Old Divides and New Trajectories in Christian Ethics

The current divide between witness and realist theologians has its origins in much older debates. Before “public theology” existed as a subfield, and before feminist theologies even arrived on the theological scene, Karl Barth and Reinhold Niebuhr found themselves on opposite sides of the theological crises provoked by the twentieth-century world wars. In order to understand what is at stake for contemporary witness and realist theologians, this chapter briefly reviews that debate before examining two of the most important contemporary witness and realist accounts as well as significant feminist contributions.

The main burden of the chapter is twofold: first, I argue that although contemporary witness and realist theologians often move beyond the Barth-Niebuhr argument in innovative directions, they also remain beholden to it in unproductive ways. I aim to show not only how contemporary witness and realist theologians’ projects
continue unnecessarily to neglect elements important to the other but also how attending to such would strengthen their proposals without sacrificing their integrity. Second, I aim to show through a discussion of significant feminist insights how an increased feminist presence in public theology would enhance the constructive reach of Niebuhr, Yoder, and King—all of whose legacies have been damaged by the witness-realism division—*while* benefiting witness, realist, and feminist proposals. My argument both demonstrates the indispensability of feminist theologies in reconfiguring “malestream” thought toward liberating ends and prevents “feminist theology from being classified as a marginal, fringe movement.” In short, I aim both to identify how the witness-realism divide and the feminist absence in public theology continue to be unproductive for the field and to explore the promising trajectories that emerge when opportunities for dialogue between witness, realist, and feminist theologies are taken seriously. But before we consider how Niebuhr’s, Yoder’s, and King’s legacies might be reinvigorated, a look back is in order.

**Barth and Niebuhr**

The world wars of the twentieth century precipitated a theological crisis. The optimism about human capacities for progress at the center of many of the liberal theologies then in vogue proved ill equipped to deal with the horrors of the day, raising anew the perennial question of how Christian faith should relate to political realities. Swiss theologian Karl Barth and his American colleague Reinhold Niebuhr developed two of the most significant theological responses.

The basic narrative of these two theologians’ influence is a familiar one. In the wake of World War I, Barth published his commentary

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on the book of Romans, which emphasized the radical disjuncture
between God and human beings. Barth’s thesis flew in the face of two
theological trends: emphasis on human experience as a theological
source for knowledge of God, and efforts to align certain social,
political, and economic positions with the divine will. With this
challenge to the Protestant liberal theologies prominent at the time,
Barth, in the words of Karl Adam, “dropped a bomb on to the
playground of the theologians.”

He insisted that the word of God is free. It cannot be discerned easily either in nature or in preestablished ethical guidelines. Rather, it speaks a unique word of judgment to each situation. Barth did develop a conception of analogia fidei that identified “prominent lines” for Christian moral action, but he continued to insist on the radical difference between the word of God and the world of humans. His focus on preserving God’s freedom resisted not only clear manifestations of human evil, such as Nazism, but any straightforward identification of Christian truth with political opinion. Rather than attempting to discern the “right” Christian response to the political and social contingencies of the day, Barth encouraged Christians to focus on their communities of faith. And even here, Barth contended that Christian action is likely to be at odds with any particular political option. When the church acts, it moves “not with the stream but against it.”

Reinhold Niebuhr took a different tack. While he appreciated Barth’s refusal to acquiesce to the “easy optimisms” of liberal theology, Niebuhr condemned Barth’s failure to provide concrete

2. As quoted in Stanley Hauerwas, With the Grain of the Universe: The Church’s Witness and Natural Theology (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2001), 152.
guidance for moral action. Dubbing Barth the “apostle of the absolute,” Niebuhr responded with a Christian realism that, like Barth’s theology, emphasized divine judgment and criticized liberal confidence in human progress. Niebuhr, however, departed from Barth in his assessment of the significance of God’s judgment for human action. He put more emphasis on the role of mercy and forgiveness in freeing human beings for what he describes as responsible political action. Insisting that “we are men and not God,” Niebuhr argued that our starting place is not the revelation of God per se but our limited understanding of it. Responding to the word of God “begins in our common experience of human reality.” For Niebuhr, Barth’s emphasis on revelation and the church enabled what he considered an irresponsible withdrawal from responsible action. He insisted that despite human limits, concrete choices must be risked in specific situations. To do otherwise, according to Niebuhr, would be to sacrifice the good that might be possible in spite of evil.

The differences between Barth’s and Niebuhr’s responses to the theological challenges of their lifetimes continue to shape Christian theology. Although history ensures changes in context, the contours of the debate remain largely the same. Witness theologians challenge realists’ reliance on human experience; realists criticize witness theologians for too absolute a conception of revelation. Witness theologians criticize realists for accommodating Christian truth to social and political realities; realists accuse witness theologians of abdicating moral responsibility by refusing to make discriminate judgments between good and evil. Witness theologians accuse realists

6. Ibid., 141.
7. Reinhold Niebuhr, “We are Men and Not God,” in Essays in Applied Christianity, 168.
9. This is not to minimize the significant differences that obtain between the various contemporary witness and realist theologians’ accounts or their differences from Barth’s and Niebuhr’s positions.
of betraying the church’s distinctive political witness; realists chastise witness theologians for what they characterize as an irresponsible withdrawal into the church. At stake for both is faithful Christian engagement in the world, and each finds the other wanting in radical ways.

Given the tenor of the discussion, it is tempting to posit a diametrical opposition between witness and realist approaches. And to be sure, there are a number of fundamental disagreements. Witness and realist theologians subscribe to different theories of truth. Consequently, witness theologians emphasize the particularity and therefore publicly inaccessible nature of Christian truth claims, whereas realists are confident that Christian truth is relevant and accessible to a wider public. Witness theologians identify the church itself as the primary political identity for Christians, whereas realists see the primary tasks of Christian ethics as necessitating involvement in secular politics. Witness theologians espouse nonviolence, whereas realists allow for the use of force.

These are irreconcilable differences, and I make no effort to reconcile them. But more often than not, what appear to be fundamental differences can ultimately be seen as different sides of the same coin. What look like differences in starting points—revelation versus experience—end up being different ways to construe the relationship between revelation and experience. What look like different attitudes toward engaging society—witness versus apology—end up being different approaches to avoiding cultural accommodation. What look like differences in political strategies—a focus on the pacifist identity and mission of the church versus participation in secular politics—end up being different ways to

10. Christian realists are often moral and theological realists, whereas witness theologians subscribe to a narrative theory of truth. For an excellent discussion of these differences, see Robin W. Lovin, Reinhold Niebuhr and Christian Realism (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995). I recognize that these descriptions are contestable.
construe political responsibility. These similarities are just as important as the differences, as they often suggest opportunities for fruitful partnership and collaboration between witness and realist theologians. Unfortunately, theologians of both approaches rarely take advantage of such opportunities.

**Contemporary Witness and Realist Theologies**

Although both Stanley Hauerwas and Robin W. Lovin—the best-known contemporary representatives of these schools—effectively expand the view from their respective vantage points, both also continue to be less than fully responsive to the other stance’s critiques. Hauerwas’