolution is just what King sees the gospel proclaiming.

* * * *

And he is not alone; John Howard Yoder joins King, describing Jesus’ mission as the “original revolution.” Yoder opens his collection of essays of that name by quoting the *Magnificat* in Luke 1:49-53, where Mary praises God and rejoices that the powerful have been brought low, that the humble have been lifted high, that the hungry have been filled and the rich have been sent away empty. Yoder describes the passage as “The Old Words and the New Agenda.” He argues that the new agenda is ‘gospel,’ an old word that, having become tired and emptied of meaning, is best translated as ‘revolution.’¹³ In other words, the incarnation of Jesus is nothing short of the original revolution, which

¹² Ibid., 76-77.

¹³ John Howard Yoder, *The Original Revolution: Essays on Christian Pacifism* (Scottsdale, Pa.: Herald Press, 1971; reprint, 2003), 15.

involves a turning of the tables, a change of heart, a reversal of old ways. “Whatever it is that God is about to do,” Yoder writes:

it will be good news for the poor, bad news for the proud and rich; it will be *change*, including changed economic and social relations...Such a change is what Jesus says is now coming into view in His beginning ministry. It will involve new attitudes, so it can be called ‘repentance,’ *metanoia*, ‘turning-the-mind-around.’ But it also involves social practices, ‘fruits worthy of repentance,’ new ways of using possessions and power.¹⁴

In this description of the original revolution, the new agenda, one hears echoes of Isaiah’s announcement that God is about to do a new thing. Indeed, Yoder understands Jesus’ ministry to be fundamentally about inaugurating this new thing, the creation of a “new order” where all live together in love.¹⁵ And living together in love involves a new agenda, a change from old ways of doing things. Scripture testifies that “The Kingdom of God is at hand: repent and believe the good news!”¹⁶ And, as Yoder argues, “To repent is not to feel bad but to think differently.”¹⁷

* * * *

These passages reveal that, although Niebuhr, King, and Yoder likely have significantly different views about what it means for God to be making all things new, each nevertheless sees the gospel as issuing a challenge to see, think, and act in new ways. Each suggests that there is something profoundly theological at work when the old and the familiar are contested, when tables are turned, when the first become last and the last become first. Each suggests that God is doing a new thing and argues that if we are to

¹⁴ Ibid., 16-17.

¹⁵ Ibid., 18.

¹⁶ Ibid., 31.

¹⁷ Ibid., 31.

perceive the new thing, we must be prepared to loosen our grip on the old. We must be prepared to be unsettled, to expect the unexpected, to be pulled up short by God's creative, redemptive activity. As Niebuhr puts it, we must allow the gospel to shake us out of our false securities. Or as King argues, we must be open to the possibility that things are other than what they seem. Or as Yoder suggests, we must be prepared to repent, to change our minds.

I suggest that these descriptions of the gospel offered by Niebuhr, King, and Yoder indicate that each views the gospel in terms of perceiving God's redemptive activity or the new amidst idolatrous forms of human attachment to the former things. For all three, receptiveness to the gospel requires a willingness to relinquish the need for absolute clarity and control that causes us to hold fast to familiar categories and static frameworks. The gospel reminds us that our categories are not necessarily God's. Each suggests that the eschatological promise of scripture is not that things will be as they always were, but that amidst the former things, God is doing a new thing. And they acknowledge that being receptive to this promise requires not a clinging to comfortable realities, but a loosening of our grip, an opening up to redemptive possibilities.

Following Niebuhr's, King's, and Yoder's lead, this dissertation aims to contribute to reflection on the political role of churches in North America by contesting the boundaries of familiar categories, such as "ethics" and "theology," "feminist theology" and "theology," to develop the insights intra-disciplinary conversation might yield. I have chosen to focus on these three figures for a variety of reasons. First, Niebuhr, King, and Yoder are three of the most influential figures in 20th century North American Protestant thought on the relationship between the Christian tradition and

political life, and specifically, on churches' relationship to politics. In fact, all three are famous for their critiques of the American church and their desire to see it reformed.¹⁸ The depth and breadth of their influence is such that their thought continues to feature prominently in both academic and public debate.¹⁹ Second, each figure represents one of three major schools of thought in North American Protestant social ethics in the 20th century: Christian realism, social gospel/liberationist, and the peace church/witness tradition.²⁰ Each of these schools of thought articulate a distinctive stance on churches' public roles, generally, and specifically, in relation to one of the most significant political questions facing churches: the moral permissibility of violence and coercion. Niebuhr is recognized as the Christian realist who condones the use of force for the sake of justice, King is recognized as the nonviolent resister, and Yoder is recognized as the Christian

¹⁸ Niebuhr closes his "Preface and Apology" to *Leaves from the Notebook of a Tamed Cynic*, a collection of his reflections on parish ministry, by saying, "I make no apology for being critical of what I love," xiv. In response to Ronald Stone's charge that Niebuhr was perhaps too critical of the church, Niebuhr replies, "But when I see how much new evil comes into life through the pretension of the religious community, through its conventional and graceless legalism and through religious fanaticism, I am concerned that my growing appreciation of the Church should not betray me into this complacency." See "Reply to Interpretation and Criticism," *Reinhold Niebuhr: His Religious, Social, and Political Thought*, ed. Charles W. Kegley (New York: Pilgrim Press, 1984 (1956)), 513. King also frequently criticized the American church for its segregation and other forms of social conformity. "If the church does not recapture its prophetic zeal," he writes, "it will become an irrelevant social club without moral or spiritual authority." See *Strength to Love*, 63-5; 102-103; 137-145. Finally, Yoder's entire theological project argues that the radical reformation vision of the church is normative for all Christians. See *For the Nations: Essays Evangelical and Public* (Eugene, Ore.: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 1997), 8.

¹⁹ This is one reason why, for example, I focus on Niebuhr rather than Paul Ramsey. Indeed, more often than not, King and Yoder themselves articulate their own positions vis-à-vis Niebuhr, suggesting that they regard him, rather than Ramsey, as the preeminent Christian realist. By the same token, however, one might argue that if enduring influence is the criterion, I should focus on Stanley Hauerwas rather than Yoder. Given Hauerwas' tremendous influence, he does seem the more fitting figure in this regard, but because I have also chosen figures who are the most representative of the traditions of thought on the question of violence and coercion, I have chosen Yoder. Most would identify him more readily as the foremost advocate of Christian pacifism. Moreover, there is less critical attention to Yoder's work even as much of Hauerwas' work claims to develop the Yoderian position. Furthermore, I also focus on Yoder because while there is substantial feminist engagement with Hauerwas, there is none with Yoder.

²⁰ As the most famous proponent of the social gospel movement, Walter Rauschenbusch would have been another candidate for such a study, but he does not address the issue of violence and coercion.

pacifist who eschews resistance altogether. Third, these figures' association with these positions vis-à-vis violence and coercion sometimes lends itself to a problematically narrow categorization of their political contributions, obscuring other important contributions they make to theological reflection on politics. In fact, the theological credentials of all three are called into question routinely.²¹

But perhaps most important, I have chosen these three figures because, in addition to the other criteria, they stand in profoundly ambivalent relationship to feminist thought. As I will show, elements of Niebuhr's, King's, and Yoder's thought seem to both resonate with and resist some of the central concerns of feminist thought. Yet there is a dearth of feminist scholarship on the three.²² This lack of scholarly engagement strikes me as odd, given the feminist potential of their work and the insights it could offer North American feminist theologians who have not given the same level of attention to the political role of churches as have Niebuhr, King, and Yoder.

²¹ Samuel Wells sums up these claims well with a sub-heading in a recent article on Niebuhr that reads: "Why Christian Realism May Not Be Quite as Theologically Serious as it May Appear." See "The Nature and Destiny of Serious Theology," *Reinhold Niebuhr and Contemporary Politics*, eds. Richard Harries and Stephen Platten (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 83. Yoder makes similar claims, arguing, for example, that "Niebuhr's theology is first of all anthropology," and that Niebuhr omits central theological doctrines such as "resurrection, the church...regeneration...and the Holy Spirit." See "Reinhold Niebuhr and Christian Pacifism," 115-116. As I indicate in Chapter Four, there are few scholarly treatments of King as a theologian. Most studies tend to focus on his historical role as leader of the Civil Rights Movement or an analysis of his philosophy of nonviolence. Finally, a major question raised in relation to Yoder's thought is whether Yoder reduces theology to ethics. See Thomas Finger, "Did Yoder Reduce Theology to Ethics?," *A Mind Patient and Untamed*, 318-389; and Mark Thiessen Nation's discussion of these criticisms in *John Howard Yoder: Mennonite Patience, Evangelical Witness, Catholic Convictions* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: 2006), 197.

²² Niebuhr is the only possible exception here, as there is a substantial amount of critical feminist engagement with his work. But very few feminist thinkers have noticed the feminist potential of Niebuhr's thought and sought to develop it.

I suspect that it is, in part, Niebuhr's, King's, and Yoder's failure to profess feminist ideals that has discouraged feminists from engaging their thought.²³ Indeed, even as their thought attempts to adhere to the gospel vision of contesting familiar categories, it is burdened by categories that have been challenged in important ways by feminist thinkers. That is, at the same time that Niebuhr, King, and Yoder articulate insights with the potential to put forward new ways to imagine the church's political involvement, their articulation of this vision is marred by old ways of thinking that trade on unproductive categories such as public and private, *agape* and *eros*, church and world. Mired in these dualisms, their thought seems less a herald of the new and more an artifact of the past.

My dissertation aims to challenge the old categories of "public" and "private," *agape* and *eros*, and "church" and "world" that ensnare their thought, in order to reveal insights that allow for the development of a view of politics and churches' roles in politics as doing something new. To do so, I draw on a variety of North American feminist thinkers, including Kathryn Tanner, Monica Coleman, Serene Jones, and Mary McClintock Fulkerson who, along with other feminist, womanist, *mujerista* and Latina theologians, identify these categories as obstacles to good theological thinking.²⁴ Employing the resources they offer, I will show that feminist theologies are indispensable to gleaning the full range of theological contributions Niebuhr, King, and Yoder make on

²³ As I will discuss, this failure manifested itself beyond the academic life of each figure. Niebuhr's embrace of gradualism during the Civil Rights Movement, King's public inability to treat women as equals as well as his womanizing and marital infidelity, and Yoder's sexual abuse of at least eight women in the Mennonite community are all profoundly troubling.

²⁴ Although I am aware of the important differences between the varieties of feminist, womanist, *mujerista* and Latina feminist theologies, when I refer to 'feminist theologies' I intend it as shorthand to reference the broad spectrum of feminist, womanist, *mujerista*, and Latina theologies. As I will indicate in the next chapter, the disadvantage of this approach is that it does not adequately attend to the important differences between these diverse feminist theologies.

the political role of churches. Feminist theologies alleviate their reliance on old categories and render apparent other, positive contributions each makes to theological and political reflection. The challenges these feminists pose enable us to see new possibilities for developing Niebuhr's, King's, and Yoder's visions for the political role of the church—visions that ultimately contribute needed resources to feminists' own reflection on the churches' political roles. Reading Niebuhr, King, and Yoder through a feminist lens thus challenges claims that their work is not theological enough, and demonstrates that feminist theologies prove absolutely critical to unleashing the full wealth of Niebuhr's, King's, and Yoder's contributions to political theology.

To critique the old and discern the new in each figure's thought, I first identify what I refer to as an "eschatological ethic" that runs through the variety and diversity of feminist theologies in the North American context. This ethic articulates a reading of feminist theologies as primarily eschatological in intent, meaning that they seek to attend carefully to the presence of former things in order to perceive potential new things. It then identifies resources from feminist theologies that are particularly salient to the thought of Niebuhr, King, and Yoder. Rather than an eschatology that reads reality in dualistic terms of good and evil and envisions the end of time as an apocalyptic battle of destruction, I have in mind a "prophetic eschatology" that draws on the biblical image of the New Creation to fund its "resistance to injustice and insistence on the renewal of the creation."²⁵ As Catherine Keller puts it, this is not an eschatology that "brooks [a] literal 'end of the world,'" but one that "announces the 'last days' of the status quo," it "claim[s]

²⁵ Catherine Keller, "Eschatology," *Dictionary of Feminist Theology*, eds. Letty M. Russell and J. Shannon Clarkson (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox, 1996), 87.

the fuller messianic hope, the hope that is the genius of biblical eschatology itself, for a justice in love with this creation.”²⁶ In this way, feminist theologies exhibit what Keller refers to as an “eschatological attentiveness” and offer a vision “not [of] a new creation out of nothing, but as the renewal of the creation from within its own shadowed potentiality.”²⁷

I develop this ethic at length in the next chapter, but briefly put, it includes: 1) a questioning of received categories; 2) an understanding of theology as a cultural and political activity; 3) a normative, pragmatic method that seeks the flourishing of God’s good creation; 4) a conception of human agency as participation in God’s ongoing creative activity; and 5) an understanding of this activity as redemptive. As I hope to show in each chapter, this ethic provides a lens to critique the things of old in Niebuhr’s, King’s, and Yoder’s thought, such as dualistic patterns of thinking, but it also reveals obscured insights that each might make to ecclesiology and political theology. Using the tools of feminist theologies, I aim to develop these insights into valuable and needed contributions to political theology. Thus, this ethic reveals that Niebuhr’s, King’s, and Yoder’s contributions to political theology extend far beyond their more familiar reflections on violence and coercion and suggests that the thought of each contains insights that might be developed to convey a vision of the political role of churches in terms of *doing a new thing*.

²⁶ Catherine Keller, *On the Mystery: Discerning Divinity in Process* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2008), 165; *God and Power: Counter-Apocalyptic Journeys* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005), 99.

²⁷ Keller, *God and Power*, 62, 52.

I recognize that in placing Niebuhr, King, and Yoder in constructive conversation with feminist theologies, I risk alienating scholars in both Protestant social ethics and feminist, womanist, *mujerista*, and Latina theologies. North American Protestant social ethicists may not see the value of reading Niebuhr, King, and Yoder through a feminist lens and some feminist theologians may question why I even bother with Niebuhr, King, and Yoder at all. Are they not irretrievably patriarchal? Or why not include a chapter on a self-identified feminist thinker? For those in Protestant social ethics, I contend that a feminist reading of Niebuhr, King, and Yoder opens up new vistas for theologians in that it reveals aspects of Niebuhr's, King's, and Yoder's thought that are consistently obscured by other readings. In this way, feminist theologies provide a necessary and productive lens that enables a richer account of Niebuhr's, King's, and Yoder's thought. In other words, feminist insights are crucial to a full understanding of Niebuhr, King, and Yoder.

In response to those who may worry that I am merely treating feminist theologies as handmaidens to dead icons of the patriarchal canon, I would argue that I aim rather to show the indispensability of feminist theologies to a full understanding of the theological task. Just as I resist the reduction of Niebuhr's, King's, and Yoder's political contributions to their familiar positions vis-à-vis violence, I also resist the ghettoization of feminist theologies as solely of interest to a small portion of the theological audience. Furthermore, I contend that Niebuhr's, King's, and Yoder's extensive attention to the political role of the church provides instructive insights to feminist theologians who have largely neglected this task. These methodological moves also carry larger political import in that they aim to heal divisions that prevent us from thinking through and working

together to address common theological and political concerns. Thus, my dissertation calls into question boundaries between ‘feminist’ and ‘mainstream’ theologies. Too often these boundaries are mobilized by those eager to de-legitimize feminist readings, to claim that rather than providing critical tools for richer exegesis, feminist theologies and the readings they produce are marginal, unproductive, or superimposed on an unwilling text. To the contrary, I show that theology cannot proceed faithfully without incorporating the critical insights of feminist theologies, and moreover, that feminist readings are crucial to providing the fullest accounts of these important thinkers’ work.

II. The Personal is Political: Contesting the Categories

Before I turn to this argument, however, I need to more thoroughly address the scope of the problem that prevents the kind of intra-disciplinary conversation that I hope to demonstrate. It is not simply the case that Niebuhr, King, and Yoder are somehow unable to articulate their visions without resorting to unproductive, old categories that obscure their best insights. Nor is it simply the case that categorizing Niebuhr, King, and Yoder according to their views on violence results entirely from our own inability to think differently and creatively, to shake off the things of old and be receptive to the new. This is a problem that attends all of our best efforts to address any theological question, and perhaps necessarily so. But it is facilitated and exacerbated by our own academic categories. The bureaucratization of knowledge creates intra-disciplinary categories that often prevent us from marshalling all of the relevant resources to address any given problem. This is not to say that these categories are always and necessarily harmful; intra-disciplinary boundaries that separate theology from ethics or ‘feminist’ theologies

from ‘mainstream’ theology can certainly be useful.²⁸ But at other times, these categories seem to be more the things of old in the way that they operate as conversation stoppers and protect each field from the criticisms and inquiries of the others. Consider the following stories from my own academic experience in relation to the major Protestant traditions of thought that address the political role of the church in North America:

It is spring of 2003, and I am sitting in a classroom in Andover Hall at Harvard Divinity School, taking a course on the ethical and religious thought of a theologian beloved to me: Martin Luther King, Jr. It is this course, in part, that drew me to study at Harvard, and I am thrilled to be spending an entire semester immersed in King’s thought. I am hoping to make sense of some of the fundamental problems that King poses for me. Particularly, how do I reconcile my respect for King as a proponent of justice and human dignity with my disappointment at King’s own perpetration of gender injustice? One day in class, I put the question to my professor: “What,” I ask, “are we to make of the fact that King’s pursuit of justice seems so at odds with the way he treated women?” My professor’s response is disturbingly brief: we simply have to posit a distinction between King’s public and private ethics. In other words, the questions and concerns of feminist thought have nothing to do with and do not illuminate anything of importance with regard to King.

²⁸ I understand the protective strategies at work in these boundaries. The space feminist, womanist, *mujerista*, and Latina theologians have created for themselves is particularly important as it allows their very contribution to the theological/ethical tradition. But at times, the boundaries seem to have outlasted their usefulness and do more harm than good, for example, when they prevent important conversations across strands of the Christian tradition or serve to dismiss feminist contributions.

Fast forward to February 2006. I am now in the faculty lounge of the Religious Studies Department at the University of Virginia. I am here with several of the other graduate students in the Theology, Ethics, and Culture program to interview a candidate for a faculty position in theology. After describing his work, he opens up the session for questions. I raise my hand and ask, “In your opinion, what are the most significant contributions of feminist theologies to the broader field of theology?” After a short pause, he responds: “Nothing.”

Fast forward again to March 2009. I am presenting a paper to the Women’s Studies in Religion section of the Southeastern Commission on the Study of Religion in Greensboro, NC. My paper, “The Feminist Impulses and Impasses of Public Theology” reflects on the curious lack of feminist theologians engaged in public theology. I argue that despite important feminist characteristics, public theology is conceptually unable fully to incorporate feminist insights. I also suggest that it is important for feminist theologians to engage public theology. I have the good fortune of presenting the paper to an audience that includes several prominent feminist theologians, one of whom offers an answer to my paper’s opening question, “Why is there no feminist public theology?”²⁹ After recalling the description of public theology in my paper and some of its main participants, including Ronald Thiemann, William Placher, David Tracy, Max

²⁹ I do not mean to suggest that there is not a rich tradition of feminist thought on the relationship between theology and the socio-political order. The ground-breaking work of feminists such as Beverly Wildung Harrison, in Christian social ethics, for example, clearly indicates the depth and significance of feminist thought vis-à-vis matters of public significance. In a sense, the term feminist public theology is redundant because, the theological is political, and all feminist theologies and feminist social ethics are feminist public theology. But here I am referring to the specifically named “public theology” project. Fortunately, such a feminist project is forthcoming. See Rosemary Carbine, “Ekklesial Work: Toward a Feminist Public Theology,” *Harvard Theological Review* 99 (2006): 433-455.

Stackhouse, and David Hollenbach, she explains that she is not involved in their conversation because “public theology is boring.”

I share these stories not to point fingers, but to demonstrate a prominent problem in contemporary theology and ethics and a motivating concern of this dissertation. Namely, thinkers wrestling with the most important questions facing the church in the United States today—particularly the question of the church’s political vocation, taken up here—are confronted with a segregated theological and ethical legacy. Too often our intra-disciplinary categories serve as excuses not to engage one another. They become old things, obstructing our ability to perceive the new. This is a problem demonstrated clearly in most religious studies curriculum. Most faculties offer a wide-range of standard theology and ethics courses that rarely include any feminist thought, and one or possibly a few courses in feminist theologies or ethics thought to address “women’s issues”—rather than issues relevant to Niebuhr, King, and Yoder, for example. Drawing on the eschatological ethic articulated by a variety of feminist theologians, and following Niebuhr’s, King’s, and Yoder’s lead, I suggest that contesting these old categories enables us to better attend to the new things that each contributes to our common endeavors.

III. It’s Complicated: The Relationship Among American Traditions of Thought on the Church’s Political Vocation

The presence of old things is particularly apparent in relation to the central concern of this dissertation: the political role of church communities. Indeed, in the stories I have just shared, three important twentieth-century North American traditions of

theological and ethical reflection on this question are represented: Protestant social ethics (represented by King), public theology, and feminist theologies.³⁰ I focus on these traditions, in part, because they offer a stage on which this segregated legacy gets played out—a stage where each gestures at but does not accomplish meaningful engagement with the other. Before moving on to address the conceptual problems lurking in each field that prevents such a fruitful engagement, I will explain my focus on Protestant social ethics, public theology, and feminist theologies.

As I indicated earlier, most of the major figures in twentieth-century Protestant social ethics address the relationship between the Christian tradition and American political life. But three in particular—Reinhold Niebuhr, Martin Luther King, Jr., and John Howard Yoder—devote most of their theological energies to sustained reflection on the church's contributions to the political realm. As with King, I was drawn to both Niebuhr and Yoder because their work seemed at once to resonate with and resist the convictions and concerns of feminist theologies. Despite these resonances, none of these figures is ever presented as related to or engaged with the feminist tradition. Nor do feminist scholars seem interested in their work. With the exception of several important treatments of Niebuhr, there is a remarkable dearth of feminist engagement with these thinkers.³¹

³⁰ Of course, theologians in the Catholic tradition have considered this question extensively. I do consider the insights of several feminist, womanist, *mujerista*, and Latina Catholic thinkers, but for the most part I focus on these Protestant traditions because they, in my estimation, demand the most ecclesiological development.

³¹ For a discussion of the feminist engagement with Niebuhr, including critiques by Barbra Hilkert Andolsen, Valerie Saiving Goldstein, Daphne Hampson, Beverly Wildung Harrison, Catherine Keller, Judith Plaskow, Rosemary Radford Ruether, and others, see Rebekah L. Miles, "What's So Bad about

While King's complicated relationship with feminist thought came to my attention at Harvard, it was also there that I first encountered public theology. Public theology insists on the importance of theological claims to civic life and concerns itself with articulating a vision of the church's role in a pluralistic society.³² In particular, Ronald Thiemann and his compelling work provided a welcome opportunity to think about these questions within the United States context. When I began my research, I first returned to the literature on public theology. What immediately struck me as I read the work of Thiemann, William Placher, David Tracy, Max Stackhouse, David Hollenbach, and Robin Lovin, was the lack of feminist or even female participants in this conversation (Kathryn Tanner proves a notable and important exception). This struck me as odd given feminist theologians' concern with the political implications of theology but also because of public theology's relationship with feminist thought. Many of the authors engaged in public theology appreciate feminist thought and some of the core contentions of public theology are, in fact, feminist claims. For example, the central claim of public theology is that what we think of as private—namely, religion—carries public implications. It seems to me that just as Niebuhr, King, and Yoder are fitting conversation partners with feminist theologies, so too, are public theology and feminist theologies.

In addition to these oddities within Protestant social thought and public theology, North American feminist theologies are not without their curiosities. One of the most

Reinhold Niebuhr? Feminist Criticisms of Niebuhr," *The Bonds of Freedom: Feminist Theology and Christian Realism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 28-56.

³² My account of public theology draws primarily from Ronald Thiemann, *Constructing a Public Theology: The Church in a Pluralistic Culture*. Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox Press, 1991.

significant contributions of feminists to theology is their attention to the political nature of theological endeavors. The most trenchant feminist critiques of “mainstream” theology involve its inattention to the powerful role theology plays in shaping cultural, societal, and political norms related to gender and human agency as well as its role in legitimating unjust social and political relations. And yet, for all their attention to the political character of theology, feminists in the North American Protestant tradition have paid little attention to the political role of the church itself.³³ Several Protestant feminists, such as Letty Russell and Serene Jones, have begun this work by articulating important normative visions of church communities, but there is need for a great deal more work in this area.³⁴ When one tries to think of a Protestant feminist theologian or ethicist who attends to the church and its political vocation in as sustained a way as other influential figures in the tradition, it is hard to come up with a name.³⁵

When turning, then, to the Protestant tradition for help in reflecting on the political vocation of the church in the U.S. context, one finds a complicated legacy. It includes several traditions of thought with rich resources to offer, each even gesturing

³³ As I will discuss later, Catholic feminist theologians such as Mary Daly, Rosemary Radford Ruether, and Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, have written a great deal on the subject.

³⁴ See Letty M. Russell, *Church in the Round: Feminist Interpretation of the Church* (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox Press, 1993); Serene Jones, “Church: Graced Community,” *Feminist Theory and Christian Theology: Cartographies of Grace* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000), 153-176; Mary McClintock Fulkerson, *Places of Redemption: Theology for a Worldly Church* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).

³⁵ There is recent literature on feminist ecclesiology coming out of the Canadian and British contexts. See, for example, Mary C. Grey’s *Beyond the Dark Night: A Way Forward for the Church?* (London: Cassell/Continuum, 1997); Pamela Dickey’s *Re-Creating the Church: Communities of Eros* (Harrisburg, Pa.: Trinity Press International, 2000); and Natalie K. Watson’s *Introducing Feminist Ecclesiology* (Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 2002). But when one thinks of Protestant theologians in the American context engaged in what we might identify as feminist political theology, such as Kathryn Tanner, Catherine Keller, Emilie Townes, or Monica Coleman, one does not find substantive development of a normative vision of the political role of the church.

towards engagement with the other, but ultimately never engaging the other fully. I intend to bring these three traditions into better communication, in the hope of overcoming their limitations and lacunae. But before I do that, I need to identify more specifically the barriers, the old categories that prevent the full import of Protestant social ethics, public theology, and feminist theologies from coming to bear on discussions regarding the political role of the church.

A) Beyond Violence as State-Wielded Force: Protestant Social Ethics for the Twenty-first Century

In an introduction to *War in the Twentieth-century: Sources in Theological Ethics*, Richard B. Miller writes of Reinhold Niebuhr, “Defending the option of some form of coercion, [he] developed his distinct brand of Christian realism, arguing that struggle was inevitable in human experience, that no relations between individuals or groups would ever be frictionless.”³⁶ In his compilation of Martin Luther King, Jr.’s thought, James M. Washington writes, “the force of his personality and his deeply spiritual, intelligent preaching against violence and for justice made [King] an internationally known Christian proponent of nonviolent social change.”³⁷ In his introduction to John Howard Yoder’s collection *The Original Revolution*, Mark Thiessen Nation describes Yoder as “arguably the most powerful apologist for Christian pacifism ever.”³⁸ He writes in his

³⁶ See Richard B. Miller, ed. *War in the Twentieth-century: Sources in Theological Ethics* (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox Press, 1992), 4.

³⁷ James M. Washington, ed. *A Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings of Martin Luther King, Jr.* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1986), xix.

bibliography of Yoder's work that "No one else, to my knowledge, has devoted such serious attention to the subject of Christian approaches to violence and nonviolence as has John Howard Yoder."³⁹

These descriptions indicate that, whatever their other contributions to political reflection, Niebuhr, King, and Yoder are recognized as interlocutors in a conversation about the proper relationship between Christian communities and legitimate forms of violence and coercion. Of course, Niebuhr, King, and Yoder make other important contributions to Christian ethics and political and social thought, but their positions are perhaps most easily categorized (and even caricatured) in terms of the kind of coercion they identify as within the bounds of Christian morality.⁴⁰ In some sense, this association is partially a product of Niebuhr's, King's, and Yoder's own sustained attention to this question. It also derives from their historical context in twentieth-century America and the century's pressing political issues related to war and violations of political rights. But no matter the cause, the problem remains that Niebuhr's, King's, and Yoder's thought can easily become captive to this narrow focus. On such an account, the movements within Protestant social ethics that each represents—Christian realism, social gospel/liberationist thought, and the peace church/witness tradition, respectively—become problematically reduced to certain stances towards violence and coercion. As I

³⁸ Mark Thiessen Nation, "Foreword." *The Original Revolution: Essays on Christian Pacifism* by John Howard Yoder (Scottsdale, Pa.: Herald Press, 1971; reprint, 2003), 1-6; 1.

³⁹ Mark Thiessen Nation, *A Comprehensive Bibliography of the Writings of John Howard Yoder* (Goshen, Ind.: Mennonite Historical Society, 1997), 9.

⁴⁰ Any student of Protestant social ethics can quickly name "Why the Christian Church is Not Pacifist," "Pilgrimage to Nonviolence," and "Reinhold Niebuhr and Christian Pacifism," as representative works of Niebuhr, King, and Yoder, respectively.

indicated earlier, Niebuhr's Christian realism can become reduced to a position that endorses violence should justice require it; King can become identified as a practitioner of nonviolent resistance; and, Yoder's conception of pacifism can be understood solely in terms of a refusal of any form of resistance.

While theological and ethical reflection on the political realm certainly demands attention to the place of violence and coercion, categorizing Niebuhr, King, and Yoder narrowly in relation to this important issue obscures other critical and rich contributions of their thought. One of my central aims is to argue against the identification of politics primarily with issues of violence and coercion, showing the relevance of Niebuhr's, King's, and Yoder's contributions beyond the question of what kind and degree of resistance they deem permissible from Christian perspective. Hannah Arendt captures their understanding of politics well when she describes the political in terms not of violence but of doing something new. In her words, "What makes a man a political being is his faculty of action; it enables him to get together with his peers, to act in concert, and to reach out for goals and enterprises that would never enter his mind, let alone the desires of his heart, had he not been given this gift—to embark on something new."⁴¹ With its distinction between violence and power, Arendt's conception of politics is one that Niebuhr, King, and Yoder would affirm in putting forward an understanding of the church's political engagement as being fundamentally about the power to do "new things."⁴²

⁴¹ Hannah Arendt, *On Violence* (San Diego: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1970), 82.

⁴² Catherine Keller also relies on Arendt's understanding of power and politics in her argument that the U.S.'s conception of power as might, which proceeds from an image of God as omnipotent, needs "recoding." In her "theology of becoming" she argues for a conception of power as love that "desires our

B) Public Theology's Conceptual Limitations and the Turn to Political Theology

Just as Niebuhr's, King's, and Yoder's contributions to questions regarding the political role of the church are limited by an understanding of politics as concerned primarily with coercion and violence, public theology suffers limitations due to its own conceptual apparatus. As I mentioned earlier, public and feminist theologies seem ideal conversation partners. Both fields reflect on the political and public implications of religious belief. Moreover, a number of feminist theologians are well-placed to address many of the pressing moral issues at the forefront of American life (marriage and family, reproductive technologies, health care, poverty, and war,) and public theologians seem sympathetic with feminist concerns. And yet, neither takes the other into account. Why? As I mentioned, I suspect it is because public theology, although it shares a number of central claims with feminists, articulates these claims in ways that present significant conceptual problems for feminist theologians. These problems include a failure to adequately challenge the church/world dichotomy, an openness to reform that problematically ties itself to authenticity, and an affirmation of diversity that unfortunately rings hollow in practice. I will say a bit about each of these problems before moving on to discuss problems in feminist theologies.

The most obvious resonance between public and feminist theologies is public theology's rejection of dualism—especially the distinction between public and private. In opposition to those who argue that religion is a private matter, public theology highlights

fullest becoming—our genesis—as individuals, as peoples, as religions, as nations, as creatures....” *God and Power*, 30.

the wide-ranging impact of theology on common political, cultural, and social concerns. As Ronald Thiemann puts it, “The line between private and public, between the personal and the political, can no longer be drawn with absolute clarity. If moral decision making has an inevitable political dimension, then moral and theological reflection must seek to assist Christians in dealing with the public aspects of their lives.”⁴³ This statement clearly echoes the feminist adage “The personal is political.” But behind the distinction of public and private lies another conceptual dualism that proves problematic for feminists: church and world.⁴⁴ On public theology’s account, the church gives rise to distinctively Christian theological thinking that is then applied to concrete situations and policy positions in the world. This conception leads to a disembodied understanding of how the church inhabits the world in that it tends to imagine churches’ political action narrowly in terms of their issuing verbal statements on various policies. This conception of applying Christian values to issues in the world limits our understanding of what theology is, what practices count as Christian, and the actual ways faith is lived out, culminating in a limited conception of the church’s public role.⁴⁵

⁴³ Thiemann, *Constructing A Public Theology*, 19

⁴⁴ Thiemann invokes this framework in his appeal for a public theology: “Christian vocation is most often worked out in the complex and ambiguous joints between church and world,” *Constructing a Public Theology*, 24. Although he rejects the public/private distinction and even acknowledges the inter-relation of church and world, he nevertheless leaves the church/world distinction relatively intact.

⁴⁵ For example, most of public theology envisions Christian involvement in public life in terms of discourse or conversation. Indeed, most discussion in public theology circles revolves around the issue of theological discourse in public settings, namely, the question of whether particularistic Christian language can be publicly accessible. Theologians as diverse as David Tracy, William Placher, Ronald Thiemann, and Robin Lovin have contributed to this debate. Despite their different positions, they all imagine the role of theology in public life in terms of “conversation.” This overwhelming focus on discourse limits the other potential ways the church might be understood to be public.

One of the most important contributions of feminist theologians is to challenge this conceptual framework, to demonstrate that church and world are not only “mutually critical and interrelated” but thoroughly implicated in one another.⁴⁶ Mary McClintock Fulkerson, for example, articulates a “theology of the ordinary” that offers a perceptive critique of the various ways the church/world conception distorts theological efforts. Through her study of the “worldly church” of Good Samaritan United Methodist Church in Durham, NC, she argues that “prominent theological options risk overlooking both the worldly way that communities live out their faith and the worldly way God is among us.”⁴⁷ Fulkerson rejects a “trickle down” theory of applied theology in favor of one that attends to the “full bodied” reality of Good Samaritan.⁴⁸ Fulkerson’s study reveals not only that actual, lived theology is less “distinctively Christian” than most theologians admit, but that some of the most transformative public potentials of the church are often overlooked. From her perspective, the church’s public role would not be limited to weighing in verbally on policy discussions but engaging in ordinary practices that create alternate social spaces that allow “the other” to appear.

A second important point of contact between public and feminist theologies is their openness to critique and emphasis on reform. Thiemann argues that churches need to attend more carefully to the teaching function of liturgy. “What are we communicating about the virtues and values of the Christian community in the words, actions, and images

⁴⁶ See Carbine, “Ekklesial Work,” 454.

⁴⁷ See Fulkerson, *Places of Redemption*, 6.

⁴⁸ Fulkerson’s approach aims to give “full attention to the structure of situation, its shape and its demand, in such a way that the complex of racialized, normalized, and otherwise enculturated bodies and desire are as much a part of the analysis as the presence of biblical and doctrinal elements,” *Places of Redemption*, 21.

of our liturgy?” he asks, “What reforms are needed?”⁴⁹ If this invitation to internal liturgical reform does not sound appealing enough to Christian feminists who have asked these very questions, Thiemann goes on to call for external critique. “By opening the Christian tradition to conversation with those in the public sphere, public theology opens Christian belief and practice to the critique that inevitably emerges from those conversation partners.”⁵⁰ It would be an understatement to say that feminist theology shares this emphasis on reform; perhaps no theological movement has contributed a more effective or thoroughgoing re-examination of the church’s teachings and practices than this one.⁵¹ This call to reform, however, while in sympathy with much of feminist theology’s efforts to reconstruct the Christian tradition, fails to adequately account for the power dynamics that have shaped the tradition from its inception and the fact of theology as a cultural activity. Public theologians such as William Placher acknowledge the need for “ad hoc alliances” in approaching social problems, but fail to adequately acknowledge what the work of theologians such as Fulkerson and Tanner reveals to be the internally “ad hoc” nature of the Christian tradition itself.

Finally, public theology shares with feminist theology its affirmation of diversity as a positive good. Indeed, part of the impetus behind the call to construct a public theology is

⁴⁹Thiemann, *Constructing a Public Theology*, 113, 121.

⁵⁰Ibid., 23.

⁵¹ Feminist biblical scholar Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza has devoted her career to reclaiming the significant contributions of women to the early church. Womanist theologians, such as Delores Williams, have highlighted the neglected contributions of African American women. And feminist theologians such as Rosemary Radford Ruether and Rebecca Chopp have challenged gender-exclusive forms in church liturgy and preaching.

the need for the church to think about its role in a pluralistic culture.⁵² But despite valuing diversity, public theology's overly normative vision of the church does not account for the ways in which the church has failed to appreciate the diversity within its own communities. For example, Thiemann's affirmation of diversity leads him to position the church as model for pluralistic citizenship where church members are schooled in virtues needed for public debate such as humility. As evidenced from the church's inability to be receptive to feminist critiques, unfortunately, the church does not always provide such models.⁵³

Given its emphasis on theology as "thick description," public theology could take a cue here from feminist theologies' attention not only to the normative vision of the church but its descriptive reality. Serene Jones' discussion of the church in *Feminist Theory and Christian Theology: Cartographies of Grace* is particularly insightful here. Jones notes not only traditional and normative markers of church community, such as a community that inhabits the gospel story "as the definitive story of our lives" but also more descriptive features such as a "community gripped by and implicated in structures of oppression."⁵⁴ Her description of the church as both "graced community" and "sinful

⁵² Thiemann celebrates this pluralism, arguing that "Ethnic and cultural pluralism has been a force for enormous good in the history of the American republic. Our national political debate has been greatly enriched by the lively positions and arguments put forward by women, African Americans, Hispanics, Native Americans, and others," *Constructing a Public Theology*, 35.

⁵³ Thiemann himself acknowledges in a reflection on 1 Corinthians that the church has often failed to be this model: "Perhaps our reluctance to 'go public' with this model is grounded in our recognition of how badly we in the church have exemplified the form of life St. Paul sets before us in this text," *Constructing a Public Theology*, 122. But this acknowledgement does not pay adequate attention to this discrepancy between the normative ideal and the reality. This oversight is especially problematic given Thiemann's understanding of theology as "thick description"—a designation that resonates well with feminist theologies' attentiveness to the particular, concrete, everyday reality of theology and church life, *Constructing a Public Theology*, 21.

community” acknowledges the distinction between the empirical and normative church and beautifully holds these together in “eschatological tension.”⁵⁵ Such a model suggests a different picture of how the church might best embody its political identity.

Each of these conceptual barriers leads me to eschew the category of public theology in favor of political theology. While I support the aims of public theology, the conceptual barriers in its current articulation recommend the more general category of political theology. But I am employing the broader category of political theology not only to avoid these conceptual problems, but to incorporate and call attention in a conspicuous way to the feminist insight that all theology is political, that politics extends beyond state structures and the ‘public’ sphere, and that politics is primarily not about violence and coercion, but power.

As I indicate at length in the next chapter, a variety of feminists highlight the political nature of theology, and they do so in a number of ways. Some feminists focus on the importance of theological language and its role in shaping cultural and social norms.⁵⁶ Others analyze dualisms that result in circumscriptions of female agency.⁵⁷ Others attend

⁵⁴ Jones, *Feminist Theory and Christian Theology*, 156, 158.

⁵⁵ Ibid., 159.

⁵⁶ Post-Christian theologian Mary Daly’s claim, “If God is male, then male is God,” or Elizabeth A. Johnson’s, “The symbol of God functions” show how feminist theologies attend to the ways theological language translates into cultural norms and wields power. See Daly, *Beyond God Father: Toward a Philosophy of Women’s Liberation* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1973), 9; and Johnson, *She Who Is: The Mystery of God in a Feminist Theological Perspective* (New York: Crossroad, 1992), 4.

⁵⁷ Christian social ethicist Beverly Wildung Harrison points out, for example, that the public/private division often results in gender dualisms and roles that underwrite inequality. Much of Harrison’s work combats such dualisms that position women as less than fully autonomous human beings. In her words, the problem is “We go from *duality* to *dualism*, from difference to subordination,” *Making the Connections: Essays in Feminist Social Ethics*, ed. Carol S. Robb (Boston: Beacon Press, 1985), 25.

to the complicated inter-workings of theology and social and political organization.⁵⁸ And a host of womanist, Asian, Latina, and *mujerista* theologians draw attention to the inherent political dimension of their theological projects which attend to differences of race and class.⁵⁹ Each of these feminist claims draw attention to the political nature of theology, demonstrating the power theology has to influence political realities. Others show the political character of theology by broadening our conception of what counts as political. Feminist theologians join their secular colleagues in understanding politics in a broader way. For these thinkers, the political is not limited to participation in state structures or even the ‘public realm,’ but includes the activity of assigning and organizing all cultural and social meanings and arrangements.

But I also use the category of political theology to highlight my attention to the nature of the church as a political entity that wields an inherent power. Churches themselves are polities; they are political entities by virtue of their existence as communities. But perhaps even more important, the political nature of church communities implies an inherent relationship to power. Arendt draws a distinction between power and violence that enables us to see that because churches act as communities, they wield power. As she argues, “*Power* corresponds to the human ability not just to act but to act in concert.

⁵⁸ As Kathryn Tanner argues, “All theology is political—it concerns how social relations should be ordered—for two reasons. The first reason stems from the fact that Christianity is not just a body of beliefs, suitable for abstract intellectual discussion, but a way of living in which beliefs are embedded... The second reason theology is political is that, no matter how far the topic seems to stray from it, theology is always making a commentary on the political whenever it incorporates social and political imagery for theological purposes,” “Trinity,” *The Blackwell Companion to Political Theology*, eds. Peter Scott and William T. Cavanaugh. (Malden, Mass.: Blackwell Publishing Ltd., 2004), 319-320.

⁵⁹ See, for example, Delores Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness: The Challenge of Womanist God-Talk* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1993); and Ada María Isasi-Díaz, *En La Lucha: Elaborating a Mujerista Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2004).

Power is never the property of an individual; it belongs to a group and remains in existence only so long as the group keeps together.”⁶⁰ Similarly, Fulkerson writes about the power church practices have to bring people of different races together and how these encounters often challenge racist attitudes or habits. It is therefore not church communities’ stances towards violence and other forms of coercion that render them political entities or ensures their political relevance, but rather their existence as communities who act as a group. In Arendt’s words, power is “inherent in the very existence of political communities...Power springs up whenever people get together and act in concert, but it derives legitimacy from the initial getting together rather than from any form of action that then may follow.”⁶¹ Because they are recognized for their views on the moral permissibility of violence, one could cling to such categories and construe Niebuhr’s, King’s, and Yoder’s political contributions in terms of the “form of action” that appropriately follows the presence of power. But Arendt’s perspective challenges us to see that Niebuhr, King, and Yoder are political thinkers because, as a feminist development of their thought shows, they offer valuable insights regarding the particular brands of power inherent in Christian communal action.

C) Feminist Limitations: Connecting the Political to the Ecclesiological

Another intended contribution of my dissertation is to build upon the valuable feminist insights regarding the political nature of theology to develop a normative vision of the political role of the church. As I suggested earlier, given feminist theologians’

⁶⁰ Arendt, *On Violence*, 44.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 52.

emphasis on the political implications of theology, it is somewhat surprising that very few feminist ecclesiologies explicitly address the political role of church communities. There are, of course, important exceptions here, especially from the Catholic tradition. In fact, the first Catholic feminists led the way in putting forward new ecclesiological visions. Before leaving the tradition, Mary Daly articulated a vision of “Sisterhood as Antichurch” whereby sisterhood or “the unique bonding of women against our reduction to low caste” constitutes “the evolution of a social reality that undercuts the credibility of sexist religion to the degree that it undermines sexism itself.”⁶² Rosemary Radford Ruether describes the church as the “avant-garde of liberated humanity,” the place “where the good news of liberation from sexism is preached, where the Spirit is present to empower us to renounce patriarchy, where a community committed to the new life of mutuality is gathered together and nurtured, and where the community is spreading this vision and struggle to others.”⁶³ Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza envisions the church as the “ekklesia of women,” or a discipleship of equals. Womanist Delores Williams imagines the black church as “invisible and rooted in the soul of community memory” which we can know “when we see oppressed people rising up in freedom.”⁶⁴ And Latina theologian María Pilar Aquino identifies the strong presence of women in the “church of the poor” of Latin American liberation theology, arguing that in the ecclesial base communities, “church becomes a *happening* where women’s word and commitment reinvent it.”⁶⁵

⁶² Daly, *Beyond God the Father*, 133.

⁶³ Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Sexism and God-Talk: Toward a Feminist Theology* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1983), 193, 213.

⁶⁴ Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness*, 205-206.

Each of these visions conceives of the church in ways that ensure women's equality and inclusion, that protest against women's oppression, and that offer an alternative ideal to the institutional church.

As such, these feminist, womanist, and Latina ecclesial visions aim to redress very real limits to women's access to ecclesial power structures. As Schüssler Fiorenza points out, feminist theologies aim to correct not only women's "societal oppression" but also their "ecclesial exclusion."⁶⁶ Taking part in the larger feminist effort to critique and reconstruct the dominant metaphors and liturgical traditions of the church, these feminist ecclesiologies are articulated alongside other constructive efforts that focus on developing alternative worship spaces, such as the women-church movement, advancing the cause of women's ordination, and reforming liturgical practices.⁶⁷ They are political in that they focus on the inclusion of women into the church's power structure and understand the church through the early feminist understanding of liberation as salvation. As Elaine Graham notes "feminist theologians allied themselves with secular critics of religion in identifying religious institutions and theological systems as cultural sources of political oppression, and this remains one of the most significant contributions for political theology as a whole."⁶⁸ While important for placing the particularity of

⁶⁵ María Pilar Aquino, *Our Cry for Life: Feminist Theology from Latin America* (Eugene, Ore.: Wipf & Stock Publishers, 2002), 43, 53.

⁶⁶ Schüssler Fiorenza, Elisabeth, "Breaking the Silence – Becoming Visible." *The Power of Naming: A Concilium Reader in Feminist Liberation Theology*, ed. E.S. Fiorenza (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1996), 172.

⁶⁷ See Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Women-Church: Theology and Practice of Feminist Liturgical Communities*. San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1985.

⁶⁸ Elaine Graham. "Feminist Theology, Northern." *The Blackwell Companion to Political Theology*, eds. Peter Scott and William T. Cavanaugh (Malden, Mass.: Blackwell Publishing Ltd., 2004), 222.

women's experience front and center, these visions, however, risk alienating those who do not feel represented by the category of woman being employed.

Curiously, the most prominent feminist theologians in the North American Protestant tradition who devote their work to the relationship between theology and politics do not articulate political ecclesiologies. Despite their attention to the way power functions in the tradition, neither Tanner nor Keller, for example, explicitly connect these insights to an understanding of the political vocation of the church itself. Tanner refers to Christian communities, but does not place her work in an ecclesial framework. And Keller, while calling for the church to espouse a "counter-imperialism" that abdicates the "idolatry of identity" that its imperial success fostered, does not specify what practices the church should engage in to nurture such a posture.⁶⁹ Fortunately, others in the tradition do articulate feminist ecclesiologies.

Although most of these visions are not given substantial development, they often emphasize the importance of eschatology. Letty Russell offers the most substantive account, developing a vision of a "church in the round."⁷⁰ Russell envisions the church as a round table, a symbol of hospitality, where everyone is included and welcome.⁷¹ She articulates a "table principle" which states that the measure of adequacy of the life of a church is how it is connected to those on the margins.⁷² Most important, she understands

⁶⁹ Keller, *God and Power*, 20, 115.

⁷⁰ Russell, *Church in the Round*, 12. For two additional ecclesiologies that place *eros* at the center, see Rita Brock, *Journeys By Heart: A Christology of Erotic Power* (New York: Crossroad, 1988) and Dickey, *Re-Creating the Church: Communities of Eros*.

⁷¹ Russell, *Church in the Round*, 17.

⁷² *Ibid.*, 25.

the church as a sign of the coming fulfillment of God's promise for a New Creation. But she makes clear that "As a sign, it is always provisional and is in constant need of renewal in order to make an authentic witness to God's love and justice."⁷³ Similarly, Serene Jones articulates a conception of the church as both a sinful and a graced community that exhibits a "bounded openness."⁷⁴ The bounded nature of the church refers to its distinctive practices while its openness indicates its vulnerability to sin.⁷⁵

Like Russell, Jones places an eschatological focus at the heart of her ecclesiology. As I noted earlier, she emphasizes the importance of making a distinction between the empirical church and the normative church and insists that the two be held together in "eschatological tension." That is, the normative church is already but not yet embodied in the empirical church.⁷⁶ Similarly, Fulkerson puts forward a vision of the church as a place where people who would not ordinarily have occasion to engage each other come to know each other as neighbors and even friends. Such encounters constitute eschatological moments where the new creation becomes a present reality. Furthermore, Rebecca Chopp proposes a "discursive construction of ecclesiology."⁷⁷ In her ecclesial vision, the ekklesia both condemns sin and proclaims grace. "Since the ekklesia not only denounces sin but announces grace, it exists to be a space in which persons find new forms of relating, in which new discourses are formed, in which new experiments of

⁷³ Ibid., 13.

⁷⁴ Jones, *Feminist Theory and Christian Theology*, 170.

⁷⁵ Ibid., 171-172.

⁷⁶ Ibid., 159.

⁷⁷ Rebecca Chopp, "Places of Grace: The Practice of Ekklesia," *Saving Work: Feminist Practices of Theological Education* (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox Press, 1995), 45.

transformation take place.”⁷⁸ Finally, Natalie Watson also echoes this eschatological emphasis:

feminist ecclesiology operates within a creative tension between women’s experiences of church as a site of marginalization and oppression and as a site of empowerment due to the shared memory of the life, death and gospel of Jesus Christ...Feminist ecclesiology is essentially a process which combines a variety of different spaces, locations of meaningful spiritual discourses in the lives of women. It takes place on the brink, on the margins of institutions and organizations, in the creation of networks and connections, in affirming meaningful traditions and the hidden history of our fore-sisters and by creating new traditions.⁷⁹

Although most of these accounts remain substantially undeveloped, they all share a common emphasis on eschatology. In particular, each understands the church as signifying both the descriptive reality of a sinful church, but nevertheless pictures the church as somehow representative of the new creation to come. Thus, while it is difficult to name any one North American Protestant feminist theologian or ethicist who attends to the church and its political vocation in as sustained a way as the other influential figures in the tradition, these feminist theologians have clearly begun the important work of articulating normative visions of church communities. I hope to garner any insights Niebuhr, King, and Yoder have to contribute to these important feminist visions to develop and articulate a political theology that develops the church’s political role in terms of eschatology. In other words, rather than articulating a political ecclesiology that imagines the church merely in terms of inclusion, of being granted access to power, I aim to put forward an understanding of the church as that community particularly attuned to

⁷⁸ Ibid., 61

⁷⁹ Watson, *Introducing Feminist Ecclesiology*, 117-118.

both the things of old and the new things and that understands itself as giving witness to both.

IV. Methodology

The first layer of my analysis, then, draws on the feminist assertion that all theology is political, that politics is broader than participation in state structures, and is characterized not by violence but power. With these insights in mind, I return to Niebuhr, King, and Yoder to show that there is much more to their thought than simply how the church should relate to politics in the narrow sense of determining which form of coercion is legitimate in a Christian framework. In other words, this feminist insight suggests that there is much more to be gleaned from Niebuhr, King, and Yoder in regards to the church's political vocation—that our limited conception of the political has also limited our conception of what constitutes political activity and how Niebuhr, King, and Yoder name and develop their conceptions of political action.

Indeed, feminist theologies do not tend to regard political action in terms of coercion and violence and pay very little attention to issues of state violence.⁸⁰ The major anthologies on Christian attitudes towards war feature no feminist authors.⁸¹ Similarly,

⁸⁰ This fact offers a partial answer to those who might ask how it is that I presume to embark on a feminist project without actually examining any one feminist thinker in the same depth that I grant to Niebuhr, King, or Yoder. Simply put, there is no feminist thinker in the tradition who devotes the same sustained attention to questions of violence as do Niebuhr, King, or Yoder.

⁸¹ See, for example, Arthur F. Holmes, *War and Christian Ethics: Classic and Contemporary Readings on the Morality of War* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Academic, 2005), which includes no feminist authors. Another major anthology, *War in the Twentieth-century: Sources in Theological Ethics*, ed. Richard B. Miller, includes only one feminist author, Jean Elshtain. The only other feminist theologian she is able to mention is Mary Daly, and only indirectly related to the subject. Aside from Elshtain, who is the co-editor along with Sheila Tobias of the collected volume *Women, Militarism and War: Essays in History, Politics, and Social Theory* (Savage, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield, 1990), the only other feminist who has engaged

collections and anthologies of feminist theologies and ethics do not address the issue.⁸²

In general, feminist theologians and ethicists have avoided entering into the just war, nonviolence, pacifism debates and directed their attention to other important issues. As Lois Daly points out, “The fact that little womanist or *mujerista* work has been published on ...war, and the like is an indication that these ‘traditional’ issues are not issues these communities feel compelled to address.”⁸³ Rather than focusing on male conceptions of violence such as war, feminist, womanist, *mujerista*, and Latina theologians tend to understand violence in terms of unjust social structures that perpetuate women’s oppression, domestic violence, ecological destruction, and trauma. Referring to ethical issues related to war, Daly argues that “when so much attention is paid to the issues identified by the ‘tradition,’ the male-dominated tradition, then less time and effort goes toward identifying other issues that may be equally important for those attempting to envision a different world.”⁸⁴

these issues is Catholic moral theologian Lisa S. Cahill with her volume *Love Your Enemies: Discipleship, Pacifism, and Just War Theory* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1994). But neither of these volumes offers a feminist theological perspective *per se*.

⁸² A survey of the edited volumes in feminist and womanist theology reveals little attention to the issue of war. *Feminist Theological Ethics: A Reader* (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox Press, 1994), ed. Lois K. Daly, Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza’s edited collection *The Power of Naming: A Concilium Reader in Feminist Liberation Theology* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1996), and Janet Martin Soskice and Diana Lipton’s *Feminism and Theology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003) each feature only one article on the topic. Beverly Wildung Harrison’s collections on Protestant feminist social ethics—*Justice in the Making: Feminist Social Ethics* (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004) and *Making the Connections*—contain no articles on war/pacifism debate. Nor does Emilie M. Townes’ edited womanist collection *A Troubling in My Soul: Womanist Perspectives on Evil and Suffering* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: 1993), Susan Frank Parson’s edited *The Cambridge Companion to Feminist Theology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), or Daphne Hampson’s *Theology and Feminism* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1990).

⁸³ Lois K. Daly, *Feminist Theological Ethics*, xv.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, xiv.

A) Politics as the Power to Create

One of the ramifications of this different understanding of violence is that these feminists also tend to understand politics differently. In particular, a number of feminists think of politics in terms of the power to create, to make positive contributions to human flourishing. As we saw with their ecclesiologies, feminists pay a great deal of attention to eschatological themes. The theme of naming, newness, and innovation permeate descriptions of feminist theological methods and aims. Elaine Graham argues that the theme of ‘naming’ so prevalent in feminist theologies is about “the interconnectedness of metaphor and power, of symbolic and material; and of the need to harness the power of language, doctrine, and symbol to effect new visions and new structures in church and society.”⁸⁵ Eleanor Humes Haney sees feminist theological ethics as contributing to an emerging vision “of a new community, indeed a new heaven and earth.”⁸⁶ She goes on to argue that

This two-fold context of feminist ethics—vision and present community—means that ‘doing’ ethics involves being a part of the envisioning and struggling. The ethic very much emerges out of the concrete, sometimes painful, often joyous activity on the part of individuals and groups both to embody that vision and to create it in and through concrete decision and action...Something new is breaking into our lives, and we call that newness good...By attending to patterns emerging in our lives and to a creative exploration of alternatives, we discover what is good.⁸⁷

Also affirming this dialectic between present and envisioned reality, Graham adds that feminist theologies are about producing new metaphors, “new imaginative picture[s]”

⁸⁵ Graham, “Feminist Theology, Northern,” *The Blackwell Companion to Political Theology*, 223.

⁸⁶ Lois K. Daly, *Feminist Theological Ethics*, 4.

⁸⁷ Eleanor Humes Haney, “What is Feminist Ethics? A Proposal for Continuing Discussion,” *Feminist Theological Ethics*, 5.

that are “the precondition for transformative action.”⁸⁸ Similarly, Schüssler Fiorenza argues that feminist theologians have embraced God as Sophia “who embodies creative agency, immanence, and the promise of shalom, justice, and salvation.”⁸⁹ Delores Williams argues that “Redemption had to do with God, through Jesus, giving humankind new vision to see resources of positive, abundant, relational life—a vision humankind did not have before.”⁹⁰ And *mujerista* theologian Ada María Isasi-Díaz views liberation in this eschatological vein:

Liberation is the realization of our *proyecto histórico*, which we are always seeking to make a reality, while accepting that its fullness will be never be accomplished in history. Liberation is realized in concrete events which at the same time points to a more comprehensive and concrete realization... Historical events are never clearly nor completely the fulfillment of the kin-dom of God, but they... are ‘eschatological glimpses,’ part of the unfolding of the kin-dom which we do not make happen but which requires us to take responsibility for making justice a reality in our world.⁹¹

Ruether identifies these eschatological glimpses at the heart of the feminist theological endeavors. She understands the tension between the current world and visions of its future transformation in a decidedly eschatological frame:

Theologically this hiatus corresponds to the traditional tension between baptism and final redemption—the tension between the initial conversion and incorporation into the new community and that future “New Heaven and New Earth” that overthrows the present structures of oppression and redeems the world.⁹²

⁸⁸ Graham, “Feminist Theology, Northern,” *The Blackwell Companion to Political Theology*, 217.

⁸⁹ Ibid., 205.

⁹⁰ Williams, “Black Women’s Surrogacy Experiences and the Christian Notion of Redemption,” *After Patriarchy: Feminist Reconstructions of the World Religions*, ed. Paula M. Cooley, William R. Eakin, and Jay B. McDaniel (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1991), 11.

⁹¹ Ada María Isasi-Díaz, *En La Lucha: Elaborating a Mujerista Theology*. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2004), 53.

Thus, there exists a formal parallel between the methods of feminist theologies and what I will argue constitutes good political theology. In other words, political theology can take cues from feminist theological methods in regards to the content of political theology itself. Just as feminist theological methods aim to create new metaphors, names, theological paradigms, and visions, political theology should concern itself with articulating innovative social arrangements and practices, new ways of living.

B) Feminist Diagnostics

The second layer of my feminist methodology is a diagnostic one. If I am arguing that the eschatological ethic present in a variety of feminist theologies possesses the capacity to unlock the full potential of these thinkers, I need to identify any problematic aspects of their thought. Relying on this eschatological ethic, I will identify problematic dualisms, or the things of old, in Niebuhr's, King's, and Yoder's thought that prevent the full flourishing of their resources for political theology. A feminist analysis reveals the presence of unproductive categories such as public and private in Niebuhr, *agape* and *eros* in King, and church and world in Yoder. Using resources from the eschatological ethic, I identify and address these dualisms in the thought of Niebuhr, King, and Yoder. Thus, I aim both to point out obstacles preventing us from appreciating the full import of their thought and to show how the eschatological ethic helps us overcome those

⁹² Rosemary Radford Ruether, "Sexism and the Liberation of Women," *From Machismo to Mutuality: Essays on Sexism and Woman-Man Liberation*, ed. Eugene Bianchi and Rosemary Radford Ruether (New York: Paulist Press, 1976), 113.

obstacles. Ultimately, my analysis will show that each thinker offers resources to develop the political role of the church in terms of the new things.

C) The Feminist Corrective Lens: An Eschatological Ethic

My dissertation intends, however, not only to articulate Niebuhr's, King's, and Yoder's contributions to political theology beyond violence, but to make significant contributions to theological thinking in general, and political theology in particular. My approach shows that, far from being marginal side projects of "mainstream" theology, the insights of feminist theologies play a critical role in the tradition. But I also aim to bring into relief what I am calling an "eschatological ethic" that runs through the full spectrum of feminist, womanist, *mujerista*, and Latina theologies in the American Protestant tradition. As I mentioned, this eschatological ethic includes: 1) a questioning of received categories; 2) an understanding of theology as a cultural and political activity; 3) a normative, pragmatic method that seeks the flourishing of God's good creation; 4) a conception of human agency as participation in God's ongoing creative activity; and 5) an understanding of this activity as redemptive. I devote the next chapter to unpacking each of these elements, each of which demonstrates the emphasis in feminist theologies on remaining faithful to the scriptural promise—seen especially in Isaiah and Revelation—regarding the "new creation," the "new heaven and the new earth." Ultimately, this eschatological ethic contributes to a political theology that envisions the role of the church as a negotiation between current realities and the creation of the new heaven and the new earth.

Thus, my project is aptly called a feminist project for three reasons. First, I draw on the feminist insight that the political is much broader than mere state political structures and issues. Second, I rely on feminist critiques of the old things to identify problematic dualisms that hinder Niebuhr's, King's, and Yoder's thought. Third, I articulate what I see as an eschatological ethic present in the feminist tradition. Each of these feminist elements of my project intends to show—contrary to what one finds in anthologies of political theology that dedicate a token chapter to feminist theologies as political theology—that political theology cannot proceed in any meaningful way unless it incorporates the insights of feminist theologies and ethics, and that Niebuhr's, King's, and Yoder's attention to the church as a political community is instructive for feminist theologies.

Ultimately, then, I intend to make four significant scholarly contributions. First, I place Niebuhr, King, and Yoder in fruitful conversation with a diversity of feminist theologies in order both to identify those categories or constructs that stymie their theological and political thinking, and allow Niebuhr, King, and Yoder to challenge feminist theologies. Placing feminist thought in conversation with Niebuhr, King, and Yoder reveals that feminist theologians, despite their attention to the political nature of theology, have not focused in as sustained a manner on the political role or practices of the church. Second, I put forward a new view of Niebuhr, King, and Yoder that extends beyond their more familiar positions on violence and coercion and invites us to attend to their deep theological contributions. Third, I connect ecclesiological investigations with the wider field of political theology and reflect on the distinctive contributions of North American Protestant thought—in particular, about the worldliness of the church and the

churchliness of the world—to the broader field of ecclesiology. Finally, I demonstrate what can be gained by recognizing the significant theological contributions of feminist theologies. I show that feminist theologies are integral to the tradition in that they are eschatological in intent, and that not incorporating feminist insights impoverishes both the theological task and our reading of others in the tradition. If we are adequately to address the pressing questions facing us today, we would do well to garner all of the resources at our disposal and think together through the problems presented by our common moral life.

V. Summary of the Argument

A) Chapter Two: Feminist Theologies and the New Things

Chapter Two identifies and develops five characteristics of an eschatological ethic present in feminist, womanist, *mujerista*, and Latina theologies. This ethic serves both as my own methodological lens to identify the old and the new in the thought of Niebuhr, King, and Yoder, and as constructive contribution to theology. I argue that undergirding the diversity of feminist, womanist, *mujerista*, and Latina theologies is a common theological core: concern for identifying and challenging the things of old and an effort to perceive potential new things. Such a reading demonstrates that feminist theologies should be understood not as dubious projects on the margins of traditional theology, but as concerned with a central scriptural theme—the redemption of God’s creation—and, therefore, a core theological topic—eschatology. In other words, this chapter demonstrates that the eschatological ethic at work in feminist theologies establishes the

criteria for what constitutes faithful theology, and thereby proves instructive for all theological endeavors.

B) Chapter Three: Reinhold Niebuhr and the Church as a Self-Critical Culture

In Chapter Three, I draw on Tanner's claim that Christian beliefs possess the capacity to create self-critical cultures in order to develop Niebuhr's conception of the church. I respond to two common charges leveled against Niebuhr: a number of feminists argue that his conception of love and justice endorses a harmful divide between public and private, while Protestant theologians claim that Niebuhr is more political philosopher and less theologian and claim that he focuses on Christianity's contributions to the public realm at the expense of developing a conception of the church and its vocation.⁹³ Using an eschatological ethic, I identify these divisions between public and private and church and public as old things that prevent us from seeing the new in Niebuhr's political vision.

I aim to highlight neglected aspects of Niebuhr's thought that carry tremendous import for political theology beyond his admission that state-wielded violence may be necessary to secure proximate justice. His understanding of human beings as finite creatures inevitably prone to sin is certainly well known, but scholars (and even Niebuhr himself) often underemphasize his companion claim that affirms human beings' creative capacities for self-transcendence. Nor do they stress his vision of the church as playing a

⁹³ I will discuss these claims in detail in Chapter Three.

critical role in cultivating these creative capacities. I show that Niebuhr's relation of Christianity to the public realm goes hand-in-hand with a robust political conception of the church itself. Using the lens provided by an eschatological ethic, I find in Niebuhr's thought a conception of the church as that community receptive to God's judgment which issues forth in hope and transformative practices. Thus, I uncover Niebuhr's vision of repentance as the church's central political practice and the church as a community of self-criticism, repentance, and transformative action.

C) Chapter Four: Martin Luther King, Jr.'s Creative Synthesis

In Chapter Four I argue that King conceives of the political role of the church not solely in terms of nonviolence but in terms of community-creating activities. Scholars often focus on the role of *agape* in funding King's understanding of nonviolent resistance as a tool of social change. But the lens provided by an eschatological ethic reveals a problematic divide between public and private in King's conception of *agape* that undermines what otherwise would be a transgressive embrace of love as a political practice. Instead, he reverts to gendered notions of love that carry the potential to associate *agape* with public life (and therefore men) and *philia* and *eros* with private life (and therefore women.) Such associations carry negative implications for women's participation in political and theological communities. I use the lens of an eschatological ethic to identify this division as an old thing that obstructs King's new theo-political vision.

In fact, I uncover a new conception of *agape* that emerges in King's thought as the civil rights movement progresses. This *agape* runs counter to the conception of *agape*

that King draws straight from traditional Protestant conceptions; it displays remarkable resonances with a number of feminist theologians' emphasis on the relational and community-oriented nature of love. I also draw on an eschatological ethic's—and in particular, womanist Monica Coleman's—conception of human agency as a participation in God's ongoing creative activity to highlight King's call for a “creative synthesis” of love and justice. Viewing King's thought through this lens reveals creativity rather than solely love or justice as central to King's theological and political vision. It indicates that love as a political practice is not limited to nonviolent resistance but constitutes any community-creating activity. As such, King views the church's political vocation in terms of being a community of creativity.

D) Chapter Five: John Howard Yoder and the Reformation that Has Yet to Happen

In this chapter, I argue that Yoder's conception of politics extends beyond his conception of pacifism articulated primarily although not exclusively as a refusal to participate in the legitimate violence of the state. Although his claim that the church constitutes its own politics resonates with the feminist contention that politics is broader than participation in formal state structures, Yoder nevertheless focuses the development of his pacifist position on the issue of state violence. His articulation of pacifism as an embodiment of nonresistant love depends heavily on what an eschatological ethic identifies as an old thing: a problematic distinction between church and world.

Using the eschatological ethic—and in particular, Jones' concept of ‘strategic essentialism’—I argue that, contrary to his critics' assumptions, Yoder's church/world

dualism does not primarily serve the purpose of distinguishing the church from the world, but that of motivating the church to focus on its innovative mission. Rather than arguing that the church exists in some pure, morally superior realm over and against the sinful world, Yoder focuses on his normative understanding of the church to call the church back to its mission to create a new humanity.⁹⁴ I also draw on an eschatological ethic's—and more specifically, Fulkerson's—emphasis on theology as a “worldly” practice to highlight the incarnational aspect of Yoder's thought. Doing so suggests a ‘new ethical possibility’ that Yoder himself does not adequately emphasize: the possibility that the church's mandate might be fulfilled outside the church and thus the church's need to be prepared to receive as a gift the ways nonviolence can be embodied outside or even against the visible church community. I thus uncover practices of discernment that enable to the church to recognize new things wherever they might appear as Yoder's central political practice.

E) Chapter Six: Toward an Eschatological Political Theology

I conclude that an eschatological ethic offers a fruitful rubric through which to reflect on Niebuhr's, King's, and Yoder's contributions to political theology and their continuing relevance to Christian ethics in the twenty-first century. In the final chapter, I sketch the potential contours of a political theology that understands the political role of the church through this rubric. I identify three characteristics of such a theology: 1) from

⁹⁴Interestingly, Yoder's pacifist position remains largely undeveloped. Although Yoder identifies an entire set of ‘body practices’ of the church and details numerous elements of this new way to live that Jesus gives to his disciples (including forgiveness, sharing of money, new patterns of relationship, etc.), he focuses his attention exclusively on state violence. It is curious to me that other aspects of Yoder's pacifist position have not been developed by those working out of the Yoderian school of Christian ethics.

my engagement with Niebuhr, an emphasis not only on the normative aspects of the church's political vocation but on its descriptive reality and the self-critical, transformative action that the dialectic between the two produces. Such a political theology places practices of repentance at the center of the church's political practice; 2) from my engagement with King, an understanding of the church as a community of co-creators called to give birth to new forms of redemptive relationships, whose political practices of love are any activity that creates and sustains community; and 3) from my engagement with Yoder, the 'world' beyond church communities as a site of God's creative, redemptive activity. In this case, practices of discernment whereby the church is able to recognize and learn from the new wherever it appears constitute its political practice. In order to do so, I must turn first to identifying the eschatological ethic present in feminist theologies.

CHAPTER TWO: FEMINIST THEOLOGIES AND THE NEW THINGS: AN ESCHATOLOGICAL ETHIC

In the previous chapter I presented several experiences that led me to consider the things of old in three North American traditions of thought on the political role of the church. I identified them as the identification of Reinhold Niebuhr, Martin Luther King, Jr., and John Howard Yoder's political contributions with questions of violence, the dualistic conceptual apparatus of public theology, and North American Protestant feminist theologies' under-emphasis on the political vocation of the church. At the conclusion of the chapter, I indicated that I would employ a threefold feminist methodology to discern both the things of old present in the thought of Niebuhr, King, and Yoder and potential new things. First, I challenge a narrow understanding of politics as solely pertaining to the activities of the state, bringing into relief Niebuhr's, King's, and Yoder's contributions beyond the issue of violence. Second, I identify the things of old, including problematic categories such as public/private, *agape/eros*, and church/world that detract from the wealth of their theological insights. Finally, I identify an eschatological ethic across the broad spectrum of feminist theologies in North America. This ethic provides a corrective lens that allows for the identification and development of new things that Niebuhr, King, and Yoder contribute to Christian ethical reflection on the political role of the church in North America.

In this chapter, I turn to the task of identifying this eschatological ethic. The rich diversity and varieties of feminist theologies in the North American context render it impossible to attend fully to the complexity and subtlety of each thinker or movement. As

I mentioned in Chapter One, because my approach aims to crystallize core commitments that I consider constitutive of feminist theologies, it risks glossing over important differences in the theological frameworks of the thinkers I examine. It is important to note that these thinkers espouse a wide range of approaches including liberal theology, process thought, post-structuralism, anthropological approaches, and forms of post-liberalism. While I have tried to mark these differences when introducing the various thinkers, I cannot attend to their differences in complete detail. Thus, while I make no claim to exhaustiveness, I do aim to broadly identify what I take to be constitutive of “feminist theologies” at large and thereby provide a description of my own methodological approach.⁹⁵ It includes a questioning of received categories, an understanding of theology as a cultural and political activity, a normative, pragmatic method that seeks the flourishing of God’s good creation, a conception of human agency as participation in God’s ongoing creative activity, and an understanding of this activity as redemptive.

This ethic does not merely serve as a tool to identify the old and the new in the thought of Niebuhr, King, and Yoder; it also offers a constructive contribution to theology. I aim to offer a reading of feminist theologies as concerned most fundamentally

⁹⁵ I recognize that some womanist and *mujerista* theologians would object to being categorized as feminists. I do not intend to gloss over the important differences among these bodies of thought, but rather to focus on similar formal or structural moves that characterize a variety of feminist, womanist, *mujerista*, and Latina theologies. On the difference between womanist and black feminist thought see Traci West, “Is a Womanist a Black Feminist? Marking the Distinctions and Defying Them,” *Deeper Shades of Purple: Womanism in Religion and Society*, ed. Stacey M. Floyd-Thomas (New York: New York University Press, 2006), 291-295. For discussion of the relationship between *mujerista* and Latina feminisms, see María Pilar Aquino, “Latina Feminist Theology: Central Features,” *A Reader in Latina Feminist Theology*, ed. María Pilar Aquino, Daisy L. Machado, Jeanette Rodriguez (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2002), 133-138.

with identifying and challenging the things of old in order to perceive potential new things. Such a reading demonstrates that feminist theologies should be understood not as dubious projects on the margins of traditional theology, but concerned with a central scriptural theme—the redemption of God’s creation—and, therefore, a core theological topic—eschatology. In other words, this chapter demonstrates that the eschatological ethic at work in feminist theologies establishes criteria for what constitutes faithful theology, and thereby proves instructive for all theological endeavors.

I. Contesting the Categories

The first characteristic of an eschatological ethic involves a contesting of the received categories of the tradition, or what scripture might refer to as the “old things.” Such categories often risk idolatry because they treat the finite as infinite, or prove sinful because they exclude some part of creation from the providence of God’s grace. The earliest feminist theologians participate in such a critical evaluation of received tradition by challenging categories that reflect male-centered understandings of God, church doctrine, and liturgy.⁹⁶ Their attention to the importance of particularity and difference in human experience reveals that theology is often done from a particular social location while masquerading as neutral. Claiming that male-centered understandings of scripture, doctrine, and practice often interfere with women’s experiences of redemption, they offer

⁹⁶ I have in mind Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, Rosemary Radford Ruether, Mary Daly, Letty Russell, Beverly Wildung Harrison, Sally McFague, and Delores Williams, among others. For an excellent account of the origins and development of feminist theology, see Rosemary Radford Ruether, “The Emergence of Feminist Theology,” *The Cambridge Companion to Feminist Theology*, ed. Susan Frank Parsons (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 3-22.

bold critiques of Christianity's captivity to patriarchy, naming and analyzing the tradition's perpetration of and complicity in the oppression of women.

This first generation of feminist theologians seeks both to reclaim the forgotten or silenced contributions of women to the Christian tradition and to assert the enduring importance of women's perspectives to theological thinking. For example, Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza's work in New Testament studies reveals the ways in which the androcentric selection and redaction of the biblical text marginalized evidence of the significant leadership roles of women in the early church. She writes:

The inconsistencies in our New Testament sources indicate that the early Christian traditioning and redactional processes followed certain androcentric interests and perspectives...[they] have manufactured the historical marginality of women, but they are not a reflection of the historical reality of women's leadership and participation in the early Christian movement. It is important to note that the redaction of the Gospels and of Acts happened at a time when the patriarchalization process of the early Church was well underway."⁹⁷

This process marginalizes women's contributions to the early church and so distorts the authentic witness of the early Christian churches. But it also perpetuates this androcentric focus through the tradition up to the present day. As Schüssler Fiorenza notes, "The biblical texts as they are read by individuals or heard in the liturgy of the church perpetuate the male bias and exclusiveness of our own culture and language."⁹⁸ This male bias in scripture often translates to other elements of church tradition with similar effect.

⁹⁷ Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her: A Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins*. Tenth Anniversary Edition (New York: Crossroad, 1994), 52.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 43.

In fact, many feminist theologies emerge as responses to this male bias not only in scripture but in doctrine and theology. Many of the early feminist critiques draw on gender essentialist understandings of female identity and assert the importance of women's particular contributions to theological reflection. Valerie Saiving Goldstein, for example, argues that Reinhold Niebuhr's account of sin as pride reflects male experience and fails to account for female sin which rather tends to involve a lack of self-assertion.⁹⁹ Similarly, post-Christian theologian Mary Daly criticizes the Christian tendency to image God as male, calling for theology to move "beyond God the Father." She argues that "the entire conceptual systems of theology and ethics, developed under the conditions of patriarchy, have been the products of males and tend to serve the interests of sexist society."¹⁰⁰ Departing from gender essentialist understandings of female identity, Rosemary Radford Ruether espouses constructivism, but nevertheless joins Daly in identifying as idolatrous patriarchal language for God. She makes a similar call for "God-language beyond patriarchy," advocating for the use of inclusive language for God.¹⁰¹ For her, the task of feminist theologies is to "question patterns of theology that justify male dominance and female subordination, such as exclusive male language for God, the view that males are more like God than females, that only males can represent God as leaders in church and society, or that women are created by God to be subordinate to males and

⁹⁹ See Valerie Saiving Goldstein, "The Human Condition: A Feminine View," *The Journal of Religion* (April 1960), 101-112.

¹⁰⁰ Mary Daly, *Beyond God the Father: Toward a Philosophy of Women's Liberation* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1973), 4.

¹⁰¹ Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Sexism and God-Talk: Toward a Feminist Theology* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1983), 61-63.

thus sin by rejecting this subordination.”¹⁰² The first generation of feminist theologians thus establishes this challenging of received tradition as one of the primary elements of the feminist theological project. They take what are understood to be neutral categories and expose them as the product of particular perspectives. They challenge the category of scripture as pure, unadulterated revelation, exposing its androcentric selection; they challenge the category of the human, exposing the male as normative; they challenge theological categories such as sin as pride and God as father, showing them to be reflective of male experience. In short, they challenge the neutrality of Christian tradition itself, revealing its patriarchal elements.

If the first feminist theologians initiated this contesting of received categories, the next generation of womanist, *mujerista*, Latina, and post-structuralist feminists continue and deepen it by calling into question the very categories used by the first generation. In particular, these theologians contest the category of women’s experience, offered as a response to the male-centered categories of received tradition. They argue that “woman” is itself an essentialized category as it fails to account for the identity and experience of women outside the white, middle-class feminist movement. By using the category of “woman,” white feminists simply repeat the same move they themselves criticized, putting forward as normative a particular notion of woman.

Womanist thought develops as a critical response of African-American women to this myopia of white, middle-class feminist thought as well as to male black theology, arguing that white, middle-class feminists pay inadequate attention to race and class in

¹⁰² Ruether, “The Emergence of Christian Feminist Theology,” *The Cambridge Companion to Feminist Theology*. 3.

their analysis of gender injustice and that black theology ignores gender. Womanists argue these omissions with regards to gender, race, and class render black women's lives invisible and therefore hinder liberation efforts. Emilie Townes, for example, eschews any pretence to an "objective" perspective and instead extols the value of attending to the particularity of her experience as an African-American woman. "My task is to explore the twists and turns of the communities from which we spring and have our very life and breath. It is to be very particular about the particular—and explore the vastness of it."¹⁰³ She describes this methodological move "not as a form of essentialism, but as epistemology."¹⁰⁴ By virtue of Townes' and other womanists' unabashed subjectivism, womanist thought not only challenges the supposed objectivism of "mainstream" theology, but the essentialism of the first feminist theologians. Townes' position implies that all theology is done from a particular perspective; a key difference is that womanists are transparent in their embrace of the particular. In doing so, she at once critiques and deepens the feminist legacy of contesting the subject and other essentialized categories.

Similarly, *mujerista* and Latina theologies also critique white feminists' failure to attend to race and class. Ada María Isasi-Díaz initiates *mujerista* theology, calling for an "epistemological vigilance," that attends to the role of subjectivity in theology.¹⁰⁵ She argues that "*Mujerista* theology denounces any and all so-called objectivity. What passes as objectivity in reality merely names the subjectivity of those who have the authority

¹⁰³ Emilie M. Townes, *Womanist Ethics and the Cultural Production of Evil* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), 2.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, 2.

¹⁰⁵ Ada María Isasi-Díaz, *Mujerista Theology: A Theology for the Twenty-First Century* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2004), 76.

and/or power to impose their point of view.”¹⁰⁶ Instead, she embraces her own particular standpoint, using the term *mujerista* to describe “Latinas who live in the United States and who are keenly aware of how sexism, ethnic prejudice, and economic oppression subjugate Latinas.”¹⁰⁷ “A *mujerista*,” she writes, “is someone who makes a preferential option for Latina women, for our struggle for liberation.”¹⁰⁸ In keeping with the feminist tradition of highlighting the importance of particularity to theology, Isasi-Díaz indicates that, like womanists, *mujeristas* place emphasis on the role of the Latina community and its “shared experiences.”¹⁰⁹ These experiences, the “lived-experience of Hispanic women,” which often run counter to “common experience,” provide a source of *mujerista* theology.¹¹⁰ She describes these shared experiences with the term *lo cotidiano*, or those things having to do with “the daily lived experiences that provide the ‘stuff’ of our reality.”¹¹¹ As Isasi-Díaz makes clear, this emphasis on the particular experience of Latina women is offered in direct response to the essentialism of the early feminist theologies. She argues that “*lo cotidiano* steers *mujerista* theology away from any essentialism that would obscure precisely what is at the core of *lo cotidiano*: difference. At the same time *lo cotidiano* moves us from the ‘add and stir’ version of feminist

¹⁰⁶ Ibid., 77.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid., 60.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., 61.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid., 67.

¹¹⁰ Ibid., 66-67.

¹¹¹ Ibid., 67.

theology.”¹¹² While protesting the essentialism of white feminist theology, Isasi-Díaz nevertheless participates in the feminist priority to challenge normative, supposedly-neutral categories, revealing their exclusions.

Latina theologians emphasize many of the same themes of *mujerista* theology, including its focus on particularity, but eschew the term in favor of “Latina feminisms.” As María Pilar Aquino points out, “there are no *mujerista* sociopolitical and ecclesial subjects or movements in the United States or in Latin America.”¹¹³ Using the term Latina thus reflects actual political realities on the ground and highlights Latina theologians’ continuity with older traditions of Latina/Chicana feminism. Interestingly, Latina theologians criticize *mujerista* theology for its own form of essentialism, again showing the contesting of categories to be central to all feminist theological projects. Aquino argues that “the *mujerista* position is indisputably understood as an ideology rooted in both the assumption of a homogenous identity of women and...a unifying women’s strategy for change.”¹¹⁴ According to Aquino, ‘Latina feminisms’ better captures the plurality and diversity of Latina feminist theologies.

More recently, a number of feminist and womanist theologians have turned to post-structuralist thought to avoid such problematic designations of the subject. Mary McClintock Fulkerson, for example, draws on post-structuralist thought to offer “an

¹¹² Ibid., 69.

¹¹³ María Pilar Aquino, “Latina Feminist Theology: Central Features,” *A Reader in Latina Feminist Theology*, 138.

¹¹⁴ Ibid., 139.

alternative to experience-based theology.”¹¹⁵ While recognizing the importance of the “inclusionary logic” that marks a number of feminists’ turn from essentialism to constructionism, Fulkerson argues that constructionism nevertheless fails because despite what it manages to include, it always excludes some unrecognized other.¹¹⁶ In keeping with her conviction that “Contesting the notion of the subject is definitional to feminist explorations,” Fulkerson critiques early feminists such as Ruether for deploying a male-female binary in their attempts to include the importance of women’s experience in theology.¹¹⁷ She argues that poststructuralist approaches demonstrate that “gender is a moving concept.”¹¹⁸ Rather than having a certain essence or being constructed upon biologically similar bodies, identity is constantly being constructed in relation to shifting signifiers in one’s particular context:¹¹⁹

The point is not to lose the subject ‘woman’ but to *change the subject* in the sense that the complex production of multiple identities becomes basic to our thinking...My proposal to ‘change the subject’ is based on the view that the liberation criticism of the category ‘woman’ mandates an approach that takes seriously the location where ‘woman’ is ‘produced.’ We must not lose the subject ‘woman.’ We must simply become more adept at changing that subject, that is, at respecting its multiple identities. Thus this is not feminism without women, as some critics of poststructuralism fear, but an attempt to increase the likelihood that *agape* for the other attends to the other’s situation and our complicity with it.¹²⁰

¹¹⁵ Mary McClintock Fulkerson, *Changing the Subject: Women’s Discourses and Feminist Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1994), 355.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 6.

¹¹⁷ Mary McClintock Fulkerson, “Contesting the Gendered Subject,” *Horizons in Feminist Theology: Identity, Tradition, and Norms*, eds. Rebecca S. Chopp and Sheila Greeve Davaney (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997), 100, 109.

¹¹⁸ Fulkerson, *Changing the Subject*, 101.

¹¹⁹ Fulkerson, “Contesting the Gendered Subject,” *Horizons*, 107.

¹²⁰ *Ibid.*, 7, 11.

The turn to post-structuralism thus enables Fulkerson to identify “the refused outside,” to contest the subject without simply replacing one particular category, posited as universal, with another.¹²¹

From its origins, then, feminist theology has been concerned to challenge the received categories of tradition—not for the mere sake of challenging them, but to guard against idolatry and insure that no one is excluded from experiencing God’s redemptive grace. As Fulkerson puts it in relation to post-structuralist feminist approaches, “To fail to do this as a feminist theologian is also to stop short of a methodological practice that is profoundly theological. I refer to a practice that displays the fallible nature of all of our categories.”¹²² I want to propose that such methodological practices are profoundly theological not only because they recognize the fallibility of all theological endeavors, but because they attempt to discern the things of old from the new things. In other words, these feminist theologians engage in a contesting of categories as part of their effort to discern God’s redemptive activity. In its self-critical aim to perceive the new things, feminist theologians exhibit a theological agenda that is thus eschatological in orientation.

II. Theology as a Cultural and Political Activity

¹²¹ Ibid., 109.

¹²² Fulkerson, *Changing the Subject*, 7.

The contesting of categories that forms the first part of this eschatological ethic suggests other pairs of categories that require challenging: theology versus culture and theology versus politics. Indeed, another significant contribution of a number of feminist theologians is their self-conscious awareness of theology as both a cultural and a political activity. Recognition of the historical, contextual nature of Christian scripture, tradition, and even human subjectivity, suggests the role of culture in producing the tradition. Similarly, an awareness of the role of power in the construction of tradition reveals it as fraught with political implications. Feminist theologians demonstrate that far from being pure, unadulterated, and power neutral, the development of Christian tradition happens in particular cultural contexts and wields significant power to shape societal relations and organization.

Contrary to those who would maintain the purity or self-contained nature of the Christian tradition, Mary McClintock Fulkerson (especially in her more recent anthropological work) and Kathryn Tanner (in her critique of post-liberalism that draws on cultural theory) draw attention to the nature of theology as a cultural and thus “impure” activity. Espousing a non-foundationalist perspective, Fulkerson rejects the idea the theology happens in a cultural and material vacuum. She argues that “Liberation epistemology requires...this refusal of typical theological dichotomies—reflection, conceived of as ideas existing prior to language, or as linguistic discourse, conceived apart from material relations.”¹²³ She criticizes post-liberal theologians for their understanding of theology as second-order reflection on first-order theological discourse,

¹²³ Ibid., 360.

rejecting the idea that theology occurs after the tradition has been developed and established:

The notion that theology is second-order reflection on the more primary language of faith is another unsatisfactory option...the problem comes when defining theology as second-order reflection implies that theology achieves a clarifying distance from which to assess critically the rush and lived everydayness of faith in the world...If there is one clear lesson to learn from the turn to discourse, it is that the project of separating out the signifiers of theology from the signifiers of other disciplines—of culture, of secular knowledges—is a fundamentally ill-conceived one... My argument from discourse analysis precludes there ever being a theological discourse free from contemporary signifying processes. Again I have argued that ‘theological’ or faith discourses and those of ‘culture’ come into being at the same time.¹²⁴

In other words, Fulkerson reveals that the practice of theology cannot be separated from the messy, gritty realities of daily life. Nor can Christian traditions of thought be parsed out and clearly distinguished from other traditions of thought. Christian theology constitutes an intricate part of culture itself.

Similarly, Tanner positions theology as a cultural activity. As she puts it, theology is a “form of cultural activity...Theology is something that human beings produce. Like all human activities, it is historically and socially conditioned; it cannot be understood in isolation from the rest of human sociocultural practices.”¹²⁵ Contrary to the strictest version of the post-liberal claim that Christianity forms its own culture with its own distinctive cultural contents, Tanner argues that “the boundary is...one...that allows Christian identity to be essentially impure and mixed, the identity of a hybrid that always shares cultural forms with its wider host culture and other religions...Christianity is a

¹²⁴ Ibid., 361-362; 368.

¹²⁵ Kathryn Tanner, *Theories of Culture: A New Agenda for Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997), 63.

hybrid formation through and through; nothing need be exempted out of fear that the distinctiveness of Christianity must otherwise be lost.”¹²⁶ Insisting on theology as a cultural activity reveals theology as a human product and therefore its fallible nature, but it also brings into focus its “worldly” character. Highlighting the ways in which the Christian tradition incorporates a variety of other traditions, practices, and ways of knowing makes clear that theology does not occur in some sacrosanct realm apart from other forms of human culture.

One important implication of this claim, for Tanner, is that it reveals theology as a political activity. Putting forward a political understanding of culture, Tanner draws attention to culture “as the site of political contest.”¹²⁷ She understands politics in the broadest possible sense to involve power relations and struggles over cultural meanings and social arrangements:

Questions of meaning and articulation such as these amount to political questions; they concern power relations. Following Roberto Unger’s definition of politics in its broadest sense, one could say that these questions are part and parcel of ‘the conflict over the terms of our practical and passionate relations to one another and over all the resources and assumptions that may influence those terms.’ They are political questions according to an expanded understanding of politics which views it not as a separate institutional sphere—say, the realm of government—but as a pervasive dimension of social relations generally.¹²⁸

Thus, any time a Christian theologian engages the cultural materials of the tradition, arranging them in certain ways or imbuing them with certain meanings, this activity

¹²⁶ Ibid., 115.

¹²⁷ Kathryn Tanner, “‘New Social Movements’ and the Practice of Feminist Theology,” *Horizons in Feminist Theology: Identity, Tradition, and Norms*, eds. Rebecca S. Chopp and Sheila Greeve Davaney (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997), 183.

¹²⁸ Ibid., 180.

carries political ramifications. This is not only the case because power dynamics are at work, but also because the particular meanings and arrangements bear on societal and political structures. Tanner describes feminist theologians as participating in the politically imbued work that theologians have always done, only to different political ends. “By doing what theologians usually do—rethinking for themselves the meaning and organization of the cultural materials with which Christian theologians work—feminist theologians contest the cultural hegemony of patriarchal forms of theological discourse on the way to constructing new theologies for a new set of interpersonal relations, in which women are finally to be granted their full humanity.”¹²⁹ If acknowledging theology as a cultural activity defies any effort to imagine theology and culture as separate realms, acknowledging the political nature and implications of theology resists any clean separation between theology and politics.

In fact, feminist, womanist, *mujerista*, and Latina theologians highlight both the cultural and political nature of theology in a variety of ways. Womanists demonstrate the nature of theology as a cultural activity, for example, by drawing on cultural sources generally viewed as external to the Christian tradition. Emilie Townes opens her most recent study on the cultural production of evil with a quotation from novelist Toni Morrison. Monica Coleman’s womanist process theology is informed by African religious traditions, including the role of ancestors and spirit possession. The importance of the past for womanist theology leads Coleman to highlight the “gritty, localized, and contextual” nature of salvation. “It is grounded in the concrete experiences of the world,”

¹²⁹ Ibid., 187.

she writes, “It must always look, feel, and taste like something.”¹³⁰ Delores Williams also highlights the importance of African-American traditions of thought and the community of black women through time whose experiences and traditions of resistance she incorporates into her own theology.

Similarly, *mujerista* and Latina theologians emphasize the importance of *mestizaje*, or “our condition as racially and culturally mixed people.”¹³¹ Isasi-Díaz considers this concept the Latina “contribution to a new understanding of pluralism,” but it also provides the foundation for her concept of “the kin-dom of God.”¹³² She describes the kin-dom of God as “a coming together of peoples, with no one being excluded and at the expense of no one.”¹³³ *Mujerista* theology also distinguishes between “official” church tradition and popular religiosity, affirming the importance of the latter. This popular religiosity combines elements of American Indian traditions, Spanish Catholicism, and African religions.¹³⁴ As Isasi-Díaz points out, “*Mujeristas* take popular religiosity very seriously...finding it to be an essential source of our theology because it is operative in the lives of Latinas.”¹³⁵ She rejects the aversion to syncretism, arguing that “The history of Christianity shows that orthodox rejections of syncretism have less to do

¹³⁰ Monica Coleman, *Making a Way Out of No Way: A Womanist Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2008), 169.

¹³¹ Isasi-Díaz, *Mujerista Theology*, 64-65.

¹³² *Ibid.*, 65.

¹³³ *Ibid.*, 65-66.

¹³⁴ Ada María Isasi-Díaz, *En La Lucha: Elaborating a Mujerista Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2004), 62.

¹³⁵ *Ibid.*, 63.

with the purity of faith and more with who has the right to determine what is to be considered normative and official.”¹³⁶ Latina theologian María Pilar Aquino also upholds the significance of *mestizaje*, affirming “its relevance to a theological method which consciously opts for “inculturality as central methodological axis.”¹³⁷ Inculturality imagines theology as a dialogue between different theological positions. Aquino describes this “intercultural dialogue” as “the condition for the possibility of creating new theological models” that attends to both the universal and particular elements of reason.¹³⁸ Thus, the same cultural mixing that Tanner and Fulkerson draw attention to in “official” church tradition is whole-heartedly embraced by *mujerista* and Latina theologians who place the resources of various cultural traditions at the heart of their theologies.

Feminist, womanist, *mujerista*, and Latina theologians also highlight the political nature of theology. Some feminists focus on the importance of language and its role in shaping cultural and social norms. Post-Christian theologian Mary Daly suggests as much with her claim, “If God is male, then male is God.”¹³⁹ Similarly, Elizabeth Johnson argues that “The symbol of God functions” to express how theological language translates into cultural norms and wields social and political power.¹⁴⁰ Others attend to the complicated

¹³⁶ Ibid., 65.

¹³⁷ María Pilar Aquino, “Theological Method in U.S. Latino/a Theology: Toward an Intercultural Theology for the Third Millennium,” *From the Heart of Our People: Latino/a Explorations in Catholic Systematic Theology*, eds Orlando O. Espin and Miguel H. Diaz (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1999), 35.

¹³⁸ Ibid., 11.

¹³⁹ Daly, *Beyond God the Father*, 9.

¹⁴⁰ Elizabeth A. Johnson, *She Who Is: The Mystery of God in a Feminist Theological Perspective* (New York: Crossroad, 1992), 4.

inter-workings of theology and social and political organization. As Kwok Pui-lan argues, “feminist theologians understand ‘politics’ in a comprehensive and multifaceted sense not limited to state power, participation in government, and political representation and rights. ‘Politics,’ for them, concerns the collective welfare of the whole people in the polis.”¹⁴¹ Similarly, process theologian Catherine Keller argues, “Theology always means—whatever else it means—theopolitics. However deeply faith may retreat into privacy, God-talk begins and ends among the *res publica*, the “public things.”¹⁴² Keller examines in particular the way an “apocalyptic unconscious” runs rampant in past and current U.S. politics.¹⁴³ Any interplay between theological discourse and practices and our communal forms of life takes on political character by virtue of their ability to shape the way we understand our relationships to others in society.

Both *mujerista* and Latina theologians also draw attention to the inherent political dimension of their theological projects. Isasi-Díaz describes *mujerista* theology as a “liberative praxis,” meaning “reflective action that has as its goal liberation.”¹⁴⁴ Theology conceived of as a liberative praxis is political in the sense that it is community oriented, but also that its primary goal is to question unjust societal structures and radically reshape them with the goal of justice in mind. As she puts it, “Doing *mujerista* theology is a liberative praxis. I am an activist-theologian, and for me doing *mujerista* theology is one

¹⁴¹ Pui-lan, “Feminist Theology, Southern,” *The Blackwell Companion to Political Theology*, eds. Peter Scott and William T. Cavanaugh (Malden, Mass.: Blackwell Publishing Ltd., 2004), 194.

¹⁴² Keller, *God and Power*, 135.

¹⁴³ *Ibid.*, viii.

¹⁴⁴ Isasi-Díaz, *Mujerista Theology*, 62.

of the ways I participate in the struggle for the liberation of Latina women and our communities in the USA.”¹⁴⁵ Similarly, Latina theologians recognize their relationship with Latin American liberation theologies and share in their “praxis-oriented methodology” which places the struggle for justice for the oppressed at the heart of its theology. In Aquino’s words, “What makes Latina thought liberative is that it deliberately focuses on our daily activities aimed at transformation toward greater justice.”¹⁴⁶ These theologians’ emphasis on theology as a liberative praxis draws attention to the political nature of theology in an explicit and self-conscious way. From their perspective, it is not possible to do theology in an apolitical way. Nor should theologians aim to separate the theological from the political. Rather, the theological is always already political.

This awareness of theology as both a cultural and political activity belies any traditional understanding of theology as somehow distinct from culture or politics. Furthermore, attention to the nature of theology as a cultural and, more specifically, political activity, calls other prominent dualistic categories into question. The distinction between public and private, between “pure” forms of love such as *agape* versus “worldly” loves such as *philia* and *eros*, and between church and world all trade on the idea that theology exists apart from the realms of culture and politics. As I suggested earlier, these divisions constitute some of the old things present in the thought of Niebuhr, King, and Yoder. Looking at each of these distinctions in more detail will lay the groundwork for my analysis of how the eschatological ethic identifies both the things

¹⁴⁵ Ibid., 1.

¹⁴⁶ María Pilar Aquino, “Latina Feminist Theology: Central Features,” *A Reader in Latina Feminist Theology*, 152.

of old and the new things in each. Thus, before I turn to the next element of an eschatological ethic—a normative, pragmatic method—I will briefly discuss these three pairs of dualisms present in Niebuhr, King, and Yoder, respectively.

A) Reinhold Niebuhr and the Division Between Public and Private

The distinction between public and private comes under fire from a variety of feminists. Feminist theorists challenge this divide, in part, because it tends to associate men with the public realm of economic and political responsibility while relegating women to the private realm of family. A number of feminists argue that the division between public and private both renders the private realm politically irrelevant and fails to account for the need for public norms like justice in private life. Feminist political philosophers such as Susan Moller Okin demonstrate the numerous ways public and private are deeply intertwined. Okin shows how this divide assumes the support and benefit of the domestic realm while rendering it politically invisible. Care theorists also articulate a challenge to the division by arguing for the necessity of care to a robust conception of justice.¹⁴⁷

Feminist theologians also note the ways the association of men with the public and justice and women with the private and emotions lead to gender valuations that underwrite inequality. Much of Ruether's and Beverly Harrison's work combats such dualisms that position women as less than fully autonomous human beings. Ruether

¹⁴⁷ See Joan Tronto, *Moral Boundaries: A Political Argument for an Ethic of Care* (New York: Routledge, 1993) and Virginia Held, *Feminist Morality: Transforming Culture, Society, and Politics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993).

identifies a problematic association of men with spirit and therefore godliness while woman are associated with the material realm and therefore sin. In Harrison's words, the problem is "we go from *duality* to *dualism*, from *difference* to *subordination*."¹⁴⁸

Womanist Marcia Riggs analyzes the way in which this division maps onto a church/public distinction that imagines the black church as a private realm where the injustices of sexual abuse can go on unchallenged. Furthermore, Isasi-Díaz attributes the subordination of Latina women's contributions to the fact that women's concerns are considered private matters. She argues that *lo cotidiano* has been "belittled and scorned precisely because it is often related to the private sphere, to that sphere of life assigned to women precisely because it is considered unimportant."¹⁴⁹ These thinkers challenge the categories of public and private, then, for the very reason that they allow a number of persons, traditions, and ideas to be classified as unimportant.

Challenging this distinction becomes particularly important in relation to Reinhold Niebuhr's thought. A host of feminist thinkers call into question the potential of Niebuhr's thought as a resource for political theology because they see his ethic as dependent on a distinction between public and private realms. In particular, Harrison criticizes Niebuhr's appeal to a transcendent norm for its production of a dualistic ethic that associates justice with the public realm while idealizing the possibilities for love in private life. She writes that Niebuhr "never questioned the dualism embedded in liberal political ideology between the 'private' sphere, that is, the arena of those interpersonal,

¹⁴⁸ Harrison, *Making the Connections*, 25.

¹⁴⁹ Isasi-Díaz, *Mujerista Theology*, 68.

humane relations of the family, and the ‘public’ sphere, those ‘impersonal relations of institutions and collectivities.’”¹⁵⁰ Similarly, Ruether argues that, according to Niebuhr’s dichotomy, “Love morality is ‘unrealistic’ in the public sphere. Here the only possible morality is that of a ‘justice’ defined as a balancing of competitive egoism...Morality is privatized, sentimentalized, and identified with the ‘feminine’ in a way that both conceals the essential immorality of sexism and rationalizes a value-free public world.”¹⁵¹ Finally, Daphne Hampson argues that sacrificial love is “a moral norm relevant to interpersonal (particularly family) relations, and significant for parents (particularly mothers, heroes, and saints), but scarcely applicable to the power relations of modern industry.”¹⁵² Each of these thinkers casts significant doubt on whether Niebuhr’s thought can contribute to political theology in any robust way given this dualism between public and private.¹⁵³

B) Martin Luther King, Jr. and Divisions Among *Agape*, *Philia*, and *Eros*

Feminists’ challenges to the public/private distinction bear themselves out in the tradition’s discussion of Christian love. This discussion becomes important for an understanding of the things of old and the new things in King’s understanding of *agape*.

¹⁵⁰ Harrison, *Making the Connections*, 27-28.

¹⁵¹ Ruether, *New Woman, New Earth: Sexist Ideologies and Human Liberation* (New York: Seabury Press, 1975), 199.

¹⁵² Daphne Hampson, *Theology and Feminism* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1990), 126.

¹⁵³ I am indebted to Rebekah L. Miles’ discussion of these feminist criticisms in *The Bonds of Freedom: Feminist Theology and Christian Realism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001). According to Miles, these criticisms “overdraw Niebuhr’s distinction between public and private life,” 40. She also “disagrees with the charge that Niebuhr’s transcendent norm leads to a pessimistic support of the status quo. He notes again and again the transformative possibilities of an appeal to transcendent norms,” 43.

King tends to position *agape* as a public, Christian love that does not partake of the worldly loves of *philia* and *eros* that we traditionally associate with private life. A number of feminist theologians challenge this conception of *agape*, however, drawing on both *philia* and *eros* as important elements in any understanding of Christian love.

One of the most important feminist critiques of the tradition's dominant conception of *agape* rejects an understanding of *agape* as self-sacrifice. Feminists find fault with this conception because it neglects the importance of self-love. Goldstein first articulates the problem with this traditional understanding of *agape*, arguing it reveals a male bias that neglects female experience. She criticizes Anders Nygren and Reinhold Niebuhr for identifying "sin with self-assertion and love with selflessness," arguing that "specifically feminine forms of sin" tend toward the "underdevelopment or negation of the self."¹⁵⁴ Thus, while an understanding of *agape* as selflessness may speak to the male need to repent of the sin of pride, it only serves to reinforce women's sin of lack of self-assertion. Barbara Hilkert Andolsen shares Goldstein's concerns. She argues that "*Agape* defined exclusively as other-regard or self-sacrifice is not an appropriate virtue for women who are prone to excessive selflessness."¹⁵⁵ Similarly, Harrison criticizes the way

¹⁵⁴ Goldstein, "The Human Situation," 109.

¹⁵⁵ See "Agape in Feminist Ethics," *Journal of Religious Ethics* 9:1 (Spring 1981): 74. Andolsen acknowledges that Gene Outka's concept of *agape* as equal-regard entails the importance of self-love and that other-regard is not synonymous with self-sacrifice. But she argues that in situations of conflict between other-regard and self-love, Outka still privileges other-regard, evincing an uneasiness with self-love, 72. She embraces Martin D'Arcy's emphasis on self-regard as a legitimate component of *agape* and his turn to the Trinity rather than atonement for grounding his notion of *agape* as mutuality, noting that this move foreshadows the work of feminist theorists, 72-73. She writes: "Feminist ethicists are...are stressing the need for a healthy self-regard and hence they are exploring mutuality as the most appropriate image of Christian love," 69.

Niebuhr “celebrated ‘sacrifice,’ a characteristic in which he thought women excelled.”¹⁵⁶ Far from seeing a healthy self-love as detracting from *agape*, each of these feminists affirms the importance of self-love. As such, they aim to correct the focus on self-sacrifice by incorporating the loves of *philia* and *eros*, which acknowledge the importance of the self in the act of loving.¹⁵⁷ Nearly all of the feminist critics join Andolsen and Harrison and thus imagine *agape* in terms of friendship, familial relationships, or intimate relationships. As we will see, other feminists move further away from individualistic notions of *agape* than even the dyadic models of friendship and intimate love suggest, affirming *agape* as a community-creating force.

Several feminists’ constructive turn from *agape* as self-sacrifice to *agape* as mutuality aims to combat both the disinterested and detached character of self-sacrifice and the individualist notion of the self that *agape* as self-sacrifice requires.¹⁵⁸ Against thinkers like Nygren, Niebuhr, and Gene Outka, who she thinks depreciate mutuality in Protestant Christian ethics, Harrison argues that viewing ‘disinterestedness’ and ‘detachment’ as important characteristics of Christian moral action results from a pernicious mind/body dualism that privileges a disembodied rationality.¹⁵⁹ In contrast to this notion, she embraces an embodied, mutual love: “The love we need and want is

¹⁵⁶ Harrison, *Making the Connections*, 28.

¹⁵⁷ Andolsen, for example, recommends an understanding of *agape* not as sacrifice but mutuality. Moving away from the way Niebuhr “down-played ‘mere’ mutuality,” Harrison affirms both it and *eros*, arguing against the Christian dualism that sees *agape* as “deep, disinterested love” in tension with *eros*, “usually defined as egoistic passion.” See *Making the Connections*, 28.

¹⁵⁸ Along with Andolsen, Beverly Harrison, Linda Woodhead, Sally McFague, Rosemary Radford Ruether, and Margaret Farley each develop concepts of *agape* based on mutuality.

¹⁵⁹ Harrison, *Making the Connections*, 271; footnote 27.

deeply mutual love, love that has both the quality of a gift received and the quality of a gift given. The rhythm of a real, healing, and empowering love is take and give, give and take, free of the cloying inequality of one partner active and one partner passive.”¹⁶⁰ In her embrace of mutuality, Harrison rejects the idea that Jesus’ crucifixion—love as self-sacrifice—provides the central image of love for the Christian tradition. Echoing King’s own understanding of *voluntary* suffering not as necessary but *accepted* and redemptive, she argues:

Jesus was radical not in his lust for sacrifice but in his power of mutuality...His death was the price he paid for refusing to abandon the radical activity of love—of expressing solidarity and reciprocity with the excluded ones in his community...Like Jesus, we are called to a radical activity of love, to a way of being in the world that deepens relation, embodies and extends community, passes on the gift of life.¹⁶¹

In fact, Harrison cites King as one who understood this power of radical mutual love. As in King’s philosophy of nonviolence, Harrison notes that Jesus “*accepted* sacrifice. But his sacrifice was *for* the cause of radical love, to make relationship and sustain it, and above all, to *righting* wrong relationship, which is what we call ‘doing justice.’”¹⁶²

Because we are not detached and disinterested beings, Harrison combats the concept of the individual, autonomous self, highlighting the nature of our common existence as one of mutual relation. She argues that for feminist moral theology, “relationality is at the heart of things...To speak of the primacy of relationship in feminist experience, and to speak of a theology of relation...is to insist on the deep, total sociality of all things. All

¹⁶⁰ Ibid., 17-18.

¹⁶¹ Ibid, 18.

¹⁶² Ibid,19.

things cohere in each other. Nothing living is self-contained; if there were such a thing as an unrelated individual, none of us would know it.”¹⁶³

In addition to challenging the detached character of *agape*, a number of feminists question whether *agape* is best described as “disinterested.” Following Nygren, most in the Protestant tradition define *agape* as disinterested, meaning it loves not in response to any value, quality, or merit of the person being loved but rather constitutes the love of God acting through the human agent. King himself articulates this view, arguing that *agape* is “an overflowing love which is purely spontaneous, unmotivated, groundless, and creative. It is not set in motion by any quality or function of its object. It is the love of God operating in the human heart. *Agape* is disinterested love.”¹⁶⁴ Sally McFague, however, questions whether God’s love actually possesses the character of disinterestedness. She argues that Protestant discussions of divine love are “principally motivated by the desire to expunge any trace of need or interest on the part of God toward creation,” but that this is a “sterile and unattractive view of divine love.”¹⁶⁵ If God declares God’s creation good, then why should we expect that God does not love creation with a deeply interested love?

In contrast to a disinterested God who creates the world and stands back, who loves creation, but in a way that does not affect God, McFague suggests a parental model for divine *agape*. “Parental love is the best metaphor we have for imagining the creative

¹⁶³ Ibid., 16.

¹⁶⁴ Martin Luther King, Jr., “An Experiment in Love,” *A Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings and Speeches of Martin Luther King, Jr.*, ed. James Washington (San Francisco: Harper, 1986), 19.

¹⁶⁵ Sally McFague, “God as Mother,” *Weaving the Visions: New Patterns in Feminist Spirituality*, eds. Judith Plaskow and Carol P. Christ (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1989), 143.

love of God.”¹⁶⁶ As such, *agape* can no longer be construed as a disinterested love but is profoundly interested and thus incorporates both *philia* and *eros*. She suggests that the better way to capture the impartiality of God’s love is to claim not that it is disinterested but that it is inclusive. McFague acknowledges that the parental model for God is not perfect, as most parents love their children more than other children. But in contrast to a view of God’s love as “detached, unconcerned, or perfunctory,” the image of God as mother, for example, has the benefit of being able to convey that “God...is parent to all species and wishes all to flourish.”¹⁶⁷

The feminist challenges to *agape* as detached and disinterested also draw on *eros* to reconstruct their concepts of *agape*.¹⁶⁸ These feminists take issue with conceptions of *agape* that seek to avoid the taint of reciprocal love, such as King’s description of *agape* as “an overflowing love which seeks nothing in return.”¹⁶⁹ They attribute the privileging of *agape* over *philia* and *eros* to a pernicious material/spiritual dualism in Christian thought that devalues material/physical reality. The claim is that the tradition disassociates *eros* from *agape* in order to maintain *agape*’s purity. As Carter Heyward argues:

¹⁶⁶ Ibid., 144.

¹⁶⁷ Ibid., 148.

¹⁶⁸ Carter Heyward, Sally McFague, Linda Woodhead, Rita Brock, and Catherine Keller all reconceptualize *agape* in terms of *eros*. See Heyward, *Touching Our Strength: The Erotic as Power and the Love of God* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1989); McFague, “God as Mother,” *Weaving New Visions*; Woodhead, “Love and Justice,” *Studies in Christian Ethics* 5:1 (1992): 44-61; Rita Brock, *Journeys By Heart: A Christology of Erotic Power* (New York: Crossroad, 1988); Catherine Keller, *From a Broken Web: Separation, Sexism, and Self* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1986).

¹⁶⁹ Martin Luther King, Jr., *King Papers*, Vol. III, 459.

The moral distinction among the three forms of love is fastened in classical christian dualisms between spiritual and material/physical reality, self and other...I am not attempting simply to rearrange the traditional christian categories of love. I am suggesting that these distinctions represent a radical misapprehension of love. The traditional christian understanding of love fails to value adequately the embodied human experience of love among friends and sexual partners *because* it assumes the negative, dangerous, and nonspiritual character of sensual, erotic, and sexual feelings and expressions.¹⁷⁰

Like McFague and others who imagine God in terms of parental models or models of friendship where we learn something of the love of God from our experiences of *philia*, Heyward suggests that our experiences of erotic love reveal something of God's love to us. She argues that "the erotic is our most fully embodied experience of the love of God."¹⁷¹ Similarly, Rita Brock argues that we need to embrace a holistic approach. She uses the metaphor of heart to describe Christian love:

In affirming God/dess as love, I am proposing that we see intimacy as love in its fullest form. In arguing for intimacy, I am planting a theology grounded in a feminist view of love as the basis of all power in human life ... Heart involves the union of body, spirit, reason, and passion through heart knowledge...Heart, used unsentimentally, carries rich connotations; it suggests powerfully the holistic dimensions of self.¹⁷²

In the same vein, womanists often use the language of "passion" to express this holistic understanding of love. Patricia L. Hunter, for example, describes passion as "creative energy" and argues "Passion is more than lust and passion is not genitally focused. Passion consumes our total being—psychological, physical, spiritual, and sexual."¹⁷³ Thus,

¹⁷⁰ Heyward, *Touching our Strength*, 98-99.

¹⁷¹ Ibid., 99.

¹⁷² Brock, *A Christology of Erotic Power*, xii-xiv.

¹⁷³ Hunter, "Women's Power--Women's Passion," *A Troubling in my Soul*, 191-191.

rather than attempt to define Christian love apart from our embodied reality, these feminists and womanists seek to articulate a concept of Christian love that honors our whole being. In doing so, they draw on forms of love often identified as impure or worldly.

Feminist developments of *agape* also move in the direction of being articulated in terms of community. In her reconstruction of *agape* as friendship, Linda Woodhead emphasizes the importance of love being based on the “neighbor’s irreplaceable particularity.”¹⁷⁴ She defines *agape* as “an active desire for the well-being of the neighbour, and for communion with him or her, based on a recognition of the neighbour’s unique worth.”¹⁷⁵ Similarly, Linell E. Cady argues that imagining *agape* as self-sacrifice not only validates oppression but obscures the relational character of love. She argues, rather, that “Love is a mode of relating that seeks to establish bonds between the self and the other, creating a unity out of formerly detached individuals...the wider life created by love constitutes a community of persons.”¹⁷⁶ While she acknowledges that friendship comes closer to accurately describing the character of love as relation, it is ultimately “too restrictive to convey the expanding dynamic of love.”¹⁷⁷ Rather, she imagines love as creating a universal community:

¹⁷⁴ Woodhead, “Love and Justice,” 58.

¹⁷⁵ Ibid, 56.

¹⁷⁶ Linell E. Cady, “Relational Love: A Feminist Christian Vision,” *Embodied Love: Sensuality and Relationship as Feminist Values*, eds. Paula M. Cooley, Sharon A. Farmer, and Mary Ellen Ross (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1987), 141.

¹⁷⁷ Ibid., 143.

Love...is continually seeking to create, deepen, and extend the bonds that unite self and others in more inclusive relationships. By expanding this expansive aim, the goal of love can be depicted more adequately through the paradigm of the universal community in which all being is interrelated in the most inclusive relationship possible...In place of the traditional Christian focus on self-sacrificial love, I have proposed an alternative interpretation of love in which the primary aim is the creation, deepening, and extension of communal life.¹⁷⁸

Harrison also imagines love as a power of activity that creates relationships and community. She writes,

to build up 'the person' is also to deepen relationship, that is, to bring forth community ... Because we do not understand love as the power to act-each-other-into-well-being we also do not understand the depth of our power to thwart life and to maim each other. The fateful choice is ours, either to set free the power of God's love in the world or to deprive each other of the very basis of personhood and community ... The command to love is not now and never was an order *to feel a certain way*. Nor does the command to love create the power to *feel* love, and it was never intended to do so....¹⁷⁹

Unlike traditional understandings of *agape* that position it as distinct from *philia* and *eros*, these feminist reconstructions draw on central elements of *philia* and *eros*, arguing that they are critical to understanding the true nature of *agape*. Rather than *agape* as self-sacrificial, disinterested, detached, and individually oriented, feminists construct an *agape* that is mutual, interested, passionate, and community-oriented. As Keller puts it, "*Agape*—when it has not been dissociated from *eros*—regenerates a common life."¹⁸⁰ Significantly, the traditional conceptions of *agape* assume the separation of theology and culture and church from world. It is as if the mainstream tradition aims to keep Christian

¹⁷⁸ Ibid., 143.

¹⁷⁹ Harrison, *Making the Connections*, 11, 14.

¹⁸⁰ Keller, *On the Mystery*, 116.

love pure and distinct, protecting it from the taint of worldliness. In keeping with their eschatological ethic, however, these feminists call into question the fruitfulness of such a division. Eschewing any separation of Christian love from the realities of world, feminist reconstructions of *agape* attest to the breadth and depth of God's grace, suggesting that there is no limit to God's redemptive powers. In highlighting the worldly character of divine love, feminists speak from an eschatological perspective that trusts in the biblical promise that the whole of creation is included in God's providential plan. It takes seriously the biblical proclamation that rather than being destroyed or created anew in some celestial realm, the new heaven and the new earth descend from heaven to this world. And it anticipates that transformation in the here and now.

C) John Howard Yoder and the Church/World Dualism

One of the most important challenges feminist theologians make with regards to combating the division between public and private and *agape* and *eros* is in relation to the conceptual framework that posits the church and world as separate realms. Fulkerson's work is again instructive here and becomes especially important for engaging Yoder's church/world distinction. She demonstrates that church and world are not only interrelated but thoroughly implicated in one another. In *Places of Redemption: Theology for a Worldly Church*, Fulkerson articulates a "theology of the ordinary" that offers a perceptive critique of the various ways the church/world conception distorts theological efforts. Through her study of the "worldly church" of Good Samaritan United Methodist Church in Durham, NC, she argues that "prominent theological options risk overlooking both the worldly way that communities live out their faith and the worldly

way God is among us.”¹⁸¹ Fulkerson rejects a “trickle down” theory of applied theology in favor of one that attends to the “full bodied” reality of Good Samaritan. Rather, her approach aims to give “full attention to the structure of situation, its shape and its demand, in such a way that the complex of racialized, normalized, and otherwise enculturated bodies and desire are as much a part of the analysis as the presence of biblical and doctrinal elements.”¹⁸² As such, Fulkerson’s study reveals that in practice, actual, lived theology takes quite worldly forms.

This is true not only in the obvious ways that church traditions and practices are conditioned by context and history, but in the ways that the majority of the church’s day to day life involves the ordinary activities of other worldly communities. For example, Fulkerson examines the ecclesial importance of what she calls “homemaking practices.” She argues that these ordinary practices, such as cooking and eating, money-raising, and maintenance/janitorial work, are just as important as more traditional ecclesial practices like Bible study and worship because they maintain and sustain the church community.¹⁸³ Thus, not only does her discussion expand our conception of what ordinary practices count as theological and therefore carry potential public import, Fulkerson points out that what makes these practices distinctively Christian is not their substantive content but the reasons they are done. In other words, these practices are Christian not because they are not worldly but because they have a divine end—the confession of Christ’s revelation and the up-building of the body of Christ.

¹⁸¹ Fulkerson, *Places of Redemption*, 6.

¹⁸² *Ibid.*, 21.

¹⁸³ *Ibid.*, 126.

I will return to each of these dualisms, identifying them as things of old, in the next three chapters. But for now, it is important to note that feminist theologies challenge each of these distinctions for the ways they detract from the flourishing of all of God's good creation. The public/private division seeks to carve out a private realm irrelevant to the issues and concerns of political life. The division between *agape*, *philia*, and *eros* seeks to maintain *agape* as a pure, divine love untainted by the messy realities of embodied life. And the church/world division pretends as though the church is able to separate itself out from the rest of fallen creation. Thankfully, feminist theologies demonstrate not only that these distinctions are things of old preventing the flourishing of all, but that they obscure deep theological insights. As I will argue, these insights prove critical to reaping the full wealth of Niebuhr's, King's, and Yoder's thought, and in particular, their new contributions to political theology. Having briefly introduced these divisions as examples of the eschatological ethic's questioning of received categories and assertion of theology as a cultural and political activity, however, I now return to the remaining elements of an eschatological ethic whose lens enables us to bring these contributions into view.

III. A Normative, Pragmatic Method

The third element of an eschatological ethic involves a normative, pragmatic method that seeks the flourishing of God's good creation. It envisions eschatological ends and creates criteria for evaluating whether various elements of the tradition enliven our attempts to realize that vision. In other words, the criteria enable these theologians to judge the redemptive value of the tradition according to whether it furthers the

eschatological vision of God's reign of justice and peace. Of course, feminist, womanist, *mujerista*, and Latina theologians do not have a monopoly on normative visions and pragmatic methods, but they embrace both of these as part of their method in a self-conscious way. As Janet Soskice points out, "Feminist writings present a challenge to traditional theology...questioning its neutrality, and deliberately combining advocacy with scholarship. They raise the question as to whether all theology does not involve advocacy, with feminist practitioners simply being honest about it."¹⁸⁴ In their transparent embrace of theology as advocacy, feminist, womanist, *mujerista*, and Latina theologians take as primary the effort to anticipate and participate in God's eschatological activity. In this sense, they place front and center the ethical ramifications of theological endeavors, whole-heartedly embracing the ability of theology to transform current realities.

This method results in feminists' self-conscious understanding of theology as a response to the things of old and an effort to perceive and participate in the new thing that God proclaims God is doing. Ruether, for example, develops a critical principle for feminist theology called "the prophetic principle" to determine which aspects of the tradition are redemptive when it comes to the full human flourishing of women and should therefore be retrieved and which elements are not and should therefore be discarded.¹⁸⁵ The four themes of the prophetic principle are: 1) God's defense of the oppressed, 2) a critique of the dominant system, 3) a vision of a new age in which justice reigns, and 4) a critique of ideology. By evaluating theological thinking according to its

¹⁸⁴ Soskice, "General Introduction," *Feminism and Theology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 7.

¹⁸⁵ Ruether, *Sexism and God-Talk*, 22-23.

impact on women's well-being and human flourishing, Ruether not only puts forward a normative understanding of human flourishing, she embraces a pragmatic method that self-consciously acknowledges the political import of all theological thinking.

More recently, Fulkerson has turned to practical theology and developed this feminist sensibility of attending to the things of old with an approach that characterizes "theology as response to a wound."¹⁸⁶ This approach holds that rather than emerging from nowhere, theological thinking begins in a very concrete way as a response to a particular problem that begs our attention:

theology reflection does not begin with a full-blown doctrine of God or of the church. Such a method misses that strange, often unremarked thing that *compels* a theological response—how it is that theological reasoning is provoked at all...The generative process of theological understanding is a process provoked, not confined to preconceived, fixed categories. Rather...creative thinking originates at the scene of a wound. Wounds generate new thinking...Like a wound, theological thinking is generated by a sometimes inchoate sense that something *must* be addressed.¹⁸⁷

Theology, then, is meant to locate a wound, and, ideally, to promote healing. Or in the language of an eschatological ethic, we might say that theology is meant to identify the things of old that become obstacles to our experience of redemption and perceive the new things in the process of coming about.

Similarly, in her definition of feminist theology, Serene Jones highlights the centrality of a pragmatic approach. She argues that feminist approaches, "share a common goal, namely, the liberation of women...This commitment is not abstract; it is

¹⁸⁶ Fulkerson, *Places of Redemption*, 12.

¹⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 13-14.

grounded in political movements that actively seek change.”¹⁸⁸ More specifically, feminist theology “takes a special interest in the lives of women, their stories, their hopes, their flourishing and their failures, and their multilayered experiences of oppression...It is a theology that articulates the Christian message in language and actions that seek to liberate women and all persons, a goal that Christian feminists believe cannot be disentangled from the central truth of the Christian faith as a whole.”¹⁸⁹ Jones uses the liberation of women, in ways not unlike Ruether’s “prophetic principle,” as the criterion for determining the redemptive value of church doctrine and practice. Rather than a principle-based approach, Jones asks, “Will [this] view...advance the struggle for women’s empowerment?”¹⁹⁰ When this question is posed with regard to church doctrine, it results in a “remapping” of traditional theological doctrines in light of women’s experience. It leads to questions such as, “What sort of Christian subject would a feminist language of faith create?” and “What happens when the Christian feminist subject is situated in this discourse?”¹⁹¹

Jones herself adopts the strategy of “strategic essentialism.”¹⁹² This position attempts to bridge essentialism, which argues that a set of common essences or inherent characteristics define women’s nature, and constructivism, which highlights the role that cultural, social, and political forces play in shaping women’s identity. As she defines it,

¹⁸⁸ Jones, *Feminist Theory and Christian Theology*, 3.

¹⁸⁹ Ibid., 11.

¹⁹⁰ Ibid., 44.

¹⁹¹ Ibid., 61.

¹⁹² Ibid., 42.

“This in-between position applauds constructivist critiques of gender but feels nervous about giving up universals (or essences) altogether. While its proponents respect the hard questions posed by the debate, they believe that the divide between essentialists and constructivists fails to capture the complexity of daily experience.”¹⁹³ For feminists who want both to create social change and to challenge oppressive essentialisms by exposing the constructed aspects of identity, it is difficult to identify exclusively with either camp. The position of strategic essentialism, however, is “‘pragmatist’ or ‘functionalist,’ because its uses ‘practical effect’ as the measure of theory.”¹⁹⁴ Jones evaluates whether to accept essentialist understandings of women’s nature by asking, “Will their view of women’s nature advance the struggle for women’s empowerment?”¹⁹⁵ As Jones notes, the strategic essentialist’s task is complex because in answering this question she must make strong normative judgments.¹⁹⁶ While navigating this position poses challenges to any feminist thinker, Jones notes that feminist theologians have more experience in doing so. “Feminist theologians are ‘feminism’s oldest and most experienced strategic essentialists because in the pulpit revelatory truth and prophetic critique are required side by side.”¹⁹⁷ They want to recognize both human finitude and the power of sin as well as the remaking

¹⁹³ Ibid., 44.

¹⁹⁴ Ibid., 44.

¹⁹⁵ Ibid., 44.

¹⁹⁶ Ibid., 45.

¹⁹⁷ Ibid., 54.

potential of grace.¹⁹⁸ Expressed in terms of an eschatological ethic, they want to both recognize the things of old and be attentive to the new things God is doing.

Similarly, Tanner adopts a pragmatic approach in relation to the goals of feminist theologies themselves, arguing that feminist theologians should choose the very elements of tradition that they want to engage according to their “important strategic value” and their “practical potential.”¹⁹⁹ Drawing on a political understanding of culture and her view of theology as a cultural activity, Tanner argues for “the strategic importance for feminist theology of remaining traditional.”²⁰⁰ She suggests that feminist theologians can most effectively challenge patriarchal uses of the tradition by reconstructing the very doctrines at the center of the tradition:

as many elements as possible from patriarchal discourse should be rearticulated to a feminist purpose. That is the only way to keep feminist theology from being classified as a marginal, fringe movement. The more that feminist theologians use for their own purposes the cultural elements that have been appropriated by patriarchal interests, the greater the feminist claim on theological credibility, and the harder it is for the feminist agenda to be dismissed by those committed to the dominant patriarchal organization of theological discourse. Such a procedure establishes feminists as serious participants in theological discourse; it establishes their right to be talked to rather than about.²⁰¹

Tanner employs this strategy in her own theological work. For example, the traditional understanding of belief in a transcendent creator God features prominently in Tanner’s discussion of reflective cultures, or cultures where “transformations are promoted by

¹⁹⁸ Ibid., 53.

¹⁹⁹ Tanner, *The Politics of God*, 31.

²⁰⁰ Tanner, “New Social Movements,” *Horizons*, 192.

²⁰¹ Ibid., 189.

reflection on principles or standards of procedure, and in that way produce a self-critical culture.”²⁰² She argues that reflective cultures, because they are marked by “deliberative reproduction are not simply self-transformative; they are self-critical.”²⁰³ Because Christian communities have the capacity to be self-critical cultures, Tanner argues that they are capable of interpreting divine transcendence in terms other than orders of creation, natural law, divine mandates, or God’s ordination of human institutions—all interpretations of God’s transcendence that enforce the *status quo*. Tanner shows how divine transcendence can be put to progressive political use by creating a distinction between divine and human realms that encourages criticism of natural and social orders with reference to the divine. As she puts it, divine transcendence “permits a view from a distance,” and “this reflection upon natural and social orders potentially involves their criticism.”²⁰⁴ Thus, Tanner demonstrates that by strategically choosing a traditional doctrine, such as divine transcendence, feminist theologians can recalibrate doctrines once put to patriarchal use, putting them towards a more redemptive purpose.

Womanist theologians also exhibit an eschatological ethic in their methods, which seek to challenge oppressive modes of thought and approaches to problems. Womanist methods aim to break free from stagnating or oppressive categories and methods of the past to signal new possibilities for the future. As Stacy M. Floyd-Thomas argues, “As intellectual revolutionaries, womanist scholars undertake praxis that liberates theory from

²⁰² Tanner, *The Politics of God*, 42.

²⁰³ *Ibid.*, 46.

²⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, 67.

its captivity to the intellectual frames and cultural values of those which cause and perpetuate the marginalization of Black women ... Womanist theological reflection created frames of thinking and ways of being that took Black women being agents of their own destiny as the norm.”²⁰⁵ The language of revolutionaries suggests that womanism challenges the *status quo* and aims to liberate black women from the traditional and confining categories of thought that render them invisible. The womanist response is to give birth to new, creative forms of thought that stand in opposition to conformity. Womanist thought seeks not to fit the current mold but to fashion new shapes and modes of thinking. As Emilie Townes argues “Womanist reflection encourages creativity rather than conformity in proposing solutions to evil and suffering.”²⁰⁶ Although it may at times appear that womanists reject past tradition altogether in their efforts to create anew, this is not the case. The role of memory and remembering is central to this process. As Monica Coleman puts it, “Womanist religious scholars want to unearth the hidden voices in history, scripture, and the experiences of contemporary marginalized African American women to discover fragments that can create a narrative for the present and future... ‘Making a way out of no way’ is not just the memory and repetition of the past. We make our way forward in creative ways by remembering and repeating the best aspects of the past.”²⁰⁷ Rather than rejecting tradition, then, womanists regard the past as critical for the reconstruction of new modes of thought. In Coleman’s words, “The past is an active participant in calling the present world toward creative

²⁰⁵ Floyd-Thomas, *Deeper Shades of Purple*, 2-3; italics mine.

²⁰⁶ Townes, *A Troubling in My Soul*, 9.

²⁰⁷ Coleman, *Making a Way*, 7, 107.

transformation.”²⁰⁸ In challenging traditional methods and approaches to theology, womanist theologians thus take on the pragmatic goal of both dismantling the structures of harmful thought that perpetuate black women’s marginalization and reconfiguring resources from the past. They take the things of old and rearrange and revivify them to suit current, redemptive purposes.

Mujerista and Latina theological methods also espouse an eschatological vision and practical strategies. Isasi-Díaz, for example, describes *mujerista* theology as a *proyecto histórico*, or historical project, which refers to “our liberation and the historical specifics needed to attain it.”²⁰⁹ She makes clear that *mujerista* theology not only offers a blueprint of that eschatological vision but constitutes the strategy needed to work for the justice present in that eschatological vision: “The articulation of Latinas’ *proyecto histórico* presented here is not only an explanation but also a strategy: it aims to help shape Latinas’ understandings in our day-to-day struggle to survive, and our identity as a community. This articulation springs from our lived-experience and is a prediction of ‘our hopes and dreams toward survival,’ of our *lucha*—struggle.”²¹⁰ She goes on to describe this strategy in eschatological terms:

Liberation is the realization of our *proyecto histórico*, which we are always seeking to make a reality, while accepting that its fullness will be never be accomplished in history. Liberation is realized in concrete events which at the same time points to a more comprehensive and concrete realization...Historical events are never clearly nor completely the fulfillment of the kin-dom of God, but they...are ‘eschatological glimpses,’ part of the unfolding of the kin-dom which we do not make happen but which requires us to take responsibility for making

²⁰⁸ Ibid., 169.

²⁰⁹ Isasi-Díaz, *En la Lucha*, 52.

²¹⁰ Ibid., 52.

justice a reality in our world...*Mujerista* theology insists on and aids Latinas in defining our preferred future: What will a radically different society look like? What will be its values and norms?...this means that *mujerista* theology enables Hispanic women to understand the centrality of eschatology in the life of every Christian.”²¹¹

Like womanists, who emphasize the importance of the past in constructing these new futures, Isasi-Díaz affirms the value of past tradition in envisioning a redemptive future. “We certainly reject any and all regurgitation of the past,” she writes, “but reflexive use of the past is an important method in *mujerista* theology.”²¹² Importantly, despite affirming the importance of *lo cotidiano* and all the differences it brings to the fore, Isasi-Díaz insists on the “need for shared agendas and strategies” in the struggle for justice.²¹³

Similarly, Aquino describes Latina theology as putting forward both an eschatological vision and the means to strive for its partial realization in history. She argues that “Latina feminist theology expresses, in religious language, our commitment and vision ‘of a new model of society and of civilization free of systematic injustice and violence due to patriarchal domination. It seeks to affirm new paradigm of social relationships that are capable to fully sustain human dignity and the integrity of creation.’”²¹⁴ Echoing womanist appeals to creative activity, she describes Latina feminist theology as “an attempt to grasp the *re-creating* work of the Spirit that activates the

²¹¹ Ibid., 53, 63.

²¹² Isasi-Díaz, *Mujerista Theology*, 72.

²¹³ Ibid., 71.

²¹⁴ Aquino, “Latina Feminist Theology,” *A Reader in Latina Feminist Theology*, 139.

strength, word, memory, and liberating struggles of women.”²¹⁵ Thus, like the normative, pragmatic approaches of feminist theologians, these womanist, *mujerista*, and Latina theologians seek to discern the new things inaugurated by God.

IV. Theological Anthropology and Creativity: The Relationship between Divine and Human Agency

In addition to these three elements of an eschatological ethic, feminists offer a particular conception of human agency and its relationship to God’s agency. Drawing on a picture of God as Creator, their theological anthropologies often invoke the creation of human beings in the *imago Dei* to emphasize human beings’ own creative capacities. Such an account construes human moral agency in terms of creativity. This component of the eschatological ethic imagines human beings as partners with God, as co-creators in God’s ongoing creative activity. This account is empowering in the sense that it points to human beings’ dignity and moral responsibility, but it does so within the proper limits that recognize God as ultimate Creator and human beings as God’s creatures.

Tanner, for example, espouses this conception of human and divine agency. In her *The Politics of God: Christian Theologies and Social Justice*, this understanding of human beings and their moral activity proves central to her account of how “Christian beliefs about God and the world may be tangled from a history of use in support of a *status quo* of injustice and reconstituted as a resource for commitment to progressive

²¹⁵ Aquino, *Our Cry For Life*, 3. *italics mine*.

social change.”²¹⁶ As we have seen, Tanner notes that Christian beliefs about God as transcendent creator carry “ambiguous potential,”²¹⁷ that these beliefs can just as easily give rise to understandings of God’s relationship to the world that emphasize immutability of order and support the *status quo* such as those offered in accounts of orders of creation, the natural law tradition, and theories of divine mandate.²¹⁸ But Tanner affirms the potential of Christian belief to inform sociopolitical critique in an account of “God’s Universal Providential Agency,” which holds that “God is bringing about God’s intentions for human affairs, and indeed for the whole world, by working in and through all human agencies and natural events.”²¹⁹ This account views “God’s all-encompassing providential agency as the creative underpinning of human action.”²²⁰

Central to Tanner’s account is a view of the human being as a creature through whom God works. Such an account bids us to recognize human beings as limited and yet significant. On one hand, it means “one must have the humility to accept oneself as not God. One must honestly acknowledge oneself as a finite creature, limited by circumstances and inherent capacities, unable to stave off moral and intellectual failings in all respects...”²²¹ But it also assigns human beings a special value and worth. It means

²¹⁶ Importantly, Tanner says that “...the normative and constructive project of the book shares a concern of the early Reinhold Niebuhr. The constructive project revolves around the question whether Christian action might not combine ‘a more radical political orientation and more conservative religious convictions than are comprehended in the culture of our age,’” *The Politics of God*, vii-viii.

²¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 76.

²¹⁸ For a discussion of these accounts, see Tanner, *The Politics of God*, 80-98.

²¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 98-99.

²²⁰ *Ibid.*, 78.

²²¹ *Ibid.*, 228.

“one must esteem what one is...the creature in itself is valuable.”²²² One’s identity as a creature of God, therefore, encourages one to have what Tanner calls “non-idolatrous self-esteem.”²²³ Such a posture includes both a sense of one’s limits as a human creature dependent upon God *and* a sense of dignity.

This conception of human beings as both finite and infinitely valuable entails a certain conception of the significance of human moral action. Tanner argues that “...as the creature of God one should feel empowered to act, empowered to take responsibility for oneself. One’s dignity before God, particularly the dignity that comes to one as a participant in God’s providential and salvific plans for the world, should give all parties an indelible sense of themselves as responsible agents.”²²⁴ This account of human beings as valuable by virtue of their status as creatures of God whom God works through in bringing about salvation positions Tanner alongside womanists who affirm their own creative capacities as children of God. The concept of non-idolatrous self-esteem resonates with womanist affirmations of their human dignity by appeal to their creative capacities.

Similarly, Keller describes human beings as collaborators in God’s creativity. Arguing against an understanding of the creation as *creatio ex nihilo*, Keller favors a conception of *creatio ex profundis*. Keller describes this conception of creation as “an open-ended process.”²²⁵ On this picture, human beings participate in the continuing

²²² Ibid., 228.

²²³ Ibid., 228.

²²⁴ Ibid., 233.

²²⁵ Keller, *On the Mystery*, 48.

creation. As Keller argues, “Already in the beginning, we are called to take responsibility for our worlds. In the story, we are created as collaborators in the creativity, in the image of the creator.”²²⁶ As such, she describes human agency in terms of a “creative responsibility,” an “an ability to respond in appreciative relation to others, human and nonhuman.”²²⁷ The relationship between divine and human agency is constituted by “interplay of creaturely and divine passions.”²²⁸

The emphasis that womanist theologians place on creativity in developing their normative, pragmatic methods also puts forward a very particular understanding of the relationship between divine and human agency. Their affirmation of God’s role and purpose in creating the universe and intending its final redemption results in a theological anthropology of human beings as co-creators and understands human agency as a participation in God’s creative agency. Drawing from a picture of God as Creator, womanists affirm that all humans are created in God’s image and thereby possess their own creative capabilities. Thus, the meaning of the *imago Dei* is expressed in terms of a shared moral agency, a shared capacity to create. Expressing this creativity enables one to affirm one’s dignity as a human being created in the image of God in situations where others deny that dignity. Significantly, womanists attend to the role of the whole person in the role of creator. It is not as though human beings can create solely with their minds or capacity for rationality, but that the process of creation calls on all of our mental, spiritual, and emotional resources. Drawing from Carter Heyward’s emphasis on *eros*,

²²⁶ Ibid., 59.

²²⁷ Ibid., 66.

²²⁸ Ibid., 94.

some womanists use the language of “passion” to express this holistic understanding of how human beings contribute to the processes of creation. Patricia L. Hunter, for example, describes passion as “creative energy” and argues the passion involved in the act of creation “consumes our total being—psychological, physical, spiritual, and sexual.”²²⁹ Here there is no separation of *philia* and *eros* from *agape*, but rather an acknowledgement that all forms of love partake of each other, that our entire being is involved in the struggle for justice and human flourishing.

Not surprisingly then, both womanists and feminists draw on artistic metaphors to express this sense of moral action. Womanists often describe their method in terms of artistic or creative activities, emphasizing the ability to create a future of wholeness out of the fragments and damages of the past. Delores Williams describes her method with the analogy of creating mosaics: “As black women retrieving our experience from ‘invisibility,’ each of us retrieves...partial facts...and partial visions of missing parts of our experience...our womanist work together is to connect these pieces of fact and vision. Like a mosaic, these ‘colored pieces’ will eventually make many designs of black women’s experience.”²³⁰ Similarly, Cheryl A. Kirk-Duggan describes womanist methods through the metaphor of quilting. “This one clear trajectory for *Womanist theory*,” she writes, “wherein we quilt complex relationships creatively toward wholeness, then becomes a witness to the awesomeness of God, the power of Creation, the gift of life, and the honor of doing this work.”²³¹ Coleman, describes her method as braiding: “The

²²⁹ Hunter, “Women’s Power--Women’s Passion,” *A Troubling in My Soul*, 191.

²³⁰ Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness*, 12.

²³¹ Kirk-Duggan, “Quilting Relations with Creation,” in Floyd-Thomas, *Deeper Shades of Purple*, 189.

constructive work here feels like braiding hair. I'm pulling together different strands of conversations, scholarship, stories, and experiences into a unity."²³² Each of these metaphors showcases the centrality of creativity to womanist thought. The mosaic and quilting metaphors suggest the possibility of taking ugly, un-useable scraps and rendering them into a beautiful piece of art. Braiding demonstrates our intricate inter-relatedness. Each takes individual people, fabrics, or fragments of the truth and creates of them something beautiful and whole. Similarly, Tanner draws on artistic metaphors for human agency. She employs the analogy of acting in a theatre production: "Social roles and the prejudiced perception of others...cannot destroy one's sense of oneself as an actor on the stage of one's own life."²³³ These artistic metaphors aim to convey both one's sense of dignity as a creature of God and one's agency as an active participation in God's creative activity. Thus, we might imagine these endeavors as taking the things of old and piecing them together toward new, redemptive purposes.

Similarly, *mujerista* and Latina theologians emphasize human moral agency as a participation in God's creative, redemptive activity. Like these womanist and feminist theologians who appeal to the *imago Dei* as the source of human dignity, *mujerista* and Latina theologians place human dignity at the center of their understandings of moral agency. Isasi-Díaz writes, "*Mujeristas* believe that in Latinas, though not exclusively so, God chooses once again to lay claim to the divine image and likeness made visible from the very beginning in women. *Mujeristas* are called to bring to birth new women and new

²³² Coleman, *Making a Way*, x.

²³³ Tanner, *The Politics of God*, 233.

men...knowing that such work requires the denunciation of all destructive senses of self-abnegation.”²³⁴ We saw already that Latina theologies take as their premise the necessity of representing and advocating for actual historical and ecclesial subjects, but Aquino also describes these subjects’ moral agency in terms of response and participation in God’s creative agency. She argues that “the primary identity of Latino/a theology comes from its way of welcoming and co-responding to the mystery of God in our lives.”²³⁵ She describes this co-responding in terms of creative, theological activity. “The only road still open for us is the creation of new ways of thinking founded not on abstract theories but on the real life of our faith communities.”²³⁶ The new things become central, then, for each tradition of feminist thought in their understandings of human dignity and moral agency.

V. The Redemptive Nature of Creative Activity

The final element of an eschatological ethic is an understanding of one’s participation in God’s creativity activity as redemptive. “Mainstream” theologians often imagine the feminist emphasis on contesting received categories, their acknowledgment of theology as cultural and political activity, their pragmatic methods, and their understanding of human agency as a participation in God’s creative activity as marginal to traditional theological enterprises at best, or destructive of it, at worst. But, as I have been arguing, feminist, womanist, *mujerista*, and Latina theologians seek rather to

²³⁴ Isasi-Díaz, *Mujerista Theology*, 62.

²³⁵ Aquino, *Our Cry For Life*, 39.

²³⁶ *Ibid.*, 13.

identify and participate in God's eschatological promise of redemption. This becomes clear when one sees how these theologians identify their pragmatic methods and the creativity of human agency with redemption.

Most feminist theologians describe redemption, in part, in terms of human participation in God's creative agency. In particular, liberation from oppressive elements of the tradition as well as oppressive societal structures constitutes redemption for feminist theologians. They imagine their creative, constructive theological work as pointing to and participating in God's redemptive activity. Ruether insists that we must appropriate the past to point to new futures. This is the very purpose of discerning a liberative norm from the Bible itself to create the prophetic principle with which the text can be evaluated for its redemptive value. Her creative reinterpretation of Jesus' crucifixion as the "kenosis of patriarchy" also takes part in this creative re-working of traditional theological doctrines. She understands Jesus as a liberator, who through the incarnation relinquishes power and thereby announces a new way of living that rejects the hierarchical patterns of life that oppress the powerless in society. Furthermore, Christ's manifestation of the kenosis of patriarchy not only points to a future free of patriarchy but renders Christ's action continuous in the present. As we saw, Jones also uses the liberation of women as the criterion for determining the redemptive value of church doctrine and practice. She uses this criterion to distinguish between the church as a "graced community" and the church as a "sinful community." Acknowledging this distinction between the empirical and normative church, Jones is able to construct an

understanding of the church that holds both its identities in “eschatological tension.”²³⁷

Furthermore, Fulkerson’s reconstruction of Christian practices to include homemaking practices serves the redemptive purpose of creating “a shared space of appearance” where people very different from one another engage ‘the other.’²³⁸ As Fulkerson notes, “although these practices are ordinary, daily activities, they are likely to have kinds of social alterations... They brought people together in a variety of settings that contravened many of their inherited racialized enculturations... Complete obliviousness to the marked ‘Other’ was not an option.”²³⁹ In a sense, then, by engaging in these Christian practices, by exercising one’s agency in this way, one participates in the “new thing” that God announces God is doing.

Although womanists refer to redemption not in terms of liberation, but survival, their accounts also draw heavily on God’s creative activity as a transformative, redemptive power. Womanists often express their concept of salvation survival with the reality of “making a way out of no way.” As Coleman argues, womanist views of salvation “draw from black women’s past cultural experiences and the creative ways by which they have survived and incorporated their experiences to make it thus far.”²⁴⁰ The idea of making a way out of no way expresses the ways in which black women survive death-dealing situations and continue to seek “survival, quality of life, and wholeness” in this life.²⁴¹ In

²³⁷ Jones, *Feminist Theory and Christian Theology*, 159.

²³⁸ Fulkerson, *Places of Redemption*, 21.

²³⁹ *Ibid.*, 154.

²⁴⁰ Coleman, *Making a Way*, 32.

²⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 31.

her reading of the Hagar story, for example, Williams invokes God's creation of human beings in the divine image and black women's status as co-creators with God. She describes God as a fellow artist who helps black women create their own means of survival. God provides to Hagar "*new vision* to see survival resources where she saw none before," but Hagar herself...crafts the means of her survival."²⁴² Salvation is thus imagined in terms of black women's creative capacities and their "relationship with a God who 'makes a way out of no way.'"²⁴³ Thus, despite their different understandings of redemption, a variety of both womanists and feminists suggest that construing human agency as a participation in the creative agency of God takes on redemptive value and content.

Mujerista and Latina theologies combine both the womanist emphasis on survival and the feminist understanding of salvation as liberation. As Isasi-Díaz puts it, "*mujerista* theology is part of the struggle for survival, the struggle for liberation...for Latinas in the USA to struggle is to live, la vida es la lucha."²⁴⁴ Perhaps even more important, she describes survival and liberation in terms of creative activity, saying that *mujerista* theology "insists that liberation is not something one person can give another but that it is a process in which the oppressed are protagonists, participants in creating a reality different from the present oppressive one."²⁴⁵ Indeed, creating a reality different from the present figures centrally in each of these accounts of God's redemptive activity.

²⁴² Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness*, 198.

²⁴³ Coleman, *Making a Way*, 12.

²⁴⁴ Isasi-Díaz, *Mujerista Theology*, 82.

²⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 1.

VI. Conclusion

What then is an eschatological ethic? In its traditional explication, eschatology refers to the end things, things God will bring about at the end of the current age. As Keller notes, a number of scholars distinguish between “prophetic eschatology” which imagines human beings as involved in the process of preparing this creation for its redemption, and “apocalyptic eschatology” which imagines rather that this world is done away with by God and simply replaced with a new one.²⁴⁶ My own understanding of eschatology espouses the “more political and worldly eschatology of the prophets.”²⁴⁷ This eschatology draws on the image of the new creation to fund its ethic. But it rejects the apocalyptic idea that the current creation is destroyed and simply replaced by an otherworldly one sent down from the heavens. Rather, it embraces an already/not yet conception that sees the new things emerging amidst the old in *this* world. Thus, my account of eschatology as a central part of the feminist, womanist, *mujerista*, and Latina agenda, points not only to the last things but to the current things. It aims to perceive and participate in God’s redemptive activity in the present world. As such, it seeks to distinguish the things of old, those ideas, concepts, or practices that detract from God’s salvific purposes, from the new things, those ideas, concepts, or practices that point to an eschatological vision of justice and peace where all of God’s good creation flourishes. I

²⁴⁶ Keller, *Apocalypse Then and Now: A Feminist Guide to the End of the World* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1996), 21.

²⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 22.

have described this ethic as consisting of five parts and as present across the diverse spectrum of feminist, womanist, *mujerista*, and Latina thought.

As such, this ethic resists what Keller refers to as the “binary habit” of apocalyptic eschatology.²⁴⁸ Rather than seeing reality in terms of an either/or, it challenges those distinctions or categories—such as public and private, *agape* and *eros*, church and world—that imagine God’s redemptive powers are not present in certain realms or are more closely aligned with others. Rather than rejecting tradition, it takes the received categories of the past and rejuvenates them, remaining self-critical and open to ever new theological, and therefore cultural and political, arrangements and meanings. In other words, it is an ethic that attempts to produce wholeness out of fragments, new life in situations where death abounds. It creates a vision of God’s eschatological purposes and develops criteria to determine the redemptive value of theological tradition accordingly. It understands human agency as participation in God’s creative agency, identifying various forms of creative action as a challenge to the *status quo*. Finally, it names this participation in God’s agency as redemptive. Abiding by an eschatological ethic entails openness to and participation in unforeseen possibilities of communion, reconciliation, and redemption that—however fleeting or fragmentary—are perceived in the here and now.

Having identified this eschatological ethic, we can now turn to the thought of Niebuhr, King, and Yoder in an effort to perceive the new thing God might be doing through their thought. Once we look past the things of old that obstruct their theological

²⁴⁸ Ibid., xiii.

thinking, it becomes clear that Niebuhr, King, and Yoder have new insights to offer regarding the church's political vocation—insights that extend beyond the justification of force, the embrace of nonviolence, and the espousal of pacifism, respectively.

CHAPTER THREE: REINHOLD NIEBUHR AND THE CHURCH AS A SELF-CRITICAL CULTURE

I. Introduction: Niebuhr and the Feminist Tradition

Reinhold Niebuhr is not exactly known for his feminist credentials, nor for having a robust ecclesiology. If one were to ask a roomful of theologians and ethicists to explicate Niebuhr's understanding of the church's political vocation, the question might be met with a confused silence. In fact, according to prominent figures in Protestant social ethics, it is impossible to even conduct a study on Niebuhr's understanding of the church. One of the most common criticisms of Niebuhr holds that, although Niebuhr pays significant attention to the relationship between the Christian tradition and the political realm, he altogether lacks an ecclesiology.²⁴⁹ Just as these critics accuse Niebuhr of attending to the public realm at the expense of the church, a number of feminist theologians, as we saw in Chapter Two, take Niebuhr to task for what they see as a problematic division between public and private realms, a division that identifies love as the appropriate norm for private life and justice for the public realm.²⁵⁰ Similarly, some feminists claim that

²⁴⁹ John Howard Yoder, Stanley Hauerwas, and William Cavanaugh, among others, make this claim. See Yoder, "Reinhold Niebuhr and Christian Pacifism," *Menmonite Quarterly Review* Vol. XXIX (April 1955), 115; Hauerwas, *The Hauerwas Reader* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2001), 59-60; and Cavanaugh, "Church," *The Blackwell Companion to Political Theology*, eds. Peter Scott and William T. Cavanaugh (Malden, Mass.: Blackwell Publishing Ltd., 2004), 393-406. Gary Dorrien points out in his recent treatment of Niebuhr that this is certainly not a new claim. Protestant leaders who made these claims include Norman Thomas, John Haynes Holmes, Robert Calhoun, Henry Van Dusen, Francis Pickens Miller, and Charles Gilkey. See *Social Ethics in the Making: Interpreting an American Tradition* (Malden, Mass.: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), 238. Interestingly, Wendy Dackson has recently argued that Niebuhr espoused an "outsider ecclesiology." While her argument nicely attends to Niebuhr's criticisms of the church as an institution, it neglects his substantive, albeit not well-developed, statements about the church's identity. See "Reinhold Niebuhr's 'Outsider Ecclesiology,'" *Reinhold Niebuhr and Contemporary Politics: God and Power*, eds. Richard Harries and Stephen Platten (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 87-101.

²⁵⁰ For an excellent discussion of these feminist criticisms, see Rebekah Miles, *The Bonds of Freedom: Feminist Theology and Christian Realism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001.

Niebuhr's distinction between the "moral" individual and "immoral" society underestimates the moral potential of religious communities.²⁵¹ And plenty of other critics cast doubt on the potential of Niebuhr's thought to support positive, progressive social change.

These critics each possess a particular view of Niebuhr and the tradition of Christian realism that he represents. These views depict a Niebuhr more interested in Western Civilization than God, more interested in responsibility than peace, more interested in justice than the possibilities of love, and more interested in the *status quo* than genuinely transformative political change. For these critics, Christian realism is less about human possibilities and creative moral action and more about limits, sin, and the necessity of violence.

Truth be told, Niebuhr often provides ample evidence to confirm these views. But these critics overlook important elements of Niebuhr's thought. In particular, they overlook aspects of Niebuhr's theological anthropology as well as his reflections on the church. Niebuhr's understanding of human beings as finite creatures inevitably prone to sin is certainly well known, but these scholars (and even Niebuhr himself) often underemphasize his companion claim that affirms human beings' creative capacities for self-transcendence. Nor do they see his potential vision of the church as playing a critical role in cultivating these creative capacities.

Looking at Niebuhr's thought through the lens of an eschatological ethic enables us to see these neglected elements in Niebuhr's thought that carry tremendous import for political theology beyond his admission that state-wielded violence may be necessary to

²⁵¹ See Sharon D. Welch, *A Feminist Ethic of Risk*. Revised edition. Minneapolis, Minn.: Fortress, 2000.

secure proximate justice. Drawing on Kathryn Tanner's claim that Christian beliefs possess the capacity to create self-critical cultures, I develop from Niebuhr's thought a conception of the church as that community receptive to God's judgment which issues forth in hope and transformative practices.²⁵² Tanner's articulation of central elements of an eschatological ethic, including 1) her emphasis on human beings as created in the image of God and therefore a conception of human agency as participation in God's ongoing creative activity, 2) the role of transcendence as a source of challenge to the *status quo* that provides a normative, pragmatic method, and 3) her articulation of justice as the goal of Christian moral action, and, therefore, an understanding of theology as a political activity—brings into relief similar elements in Niebuhr's own work. These emphases in Tanner's work help uncover Niebuhr's reflection on the church, which I will then develop into a vision of the political role of the church as a community of self-criticism, repentance, and transformative action. Importantly, this vision resonates with certain feminist reflections on the church, potentially contributing to an eschatological political theology that draws from both Niebuhr and a variety of feminist sources.

Relying on the elements of the eschatological ethic present in Tanner's work, this chapter first identifies both the old and the new in Niebuhr's thought. It suggests that three old distinctions—between church and public, public and private, and *status quo* and transformation—obscure Niebuhr's contribution to political theology beyond his

²⁵² In addition to their emphasis on divine transcendence, Niebuhr and Tanner are a fitting pair as Tanner's work in *The Politics of God* aims to pursue what Tanner identifies as a Niebuhrian project. She writes that "...the normative and constructive project of the book shares a concern of the early Reinhold Niebuhr. The constructive project revolves around the question whether Christian action might not combine 'a more radical political orientation and more conservative religious convictions than are comprehended in the culture of our age,'" *The Politics of God: Christian Theologies and Social Justice*. Minneapolis, Minn.: Fortress Press, 1992, vii-viii.

reflections on the proper Christian stance towards violence and coercion. It then argues that setting aside the old allows us to see a new vision: the church as a self-critical community with practices of repentance as its most important political practice.

II. Niebuhr Beyond Christian Realism

No one would challenge Niebuhr's theological contributions to politics. He is rightly regarded as one of the foremost theologians and political philosophers of the twentieth-century. Not only a pastor/theologian but a political activist, Niebuhr still enjoys a popularity beyond the theological academy. Groups such as "Atheists for Niebuhr" and President Obama's recent invocations of Niebuhr's thought attest to his influence as a political philosopher. Unlike many theologians, Niebuhr's name and ideas are common currency among anyone conversant with American politics in the twentieth-century. Some may even be able to cite his core claims about love as an "impossible possibility," justice as the "approximation of brotherhood under the conditions of sin," and democracy as "a method of finding proximate solutions for insoluble problems."²⁵³ Even Niebuhr's formulation of the relationship between love and justice points to political realities: the inevitable presence of power struggles and therefore the necessity of violence in political life.

Indeed, as we saw in Chapter One, Niebuhr is well known for his reflection on the relationship between the Christian tradition and the political realm, particularly in relation

²⁵³ See Reinhold Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man, Vol. 2: Human Destiny* (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox Press, 1996 (1941)), 254; and Reinhold Niebuhr, *The Children of Light and the Children of Darkness: A Vindication of Democracy and a Critique of its Traditional Defense* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1960), 118.

to nation states, and specifically their use of force. Niebuhr's work features prominently in most of the anthologies on war and Christian ethics. We saw already in Chapter One, that Richard B. Miller identifies Niebuhr's Christian realism, in part, with "defending the option of some form of coercion." Similarly, Arthur F. Holmes writes in *War and Christian Ethics* that "Niebuhr developed a Christian realism that sees both the natural law's theory's rule of reason and the idealist's rule of love as presently unattainable ideals; it views pacifism as a kind of Renaissance optimism ... Realistically ... Christian love must leaven the evils of this life by means of just laws and, when necessary, by the use of force."²⁵⁴ Departing from this statist framework, Robin Lovin has recently articulated the need to redevelop Christian realism in light of the 'new realities' such as globalization.²⁵⁵ This is certainly an important task. But I want to return, in a sense, to develop Niebuhr's political reflections in relation to an even older trans-national reality—the church—to identify Niebuhr's contributions to political theology in terms of the power that might be present in the church community as it seeks to do a new thing.

III. Old Things: Variations on the Public/Private Divide

Before we can develop Niebuhr's insights on the church's political practice, however, we need to attend to dualisms at work in this thought that obscure his more robust theological contributions. These include divisions between public and private, as well as

²⁵⁴ Holmes, *War and Christian Ethics*, 301.

²⁵⁵ See Robin W. Lovin, *Christian Realism and the New Realities*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008.

a related variation, church and public. Although these dualisms are not as pronounced as the ones I will identify in King and Yoder, they nevertheless contribute to our inability to reap the full wealth of Niebuhr's theological contributions to reflection on the church's political vocation.

A number of feminist critiques challenge the usefulness of Niebuhr's thought as a resource for a political ethic because of a set of problems related to his division between public and private. These criticisms include not only his division between public and private itself, but his use of transcendent norms, the ethical norms pertinent to each realm, as well as his view of the possibility for moral community action.²⁵⁶ Sheila Collins argues that Niebuhr's appeal to an impossible transcendent ideal refuses the possibility of real change within history. She argues that realism posits "a kind of ontological determinism [that] offers no new vision by which to understand reality and therefore no new hope for the oppressed. The result is that Christian realism tends to become the ideology of the establishment masquerading as a universally valid world view."²⁵⁷

Beverly Wildung Harrison offers a related criticism that Niebuhr's appeal to a transcendent norm produces a dualistic ethic that associates justice with the public realm while idealizing the possibilities for love in private life. She writes that Niebuhr "never questioned the dualism embedded in liberal political ideology between the 'private' sphere, that is, the arena of those interpersonal, humane relations of the family, and the 'public' sphere, those 'impersonal relations of institutions and collectivities.'"²⁵⁸

²⁵⁶ See Miles, *The Bonds of Freedom*, 36-43.

²⁵⁷ Sheila D. Collins, *A Different Heaven and Earth* (Valley Forge, Pa.: Judson Press, 1974), 157-58.

²⁵⁸ Harrison, *Making the Connections*, 27-28.

Similarly, Rosemary Radford Ruether argues that, according to Niebuhr's dichotomy, "Love morality is 'unrealistic' in the public sphere. Here the only possible morality is that of a 'justice' defined as a balancing of competitive egoism...Morality is privatized, sentimentalized, and identified with the 'feminine' in a way that both conceals the essential immorality of sexism and rationalizes a value-free public world."²⁵⁹ Finally, Daphne Hampson argues that sacrificial love is "a moral norm relevant to interpersonal (particularly family) relations, and significant for parents (particularly mothers, heroes, and saints), but scarcely applicable to the power relations of modern industry."²⁶⁰ Each of these thinkers casts significant doubt on whether Niebuhr's thought can contribute to a political theology that feminists would find palatable, much less progressive.²⁶¹

Add to these criticisms a related one from a variety of Protestant thinkers who argue that Niebuhr's thought exhibits a different kind of division between public and private—one that prioritizes the public realm at the expense of the church. Although these critics do not explicitly make this claim, their criticism implies that it is almost as if Niebuhr positions the public as the only politically important realm and thereby positions the church in the private realm, a realm irrelevant to politics. In fact, so strong is the affiliation of Niebuhr with expounding the relevance of Christianity to the formal governmental structures of the state, that many scholars claim he neglects the church

²⁵⁹ Rosemary Radford Ruether, *New Woman, New Earth: Sexist Ideologies and Human Liberation* (New York: Seabury Press, 1975), 199.

²⁶⁰ Hampson, *Theology and Feminism*, 126.

²⁶¹ I am indebted to Miles' discussion of these feminist criticisms in *The Bonds of Freedom: Feminist Theology and Christian Realism*. According to Miles, these criticisms "overdraw Niebuhr's distinction between public and private life," 40. She also "disagrees with the charge that Niebuhr's transcendent norm leads to a pessimistic support of the *status quo*. He notes again and again the transformative possibilities of an appeal to transcendent norms," 43.

altogether. Recent articulations of this claim appear in the work of John Howard Yoder, Stanley Hauerwas, and William T. Cavanaugh. Yoder claims that Niebuhr omits central theological doctrines such as revelation, regeneration, the Holy Spirit, and the church: "...the concept of the church," he writes, "is quite absent from his thought; when he mentions the word 'church' it is only to criticize the medieval synthesis of Catholicism."²⁶² Similarly, Hauerwas argues that "For Niebuhr and the social gospelers the subject of Christian ethics was America."²⁶³ And William T. Cavanaugh states that "Ecclesiology is simply absent from Niebuhr's political theology."²⁶⁴ For each of these thinkers, Niebuhr is more political philosopher than theologian because he is so devoted to applying the insights of the Christian tradition to the public realm that he effectively renders the church private and therefore politically irrelevant. Indeed, as they claim, it is not just that the church becomes politically irrelevant in this thought, but that it is non-existent.

To these two categories of criticisms, add another: Niebuhr tends toward a conservative defense of the *status quo* rather than supporting social and political transformation. As we have just seen in feminist critiques of Niebuhr's appeal to a transcendent norm, feminists often make this very claim. Harrison argues that realists' "pessimism about the inevitability of human power struggles finally denies 'the particularity of historical process and the shifting history of institutions largely drops out

²⁶² Yoder, "Reinhold Niebuhr and Christian Pacifism," 115-116.

²⁶³ Hauerwas, *The Hauerwas Reader*, 59-60.

²⁶⁴ Cavanaugh, "Church," *The Blackwell Companion to Political Theology*, 393-406.

of the picture.”²⁶⁵ Sharon Welch characterizes Niebuhr’s serenity prayer that asks “for courage to change what I can, the serenity to accept what I cannot change, and the wisdom to know the difference” as “comfortable.”²⁶⁶ Even Tanner, whom we will turn to for critical insights to access the full potential of Niebuhr’s thought, suggests that “Niebuhr’s own shift from socialist to official establishment theologian demonstrates...a tendency to drift from a radical politics to a qualified affirmation of the *status quo*.”²⁶⁷ Here the divide is one between stasis and transformation, and each of these feminist critics suggests that Niebuhr tends toward the former.

But others join the chorus. Carol Polsgrove argues that “no one better exemplifies the caution that northern white intellectuals displayed toward desegregation” than Niebuhr.²⁶⁸ She puts the matter starkly: “If Reinhold Niebuhr was not ready to speak on behalf of the Negro South, what white man was likely to?... Yet, when the question was called, he stepped back—counseled restraint, patience, and wondered if the Brown decision, provoking resistance, had not made things worse.”²⁶⁹ Similarly, in a discussion of Niebuhr’s critique of the social gospel, Christopher Lasch argues, “Eager to make the point that ‘sentimentality is a poor weapon against cynicism,’ he said too much about sentimentality and too little about cynicism.”²⁷⁰ Charles Mathewes notes that in the eyes

²⁶⁵ Harrison, *Making the Connections*, 59.

²⁶⁶ Welch, *A Feminist Ethic of Risk*, 37.

²⁶⁷ Tanner, *The Politics of God*, ix-x.

²⁶⁸ Carol Polsgrove, *Divided Minds: Intellectuals and the Civil Rights Movement* (New York: Norton, 2001), 42.

²⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 47.

of critics who make such claims, Niebuhr “treated hope almost as an anesthetic, like a scotch at the end of a hard day at work,” and that “‘Christian realism’ has sometimes confused reality with the *status quo*, and has hence been too resigned to the way the world presently is.”²⁷¹ As Polsgrove’s critique indicates, critics who describe Niebuhr as conservative often point to his embrace of gradualism during the civil rights movement. Like feminist critics who doubt the potential of Niebuhr’s ethic to inspire political and social change, these thinkers worry that Christian realism counsels caution, restraint, pessimism, and therefore endorses the *status quo* rather than prompting progressive political change. What are we to make of these claims? Does his thought posit a division between a public realm of justice and a private realm of love? Is it indeed the case that Niebuhr lacks an ecclesiology? Is it true that Niebuhr’s appeal to a transcendent norm sanctions current norms and prevents social change, tying Christian realism to an inevitable support of the *status quo*?

IV. Niebuhr and an Eschatological Ethic

In this section, I argue that these criticisms, though warranted at times, do not do full justice to Niebuhr’s thought. In other words, there is truth to claims that suggest Niebuhr posits a harmful division between public and private and attends to the political realm at the expense of the church. In this sense, these distinctions are old things in that they obscure Niebuhr’s emphasis on the new. But it is also the case that at times, critics’

²⁷⁰ Christopher Lasch, *The True and Only Heaven: Progress and its Critics* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1991), 379.

²⁷¹ Charles Mathewes, *A Theology of Public Life* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 239-240.

attention to these categories itself becomes part of the old, preventing them from seeing a new Niebuhr. As Miles indicates, these feminist criticisms of Niebuhr's division between public and private life do not attend carefully enough to Niebuhr's claims about the importance of love in the public realm and the need for justice in the family.²⁷² It may be the case, as she argues, that "Niebuhr's focus on the transcendent norm as expressed in the suffering love of the cross raises problems for feminists," but this does not render Niebuhr altogether useless to feminists.²⁷³ Similarly, it may be true that Niebuhr does not view the distinctiveness of the church in terms of a unique moral capacity as Yoder, Hauerwas, and Cavanaugh do; but this does not mean Niebuhr lacks an ecclesiology altogether. Furthermore, although Niebuhr does tend toward a pessimism that seems conservative at times, he violates his own thought when he does this.²⁷⁴ At these points, he overemphasizes human finitude and sin while underemphasizing capacities for self-transcendence and freedom. Indeed, Niebuhr's pessimism about progress violates his own convictions about human freedom, the creative capacities of human beings, and the role of church in cultivating hope and enacting transformation. As Lovin reminds us, "The Christian Realist is not an inherently conservative creature...The Christian Realist has no *a priori* commitment to the particular set of social, political, and economic forces that proved decisive in the situations that Reinhold Niebuhr analyzed."²⁷⁵ To underscore Lovin's point, I hope to show that viewing Niebuhr's thought the lens of an

²⁷² See Miles, *The Bonds of Freedom*, 40-43.

²⁷³ *Ibid.*, 43.

²⁷⁴ I am indebted to Miles for this way of framing the problem.

²⁷⁵ Lovin, *Christian Realism and New Realities*, 238-239.

eschatological ethic reveals a vision of the church's political role as a community of self-criticism which holds up practices of repentance as central to its political practice.

As I indicated in Chapter Two, one aim of this dissertation is to make explicit an implicit theme—a theme I refer to as an eschatological ethic—that runs through the full spectrum of feminist theologies in the North American context. This ethic attends carefully to the scriptural theme of the “new creation.” In this section, I turn to Tanner’s work as representative of this ethic, in hopes that it will bring into relief similar, but neglected themes in Niebuhr’s own thought. In particular, the eschatological ethic present in Tanner’s thought highlights for us Niebuhr’s anthropological focus on humans’ creative moral capacities, the importance of transcendent norms in establishing a normative, pragmatic method, as well as the role these transcendent norms play in communicating judgment and inspiring hope. This lens, in turn, brings to the fore Niebuhr’s own ecclesiology, which I will construe through the rubric of the church as a self-critical culture.

A) Human Moral Agency as a Participation in God’s Creative Activity

As I discussed in Chapter Two, Tanner posits an understanding of human beings as created in the image of God that, in turn, produces a conception of human agency that view human beings’ creative moral activity as a participation in God’s own creative agency. This lens enables a fresh look at Niebuhr’s own anthropology. Most accounts of Niebuhr’s anthropology emphasize Niebuhr’s understanding of human beings as finite creatures, inevitably prone to sin. But these accounts tend to overlook the other half of his anthropology. Like Tanner, Niebuhr’s emphasis on the creation paints a picture of human

beings as a particular kind of being. “The obvious fact is that man is a child of nature, subject to its vicissitudes, compelled by its necessities, driven by its impulses, and confined within the brevity of the years which nature permits its varied organic form, allowing them some, but not too much, latitude,” Niebuhr writes, “The other less obvious fact is that man is a spirit who stands outside of nature, life, himself, his reason and the world. This latter fact is...not frequently appreciated in its total import.”²⁷⁶ Indeed, this ‘less obvious fact’ is not even ‘appreciated in its total import’ by Niebuhr himself as he tends to emphasize humans’ finitude over human self-transcendence.

Niebuhr’s treatment of sin reveals this bias. Drawing on his two-part anthropology, Niebuhr articulates a dual conception of sin. Human beings sin when they try to overcome their finitude (pride); but they also sin when they fail to assert their capacities for self-transcendence (sensuality). As Miles helpfully points out, part of the problem resides in Niebuhr’s tendency to overemphasize his conception of sin as pride rather than his conception of sin as sensuality.²⁷⁷ Focusing on sin as pride suggests that humans are more likely to flout their finite limits than embrace and act upon capacities for self-transcendence. Lovin makes a similar point: we have “become too familiar with Niebuhr’s denunciations of pride and his emphasis on the moral significance of finite humanity...Freedom, we must reiterate, makes it impossible to set any limits on moral achievements within history.”²⁷⁸ As Lovin reminds us, human freedom occupies a central

²⁷⁶ Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man: A Christian Interpretation, Vol. 1: Human Nature* (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox Press, 1996 (1943)), 3-4.

²⁷⁷ Miles, *The Bonds of Freedom*, 35-36.

²⁷⁸ Lovin, *Reinhold Niebuhr and Christian Realism*, 156-157.

place in Niebuhr's anthropology. Human beings are not only finite; they possess capacities for self-transcendence by virtue of their creation in the image of God.

Just as Tanner's account emphasizes the empowerment that obtains to human beings when we recognize our infinite value as creatures of God, Niebuhr posits freedom as a creative force inherent in human nature. Although a human being's "failure to observe the limits of his finite existence causes him to defy the forms and restraints of both nature and reason," it is nevertheless the case that "The freedom of his spirit enables him to use the forces and processes of nature creatively...."²⁷⁹ In fact, the ability of human beings to creatively engage the world is the distinctive mark of what it means to be human:

Human existence is obviously distinguished from animal life by its qualified participation in creation. Within limits it breaks the forms of nature and creates new configurations of vitality... This is the basis of human history, with its progressive alteration of forms, in distinction from nature which knows no history but only endless repetition within the limits of each given form.²⁸⁰

Here Niebuhr distinguishes humans from animals with reference to our capacity to create new social, cultural, and political arrangements. Just as Tanner makes reference to the fact that one's value as a creature of God should give one a "sense of oneself as an actor on the stage of one's own life," so Niebuhr likens history to the infinite performances to which any given script gives rise. Thus, history itself becomes the artistic medium through which human beings exercise their creative capacities.

Indeed, Niebuhr often invokes the metaphor of drama to convey his conception of human beings as creatures participating in God's larger drama of salvation. For example,

²⁷⁹ Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man, Vol. 1* (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox Press, 1996 (1943)), 17.

²⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 26.

his *The Self and the Dramas of History* draws on the metaphor of history as drama.

Drama is a creative art form, but like all forms of art, it requires one work within certain conventions. One does not create out of nothing—there is a script—but there is also freedom to perform the script in any number of ways. In fact, a good performance of the script will require such imaginative interpretation. The appeal to drama as an art form speaks, then, to both the limits of human endeavors (the script) and the freedom to creatively work within those bounds (a unique performance of the script).

One might argue that Niebuhr's use of drama undercuts the possibility for genuine innovation. The script is finished, after all, and no interpretation or performance can change the outcome. But as any playwright or actor will attest, genuine creativity arises from having to work within (or trying to challenge) the constraints of the art form. Furthermore, although the basic plot may be written once and for all, the meaning of the events can range widely depending on the creative input of the actors.

As we will see, another important component of an eschatological ethic that the metaphor of drama captures nicely is the appeal to a transcendent creator God that provides the norm for a pragmatic method. Every drama has an author and director who writes the script and oversees its production. God's authorship and providence of creation and human history means not only that human beings are endowed with value and the freedom to act; it also means that, as creatures, human beings stand under the judgment of God. Just as a director guides and critiques the performances of his or her company, God oversees God's creation and communicates a divine standard that measures all human action. Tanner describes this as "the negative side of God's relation to creation—

God's judgment of iniquities."²⁸¹ Similarly, Niebuhr's emphasis on human freedom entails an emphasis on God's role as judge and humans as those creatures who stand in need of God's judgment. In fact, as the lens of an eschatological ethic helps us see, it is in relation to God's judgment that Niebuhr's normative, pragmatic method and, in turn, his ecclesiology comes to the fore.

B) Transcendence as a Norm

As I indicated in Chapter Two, Tanner argues for the importance of a transcendent creator God for creating the possibility of what she calls "self-critical cultures." She defines self-critical cultures as reflective cultures over and against customary cultures. Customary cultures are those where "transformations...happen by way of unreflective habits" and reflective cultures are those where "transformations are promoted by reflection on principles or standards of procedure, and in that way produce a self-critical culture."²⁸² Because reflective cultures are marked by "deliberative reproduction, they are not simply self-transformative; they are self-critical."²⁸³ As Tanner points out, belief in divine transcendence can act as a resource in such a self-critical culture. Transcendence creates "a view from a distance" which encourages reflective cultures to hold themselves accountable to a divine norm that serves as the basis of critique for current social and political organization.²⁸⁴ Thus, rather than endorsing

²⁸¹ Tanner, *The Politics of God*, 109.

²⁸² Ibid., 42.

²⁸³ Ibid., 46.

²⁸⁴ Ibid., 67.

current societal and political arrangements, belief in divine transcendence can create a distinction between divine and human realms that encourages criticism of natural and social orders with reference to the divine. As she puts it, this view from a distance, “this reflection upon natural and social orders potentially involves their criticism.”²⁸⁵ Indeed, Tanner argues that “a belief in divine transcendence generally fosters the structural features of self-critical cultures.”²⁸⁶

These structural features are three-fold. First, the idea of God’s transcendence creates a distinction between the divine realm and the human realm, refusing the idea that human relations are aligned with the order of the divine realm. Divine transcendence “opens up...the possibility for a distinction between what is naturally given and what is socially required.”²⁸⁷ Second, the idea of divine transcendence creates a distinction between the social world and the world of the individual, meaning that the social roles of individuals are not determined according to some sacred order.²⁸⁸ Third, the idea of divine transcendence creates a realm of truth that offers a source of criticism of human orders and endeavors. It offers “a locus for the true and good” and “suggests that human notions and norms might be judged and found wanting, inadequate, and in need of change.”²⁸⁹ Tanner thus concludes:

²⁸⁵ Ibid., 67.

²⁸⁶ Ibid., 67.

²⁸⁷ Ibid., 67.

²⁸⁸ Ibid., 68.

²⁸⁹ Ibid., 68.

the notion of divine transcendence tends to compel...a recognition of (1) the limited and finite nature of human ideas, proposals and norms; (2) their historical and socially circumscribed bases; (3) their essentially fallible and defeasible character. The transcendence of God functions as a protest against all absolute and unconditioned claims.²⁹⁰

Having explored the ways divine transcendence can function in a self-critical culture, Tanner concludes that Christian beliefs such as divine transcendence indicate that Christianity has the potential to create a “genuine culture of self-criticism.”²⁹¹

Likewise, there is no doubt that a central part of Niebuhr’s theological project also consists in the application of Christian beliefs, including God’s transcendence, to the political realm. Niebuhr’s central ethical formulation posits the transcendent norm of self-sacrificing love as a divine standard hovering over and informing our understanding of justice. As he puts it, “The Cross symbolizes the perfection of agape which transcends all particular norms of justice and mutuality in history. It rises above history and seeks conformity to the Divine love rather than harmony with other human interests and vitalities.”²⁹² Just as Tanner describes divine transcendence functioning as a criticism on human orders, Niebuhr describes sacrificial love as the divine norm that renders judgment on all human action. “The Cross represents a transcendence perfection which clarifies obscurities in history and defines the limits of what is possible in historical development.”²⁹³ But in doing so, it does not become irrelevant to history, but, as we will see, becomes the norm that informs our strides towards justice.

²⁹⁰ Ibid., 69.

²⁹¹ Ibid., 124.

²⁹² Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, Vol. 2: *Human Destiny*. Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox Press, 1996, 74.

C) A Normative, Pragmatic Method with Justice as its End

Indeed, the goal for Tanner in determining whether Christian beliefs can give rise to self-critical cultures consists not simply in affirming that belief in a transcendent God can produce a self-critical culture but in directing these self-critical capacities toward actual political action. Tanner lays out a specific “goal for action.” She describes it as “giving all persons their due as creatures of God, working for social relations in which the basic dignity and rights I have talked about are guaranteed to all persons, a society where differences are respected therefore and not made the focus of oppressive or exploitative relations among persons...One can now see a direction for action on my account: the direction is toward justice.”²⁹⁴

Although Niebuhr identifies love as the ideal goal of Christian moral action, his understanding of love as an “impossible possibility” also leads him to identify justice or the “approximation of brotherhood under the conditions of finite existence” as the proximate goal of Christian moral action. “The struggle for justice,” he writes,

is as profound a revelation of the possibilities and limits of historical existence as the quest for truth...The obligation to build and to perfect communal life is not merely forced upon us by the necessity of coming to terms with the rather numerous hosts, who it has pleased an Almighty Creator to place on this little earth beside us. Community is an individual as well as social necessity...Love is therefore the primary law of his nature; and brotherhood the fundamental requirement of his social existence.²⁹⁵

²⁹³ Ibid., 86.

²⁹⁴ *The Politics of God: Christian Theologies and Social Justice*. Minneapolis, Minn.: Fortress, 1992, 225.

²⁹⁵ Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, Vol. 2: *Human Destiny*, 244.

For Niebuhr, grace enables Christians to go about doing the work of justice, “to give his devotion to the highest values he knows; to defend those citadels of civilization of which necessity and historic destiny have made him the defender.”²⁹⁶ Importantly, Niebuhr understands efforts at securing justice to be a creative activity. The church’s role is to respond creatively to the current situation. The church is not to “liv[e] on the heritage of the past,” but to “re-creat[e] spiritual vitality in terms meaningful to our own generation.”²⁹⁷ Thus, Niebuhr posits the political vocation of the church as one of justice and re-creation.

V. New Things: The Church as a Self-Critical Culture

It is interesting that despite Tanner’s exploration of whether Christian beliefs can be productive of these transforming self-critical cultures, she does not explicitly attend to churches themselves. Having determined that Christian beliefs can produce self-critical cultures, she stops there rather than developing these insights into a political ecclesiology that posits the church as a self-critical culture. Fortunately, Niebuhr has done it for her. Indeed, the distinguishing features of Tanner’s self-critical cultures—“(1) the limited and finite nature of human ideas, proposals and norms; (2) their historical and socially circumscribed bases; (3) their essentially fallible and defeasible character”—are the very marks of the church as Niebuhr describes it. For Niebuhr, it is not just that the Christian tradition possesses the resources to create national self-critical cultures, but that the

²⁹⁶ Niebuhr, “Why the Christian Church is Not Pacifist,” in Richard B. Miller, *War in the Twentieth Century: Sources in Theological Ethics*. Louisville, Ky.: Westminster Press, 1992, 45.

²⁹⁷ Niebuhr, “Can the Church Give a Moral Lead?” in *Essays in Applied Christianity: The Church and the New World*. Edited by D.B. Robertson. New York: Meridian, 1959, 77.

church itself is the paradigmatic self-critical culture. An eschatological ethic thus brings into relief Niebuhr's own ecclesiology and suggests the content of its political vocation.

A) The Distinction between Divine and Human Realms: "The Limited and Finite Nature of Human Ideas"

The first theme that emerges in Niebuhr's discussion of the church is a distinction between divine and human realms. According to Niebuhr:

The church is that place in human society where men are disturbed by the word of eternal God, which stands as judgment upon human aspirations. But it is also the place where the word of mercy, reconciliation and consolation is heard...The Church is the place where the Kingdom of God impinges upon all human enterprises through the divine word, and where the grace of God is made available to those who have accepted His judgment.²⁹⁸

Just as Tanner notes that belief in divine transcendence creates a distinction between the divine and human realms, so too, Niebuhr emphasizes the distinction between the human and the divine. He contrasts "human society" with the word of the "eternal God." He refers to the "Kingdom of God," contrasting it with "human enterprises." He speaks of "God" in relation to "men." The entire passage trades heavily on this very distinction between divine and human.

But the passage does not merely distinguish God from humans, God's realm from the natural and social realm of humans; it also communicates that this relation is one of critique and judgment. Niebuhr speaks of the church as the place where humans are

²⁹⁸ Reinhold Niebuhr, *Beyond Tragedy: Essays on the Christian Interpretation of History* (New York: Scribner's Sons, 1941), 62.

“disturbed” by the word of God. It is the place where the word of God “stands as judgment” upon human aspirations. The Kingdom of God “impinges” upon human enterprises. The emphasis on judgment in the passage recalls Tanner’s own claim that belief in a transcendent God creates a standard of critique by which to judge all human action. Here the divine word consists of a standard that human beings acknowledge as authoritative and aspire to but can never reach. The church is thus the place where a divine standard is communicated, heard, and believed. Judgment cannot occur without reference to a normative vision. The church as a body of believers who willingly submit themselves to judgment also entails an openness to being shaped by the ultimate norm that renders that judgment.

Importantly, the church is not only the place where God communicates God’s divine standard and human beings stand indicted. It is also the place where God communicates God’s mercy. Although Tanner does not mention it specifically in her discussion of divine transcendence, God’s mercy constitutes another important aspect of belief in divine transcendence. If God were not transcendent, God would not have the power or authority to grant mercy to human beings when they fail. Furthermore, Niebuhr’s emphasis not only on judgment but mercy is an important part of how Christian beliefs contribute to a self-critical culture because it forestalls a kind of despair that might set in when the divine judgment is rendered. As Tanner notes, divine transcendence has the potential to lead to despair, shutting down progressive political action rather than sustaining it. In her discussion of the “ambiguities of divine transcendence,” Tanner argues:

the transcendence of divinity...can undercut its own critical potential for sociopolitical critique by suggesting that the norms and truths that divinity represents are irrelevant to human concerns...Human orders may be so completely devalued, in comparison with the transcendent ideals of truth and goodness that God represents, that applying divine standards to such orders is more hopeless than ungermane...the more radical the transcendence of divine norms or standards vis-à-vis human orders, the more likely...a belief in the irrelevance of divine standards for human society out of despair over the possibility of ever implementing them there.²⁹⁹

By emphasizing not only divine judgment but divine mercy, Niebuhr prevents any sense of despair that might result from hearing the divine standard. The church is the place where God's word of "mercy, reconciliation and consolation is heard." It is the place "where the grace of God is made available." In fact, judgment and mercy go hand and hand. One cannot be receptive to God's judgment without also hearing God's word of mercy. In this way, Niebuhr defends against the possibility that belief in God's transcendence might undercut its progressive potential: "The Christian," he writes, "is freed by that grace to act in history."³⁰⁰ In other words, because of its intimate connection with mercy, judgment need not immobilize Christians. Rather it acts as a catalyst, inviting believers to embrace their creative capacities.

B) "The Historical and Socially Circumscribed Basis of the Church"

In addition to a distinction between divine and human realms which compels recognition of the limited and finite nature of human ideas, recall that Tanner argues self-critical cultures also foster recognition of the historically and socially circumscribed basis

²⁹⁹ Tanner, *The Politics of God*, 71-72.

³⁰⁰ Niebuhr, "Why the Christian Church is Not Pacifist," 45.

of human institutions. Bringing this lens to Niebuhr's thought again reveals that he sees the church as just such a historically and socially constructed community. Indeed, this recognition sets Niebuhr's ecclesiology apart from theologians like Yoder who contend that the church possesses special moral resources to which other communities do not have access. Maintaining this distinction between divine and human requires Niebuhr to insist that the church community possesses no special distinction in relation to other people. All humans are human. None manage to escape this fundamental fact of existence. As Niebuhr puts it:

No church can lift man out of the partial and finite history in which all human life stands. Every interpretation of the church which promises an 'efficient grace,' by which man ceases to be man and enters prematurely into the Kingdom of God, is a snare and a delusion. The church is not the Kingdom of God.³⁰¹

Thus, the church community distinguishes itself only by its willingness to submit itself to God's judgment, not for its supra-human moral ability. "The church," Niebuhr writes, "is not a congregation of people who can pride themselves upon their unique goodness."³⁰² Rather, "the sanctity of the church does not consist in the goodness of its members but in the holiness of its Lord."³⁰³ Niebuhr makes clear that what sets the church apart lies not any special moral ability but its recognition of the distinction between human and divine and the judgment that that puts human beings under. "The church has not a clear moral lead but a clear moral insight."³⁰⁴ This conviction informs Niebuhr's claim that religious

³⁰¹ Niebuhr, *Beyond Tragedy*, 62.

³⁰² *Ibid.*, 60-61.

³⁰³ Niebuhr, "Can the Church Give a Moral Lead," *Essays in Applied Christianity*, 92.

³⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, 92.

communities are subject to same dynamics as all other groups. In this regard, Niebuhr disagrees wholeheartedly with Yoder. He does not see the church as a divine-human society with the ability to act more morally than other groups. "The church, as well as the state," Niebuhr writes, "can become the vehicle of collective egotism. Every truth can be made the servant of sinful arrogance, including the prophetic truth that all men fall short of the truth. This particular truth can come to mean that, since all men fall short of the truth and since the church is a repository of a revelation which transcends the finiteness and sinfulness of men, it therefore has the absolute truth which other men lack."³⁰⁵ The church does not, in other words, either possess truth or manifest it in a special way. Rather, the church distinguishes itself by submitting itself to God's judgment and recognizing that it, like all other communities, ultimately fails to embody the truth to which it attests. This acknowledgment constitutes the church's distinctive mission.

Indeed, Tanner's discussion of self-critical cultures not only highlights these elements of Niebuhr's political ecclesiology; it clarifies important differences between Niebuhr and figures like Yoder, who claim that Niebuhr lacks an ecclesiology. Namely, it accounts for the descriptive as well as the normative aspects of his ecclesiology, his insistence that the church is not more moral than any other group, and that the church is prone to the same social dynamics as other groups. These characteristics indicate that far from not having an ecclesiology, Niebuhr has an ecclesiology; it is simply different from that of Yoder, Hauerwas, and Cavanaugh. In fact, its differences from these thinkers'

³⁰⁵ Niebuhr, *Nature and Destiny*, Vol. 1, 217.

conceptions are what render Niebuhr's ecclesiology an attractive one for feminists aiming to articulate a political conception of the church.

C) The “Essentially Fallible and Defeasible Character” of the Church

The third feature of self-critical cultures, according to Tanner, is the “essentially fallible and defeasible character” of human ideas, plans, and organizations. When we read Niebuhr through this lens, here again, we find that Niebuhr describes the church as just such a fallible community. In fact, he highlights the distinction between the Kingdom of God and the church as an historical and human institution, in order to acknowledge that the church can make errors. Niebuhr notes that both Catholics and Protestants risk the erasure of this important distinction:

Protestantism is right in insisting that Catholicism identifies the church too simply with the Kingdom of God. This identification, which allows a religious institution, involved in all the relativities of history, to claim unconditioned truth for its doctrines and unconditioned moral authority for its standards, makes it just another tool of human pride.... But as soon as the Protestant assumes that his more prophetic statement and interpretation of the Christian gospel guarantees him a superior virtue, he is also lost in the sin of self-righteousness. The fact is that the Protestant doctrine of the priesthood of all believers may result in an individual self-deification against which Catholic doctrine has more adequate checks... There is no final guarantee against the spiritual pride of man... If that final mystery of the sin of pride is not recognized the meaning of the Christian gospel cannot be understood.³⁰⁶

Part of Niebuhr's concern here is to preserve the distinction between the human institutions of the church and the divinely instituted realm of the Kingdom of God.

Niebuhr's emphasis on the church as the place where the human and the divine is brought

³⁰⁶ Ibid., 202.

into relief, leads him to focus less on a normative vision of the church (as Yoder does) and more on a descriptive one. Niebuhr focuses his discussion of the church, for the most part, on actual church communities. (Niebuhr's ecclesiology is of course also normative. The church as the site of judgment is itself an ideal, but Niebuhr's emphasis on the human-ness of the church more readily admits the sinfulness of the church and therefore acknowledges this descriptive reality in a way that Yoder's normative vision only implicitly indicates.) Far from not having a notion of the church or not understanding its distinctiveness in relation to other social bodies, Niebuhr's ecclesiology is informed by a reverence that says "God alone is good." His insistence on the distinction between human and divine derives not from any attempt to ignore the church or its importance but to maintain its role as a community that receives God's judgment and, relying on God's mercy, takes up the task of doing God's work. Without the contrast between divine and human, there exists no means for critique: The divine standard becomes the human standard. The loss of this critical gap stifles religious imagination and discourages moral action. If one has already attained the divine standard and indeed lives by it, the need to imagine or strive anew dissipates. In effect, Niebuhr aims to prevent a self-satisfied church that rests on its moral laurels rather than engaging in constant self-criticism that leads to transformative action.

Thus, claims that Niebuhr omits the church and/or revelation ring hollow. It would be more accurate to claim that Niebuhr's ecclesiology differs from those like Yoder (and stands in need of further development). Niebuhr focuses on revelation as a source of judgment and mercy whereas Yoder argues that revelation, in part, enables the church to act more morally. For Niebuhr, revelation—with its articulation of a divine

standard—reveals our sin (and thus enables us to act without worrying if we fail to attain perfection); for Yoder, revelation not only gives the standard but enables us to act in accordance with the divine standard. As I hope to show, however, both thinkers' political ecclesiologies draw richly on the conviction that the church's political vocation involves human beings' affirming and acting upon their God-given creative capacities. But before I demonstrate this shared connection, I need to show that one can interpret politically Niebuhr's concept of the church as a site of judgment. That is, that the church as a site of judgment constitutes not only a self-critical culture but a self-critical culture with a political vocation. Contrary to the worry that self-criticism leads to a immobilizing and crippling suspension of our creative capacities and desire to work for change, Lovin argues that in contexts where freedom becomes trivialized "the role of Christian Realism is not to talk about realistic limits, but to expand political imagination... When no one any longer dares to be utopian, however, the role of the Realist may be to recall that the human reality also includes the capacity for such dreams."³⁰⁷ Thus, Lovin concludes that "properly understood, the Christian Realist claim that there are no limits to our moral achievements within history is not an invitation to pride, but to politics."³⁰⁸ Indeed, as the lens of an eschatological ethic brings to light, for Niebuhr, the church has its own politics.

VI. The Political Vocation of the Church as a Self-Critical Culture

But reading Niebuhr through the lens that Tanner provides also indicates that the church as a self-critical culture shares the socio-political agenda of self-critical cultures as

³⁰⁷ Lovin, *Reinhold Niebuhr and Christian Realism*, 246.

³⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, 157.

Tanner describes them. We have seen that this agenda posits justice as the end of Christian political action. It also includes a method of attaining justice (transformative action versus complacency), and the moral character of such action (humility and perseverance), which gives rise to hope. Interestingly, Niebuhr's own discussion of the church as the place where God's word is heard and offers a judgment on all human action possesses these same characteristics. As I will suggest, each of these characteristics can be used to express the political vocation of the church.

A) Combating Complacency and Inspiring Transformation

Because justice, informed by the moral norm of love, is one of the political goals of Christian moral life, both Tanner and Niebuhr emphasize the importance of combating complacency; both identify transformative action as the counter to complacency. Tanner writes, "One ought not say...that, given the transcendence of God, the human world *could* be critically assessed and challenged, thereby leaving open the question whether it *needs* to be. The human world should be challenged as an order infiltrated by sin. One cannot remain complacent about the world in which one lives."³⁰⁹ In particular, Tanner speaks often about how the dignity that inheres to creatures by virtue of their creation by God gives people the resources they need to demand equality, to not rest content with one's low status in society meanwhile consoling oneself with the knowledge that one is valued by God:

However lowly one's present status according to the usual social standards (e.g., money, property, education), one's dignity as a creature of God gives one the right to expect—indeed, the right to demand—treatment that respects that dignity ... It is

³⁰⁹ Ibid., 79.

clearly improper on my account to appeal to a value before God that holds independently of one's social standing, in order to downplay efforts to realize better treatment where those efforts have a chance for success.³¹⁰

Similarly, on Niebuhr's account, one must always guard against moral complacency. Niebuhr emphasizes the church as the site of judgment, in part, because the church finds itself especially prone to such a moral stance. "The church is always in danger of becoming the Anti-Christ," he writes, "It lives too little by faith and hope and too much by pretensions of righteousness ... Ideally the faith and hope by which the church lives sharpen rather than annul its responsibility for seeking to do the will of God amid all the tragic moral ambiguities of history."³¹¹ Importantly, Niebuhr relates 'pretensions of righteousness' with the church's 'responsibility for seeking to do the will of God,' suggesting that the former prevents the latter. The church is particularly susceptible to complacency because its temptation is to forget the distance between it and God, to claim to represent God. It is "tempted to insinuate historical evils into the final sanctity. It succumbs to that temptation whenever it identifies its own judgments with God's judgments; or whenever it pretends that the meaning of history has culminated in the church as an historical institution."³¹² Ecclesiologies that claim a distinctive moral status for the church thus risk what Niebuhr calls "the dangerous mixture of religious sanctity with the moral complacency of a culture."³¹³ This is Niebuhr's very worry with Yoder's

³¹⁰ Tanner, *The Politics of God*, 230-231.

³¹¹ Reinhold Niebuhr, *Faith and History: A Comparison of Christian and Modern Views of History* (New York: Scribner's Sons, 1949), 238.

³¹² *Ibid.*, 236.

³¹³ Niebuhr, "Can the Church Give a Moral Lead?" *Essays in Applied Christianity* (New York: Meridian, 1959), 104.

contention that “the body of Christ differs from other social bodies in that it is not less moral than its individual members.” In fact, Niebuhr might argue that the failure of the church to adhere to the radical reformation vision that Yoder regards as normative is a direct result of Yoder’s ecclesiology. The idea that the church operates as a divine society on earth with access to special moral resources that enable it to act now as though in the Kingdom of God, invites a kind of self-satisfied complacency that regards its work as finished. In other words, what need is there to strive for righteousness when one has already attained it?

To the contrary, Niebuhr positions the church itself as a self-critical culture, but also one that encourages each of its individual members to embark on the same project of self-criticism. “This is one of the chief functions of vital religion. An honest religious experience makes the soul conscious of its own inadequacies and sins as it feels itself in the presence of God...It is not only in helping people make an honest self-analysis that the modern church fails. It fails also to make a rigorous analysis of society for the benefit of those it claims to lead.”³¹⁴ In this indictment of the church’s failures, Niebuhr indicates that one of the church’s vocations consists of prompting on an individual level the kind of self-criticism it engages in on a collective level.

Against complacency, Niebuhr emphasizes transformative action. The church does not submit itself to God’s judgment for its own sake, but for the purpose of initiating transformative social change. Niebuhr argues that the Gospel “will...shake the false islands of security which men have sought to establish in history in the name of the

³¹⁴ Ibid., 73-74.

Gospel.”³¹⁵ The church is “that community of saints among whom life is transformed because it is always under the divine word.”³¹⁶ The church is thus not only the “the community which is the bearer of judgment,” but the locus of transformation.³¹⁷ “Actually,” writes Niebuhr, “it is that community where the Kingdom of God impinges most unmistakably upon history because it is the community where the judgment and the mercy of God are known, piercing through all the pride and pretensions of men and transforming their lives.”³¹⁸ Being under the divine word thus prompts this transformation. Indeed, Niebuhr always ties God’s judgment to being stirred out of complacency and into action. As Niebuhr argues, “Against the complacency to which men may be tempted by the temporal remoteness of the end, New Testament faith introduces a note of urgency and insists that ‘the time is short’...It derives this sense of urgency from the feeling that the ultimate judgment and the ultimate issues of life impinge upon each moment in time.”³¹⁹

B) Humility, Perseverance, and Hope

But it is not just that the church works towards the end of justice by being receptive to God’s judgment and responding with transformative action, but that this work takes on a certain character: humility and perseverance. As Tanner notes, “Christian activism is

³¹⁵ Niebuhr, *Faith and History*, 243.

³¹⁶ Ibid., 242.

³¹⁷ Ibid., 242.

³¹⁸ Ibid., 239.

³¹⁹ Ibid., 236.

neither cocksure of success nor desperate; it is firmly committed yet humble, uncompromising about the goal of greater justice yet flexible and free to maneuver with respect to the means to that end.”³²⁰ In other words, Christian moral action is marked by both humility and hope.

Indeed, for Niebuhr, judgment is necessarily connected to hope. Hope is “the nerve of moral action” and springs from “gratitude and contrition”—“gratitude for Creation and contrition before judgment...”³²¹ This emphasis on hope means that the church is not only the bearer of judgment, a community of the transformed, but a people of hope. Niebuhr writes:

The Christian church is a community of hopeful believers, who are not afraid of life or death, of present or future history, being persuaded that the whole of life and all historical vicissitudes stand under the sovereignty of a holy, yet merciful, God whose will was supremely revealed in Christ. It is a community that does not fear the final judgment, not because it is composed of sinless saints but because it is a community of forgiven sinners, who know that judgment is merciful if it is not evaded. If the divine judgment is not resisted by pretensions of virtue but is contritely accepted, it reveals in and beyond itself the mercy which restores life on a new and healthier basis. Ideally the church is such a community of contrite believers.³²²

In this passage Niebuhr connects judgment with a certain fearlessness and hope. He makes clear that the ability to receive judgment and repent creates in the church community the character of contrition. As we will see, the character of contrition is central to Niebuhr’s understanding of the political role of the church as a self-critical culture and therefore a community of repentance. But, important for my argument about

³²⁰ Ibid., 227.

³²¹ Lasch, *The True and Only Heaven*, 371.

³²² Niebuhr, *Faith and History*, 238.

the political vocation of the church, Niebuhr connects humility with the purpose of creative, constructive social change. “The remorse and repentance which are consequent upon such contemplation,” writes Niebuhr, “are similar in their acknowledgment of freedom and responsibility and their implied assertion of it.”³²³ Furthermore, “the faith and hope by which the church lives...are the condition for a courageous witness against ‘principalities and powers.’”³²⁴ Thus, the purpose of the church’s witness to the power of sin and self-interest serves the larger purpose of encouraging its members to exercise their creative capacities with the goal of transforming themselves and their societies.

Any development of Niebuhr’s conception of the church as a community of self-criticism and therefore self-transcendence, must deal, however, with Niebuhr’s claims that groups are less likely than individuals to manifest their powers of self-transcendence. Indeed, several feminists make this very claim. Miles argues that Niebuhr’s vision fails to do justice to the presence of God’s love in creation apart from the self-sacrifice of the cross. She puts forward a feminist Christian realism that “retains Niebuhr’s model of divine transcendence while giving greater emphasis to the divine presence in creation, liberation, judgment, incarnation, community, and the power of the holy spirit.”³²⁵ Welch also offers an implicit criticism of Niebuhr’s tendency to locate the most ideal forms of moral activity on the individual level. Her “feminist ethic of risk” embraces the moral capacities of groups. Miles argues that “Welch’s insistence on the positive role of

³²³ Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, Vol. 1, 255.

³²⁴ Niebuhr, *Faith and History*, 238.

³²⁵ Miles, *The Bonds of Freedom*, 153.

community interactions is a helpful balance to Niebuhr's ambivalence about the moral capacities of communities."³²⁶

These criticisms are indeed apt; I am suggesting, however, that the eschatological ethic articulated by Tanner shows that Niebuhr has the resources latent within his thought to counter his tendency to pay more attention to finitude than freedom. It is true that Niebuhr often focuses on limits. His position during the civil rights movement certainly attests to his convictions about human limitations. His thesis in *Moral Man and Immoral Society*—that “the tragedy of the human spirit is its inability to conform its collective life to its individual ideals”—appropriately critiques the church on occasions when it exhibits the same lack of transcendence of other groups. But it also fails to reflect the reality of Christian communities' abilities for self-transcendence. The civil rights movement itself offers a witness to the church's capacity to embody God's love in a real way here and now. As Miles suggests, the emphasis Welch places on horizontal transcendence provides a helpful counter to Niebuhr's pessimism about the moral capacities of human communities. But as we saw with Tanner, neither Miles nor Welch addresses the role of the church. I argue that Niebuhr's emphasis on the creative capacities of human beings, and in particular, his claim that the church provides the locus for these forms of creative moral action, provides the resources to address these problems. Just as these feminist theorists help identify both problems and potentials in Niebuhr's thought, then, what we find in Niebuhr's conception of the church also possesses the potential to further these feminist accounts, to extend their own proposals to church communities.

³²⁶ Ibid., 27.

VII. Conclusion: The Church as a Community of Repentance

Although it differs from Yoder conception of the church's distinctiveness, Niebuhr's view of the church does suggest a special role: to recognize and repent of its sin. While the church is not distinctive in the sense of being the exclusive locus or site of God's redemptive activity or even the new creation, it does have a special responsibility to bear God's judgment. While some, like Yoder, would claim that Niebuhr's omission of the church obviously entails a lack of attention to ecclesial practices, the lens provided by the eschatological ethic suggests otherwise. In fact, Niebuhr's description of the church as a body of "contrite believers" lends itself to a vision of the church as that community which cultivates attitudes of humility by engaging in practices of repentance. If one follows Lovin's lead and reads realism as part of the same tradition as narrative ethics, then one could argue that Niebuhr's ecclesiology envisions the church as a place that shapes its members in virtues/practices of humility.³²⁷ Thus, not only does Tanner's articulation of the eschatological ethic provide resources to read Niebuhr's understanding of the church as a self-critical culture, but situating this understanding in a political framework thus suggests practices of repentance as the church's political practice.

In her *The Church for the World: A Theology of Public Witness*, Jennifer McBride develops an account of the church's socio-political practice that proves instructive here. Drawing on the work of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, she identifies the "confession of sin unto

³²⁷ Ibid., 96.

repentant action” as the church’s political vocation.³²⁸ This account positions repentance as the church’s means of navigating between the penultimate (what I would call the old things) and the ultimate (the new things), holding that confession of its own sin as well as that of the wider world, prepares the way for Christ’s kingdom. Following Bonhoeffer, she describes repentance as “visible, creative activity on the greatest scale.”³²⁹ This repentant activity “trusts in the necessity of Christ’s transformative power, creating life out of human labor,” and it is a call to both “humility and ‘a commission of immeasurable responsibility.’”³³⁰ Importantly, this understanding of repentance shares several of the same features the eschatological ethic highlights in Niebuhr’s own ecclesiology.

In fact, Niebuhr’s own understanding of the church corresponds well with this account. Specifically, he would agree that the most potent witness the church can offer the world comes in the form of bearing God’s judgment. He would also affirm the connection made between the confession of sin and action, and in particular, creative activity. In addition, with its emphasis on Christ’s ability to work through human labor, this account shares Niebuhr’s own articulation of the eschatological ethic’s understanding of human agency as a participation in God’s creative agency. Furthermore, just as Niebuhr insists that the church’s distinctiveness does not come in the form of special moral capacities, this understanding of the church’s political practice affirms the ultimate

³²⁸ Jennifer McBride, *The Church for the World: A Theology of Public Witness* (Ph.D. diss., University of Virginia, 2008), i.

³²⁹ *Ibid.*, 254.

³³⁰ *Ibid.*, 256-257.

unity of church and world. As McBride puts it, “The church’s broader confession of sin recognizes the permeable nature of the church and world that together constitute one Christ-reality. The shared sphere of sin and redemption (and the shared sin itself) places the church not in opposition to but in partnership with the broader world.”³³¹ Not only does this account resonate well with Niebuhr’s own understanding of the church’s distinctive vocation to recognize and receive God’s judgment, and for practices of repentance to be at the heart of the church’s institutional life, but it would also likely find a welcome audience among feminist theologians who have been keen for the church to confess its own complicity in women’s oppression and among those who stress the overlapping nature of church’s sin with the world. Indeed, the feminist project of critique and reconstruction of the Christian tradition calls for such a confession of sin on the part of the church. Kwok Pui-lan argues that “While male liberation theologians have exhorted the church to bring about social change, female theologians are more realistic about ecclesial power and their optimism more guarded. The church, steeped in male hierarchy and tradition, has to repent for its sexism before it can be a beacon of hope and an agent for change.”³³² We find in Niebuhr’s thought just such a demand for the church to submit to God’s judgment and transformative process.

Thus, an eschatological ethic illuminates overlooked resources in Niebuhr’s thought that prove helpful in articulating an eschatological political theology. It is not only Niebuhr’s ability to recognize human capacities for self-transcendence, but also his

³³¹ Ibid., 255.

³³² Kwok Pui-lan, “Feminist Theology, Southern.” *The Blackwell Companion to Political Theology*, eds. Peter Scott and William T. Cavanaugh (Malden, Mass.: Blackwell Publishing Ltd., 2004), 207.

emphasis on sin that appeals to feminist sensibilities. His ability to recognize and fruitfully address the complexity and ambiguity of the moral life recommends his thought as a rich resource for an eschatological political ecclesiology. As we have seen, the eschatological ethic that I identified in Chapter Two highlights similar emphases in Niebuhr's own thought, including an affirmation of human beings' freedom and an understanding of their own creative moral capacities as a participation in God's creative activity, along with an emphasis on the importance of transcendent norms and their important role in creating a normative, pragmatic method for the church as a site of judgment, transformation, and hope.

I have shown that the elements of Tanner's self-critical cultures appear in Niebuhr's own discussion of the church, suggesting a conception of the church whose political role is to bear this judgment and be reformed. In turn, this view suggests the church constitutes a community of repentance with practices of repentance as its primary political practice. Importantly, Niebuhr's ecclesiological vision resonates with those of several feminist theologians. These points of resonance offer critical elements of an eschatological political theology that draws on both Niebuhr and feminist theologies. These elements include an acknowledgment of both descriptive and normative aspects of the church's identity and the necessity of the church's interaction with the world as part of its role as the bearer of judgment.

Such a theology acknowledges both the descriptive and normative aspects of the church's existence in the world. Indeed, Niebuhr's reflections on the church suggest a dialectic that moves back and forth between the descriptive and the normative. Tanner acknowledges in her discussion of self-critical cultures that although she can show that

Christian beliefs can produce a self-critical culture, this does not mean that they inevitably do. Indeed, the potential for Christian beliefs to support the *status quo* is ever-present. Tanner acknowledges that she is not “blind to uses of Christian doctrines that encourage social conformity and servility, a self-satisfied ‘all’s right with the world,’” but that her “point has been to show with what right one can subvert, from within, such uses of Christian doctrine.”³³³ Indeed, Tanner is not the only theologian to attend to both normative and descriptive. In her work, Jones puts forward an ecclesiology that affirms this interplay between the church’s normative and descriptive aspects. She notes not only traditional and normative markers of church community, such as a community that inhabits the gospel story “as the definitive story of our lives” but also more descriptive features such as a “community gripped by and implicated in structures of oppression.”³³⁴ Her description of the church as both “graced community” and “sinful community” holds the distinction between the empirical and normative church in “eschatological tension.”³³⁵ As Elaine Graham argues, this dialectic between normative and descriptive is characteristic of all feminist theology: “This dialectic between the historical reality of religion and its utopian promise is the most consistent and unifying theme across the entire feminist-womanist-Latina spectrum.”³³⁶ Indeed, as I have demonstrated, attention

³³³ Tanner, *The Politics of God*, 251.

³³⁴ Jones, *Feminist Theory and Christian Theology*, 156, 158.

³³⁵ *Ibid.*, 159.

³³⁶ Elaine Graham, “Feminist Theology, Northern,” in *The Blackwell Companion to Political Theology*, eds. Peter Scott and William T. Cavanaugh (Malden, Mass.: Blackwell Publishing Ltd., 2004), 222.

to both the old things and the new things is at the heart of the eschatological ethic that I identified in Chapter Two.

This is the same dialectic that we find in Niebuhr's vision of the church. Like Tanner and Jones, Niebuhr acknowledges the human capacity for both sin and for self-transcendence. Indeed, the eschatological ethic present in Tanner's work brings into relief Niebuhr's acknowledgment of the church's tendency to operate as sinfully as any other group—especially its temptation to exhibit a moral complacency that excuses itself from creative moral action—but also its ability to live up to the ideal of being the locus of judgment and transformation. Contrary to some feminist claims that Niebuhr draws a heavy-handed division between public and private life, Niebuhr's focus on the dynamics of power and need for coercion apply just as forcefully to the family and to the church as they do to society at large. Indeed, Niebuhr's critique of communities for their failure often to act less morally than individuals offers feminists a trenchant critique of the church as an institution that too often plays by society's rules. But as Welch's and Miles' work suggests, Niebuhr's emphasis on the creative capacities of humans, particularly as deployed within the church itself, indicates the presence of resources that affirm a more positive moral role for the church community. Thus, Niebuhr's ecclesiology shares feminist convictions that lead him to posit the church as a place that negotiates the tension between sin and self-transcendence.

Furthermore, in keeping with an eschatological ethic's focus on promoting the flourishing of all of God's good creation, Niebuhr's ecclesiology—in its understanding of the church as the bearer of judgment rather than a community with access to resources unavailable to others—offers a profoundly theological account of the church's

relationship to the rest of creation. Niebuhr's inclusive understanding of human moral action, his affirmation of all humans' creative capacities and his view of history—not exclusively the church—as the stage of humans' creative action attends in a profound way to the embodiment of God's word outside the church. Scholars often point to Niebuhr's concern for politics and the fate of western civilization as evidence for his lack of concern with the church, but the lens of an eschatological ethic shows that Niebuhr's emphasis on history is not an evasion of ecclesiology but an extension of it. The church is of course important for Niebuhr but he does not limit his attention to ecclesial concerns nor does he deny the capacity for all human beings to engage in creative, transformative moral action.

Indeed, Niebuhr's focus not just on the church as a medium of creative activity but on history itself proves important for acknowledging what Fulkerson refers to as the "worldly" character of theology and the church, but also what we might call the "churchliness of the world." Attending to the churchliness of the world, the ways in which the world embodies the the gospel, proves central to any attempt to articulate an eschatological political theology. For, as Karl Barth reminds us, the book of Revelation pictures the new creation as a city, not a church. The fullness and redemption of creation "is not in an eternal Church but in the *polis* built by God."³³⁷ Moreover, this is not an earthly city taken up into the heavens from this world, but a city that takes form in this world. The biblical account thus suggests the worldly nature of the new creation. While ultimately created by God, the new creation becomes incarnate in this world, not some

³³⁷ Karl Barth, "The Christian Community and the Civil Community." *Against the Stream: Shorter Post-War Writings 1946-52* (New York: Philosophical Library, 1954), 19.

otherworldly divine realm. This fact should alert us to the ways in which this world already partakes of the new creation, and attune us to the redemptive insights the rest of creation has for the church. Indeed, as Niebuhr argues, it is not only that the church as the bearer of judgment should be ready to receive God's judgment and communicate it to secular society, but that the church should be prepared to receive God's judgment when heard on lips of those outside the church. The church's capacity to receive God's judgment "might make us willing to let secular idealism speak the 'word of God' on occasion."³³⁸ As Niebuhr points out, the work of the church is often not done by the church but by its enemies.³³⁹

This has important implications for how the church goes about doing its work. Not only does it suggest that the church should partner with others outside its walls, but that the church should be prepared to see its true mission embodied in those who do not profess Christian belief. God's judgment and fulfillments of the church's own normative ideal may be revealed to the church from beyond its own communities. In this way, Niebuhr's own account of the church bears some similarity to Paul J. DeHart's articulation of the church as a "trial of the witnesses of the resurrection."³⁴⁰ Drawing on the work of Hans Frei, George Lindbeck, and Niebuhr's own brother, H. Richard Niebuhr, DeHart reconceptualizes the contributions of post-liberal theology to develop an understanding of how the church relates to the wider culture. He identifies the church's

³³⁸ Niebuhr, "Can the Church Give a Moral Lead?" *Essays in Applied Christianity*, 94.

³³⁹ D.B. Robinson makes this point in his introduction to *Essays in Applied Christianity: The Church and the New World*, ed. D.B. Robertson (New York: Meridian, 1959), 22.

³⁴⁰ Paul J. DeHart, *The Trial of the Witnesses: The Rise and Decline of Post-liberal Theology* (Malden, Mass.; Blackwell Pub., 2006), 244.

identity through three aspects of a “trial”: “a situation demanding patience or endurance,” being “submitted to the judgment of a public of some sort,” and going through a “tentative process, an experiment.”³⁴¹ Each of these elements points to the importance of those sites outside the church for an authentic embodiment of God’s word. In particular, the second component resonates with Niebuhr’s own understanding of the church as that community which bears God’s judgment. DeHart argues that “the judgment of the world is the echoing back to the witnesses of the word they have spoken, and often (the divine irony at work!) it is only through this echo in the world that they can understand what they have really said.”³⁴² Just as in Niebuhr’s account, this view attends to the importance of not just the church, but all of human history, not just Christians’ creative capacities but all of humanity’s. It affirms that “God’s Holy Spirit is active on both sides of the human activity of witness,” on “both sides of the boundary of belief.”³⁴³ If the church is to be the bearer of God’s judgment as Niebuhr envisions it, it must therefore be attuned to that judgment wherever and however it is made known. As DeHart’s account suggests, discerning God’s judgment requires a delicate negotiation between the church and the rest of human culture. Rather than assuming Niebuhr is more concerned with human history and western civilization than the church or completely neglects a doctrine of the church or even the Holy Spirit, such an account reveals these concerns of Niebuhr’s to be deeply theological.

³⁴¹ Ibid., 244.

³⁴² Ibid., 262.

³⁴³ Ibid., 262.

Thus it is not the case that Niebuhr has nothing to say about the church. It is true that he does not see the church as distinctive from other groups in terms of their moral capacities. But this does not mean that he lacks an ecclesiology altogether. Indeed, he has an ecclesiology. And it is not just a source of divine mercy that consoles us, as Yoder argues. The church is that community that makes itself receptive to divine judgment and then engages in constructive, transformative action. Because of the old things present in Niebuhr's thought and the old ways we are used to thinking of Niebuhr's Christian realism, it is not surprising that feminists and other theologians make the criticisms they do. It is indeed the case that Niebuhr often underestimates the church's and human beings' capacities for self-transcendence. But as the eschatological ethic highlights for us, Niebuhr's emphasis on human freedom and creativity provide the necessary resources to combat these tendencies. What Niebuhr does not focus on but should recognize more readily are the times when the church does avail itself of these resources and thus shows the capacity for self-transcendence. It is not, therefore, that Niebuhr is not ecclesial enough; rather, it is simply that Niebuhr does not abide as thoroughly as he should in the dialectic in his own thought between limits and freedom.

But these old things need not prevent us from seeing a new Niebuhr whose contributions to political theology extend beyond his insights on violence and coercion. As I have argued, when viewed through the lens of an eschatological ethic, Niebuhr's thought provides the resources for developing an understanding of the church as a self-critical culture, as a community of repentance. By placing practices of repentance at the heart of its political practice, the church more readily understands its political vocation

not in terms of its stance towards violence or coercion but in terms of the power of repentance.

CHAPTER FOUR: MARTIN LUTHER KING JR.'S 'CREATIVE SYNTHESIS'

I. Introduction: King and the Feminist Tradition

The relationship between Martin Luther King Jr. and the feminist tradition is a complex one. On one hand, feminists can find much to admire in King's commitment to justice, his incisive ability to identify connections among various forms of oppression, and his embrace of love as a political practice. On the other hand, despite King's leadership of one of the most important social movements for human dignity and equal rights in American history, he paid little attention to gender injustice.³⁴⁴ He spoke often of the "triple evils of poverty, racism, and war," but never identified sexism as an equally pernicious evil.³⁴⁵ One would expect a civil rights leader who moved beyond race to identify a complicated web of oppression to be attuned to the relationship between gender injustice and other forms of injustice.³⁴⁶ King himself resisted the efforts of others to limit his moral authority to race issues. "For those who ask the question, "'Aren't you a civil rights leader?'—and thereby mean to exclude me from the movement for peace—I answer by saying that I have worked too long and hard now against segregated public

³⁴⁴ In fact, in an interview with Alice Walker, Coretta Scott King mentions that she wished her husband had spent more time addressing gender issues. See Alice Walker, "Coretta King: Revisited," *In Search of our Mothers' Gardens* (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1983), 155. It should also be noted, given the emphasis that feminists often place on environmental concerns that King also failed to attend to justice issues related to the care of creation.

³⁴⁵ Martin Luther King, Jr. *Strength to Love* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1963), 8.

³⁴⁶ David A.J. Richards notes that James Baldwin came to a related conclusion: He "noticed a surprising conventionality in King's public sexual voice, which failed to see the connections between racism and the abridgment of basic human rights to sexual freedom." See *Disarming Manhood: Roots of Ethical Resistance* (Athens, Ohio: Swallow Press, 2005), 179.

accommodations to end up segregating my moral concern. Justice is indivisible.”³⁴⁷

Had it not been for his silence on sexism, we might argue that King had succeeded—in the words of feminist social ethicist Beverly W. Harrison—in “making the connections.” Although a pair of recent studies offers a reading of King that likens his thought to that of feminist ethicists of care, there is very little feminist engagement with King.³⁴⁸ Nor is there substantial womanist engagement with King.³⁴⁹ One suspects this has something to do not only with the glaring omission of gender justice in King’s political vision, but his own sexist behavior.

Indeed, in addition to his failure to acknowledge gender injustice as a problem deeply embedded with other societal evils, King’s own actions present significant challenges. The feminist insight that ‘The personal is political’ suggests that any feminist engagement with King requires consideration not only of King’s thought but his life. King’s personal history of marital infidelity suggests an inability to accord women full

³⁴⁷ “The Trumpet of Conscience,” *A Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings of Martin Luther King, Jr.*, ed. James M. Washington (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1986), 636.

³⁴⁸ King’s championing of love as a political virtue leads Eric Gregory to notes resonances with care theorists, and his embrace of nonviolence prompts Richards to read King as a maternal thinker who in embracing care, rejects the masculine use of violence. See Eric Gregory, *Politics and the Order of Love: An Augustinian Ethic of Democratic Citizenship* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), and David A. Richards, *Disarming Manhood: Roots of Ethical Resistance*. I include an analysis of these arguments as an appendix to the chapter.

³⁴⁹ Katie G. Cannon briefly considers King. While acknowledging that King did not “reflect directly on Black women’s experience,” she nevertheless finds within King’s thought resources for a “politics of justice.” She names King’s understanding of human beings created in the image of God, the relationship between love and justice, and the beloved community as resources that womanists may find helpful. See *Black Womanist Ethics* (Atlanta, Ga.: Scholars Press, 1988), 174. To my knowledge the only other source that reflects on the relationship between King and womanist thought is Noel Leo Erskine’s *King Among the Theologians*. Cleveland, Ohio: Pilgrim Press, 1994. He devotes a chapter to King and womanist theology, but does not make any constructive suggestions beyond those of Cannon.

dignity as persons in his personal life.³⁵⁰ Moreover, criticisms from women involved in the civil rights movement indicate that King assumed a patriarchal model of leadership and also struggled to treat female colleagues as equals in his public endeavors.³⁵¹

Attempts to make sense of the disjuncture between King as an advocate for justice and his well-documented sexism offer feminists no relief. One common approach attributes the discrepancy to human nature. Despite the tendency to idolize our heroes, so the explanation goes, King is only human. We better continue his legacy when we recognize that he was not a saint, but rather an imperfect and fallible person, just like us.³⁵² While this explanation certainly possesses merits—namely, its account of human

³⁵⁰ King's extra-marital affairs are well-documented. Ralph Abernathy provides an account of King "as a womanizer" in his autobiography *And the Walls Came Tumbling Down: An Autobiography* (New York: Harper & Row, 1989), 434-36, 470-75, 631. See also David Garrow, *Bearing the Cross: Martin Luther King, Jr., and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference*. New York: Vintage Books, 1988.

³⁵¹ Consider this excerpt from David Garrow: "Bernard Lee put it bluntly. 'Martin...was absolutely a male chauvinist. He believed that the wife should stay home and take care of the babies while he'd be out there in the streets.' Dorothy Cotton saw it regularly. 'He would have a lot to learn and a lot of growing to do' concerning women's rights ... 'the male chauvinism that existed within the movement... They were sexist male preachers' and 'grew up in a sexist culture... I really loved Dr. King but I know that that streak was in him also,'" *Bearing the Cross*, 375-376. In particular, Garrow addresses King's tense relationship with SNCC organizer Ella Baker. He quotes Andrew Young as saying, "...Martin's problems with Ella Baker...were directly related to his need to be free of that strong matriarchal influence," 655. Garrow continues: "Baker had found [King and Abernathy] unwilling to discuss substantive issues with her as an equal, and unreceptive to any critical comments she might offer. To James Lawson, the root of the problem was simple: 'Martin had real problems with having a woman in a high position,'" 141.

Kentucky State Senator Georgia Davis Powers also discusses the lack of respect given to women in the movement by the male leadership in her autobiography, *I Shared the Dream: The Pride, Passion and Politics of the First Black Woman Senator from Kentucky*. Far Hills, New Jersey: New Horizon Press, 1995. She writes that she was "one of the few women fortunate enough to be treated as a peer by the leaders of the civil rights movement," 323. In general, however, "Black women gained positions in the movement but never any recognition for their deeds. The Black ministers wanted women to participate because they knew that was the only way for the routine work of the movement to be done. They freely used the ideas presented by the women, simply adopting them as their own... In private, they sought our advice and our suggestions, but they were the ones who made the public announcements. To them, it boosted the image of the Black male power," 153, 155-156.

³⁵² In the Epilogue of *Bearing the Cross* Garrow writes: "By exalting the accomplishments of Martin Luther King, Jr., into a legendary tale that is annually told, we fail to recognize his humanity—his personal and public struggles—that are similar to yours and mine. By idolizing those whom we honor, we fail to realize that we could go and do likewise," 625.

beings as moral yet sinful—it lends an air of nonchalant inevitability to King’s sins, leaving unconsidered the relationship between his moral pursuits and moral failings.

Another flawed approach attempts to resolve the tension by creating two Kings: the moral King of public life and the immoral King of private life. As I mentioned in Chapter One, I encountered this approach in a course at Harvard on “The Ethical and Religious Thought of Martin Luther King, Jr.” But this response is even less satisfying because it attempts to resolve the tension in King’s theological and political ethic with a simple reassertion of the division liberal political theory posits between public and private life. While it offers a tidy solution to the discrepancy between King’s public pursuit of justice and private perpetuation of gender injustice, it leaves King’s public participation in gender injustice unexamined. (King’s condescension toward female colleagues in the civil rights movement indicates that his failure to pursue gender justice was just as public as it was private. Indeed, it is perhaps his public failures to accord women full dignity—while not as titillating a topic as King’s extra-marital affairs—that ultimately prove most troubling.) Nor does this response reflect on possible connections between King’s inability to treat women as equals in public and his similar private behavior. It leaves unattended the ways King’s political ethic—despite its concern with dignity and equality—fails to accord women full inclusion. Feminists compelled by King’s thought thus find themselves left with a familiar question: where do we go from here?

Convinced of the value of King’s thought for the development of an eschatological political theology, but fully aware of challenges such an endeavor presents, this chapter wrestles with King’s rich but complicated relationship to feminist

theologies. I draw on the feminist insight that politics is broader than participation in state structures to argue that, despite some scholarly conceptions to the contrary, King's contributions to political theology extend beyond his philosophy and practice of nonviolence. Using the lens of an eschatological ethic, the next section identifies as an old thing the division King posits between public and private in his conception of *agape* which leads him to define *agape* over and against *eros*. The next section argues that the understanding of human agency as a participation in God's creative, redemptive activity identified in the eschatological ethic of Chapter Two—represented here by Monica Coleman and a variety of other womanists—provides a much needed lens to highlight the role of creativity in King's conception of love.³⁵³ This lens reveals the importance not only of love or justice but the product of their "creative synthesis"—that is, community-creating practices—to King's theological and political vision. It also traces something of a creative synthesis in King's own thinking. This creative synthesis is one between the traditional conceptions of *agape* King inherits and adopts wholesale from Nygren and others in the Protestant tradition and a new vision of love that emerges when the traditional conception comes down to earth and hits the ground running, so to speak. Indeed, the notion of *agape* that King inherits from the Protestant tradition comes to ill fit his own practice of love in the civil rights movement. Bringing the eschatological ethic to bear on King's thought thus reveals that as the movement progresses, a new, worldly

³⁵³ I should note that despite their shared emphasis on creativity, King and Coleman espouse different theological frameworks. While King draws much of his theological approach, and specifically his thought on love and creativity from Paul Tillich, Coleman's emphasis on creativity draws from process thinkers such as Alfred North Whitehead and John B. Cobb, Jr. While these differing frameworks may make King and Coleman seem like an odd pair, it is nevertheless the case that Coleman's explicit attention to creativity offers a useful lens for revealing this less appreciated aspect of King's thought. It also needs to be considered how much of their shared emphasis on creativity derives from the African-American religious tradition.

conception of love emerges amidst the structures of the old, disinterested, otherworldly love. King often expresses this love in terms of creativity—a love in action that draws on the mutual, reciprocal, passionate, and community-creating aspects of *philia* and *eros*. I conclude by pointing toward the feminist development of a Kingian view of the church as a community of creativity that places these community-creating practices at the heart of its political practice.

II. Beyond Nonviolence

Those familiar with King's life and work rightly identify him as a practitioner of the philosophy of nonviolence. King's primary theological and political contribution is most often viewed in terms of his leadership of the civil rights movement and his implementation of nonviolent political practices. King himself dedicated much of his writing to articulating his philosophy of nonviolence and explaining its origins in both the spirit of the gospels and the method of Mahatma Gandhi's movement for India's political independence. The Nobel Prize committee honored King's practice of nonviolence in the service of social change with the 1964 Nobel Peace Prize. And much of the scholarly literature on King treats him as a great civic leader and examines his philosophy and practice of nonviolence. Indeed, the most comprehensive collection of King's writings and related documents, the six-volume *The Papers of Martin Luther King, Jr.* are sponsored by the King Center for Nonviolent Social Change. But others share this focus on King as primarily an advocate of nonviolence. In his study of American nonviolence, Ira Chernus claims that King "was neither a systematic theologian nor a great religious thinker" but the "greatest leader" for "nonviolent social change movement in US

history.”³⁵⁴ Similarly, David A.J. Richards opens his study on ethical resistance by stating, “Martin Luther King, Jr. ... must be understood not only as a person in and of himself but also as the leader of the nonviolent mass movement of protest that he inspired.”³⁵⁵ James M. Washington opens his collection of King’s essential writings by placing King’s essays on nonviolence front and center. Even when King is treated primarily as a theologian in secondary sources, the focus tends to fall on King’s relationship with Reinhold Niebuhr and their stances towards coercion and violence.³⁵⁶

The scholarly literature in Christian theology and ethics shares this focus on King as a practitioner of nonviolence. Yoder examines King’s pacifism in several articles and includes King in his study of pacifism, *Nevertheless: The Varieties and Shortcomings of Religious Pacifism*. (More often than not, however, King is not even included in the major anthologies of Christian ethics on war, pacifism, or political theology—which speaks less to King’s focus on nonviolence and more to the related tendency to disregard King as a significant religious thinker).³⁵⁷ Indeed, the majority of scholars who address his theological thought are black theologians who rightly insist on King’s status as one of America’s preeminent theological thinkers.³⁵⁸ But even these scholars tend to highlight either King’s philosophy of nonviolence or the relationship between love and justice in

³⁵⁴ Ira Chernus. *American Nonviolence: The History of an Idea* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2004), 161.

³⁵⁵ Richards, *Disarming Manhood*, 131.

³⁵⁶ See for example, “Martin Luther King, Jr.’s Encounter with Niebuhr,” Christopher Lasch, *The True and Only Heaven*, 386-390, and “Northern Reservations,” Carol Polsgrove, *Divided Minds*, 41-47.

³⁵⁷ Neither Holmes (*War and Christian Ethics*) nor Miller (*War in the Twentieth-century*) include King in their Christian anthologies on war.

³⁵⁸ See, for example, James H. Cone, “The Theology of Martin Luther King, Jr.,” *Union Seminary Quarterly Review* Vol. XL, No. 4 (1986), 21-39; Cornel West, “Prophetic Christian as Organic Intellectual: Martin Luther King, Jr.” *The Cornel West Reader* (New York: Basic Books, 1999), 426.

King's thought, understood as the theological foundation of King's nonviolence. Both James Cone and Cornel West, for example, identify "Mohandas K. Gandhi and Henry David Thoreau" and a "prophetic Gandhian method of nonviolent social change," respectively, as one of four of the major intellectual sources of King's thought. Preston Williams offers an excellent analysis of the relationship between love and justice in King's thought.³⁵⁹ As Gary Dorrien notes, "For many, King...epitomized the ethic of self-sacrificial love and nonviolent resistance to oppression."³⁶⁰ A few recent studies, such as Charles Marsh's *Beloved Community*, and Richard Willis' *Martin Luther King, Jr and the Image of God*, consider King's theological contributions beyond nonviolence, but these are exceptions to the rule. In fact, most of the major studies on King are historical, not theological, in nature.

I do not intend to suggest that the identification of King as an advocate of nonviolent resistance is misguided or that King's philosophy of nonviolence does not merit the scholarly attention it receives. I do want to suggest that this identification of King primarily as a practitioner of nonviolent resistance derives from our inability to consider the political relevance of King's thought beyond statist structures. In other words, I want to propose that King's status as a political thinker derives from his fundamental understanding of politics as having to do with the power to do a new thing. As such, our tendency to identify him primarily as an advocate of nonviolence is part and parcel of what theologian Charles Marsh identifies as the tendency to view the civil rights

³⁵⁹ Williams, "An Analysis of the Conception of Love and Its Influence on Justice in the Thought of Martin Luther King, Jr." *Journal of Religious Ethics* 18:3 (Fall 1990): 15-31.

³⁶⁰ Dorrien, *Social Ethics in the Making*, 395.

movement as “a great civics lesson of a nation’s common hopes.”³⁶¹ The fact that the civil rights movement is seen as a great civics lesson speaks to the way the public, King scholars, and perhaps even Christians, view King’s theological and political contributions primarily in relation to the formal structures of the nation and its government frameworks. That is, King’s reflections on the task of Christian ethics are articulated in relation to but are also limited by the formal state structures of the government, particularly in its role as the sole legitimate wielder of violence.

On the contrary, King’s contributions to political theology extend far beyond nonviolence. We fail to reap the wealth of King’s theological and political legacy if we understand his concept of *agape* to be exclusively or even primarily expressed in nonviolent protest. The context of the civil rights movement dictated that King develop his political practice vis-à-vis the *de jure* and *de facto* injustices legitimized by the American state, but nonviolent resistance constitutes but one example of the agapic activity that King calls for from Christian communities. I argue that King’s conception of *agape* includes any activity that creates and preserves community—whether this community is the church, the nation, or even family, friendship, or intimate partnership. Thus, the political ramifications of *agape* are better imagined more broadly as those activities that have the power to *create* certain qualities of relationship or social spaces marked by reconciliation and justice. King describes love as “the most durable power in the world,”³⁶² as “a creative force in the universe that works to bring the disconnected

³⁶¹ Charles Marsh, *The Beloved Community: How Faith Shapes Social Justice from the Civil Rights Movement to Today* (New York: Basic Books, 2005), 6.

³⁶² King, *Strength to Love*, 56.

aspects of reality into a harmonious whole.”³⁶³ Indeed, King often invokes *creative* power when he discusses the nature of love. Just as Marsh seeks to “reinvest the civil rights movement of its deep soul by interpreting the civil rights movement as theological drama...a plotline that far exceeds the movement’s significant political or economic achievements,” I aim to reinvest King’s contributions to political theology with a theological significance that far exceeds the movement’s implementation of nonviolence.³⁶⁴ In order to do so, I suggest we focus less on love or justice *per se* but the creative power that King sees as marking the activities of each.

III. Old Things: King’s Separation of *Agape* and *Eros*

King’s earliest articulations of his understanding of *agape* often position it over and against the more ‘worldly’ loves of *philia* and *eros*. This strand of King’s thought is clearly drawn from and informed by the standard accounts of *agape* in Protestant social ethics. As we saw in Chapter Two, this account, developed by Anders Nygren, Reinhold Niebuhr, and others, conceptualizes *agape* through the rubric of divine self-sacrifice. It thus emphasizes the disinterested, detached, and spontaneous nature of love in a way that a number of feminists find problematic. It is a love unmotivated by any benefit to the person doing the loving and it is not prompted by the value, qualities, or merits of the person being loved. In fact, this love is so pure that it is often imagined as an otherworldly love, the love of God acting through the vehicle of the human agent, untainted by worldliness of any kind. A number of feminists also criticize this conception

³⁶³ King, “An Experiment in Love,” *A Testament of Hope*, 20.

³⁶⁴ Marsh, *Beloved Community*, 6.

of *agape* as individualistic because it does not attend to the reciprocal relations between people in the act of loving.

This conception of *agape* is present in King's thought throughout his career. His embrace of love as a political practice certainly moves beyond Niebuhr's account of *agape* as relevant but not directly applicable to politics, and he begins to emphasize the redemptive, transformative potential of *agape* to initiate a "new age," but King nevertheless continues to appeal to the Greek distinctions between *agape* and *eros* and even associates this division with the division between public and private. As the feminist criticisms we considered in Chapter Two indicate, his account thus maintains a problematic reliance on gendered notions of love that carry the potential to associate *agape* with public life (and therefore men) and *philia* and *eros* with private life (and therefore women). Such associations do not portend well for women's participation in political and theological communities and fail to overturn the gendered dualisms that denigrate women's dignity.

King clearly inherits his early understanding of *agape* from the dominant Protestant tradition that construes *agape* as disinterested and detached. As Preston Williams points out in his analysis of King's understanding of love, this conception omits mutual, reciprocal, and emotional elements, instead maintaining *agape* as an abstract, detached kind of love. In fact, in his early writings, King's descriptions of *agape* sound as though they were taken straight from Nygren's text. In "A View of the Cross Possessing Biblical and Spiritual Justification," a paper King wrote in 1950 for Professor Davis' course, "Christian Theology," at Crozer Theological Seminary, King cites Nygren's conception of *agape*. King describes the sacrifice of Christ on the cross as an example of

agapic love: “The divine love is purely spontaneous and unceasing in character. God does not allow his love to be determined or limited by man’s worth or worthlessness. This divine love, in short, is sacrificial in nature.”³⁶⁵ Two years later, in January of 1952, now at Boston University doing his doctorate in theology, King refers again to Nygren’s *Agape and Eros* in a paper written for Professor DeWolf’s seminar in systematic theology. He notes Nygren’s contrast between the Greek *eros* and *agape*, describing *eros* as loving “in proportion to value of the object” and *agape* as “‘spontaneous and uncaused,’ ‘indifferent to human merit’...It flows down from God into the transient, sinful world.”³⁶⁶ This understanding of *agape* lays the foundation for King’s own conception of love during his days as a student and continues to inform his understanding of *agape* throughout his career.

While King begins to emphasize not only the divine, disinterested, and detached notions of *agape* but also its redemptive, transformative potential as the movement gets underway, King nevertheless continues to appeal to the ancient Greek distinctions between various forms of love and is quick to distinguish between *agape*, *eros*, and *philia*. Even more problematically, he begins to associate *agape* and *eros* with public and private. Although King still refers to love in the Niebuhrian sense of a “regulating ideal,” he insists on the relevance of love in action, connecting *agape* with his public campaign of nonviolent resistance. In “The Montgomery Story,” an address given to the Forty-Seventh annual NAACP Convention in June of 1956, King describes the love that was

³⁶⁵ Martin Luther King, Jr. *The Papers of Martin Luther King Jr. Vol. I*, eds. Clayborne Carson, Ralph E. Luker, and Penny A. Russell (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992), 267.

³⁶⁶ Martin Luther King, Jr. *The Papers of Martin Luther King Jr. Vol. II*, eds. Clayborne Carson, Ralph E. Luker, Penny A. Russell, and Peter Holloran (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), 127.

present in the Montgomery Bus Boycott: "The Greeks talked of so many types of love. But we are not talking about *eros* in Montgomery, we are talking about *agape*... We are talking about a love which seeks nothing in return... That is a higher type of love."³⁶⁷ Just a month later in "Non-Aggression Procedures to Interracial Harmony," an address delivered at the American Baptist Assembly and American Home Mission Agencies Conference, King says that *agape* is "the type of love that can redeem. It is a transforming love. And this is the type of love that we talk about, and that we are supposed to live about in this method of nonviolent resistance. It is a love that can change individuals. It can change nations. It can change conditions."³⁶⁸ Thus, despite these innovations, King maintains his understanding of *agape* as opposed to *eros*.

Indeed, even in November 1957, King is still referring to the Greek divisions of love. In his sermon, "Loving your Enemies," King draws on the Greek to make clear that in his estimation, only *agape* qualifies as divine love, while *eros* and *philia* remain tainted by emotion and reciprocity and are thereby dismissed as worldly forms of love:

The meaning of love is not to be confused with some sentimental outpouring. Love is something much deeper than emotional bosh. Perhaps the Greek language can clear our confusion at this point. In the Greek New Testament are three words for love. The word *eros* is a sort of aesthetic or romantic love... The second word is *philia*, a reciprocal love and the intimate affection and friendship between friends... The third word is *agape*, understanding and creative, redemptive will for

³⁶⁷ King, *The Papers of Martin Luther King Jr. Vol. III*, eds. Clayborne Carson, Stewart Burns, Susan Carson, Peter Holloran, and Dana L.H. Powell (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), 306.

³⁶⁸ "Non-Aggression Procedures to Interracial Harmony," *King Papers, Vol. III*, 327. "But then the Greek comes out with something higher, something that is strong, something that is more powerful than *eros* or any other type of love. It talks about *agape*, and *agape* is understanding goodwill for all men. *Agape* seeks nothing in return. It is a redemptive love. It is a love of God working within men. And so when men move to the point of *agape*, they love not because the individuals are so wealthful to them, not because it's anything they like so much about the individuals, but they love them because God loves them. They love them because they are wealthful to God, and this is the meaning of *agape*. It is a love that loves a person that does an evil deed, while hating the deed that the person does."

all men... When Jesus bids us to love our enemies, he is speaking neither of *eros* nor *philia*; he is speaking of *agape*.”³⁶⁹

In this passage, King appeals to the Greek divisions of love but uses them to argue that only *agape* qualifies as public love, while *eros* and *philia* remain appropriate only in private. He argues that the kind of love Jesus admonishes us to have as Christians is neither that of romantic love or friendship, but *agape*. In effect, *philia* and *eros* are disassociated from the public ministry of Jesus and therefore Christian discipleship. King draws a contrast between these loves and *agape*, which he identifies as a love relevant beyond friendship and intimate relationships to the political practice of nonviolence and social, cultural and political conditions of nations. *Agape* goes public while *philia* and *eros* remain private. Invoking these distinctions effectively allows King to deny *eros* and *philia* the same kind of public relevance as *agape*. Only *agape* is baptized for public, political use. As Williams notes “Although he constantly cited the three Greek words for love—*eros*, *philia*, and *agape*—he utilized only the understanding of love as *agape* in his application of love to society or social change.”³⁷⁰ The result is that although King emphasizes the importance of love to the public realm, his conception of love in public exhibits an “absence...of the emotional and affectional elements.”³⁷¹ Thus, these passages indicate something of the movement of King’s conception of *agape*. In his early student papers, King demonstrates that his conception of *agape* is heavily informed by Nygren, Niebuhr, and others. As the movement begins in Montgomery, he begins to

³⁶⁹ King, *Strength to Love*, 52.

³⁷⁰ Preston Williams, “An Analysis of the Conception of Love and Its Influence on Justice in the Thought of Martin Luther King, Jr.” *Journal of Religious Ethics* 18:2 (Fall 1990), 24.

³⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 24

insist on love as a political practice but continues to refer to the Greek divisions of love and his understanding of love as disinterested and self-sacrificial. Unfortunately, this conception not only distinguishes *agape* as a divine love from *eros* as a worldly love, it associates *agape* with public life and *eros* with the private.

I say unfortunately because King's reliance on the dominant tradition's understanding of *agape* as divine, detached, and otherworldly carries potentially negative consequences for the place and role of women in King's theo-political vision. Recall the feminist reconstructions of *agape* that we examined in Chapter Two; it is important to keep in mind not only how these feminists reconstruct the ideas of *agape*, but *why* they do so. We need to attend to what aspects of the dominant tradition feminists aim to correct. In each case, they aim to correct a dualism that becomes gendered and thereby threatens to denigrate women. Feminists like Andolsen worry that *agape* as self-sacrifice tends to be expected only of women in the private realm. As she puts it, "The contemporary overemphasis on self-sacrifice as the central Christian virtue is based upon an uncritical acceptance of the dichotomy between the private and public spheres of life."³⁷² With disinterestedness and detachment, feminists combat a disembodied notion that privileges mind over body and therefore men over women. Heyward aims to combat the division of loves because she sees it as based on a devaluation of the body, while Brock uses the metaphor of heart in an effort to look "beyond false polarities."³⁷³ As McFague argues, "In Christianity our first birth has been strangely neglected... Christianity, alienated as it always has been from female sexuality, has been willing to

³⁷² Barbara Andolsen, "Agape in Feminist Ethics," *Journal of Religious Ethics* 9:1 (Spring 1981): 74, 78.

³⁷³ Rita Brock, *Journeys By Heart: A Christology of Erotic Power* (New York: Crossroad, 1988), xvi.

imagine the second, 'spiritual,' renewal of existence in the birth metaphor, but not the first, 'physical,' coming into existence."³⁷⁴ Thus, the overall thrust here is to reject a division between public and private, and material and spiritual, moving rather towards a holistic understanding of love that recognizes the importance of community on all its levels. Because King does not adequately challenge the traditional conception of *agape*, he ultimately does not challenge the undergirding dualisms of *agape* and *eros*, public and private that feminists find problematic.

Williams underscores this problem. He notes that "*eros* or passion was also missing from King's conception of love. In light of the way in which both Tillich and King expressed their sexuality more needs to be said, but not in this essay, about the consequence this may have had for their failure to accord full equality, dignity, and respect to women."³⁷⁵ These comments suggest that King's refusal of *philia* and especially *eros* in his conception of *agape* should not be dismissed as rhetorical flourish, but examined as being of central importance to understanding King's silence on gender injustice and his own failure to respect women. I argue what Williams implies: that King's underplaying of *eros* and *philia*, which King rules out as relevant to Christ's public mission, and the traditional identification of *eros* with the private realm and therefore women, is directly related to King's failure to advocate for women's justice. Furthermore, King's omission of *eros* and *philia* from his conception of love leaves unconsidered the potential relevance of these forms of love for the public realm. In effect,

³⁷⁴ Sally McFague, "God as Mother." *Weaving The Visions: New Patterns in Feminist Spirituality*, eds. Judith Plaskow and Carol P. Christ (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1989), 146.

³⁷⁵ Williams, "Love and Justice," 24

King fails to challenge the public/private distinction and the mind/body dualisms that these feminists have identified as pernicious.

In fact, King exacerbates these associations, often privileging the spirit over the body. In other passages that explicate the meaning of *agape*, King more clearly associates *eros* with bodily desire and affection. And he also identifies the reciprocal “taint” of *philia* that threatens its purity—the very taint that Heyward critiques in the tradition’s conception of *agape*. King argues:

eros is a sign of aesthetic love...it boils down to a romantic love. It is craving for something, and it has with it a bit of affection, an affectionate feeling ... And then there is another type of love that we talk about a great deal, it’s a love that we have for personal friends. The Greek talks about it in *philia*. And it is a type of love, it stands on the basis of reciprocity. It has with it that mutual taint; it loves because it is loved.³⁷⁶

King’s comment that *eros* is “a craving for something” suggests the corrupting influence of bodily desire. And his description of *philia* as having a mutual taint suggests that it is somehow less than a spiritual love. He describes these loves in opposition to *agape* as a “pure” form of love.

This privileging of the spirit over the body, this desire to keep *agape* pure of the reciprocal elements of *philia* and *eros*, also appears in King’s discussion of his doctrine of human beings, where King falls back on gendered associations that privilege the spirit over the body. In “What is Man?,” King writes:

Now let us notice first that man is a biological being with a physical body. This is why the psalmist says, ‘Thou has made him less than God.’ We don’t think of God as a being with a body. God is a being of pure spirit, lifted above the categories of time and space; but man, being less than God, is in time ... This is what the biblical writers mean when they say that man is made in the image of

³⁷⁶ King, “Non-Aggression Procedures to Interracial Harmony,” *King Papers*, Vol. III, 327.

God. Man has rational capacities; he has the unique ability to have fellowship with God. Man is a being of spirit ... You look at me and you think you see Martin Luther King. You don't see Martin Luther King; you see my body, but, you must understand, my body can't think, my body can't reason. You don't see the me that makes me me. You can never see my personality.³⁷⁷

King goes on to say that "there is nothing wrong with having a body," but if we picture God the Creator as pure spirit and we understand that our being made in the image of God means that we too are creatures of spirit, then this suggests that the body is subordinate to the spirit in some way. And if we associate women with the body, as feminist theologians suggest the Christian tradition does, then we are not thinking of women as partaking in God's creative capacities as fully as men do.

Of course, in his appeals to the Greek divisions of love, King clearly sought to avoid what Niebuhr would characterize as an understanding of love as mere sentiment unrelated to the workings of power at the institutional or structural level. Scholars offer various explanations of King's reasons for distinguishing *agape* from *philia* and *eros*, and it seems to me that each has merit. According to Williams, King's relegation of *eros* and *philia* to the private realm results from King's view that *agape* is a commandment.³⁷⁸ Eric Gregory argues that King draws on these distinctions in order to stress that love is not unrelated to structures of power.³⁷⁹ Jonathan Rieder argues that King distinguishes *agape* in order to ensure blacks that they need not like white people in order to love

³⁷⁷ Martin Luther King, Jr. *Measure of a Man* (Philadelphia: Pilgrim Press, 1959), 20, 27, 57.

³⁷⁸ Williams, "Love and Justice," 22.

³⁷⁹ Gregory, *Politics and the Order of Love*, 195.

them.³⁸⁰ But, in a sense, King overstates his case. In order to make it clear that one is not required to love the oppressor as friend or lover, he defines *agape* in such a way to suggest that it never draws on such loves.

As we will see, one of the consequences of this inattention to *eros* and *philia* is that it obscures an important element in King's conception of love that draws on these forms of love, namely his conviction that love is a *creative* power. Thus, King's inattention to *eros* and *philia* undercuts a prominent theme within his own work that provides a space for thinking about the value of *eros* and *philia* to the public realm. King's definition of *agape* as a public love has negative consequences for valuing not only the role of *eros* and *philia* in politics, then, but also the role *agape* should play in other forms of community such as families and intimate relationships. King fails to consider the roles of *philia* and *eros* in God's redemptive activity as well as the need for *agape* in "private" relationships.

As his description of love as a "creative power" suggests, King's efforts to distinguish between *agape* and *eros*, his reliance on the old things of the dominant tradition, actually run against the grain of his own best thought. Although King was quick to clarify that *agape* is not "emotional bosh," that when he speaks of love he is not appealing to worldly sentiment or emotions, but an otherworldly divine love, if we continue to trace King's discussions of love throughout the civil rights movement, it becomes clear that his thought and practice actually draw on all manner of worldly loves in order to inspire and motivate actors within the civil rights movement as well as to

³⁸⁰ See Jonathan Rieder, *The Word of the Lord is Upon Me: The Righteous Performance of Martin Luther King, Jr.* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2008), 343.

appeal to the conscience of the nation. As James Gilman argues, "...the powerful passion that King denies of love in theory is precisely the power that allows him to speak of love as 'a potent force for social change.'"³⁸¹ King's explanation of *agape* as the love relevant to the public realm thus begins to seem at odds with his reliance in practice on the worldly elements of love typically associated with *philia* and *eros*. Thus, alongside this traditional strand of thought on *agape* that partakes of the old things, we can begin to detect the presence of a new thing in King's conception of *agape*. These new things were present from King's earliest writings but obscured by his attempts to rely on the old things of the dominant tradition. But as the movement gets underway, this divine love of old becomes incarnate in the worldly forms of this life. This *agape* begins to sound a lot less like Nygren and Niebuhr and a lot more like the feminists in Chapter Two who put forward a new conception of *agape* as a divine, yet entirely 'worldly' love.

IV. New Things: King's Feminist Conception of *Agape*

At the same time, then, that King clings to the things of old in the Protestant tradition's understanding of *agape*, his efforts to put this divine love into human practice also reveal new things in his understanding of love. In contrast to the traditional conception in Protestant social ethics of *agape* as self-sacrificial, disinterested, and detached, King joins a number of feminists in putting forward a reconstructed *agape* that draws on the mutuality, intimacy, and passion of *philia* and *eros*. Although the old things continue to linger in King's discussions of love, the new nevertheless manages to emerge.

³⁸¹ James Gilman, *Fidelity of Heart: An Ethic of Christian Virtue* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 186.

Like the feminists we considered in Chapter Two, King emphasizes the importance of self-love, of our mutual interconnectedness as persons, and the power of the erotic to articulate his understanding of Christian love.

One core element of King's thought that commends it as a resource for developing an eschatological political theology is his embrace of love as a political virtue. As I mentioned earlier, King's political appeal to love marks his departure from Niebuhr's own view that love remains relevant to the political realm as a regulating ideal but not directly relevant as a concrete possibility. This innovation on King's part places him in good stead with feminist theologians who contend that the tradition of 20th century Protestant social ethics tends to exile love from the public realm.³⁸² Contrary to those who position justice as a public norm, and love as a private norm, King calls for a "creative synthesis of love and justice" that endears him to feminists weary of claims regarding love's irrelevance to public morality. In fact, Preston Williams notes that part of the importance of love for King resides in its relevance to all realms of life. "The importance of love," Williams writes, "stemmed in part from the fact that it was present in both the private and public sphere, determining the character of the individuals and the policies of the institutions that constituted the society and the state."³⁸³ On this account, love pervades all of life and informs both public and private action; because love proves central to human life in its entirety, there is no sense in which love can be partitioned off

³⁸² This is a common feminist claim about Reinhold Niebuhr's conception of love and justice. See, for example, Barbara Andolsen, "Agape in Feminist Ethics," *Journal of Religious Ethics* 9:1 (Spring 1981): 69-83. Andolsen argues that Niebuhr's identification of *agape* with self-sacrifice locates mutual love in the private realm and justice in the public realm. Rosemary Radford Ruether, Beverly Wildung Harrison, Daphne Hampson, and Sheila D. Collins make similar claims. See Rebekeh Miles, *Bonds of Freedom*, for an excellent discussion of these criticisms.

³⁸³ Williams, "Love and Justice," 18.

from public life. Indeed, as King makes clear, the religious understanding of love as *agape* that he invokes to motivate social change derives from the familial love he experienced during childhood. In the same year that King was drawing from Nygren's account of *agape* in his seminary course with Professor Davis in 1950, King wrote another paper, "An Autobiography of Religious Development," in which he described the love of God in terms of the familial love of his home. "It is quite easy for me to think of a God of love," he writes, "mainly because I grew up in a family where love was central and where lovely relationships were ever present. It is quite easy for me to think of the universe as basically friendly mainly because of my uplifting hereditary and environmental circumstances."³⁸⁴ Echoing McFague's descriptions of divine love as parental love, King connects this love that was present in the 'private' realm of his family and friends with God's love, leading him to view the universe—let alone the public realm—as a realm of friendship. King's reference to the universe points to his view of love as an ontological reality that binds all of life, both public and private, together: "the highest good is love. This principle is at the center of the cosmos. It is the great unifying force of life. God is love. He who loves has discovered the clue to the meaning of ultimate reality; he who hates stand in immediate candidacy for nonbeing."³⁸⁵ Love thus creates and sustains all that is—regardless of whether we associate it with the public or private realm. In this sense, King joins the feminists mentioned in Chapter Two in rejecting the relegation of love to the private realm and even suggests that familial love provides the foundation for a proper understanding of love's public significance.

³⁸⁴ King, "An Autobiography of Religious Development," *King Papers, Vol. I*, 360.

³⁸⁵ King, *Strength to Love*, 144.

This resonance between King and the feminist accounts of Chapter Two does not end at their embrace of love as a public reality; their descriptions of love itself bear remarkable similarity. As we saw, feminist interventions into the discussion regarding love and justice in 20th century Protestant social ethics not only criticize the tradition for identifying *agape* as the only publicly relevant form of love but for separating *agape* as a public ideal (that merely regulates and informs our efforts to achieve justice) from the mutual and intimate loves of *philia* and *eros*. Rather than describing *agape* as self-sacrificial love, feminists point to the importance of self-love. Rather than affirming the disinterested nature of *agape*, feminists call for mutuality. Rather than insisting upon *agape* as detached and emotionless, feminists emphasize the importance of passion. And rather than focusing on *agape* as the activity of an individual self, feminists construe *agape* as a community-creating force. Like these feminists who aim to reconstruct dominant notions of *agape* as the sacrificial, disinterested, detached activity of God working through individual human selves, King describes love in terms of mutuality, intimacy, and community.

A) *Agape* as Self-Sacrifice

As I demonstrated in Chapter Two, some of the prominent feminist criticisms—including those of Goldstein, Andolsen, and Harrison—challenge the traditional conception of *agape* as self-sacrifice. While King does not explicitly critique understandings of *agape* as self-sacrifice, he does join these feminists in emphasizing the importance of self-love. Just as these feminists aim to correct a tendency on the part of women to err in the direction of self-sacrifice and non-assertiveness, King bids the black

community to affirm its “somebodyness” in the face of racial oppression. In his discussion of the Montgomery bus boycott, King writes:³⁸⁶

Once plagued with a tragic sense of inferiority resulting from the crippling effects of slavery and segregation, the Negro has now been driven to re-evaluate himself. He has come to feel that he is somebody. His religion reveals to him that God loves all his children and that the important thing about man is not his specificity but his fundamentum, not the texture of his hair or the color of his skin but his eternal worth to God.”³⁸⁷

As Richard Wayne Wills, Sr. notes, King appeals to the *imago Dei* to articulate this ‘eternal worth’ possessed by each individual. Far from extolling the virtue of selflessness, King recognized that most members of the black community needed the opposite: an affirmation of their significance as selves. King affirms that “self-affirmation includes both a proper self-love and a properly propositioned love of others...the right kind of self-love and the right kind of love of others are interdependent.”³⁸⁸ Citing Rabbi Joshua Liebman’s book *Peace of Mind* which includes a chapter titled “Love Thyself Properly,” King notes, “Many people have been plunged into the abyss of emotional fatalism because they did not love themselves properly. So every individual has a responsibility to be concerned about himself enough to discover what he is made for ... Love yourself, if that means rational, healthy, and more self-interest. You are commanded to do that ... Love your neighbor as yourself. You are commanded to do that.”³⁸⁹ Wills argues that

³⁸⁶ See Garth Baker-Fletcher, *Somebodyness: Martin Luther King, Jr. and the Theory of Dignity*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993.

³⁸⁷ Martin Luther King, Jr., *Stride Toward Freedom: The Montgomery Story* (New York: Harper, 1958), 190.

³⁸⁸ King, *Strength to Love*, 118.

³⁸⁹ King, *The Measure of a Man*, 44-45, 57.

King's strides toward effecting "this change in racial self-perception," of getting blacks to "overcome a sense of nobodiness and to develop a healthy self-love and a sense of Somebodyness...represented, perhaps, the movement's greatest achievement."³⁹⁰ Indeed, King rejects segregation because of the way it communicates and reinforces this sense of nobodyness. As King is fond of saying, segregation treats people as things, it

substitutes an 'I-it' relationship for the 'I-thou' relationship, and relegates persons to the status of things. It scars the soul and degrades the personality. It inflicts the segregated with a false sense of inferiority, while confirming the segregator in a false estimate of his own superiority. It destroys community and makes brotherhood impossible.³⁹¹

This appeal to "somebodyness" also finds a central place in his 1963 appeal to the white ministers of Birmingham in "Letter from Birmingham Jail," where King explains that the time has come to challenge segregation because of the way it creates a sense of "nobodiness:" "when you are forever fighting a degenerating sense of 'nobodiness'—then you will understand why we find it difficult to wait."³⁹²

This is not, of course, to say that sacrifice has no place in King's understanding of *agape*; in fact, *agape* in action through nonviolent resistance involves "a willingness to accept suffering without retaliation, to accept blows from the opponent without striking back."³⁹³ As we saw, one of the understandings King inherits from Nygren is an

³⁹⁰ Richard Wayne Wills, Sr., *Martin Luther King, Jr. and the Image of God* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 210.

³⁹¹ King, *Strength to Love*, 141.

³⁹² King, *Why We Can't Wait*, 70.

³⁹³ King, "An Experiment in Love," *A Testament of Hope*, 18.

understanding of *agape* as sacrifice.³⁹⁴ On later occasions, King still defines *agape* in this way. In “Facing the Challenge of a New Age,” delivered in December 1956 to the NAACP meeting at Vermont Avenue Baptist Church in Washington, D.C., King says, “The other word for love of which I am speaking tonight is the word *agape* meaning sacrificial, productive brotherly love as exemplified by Christ on the Cross.”³⁹⁵ Indeed, a number of feminist and womanist theologians often criticize King’s view of the value of unmerited suffering, arguing that it valorizes suffering and condones the abuse of women.³⁹⁶

But it is important to note that, for King, there is a difference between sacrifice and self-sacrifice. Sacrifice is voluntary and results in the affirmation of self and community. Self-sacrifice violates one’s dignity as a creature of God. Sacrifice is productive; self-sacrifice, destructive. Thus, self-sacrifice, as these feminists understand it—as a denial of self-love that neglects one individual in order to aggrandize the other—is not what King has in mind. Furthermore, these feminist criticisms often erroneously suggest that King views suffering as *necessary*. They overlook the difference between involuntary and voluntary suffering and therefore assume that King glorifies any kind of

³⁹⁴ In “A View of the Cross Possessing Biblical and Spiritual Justification,” one of his papers written at Crozer Theological Seminary in 1950, King follows Nygren and argues that “divine love...is sacrificial in its nature. This truth was symbolized...by the death of Christ....” See King, *King Papers Vol. I*, 267.

³⁹⁵ King, “Facing the Challenge of a New Age,” *King Papers, Vol. III*, 459.

³⁹⁶ Brown and Parker argue, for example, that “King sees suffering as necessary because the very suffering of the victims of injustice will cause change by inspiring evil doers to change... The problem with this theology is that it asks people to suffer for the sake of helping evildoers see their evil ways. It puts concern for the evildoer ahead of concern for the victim of evil. It makes victims the servants of the evildoer’s salvation,” *Christianity, Patriarchy, and Abuse: A Feminist Critique*, eds. Joanne Carlson Brown and Carole R. Bohn (New York: Pilgrim Press, 1989), 20. Similarly, although not in reference to King, Linda Woodhead urges us not to connect love and self-sacrifice, in part because self-sacrifice idealizes suffering. See “Love and Justice,” *Studies in Christian Ethics* 5:1 (1992), 51.

suffering, even viewing suffering as a requirement for salvation. On King's view, however, suffering is neither required nor necessary, but, rather, willingly accepted as the consequence of living a life of radical love. Any suffering that results from the person's voluntary choice to submit oneself to its possibility is rendered meaningful by being interpreted as having redemptive value. Although King understands suffering as possessing the potential to be transformed into a redeeming experience, he does not understand *agape* itself in terms of self-sacrifice or even voluntary suffering. As we will see, for King, *agape* may involve sacrifice but this kind of sacrifice involves not a denial of self but its affirmation in order to create community. Thus, *agape* pertains not to the individual self but to the self as part of a community.

B) *Agape* as Mutual and Interested

As I discussed in Chapter Two, another set of feminist criticisms—articulated by Andolsen, Harrison, Woodhead, McFague, Ruether, and Farley, among others—challenges conceptions of *agape* as disinterested and detached. The embrace of *agape* as a mutual and interested love found in these feminists' work echo King's own "relational ontology" of persons.³⁹⁷ He rejects the myth of the independent self and calls attention to the nature of the self as relational and interdependent. King's primary battle cry against injustice is that it tears at the fabric of our mutual existence and destiny. In his letter to the white clergy of Birmingham, King writes: "Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere. We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single

³⁹⁷ Kathryn Tanner, "The Care that Does Justice: Recent Writings in Feminist Ethics and Theology," *Journal of Religious Ethics* 24:1 (Spring 1996), 179.

garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly.”³⁹⁸ King’s reference to this inescapable network of mutuality—a theme that pervades his work—resonates with Harrison’s insistence on the “deep, total sociality of all things.” For example, in his 1961 sermon, “The Man Who was a Fool,” King concludes that “The rich man was a fool because he failed to realize his dependence on others.”³⁹⁹ In “Transformed Nonconformist,” King rejects “compassionless detachment and arrogant individualism.”⁴⁰⁰ In the 1962-63 “On Being a Good Neighbor,” he proclaims, “I must not ignore the wounded man on life’s Jericho Road, because he is part of me and I am a part of him. His agony diminishes me, and his salvation enlarges me.”⁴⁰¹ In each of these sermons, King challenges his listeners to see that their own lives and actions are deeply implicated in those of their neighbors. Rather than maintaining the fiction that we are all isolated, self-contained selves, King puts himself in the company of these feminists who bid us to recognize our dependence on others and advocates the mutual love that our reality as interdependent selves requires.

Another characteristic of the feminist accounts, and in particular McFague’s, that we discussed in Chapter Two is a rejection of the idea that *agape* is a disinterested kind of love. Interestingly, McFague’s parental model for *agape* calls to mind King’s own

³⁹⁸ King, *Why We Can’t Wait*, 65. Or as he puts in one of his sermons: “All of this tells us something basic about the interdependence of men and nations. Whether we realize it or not, each of us is eternally ‘in the red.’ We are everlasting debtors to known and unknown men and women... Before we leave for our jobs we are beholden to more than half the world. In a real sense, all life is interrelated. All men are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny... This is the interrelated structure of reality,” King, *Strength to Love*, 72.

³⁹⁹ King, *Strength to Love*, 71.

⁴⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 23.

⁴⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 38.

claim that he learned the meaning of God's love through the love he experienced from his parents. Indeed, despite King's statement that *agape* is "unmotivated" and "disinterested," at other times his statements express McFague's concept of God's love as impartial and inclusive. In fact, already between 1951 and 1955 it appears that King begins to rethink Nygren's understanding of love as spontaneous, divine love. He argues "God's love has breadth. (It is all inclusive)... Moreover God's love is spontaneous [crossed out and then replaced with] impartial."⁴⁰² King's replacing of spontaneous with impartial demonstrates the tension between his understanding of *agape*, as informed by the old things of the received Protestant tradition, and his own conception of *agape* that was coming into being during his involvement in the movement. It is as if King recognizes the use of "disinterested" and "spontaneous" as failed attempts to convey the impartial, inclusive character of God's love. Thus, King intends not to imply a lack of interest on God's part with his use of the word disinterested but rather to communicate the impartial, universal character of God's love.

C) *Agape as Eros*

Like the feminists and womanists, such as Heyward, Brock, and Hunter, who insist that we cannot fully understand *agape* without reference to *philia* and *eros*, King draws on the language of *philia* and *eros* to convey the meaning of God's love. Throughout his thought, King invokes the love of family, friends, and lovers to explain the love that fuels the movement. In fact, King often uses the metaphor of friendship to describe the goal of the movement: the aim is not to "seek defeat or humiliate the enemy but to win his

⁴⁰² King, "God's Love," *King Papers*, Vol. II, 327.

friendship and understanding.”⁴⁰³ In his 1963 “I Have a Dream” speech, King articulates the aim of the movement with an image of his children and the children of former slave owners sitting down at the table as friends. King also frequently uses familial metaphors to describe the goal of the movement: to work for a brotherhood of man. These friend-and family-oriented metaphors appear to be the maturation of ideas already present in King’s 1950 essay, “Six Talks Based on Beliefs that Matter by William Adams Brown,” where he relies on parental metaphors to convey our relationship with God and the nature of God’s love for humanity. “Each Christian should believe that he is a member of a larger family of which God is the Father. Jesus expresses the view throughout the gospels that we are members of one family, meant to live as brothers and to express our brotherhood in helpfulness.”⁴⁰⁴ In response to the question “What is Man?” King answers that “Man is a child of God.”⁴⁰⁵ He invokes the “home” as a way of conveying God’s undying love for human beings, explaining that the parable of the prodigal son demonstrates the type of love God has for us: “This is the glory of our religion: that when man decided to rise up from his mistakes, from his sin, from his evil, there is a loving God saying, ‘Come home, I still love you.’”⁴⁰⁶ Indeed, in a 1950 essay, “What Shall We Think About the Church,” King describes the church as home. “It is the

⁴⁰³ King, *Strength to Love*, 51.

⁴⁰⁴ King, “Six Talks Based on Belief that Matter by William Adams Brown,” *King Papers*, Vol. I, 281.

⁴⁰⁵ King, *Measure of a Man*, 24.

⁴⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, 33.

place of the church to make people feel at home...in the deep and abiding sense of finding peace in the fellowship which we have with one another.”⁴⁰⁷

In addition to the mutual love of friends and of parents and children, King also draws on the mutual love of intimate relationships. He evokes *eros* to convey the posture which participants in the movement should take towards their political action. Describing the willingness to accept suffering in the practice of nonviolent resistance in 1958, King says “If going to jail is necessary, he enters it ‘as a bridegroom enters the bride’s chamber.’”⁴⁰⁸ King relies here on an understanding of *eros* to describe part of the process *agape* initiates. Thus, it is not that *eros* plays no part in the activity of *agape*. In this case, it is necessary to accept one’s suffering with a passion akin to that of embracing one’s lover. Furthermore, statements from friends and colleagues of King suggest that the charismatic power of King’s presence itself possessed an erotic dimension.⁴⁰⁹ Thus, despite his insistences that *agape* is different from *eros*, King nevertheless describes the love of the civil rights movement in ways that draw on the passion of *eros*.

D) *Agape* as Community Creating

Some of the feminist conceptions of *agape* that I discussed in Chapter Two, such as Woodhead’s, Cady’s, and Harrison’s, also make a radical departure from the dominant conception of *agape* as self-sacrifice in Protestant social ethics by interpreting *agape*

⁴⁰⁷ King, “What Shall We Think About the Church,” *King Papers Vol. I*, 286.

⁴⁰⁸ King, “An Experiment in Love,” *A Testament of Hope*, 18.

⁴⁰⁹ Ralph Abernathy reports in his autobiography that King “...was a man who attracted women, even when he didn’t intend to, and attracted them in droves.” *And the Walls Came Tumbling Down: An Autobiography*, 471.

through the rubric of community. Remarkably, King takes the same path of departure. His incorporation of mutuality and passion into his conception of *agape* leads him, like these feminists, to affirm the role of *agape* in creating community relationships. As King puts it just as the movement was getting underway in 1958:

Agape is love seeking to preserve and create community. It is insistence on community even when one seeks to break it. *Agape* is a willingness to go to any length to restore community...The cross is the eternal expression of the length to which God will go in order to restore broken community. The resurrection is a symbol of God's triumph over all the forces that seek to block community. The Holy Spirit is the continuing community creating reality that moves through history. He who works against community is working against the whole of creation...creation is so designed that my personality can only be fulfilled in the context of community...In the final analysis, *agape* means a recognition of the fact that all life is interrelated. To the degree that I harm my brother, no matter what he is doing to me, to that extent I am harming myself...If you harm me, you harm yourself.⁴¹⁰

Here King makes clear that the sacrifice of the cross was not for the sake of sacrifice itself but for the end of restoring community. He also emphasizes the mutuality that these feminists insist upon, arguing that the self becomes a self only through participation in community. This description of love's aim resonates resoundingly with King's own discussion of the beloved community: "The end is the creation of a beloved community ... [and] the creation of a society where men will live together as brothers...not retaliation but redemption. That is the end we are trying to reach...the old order is dying and the new order is being born."⁴¹¹ *Agape* here is less self-sacrifice and more recognition of our interdependence. In fact, King most often describes our neighbors in the familiar terms of brothers. And his claim that we harm ourselves when we harm our

⁴¹⁰ King, "An Experiment in Love," *A Testament of Hope*, 20.

⁴¹¹ King, *King Papers*, Vol. III, 458.

brothers calls into question the character of *agape* as disinterested, making clear that each individual has a personal stake in loving their brother. In one sense, *philia* and *eros* inform *agape* in critical ways because friendships, families, and intimate relationships are themselves small communities. And it is in these communities that we learn how to love.

Thus, there is a real tension in King's thought on love that reflects both old things present in the dominant understanding of *agape* and new things that both feminist efforts and King's own vision suggest. In tracing the tension between the *agape* King receives from the tradition and the *agape* that he transforms into a political practice as the movement progresses, it is almost as if we can see the new emerging through the old. It is clear that King clings to Nygren's understanding of *agape*, in part, because he wants to avoid the idea that love is mere sentiment. He is trying to avoid detaching love from structures of power or turning love into mere "feeling" as Harrison put it. King says: "Now I realize that in talking so much about love it is very easy to become sentimental. There is the danger that our talk about love will merely be empty words devoid of any practical and true meaning. But when I say love those who oppose you I am not speaking of love in a sentimental or affectionate sense."⁴¹² But it is important to note that King is not saying here that emotional and reciprocal forms of love cannot inform our understanding of *agape*. As his new understanding of love indicates, King also wants to affirm the self-love, mutuality, and embodied nature of love. Indeed, in some sense this is the ultimate goal: that we recognize each other as friends, as part of God's family.

But in doing so, King overstates his case; in trying to make this point, he goes too far and fails to acknowledge that while he is not calling on the black community to feel

⁴¹² Ibid., 458.

philia or *eros* towards whites, these forms of love are certainly not excluded from *agape*. As Harrison's rejection of love as mere "feeling" indicates, feminists do not intend to replace *agape* with affection, emotion, and feeling either. They simply argue that these types of love often inform our understanding of *agape* and at times better reflect the nature of God's love for us than the notion of disinterested, detached love that conceptions of *agape* often put forward. In other words, *agape* refers not to one particular type of love but to all forms of love when they achieve their proper Christian form.⁴¹³ Of course, feminists run the opposite risk. In imagining God's love as *philia* and *eros*, they run the risk of defining God's love too narrowly vis-à-vis the love of friends and lovers. We lose a sense of the commanded, impartial and inclusive nature of love. But the most important point for our purposes is that King's overstatement of *agape*'s disinterested, unemotional nature, his understanding of *agape* that draws heavily on the tradition's penchant for defining *agape* over and against *eros*, reflect more the things of old than the new vision that comes to the fore as the civil rights movement progresses. King's reliance on the old things prevents him from overturning the gendered dualisms these feminists aim to resist, but the new *agape* that emerges in actual practice during the movement embodies the very conception of *agape* that these feminists articulate.

V. New Things: Love as a *Creative Practice*

Granted the centrality of love to King's thought, how might we best understand the practice of love and therefore King's contributions to political theology in a way that does not fall prey to the old things, to understandings of *agape* that position it over and

⁴¹³ Woodhead, "Love and Justice," 55.

against *eros*? I argue that the emphasis in an eschatological ethic—and in particular, the account of womanist Monica Coleman—on human agency as a participation in God’s creative activity and an understanding of this activity as redemptive, highlights the role of creativity in King’s own thought, revealing it to be an important but heretofore neglected aspect of his theology. In fact, in the six-volume *King Papers*, index references to *agape* and *eros* disappear after the fourth volume and are replaced in the sixth with references to creativity. Highlighting the creative nature of love better corresponds with the strand of King’s thinking that resonates with feminists’ reconstructed conceptions of *agape* that incorporate the mutuality, reciprocity, and passion of *philia* and *eros*. Furthermore, recognizing the nature of love as a creative force, and thus the centrality of creativity to King’s thought thus proves crucial for understanding King’s view of the church’s political practice. As we saw earlier, King’s definition of *agape* as “love seeking to preserve and create community” suggests that for King the political is not merely limited to activities that engage the formal structures of the state, such as nonviolent resistance, but any ‘agapic activity’—any activity that seeks to create and sustain community.⁴¹⁴ This section thus identifies community-creating practices at the heart of King’s vision of the political vocation of the church.

A) Theological Anthropology and Conception of Human Agency

As we saw in Chapter Two, womanists’ theological anthropologies affirm the creation of each human being in the image of God and stress human agency as a participation in God’s creative agency. In her postmodern womanist theology, Coleman

⁴¹⁴ King, “An Experiment in Love,” *A Testament of Hope*, 20.

identifies the womanist concept of ‘making a way out of no way’ with that of ‘creative transformation’ in process thought. She describes creative transformation as an understanding of “how we work with God to implement God’s ideals in the world.”⁴¹⁵ This account emphasizes the role of human agency as a continuation of and participation in God’s creative activity. Indeed, Coleman describes her theology as “a normative process of becoming,” as a kind of continual creation.⁴¹⁶ She notes that the “term *creative* affirms the way in which we are created and self-creating in our change.”⁴¹⁷ The notion of making a way out of no way is, in short, “a combination of God’s presentation of possibilities and human decision.”⁴¹⁸ Her account thus holds that because of our creation by God, we are co-creators who work with God to carry on God’s process of creation.

Similarly, King’s view of God as a Creator leads him to a theological anthropology that highlights human beings’ creative capacities. King provides the most direct appeal to human beings’ participation in the creative agency of God in his discussion of marriage. Describing his understanding of the place of sex within marital relationships, King writes, “Sex is basically sacred when it is properly used and ...marriage is man’s greatest prerogative in the sense that it is through and in marriage that God gives man the opportunity to aid him in his creative activity.”⁴¹⁹ But it is clear from King’s view of love as the power of being, as a creative force that reverberates

⁴¹⁵ Monica Coleman, *Making a Way Out of No Way: A Womanist Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2008), 86.

⁴¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 86.

⁴¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 92.

⁴¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 35.

⁴¹⁹ David Garrow, *Bearing the Cross*, 376.

through all that is, that King does not limit human opportunities to aid God in God's creative activity to marriage or sex.

Rather, his discussions of love as a creative power indicate that he sees all of life as human participation in the creative agency of God. In fact, he makes frequent reference to the human task to live creatively and employ our God-given creative powers. In his sermon "Creating the Abundant Life," King says, "Life is something you create. It was always Jesus' conviction that life is worth living and that men through the proper adjustment and attitudes create a meaningful life....Jesus is saying that part of his mission on earth it to help men create the abundant life."⁴²⁰ Just as womanist accounts draw on the *imago Dei* as their source for affirming human being's creative capacities, King comes by his emphasis on creativity through an understanding of God as Creator. "Man," King writes, "that being God created just a little lower than the angels, is able to think a poem and write it; he's able to think a symphony and compose it. He's able to imagine a great civilization and create it."⁴²¹ Counseling against despair in another sermon, King declares that "Our capacity to deal creatively with shattered dreams is ultimately determined by our faith in God...His creative power is not exhausted in this earthly life."⁴²² Again, calling for Western civilization to re-align its priorities, he writes that "Our hope for creative living lies in our ability to reestablish the spiritual ends of our

⁴²⁰ Martin Luther King, Jr., *The Papers of Martin Luther King Jr. Vol. VI*, eds. Clayborne Carson, Susan Carson, Adrienne Clay, Virginia Shadron, and Kieran Taylor (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 188.

⁴²¹ *Ibid.*, 178.

⁴²² King, *Strength to Love*, 96.

lives in personal character and social justice.”⁴²³ In a sermon on how to deal with fear, King states that “This requires the exercise of a creative will that enables us to hew out a stone of hope from a mountain of despair.”⁴²⁴ In each of these examples, King identifies God’s creative power as a living force that human beings are to partake of in struggling against the destructive forces in the universe that threaten against wholeness, integrity, and well-being. Thus, for King, love is not, as other Christian ethicists suggest, merely other-regard, self-sacrifice, or even mutuality, but a creative power. Joining womanists in their efforts to affirm and marshal their own power as creators, King suggests that, as human beings seeking to do the will of a loving, Creator God, we must respond in kind, by embracing our own creative powers.

B) Creative Activity

As we saw in Chapter Two, embracing their creative powers prompts womanists to describe their theological methods in terms of creative activities. Coleman emphasizes that womanist theology itself is an activity. “Postmodern womanist theology is an activity. It is a verb, a gerund.”⁴²⁵ The creative nature of this activity is often conveyed through artistic images. Recall that Coleman describes her work as “braiding,” “pulling together different strands of conversations, scholarships, stories, and experiences into a unity.”⁴²⁶ She also refers to womanist theology as the process of weaving a tapestry. “It

⁴²³ Ibid., 76.

⁴²⁴ Ibid., 119.

⁴²⁵ Ibid., 169.

⁴²⁶ Coleman, *Making a Way*, x.

weaves the past, future, and possibilities offered by God into decisions that lead to survival, quality of life, and liberation for black women.”⁴²⁷ This image of weaving a tapestry calls to mind King’s own conviction about the inter-related structure of creation, that “deeply woven into the fabric of our religious tradition is the conviction that men are made in the image of God,” that “all life is interrelated.” These images picture God as a knitter who knits together our common humanity,⁴²⁸ and King’s reference to the *imago Dei* suggests that human beings’ own agency should be construed through such creative activities.

Indeed, this emphasis on creativity is present in King’s philosophy of nonviolence and method of nonviolent direct action.⁴²⁹ Because scholars usually interpret King’s nonviolent practice as the manifestation of how King relates love and justice, few attend to the role of creativity in King’s discussions of his nonviolent methods. King indeed regarded nonviolent direct action as a practical way of putting Jesus’ love ethic into action, but here again we should attend to love’s creative character. King conceives of nonviolent direct action, first and foremost, as a creative act. “Love is the most durable power in the world,” King writes, “This creative force, so beautifully exemplified in the life of our Christ, is the most potent instrument available in mankind’s quest for peace

⁴²⁷ Ibid., 36.

⁴²⁸ Similarly, Peter Goodwin Heltzel interprets King’s statements about being “tied into a single garment of destiny” as indicating that “Our common humanity, knitted together by the living God, is the reason that humanity will prevail.” See “Radical (Evangelical) Democracy: The Dreams and Nightmares of Martin Luther King, Jr. and Antonio Negri.” *Political Theology* 10:2 (2009), 301.

⁴²⁹ For a discussion of nonviolent resistance (including King’s) as a constructive strategy that expresses and evokes trust, see James F. Childress, “Nonviolent Resistance: Trust and Risk-Taking,” *Journal of Religious Ethics* 1:1 (1973): 87-112.

and security.”⁴³⁰ He refers to acts of civil disobedience as “creative protests.” In sermons he declares that “Human salvation lies in the hands of the creatively maladjusted.”⁴³¹ He writes in “Letter from Birmingham Jail” that “Perhaps the South, the nation and the world are in dire need of creative extremists.”⁴³² In the same letter, King describes the creative function of nonviolent protest as dramatizing tension and the presence of conflict. “Nonviolent direct action,” he writes, “seeks to *create* such a crisis and foster such a tension that a community which has constantly refused to negotiate is forced to confront the issue.”⁴³³ King is clear that the creation of this tension has not a destructive end, but a creative one:

My citing the creation of tension as part of the work of the nonviolent-resister may sound rather shocking....but there is a type of constructive, nonviolent tension which is necessary for growth. Just as Socrates felt that it was necessary to create a tension in the mind so that individuals could rise from the bondage of myths and half-truths to the unfettered realm of creative analysis and objective appraisal, so must we see the need for nonviolent gadflies to create the kind of tension in society that will help men rise from the dark depths of prejudice and racism to the majestic heights of understanding and brotherhood.⁴³⁴

It is appropriate then that some scholars speak of King’s methods in terms of drama because King conceived of history as an artistic medium, as a stage for the divine production. As Chernus notes, “King spoke of his own time of civil rights struggle as an era of especially acute historical tensions,” and of history as “a dynamic theater of

⁴³⁰ King, *Strength to Love*, 56.

⁴³¹ Ibid., 27.

⁴³² King, *Why We Can't Wait*, 77.

⁴³³ Ibid., 67. Italics mine.

⁴³⁴ Ibid., 68.

interacting forces.”⁴³⁵ In this dynamic theatre, nonviolent direct action seeks both to dramatize, to call attention to those aspects of a situation that are unjust, but also to point to their transformation.⁴³⁶ Indeed, it is not just that creativity is central to King’s account of nonviolent protest but that King views this creative activity as salvific.

C) Creative Activity as Salvific

Another component of the eschatological ethic that I identified is an understanding of humans’ participation in God’s creative activity as redemptive. In addition to the emphasis on human agency, Coleman’s account of salvation, understood through the rubric of making a way out of no way, includes “God’s presentation of unforeseen possibilities,” “the goal of justice, survival, and quality of life,” and “a challenge to the existing order.”⁴³⁷ As we will see, each of these elements is present in King’s own discussion of the role of creativity in nonviolent protest.

Coleman’s account envisions a central role for creative human agency, but this agency responds to a prior creative act on the part of God. This becomes clear in her discussion of God’s relationship to the world. Coleman highlights the interested, deeply involved nature of God with the world. “God has hopes and preferences for the world. As we engage in the ongoing processes of life, God is actively involved. God offers us the

⁴³⁵ Chernus, *American Nonviolence*, 168.

⁴³⁶ For discussions of King’s work as related to drama, see Charles Marsh, “Civil Rights Movement as Theological Drama,” *The Role of Ideas in the Civil Rights South*, ed. Ted Ownby (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2002), 19-38.

⁴³⁷ Coleman, *Making a Way*, 33.

possibilities that introduce newness into the world.”⁴³⁸ Our own ability to be creative thus derives from God’s own ability to create anew. As Coleman puts it, “Creative transformation is the change that occurs when God’s aims toward novelty are accepted and incorporated.”⁴³⁹ Coleman’s emphasis on the role of God in creating new possibilities echoes in King’s own discussion of the way in which nonviolent protest allows one to see resources not previously available. Speaking of the effect of engaging in such protests, King argues that “the nonviolent approach does something to the hearts and souls of those committed to it. It gives them new self-respect. It calls up resources of strength and courage that they did not know they had.”⁴⁴⁰ In other words, it makes a way out of no way. It puts before the person new possibilities, new resources not previously in view.

Coleman also speaks of creative transformation as salvific because it seeks justice, survival, and quality of life. Drawing on John Cobb’s understanding of Christ as that which opposes situations of destruction, Coleman envisions creative transformation as a process that renders fragments whole, that creates new redemptive futures out of the damages of the past. In her words, womanist theology is a “quest for wholeness.”⁴⁴¹ It “strives for tangible representations of the good. The good includes justice, equality,

⁴³⁸ Ibid., 75.

⁴³⁹ Ibid., 92.

⁴⁴⁰ King, *Strength to Love*, 151.

⁴⁴¹ Coleman, *Making a Way*, 94.

discipleship, quality of life, acceptance, and inclusion.”⁴⁴² In particular, Coleman names acts of teaching and healing as crucial to this quest for wholeness.

Similarly, King describes nonviolent direct action as creative because it partakes in and seeks to restore God’s original creation. It participates in the creating, sustaining, conserving capacities of God that seek to lead creation to its proper fulfillment. As co-creators with God, human beings are called to participate in the creation of a new order unblemished by the injustices of the present order. King writes, “When our days become dreary and low-hovering with clouds and our nights become darker than a thousand midnights, we will know that we are living in the creative turmoil of a genuine civilization struggling to be born.”⁴⁴³ In the case of nonviolent direct action, this creative turmoil aims to create new scenarios where whites and black relate in just patterns of relationship. As Chernus puts it, nonviolent direct action “...turns the tensions into a constructive energy that can move the conflict toward resolution...What resisters are seeking is a new situation, created by their opponents’ free decision to act differently.”⁴⁴⁴ Thus the creative turmoil present in nonviolent direct action foreshadows the creative turmoil of the universe as it gives rise to a new creation, marked by reconciliation.

It is against this backdrop of King’s understanding of nonviolent direct action as a creative act that we should understand King’s views of salvation and redemption. As I indicated earlier, feminist and womanist theologians often criticize King’s view of the value of unmerited suffering, arguing that it valorizes suffering and condones the abuse

⁴⁴² Ibid., 86.

⁴⁴³ King, *Strength to Love*, 168

⁴⁴⁴ Chernus, *American Nonviolence*, 171.

of women. I have suggested that these views misread King's view of suffering. But I also want to suggest that, here again, creativity is central to King's theology as he speaks of transforming suffering into a "creative force." King does not argue that suffering as such is redemptive; he argues that suffering can be transformed into a creative force. And it is this transformation that is redemptive, not the suffering itself. He writes, "As my sufferings mounted I soon realized that there were two ways in which I could respond to my situation—either to react with bitterness or seek to transform the suffering into a creative force."⁴⁴⁵ Suffering is redemptive, then, not because it valorizes suffering but because it is creative. In this sense, King is, like womanists, taking something fragmented and creating something of beauty out of it. Voluntary suffering can be redemptive because it creates something of enduring value out of nothing. It creates a way out of no way. Thus, it is not that suffering redeems *per se*, but that humans as co-creators with God can transform suffering. Redemption resides not in the suffering but in the transformation of that suffering directed towards the birth of new life.

Finally, Coleman's account of making a way out of no way emphasizes that creative transformation challenges the *status quo*. Indeed, womanist thought emerges, in part, as response to past injustices, to black women's experiences of marginalization and violations of their human dignity. If King talks about the "triple evils of race, class, and war," womanists speak of the "triple oppression of racism, sexism, and classism," and seek to challenge these forces of oppression.⁴⁴⁶ Coleman writes, "As creative transformation leads us into the future, it necessarily challenges the world as we currently

⁴⁴⁵ King, *Strength to Love*, 152.

⁴⁴⁶ Coleman, *Making a Way*, 7.

experience it...Creative transformation upsets the *status quo* and demands that we give up the things to which we are attached.”⁴⁴⁷ It “challenges the oppressive forces of society.”⁴⁴⁸ It thus envisions new redemptive futures that break free from the oppressive patterns of the past.

Just as Coleman and other womanists emphasize the importance of creativity as a counter to conformity, King repeatedly critiques the church for its failure to resist the *status quo* of society and encourages it rather to be a wellspring of creative forces. He criticizes the church for its lack of unity and for its conformity to social norms. In his sermon “Transformed Nonconformist,” King writes:

Nowhere is the tragic tendency to conform more evident than in the church, an institution which has often served to crystallize, conserve, and even bless the patterns of majority opinion. The erstwhile sanction by the church of slavery, racial segregation, war, and economic exploitation is testimony to the fact that the church has hearkened more to the authority of the world than to the authority of God. Called to be the moral guardian of the community, the church at times has preserved that which is immoral and unethical. Called to combat social evils, it has remained silent behind stained-glass windows. Called to lead men on the highway of brotherhood and to summon them to rise above the narrow confines of race and class, it has enunciated and practiced racial exclusiveness...The hope of a secure and livable world lies with disciplined nonconformists, who are dedicated to justice, peace, and brotherhood. The trailblazers in human, academic, scientific, and religious freedom have always been nonconformists.⁴⁴⁹

In this passage King calls for the church to be a community of creative nonconformists. He argues that the church should nurture “the creatively maladjusted.”⁴⁵⁰ This critique of the church’s conformation affirms that King understands the church’s calling as enacting

⁴⁴⁷ Ibid., 89.

⁴⁴⁸ Ibid., 93.

⁴⁴⁹ King, *Strength to Love*, 25-27.

⁴⁵⁰ Ibid., 27.

this transformation. Critical for King is that this nonconformity takes on a creative purpose. He argues that “Nonconformity is creative when it is controlled and directed by a transformed life and is constructive when it embraces a new mental outlook. By opening our lives to God in Christ we become new creatures. This experience, which Jesus spoke of as the new birth, is essential if we are to be transformed conformists....”⁴⁵¹ At the conclusion of the sermon, he says to the church: “We must make a choice. Will we continue to march to the drumbeat of conformity and respectability, or will we, listening to the beat of a more distant drum, move to its echoing sounds?”⁴⁵² Rather than being a thermometer and perpetuating the unjust *status quo*, King argues, God calls the church to be a thermostat that transforms the temperature of society.⁴⁵³ As such, the church fulfills its political role by rejecting conformity and embracing its vocation of creativity. The church is to play an important role in creating a new humanity. King speaks of a “‘new world order’ to replace ‘the old order’ of colonialism, exploitation, and segregation.”⁴⁵⁴ He says while “we are familiar with the old order that is passing away,” we are faced with the challenge of “entering the new age with goodwill.”⁴⁵⁵ Thus, just as Coleman and other womanists understand a challenge to the *status quo* as central to God’s redemptive activity, so King understands the church’s mission in terms of transforming patterns of social conformity.

⁴⁵¹ Ibid., 25-27.

⁴⁵² Ibid., 29.

⁴⁵³ Ibid., 23.

⁴⁵⁴ King, “Facing the Challenges of a New Age,” *King Papers*, Vol. III, 451.

⁴⁵⁵ Ibid., 454-57.

VI. Conclusion: The Church as Creative Community

We can see in King's emphasis on the church's mission to resist the forces of social conformity a new vision: the church as a community of creativity. Although King does not explicitly describe churches as communities of creativity, I argue that we should read his critique of the churches' conformity as just such a view. Having highlighted the creative power of nonviolence, I want to make clear that I do so not merely to better understand the role of creativity in that particular practice of love but to suggest that creativity is increasingly central to King's political practice as a whole. As such, the practices of love and creativity are not limited to nonviolent protest, but any practice that creates new redemptive relationships and forms of community. King's critique of the American church reveals that he views the church as a site of divine creativity, a creative community whose calling consists in embodying and ushering in the new creation. In fact, one way to understand King's discussion of beloved community is that it offers a way to talk about how the church both fulfills and resists its calling to be a community of creativity.

The failure of the church to fulfill its vocation as a community of creativity, however, does not deter King from envisioning such a community. King acknowledges that the church fails to "perfectly perpetuate the ideal for which it stands. It is an obvious fact that the church, flowing through the stream of history has picked up the evils of little tributaries, and the evils of these tributaries, have been so powerful that they have been

able to overthrow the main stream.”⁴⁵⁶ Nevertheless, he insists that the church has at times fulfilled its calling:

The essence of the Epistles of Paul is that Christians should *rejoice* at being deemed worthy to suffer for what they believe. The projection of a social gospel, in my opinion, is the true witness of a Christian life. This is the meaning of the true *ekklēsia*—the inner, spiritual church. The church once changed society. But today I feel that too much of the church is merely a thermometer, which measures rather than molds popular opinion.⁴⁵⁷

It seems as though King identifies this true, inner, spiritual church with the beloved community. The beloved community is the fulfillment of God’s creation, the redemption of the fallen creation that we experience now as well as at the end of creation: “The end is the creation of a beloved community ... [and] the creation of a society where men will live together as brothers...not retaliation but redemption. That is the end we are trying to reach...the old order is dying and the new order is being born.”⁴⁵⁸ Although the church does not live up to its vocation, the beloved community does exist, and when it does, it offers a vision to the church of its true vocation. The beloved community offers a vision of salvation, of a justly ordered social order marked by love. It offers both a critique of the church’s conformity and a positive vision of what the church should be. As Charles Marsh argues,

One could say that the relationship between church and beloved community is mutually enriching, even as the church remains at all times theologically prior. In other words, the church establishes the hidden meaning of beloved community even as beloved community makes visible that meaning in ways the church may often not...beloved community is a way of talking about the redemptive and reconciling

⁴⁵⁶ King, “What Shall We Think About the Church,” *King Papers*, Vol. I, 285.

⁴⁵⁷ King, “*Playboy* Interview: Martin Luther King, Jr.,” *A Testament of Hope*, 345.

⁴⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 344.

spaces whose real history is the church but which cannot be contained by the church or brought fully under its management.⁴⁵⁹

The beloved community, then, enacts now the creative community that God calls the church to be. Because of its creative nature, it is appropriate that scholars often discuss the beloved community with reference to drama. Marsh, for example, describes the beloved community in language that highlights the creation of beloved community as part of God's salvation drama. He argues that "King understands the fading of the 'old order' and the emergence of a 'new age' as a pervasively theological, if not ecclesiological, *event*...the Cross *enables* resistance...the 'great epic' *activates* the mission of the church."⁴⁶⁰ The beloved community thus draws on the creative resources Christ unleashes through his life, death, and resurrection.

At the same time, it offers a picture for the church of its true vocation. If we are to understand King's view of the church's public role it resides here in his descriptions of the beloved community—the creation of a community that honors the *imago Dei* in each person, resists the destructive forces that threaten it, and transforms social relations. Always open to the creative moving of the Spirit, it challenges the *status quo*, confronts conformity, and gives birth to a new creation. As Catherine Keller puts it, "The co-creativity to which we are together lured produces more than togetherness: it affects the structures of justice that will support the creativity of an ever-diversifying

⁴⁵⁹ Marsh, *Beloved Community*, 207-208.

⁴⁶⁰ Marsh "Civil Rights as Drama," 30.

togetherness.”⁴⁶¹ What Keller here refers to as togetherness is what King calls reconciliation, the new order, beloved community.

Thus, while most view King as a prophet of nonviolence whose method puts love into action for the sake of justice, viewing King through the lens of the eschatological ethic identified in Chapter Two suggests that it is not so much King’s call for a synthesis between love and justice that is most significant, but his call for a *creative* synthesis. Indeed, in a sense, the eschatological ethic has allowed us to see a creative synthesis present in King’s own thought between the traditional Protestant conceptions of *agape* and those of feminist theologians that emphasize the worldly nature of love as mutual, reciprocal, and most important, community-creating. Tracing these two strands of King’s thought on love has allowed us to see, as it were, the new emerging through the old as King’s early theology is put into practice in the world. Indeed, as King puts his textbook definitions of love as an otherworldly force into action, a new, worldly love emerges that resembles the very understanding of love that feminist theologians propose. I have argued that the eschatological ethic exemplified in Monica Coleman’s thought—namely, its focus on human agency as a participation in God’s creative and redemptive activity—indicates that this love is better imagined in terms of creativity. Furthermore, it has revealed that King’s political vision extends beyond his practice of nonviolent resistance, that nonviolent methods offer not the paradigmatic example of love’s relating to justice but one particular example of the church’s creative practices. This, in turn, reveals King’s vision of the church as a community of creativity called to give birth to ever new forms of relationship.

⁴⁶¹ Keller, *On the Mystery*, 124-125.

Appendix: King as an Ethicist of Care?

As I mentioned in the introductory section on King and the feminist tradition, two recent studies liken King to the feminist ethicists of care. My own sense is that while these studies certainly illuminate important connections between King's thought and the feminist tradition, they do less to acknowledge the elements of King's thought that complicate such comparisons. Comparing King with care theorists does not offer a sufficient account of King as a feminist both because, as we have seen, King does not challenge the old things such as the public/private divide as care theorists do, but also because love and care are not synonymous terms. As I have shown, King's embrace of love includes a robust theological framework of creation and redemption that places creativity at the forefront of his political ethic, an emphasis care theorists do not share. Thus, the comparisons between King and care theorists demonstrate that King joins care ethicists in challenging justice as the primary political value and shares similar convictions about anthropology and the role of "feminine" values to political life, but they also point to significant differences that my account has shown are better illuminated by comparisons with feminist and womanist theologians.

With its origins in Carol Gilligan's study of gender and moral reasoning, care theory has developed into a political ethic that positions itself as an alternative to traditional liberal theory. Detecting a difference in the moral reasoning of men and women, Gilligan's study suggests that while men's moral reasoning tends to employ abstract, universal rules that emphasize individual autonomy and respect for the rights of

others, women place more importance on interpersonal relationships, affective ties, and attention to the concrete particulars of given situations. Care theorists identify female moral reasoning as “an ethic of care,” in contrast to an ethic of justice. If an ethic of justice prioritizes “abstract rationality, rights, and individual autonomy,” an ethic of care emphasizes “dependence, responsibility, contextual narrative, and empathetic attention to the concrete needs of particular persons.”⁴⁶² At first glance, the similarities between an ethic of care and King’s own political ethic are often striking. King shares with care ethicists a challenge to the exclusive focus on justice as the primary virtue of political life, a conception of love as a practice rather than an emotion, an anthropology that focuses on the inter-related nature of human persons and community, and a methodology that draws on personal experience and emphasizes the importance of attention to particulars.

As I mentioned, these very similarities lead scholars to connect King with an ethic of care. Eric Gregory, for example, aims to reclaim love as a political virtue for political liberalism. He sees care theorists, in their own critical reconstruction of liberalism, as embarking on a parallel project and notes that, “Like Christian ethicists who challenge a dualistic conception of love and justice, feminist theorists have challenged the apparent dichotomy of justice and care.”⁴⁶³ Gregory briefly discusses King, “associating [him] with feminist ethics and my kind of Augustinian civic liberalism.”⁴⁶⁴ Because of King’s emphasis on love as a political virtue, Gregory finds common ground between King and

⁴⁶² Virginia Held, *Feminist Morality: Transforming Culture, Society, and Politics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), 1; Gregory, *Politics and the Order of Love*, 160.

⁴⁶³ Gregory, *Politics and the Order of Love*, 158-159.

⁴⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 179.

ethicists of care in their arguments that justice alone is inadequate as a political norm, and concludes his comparison by arguing that “King’s account of love and justice is a striking example of a prophetic liberalism that might provide fertile soil for Augustinian and feminist political ethics.”⁴⁶⁵

Similarly, David A. J. Richards equates King’s ethic of nonviolence with an ethic of care. In *Disarming Manhood: Roots of Ethical Resistance*, Richards argues that King’s ethic of nonviolence challenges the masculine emphasis on violence and focuses on the importance of care as a component of an ethic of justice. Rather than taking on the male moral voice, King derived his political ethic from the female moral voice of his mother and maternal caretakers:

Almost certainly, his developmental psychology found its sense of religious voice not in his father’s patriarchal voice but in the voices and loving care of his grandmother and mother, reflecting...a long tradition of the intense identification of Baptist black women with Jesus of Nazareth. His theological studies had brought him to personalism, the view...that what is valuable in religion is the sense of persons made in God’s image and finding themselves in loving, caring relationships to the individuality of other persons.⁴⁶⁶

In addition to love and care, this ethic emphasized “protection, nurture, and acceptability.”⁴⁶⁷ In keeping with its focus on relationships and particular persons, King’s ethic sought to view the world from the eyes of those who endured injustice and thus rather than rely solely on his own male voice, he “took on a number of different

⁴⁶⁵ Ibid., 193.

⁴⁶⁶ Richards, *Disarming Manhood*, 154.

⁴⁶⁷ Ibid., 166.

perspectives and voices.”⁴⁶⁸ This emphasis on love, care, relationships, and nonviolence leads Richards to join Gregory in aligning King with ethicists of care.

A) Are Care and Love Synonymous? Differences between King and Care Ethicists

Indeed, King and care ethicists do converge on several important themes including arguments against an exclusive focus on justice as the primary political virtue, their conception of love and care, respectively, as practices rather than emotions, their anthropological convictions about the inter-dependent nature of human life, and their emphasis on attending to particular people in their concrete situations. But despite these important similarities, salient differences do exist. As Williams helpfully points out in his discussion, King’s conception of love carries with it an entire theological framework of meaning. It invokes God’s loving creation of the world and human participation in the redemption of the world. As such, where care theorists speak of sustaining, preserving and repairing the world, King speaks of creating and redeeming it. Where care theorists discuss inclusion and exclusion within the political order, King’s discussion of love is on the order of being and non-being. And where care theorists embark on a political project as the end of their moral theory, King’s identifies the political realm as a site of grace that offers a stage for the enactment of an end that lies beyond history. I argue that although care is similar to love, it falls short of the radical, generative, and transformative capabilities of love.

⁴⁶⁸ Ibid., 169.

But these differences between care and love are not the only problem with identifying King with care ethicists. For King himself fails to fully incorporate the radical challenge to the division of public and private realms that one finds at the center of care theory. The very act of parsing love into parts, some approved for public use and others not, runs counter to care theorists' efforts to highlight the relevance of "private, female values" to the public sphere. Certain strands of King's concept of love thus reinforce rather than challenge the division between public and private life that care theorists resist.

B) Care Maintains and Repairs; Love Creates and Redeems

While the call for both justice and love as political virtues may render King's thought similar to that of care ethicists, care and love are not the same thing. Joan Tronto, for example, describes care as a "central concern of human life."⁴⁶⁹ She offers this definition of 'caring': "a species activity that includes everything that we do to maintain, continue, and repair our 'world' so that we can live in it as well as possible. That world includes our bodies, ourselves, and our environment, all of which we seek to interweave in a complex, life-sustaining web."⁴⁷⁰ In addition to the compassion, concern, sympathy, and nurture present in accounts of care theory as drawing on the moral power of emotions, Tronto's definition focuses on care as a preserving, sustaining, improving attention to the world.

⁴⁶⁹ Joan Tronto, *Moral Boundaries: A Political Argument for an Ethic of Care* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 180.

⁴⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 103.

While these notions may be present in King's description of love, they fail to capture the full meaning of King's concept. King describes love as "understanding and creative, redemptive goodwill for all men."⁴⁷¹ He says that "By its very nature love creates and builds up. Love transforms with redemptive power."⁴⁷² He describes love as "a creative force," "the most durable power in the world."⁴⁷³ No matter how King formulates his definition of love, its ever-present theme is love's ability to create. For King, love is an ontological concept that harkens back to God's creation of the world. King never fails to describe love with reference to the creation, to God's decision to create new life out of nothing. "The highest good is love," King writes, "This principle is at the center of the cosmos. It is the great unifying force of life. God is love. He who loves has discovered the clue to the meaning of ultimate reality; he who hates stand in immediate candidacy for nonbeing."⁴⁷⁴ Love is thus an ontological reality that brings life into being and binds all of life together. While love shares certain similarities with care theory, such as compassion and sympathy, care theory does not capture the creativity, the sheer generative capabilities central to King's conception of love.

Furthermore, because King describes love with reference to the creation, it is also inextricably tied to notions of salvation. Love is redemptive. It "transforms with redemptive power."⁴⁷⁵ While care theory suggests compassion, concern, sympathy, and

⁴⁷¹ King, *Strength to Love*, 52.

⁴⁷² *Ibid.*, 54.

⁴⁷³ *Ibid.*, 56.

⁴⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 144.

⁴⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 54.

nurture, King's love invokes the power of transformation and salvation. Compared with King's concept of love, care is too docile a concept. It does not capture the novelty, the radicality, or the sheer possibilities that King implies when he invokes love. If the focus in Tronto's conception of care is maintaining and repairing the life already present in our world, King's concept of love, with its emphasis on creativity, speaks not only of preserving what already exists, but giving birth to new life. He speaks less of shifting or expanding moral boundaries than the creation of altogether new forms of being and relating. Indeed, as Charles Marsh notes, "In King's mind, the goal of political action informed by *agape* love involves nothing less than the creation of a new social space."⁴⁷⁶ Significantly, Tronto excludes "creative activity" from her definition of care.⁴⁷⁷ "To create a work of art, is not care," she argues.⁴⁷⁸ But King's understanding of love is most appropriately understood as a creative, artistic activity. Just as God creates out of the sheer gratuitousness of God's love, so humans are called to create each other and bring forms of social organization and community into being, as one would a work of art.

C) Care Includes; Love Brings into Being

Another major difference between care and love has to do with the difference between King's and care theorists' visions of human interdependence; while care theory concerns itself with political inclusion and exclusion, King concerns himself with categories beyond mere political recognition. His central concern is with being and non-

⁴⁷⁶ Marsh, "Civil Rights as Drama," 24.

⁴⁷⁷ Tronto, *Moral Boundaries*, 104.

⁴⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 104.

being. Care theorists reclaim care as a political ethic in order to draw attention to the presence of power and privilege in the political order. “By not noticing how pervasive and central care is to human life, those who are in positions of power and privilege can continue to ignore and to degrade the activities of care and those who give care.”⁴⁷⁹ As Tronto argues, “only if we understand care as a political idea will we be able to change its status and the status of those who do caring work in our culture.”⁴⁸⁰ Thus, reclaiming the importance of care to the political realm is fundamentally about inclusion and exclusion within the political order. By paying attention to care, we can better attend to who is included and who is excluded.

For King, however, love is about something much more fundamental. While King’s political ethic is concerned with inclusion and exclusion, its primary concern goes deeper than participation in the rights and privileges of political society: it is about being and nonbeing. The inter-related structure of reality again harkens back to creation, deriving from an ontological picture of the world as created by a loving God. It is not simply a social or political fact that human beings are not autonomous individuals; it is an ontological given. As Williams notes, “King believed that all individuals have been created equal in the image of God and are as a result interdependent and interrelated...Being in the image of God entails the existence of a conception of duties and obligations toward one another as well as a conception of one’s end or destiny.”⁴⁸¹ Because our end and destiny extend beyond the political realm, so too, do our duties and

⁴⁷⁹ Ibid., 111.

⁴⁸⁰ Ibid., 157.

⁴⁸¹ Williams, “Love and Justice,” 18-19.

obligations. The very nature of our existence dictates that each individual's life and well-being takes part in others'. It is not simply that my identity and action in the world depend upon others'; rather, I do not actually exist when this interdependence goes unacknowledged. I cannot be in the fullest sense without the being of others. In King's words, "Strangely enough, I can never be what I ought to be until you are what you ought to be. This is the way the world is made. I didn't make it that way, but this is the interrelated structure of reality."⁴⁸² This reference to how the world is made points to a Creator God who designs creation as an inter-related structure of integrity. "Creation is so designed," he writes, "that my personality can be fulfilled only in the context of community."⁴⁸³ Thus, God's creation of the world as an inter-related structure dictates that our very being depends upon the being of others. Just as with love—which is both a creative and redemptive force—the inter-related structure of reality entails consequences for our salvation.

Just as our being intertwines with that of others, so our salvation depends on others' salvation. "I must not ignore the wounded man on life's Jericho Road," King writes, "because he is part of me and I am a part of him. His agony diminishes me, and his salvation enlarges me."⁴⁸⁴ While King certainly aimed to achieve political inclusion for those denied civil rights, more fundamentally his concern lay in getting people to acknowledge their neighbors as human beings created by God, not mere citizens claiming

⁴⁸² King, "The American Dream," *A Testament of Hope*, 210.

⁴⁸³ Chernus, *American Nonviolence*, 164.

⁴⁸⁴ King, *Strength to Love*, 38.

political rights. Care theory is a political project with political ends, whereas for King, politics is a site for the pursuit of eternal ends.

D) King's Endorsement of the Public/Private Divide

While we might argue that aligning King with care theory does not do justice to King's conception of love and its radical implications, it is also the case that aligning King with care theory reveals the ways in which King himself fails to incorporate care theory's own radical critique of the public/private divide that threatens the unity of creation King extols. Specifically, despite the commonalities between King and care theory—especially King's embrace of love as a political virtue—he nevertheless reinforces the public/private division that care ethicists challenge. One of the basic insights of care theory is that the exclusive focus on justice as the primary political virtue results from the division liberal political theory posits between public and private realms. This division holds that “male values” such as justice and rationality belong to the public sphere of politics and economics while “female values” such as care and emotions belong to the private sphere. Care theorists' emphasis on the relevance of care and emotions to the political realm constitutes an effort to redress the harmful effects of the public/private division. In emphasizing the role of care in the public realm, care theorists aim to correct a deficiency in traditional political theories. They aim to restore women's morality to a male dominated tradition of thinking, to “change the moral boundary between political and moral life.”⁴⁸⁵

⁴⁸⁵ Tronto, *Moral Boundaries*, 158.

King does not share this agenda. While his embrace of love as a political virtue appears to put him in concert with care theorists, King separates what he regards as the publicly relevant form of love, *agape*, from its more emotional forms, *eros* and *philia*. Interestingly, the difference here is not one of care theorists embracing care as an emotion versus King's rejection of love as an emotion. Both care theorists and King understand care and love, respectively, not only as emotions but as practices. Tronto, for example, writes, "I am not arguing that care has nothing to do with dispositions or emotions. What I do assert, though, is that these dimensions are only a part of care. Unless we also understand care in its richer sense of a practice, we run the risk of sentimentalizing."⁴⁸⁶ Likewise, King rejects a concept of love as "emotional bosh." But unlike care theorists, who nevertheless maintain the importance of care as an emotion to a conception of care as a political ethic, King does not fully articulate what he conceives of as the emotional aspects of love. He divides love into its politically relevant form, *agape*, and its political irrelevant forms, *eros* and *philia*. Care theorists aim to enhance women's and other care-givers' political status by highlighting the centrality and importance of care to our every endeavor. King manages to continue to denigrate those forms of love he associates with women and the private realm. His rejection of *eros* and *philia* as irrelevant to the public realm thus reinforces women's already second-class position in society. Just as Tronto argues that "current fragmented conceptions of care operate as they do to perpetuate gender, class and racial structures of power and privilege through

⁴⁸⁶ Ibid., 119.

the construction of ‘otherness,’” so too, does King’s concept of love as *agape* function to perpetuate women’s exclusion from full equality.⁴⁸⁷

Thus, while those aiming to place King in the tradition of an ethic of care rightly highlight his emphasis on love as a necessary ingredient in an ethic of justice, they fail to pay adequate attention to the way King reinforces the divide between public and private life, as well as King’s description of the synthesis of love and justice as “creative.” It is true that King shares with care ethicists the view of justice as an inadequate political norm and affirms the interdependent and dependent nature of human life, as well as the importance of relationships and recognizing people in their full humanness. But for King, these themes derive from an ontological picture of reality that features God’s creation of the world, its fall from that perfect creation, and its salvation. Creation and its ramifications for salvation constitute the central theme that runs through King’s vision of the world and our relationship to others. Although Gregory acknowledges that “King’s ‘beloved community’ is not Rawls’s ‘well-ordered society,’” his comparison of King to care theory leaves unconsidered the creative, redemptive, and transformative component of love not present in conceptions of care.⁴⁸⁸ Because of its ontological dimension that focuses on God’s creation of the world as an inter-related structure and our own status as co-creators with God, King’s political ethic calls for the creation of a community much more radical than care theory. Thus, while Gregory’s and Richards’ comparison of King with care ethicists notes several important similarities, the comparison also obscures the radical—indeed, creative—potential of King’s ethic.

⁴⁸⁷ Ibid., 101.

⁴⁸⁸ Gregory, *Politics and the Order of Love*, 193.

CHAPTER FIVE:

JOHN HOWARD YODER AND THE REFORMATION THAT HAS YET TO HAPPEN

I. Introduction: Yoder and the Feminist Tradition

When one thinks of John Howard Yoder, feminist theologies are not the first things that come to mind. Yoder devoted most of his scholarly energies to articulating what he understands to be the pacifist imperative of the Gospel and proclaiming this radical reformation vision as normative for all Christians. He does not substantially engage feminist thought.⁴⁸⁹ Nor have many feminist thinkers engaged his. Yoder's emphasis on nonresistant love, his church-world opposition, and his conception of the church as present foretaste of the Kingdom of God certainly seem, at first glance, to run afoul of the focus on justice, attention to the cultural and historical context (and therefore "worldliness") of church tradition, and the critique of the church's complicity in sin found in the work of many feminist theologians.

To make matters more complicated, Yoder's personal history as a perpetrator of sexual abuse further compromises any claim his work might have to feminist credentials.⁴⁹⁰ Cynthia Hess acknowledges this obstacle in her own recent work, which

⁴⁸⁹ To my knowledge, the only feminist scholars Yoder cites are Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza (in *The Politics of Jesus: Behold the Man! Our Victorious Lamb* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1972) and Rosemary Radford Ruether (in *For the Nations: Essays Evangelical and Public* (Eugene, Ore.: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 1997). For an account of the critical exchange between Schüssler Fiorenza and Yoder on Yoder's understanding of revolutionary subordination in *The Politics of Jesus*, see Gary Dorrien, *Social Ethics in the Making*, 468. Mark Thiessen Nation also cites Schüssler Fiorenza as affirming Yoder's work on apocalyptic material, *John Howard Yoder: Mennonite Patience, Evangelical Witness, Catholic Convictions* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2006), 123.

draws on Yoder's account of nonviolence to reconceptualize Christian nonviolence in relation to the internal violence of trauma. Hess notes that Yoder's "sexual offenses against multiple women in the Mennonite community...may make it seem problematic to use his work as a constructive resource for a project on trauma and nonviolence," but "at the same time, I find his theological insights about discipleship and Christian community helpful for reconceptualizing nonviolence, even though he did not embody these insights in his own life."⁴⁹¹ Hess thus disregards the radical disjuncture between Yoder's public theological endeavors and his own personal behavior, implying the one is not relevant to the other.

I am less confident that we can posit such a distinction between Yoder's public scholarship and his private life. Most of the theologians quoted in reports of the abuse published in Yoder's local newspaper, *The Elkhart Truth*, conclude that Yoder's decision to submit himself to the disciplinary procedures (patterned after the tradition of binding and loosing in Mathew 18) of his church conference demonstrate the degree to which he embodied his own ethic. None consider, however, whether Yoder's initial inability to embody the nonviolence his work espouses indicates inadequacies in that very vision, particularly his church-world opposition. In keeping with the feminist insight that 'The

⁴⁹⁰ Although not readily addressed or even acknowledged in scholarship on Yoder, Yoder committed sexual offenses against eight women in the Mennonite community and later submitted himself to the disciplinary procedures of the Indiana-Michigan Mennonite Conference. See "Yoder Suspended," *Christian Century* August 12-19, 1992, 737-738. The local newspaper, *The Elkhart Truth*, also ran a five-part series on the allegations and related issues. See "Theologian Cited in Sex Inquiry," 29 June 1992, B1; "Theologian's Future Faces a 'Litmus Test,'" 12 July 1992, B1; "Theologian Accused: Women Report Instances of Inappropriate Conduct," 13 July 1992, B1; "A Known Secret: Church Slow to Explore Rumors Against a Leader," 14 July 1992, B1; "Yoder Actions Framed in Writings," 15 July 1992, B1; and "Teachings Tested: Forgiveness, Reconciliation in Discipline," 16 July 1992, B1. I am grateful to Reuben Shank for sharing these articles with me.

⁴⁹¹ Cynthia Hess, *Sites of Violence, Sites of Grace: Christian Nonviolence and the Traumatized Self* (Lanham, Md.: Lexington Books, 2009), 9.

personal is political,' I intend not to dismiss Yoder's sexual offenses as somehow irrelevant to his pacifist message, but rather to read them as an indication of problems with his articulation of that message—problems that resources from the eschatological ethic that I identified in Chapter Two might helpfully address.

Despite these obvious and significant obstacles, feminist concerns—and occasionally the term itself—do appear in Yoder's work. Although such references are easily overlooked, Yoder describes as "feminist" a major component of his pacifist message: the social egalitarianism of the early church.⁴⁹² Discussing instances of the church's unfaithfulness in "The Authority of Tradition," he immediately names "the betrayal of the feminist thrust that had begun with the Gospels."⁴⁹³ Indeed, as I will discuss shortly, Yoder's analysis of what he sees as the church's capitulation to Constantinianism bears similarity to a number of feminist critiques of the patriarchal corruption of the church and Christian tradition. In his essay on H. Richard Niebuhr's *Christ and Culture*, Yoder also mentions "feminism" along with hospitals, service of the poor, generalized education, egalitarianism, and abolitionism as examples of cultures that Christians themselves created.⁴⁹⁴ Furthermore, Yoder himself authored two unpublished memos on feminist theology: "Feminist Theology Miscellany #1: Salvation Through

⁴⁹² John Howard Yoder, *Priestly Kingdom: Social Ethics as Gospel* (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984), 73.

⁴⁹³ *Ibid.*, 73.

⁴⁹⁴ John Howard Yoder, "How H. Richard Niebuhr Reasoned: A Critique of *Christ and Culture*," *Authentic Transformation: A New Vision of Christ and Culture*, Glen H. Stassen, D.M. Yeager, and John Howard Yoder (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996), 69.

Mothering?” and “Feminist Theology Miscellany #2: What Kind of Feminist Was Jesus?”⁴⁹⁵

In the first, Yoder challenges traditional interpretations of I Timothy 2:15 that understand the verse in a literal sense to mean women “will be saved through child bearing.” Rejecting this interpretation’s assumption of an individualist conception of salvation, Yoder interprets the fall as a “fall into patriarchy” and then argues that the restoration of matriarchy constitutes the meaning of salvation.⁴⁹⁶ He writes: “It is that fallenness which is in the process of being set right when we are told that restored wholeness (salvation) will come about through mothering.”⁴⁹⁷ By ‘mothering’ Yoder means not biological child birth and the nurturing of children but a certain mode of being in the world:

...when measured by the understandings of human dignity propagated by our dominant cultures, the traits we are taught to call ‘feminine’ are closer to the way of life that Jesus taught and exemplified than are those which we are taught to consider ‘masculine.’ The God of whom Jesus speaks in the gospels, although called ‘papa,’ is no patriarch...Take any contemporary schema of gender style stereotypes: authority versus compassion, rationality versus relatedness, manipulation versus interaction, distancing versus identification...regularly you will find that Jesus himself, and what he asks of his followers (including the males among them), and the style of mutual love which Peter and Paul and James ask for in the later church, are qualities which stand in the ‘feminine’ column of the list.”⁴⁹⁸

⁴⁹⁵ I am grateful to Mark Thiessen Nation and Gayle Gerber Koontz as well as Eileen K. Saner, Librarian at the Associated Mennonite Biblical Seminary in Elkhart, Indiana, for helping me locate these memos.

⁴⁹⁶ John Howard Yoder, “Feminist Theology Miscellany #1: Salvation Through Mothering?” (October 1990), 6.

⁴⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 6.

⁴⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 6.

This passage indicates the radical departure Yoder takes from traditional interpretations of I Timothy 2:15 (“Yet woman will be saved through bearing children, if she continues in faith and love and holiness, with modesty.”) Rather than offering a literal reading which understands the text to indicate that each individual woman must either bear children or forgo salvation, Yoder interprets ‘mothering’ as a way of life marked by certain qualities of relating to others. If we are to follow Jesus, we are to be compassionate, relational, interactive, sympathetic, and engage in mutual love. In short, we are to be what the dominant culture defines as ‘feminine.’⁴⁹⁹

Yoder further develops this alternative mode of living and Jesus’ own embodiment of these ‘feminine’ qualities in the second memo. In “Feminist Theology Miscellany #2: What Kind of Feminist Was Jesus?”—note that the very title already describes Jesus as feminist and proceeds to determine which kind—Yoder examines several key passages in the gospels that describe Jesus’ interactions with women. Yoder’s readings of various gospel passages reveal that “Jesus did not merely accept women as full human beings in his dealings with them, without discriminating against them as the normal practices of the time would have called him to do.”⁵⁰⁰ Rather, “Both women and men received his independent attention as objects of ministry. Women were no less

⁴⁹⁹ Mark Thiessen Nation points out that feminist ethicist and political philosopher Jean Bethke Elshtain makes a similar argument regarding the moral revolution of early Christianity. Citing *Public Man, Private Woman*, Nation notes that Elshtain “is claiming that in the early Christian community the virtues that had often been assigned to the private sphere of life in the ancient world were being upheld for the whole community in both their private and public lives. On the one hand, this change grants dignity to roles usually assigned to women. On the other, it calls on men to live in the same way. Within the context of both the ancient world and the subsequent development of political philosophy, this reorientation was revolutionary.” See “Feminism, Political Philosophy, and the Narrative Ethics of Jean Bethke Elshtain,” *Virtues and Practices in the Christian Tradition: Christian Ethics After MacIntyre*, eds. Nancey Murphy, Brad J. Kallenburg, and Mark Thiessen Nation (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 2003), 294.

⁵⁰⁰ “Feminist Theology Miscellany #2: What Kind of Feminist Was Jesus?” (October 1990), 1.

worthy than men of being dealt with, spoken with, healed, taught...But there is more.”⁵⁰¹ Indeed, ‘the more’ is, as Yoder concludes from his study of the gospels,

not simply that Jesus does not discriminate, that he considers women and men equally to be persons worthy of his esteem. He goes beyond that and is specifically accessible and generous beyond the line of duty to women at points of specific sex-related discrimination. To use modern language: he is not simply nondiscriminatory. He takes affirmative action.⁵⁰²

Here again, Yoder interprets Jesus’ mission as involving a turning of the cultural tables. Just as he reads the I Timothy passage as calling for Christians to embody a certain ‘feminine’ way of life, so too, does he understand Jesus’ actions to involve a disruption of the dominant culture’s way of treating women. Rather than engage in the discriminatory practices of the time period that fail to honor women’s dignity, Jesus confronts these practices directly and scandalously affirms women’s full dignity as persons.

These brief forays into feminist theology, along with his claim that the church has betrayed the “feminist thrust”⁵⁰³ of the Gospel raise the question of how Yoder’s thought relates to feminism and whether such thrusts are present within Yoder’s own work. Could it be the case that feminist theologies—in Yoder’s own words—“pose a new question or challenge” that “enable a midcourse correction, a rediscovery of something from the past whose pertinence was not seen before...enabling us to see it speaking to us?”⁵⁰⁴ I argue that feminist theologies do just that. It is not simply that the questions and challenges of

⁵⁰¹ Ibid., 1.

⁵⁰² Ibid., 2-3.

⁵⁰³ Yoder, *Priestly Kingdom*, 73.

⁵⁰⁴ Ibid., 69.

feminist theologies illuminate similar questions and challenges in Yoder's own thought; but that a feminist development of Yoder's ideas renders them even more religiously and politically potent than in Yoder's own articulation, highlighting the fruitfulness of Yoder's thought for the potential development of an eschatological political theology beyond pacifism.

More specifically, with the help of resources from the eschatological ethic identified in Chapter Two, I challenge Yoder's articulation of his church-world opposition as a thing of old that prevents us from seeing the full range of Yoder's contributions to political theology. I argue that Serene Jones' concept of "strategic essentialism" highlights what Yoder might refer to as the "corrective function" of his church-world opposition, and that Mary McClintock Fulkerson's attention to the embodied, worldly character of ecclesial practices highlights the 'incarnational' nature of Yoder's theology.⁵⁰⁵ These lenses allow for a revised, more dynamic understanding of Yoder's church-world opposition that, in turn, enables the development of Yoder's 'body practices' into criteria for identifying sites of grace wherever they appear—whether in actual church communities or outside them. What now comes into view is a 'new ethical possibility' that Yoder himself did not adequately emphasize but I aim to develop: the possibility that the church's mandate might be fulfilled outside the visible church, and therefore churches' need to be prepared to receive as a gift the ways its mission can be

⁵⁰⁵ As in the case with King and Coleman, it is important to note that Yoder, Fulkerson, and Jones represent different theological traditions. While Yoder's Mennonite convictions draw from the Anabaptist tradition, Fulkerson is a Presbyterian whose theological work takes an anthropological approach to questions of the relationship between culture and the Christian tradition. Jones's work is heavily influenced by her own Calvinist background. Despite these differing perspectives, Fulkerson's and Jones' work highlights elements of Yoder's own approach that regularly go unnoticed (in many cases on account of his Anabaptist heritage).

embodied outside or even against the visible church community. This account reveals Yoder's contributions to political theology to extend beyond the community's refusal of participation in the violence of the state to express a new kind of power: the ability to discern new expressions of the Gospel that the church itself has yet to anticipate. As Romand Coles points out, quoting Yoder, "the church ought to move through history as 'a continuing series of new beginnings.'"⁵⁰⁶ My account thus uncovers Yoder's vision of the church as a community of discernment that places practices of "discernment" at the heart of its political practice.

II. Yoder and the Church's Political Vocation

Along with Niebuhr and King, Yoder spent a great deal of his career reflecting on the question of the church's political vocation. Although his earliest work concentrates on issues related to the Mennonite church and Anabaptist history, including a dissertation on the debates between Zwingli and the Anabaptists, Yoder addresses questions as wide-ranging as war and peace, missions, and social ethics. He does so in fields as varied as biblical studies, theology, and ethics. Regardless of the questions or the field, however, Yoder's early writings inform all of his work, as he seeks to claim the radical reformation vision of the church as normative for all Christians. Yoder insists on his vision of the church as both radical and catholic, identifying nonviolence as the fundamental mark of Christian discipleship and thus the core of ecumenical relations. The import of his conviction that the renunciation of violence constitutes the central teaching of the gospel

⁵⁰⁶ Romand Coles, "The Wild Patience of John Howard Yoder: 'Outsiders' and the 'Otherness of the Church.'" *Modern Theology* 18:3 (July 2002), 313-314; Yoder, *Priestly Kingdom*, 133.

appears throughout his work and shapes the central questions that drive his scholarship: What is the significance of Jesus for Christian ethics? What is the nature of the church? What is the church's vocation in the world?

One of Yoder's central conceptual presuppositions is the validity of revelation as a category of knowledge and experience, and specifically, the very particular Christian confession that Jesus is Lord. For Yoder, this claim articulates not a narrowly conceived statement of faith relevant only to his particular faith community, but rather, an affirmation about the universe and its governance: "Jesus Christ is Lord is a statement not about my inner piety or my intellect or ideas but about the cosmos."⁵⁰⁷ This affirmation of Christ's all-encompassing authority funds, for example, Yoder's critique of Reinhold Niebuhr in which he claims that Niebuhr raises an alternative revelatory claim above that of Jesus. Yoder argues that Niebuhr neglects the biblical claim that "our 'resurrection with Christ'" opens "new ethical possibilities," that the nature of the church as body of Christ "differs from other social bodies," and the role of the Holy Spirit in an "imparting of *power*" that "opens a brand-new realm of historic possibilities."⁵⁰⁸ Yoder concludes that rather than obedience to Christ and the law of love, Niebuhr concerns himself with the "un-Biblical assumption of responsibility for policing society and for preserving Western Civilization."⁵⁰⁹ He positions his own work, rather, as a rescuing of Jesus as the normative source for Christian ethics, declaring that the revelation given in Christ's

⁵⁰⁷ Yoder, *For the Nations*, 24.

⁵⁰⁸ John Howard Yoder, "Reinhold Niebuhr and Christian Pacifism," *Mennonite Quarterly Review*, Vol. XXIX (April 1955), 115.

⁵⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, 117.

incarnation, crucifixion, and resurrection renders the law of love not only possible but the only obedient act of faith.

In these criticisms of Niebuhr, Yoder is actually responding to a larger phenomenon that Yoder refers to as Constantinianism. Although Yoder acknowledges that, historically speaking, instances of Constantinianism had taken place prior to Constantine's conversion to Christianity, he locates the symbolic origins of this error in the fourth century when Christianity ceases to be a minority religion. For Yoder, Constantinianism marks a turning point in the history of the church that leads it away from its authentic vocation in the world. Most simply put, this transition involves the "wedding of piety and power."⁵¹⁰ Yoder also describes it as the "church's compromise with the world."⁵¹¹ According to Yoder, the pre-Constantinian church was a visible church with minority status. It drew the content of its ethics from the New Testament and recognized Jesus as its source—the result being that the church existed as a distinctive community with its own particular practices and ways of living.⁵¹² This mode of being included practices Yoder refers to as the church's "body politics." These practices include binding and loosing (forgiveness), baptism, the sharing of economic resources as dictated by the eucharist, recognition of each member's leadership gifts, and the open meeting. In operating according to this fundamentally different logic over and against the rest of society, the church offered a distinctive witness.

⁵¹⁰ Yoder, *Priestly Kingdom*, 140.

⁵¹¹ John Howard Yoder, *The Christian Witness to the State* (Scottsdale, Pa.: Herald Press, 1964), 56.

⁵¹² Yoder, *Priestly Kingdom*, 141.

In fact, this is how Yoder understands the church's political vocation. Jesus' revelation of a new way to deal with problems of evil, war, and violence, is only one aspect of the new way he reveals to deal with all injustices of the social, political, and economic order: the creation of a new society. For Yoder, the church constitutes its own society, a new political order whose existence challenges the injustice of the dominant order:

When He called his society together Jesus gave its members of new way of life to live. He gave them a new way to deal with offenders—by forgiving them. He gave them a new way to deal with violence—by suffering. He gave them a new way to deal with money—by sharing it. He gave them a new way to deal with problems of leadership—by drawing upon the gift of every member, even the most humble. He gave them a new way to deal with a corrupt society—by building a new order, not smashing the old. He gave them a new pattern of relationships between man and woman, between parent and child, between master and slave, in which was made concrete a radical new vision of what it means to be a human person. He gave them a new attitude toward the state and toward the 'enemy nation.'⁵¹³

But this new community, with its own set of values and practices, does not exist for itself. It exists for the "world." As Yoder points out, "'Gospel' is good news having seriously to do with the people's welfare."⁵¹⁴ Thus, the political nature of the church is less about power construed as use of force but a new form of power distinctive to the Christian community but ultimately for the benefit of all creation. This understanding of the gospel leads Yoder to elaborate on the church's political vocation vis-à-vis nonbelievers.

Indeed, if one were to identify a second conceptual presupposition that guides Yoder's work, it is a dichotomy between church and world. The church and the world manifest two coexisting, but distinct aeons. Yoder differentiates the two ages not in terms

⁵¹³ John Howard Yoder, *The Original Revolution: Essays on Christian Pacifism* (Scottsdale, Pa.: Herald Press, 1971; reprint, 2003), 29.

⁵¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 15.

of temporality but direction. “The present aeon is characterized by sin and centered on man; the coming aeon is the redemptive reality which entered history in an ultimate way in Christ.”⁵¹⁵ Yoder also describes the difference between the church and the world in this way: “‘World’ signifies ... not creation or nature or the universe but rather the fallen form of the same, no longer conformed to the creative intent ... Over against this ‘world’ the church is visible; identified by baptism, discipline, morality, and martyrdom.”⁵¹⁶ The church, then, stands out as a visible community against the world as representative of the fallen order. Yoder often uses the state, whose mandate is to use evil means—violent force—to restrain evil, as his prime example of the world. In contrast to other communities or the rest of society, then, the church is marked by its refusal to participate in the violence of the state.

Yoder’s emphasis on Jesus as the normative source for Christian ethics as well as his related understanding of the church as a distinctively pacifist political community results in two primary critiques of Yoder’s work. The first set of critiques charge Yoder with sectarianism.⁵¹⁷ These critics hold that Yoder’s church-world distinction and his vision of the church as its own distinctive political community amount to a sectarian withdrawal from society. Although he does not specifically name Yoder, James Gustafson writes perhaps the most well-known critique of sectarianism, or what he calls the “seductive temptation.” He writes, “While the Anabaptist vision of Christian morality

⁵¹⁵ Yoder, *Christian Witness*, 9.

⁵¹⁶ John Howard Yoder, *The Royal Priesthood: Essays Ecclesiological and Ecumenical*, ed. Michael G. Cartwright (Scottsdale, Pa.: Herald Press, 1994), 56.

⁵¹⁷ See Richard Mouw’s *Politics and the Biblical Drama* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1976), 90ff. for an example of such a critique, and Yoder’s *For the Nations*, 3-4, for a discussion of the sectarian label.

can be seductively appealing because it provides clear lines of distinction between Christ and culture, Church and world, it can also lead to isolation of Christians from participation in critical ambiguous choices in professional and public life.”⁵¹⁸ Yoder offers his collection of essays *For the Nations* as an effort to correct misunderstandings of his “sectarian” position when that label is understood in the pejorative sense that Gustafson intends it.

Another major line of critique contends that in his account of Jesus’ normativity for Christian ethics, Yoder succumbs to a form of Christian supersessionism.⁵¹⁹ In their response to Yoder’s *The Jewish-Christian Schism Revisited*, Peter Ochs and Michael Cartwright argue that although Yoder begins with a laudable goal—to understand Christianity in light of the Jewish tradition, rather than in opposition to it—Yoder ultimately espouses a “neo-neo-Christian supersessionism.”⁵²⁰ In the process, Yoder presents a Judaism that Ochs argues most Jews would not recognize. Rather than

⁵¹⁸ James M. Gustafson, “The Sectarian Temptation: Reflections on Theology, the Church and the University,” *Catholic Theological Society of America* 40 (1985): 83-94. 91

⁵¹⁹ Interestingly, feminist theologian Judith Plaskow makes similar charges of anti-Judaism against Christian feminists. Plaskow identifies three areas of Christian feminist thought in relation to images of God that manifest this anti-Judaism: the contrast between a wrathful Old Testament God and a loving New Testament God, holding Judaism responsible for the death of the Goddess, and “Jesus was a feminist” claims. As we will see, Yoder also makes the “Jesus was a feminist” claim, thus, that particular theme is relevant to Yoder as well as the feminists Plaskow identifies. Just as Ochs points out that Yoder ends up espousing a picture of Judaism that most Jews would not recognize, Plaskow argues that feminist efforts to claim Jesus for their cause often require them to depict the Judaism of Jesus’ time in an inaccurate (and negative) light. Plaskow argues, rather, that “whatever Jesus’ attitudes towards women, they represent not a victory *over* Judaism but a possibility within early Judaism.” If nothing else, the similarity between these charges of anti-Judaism made against both Yoder and feminist theologians provide an additional—if unfortunate—parallel between Yoder and the feminist tradition. It is my hope that my own constructive engagement with Yoder alleviates this problem by developing Yoder’s position to be more fully receptive to the redemptive power of God that Christ witnesses to wherever it appears, whether that be in the Jewish tradition or outside church communities in society at large. See “Feminist Anti-Judaism and the Christian God,” *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion*, 7 (Fall 1991), 99-108.

⁵²⁰ John Howard Yoder, *The Jewish-Christian Schism Revisited*, eds. Michael G. Cartwright and Peter Ochs (London: SCM Press, 2003), 211.

acknowledging the pluriform historical traditions of Judaism, Yoder identifies the Judaism of the Babylonian exile as the true Judaism. This is a Judaism that shares the same vocation with Christians to be a voluntary, pacifist society. As Ochs points out, Yoder “has a tendency to overstate and reify this view of Exilic Judaism...In this way, he transforms what post-liberal Jews would consider their sages’ striving for peace into a conceptually clear and distinct ‘pacifism.’”⁵²¹ Yoder’s revisionist account of Jewish history also has several other unintended, but supersessionist effects. Cartwright argues that not only does Yoder’s account detach Israel from the land/Zion, it “involves an ‘erasure’ of the Jewish witness as found in the institutions and practices of post-biblical Judaism.”⁵²² Michael Wyschogrod argues that in separating Abrahamic identity from its embodiment in the people of Israel, Yoder effectively eliminates Jews from human history.⁵²³ And Douglas Harink argues that in Yoder’s emphasis on the exilic period, any discussion of covenant and election drops out of the picture.⁵²⁴ As Cartwright summarizes Yoder’s attempt at Jewish-Christian dialogue, “in seeking a way for Jews and Christians to share a common witness for peace, Yoder slips into a form of *neo-neo-supersessionism* that, in effect, erases the covenantal basis of Jewish peoplehood even as it attempts to re-describe Jewish identity with the framework of the ‘new covenant’ of

⁵²¹ Ibid., 92.

⁵²² Ibid., 219, 215.

⁵²³ Michael Wyschogrod, *The Body of Faith: God in the People of Israel* (New York: Harper & Row, 1983), xv.

⁵²⁴ Douglas Harink, *Paul Among the Theologians: Pauline Theology Beyond Christendom and Modernity* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Brazos Press, 2003), 201-202.

Jesus.”⁵²⁵ In a related criticism, Christian theologian Oliver O’Donovan offers an implicit critique of Yoder’s own political theology in his insistence that political theology must take its concepts from scripture—“The Scriptures in their entirety, that is, and not only certain texts within them.”⁵²⁶ Just as Ochs and Cartwright note that Yoder tends to disregard the prophets after Jeremiah, so O’Donovan would contend that Yoder’s political theology problematically reserves true revelatory status for the New Testament alone. Using the resources of the eschatological ethic in Chapter Two, I hope to develop Yoder’s contributions to political theology in ways that more readily avoid these problems.

III. Beyond Pacifism

Most Christian ethicists would immediately identify Yoder’s contributions to the field primarily in terms of his apology for Christian pacifism. No other contemporary Christian thinker has self-consciously devoted so much of his scholarly energies to developing a Christian pacifist position.⁵²⁷ The bulk of his work proclaims his central conviction that the fundamental mark of the church and the Christian disciple is nonviolence—primarily, although not exclusively, understood as nonparticipation in the military apparatus of the state.⁵²⁸ Mark Thiessen Nation argues that “Yoder provided

⁵²⁵ Michael Cartwright, “Afterword: ‘If Abraham is Our Father...,’” *The Jewish-Christian Schism Revisited* (London: SCM Press, 2003), 229.

⁵²⁶ Oliver O’Donovan, *The Desire of the Nations: Rediscovering the Roots of Political Theology* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1996), 22.

⁵²⁷ Stanley Hauerwas, of course, carries on Yoder’s pacifist agenda. But because Hauerwas came to his own pacifist project through Yoder, I focus here on Yoder.

what I would argue is the most powerful articulation of a Christian theological rationale for pacifism that has ever been given.”⁵²⁹ The three major articulations of Yoder’s thought regarding the church’s embodiment of nonviolence are his 1972 *The Politics of Jesus*, and 1971 works *The Original Revolution: Essays on Christian Pacifism* and *Nevertheless: The Varieties of Religious Pacifism*. In *The Politics of Jesus*, Yoder recovers Jesus and, specifically, his nonresistance to evil, as the norm for Christian ethics. The second, a collection of essays, offers biblical and ecumenical perspectives on Christian pacifism, and is described by *Nation* as having the purpose of leading its readers “to reflect deeply on the meaning of the Christian claim that Jesus is Lord.”⁵³⁰ The third study discusses the numerous varieties of religious pacifism, including Yoder’s own position, “the pacifism of the messianic community.”⁵³¹ Yoder writes *Nevertheless* as a direct response to conversations regarding pacifism at the time of the Vietnam War, and both collections as a response to what he sees as the mainstream churches’ abandonment of nonviolence.⁵³² In addition to these major works, Yoder also responds to Reinhold Niebuhr’s famous essay “Why the Christian Church is Not Pacifist” in

⁵²⁸ Chris K. Huebner makes the significant point that Yoder’s approach to epistemological issues and refusal to identify any one method as his own is also part of his pacifism. “Christian pacifism is thus not to be understood merely as a conclusion to some ethical theory that legitimizes and prohibits various activities and justifies particular political structures. It is also—at the same time, in the same place—a particular style of thinking or mode of discourse. In addition to the way of life it calls for, Christian pacifism involves a corresponding epistemology, a different way of thinking about knowledge,” *A Precarious Peace: Yoderian Explorations on Theology, Knowledge, and Identity* (Scottsdale, Pa.: Herald Press, 2006), 99.

⁵²⁹ *Nation*, John Howard Yoder, 193.

⁵³⁰ Yoder, *Original Revolution*, 1.

⁵³¹ John Howard Yoder, *Nevertheless: The Varieties of Christian Pacifism* (Scottsdale, Pa.: Herald Press, 1971), 122.

⁵³² *Ibid.*, 5.

“Reinhold Niebuhr and Christian Pacifism,” and Karl Barth’s stance on war in *Karl Barth and the Problem of War*. Other writings, geared toward popular audiences, such as *What Would You Do If?*, also respond to typical questions posed to pacifists.

Those working in Yoder’s scholarly tradition, as well as the scholarly literature on Yoder, maintain this focus on pacifism, developed by Yoder primarily as the rejection of participation in state violence.⁵³³ Yoder’s then-colleague at Notre Dame, Stanley Hauerwas, is perhaps the most well known of these scholars, and is largely responsible for making Yoder a household name in Christian ethics.⁵³⁴ But Craig A. Carter, Michael G. Cartwright, Harry J. Huebner, Chris K. Huebner, James McClendon, Nancey Murphy Mark Thiessen Nation, Gayle Gerber Koontz, Glen H. Stassen, and a host of others have all made critical contributions to examining or developing Yoder’s pacifist position.⁵³⁵

⁵³³ In relation to Hauerwas’ thought, for example, Gloria Albrecht argues that his “definition of violence seems limited to two expressions: 1) the violence of war between nation states, and 2) the violence which Hauerwas identifies as residing equally within all humans as a result of human self-interest and self-protection...in all this talk about violence, what is not explicitly named as violence are the structural oppressions that support ‘our’ institutionalized privileges: poverty, racism, sexism, homophobia, and political injustice. The violence embedded in our economic structures is not named,” *The Character of our Communities: Toward an Ethic of Liberation for the Church* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1995), 117. Albrecht goes even further to suggest that Hauerwas’ ethic perpetrates its own violence against women. “In the need to defend the absolute virtue of nonviolence, as he defines, it, Hauerwas’s ethics consigns some of us...to violences he may not be able to imagine,” 127.

⁵³⁴ Hauerwas credits Yoder with converting him to pacifism. “Indeed, the very reason I became a pacifist was because I awoke, through John Howard Yoder’s help, from the dogmatic slumber, induced by Reinhold Niebuhr...” *The Hauerwas Reader*, 117. Hauerwas also acknowledges his indebtedness to Yoder in the introduction to *The Peaceable Kingdom: A Primer in Christian Ethics* (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1983), xxiv. See Mark Thiessen Nation’s “Stanley Hauerwas: Where Would We Be Without Him?” *Faithfulness and Fortitude: In Conversation with the Theological Ethics of Stanley Hauerwas*, eds. Mark Thiessen Nation and Samuel Wells (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 2000), 19-38, for an account of Yoder’s influence on Hauerwas. Also see Jeffrey Stout, *Democracy and Tradition* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004), 143, for a more critical analysis of Yoder’s influence on Hauerwas and Hauerwas’ early critiques of Yoder. See Hauerwas, “The Nonresistant Church: The Theological Ethics of John Howard Yoder,” *Vision and Virtue: Essays in Christian Ethical Reflection* (Notre Dame, Ind.: Fides Publishers, Inc, 1974), 197-221, for his earliest engagement with Yoder’s views.

⁵³⁵ See, for example, Craig A. Carter, *The Politics of the Cross: The Theology and Social Ethics of John Howard Yoder* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Brazos Press, 2001), Huebner, *A Precarious Peace: Yoderian*

Even those scholars who would not identify themselves as Yoderian engage Yoder primarily on questions related to pacifism as a refusal of participation in the military functions of the state.⁵³⁶ Two important exceptions to this focus on pacifism understood in terms of military violence are Chris K. Huebner's *A Precarious Peace* and Hess' *Sites of Violence, Sites of Grace*. Huebner attends to Yoder's approaches to epistemology and method as central to his pacifism, and Hess re-conceptualizes Yoder's nonviolent position to address the internal violence of trauma.⁵³⁷ For the most part, however, the scholarship on Yoder tends to focus on questions related to the legitimate use of force.

My own sense is that most scholarly engagement with Yoder takes one of two unproductive extremes. Most of the secondary literature is dominated by debates between pacifists who come close to a hagiographical view of Yoder and those who hastily dismiss Yoder as a politically irresponsible sectarian. My own position aims to stake out middle ground. I seek neither to offer unqualified praise of Yoder nor to dismiss him as irrelevant to questions regarding the political vocation of the church. As I indicated, I hope to show that Yoder's contributions to political theology do not come primarily in

Explorations on Theology, Knowledge, and Identity (Scottsdale, Pa.: Herald Press, 2006); Nation, *John Howard Yoder*; Ben C. Ollenburger and Gayle Gerber Koontz, eds. *A Mind Patient and Untamed: Assessing John Howard Yoder's Contributions to Theology, Ethics, and Peacemaking* (Telford, Pa.: Cascadia Publishing House, 2004); and *The Wisdom of the Cross: Essays in Honor of John Howard Yoder*, eds. Stanley Hauerwas, Chris K. Huebner, Harry J. Huebner, and Mark Thiessen Nation (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1999).

⁵³⁶ For example, see O'Donovan's *The Desire of the Nations*, 152, and Phillip W. Gray's "Peace, Peace, but there is no Peace": A Critique of Christian Pacifist Communitarianism" *Politics and Religion* 1:3 (December 2008) 411-435. Both charge Yoder with being anachronistic when he distinguishes between the police function of the state and the military apparatus of the state.

⁵³⁷ Hess argues that Yoder's work focuses on responses to "external violence" and "overlooks a dimension of violence that contemporary understandings of violence must address...internalized violence, forms of violence that have assaulted persons from the outside and then moved into their bodies, minds, and souls," 2.

the form of his critique of Constantinianism or his embrace of nonresistant Christian pacifism, but rather his conviction that it is the church's role to constantly discern the new things.

Indeed, Yoder's own focus on nonviolence and his definition of violence primarily understood in terms of the sword—as state exercised use of force—obscures his other valuable contributions to political theology. As Linda Woodhead points out with regard to Stanley Hauerwas' thought—but the insight could be applied equally to Yoder's—feminists offer a valuable challenge to this “preoccupation with violence” understood primarily in terms of war.⁵³⁸ She argues that “What is interesting from a gendered perspective is what this leaves out. For whilst active involvement in war has undoubtedly been a, if not the, major male mode of participation in violence in the twentieth-century...it is not clear that the same has been true for women.”⁵³⁹ She proceeds to name various ‘violences’—not necessarily even physical—inflicted upon women in male-dominated societies where women often do not have the same level of access to economic and cultural resources, as well as domestic and sexual violence that occurs in the private realm.⁵⁴⁰ One problem that a feminist analysis of this narrow conception of violence identifies is the way in which it “mask[s] the reality of sin as it is encountered by many women.”⁵⁴¹ In other words, the conception of violence that Yoder primarily

⁵³⁸ Linda Woodhead, “Can Women Love Stanley Hauerwas? Pursuing an Embodied Theology.” *Faithfulness and Fortitude: In Conversation with the Theological Ethics of Stanley Hauerwas*, eds. Mark Thiessen Nation and Samuel Wells (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 2000), 171.

⁵³⁹ *Ibid.*, 172.

⁵⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 173.

⁵⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 175.

works with is a decidedly male-oriented understanding of violence that does not attend as carefully as it should to the various forms of violence that pervade human existence.⁵⁴² I want, however, to be clear: it is not the case that Yoder understands violence strictly in relation to the state's use of force—indeed, he talks about nonviolence as encompassing the total way of life of the Christian community as well as part of his own theological method. I simply note that he focused the bulk of his attention on how Christian communities should regard the state's use of force.

Another problem with Yoder's focus on nonviolence, understood vis-à-vis the state, is that it relies on Yoder's church-world opposition which risks underestimating life outside church communities as site of redemption.⁵⁴³ It risks participation in a "totalizing discourse" that produces "a deeply abstract and idealized picture of the Church" and

⁵⁴² Interestingly, in his early engagement with Yoder, Hauerwas makes a related observation: "For the nature of evil is broader than the questions of violence in itself. We constantly confront and perpetrate on other subtle forms of aggression and injustice that are all the more fatal for their nonviolent forms. What form would nonresistance take in the face of this kind of problem in our lives?" (*Vision and Virtue*), 221. Hauerwas seems to be critiquing Yoder's narrow focus on war-related violence, which moves him closer to Woodhead's critique. But note that he is not actually calling for a broader conception of violence, but rather naming other evils, which do not go by the name of violence, but 'aggression' and 'injustice.' Gloria Albrecht points out in her critique of Hauerwas, that he locates violence within the soul of the individual and therefore is unable to account for the violence embedded in social structures as well as the violence the church perpetrates by insisting that there is one 'Christian story.' "In women's experience, the freedom to participate in the cocreation of either secular or religious meaning has been consistently thwarted by social roles and virtues that establish places for us within hierarchies of domination. For women, then, the understanding of violence includes the experience of the loss of power to cocreate ourself-in-relation. Violence names the experience of being defined by dominant discourses that are embedded in the structures of our institutions, in the material practices of our social, political, and economic systems, as well as in the theories and stories that give them authenticity," *The Character of our Communities: Toward an Ethic of Liberation for the Church*, 96-101.

⁵⁴³ In the interest of greater clarity between church and world as theological categories (where church means creation in obedience and world means "the fallen form of creation") and church and world as descriptive of church communities versus that which is outside of church communities, when I use the term church, I refer to its mandate. When I want to refer to actual church communities I either use that phrase or refer to churches. When I use the term world, I refer to the fallen form of creation; and when I want to refer to creation at large, I use the phrase "all that exists outside of actual church communities" or similar phrases.

“positions whatever falls outside [the church’s] jurisdiction as ‘error.’”⁵⁴⁴ I suspect that both of these tendencies are ultimately at odds with Yoder’s reforming agenda and his incarnational theology. When one understands the church-world opposition as a totalizing discourse, two problems result: the distinction fails to adequately acknowledge the complicity of church communities in sin, and it problematically pictures the state not as a “blend of order and revolt,” but entirely rebellious. On this account, church communities are marked solely by their refusal to participate in the legitimate violence of the state, and the state is marked solely by its use of evil means to restrain evil. If Yoder took more seriously his own definition of world as the fallen form of creation (rather than all that exists outside church communities) he would more directly and explicitly acknowledge both the rebellion of church communities and the state’s potential for order.

IV. Old Things: Yoder’s Church-World Opposition

As I indicated in Chapter Two, feminists, womanists, *mujerista*, and Latina theologians often respond to the corruption of the church by highlighting the contextual, historical, ad hoc, ‘worldly’ nature of the Christian tradition, often leading them to a positive affirmation of life outside the church. Undoubtedly this affirmation results, in part, from the fact that women have often experienced equality and dignity outside of church communities in ways that they are denied that equality within church communities.⁵⁴⁵ This experience enables these theologians to readily acknowledge when

⁵⁴⁴ Ibid., 184; 183.

⁵⁴⁵ See Beverly Harrison, “The Early Feminists and the Clergy: A Case Study in the Dynamics of Secularization,” *Making the Connections*, in which she argues that the church’s failure to embrace the women’s movement had the effect of secularizing it. The “failure to place a hermeneutic of justice at the

communities beyond the churches outdo them at being church, so to speak. In other words, their acknowledgement of the worldliness or rebellion of churches leads them to affirm a corresponding churchliness of the world, or that which is outside of church communities. Yoder's response differs. Rather than directly attending to the ways in which church communities are marked by the category of world and naming them as such; and rather than directly attending to the ways in which broader society exhibits the marks of the category of church and naming them as such, he emphasizes his normative vision of the church and its mandate. His church-world distinction is thus central to his response to Constantinianism. He draws on it to proclaim that the church is its own *polis*—that, rather than wed itself to state power, the church should manifest its own distinctive kind of power.

At times, Yoder discusses the church-world opposition in ways that suggest it as a dynamic concept. As I already mentioned, on some occasions, he makes clear that the terms church and world do not refer to separate realms but are representative of different aeons capable of being witnessed to either in church communities or outside them. Yoder's emphasis on the ontological unity of church and world, the necessary and valuable roles both the church and the state play in God's salvation history, his utmost concern with the destiny of all of creation, and his conviction that the Christian vocation demands involvement in the socio-political order, demonstrate that Yoder's theology is concerned with the flourishing not only of churches but all of creation. I will discuss

these aspects of Yoder's church-world opposition before moving on to ultimately identify it as a thing of old that needs to be challenged.

Yoder makes clear that his church-world opposition does not undermine the ultimate unity of the cosmos under the lordship of Christ. As Craig R. Hovey puts it, "There may be a descriptive dualism but not an ontological one or, better, not a necessary dualism but a contingent one."⁵⁴⁶ The world does not possess an ontological integrity of its own:

...there is no one tangible, definable quantity that we can call 'world.' The *aion houtos* is at the same time chaos and a kingdom. The 'world' of politics, the 'world' of economics, the 'world' of theater, the 'world' of sports, the under-'world,' and a host of others—each is a demonic blend of order and revolt. The world 'as such' has no intrinsic ontological dignity. It is creaturely order in the state of rebellion....⁵⁴⁷

In this passage Yoder makes clear that the world is not a separate, autonomous reality outside the reign of Christ. Rather "the world" designates any form of culture that rebels against Christ's rule. Although Yoder does not mention church communities in this statement, he could just as easily have spoken of the 'world' of church communities. In fact, if churches were not deeply unfaithful, Yoder would not be calling them to account in the way that he does. As Stout notes, it is important to remember that Yoder is criticizing the church for its unbelief, not the world.⁵⁴⁸ The same blend of order and revolt that marks other forms of life pertains to churches as human institutions. As Hess

⁵⁴⁶ Craig R. Hovey, "The Public Ethics of Yoder and Hauerwas: Difference or Disagreement," *A Mind Patient and Untamed: Assessing John Howard Yoder's Contributions to Theology, Ethics, and Peacemaking*, eds. Ben C. Ollenburger and Gayle G. Koontz (Telford, Pa.: Cascadia Publishing House, 2004), 209.

⁵⁴⁷ Yoder, *Royal Priesthood*, 56.

⁵⁴⁸ Stout, *Democracy and Tradition*, 154.

notes, "...it is important to note that he does not say that the basis for this distinction is that the church is sinless, while the world is not. The church itself is a power or structure, and it is therefore subject to corruption...As fallen form of creation, the world is unbelief; and those who profess faith in Jesus participate in this unbelief as well."⁵⁴⁹ While the world may revolt from Christ's rule it nevertheless fails to attain its independence as an autonomous ontological reality.

Yoder also indicates in *The Christian Witness to the State and Discipleship as Political Responsibility*, that both the state and the church play important roles in God's salvation history. The state, for example, as "a deeply representative segment of the 'world,'" carries the responsibility of maintaining order in society.⁵⁵⁰ Like the church, the state possesses a divine mandate. It "consists in using evil means to keep evil from getting out of hand."⁵⁵¹ Yoder again derives this picture from the New Testament, which speaks of "human affairs" as being "dominated by superhuman powers."⁵⁵² This concept of 'powers' refers to "the dimensions of cohesiveness and purposefulness which hold together human affairs beyond the strictly personal level, especially in such realms as that of the state or certain areas of culture."⁵⁵³ Although Christ, through his resurrection, has triumphed over the powers, God allows the powers to restrain human evil through evil forces. In Yoder's words: "God permits human evil to keep itself under control by using

⁵⁴⁹ Hess, *Sites of Violence*, 19.

⁵⁵⁰ Yoder, *Christian Witness*, 12.

⁵⁵¹ John Howard Yoder, *Discipleship as Political Responsibility* (Scottsdale, Pa: Herald Press, 1964), 18.

⁵⁵² Yoder, *Christian Witness*, 8.

⁵⁵³ *Ibid.*, 8.

evil against itself ... How God can use that which is pagan, indeed that which is demonic, without affirming it, is something that human understanding cannot completely grasp.”⁵⁵⁴ Thus, the state is the “fundamental phenomenon that society is organized by the appeal to force as the ultimate authority.”⁵⁵⁵ The world is the “order of providence” “where Christ reigns over man’s disobedience, through the ‘powers’ including the state.”⁵⁵⁶ Structures outside church communities, like the state, that use evil means to maintain order among fallen humanity are nevertheless under the rule of Christ.

Although they have separate mandates, then, “church” and “world” are nevertheless deeply connected. “Church and world,” he writes, “are not two compartments under separate legislation or two institutions with contradictory assignments, but two levels of the pertinence of the same Lordship. The people of God is called to be today what the world is called to be ultimately.”⁵⁵⁷ In other words, “The church is the part of the world that confesses the renewal to which all the world is called.”⁵⁵⁸ Thus, church communities and those outside the church are mutually implicated in the same destiny.

Yoder even explicitly rejects the idea that his ethic demands a complete lack of involvement or participation in the state or culture outside of the church community. “The incarnation is by definition involvement,” Yoder writes, “Christ himself was in the

⁵⁵⁴ Yoder, *Discipleship as Political Responsibility*, 18, 20.

⁵⁵⁵ Yoder, *Christian Witness*, 12.

⁵⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 12.

⁵⁵⁷ John Howard Yoder, *Body Politics: Five Practices of the Christian Community Before the Watching World* (Scottsdale, Pa.: Herald Press, 1992), ix.

⁵⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 78.

middle of the socio-political maelstrom of military occupation and underground war, 'yet without sin.' To equate involvement with compromise and then compromise with sin so that sin is an essential dimension of the human situation is not only Christologically unorthodox and the death of further fruitful thought; it sells out in advance to the same kind of legalism it intended to combat."⁵⁵⁹ Yoder confirms this place for Christian involvement in "The Biblical Mandate for Evangelical Social Action," where he discusses the Christian imperatives for social concern. Addressing a group of evangelicals regarding their mission to effect social change, Yoder says: "We would not be gathered here if we did not believe that the love of a sovereign God drives us into concern for the social order ... God does not simply tell us to accept the existing order; he tells us also that it must change."⁵⁶⁰ Thus the question is not whether Christians should attempt to effect social change, but how. Yoder's emphasis on transforming the social order clearly demonstrates that Christian involvement outside church communities is not to be avoided for fear that Christians would compromise their moral purity; there is no risk that Christians would become tainted because Yoder acknowledges that every part of creation carries the marks of both rebellion and order, including churches.

But despite these relatively unproblematic descriptions of his church-world opposition, there are other elements of Yoder's church-world opposition that lead one to read it less as a dynamic theological tool and more as a thoroughly entrenched dichotomy between two different realms. His emphasis on the church as a visible reality and his over-identification of the state with revolt encourage a view of the church-world

⁵⁵⁹ Yoder, *Christian Witness*, 57-58.

⁵⁶⁰ Yoder, *For the Nations*, 182.

opposition that maps too easily onto actual church communities and everything outside actual church communities. Such a view risks an identification of order with actual churches and rebellion with those outside the churches.

Yoder identifies the church as a visible reality, tempting one away from a temporal conception of the church-world opposition as describing two different aeons to a spatial one that pinpoints separate realms of reality. "... Over against this 'world' the church is visible; identified by baptism, discipline, morality, and martyrdom."⁵⁶¹ As Chris Huebner argues, the visibility of the church is important for Yoder because it offers an embodied counter-witness to violence. But his description of the church as a visible reality also risks a simple, wholesale identification of the theological category of church with actual church communities, such that actual church communities' rebellion against Christ is not accounted for and the order of that beyond church communities is not acknowledged. In other words, when Yoder speaks of the church as a visible community that stands out over and against the world, he pushes his normative vision in a descriptive direction. It encourages one to identify his category of 'church' with actual churches and their very specific practices, like baptism and scripture reading, leading to a picture where churches have a monopoly on redemption and everyone and everything else finds itself wholly outside the redemptive reality of Christ.⁵⁶² I am not arguing that Yoder's

⁵⁶¹ Yoder, *Royal Priesthood*, 56.

⁵⁶² As Lydia Harder points out, although the boundaries of Yoder's church-world opposition "are more subtle" than others in the Mennonite tradition, "his insistence on a particular language and institutional form to express the lordship of Christ allows him to put strict boundaries between the faithful church and the unfaithful church...it has also...contributed to a division between the secular and religious exercise of power. Banning ideas and people who do not conform to the accepted norms of the church to the sphere of the 'world' has therefore been justified theologically." See "Power and Authority in Mennonite Theological

insistence on the church as a visible reality needs to be abandoned, but rather that he needs to more readily acknowledge the possibility of both the ‘worldly’ character of churches and the ‘churchly’ character of life outside church communities. Given Yoder’s focus on the visible church, it is not surprising that critics often treat the distinction as though it implies an ontological or even physical separation of realms.

Yoder’s conviction that as a social body the church already partakes of the Kingdom of God allows him to speak of the “otherness of the church.”⁵⁶³ The titles of Yoder’s works often make reference to the special role of this chosen body in God’s salvation history. He employs biblical terms in speaking of the church as God’s “chosen people,” “the priestly kingdom,” “the royal priesthood.” These terms highlight the importance of the church as a distinctive community, as a people with its own particular history, practices, and mandate:

Each of the ... nouns designates a collectivity: chosen *race*, royal *priesthood*, holy *nation*, God’s own *people*, while each of the adjectives denotes distinctiveness. This distinctiveness is not something that the addressees have merited, but a gift of grace. It is a privilege, but its purpose is not that its beneficiaries should enjoy it for themselves, but rather that, by the very fact of being what they are, they should ‘*declare the wonderful deeds of him who called you*’.”⁵⁶⁴

The church, therefore, is ‘other’ in two senses. First, God chooses it to fulfill God’s particular purposes. Second, God grants the church the resources to embody its distinctiveness. Yoder speaks of Christ’s incarnation, crucifixion, and resurrection as enabling the church to embody these distinctive practices.

Development,” *Power, Authority, and the Anabaptist Tradition* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 2001), 92.

⁵⁶³ Yoder, *Royal Priesthood*, 53.

⁵⁶⁴ Yoder, *For the Nations*, 40.

Indeed, the church possesses resources unavailable to the rest of society. “The church,” Yoder writes, “is able to be [sacrament] because of the presence in her midst of witness and empowerment which are not in the same way accessible to the wider society.”⁵⁶⁵ In particular, the church, through the example embodied in Christ, the power released through the Holy Spirit, and the communion the body of Christ shares, possesses resources only available to those who believe:

...a great deal does depend on the identity of the moral agent. Christian ethics is for the Christian, who—if he will—disposes of the resources of love, repentance, the willingness to sacrifice, and the enabling power of the Holy Spirit, within the supporting fellowship of the church. Whether or not, or in what sense, the non-Christians or the non-Christian society *should* love, forgive, and otherwise behave like Christians is a speculative question. The spiritual resources for making such redeemed behavior a real possibility are lacking.⁵⁶⁶

As this passage suggests, Christ’s revelation not only institutes certain practices and makes them possible, but the practices themselves shape the church community in such a way as to further enable it to fulfill its mission. But Yoder’s confident assertion that these resources are lacking in the rest of society again tips the normativity of his church-world opposition in descriptive directions.

Yoder’s discussion of the state’s use of evil means also renders his church-world opposition problematic. Although Yoder describes the state as a “deeply representative segment of the world,” thus leaving some small room for the possibility that the state could be marked by more than rebellion, his actual discussion of the state at times sounds more like he regards the state as a *totally* representative segment of the world. If all of culture is a blend of order and revolt then there must be some order in the state, some

⁵⁶⁵ Yoder, *Priestly Kingdom*, 93.

⁵⁶⁶ Yoder, *Christian Witness*, 29.

positive function that it serves that allows it to be a site of God's grace.⁵⁶⁷ As O'Donovan argues, Yoder offers varying understandings of the state's role as part of the divine history. At times, he suggests that the biblical text provides criteria for determining when the state's activities are consonant with Christ's reign, where for example, the state's use of force may be part of God's plan. But at other times, he describes the state as purely rebellious without reference to Christ's reign. O'Donovan writes, "[Yoder's] language of principalities and powers was invoked solely to point up the demonic character of the state...which I find impossible to reconcile with Paul's statements that the authorities praise those who do good, and that obedience is due 'as a matter of principled conviction.'"⁵⁶⁸ O'Donovan's critique nicely points to Yoder's tendency to construe the state as marked by pure revolt, rather than capable of serving God's redemptive purposes. In this sense, Yoder narrowly defines the state's role in God's providential plan as the use of evil means, underestimating the potential of the state to serve as a site of God's redemptive grace.

In a sense, this over-identification of the state with revolt results from Yoder's focus on the state primarily as the legitimate wielder of violence and his subsequent development of pacifism primarily as a refusal of participation in the use of force. Ironically, Yoder seems unable to apply his broad understanding of politics (as in his conviction that the church is itself a political structure) to the state itself. He seems to limit the political nature of the state to its use of violence, overlooking the various ways

⁵⁶⁷ As a younger Hauerwas put it: "...one must ask if Yoder's theological predisposition has not prevented him from considering a more positive understanding of the nature of political community," "The Nonresistant Church," *Vision and Virtue*, 218.

⁵⁶⁸ O'Donovan, *The Desire of Nations*, 151.

the state participates in life beyond its formal structure. In other words, Yoder's emphasis on the state's use of force eclipses his attention to the state's constructive activities.⁵⁶⁹ Had Yoder's conception of violence attended more adequately to its more subtle and pervasive forms, he might have presented a more balanced view of both the state's role in God's providential history as well as the rebellion that marks churches. Yoder's tendency to use the state as the primary example of 'the world' only serves to exacerbate this problem. 'World' and 'state' become almost interchangeable, identifying the state too simply with rebellion and churches too simply with order.

These elements of Yoder's discussion of the church-world opposition render it problematically rigid. It seems to limit faithfulness to churches and neglect the reality of churches' complicity in and continuance of sin—to leave unacknowledged the ways in which churches, too, take part in the fallenness of the created order. As Harder argues, "Mennonites have identified with Jesus and his life and teaching, creating in the process an ideal model for discipleship, but they have failed to include the fallible disciples in that model. They have written an ideal Anabaptist history while ignoring many of the actual Anabaptists."⁵⁷⁰ Despite the fact that Yoder's very use of the church-world opposition as a way of calling churches back to their mandate implies their unfaithfulness, Yoder rarely (if at all) explicitly states that churches are rebellious. Recall that he fails to mention 'the world of the church' in his description of world as

⁵⁶⁹ For an attempt to develop such a "positive theology of law and civil institutions," see A. James Reimer, 'I came not to abolish the law but to fulfill it': A Positive Theology of Law and Civil Institutions," *A Mind Patient and Untamed*, 245-273.

⁵⁷⁰ Harder, "Power and Authority," *Power and Authority*, 92-93.

“creaturely order in the state of rebellion.”⁵⁷¹ As Huebner notes, “Accounts of the strangeness or otherness of the church regarding the world are often delivered in comforting and self-confirming tones. They tempt us to fix our critical gaze on some other terrain...”⁵⁷² As criticisms of Yoder’s work indicate, Yoder’s church-world opposition is received as doing just this, focusing attention on the other terrain of life outside churches, rather than the unfaithfulness of church communities.

Indeed, critics often read Yoder’s church-world opposition as a thoroughly entrenched dichotomy.⁵⁷³ From this perspective, church and world represent fundamentally different realms of life with competing modes of being and acting. The world exists in the realm of rebellion, while churches witness to the coming Kingdom;

⁵⁷¹ Yoder, *Royal Priesthood*, 56.

⁵⁷² Huebner, *A Precarious Peace*, 21.

⁵⁷³ In addition to the problematic elements of Yoder’s discussion of his church-world opposition, I suspect that this tendency is exacerbated by Hauerwas’ more rigid development of Yoder’s church-world opposition. Most readers come to Yoder’s work via Hauerwas, and at least early on, Hauerwas was not as clear as Yoder in his affirmation and concern for the world. Craig R. Hovey points out, for example, that Hauerwas diverges from Yoder on “the issues of Constantinianism in modernity, pluralism, translatability, and the world’s response to the church’s witness,” “The Public Ethics of John Howard Yoder and Stanley Hauerwas: Difference or Disagreement?,” 207. More specifically, 1) Hauerwas “identifies the Enlightenment with Constantinianism in a way that Yoder rarely if ever did,” 207; 2) “Yoder does not want to reject some of the fruits of modern liberalism to the extent that Hauerwas wants. He is sympathetic to a ‘soft pluralism,’” 210; 3) “Hauerwas has ‘a number of theological and philosophical misgivings about the very idea of translation,’” whereas “Yoder relied on the ability of Christians to translate their convictions into the language used by the state,” 212-213; and 4) “Yoder is much more optimistic about the world’s response... According to Hauerwas,... the watching world is more likely to reject the church’s witness than learn from it,” but for Yoder, “the practical rationality of the church is commensurate with that of the world,” 215, 217. For other sources that suggest Hauerwas is less optimistic about the world than Yoder, see Kent Reames, “Why Yoder is not Hauerwas and Why it Matters,” Paper presented at the Society of Christian Ethics Annual Meeting, 1999; Craig A. Carter’s *The Politics of the Cross*, 227; Jeffrey Stout’s “Virtue and the Way of the World” in *Democracy and Tradition*; Duane Friesen’s “Toward a Theology of Culture,” *Conrad Grebel Review* 16: 2 (Spring 1998); and Michael Cartwright’s “Radical Reform, Radical Catholicity: John Howard Yoder’s Vision of the Faithful Church,” in *The Royal Priesthood: Essays Ecclesiological and Ecumenical*, 1-49. For those who argue that their understanding of the world is similar, see Douglas Harink’s “For or Against the Nations: Yoder and Hauerwas, What’s the Difference?” *Toronto Journal of Theology* 17:1 (2001) and Paul Doerksen’s “Share the House: Yoder and Hauerwas Among the Nations,” in *A Mind Patient and Untamed*, 187-204.

church communities remain untainted by worldly ways, demonstrating to the world how life is meant to be lived, thus inviting charges that Yoder is a sectarian whose normative vision of the church is indifferent to or even hostile towards the rest of the world. Charles Mathewes, for example, argues that Yoder's view "recapitulates a church-world dichotomy" that, "rather than eliciting a concern for how we should order our common life, merely renounces politics and fails to offer a vision of existence as sacramental."⁵⁷⁴

When Yoder's thought is understood in this way, it is not difficult to see why feminists would find Yoder's church-world opposition problematic. A diverse range of feminists have, after all, devoted their energies to revealing and naming the ways in which churches partake of the fallenness of the created order, the ways churches are marked by all the same 'worldliness' as other social organizations and structures. By the same token, feminist theologies are also keenly attendant to redemptive powers when they appear and are experienced outside the institutional church. Rather than erecting a dichotomy between church and world, they have made an effort to complicate that distinction, to demonstrate that churches and creation beyond church communities are not only, "mutually critical and interrelated" but thoroughly implicated in one another.⁵⁷⁵

But Yoder's church-world opposition need not be formulated as he so often formulated it, as a church-world dichotomy; his deeper point, which runs counter to the frequently dualistic rhetoric of his texts, is that churches exist *for* those outside its walls. The resources of an eschatological ethic can help develop his church-world opposition in

⁵⁷⁴ Mathewes, *A Theology of Public Life*, 240-241.

⁵⁷⁵ Carbine, "Ekklesial Work," *Harvard Theological Review*, 454.

more dynamic directions and still preserve—and even augment—his concern with maintaining the primacy of revelation and Christ’s redemptive powers. As Stout notes in regards to Stanley Hauerwas’ use of Yoder: “It was possible to develop Yoder’s conception of church in a nondualistic direction. All he needed to do was emphasize that the world, like the church, is a realm ordained and ruled by God—an arena in which those with eyes to see can perceive the workings of God’s gracious providence.”⁵⁷⁶ My own sense is that the resources found in the eschatological ethic that I identified in Chapter Two can do just this. In fact, the problem Yoder faces in articulating his normative picture of the church’s identity is one that has confronted feminists in the essentialism/constructivism debate about women’s nature. Looking to how feminist theologians navigate these debates offers helpful hints for Yoder’s position and bring certain aspects of his church-world opposition to light that allow us to articulate it in less problem-prone ways.

V. New Things: Reading Yoder’s Church-World Opposition as a Strategic Essentialism

Although Yoder’s church-world opposition is problematic, the similarity between a number of feminist critiques of patriarchy and his own critique of Constantinianism suggest that Yoder is up to something more important. As I suggested earlier, I suspect that Yoder is less concerned with erecting a church-world opposition, and more concerned with putting forward a new understanding of politics related to the Christian

⁵⁷⁶ Stout, *Democracy and Tradition*, 154.

communities' distinct brand of power. After detailing some important resonances between Yoder's critique of Constantinianism and a number of feminist theologians on patriarchy, I will argue that the lens of an eschatological ethic clarifies the intended corrective function of Yoder's church-world opposition. More specifically, reading Yoder's church-world opposition in light of the essentialism/constructivism debates within feminist theory, and especially feminist theologian Serene Jones' concept of "strategic essentialism" not only more adequately reveals the purpose of Yoder's church-world opposition but renders it more dynamic, allowing for new lines of development. It demonstrates that misunderstanding Yoder's distinction—reading it as a descriptive statement that identifies church communities with the church's mandate and that which is outside churches with rebellion, rather than a normative, and therefore critical, vision—blinds us to how the distinction might be used to critique the unfaithfulness of churches and the potential it holds for identifying sites of redemption or places where the church's mandate is fulfilled outside actual church communities. In short, the goal will be to use an eschatological lens to highlight the correct function of the church-world opposition, which brings Yoder's primary concerns—the redemptive power of Christ and empowering church communities to be a better witness to it—to the forefront. Recognizing these concerns allows us to more faithfully represent Yoder's thought and to develop it in new directions that render it even more potent with regard to his concerns than his own articulation.

A) Patriarchy and Constantinianism: Distortion of the Tradition by Worldly Power

Yoder and a number of feminist theologians offer similar analyses of the problem that prevents the church from faithfully proclaiming Christ's revolutionary message: the church corrupted by "worldly" power (meaning the fallen form of creation). More specifically, Yoder's critique of Constantinianism bears similarity to a number of feminist critiques of the patriarchal corruption of the church. One shared conviction is that the church buys into power structures marked by the fall. If Yoder describes this primarily through the wedding of church and state power, the first feminist theologians describe a similar corruption of the church by male power. Yoder joins Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza and Rosemary Radford Ruether in identifying two different but related examples of the way in which the church buys into power structures that are not consonant with those the church proclaims as true. In fact, in *The Politics of Jesus*, Yoder makes clear that he agrees with "the basic stance" of Schüssler Fiorenza's claims in *In Memory of Her* regarding this corruption of early church tradition.⁵⁷⁷ If the result of the wedding of piety with power, for Yoder, is that the church takes on the role of chaplaincy to state power, then the result of the wedding of scripture and church tradition with patriarchy is that the church becomes the carrier and perpetuator of male privilege.

A number of feminists would also agree with Yoder's claim that the early church experienced a gradual emptying of ethical guidance from the teachings of Jesus. Yoder and Schüssler Fiorenza, for example, agree that "within a short time the emancipatory vision [of Jesus and the early church] was lost."⁵⁷⁸ As we have seen, part of this

⁵⁷⁷ Yoder, *The Politics of Jesus*, 190.

⁵⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 190.

emancipatory vision is the social egalitarianism that Yoder identifies as the “the feminist thrust that had begun with the gospels.”⁵⁷⁹ Recall that Yoder argues, “When He called His society together Jesus gave its members a new way of life to live...He gave them a new pattern of relationships between man and woman...in which was made concrete a radical new vision of what it means to be a human person.”⁵⁸⁰ Indeed, Yoder’s vision of social egalitarianism, along with his understanding of the way Jesus challenged the sex-discrimination of his day, calls to mind Ruether’s understanding of Jesus as the “kenosis of patriarchy.”⁵⁸¹ Just as Yoder’s feminist theology memos argue that Jesus treated women with dignity as an affront to the dominant norms of his day, Ruether argues that Jesus manifests “the announcement of the new humanity through a lifestyle that discards hierarchical caste privilege and speaks on behalf of the lowly”; it is “a witness against...the idolatrous system of patriarchal privilege.”⁵⁸² Thus, both Yoder’s critique of Constantinianism and Schüssler Fiorenza’s and Ruether’s critiques of patriarchy identify points at which the church comes to mirror the power structures of the fallen creation, rather than taking Jesus’ ethic as their source and criterion for ethical action.

Finally, critiques of Constantinianism and patriarchy share another interesting similarity: loss of the true church’s minority status. The result of the wedding of piety and power—whether it be imperial or male—along with the emptying of Jesus as a source for

⁵⁷⁹ Yoder, *Priestly Kingdom*, 73.

⁵⁸⁰ Yoder, *Original Revolution*, 29.

⁵⁸¹ Ruether, *Sexism and God-Talk*, 137.

⁵⁸² *Ibid.*, 137.

moral guidance, is that the church loses its minority status as a community whose practices (such as the treatment of women and slaves as equals or the renunciation of violence) challenge the dominant practices of the larger society. This leads Yoder to champion the minority witness of the radical reformation churches as normative for all Christians. And it often resulted in what Ruether calls “feminist base communities” where Christians committed to Jesus’ original emancipatory vision can embody that vision and bring it “to bear on the institutionalized Church.”⁵⁸³ As Yoder points out, these minority communities serve all kinds of positive political functions. He argues that by their dissent, minority communities “maintain the wider community’s awareness of some issues in such a way that ideas which are unrealistic for the present may become credible later,” they “exercise pioneering creativity in places where no one is threatened,” they “can appeal to the conscience of a society at large and call it to outdo itself occasionally in moral commitment” and they “continue to voice the claims of unrepresented peoples and causes, when they do not yet have the ear or the heart of the majority.”⁵⁸⁴ The Woman-Church movement, for example, might be seen as a feminist witness to the patriarchal corruption of the church in the same way that Yoder sees the radical reformation churches as a witness to the Constantinianism espoused by the majority of Christian communities.

Thus, Yoder’s critique of Constantinianism shares much with feminist critiques of patriarchy. These diagnoses are remarkably similar in that they both attend to corruption

⁵⁸³ Yoder, *Priestly Kingdom*, 97.

⁵⁸⁴ Yoder, *Priestly Kingdom*, 97.

of what they understand to be the church's faithful witness. Both offer analyses of the ways in which the "fusion" between the authority of the church and other structures "create a 'framework of normalcy'" that prevents the church from seeing "the radical challenge of the gospel of Jesus Christ."⁵⁸⁵ Both affirm the redemptive power of Christ and see the church as failing in some significant way to faithfully proclaim this central Christian claim. In a sense, both Yoder's critique of Constantinianism and these feminist critiques of patriarchy pinpoint the church's unfaithfulness by identifying its 'worldly' forms of corruption. As we have seen, the problem is that Yoder's response—his church-world dualism—often seems to be more about condemning the world than judging churches.

B) Strategic Essentialism

Looking at Yoder's thought through the lens of the essentialism/constructivism debates within feminist theory, discussed in Chapter Two, highlights the fact that Yoder is in a similar position with respect to his understanding of the identity of the church. I noted that Jones describes strategic essentialism as an "in-between position that applauds constructivist critiques of gender but feels nervous about giving up universals (or essences) altogether."⁵⁸⁶ A strategic essentialist may acknowledge that gender is socially constructed yet employ essentialized understandings of women's nature to strategic political use. Similarly, Yoder is trying to articulate both a normative (or essentialist) vision of the church that also acknowledges that actual church communities are marked

⁵⁸⁵ Harder, 87-88.

⁵⁸⁶ Jones, *Feminist Theory and Christian Theology*, 44.

by sin (in effect, that church communities are socially constructed). His essentialist/normative vision is meant to mobilize church communities to more faithfully be communities of radical social change that Jesus intended. But he can only articulate this essentialist/normative vision because of his constructivist/critical ability to identify the church's sin and failure to be those communities.

Indeed, this is the purpose of his church-world opposition. It serves, as he says in relation to dualisms generally, a "corrective function."⁵⁸⁷ Like Jones in evaluating essentialist claims about women's nature, Yoder recognizes that essentialist claims about the church and the world can be dangerous, but he nevertheless finds them useful in faithfully proclaiming his normative vision of radical social change. In "Patience as Moral Reasoning," he writes,

Most theological systems distinguish at some point or other between 'religious' and 'secular,' or between 'individual' and 'social,' or between 'inward' and 'outward.' Often these dichotomies are ultimately abusive. In the substance of moral discourse the splits they impose are usually wrong. Yet along the way they sometimes have a positive corrective function... Thus there will often be proper *corrective* uses of arguments that are not ultimately valid.⁵⁸⁸

Although Yoder does not explicitly name his church-world opposition as one such dichotomy, I would argue that based on this passage we can assume he would acknowledge that it also functions in similarly abusive ways yet, along the way, has a corrective function. Yoder's description of these dichotomies as abusive is part of what Chris K. Huebner identifies as Yoder's more general aversion to methodological

⁵⁸⁷ Yoder, "'Patience' as Method in Moral Reasoning," *The Wisdom of the Cross: Essays in Honor of John Howard Yoder*, eds. Stanley Hauerwas, Chris K. Huebner, Harry J. Huebner, and Mark Thiessen Nienow (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1999), 27.

⁵⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 27.

dualisms.⁵⁸⁹ “The problem with methodological dualisms,” Huebner writes, “...is that they define the available alternatives in advance of actual engagement with others and the concrete social contexts they inhabit.”⁵⁹⁰ Yet Yoder does not let this problem interfere with his frequent use of the church-world dualism. Rather he seems aware of the abuse it wields but also sees it as having a crucial purpose that justifies its use. Thus, just as Jones points out that the essentialist views of women as nurturers (an expression of a male-female dualism) can be abusive if used to oppress women, they can also have a corrective function when used to emancipatory effect. If they enable women, for example, to enter the ministry, then this view is ultimately empowering.⁵⁹¹ In Yoder’s case, his essentialist understanding of the church’s identity may neither correspond to the reality of church communities’ sin nor adequately indicate that church and world share the same destiny, and can therefore be abusive, but it nevertheless serves an empowering function in that it aims to mobilize churches to embrace a reforming agenda.

If we understand Yoder’s church-world opposition from the perspective of its functional purpose, we can regard it as Yoder’s own “strategic essentialism.” The distinction, then, becomes less an effort to describe the actual identities of church

⁵⁸⁹ It is important to note that Huebner himself makes an exception for Yoder’s church-world dualism, suggesting that it is not one of the dualisms Yoder finds problematic. “It is important to recognize that Yoder does not reject all dualisms as such. This is most clearly suggested by the prominence of the distinction between church and world in his work. Rather, Yoder is rejecting those dualisms which provide the framework for establishment epistemology,” *A Precarious Peace*, 220, footnote 48. It is unclear to me, however, why, according to Huebner, Yoder only finds dualisms problematic when others use them. It seems to me not that Yoder approves of dualisms so long as they are not part of the establishment epistemology, but rather that Yoder employs his own church-world opposition for its corrective function, fully aware of the abuse it potentially wields. In other words, while Yoder would acknowledge that his church-world opposition is ‘ultimately abusive’ (church and world share the same destiny, after all), it is nevertheless useful for its ‘positive corrective function.’

⁵⁹⁰ Ibid., 103.

⁵⁹¹ Jones, *Feminist Theory and Christian Theology*, 45.

communities or non-church communities, and more a pragmatic response aimed at liberating churches from their own sin. Yoder recognizes church communities and communities outside the church do not behave according to their essential natures (or mandates) as he has articulated them. As we have seen, actual church communities as well as other forms of culture are capable of revolt and therefore are, at times, representative of what Yoder names ‘the world.’ This is indeed why Yoder must distinguish between the *church* (meaning actual church communities) and the *mandate* of the church (meaning his normative vision of the church). But he nevertheless articulates these essences in order to provide a normative vision that might unite churches across denominational, national, and cultural lines to emancipatory purpose. In other words, his normative vision provides what Jones calls “a regulative ideal” that involves a “utopic essentialism” that “breaks opens the present to imagine humanity anew.”⁵⁹² In a sense, Yoder’s church-world opposition gives voice to the already-not yet aspect of the church’s mandate. It simultaneously communicates the ‘already’ of the church’s mandate (by distinguishing between church and world) *and* the ‘not yet’ of the church’s failure to fulfill its mandate (as indicated by the need to offer such a normative, essentialized vision of both church and world as a corrective to present reality). Viewing Yoder’s church-world opposition as a strategic essentialism reveals it to be less about identifying the essential identities of each with descriptive reality and more about articulating a normative vision that attempts to critique the church’s faithlessness. Thus, it seems that Yoder would acknowledge that his church-world opposition wields its own abuse, but that its corrective function outweighs any possible damage.

⁵⁹² Ibid., 46.

But it also suggests that Yoder need not intend his church-world opposition as a rigid dichotomy that straightforwardly identifies actual church communities solely with order and the rest of creation solely with revolt. It is clear that the corrective function is directed towards churches, to correct their failure to fulfill their mandate. Yoder does not discuss the possible abuses he has in mind, but I would suggest that Yoder would acknowledge his church-world opposition to be abusive in several ways. First, because its corrective function is addressed to church communities, it risks a focus on the normative vision that under-articulates church communities' complicity in sin. Second, in defining the "world" in opposition to the "church," it underestimates the potential for order that exists outside churches. Would it be possible to develop Yoder's church-world opposition in ways that mitigate the abuse it wields? I think it is; to do so we must attend to the public and therefore embodied nature of the church's mandate.

Indeed, the lens of strategic essentialism not only reveals the corrective function of Yoder's church-world opposition; it brings into clearer focus the public nature of church communities. We have seen that Yoder articulates the church-world opposition as a way of defining the church's and world's mandates. The purpose of articulating the mandate of the church is to mobilize and encourage church communities to reform themselves into the true body of Christ. We have also seen that Yoder views the mandate of the church as having relevance for the whole of creation. This conviction that the church's mandate is relevant to all of creation leads Yoder to emphasize the very public and political nature church communities. This in turn leads Yoder to emphasize the visibility of the church.

As I indicated earlier, his emphasis on visibility is often problematic as it tends to reinforce the misguided view that church and world are essentially different or

ontologically separate realms or spaces. But one will not find, for example, a visible difference in terms of faithfulness. Yoder makes clear that it is not the case that those outside church communities are marked by sin whereas churches are sinless. Both are sinful; the difference is one not one of visible righteousness or sin, but belief and unbelief. In *The Christian Witness to the State*, Yoder writes, “The fundamental duality with which the Christian speaking to the envioning society must reckon is not the difference between church and state as social institutions ... but the difference between faith and unbelief as the presuppositions of his ethical message.”⁵⁹³ In “The Believers Church,” Yoder goes on to clarify that Christians and non-Christians share the same destiny, but differ in terms of what they believe about that destiny:

The calling of the people of God is thus no different from the calling of all humanity. The difference between the human community as a whole and the faith community is a matter of awareness or knowledge or commitment or celebration, but not of ultimate destiny. What believers are called to is no different from what all humanity is called to.⁵⁹⁴

Likewise, in *For the Nations*, he asserts that “Because the risen Messiah is at once head of the church and *kyrios* of the *kosmos*, sovereign of the universe, what is given to the church through him is in substance no different from what is offered to the world.”⁵⁹⁵ As Craig A. Carter puts it, the difference between church and world is a “distinction of confession.”⁵⁹⁶ Or as Gerald W. Schlabach says, “For Yoder, the distinction between church and world was not the kind of *dualism* that would imagine that the church could

⁵⁹³ Yoder, *Christian Witness*, 29.

⁵⁹⁴ Yoder, *For the Nations*, 24.

⁵⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 50.

⁵⁹⁶ Carter, *The Politics of the Cross*, 148.

separate itself entirely from the world, but rather a *duality* based on faith and unbelief, allegiances in opposite directions...”⁵⁹⁷ Thus, proclaiming and celebrating its calling is what makes church communities distinctive from others and what renders its mission a fundamentally public one. Obviously, visibility is an important part of church communities’ public proclamation.

But if we can get past the idea that visibility means that church communities perfectly fulfill their mandate, then we can acknowledge the important point about the church’s visibility: its embodiment in the world. This embodiment in the world is not a means of setting itself apart from the rest of creation but being fully part of it. In this sense, the public nature of the church’s profession indicates that Yoder’s position would be better developed in ways that avoided hostility towards those outside church communities, and instead more readily acknowledged the sin of both church communities and those outside them as well as the potential of both to be sites of grace. Thus, treating Yoder’s church-world opposition as a strategic essentialism enables us to bring more clearly into view what Yoder seeks to correct, and therefore what is most at stake. When we ask what Yoder intends to correct, it becomes clear that Yoder aims to place priority on the redemptive power of Christ and seeks to correct the churches’ failure to honor their claim that “Jesus is Lord.” This indicates that any move that further enhances respect for the redemptive value of Christ is consonant with Yoder’s purpose. In the next section, I will argue that the eschatological ethic’s attention to theology as a political and

⁵⁹⁷ Gerald W. Schlabach, “The Christian Witness in the Earthly City: John H. Yoder as Augustinian Interlocutor.” *A Mind Patient and Untamed: Assessing John Howard Yoder’s Contributions to Theology, Ethics, and Peacemaking*, eds. Ben C. Ollenburger and Gayle G. Koontz (Telford, Pa.: Cascadia Publishing House, 2004), 232.

cultural activity provides a lens through which to develop Yoder's church-world opposition. This lens allows us to account for creation as a site of redemption in ways that are even more faithful to Yoder's concern to proclaim the revelation of Christ.

VI. New Things: Mary McClintock Fulkerson's Worldly Theology and Yoder's Incarnational Theology

As I argued in Chapter Two, another important element of an eschatological ethic is the affirmation of theology as a cultural and political activity. Yoder's understanding of churches as political communities clearly indicates that he agrees with feminist, womanist, *mujerista*, and Latina theologians on this point. The potential of his church-world opposition to tend in dualistic directions discourages one, however, from identifying his vision as including an understanding of theology as part of culture, as a worldly, in the sense of creaturely, activity. Fortunately, bringing Mary McClintock Fulkerson's attention to the 'worldly' nature of theology as a lens to Yoder's thought makes clear that the churches' mission is public because it is embodied, because its practices take place within the created order. The lens she provides thus reveals the embodied, incarnational character of Yoder's own theology.⁵⁹⁸ In fact, although Yoder does not use Fulkerson's bodily language of theology as "response to a wound," it would be entirely accurate to say that "Constantinianism" is the wound to which Yoder's thought responds. The language of "wound" is particularly apt as it calls attention to the

⁵⁹⁸ For a helpful discussion of Yoder's view of the church as embodied, see Harry J. Huebner, "Moral Agency as Embodiment: How the Church Acts," *Wisdom of the Cross*, 189-212.

political, embodied nature of churches' response to Constantinianism as Yoder envisions it.

Like Fulkerson, Yoder affirms that it is not simply the public nature of the churches' practices that makes them political but that the new practices actually take form in the world. That is, they are ordinary social activities. In substance the practices and activities churches engage in are often no different from those of the people outside the church. Referring to the 'body politics' that mark Christian communities, Yoder writes: "...they are not 'ritual' or 'religious' in any otherworldly sense...they...can be spoken of in social process terms, which can easily be transposed into non-religious equivalents that a sociologist could watch. People who do not share the faith or join the community can learn from them."⁵⁹⁹ Indeed, Yoder makes clear that the particularity of Christian truth claims does not detract from their universality. In "But We Do See Jesus," Yoder argues that it is Jesus' very ordinariness that is central to his universal reign. "The ordinariness of the humanness of Jesus is the warrant for the generalizability of his reconciliation."⁶⁰⁰ It is this generalizability, Yoder suggests, that allows for churches to have "tactical allies" in those who may not speak the same language or have the same "cosmic vision."⁶⁰¹ Yoder suggests, for example, that "We may...find tactical alliances with the Enlightenment, as did Quakers and Baptists in the century after their expulsion from the Puritan colonies, or with the Gandhian vision, as did Martin Luther King, Jr."⁶⁰²

⁵⁹⁹ Yoder, *Body Politics*, 77.

⁶⁰⁰ Yoder, *Priestly Kingdom*, 62.

⁶⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 61, 53.

⁶⁰² *Ibid.*, 61-62.

These examples indicate that Yoder does not envision the church as the sole possessor of faithfulness. They demonstrate that Yoder sees movements outside the walls of churches as sharing in (and perhaps even out-doing) them in being faithful to Christ, although they would likely not claim to be believers.

Yoder frequently identifies such occurrences where church practices serve as models or paradigms for worldly practices.⁶⁰³ In particular, the five practices of the body politics provide models for worldly practices. The Eucharist, or sharing bread, for example, “is a model not only for soup kitchens and hospitality houses, but also for Social security and negative income tax.”⁶⁰⁴ “‘Binding and loosing’ can provide models for conflict resolution, alternatives to litigation, and alternative perspectives on ‘corrections.’”⁶⁰⁵ And “Dialogue under the Holy Spirit is the ground floor of democracy.”⁶⁰⁶ All five practices are not only ordinary social activities that all share, but each has potential secular expressions. In fact, the very public nature of the church depends upon those outside its walls being able to understand the church’s practices. The church can be public because it shares enough vocabulary and practices with others for others to understand its practices. Churches do “ordinary social things differently.”⁶⁰⁷

⁶⁰³ Yoder originally spoke of such practices as ‘middle axioms.’ See *The Christian Witness to the State*.

⁶⁰⁴ Yoder, *Body Politics*, 76.

⁶⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, 77.

⁶⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, 78.

⁶⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, 75. Further discussion of such overlapping practices can be found in Yoder’s articles, “The Christian Case for Democracy,” and “Civil Religion in America,” *For the Nations*, where Yoder details the Christian contributions to democracy.

The difference is that for churches the practices are part of an embodied way of life that professes belief in Christ. Yoder writes:

For us to approach social ethics in this light will not lead us to differ at every point from what others have been saying on other grounds as to the immediate dictates for our contemporary caring. What will differ...is its shape as a whole; namely, the conception that the Christian social ethical witness must be defined not by its independence from the witness of the faith community but by its derivation therefrom.⁶⁰⁸

Thus, just as Fulkerson notes the ‘worldliness’ of the church’s ordinary but ecclesial practices, Yoder does the same and also notes the ecclesial nature or churchliness of the world’s ordinary practices.

Furthermore, the public nature of the church for Yoder is not unlike Fulkerson’s in that both hold that the churches’ mission is to bring people of different backgrounds together. For Fulkerson, part of what makes the homemaking practices ecclesial is that they bring together diverse groups of people. These practices create “a shared space of appearance” where members engage ‘the other.’”⁶⁰⁹ As Fulkerson notes, “although these practices are ordinary, daily activities, they are likely to have kinds of social alterations...They brought people together in a variety of settings that contravened many of their inherited racialized enculturations...Complete obliviousness to the marked ‘Other’” was not an option.”⁶¹⁰ These practices are ecclesial because they create a very public and political challenge in that they both reveal our obliviousness to race and challenge us to overcome such divisions within the body of Christ and beyond.

⁶⁰⁸ Ibid., 78.

⁶⁰⁹ Fulkerson, *Places of Redemption*, 21.

⁶¹⁰ Ibid., 154.

Likewise, Yoder speaks of the social egalitarianism of Jesus as a rejection of ethnic provincialism. The good news Jesus proclaims is for all the nations, not just the Jewish people. The gospel of Christ declares a radical equality for all people, regardless of ethnic or other differences. Yoder frequently criticizes ethnic provincialism:

Another besetting sin of the political realm is provincialism: the limitation of one's love to one's own kind of people ... the alternative vision which it is our business to proclaim is more than cross-cultural education; it is a spiritual mandate. 'If anyone is in Christ—there is a whole new world!' ... But unless the wider vision be spiritually rooted, it will not hold in the crunch against the instincts of group enmity ... Unless the *positive love of the enemy* stands behind the affirmation of the dignity of other groups, unless divisions are transcended by a dynamic rooted in the divine nature and in the reconciling work of Christ, it cannot tame our demonic native ethnocentrism.⁶¹¹

Thus, love of enemy, not rejection of outsiders, is the Christian mandate. In fact, Yoder goes on to argue that not only is the Christian community obligated to love its enemies, the place of the outsider is central to the biblical vision of human dignity:

The beginning difference between the nationally defined vision of human dignity and the biblical one is the place of the outsider. The Abrahamic covenant begins with the promise that all the people's of the earth are to be blessed ... It seems clear that in the *ordinary* meaning of 'civil religion,' the American experience has always needed the polar outsider to precipitate a common self-awareness: the savage, the slave, the infidel, the 'hun,' the 'Jap,' the godless Communist ... It may be that our own ethnically mixed society demanded the foil of a racially polar bad guy nation to reflect upon ourselves a borrowed sense of natural unity.⁶¹²

While Yoder speaks specifically in this passage of demonizing those who differ from Americans ethnically or nationally, Yoder's concern for human dignity renders it equally applicable to differences of all types.

⁶¹¹ Yoder, *For the Nations*, 192.

⁶¹² Yoder, *Priestly Kingdom*, 189.

VII. The Reformation that Has Yet to Happen: The Churchliness of the World⁶¹³

The public nature of the church and its ordinary social activities, along with Yoder's argument that church and world share the same ontology, suggests that the church's mandate can be fulfilled outside actual churches. Recall Yoder's conviction that there is "no dichotomy of substance" between church and world. Yoder frequently emphasizes this point, guarding against any dualism that would suggest church and world are somehow essentially different: "The mediation or 'kingdom presence rejects, as classical social ethics affirmed, that there should be a firm dualism separating Christ from culture or law from gospel or creation from redemption...."⁶¹⁴ Relying on the ontological unity of church and world, Yoder discusses the practices of the church, acknowledging that his list of distinctively Christian practices is not exhaustive and that they are possibly co-terminus with those of the rest of creation. After discussing the 'body politics' of the church, he concludes:

There may be components of discipleship, important for both church and world, which are not covered by these five practices and where the neat symmetry of a New Testament 'sacrament' may not apply...It should not be surprising if there were such a deep structure that, once discerned in the five places where we have touched it, would then illuminate more broadly the shape of all of God's saving purposes.⁶¹⁵

⁶¹³ As Craig A. Carter makes clear, when Yoder refers to the reformation that has yet to happen he has in mind the elimination of clergy-laity distinction and the restoration of the practice of binding and loosing, *The Politics of the Cross*, 200. My own constructive move here is to suggest that another reformation that has yet to happen might involve greater recognition of Christ's redemptive powers outside church communities.

⁶¹⁴ Yoder, *Body Politics*, 74.

⁶¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 80.

This passage suggests that Yoder views the church's 'body politics' less as an exhaustive account of church practices and more as paradigms that reveal redemptive practices wherever they take place. Thus, the practices of the churches could potentially illuminate practices in the rest of creation that despite not being identified as Christian practices are nevertheless marked by the redemptive purposes of Christ.

Once we acknowledge that the identities Yoder describes as belonging to church and world are not meant to be taken as deterministic essences, we can conceive of church and world more fluidly and in ways that more adequately reflect the complexity of daily life. For example, while Jones' strategic essentialism can make positive use of essentialist claims such as "all women are nurturing," it can also recognize in a constructionist vein not only that this is not necessarily true, but that many men possess nurturing capacities. If we extend this approach to Yoder's church-world opposition, we can see that not only are Yoder's essentialist claims about the church and the world meant to serve a positive critical purpose for churches, but that creation at large might also possess many of the same characteristics as the church. Indeed, if church and world truly are, for Yoder, two coexisting aeons, then the distinctive mandates of the church and world do not necessarily correlate with actual churches versus extra-church realms and structures. It may be the case that the mandate of the church is fulfilled in the "world" and that the mandate of the world is being fulfilled in the "church." In other words, the church does not necessarily refer to actual church communities, and the world need not refer to life beyond the walls of church communities. Church and world are not separate physical spaces or ontological entities; they are the names Yoder gives to define practices/spaces

marked by obedience versus “rebellion against God.”⁶¹⁶ In a sense, emphasizing the dynamic nature of Yoder’s church-world opposition is in keeping with Heubner’s Yoderian aim to “explore the character of the church as a kind of dislocated identity... They tell a story of the relationship between church and world, focusing in particular on the sense in which the church exists as somehow torn between the very distinction of church and world that defines it.”⁶¹⁷ Conceiving of the church as having a dislocated identity better captures the reality both of the complex, fragmentary, and diffuse nature of identity and belief as well as Christ’s redemptive powers than the rigid way in which critics often understand (and Yoder sometimes communicates) his church-world opposition.

Such a conception makes clearer that redemptive resources do exist outside churches and are available to the wider society in some way, and that churches can, and often do, fail to avail themselves of the redemptive resources to which they have access.⁶¹⁸ Perhaps most important, this conception allows a more positive view of the

⁶¹⁶ Yoder, *Body Politics*, 78. Of course, these are not merely names or labels. Yoder really does believe his essentialist vision of the church as foretaste of the Kingdom of God is true. But this conception guards against reading Yoder’s normative statements as descriptive ones. It also highlights the strategic element of his church-world opposition. Yoder would not deny that the redemptive power of Christ is available and operable outside of actual church communities, but his concern is to call churches to account for their unfaithfulness. This conception also makes room for the church to be closed enough to have integrity as a community but also to be open enough to change. As Serene Jones puts it: “communities need both normative principles to bind them and a healthy suspicion of norms so as to be open to self-critique and change,” *Feminist Theory and Christian Theology*, 152.

⁶¹⁷ Huebner, *A Precarious Peace*, 23.

⁶¹⁸ Hauerwas raises this issue in his first published engagement with Yoder. He writes, “...my question is whether some forms of justice based on the possibilities open to unbelief do not have a more positive relation to the life of faith than Yoder’s account provides,” *Vision and Virtue*, 217. I am arguing that the resources of feminist theology help us develop Yoder’s account more fully in this direction. Conceiving of Yoder’s church-world opposition as a strategic essentialism renders his account of church/world and belief/unbelief more dynamic.

possibilities for redemptive community outside churches and grants the “world” authority to speak a word of judgment to churches, if necessary. In fact, discussing the churches’ betrayal of their egalitarian convictions, Yoder acknowledges that “...it can very well seem now that the churches’ joining the equality movement has about it an element of Johnny-come-lately, trying to catch up with a bandwagon.”⁶¹⁹ Yoder is careful to say that churches have their own, distinctive grounds for embracing egalitarianism that differ from those of the Enlightenment. But he nevertheless acknowledges both the churches’ failure to embody their own egalitarian convictions and the secular world’s ability to do so. These acknowledgements suggest that we might understand the Enlightenment norms—despite their different grounding from those of the gospel—as a kind of fulfillment of the church’s mandate outside its walls. Such a view suggests that the redemptive powers of Christ know no limits; that we should be prepared to hear the Word regardless of whether the lips which speak it are in actual church communities or not. Thus, while Yoder tends to speak of the church as a witness to the world, this acknowledgement of a “deep structure” suggests the possibility that those outside the church might also witness to church communities. If proclaiming Christ’s redemptive powers is what is at stake, why should access to these spiritual resources be said to exist only among those who profess belief?

Once church and world become fluid categories, however, how might we discern and identify the places and occasions where the mandates of the church are fulfilled? As Yoder’s critique of H. Richard Niebuhr suggests, the real task is not distinguishing

⁶¹⁹ Yoder, *Body Politics*, 40.

between Christ and Culture but distinguishing between culture that aligns itself with the divine intent and culture that rebels against the authority of Christ. H. Richard Niebuhr is perhaps best known for his study *Christ and Culture* that identifies a typology of six types for understanding how the church historically has addressed its relationship to the world. Yoder rejects Niebuhr's typology for assigning a monolithic, autonomous ontological integrity to culture. "...the assumption that culture 'as such,' i.e., as distinct from Christ, is a tangible reality patient of being related consistently to Christ ... attribute[s] to the world that intrinsic ontological dignity that neither the New Testament nor history allows it to claim."⁶²⁰ Yoder suggests that this way of posing the problem leads Niebuhr to characterize the Christian options as withdrawal, transformation, or paradox, leaving authentic Christian discipleship amidst the historical forms of culture off the table. It assumes that "Jesus' call is not itself a real option within history and culture but rather a direction 'pointing away' from the world, and therefore by definition incapable of standing alone, incapable of faithful Incarnation."⁶²¹ But, as Yoder argues,

Because the Christ who is Lord is inseparable from the man Jesus of Nazareth, neither who he was nor what he was, nor what he did nor what he taught, nor his 'Lordship' as the holistic claim he made on his disciples or makes on us now, is properly understood if thought of as 'pointing away from' full and genuine human and historical existence. The humanity of Jesus of Nazareth was a cultural reality. To confess him as 'Christ' makes that no less the case. Then those disciples who follow him faithfully are also within culture, not by accident or compromise, or out of weakness or inconsistency or in spite of themselves, but *by virtue* of their being his disciples. Any way of setting up the problem as if a priori Christ were

⁶²⁰ Yoder, *Royal Priesthood*, 62.

⁶²¹ Yoder, "How H. Richard Niebuhr Reasoned," 64.

alien to 'culture' as a whole, or on another level or wave length, is therefore sure to distort.⁶²²

Thus, despite the distinction between the church and the world, Yoder maintains their essential ontological unity under the lordship of Christ. "For when the New Testament speaks of 'world' it precisely does not mean, as Niebuhr says...all of culture. It means rather culture *as self-glorifying* or culture *as autonomous* and rebellious and oppressive, opposed to authentic human flourishing."⁶²³ The real task, then, is not to separate Christ and culture, determining how they should relate; that task is already complete. We know that Christ precedes and rules over all culture.

The real task is to distinguish between faithfulness and unfaithfulness. Yoder describes this task as a process of discrimination and discernment:

The cultural stance of the Christian church according to the New Testament will therefore not be a matter of seeking for a strategy to be applied uniformly, either accepting or rejecting (or paradoxing or transforming) all of 'culture' in the same way. It will and should proceed precisely by denying such a global character to culture, and will move rather by discrimination ... Our need, one with which Niebuhr gives us no assistance, is precisely to find categories of discernment by virtue of which the several value dimensions of culture creativeness can be distinguished.⁶²⁴

In short, all of culture is a blend of order and revolt. The task of the churches as part of culture is to discern when their mandate is fulfilled and when it is not, wherever this happens, be it in actual church communities or outside church communities. As Hess notes, "Yoder recognizes that people's lives are a mixture of belief and unbelief...In light of this complex relation between church and world, belief and unbelief, he advocates not

⁶²² Ibid., 68.

⁶²³ Ibid., 70.

⁶²⁴ Ibid., 69-70.

‘the creation, over against the world of a ‘church’ that just sits there at odds with the world, but rather an ongoing critical process.”⁶²⁵ We might, as Yoder indicates, look to the body politics of the church not just as specific church practices but as paradigms that help us recognize ‘places of redemption’ when they appear outside its walls.

For example, Yoder identifies egalitarianism as one of the central markers of Christian community which is communicated through baptism and the universality of giftedness. He argues that baptism is a practice that creates new patterns of relationship, the creation of a “new humanity” where ethnic boundaries and barriers of slavery, gender, and class are broken though.⁶²⁶ “Baptism introduces or initiates persons into a new people. The distinguishing mark of this people is that all prior given or chosen identity definitions are transcended... Thus, the primary narrative meaning of baptism is the new society it creates, by inducting all kinds of people into the same people.”⁶²⁷ In other words, “Baptism celebrates that new life is possible.”⁶²⁸ Using baptism as our paradigm, we might then, as Yoder does, identify any practice which celebrates new life, which allows people to transcend the boundaries that normally separate them from others, that allows people to join in a community of equals, as a kind of baptism.

Similarly, we might look to Yoder’s discussion of another body practice—the universality of giftedness—as another indicator of peace-making practices present not

⁶²⁵ Hess, *Sites of Violence*, 19-20.

⁶²⁶ Yoder, *Body Politics*, 29.

⁶²⁷ *Ibid.*, 28, 32.

⁶²⁸ *Ibid.*, 41.

just in church communities but in discernable forms in the world. Drawing on this concept of Paul's, Yoder rejects the idea of hierarchical, specialized leadership. Rather, he claims that "...*every member* of the body has been given *some* gift by the Holy Spirit and that all of the gifts are of equal dignity."⁶²⁹ He argues that "...we need to challenge the concentration of authority in the hands of office-bearers accredited on institutional grounds...one impact of biblically oriented renewal has been to reopen the notion of charisma, rediscovering patterns of ministry in addition to or over against the male monarchical ones that had settled in over the years."⁶³⁰ Yoder argues that this anti-hierarchical vision of Paul's "is one of the dimensions of redemption least noted and least honored in Christian history since then...Paul's vision has yet to be consciously and consistently lived out."⁶³¹ He goes on to suggest that the debate over women in ministry has in a sense missed the real and more radical point:

The Pauline vision of every-member empowerment is one fragment of the gospel vision that has yet to find its reformation...There is not one 'ministerial' role, of which then we could argue about whether it is gender specific. There are as many ministerial roles as there are members of the body of Christ, and that means that more than half of them belong to women. The roles *least justified* by the witness of the New Testament—quite regardless of the gender debate—are those of priest and of bishop, precisely the ones that some men have for generations wrongly restricted and that did not even exist in the apostolic churches may be a good kind of 'affirmative action', but it is hardly the most profound vision of renewal...The transformation that Paul's vision calls for would not be to let a few more especially gifted women share with a few men the rare roles of domination; it would be to reorient the notion of ministry so that there would be no one ungifted,

⁶²⁹ Ibid., 50.

⁶³⁰ Ibid., 51-52.

⁶³¹ Ibid., 56-57.

no one not called, no one not empowered, and no one dominated. Only that would live up to Paul's call to 'lead a life worthy of our calling.'"⁶³²

Just as we might see baptism as a paradigm for recognizing practices that celebrate new life—whether in churches or outside churches—so to we might understand this vision of every-member empowerment as a paradigm that identifies practices which contribute to Yoder's positive conception of peace. Any practice that empowers every individual to make use of their God-given talents and gifts would constitute a creative manifestation of peace.

With this body practice, in particular, I want to suggest that we might move even beyond Yoder's vision of member empowerment to 'world' empowerment. That is, ultimately, all persons, not just those who confess Christ as Lord, are part of the world community redeemed by Christ. And in this sense, we might read Yoder's call as a call to recognize all people in the world as members, who like church members, have gifts and talents to offer to the rest of the community. In other words, the 'fragment of the gospel vision that has yet to find its reformation' may just be the church's ability to recognize the practices of peace when they occur outside actual church communities and to learn from them.

Such a conception is not unlike Jones' conception of church as having a 'bounded openness.' As Jones describes it, "the bounded church is distinguished by the specificity of its adorning practices and disciplines" but its openness makes it vulnerable to the sin of the world." This conception acknowledges and maintains the separateness of the Christian community from the world, so as to be able to recognize it as a visible

⁶³² Ibid., 60.

community but it also guards against viewing the churches as somehow ontologically different from the rest of creation therefore immune to worldliness. To more fully account not only for the ways the church is complicit in sin, but also the ways in which the world is a site of grace, we might also think in terms of Fulkerson's use of 'place theory' to conceptualize the church. God creates the church for the purpose of embodying Christ's redemption but church is not necessarily an actual physical space, building, institution, location, or particular community. The actual occurrences of church may be tied to visible, easily identifiable communities, but they can also be invisible, fragmentary, or fleeting. We might think of these spaces as a kind of fugitive church.

In fact, both of these descriptions bear similarity to what Huebner describes as Yoder's conception of the church as "the scattered body of Christ."⁶³³ Huebner argues that far from "a static, concentric conception of space... Yoder's reading of the scattered body of Christ is most important an attempt to articulate an ecclesiology that resists the Constantinian temptation to self-absolutization."⁶³⁴ As opposed to the way most understand Yoder's church-world opposition as a rigid, territorial identification of two separate realms, Huebner argues that Yoder moves away from the "essentially violent temptations toward closure, finality, and purity that haunt so much contemporary theology."⁶³⁵ Unlike the purity often invoked in references to the church's political role to "be the church," Huebner suggests that Yoder's ecclesiology "...renounces the temptation to understand its identity as a stable entity to be protected and preserved" and

⁶³³ Huebner, *A Precarious Peace*, 124.

⁶³⁴ Ibid., 124-125.

⁶³⁵ Ibid., 125.

as such, “one’s social existence in space is thus ‘complicated and compromised by numerous crosscutting allegiances, connections, and modes of collaboration.’”⁶³⁶ This reading of Yoder’s ecclesiology suggests the kind of fluidity, fragmentary, and complex understandings of the church’s embeddedness in creation that a number of feminist theologians describe. It also suggests that perhaps we might understand the scattered body of Christ to be scattered not only in the sense of exile or diaspora, but in the sense of being scattered amidst the forms of creation.

VIII. Conclusion: The Church as a Community of Discernment

In his treatment of Yoder, the political theorist Romand Coles cautions against interpreting Yoder’s convictions about the “otherness of the church” as a kind of disengagement with the world. He argues, rather, that Yoder’s vision is of the church as a “dialogical community” that assumes a stance of “vulnerable receptivity” towards outsiders.⁶³⁷ The account of politics, of pacifism, that Coles finds in Yoder’s work is not one defined in relation to the legitimate violence of the state, but broadly construed as involving “wild patience,” giving and receiving between church and world, and a “readiness for reformation.”⁶³⁸ Coles argues that “vulnerable relations with outsiders are integral to the otherness of the church, and that when this understanding of *caritas* is forgotten and unpracticed, the church loses its otherness, it assimilates the violence of the world. When Christians cease to engage outsiders with receptive generosity, they cease to

⁶³⁶ Ibid., 126.

⁶³⁷ Coles, “The Wild Patience of John Howard Yoder,” 306.

⁶³⁸ Ibid., 305, 312, 313.

let the church be the church, they lose sight of Jesus as Lord.”⁶³⁹ In other words, engagement with outsiders is constitutive of the church itself.

This receptive generosity occupies such a central role in Yoder’s vision of the church’s politics because of the radical reformation commitment to the church’s constant reformation and the Lordship of Christ over both church and world. The ontological unity of church and world dictates that the church often learns of its unfaithfulness or is enabled to see the gospel anew through its encounters with those beyond the church. As Coles puts it, “efforts to discern charisma (gift) must reach beyond the church body to scrutinize incarnations of God’s ‘providence’ in manifestations of foreignness.”⁶⁴⁰ Thus, Coles highlights Yoder’s insistence on the church’s mandate to expect the new.

My own account of Yoder’s vision of the political role of the church bears certain similarities to Coles’. (In fact, Coles notes “sympathies and resonances” between Yoder and feminists that demand fuller dialogue.⁶⁴¹) Placing Yoder in dialogue with the eschatological ethic I identified in Chapter Two has enabled me to challenge the “old things” in Yoder’s theology, namely his church-world opposition, in order to reveal the “new things,” namely, the possibility that those outside the church may give expression to the gospel anew. More specifically, I have argued that reading Yoder’s church-world opposition in light of Jones’ concept of strategic essentialism and reading Yoder’s body politics in light of Fulkerson’s worldly theology renders church and world less absolute descriptive realities and more dynamic, fluid normative events. Reading Yoder in this

⁶³⁹ Ibid., 307.

⁶⁴⁰ Ibid., 314.

⁶⁴¹ Ibid., 327.

way renders this distinction less rigid than it may at first appear and therefore less abusive. We can thus see that the distinction is less about Yoder describing the actual difference between churches and world and more about employing categories that allow one to invoke normative ideals. Like Jones, Yoder recognizes that both essentialist and constructivist understanding of identity do valuable work. The first puts forward a normative vision while the other elucidates the discrepancy between that normative vision and descriptive reality. By maintaining a middle position, one acknowledges the critical muscle of the constructivist approach while maintaining the mobilizing power of the essentialist vision. Thus by using Yoder's church-world opposition as a way of detecting the redemptive versus fallen aspects of life, we are better enabled to identify the places of redemption wherever they occur. As Yoder writes:

Everything we call 'culture' is both in some ways created and creative and positive, and in other ways rebellious and oppressive. This is not a fifty-fifty mix, but a far more complex dialectical challenge, whereby we are called to exercise discernment... The Gospel alternative we have gradually been watching unfold will rather deny that there is any such things as an already given 'nature' of things," "out there" or "as such," to which we could then choose to say simply "for" or "against" or with more nuances "above" or "tension" or "transform"... Instead, in each setting, each event, each relationship will open for us a set of options or challenges, where we shall need to decide how to love our enemies, how to feed the hungry, how to keep our promises, how to make the earth be fruitful, how to celebrate community, how to remember our heritage ... The challenge 'what will you do about this value we call culture?' far from helping us to be responsible, is something we are freed from, by the concreteness with which the Torah and the Kingdom message of Jesus describe our path."⁶⁴²

My feminist development of Yoder's church-world opposition indeed frees us from the need to identify wholesale blocks of culture to which the church is opposed. Rather, it

⁶⁴² Yoder, "How H. Richard Niebuhr Reasoned," 89.

identifies this process of discernment, this ability to identify new expressions of the Gospel in each setting, each event, each relationship, as the church's political practice. In other words, "Church disciplines must always aim to cultivate both the expectation of unanticipatable and often initially inchoate newness and the discerning capacities to renew the orientation, direction, and order of the Gospel tradition that faces and works with it."⁶⁴³ If being receptive to newness is the church's mandate, then the practices of discernment that enable churches to do so must form the heart of its political practice.

Importantly, this position more faithfully upholds the primacy of Christ's revelation than Yoder's own vision. If God can, as Yoder argues, use evil in mysterious ways, then it must also be the case that God can use redemptive power in mysterious ways. As Harder suggests, "Naming the Mennonite theological game 'In Search of God's Kingdom Incarnate' might be helpful, for this slogan can remind us that 'thy kingdom comes on earth as it is in heaven' is a prayer more than a truth claim, and that 'the Word become flesh' happens at God's initiative more than ours."⁶⁴⁴ For if, as Yoder claims, Christ's resurrection inaugurates new ethical possibilities, there is no reason not to suggest that one of these new ethical possibilities is that the church's mandate may at times be fulfilled outside actual church communities. Indeed, as Coles reads him, Yoder offers an account which may involve "a tentative, selective, partial confusing of some bodily distinctions between church bodies and outside bodies at certain points in the

⁶⁴³ Coles, "The Wild Patience of John Howard Yoder," 313.

⁶⁴⁴ Harder, "Power and Authority," *Power and Authority*, 94.

identity markers that constitute a border between one and the other.”⁶⁴⁵ Or in Huebner’s words, this suggests the church must embrace its ‘dislocated identity.’ For, as Yoder argues, the radical reformation should be interpreted as “a call to remain open to the possibility of radical criticism...Any existing church is not only fallible but in fact peccable. That is why there needs to be a constant potential for reformation and in the more dramatic situations a readiness for the reformation even to be ‘radical.’”⁶⁴⁶ I have been suggesting that the radicality of the claim “Jesus is Lord” means that Christ’s “new ethical possibilities” can find expression not just in churches, but anywhere in creation, and that this might constitute the beginning of what a feminist Yoder might call “the reformation that has yet to happen.”

⁶⁴⁵ Coles, “The Wild Patience of John Howard Yoder,” 320.

⁶⁴⁶ Yoder, *Priestly Kingdom*, 5.

CHAPTER SIX: TOWARD AN ESCHATOLOGICAL POLITICAL THEOLOGY

From Genesis to Revelation, scripture proclaims that God makes all things new. God creates the heavens and the earth, and “saw that it was good.”⁶⁴⁷ After the fall and the flood, the new age begins with God’s repentance and reaffirmation of the goodness of creation: “I will never again curse the ground because of humankind...nor will I ever again destroy every living creation as I have done.”⁶⁴⁸ In the book of Isaiah, God renews the covenant with Israel, saying “Do not remember the former things, or consider the things of old. I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?”⁶⁴⁹ Jesus declares in the gospel of John that he has come to give “a new commandment.”⁶⁵⁰ And the book of Revelation repeats the refrain from Isaiah as John proclaims his eschatological vision: “Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth...for the first things have passed away...And the one seated on the throne said, “See, I am making all things new.”⁶⁵¹ These reminders that God’s creative, redemptive activity does not cease with the first creation, but continues even into the present, weave a constant thread through scripture. They offer an eschatological promise, an assurance that amidst the things of old, God brings forth new things.

⁶⁴⁷ Gen. 1:10.

⁶⁴⁸ Gen. 8:21.

⁶⁴⁹ Isa. 43:18-19.

⁶⁵⁰ John 13:34.

⁶⁵¹ Rev. 21: 1-6.

But what does it mean for God to be “making all things new?” How are we to understand the tasks of theology in light of this divine proclamation? What implications does this radical claim have for Christian ethics? More pointedly, does God’s claim to be making all things new carry import for the way theologians and ethicists address our communal moral life?⁶⁵² What impact should this claim have on theologians and ethicists reflecting on the political role of the church in North America?

My dissertation has sought to address these questions through a feminist engagement with three prominent figures in 20th century American Protestant thought who devoted most of their theological energies to sustained reflection on the relationship between the church and politics. As the opening vignettes demonstrate, Niebuhr, King, and Yoder take seriously God’s claim to be doing a new thing and position this claim at the heart of their theological endeavors. Unfortunately, their reliance on categories that feminist theologies have revealed as problematic, as well as their recognition for their contributions to reflection on how the church should regard the use of violence and coercion, obscures their more robust theological and political insights.

Building on the invaluable insights of a number of feminist, womanist, *mujerista*, and Latina theologians, I have suggested that we think of these categories as things of old that prevent us from discerning possible new things. These categories include distinctions between public and private, *agape* and *eros*, church and world—categories often meant to maintain the political neutrality, purity, and distinctiveness of the Christian tradition, but

⁶⁵² I am indebted to Traci C. West for this phrase. She uses it to “avoid reinforcing a rigid dichotomy between public and private moral issues that is so prevalent and detrimental to recognition of the public moral significance of certain serious problems like intimate violence against women,” See “Constructing Ethics: Reinhold Niebuhr and Harlem Women Activists,” *Journal of the Society of Christian Ethics* 24: 1 (2004), 49.

often having the unintended effect of drawing boundaries that restrict God's redemptive power to certain realms and not others.

I. Summary of the Argument

In Chapter Two, I argued that despite the important differences within the wealth and diversity of feminist theologies in the North American context, these theologies share a common concern to identify and critique things of old in order to anticipate redemptive futures. I referred to this common concern as an "eschatological ethic," and by bringing it into relief, I offer a reading of feminist theologies as primarily concerned with the Christian doctrine of eschatology. To be sure, this is not a traditional eschatology focused on "death, judgment, heaven and hell" but rather eschatology as "the object of biblical hope."⁶⁵³ As Catherine Keller points out, the best feminist theologies avoid an apocalyptic eschatology that is "dualistic, deterministic, and otherworldly."⁶⁵⁴ Rather, feminist theologies tend to favor prophetic eschatologies wherein "resistance to injustice and insistence on the renewal of the creation will always draw fuel from the image of the New Creation."⁶⁵⁵ Keller notes that even feminist theologies that do not explicitly invoke the doctrine of eschatology nevertheless rely on eschatological themes. "Whether or not they use the term eschatological," she writes, "feminist theologians return persistently to the prophetic themes of collective hope for the disenfranchised, for bodily, social, and

⁶⁵³ Keller, "Eschatology," *The Dictionary of Feminist Theology*, 86.

⁶⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 87.

⁶⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 87.

cosmic renewal.”⁶⁵⁶ This return to these prophetic themes constitutes the “eschatological ethic” that I have identified as the common thread woven through the variety and diversity of feminist, womanist, *mujerista*, and Latina theologies in North America. I have articulated this ethic with reference to five themes: 1) a questioning of received categories; 2) an understanding of theology as a cultural and political activity; 3) a normative, pragmatic method that seeks the flourishing of God’s good creation; 4) a conception of human agency as participation in God’s ongoing creative activity; and 5) an understanding of this activity as redemptive. I have rendered explicit these implicit characteristics shared across the spectrum of feminist theologies in the North American context to argue that *all* theology, not just feminist theologies, would do well to exhibit these characteristics.

Looking again at Niebuhr, King, and Yoder through this eschatological lens reveals a less familiar Niebuhr, a less familiar King, and a less familiar Yoder. These less familiar figures have much more to contribute to political theology than reflection on which type of violence or coercion is legitimate within a Christian moral framework. Borrowing from Arendt’s understanding of power as the opposite of violence, we might say that these ‘new’ figures are concerned with politics more broadly construed. As Arendt argues, politics is about power, and more specifically, the gift “to embark on something new.”⁶⁵⁷ Indeed, Niebuhr, King, and Yoder are political thinkers because they share this emphasis on doing something new, concerned as they are with the particular brands of power inherent in Christian communal action. My feminist development of

⁶⁵⁶ Ibid., 87.

⁶⁵⁷ Arendt, *On Violence*, 82.

Niebuhr upholds repentance as a primary political practice of the church; my feminist development of King, practices of love that manifest themselves in any creative action marked by reconciliation; and my feminist development of Yoder, practices of discernment as central to the church's political engagement. Through these practices, each puts forward a view of the church's politics that involves new, creative use of practices that are as old as the Christian tradition itself.

In Chapter Three, I took on old, stereotyped views of Niebuhr and used the eschatological ethic—represented most specifically in this case by Kathryn Tanner—to bring a “new” Niebuhr to light. In addition to the standard reading of Niebuhr as a Christian realist who condones the use of force in the name of justice, these old views portray a “no church, no change” Niebuhr. This Niebuhr is more political philosopher than theologian, more stodgy conservative than hope-imbued progressive. This Niebuhr fails to even mention the church and develops an ethic that endorses the *status quo* rather than challenging it. As the lens of an eschatological ethic makes clear, however, these old views obscure a Niebuhr who potentially sees the church as a self-critical culture, whose practices of repentance inspire transformative social and political action.

In particular, I drew on Tanner's work to highlight neglected elements of Niebuhr's thought. First, Tanner's emphasis on “non-idolatrous self-esteem” offers a conception of human agency that emphasizes our creation in the image of a creator God that therefore construes human agency as participation in God's ongoing creative activity. This uncovers Niebuhr's own anthropological focus not only on human limits and the inevitability of human sin, which are well known, but on human possibility and our creative moral capacities. Second, Tanner's exploration of the role of a view of God as

transcendent and its relation to immanent critique reveals a similar view of the normative, pragmatic role of Niebuhr's own transcendent norm of love. This norm provides a critical function that fosters the pursuit of justice, central to the flourishing of God's good creation. Third, Tanner's argument for the Christian tradition's capacity to create self-critical cultures brings into relief Niebuhr's own discussion of the church as the site of judgment and mercy.

Thus, these elements of the eschatological ethic, articulated in Tanner's work, show that Niebuhr's relation of Christianity to politics goes hand in hand with a potentially robust political conception of the church itself. This conception does not articulate a particular stance towards violence, but puts forward a vision of repentance as the church's central political practice.

In Chapter Four, I argued that King's contributions to political theology extend beyond his embrace of nonviolent resistance. Scholars who identify King as a prophet of nonviolence are right to focus on King's understanding of *agape* as what King himself refers to as "the most durable power in the world," but they are wrong to limit King's conception of *agape* to nonviolent protest. The eschatological ethic expressed in feminist and womanist thought highlights both problems with King's conception of *agape* and its more robust expression as a form of creative action that includes any activity that creates and preserves community—whether this community is the church, the nation, or even family, friendship, or intimate partnership.

To do so, it first identifies a thing of old that haunts King's definition of *agape*: a division between public and private. This division aims to keep love pure of worldly taint and risks the full inclusion of women in political and church communities. But an

eschatological ethic also reveals striking similarity between a new understanding of *agape* that emerges in King's thought as the civil rights movement progresses and reconstructed conceptions of *agape* offered by a number of feminist theologians. In contrast to the traditional conception in Protestant social ethics of *agape* as self-sacrificial, disinterested, and detached, King joins these feminists—including Beverly Wildung Harrison, Carter Heyward, Sally McFague, Linell Cady, and others—in putting forward a reconstructed *agape* that draws on the mutuality, intimacy, and passion of *philia* and *eros*.

The emphasis in the eschatological ethic—articulated here by Monica Coleman—on a conception of human agency as participation in God's ongoing creative activity, and an understanding of this agency as redemptive, reveals this new love as a “creative” one. Recognizing the nature of love as a creative force, and thus the centrality of creativity to King's thought, proves crucial for understanding King's theology, his political ethic, and his view of the church's public role. In particular, it reveals that the political ramifications of *agape* are better imagined more broadly as those activities that *create* certain qualities of relationship or social spaces marked by reconciliation and justice. King's critique of American churches' conformity to the *status quo* suggests that King views the church as a creative community, meant to develop and practice new forms of being, new ways of engaging our neighbors. King's invocation of love's creative power suggests, therefore, that the church's primary political practice is not exclusively nonviolent protest but any creative action that reconciles the alienated and brings them into community with one another.

In Chapter Five, I argued that an eschatological ethic brings into view important elements of Yoder's political theology that are obscured when we regard him primarily as a Christian pacifist who rejects the use of force and, indeed, any form of resistance. The emphasis of an eschatological ethic on pragmatic, normative methods highlights Yoder's own normative, pragmatic approach. In particular, Mary McClintock Fulkerson's conception of "theology as response to a wound" brings into focus Yoder's own conception of theology as a response to current problems.⁶⁵⁸ This vantage point, in turn, offers a new way to view Yoder's old church-world distinction. Viewing Yoder's church-world distinction through the lens of Serene Jones' articulation of strategic essentialism brings into focus the 'corrective function' of Yoder's distinction and renders it more dynamic than Yoder's own presentation suggests.

The emphasis of an eschatological ethic on theology as a cultural and political activity—and specifically Mary McClintock Fulkerson's attention to the embodied, worldly character of ecclesial practices—also brings this very emphasis of Yoder's into focus. It allows us to see anew the incarnational focus of Yoder's theology which views the church's political practice not simply in terms of a refusal to participate in the legitimate violence of the state, but as a way of life marked by the creative and innovative practices that constitute the 'new ethical possibilities' Yoder understands to be unleashed with Christ's resurrection.

Most important, however, an eschatological ethic highlights the interplay and relationship between the church's political practices and those of extra-church communities. Rather than upholding a stark division between church and world, Yoder's

⁶⁵⁸ Fulkerson, *Places of Redemption*, 12.

focus on how Christian practices are embodied in ordinary ways of life demonstrates the commonalities between church practices and extra-church activities. This view suggests a ‘new ethical possibility’ that Yoder himself did not adequately address: the possibility that the church’s mandate might be fulfilled outside the visible church, and therefore the church’s need to be prepared to receive as a gift the ways nonviolence can be embodied outside the visible church community. Such an account positions practices of discernment whereby the church is enabled to receive these gifts as the heart of its political practice.

II. Scholarly Contributions

Within these new readings of the old Niebuhr, King, and Yoder, it is my hope that four layers of scholarly contributions have become clear. The first places Niebuhr, King, and Yoder in conversation with a diversity of feminist theologies. As I have suggested, reading Niebuhr, King, and Yoder through the lens of the eschatological ethic present in these feminist theologies allows me to identify those categories or constructs that stymie their theological and political thinking, revealing new insights. These new insights refuse to rely on unfruitful categories that separate public from private, *agape* from *eros*, and church from world. Furthermore, this conversation allows Niebuhr, King, and Yoder to challenge feminist theologies as well. Placing feminist thought in conversation with Niebuhr, King, and Yoder reveals that feminist theologians, despite their attention to the political nature of theology, have not focused in as sustained a manner on the political role or practices of the church. (I acknowledge that the dialogue is unbalanced in the sense that I have paid more attention to the first than the second, but at the close of this

conclusion I will suggest future lines of thought in regards to articulating an eschatological political theology.)

The second layer relates to the field of Protestant social ethics. Our inability to see Niebuhr, King, and Yoder as proclaimers of the new results not only from their own reliance on unproductive distinctions but from our own disciplinary boundaries that often suggest ethicists have nothing of significance to say about theology. In some sense, we should not be surprised that most theologians dismiss Niebuhr as a political philosopher, King as a civil rights leader, and Yoder as a sectarian. Treating them as such excuses us from attending to their deep theological contributions. By treating Niebuhr, King, and Yoder as political theologians, I insist on the importance of theology to ethics and of ethics to theology. This is true not only in the sense that I aim to uncover the deeply theological insights that ethicists like Niebuhr, King, and Yoder have to offer, but also in the sense that I attend to the explicitly ethical dimensions of feminist theologies by identifying the eschatological ethic they exhibit.

Third, my dissertation aims to contribute to Protestant reflection on the nature of the church, or ecclesiology. The first aspect in this regard is to connect ecclesiological investigations with the wider field of political theology. The second aspect is to reflect on the distinctive contributions of Protestant thought to the broader field of ecclesiology. As a comparison of the Catholic and Protestant traditions of feminist thought reveals, ecclesiology tends to be the province of Catholic thinkers. But it seems to me that Protestant traditions of thought have much to contribute as well. As Kathryn Tanner, Monica Coleman, Serene Jones, Mary McClintock Fulkerson, and other Protestant feminist and womanist theologians show, there is something deeply worldly about the

church and the Christian tradition. And as the new readings of Niebuhr, King, and Yoder show, there is something deeply churchly about the world, whether by ‘world’ we mean history, *agape*, or extra-church life. Connecting these insights to the deeply Protestant emphasis on continual reformation suggests important Protestant contributions to the field of ecclesiology. I would characterize these contributions in terms of what Paul J. DeHart refers to as the “fragile assurance that the world of human meaning both within and beyond the church is already potentially open to God’s future,” the “continual bringing together of the Word abroad and the Word made flesh,” whereby “With each new processing of cultural elements, never quite anticipatable beforehand, a new facet of the shape of the redeemer’s original appearance is revealed.”⁶⁵⁹ In other words, it seems to me that Protestant traditions especially, although not exclusively, are acutely attuned to what I have been referring to as the ‘worldliness of the church’ and the ‘churchliness of the world’ in an effort to perceive and embody the new thing God is doing.

Finally, my dissertation aims to move beyond the ghettoization of feminist theologies that occurs in the academy. Too often, feminist theologies are treated as marginal side projects with no significance to theology at large. My project aims to demonstrate what can be gained by recognizing the significant theological contributions of feminist theologies. I hope to have shown that feminist theologies are integral to the tradition in that they are eschatological in intent, and that not incorporating feminist insights impoverishes both the theological task and our reading of others in the tradition. In this sense, the five elements of the eschatological ethic provide a model of faithful theology and prove instructive for theologians and ethicists of all schools.

⁶⁵⁹ DeHart, *The Trial of the Witnesses*, 266, 274-275.

I recognize that a project like mine, that does not pledge allegiance to any one school of thought, runs the risk of angering everyone and pleasing no one. No doubt many scholars will regard this project as a feminist one that, as such, bears no relevance to their own work. And no doubt many feminist, womanist, *mujerista*, and Latina theologians will feel betrayed by my focus on three of the patriarchal figures in the tradition, seeing my feminist engagement as tangential at best to the main focus of the project. I can only say that I would regard both responses as a loss in the face of our common theological and political tasks. I have tried to show that a feminist reading of Niebuhr, King, and Yoder reveals a whole dimension of their work that is yet to be appreciated by both ethicists and theologians. I have also tried to show that we cannot come to a full understanding of the theological task without the invaluable contributions made in recent years by feminist theologies. To deny either the former or the latter is to impoverish the theological undertaking by reducing Niebuhr, King, and Yoder to ethicists who only address violence, and by reducing feminist theologians to auxiliaries to “real” theology. If we are to adequately address the pressing questions facing us today, we would do well to garner all of the resources at our disposal and think together through the problems presented by our common moral life.

III. Toward an Eschatological Political Theology

What then can I say about the eschatological political theology that might result from the intra-disciplinary conversation that I have sought to initiate? I stated in the introduction that one intended contribution of my dissertation is to build upon the valuable feminist insights regarding the political nature of theology and those of Niebuhr,

King, and Yoder to develop a normative vision of the political role of the church.

What might such a political theology look like and what do the new Niebuhr, King, and Yoder have to contribute?

As I indicated, for Niebuhr the church is “the place where the Kingdom of God impinges upon all human enterprises through the divine word, and where the grace of God is made available to those who have accepted His judgment.”⁶⁶⁰ As a result, my feminist development of Niebuhr’s thought identifies repentance as the church’s distinctive political practice. Although Tanner’s insights into the political nature of theology and the capacity of the Christian tradition to create self-critical cultures helps us identify this element of Niebuhr’s thought, Tanner herself does not explicitly develop these contributions in terms of a political conception of the church. Furthermore, the eschatological tension that Serene Jones posits in her conception of the church as both “graced community” and “sinful community” nicely points to the important criticisms a number of feminist theologians have made of the patriarchal abuses of the church.⁶⁶¹ But it seems to me that these thinkers have contributed most in the area of pinpointing the sin of the church as an institution and creating their own new, alternative worship spaces and liturgical practices. These alternative worship spaces and liturgical practices are of course important in that they provide spaces for people to experience God’s grace in ways the institutional church denied them.

But Niebuhr’s conception of repentance as a political practice also suggests that feminist, womanist, *mujerista*, and Latina theologians are well-placed to reinvest old

⁶⁶⁰ Niebuhr, *Beyond Tragedy*, 62.

⁶⁶¹ Jones, *Feminist Theory and Christian Theology*, 159.

practices like the confession of sin and repentance with new meaning. Tanner has suggested such a strategy in her general recommendations that feminist theologies make the strategic move of recalibrating traditional doctrines and practices rather than creating new ones.⁶⁶² According to Tanner, investing old practices with new meaning rather than creating new ones garners a kind of theological legitimacy for feminist theologians that those in the ‘mainstream’ are all too eager to deny them.

The critique of old categories that I have identified in an eschatological ethic suggests that confession of sin and repentance should have a central place as political practices in an eschatological political ecclesiology.⁶⁶³ Margaret Farley, for example, has written of the powerful impact such a practice can have. She describes Pope John Paul II’s March 2000 Lenten prayer in Jerusalem, where the pope prayed in the name of the church for forgiveness for wrongs against co-believers and those of other traditions, as such a practice.⁶⁶⁴ Farley writes:

This may have been the most important and effective word spoken in the public forum by a representative of the Roman Catholic Church in a long time ... Embodying vulnerability in the expression of truth, never was the church more strong. Acknowledging not only mistakes but real evil, never was the church more prophetic in its commitment to justice... whatever word is spoken, whatever action taken, it needs to be formed with this same spirit: of humility, respect, and the deepest compassion.⁶⁶⁵

⁶⁶² Tanner, *The Politics of God*, 31.

⁶⁶³ See Jennifer McBride, *The Church for the World: A Theology of Public Witness* (Ph.D. diss., University of Virginia, 2008).

⁶⁶⁴ Margaret Farley, “The Church in the Public Forum: Scandal or Prophetic Witness?” *CTSA Proceedings of the Fifty-Fifth Annual Convention* 55 (2000), 87.

⁶⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 87, 101.

With this description of the Pope's prayer for forgiveness on behalf of the church, Farley paints a picture of the potential role the confession of sin and repentance might have in an eschatological political ecclesiology. She suggests that the most powerful criticism the church can make, the most vital witness the church can provide, may just come from the church's capacity to be a self-critical culture, to confess when it conspires with the old rather than witnessing to the new.

Just as my feminist engagement with Niebuhr casts repentance as a political practice of the church, so my feminist and womanist engagement with King posits creative practices of love and community-building as central to an eschatological political theology. As I have argued, it is tempting to see nonviolent protest as the only expression of love in action, but looking at King through an eschatological ethic reveals that King regards the church as a community of creativity. Its political practices consist of the creation of new relationships and new forms of community marked by justice and reconciliation.

In the same way that Tanner stops short of developing her notion self-critical cultures within the context of a political ecclesiology, womanists have neither explicitly identified the theme of creativity that runs through their work nor connected it with the church's political mission. Although a communal context is often central to womanist projects, very few womanists offer political constructions of the church. Delores Williams puts forward a conception of the church as the community of black women who have gone before her, constructing a church of past memory. But such identity-centered conceptions of the church—while having their own significant political implications in that they retrieve forgotten contributions and reclaim the church for black women—run

the risk of being identity exclusive in a way that runs counter to King's vision of an inclusive beloved community. King seems more intent to conceive of the church as a community that goes out of its way to love people who are not like ourselves.

Mary McClintock Fulkerson puts forward such a view in her study of Good Samaritan Methodist Church in Durham, NC. As we have seen, she examines the ecclesial importance of what she calls the "homemaking practices" of that community and argues that these practices constitute ecclesial practices like Bible study and worship.⁶⁶⁶ More importantly, these practices create "a shared space of appearance" where members engage 'the other.'⁶⁶⁷ Not only does her discussion expand our conception of ecclesial and, therefore, political practices, it demonstrates how these practices are practices of love in that they reveal our obliviousness to race and afford opportunities for diverse people to work together in a way they most likely would not otherwise. These creative practices form a critical part of an eschatological political theology because in overcoming the divisions and prejudices that mark our current existence, they provide eschatological glimpses of the redeemed future for which Christians hope.

A valuable insight that a new King contributes to such a conception of love as a creative political practice is that these practices need not be located in the church. His attention the civil realm as well as his theological development of the "beloved community" suggest that the church's practices of love, by their very nature, resist confinement to church communities. Indeed, Tanner has pointed to the importance of

⁶⁶⁶ Fulkerson, *Places of Redemption*, 126.

⁶⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 21.

Christians partnering with those outside the church in their reform efforts. She suggests that what is most significant about the public character of theological discourse is not the discourse itself but its “effects.” She writes:

The primary practical objective in debate is simply to arrive at mutually agreed upon decisions about the shape that social relations should take...In debate with people who do not share a full-blown religious or philosophical outlook one seeks only a consensus with them on that account of shared norms and values that is necessary and sufficient to warrant a particular policy agreement.⁶⁶⁸

In other words, we need not agree on everything to work together. We need only agree on what we want to accomplish. She also stresses the importance of engaging in extra-church avenues for such reform. As she puts it, “It is not at all unusual for Christians to think they have responsibilities to the world which are not best pursued by simple church witness to a different way of life but call for participation in associations outside the church that might bring out change.”⁶⁶⁹ This emphasis on pragmatic methods is part of an eschatological ethic and Tanner indicates here how King’s political practices of love might be manifest in such partnering efforts with those with whom we differ and even disagree. Indeed, part of the genius of King’s interpretation of the ‘beloved community’ and his actual leadership of the civil rights movement was his openness to work alongside all who shared his goal, regardless of religion or race. His practices of love display King’s willingness to work with others across denominational and religious lines,

⁶⁶⁸ Kathryn Tanner, “Public Theology and the Character of Public Debate.” *Annual of the Society of Christian Ethics* (1996), 90.

⁶⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 93.

allowing him to effectively build coalitions based not on doctrinal orthodoxy but pragmatic goals.

In addition to Niebuhr's repentance and King's creative practices of love, Yoder contributes an understanding of practices of discernment as central to the church's political engagement. Yoder specifically identifies the "body politics" of the church, including the refusal to participate in violence, relationships of social egalitarianism, communism or the sharing of economic resources, binding and loosing or forgiveness, and alternative modes of leadership, such as relying on the gifts of every member of the community. But what is most important for our purposes is to note the ways in which these practices take embodiment and incarnation seriously, so that our eyes are opened anew to redemptive practices even when they occur outside the church community. In fact, each practice is an ordinary social activity that the church does a bit differently. Each possesses potential secular expressions, and their ordinariness means that Christians can form "tactical alliances" with those who express these same practices outside the church community.⁶⁷⁰ It is the church's political task to discern these practices in order to attend to new manifestations of the Gospel.

One of the implications of this view is that the location of 'church' becomes more difficult to pin down. Chris Heubner describes his own Yoderian aim as the desire to "explore the character of the church as a kind of dislocated identity," to "tell a story of the relationship between church and world, focusing in particular on the sense in which the church exists as somehow torn between the very distinction of church and world that

⁶⁷⁰ Yoder, *Priestly Kingdom*, 61, 53.

defines it.”⁶⁷¹ As I have argued, conceiving of the church as having a dislocated identity, rather than part of a rigid church-world distinction, better captures the reality both of the complex, fragmentary, and diffuse nature of identity and belief as well as Christ’s redemptive powers. Thus, my feminist engagement with Yoder has revealed a new Yoder intent not on insisting on radical differences between church and world but on fostering the church’s ability to discern incarnational practices wherever they might occur and for the church to learn from these. One of the implications of such a view is that the church must assume a kind of humility to be willing to learn from others and a willingness to acknowledge that it does not always know best.

Feminist and womanist theologians are certainly not strangers to the idea that the church may need to learn from the wider world. As the work of post-Christians such as Mary Daly and Daphne Hampson makes clear, feminist theologians have not been hesitant to identify the sin of the church, condemn it as hopelessly patriarchal, and turn to resources outside the Christian tradition. Nor have feminist theologians been hesitant to create their own alternative worship spaces and re-imagine church, as Ruether and Chopp indicate in their work on the women-church movement and discursive reformulations of church. Nor, as Tanner’s earlier comments indicate, do feminists deny the importance of participating in secular avenues of reform. The kind of dislocated identity of the church that I discuss is certainly not an unfamiliar one to these theologians.

But one of the critiques of feminist and womanist theologies made by theologians of other bents, is that—while comfortable with the idea of redemption outside the

⁶⁷¹ Huebner, *Precarious Peace*, 23.

church—they do, however, seem a bit too confident about naming what is redemptive and what is not. And while the eschatological ethic's focus on questioning received categories certainly suggests the importance of bringing a critical eye to theological doctrines and church practices, it still remains the case that grace is God's to give. Recall, for example, that Serene Jones establishes the liberation of women as her criterion for determining the redemptive value of church doctrine and practice. In adjudicating between redemptive or oppressive doctrines, Jones asks "Will [this] view...advance the struggle for women's empowerment?"⁶⁷² Such a view suggests that one has ultimate knowledge about what will advance the cause and what women's empowerment looks like. It also presumes to decide for oneself what elements of the tradition are authoritative. Given Yoder's distinction between faithfulness and effectiveness, he might criticize Jones for coming down on the side of effectiveness rather than faithfulness in determining which elements of the tradition are authoritative.⁶⁷³

Similarly, theologians especially attuned to maintaining the primacy of God's agency over human agency might have problems with certain womanist construals of their empowerment. An eschatological ethic affirms the value of all human beings by virtue of their creation in the image of God, and it views human creative agency as a participation in God's own creative agency. But it is important to stress that God's agency is primary. When Delores Williams, for example, claims in her re-reading of the

⁶⁷² Ibid., 44.

⁶⁷³ See Yoder, *The Politics of Jesus*, where he draws a distinction between strategies of effectiveness and faithfulness. As he puts it, "The relationship between the obedience of God's people and the triumph of God's cause is not a relationship of cause and effect but one of cross and resurrection," 232.

Hagar story that God provides to Hagar “new vision to see survival resources where she saw none before,” but Hagar herself ... “crafts the means of her survival,” Williams comes dangerously close to claiming that Hagar saves herself rather than being dependent upon God.⁶⁷⁴ If feminist and womanist theologies tend in this direction of over-confidence that verges on idolatry, the new Yoder cautions against this theological hubris.

In fact, Yoder’s emphasis on the need to carefully hone our ability to discern the possible stirrings of God’s redemptive powers outside the church, along with his emphasis on the ordinary or worldliness of the church’s political practices, offers in a sense, the most political vision of the church and its practices. As Karl Barth reminds us, it is not that the church is lifted up into the heavens to form the new heaven and the new earth. Rather, the new heaven and the new earth is a city that God prepares and sends down to earth, echoing the incarnation itself. Just as God took on human form, so too shall the new heaven and the new earth take on worldly form:

the object of the promise and the hope in which the Christian community has its eternal goal, consists, according to the mistakable assertion of the New Testament, not in an eternal Church but in the *polis* built by God and coming down from heaven to earth, and the nations shall walk in the light of it and the kings of the earth will bring their glory and honor into it (Rev. 21.2, 24)—it consists in a heavenly *politeuma* (Phil. 3.20)—in the *basileia* of God—in the judgement of the King on the throne of His glory (Matt. 25.31f). Bearing all this in mind, we are entitled and compelled to regard the existence of the Christian community as of ultimate and supremely political significance.⁶⁷⁵

⁶⁷⁴ Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness*, 198

⁶⁷⁵ Barth, “The Christian Community and the Civil Community,” 19.

The New Creation is not a church, then, but a city, a political community. The church's political significance does not depend on forming the core of the new creation but in being prepared to receive God's gift in this world.

I have suggested that, in the meantime, the church's most potent political practice is to anticipate this gift by discerning between the old and the new, by critiquing the old and striving to participate in God's creative agency. Indeed, as I hope to have shown, Niebuhr, King, and Yoder view the Christian community as possessing significant political importance beyond the issue of violence and coercion. My feminist engagement with these figures has revealed their articulation of Christian political practices that are distinctively Christian, but at the same time wholly worldly. It has attuned us to the things of old in their work to reveal the potential contours of an eschatological political theology that positions repentance, creative expressions of love and reconciliation, and practices of discernment at its center. Such an eschatological political theology, while built amidst the things of old, nevertheless attempts to perceive and participate in the new thing that God promises to be doing, is doing, and will be doing.

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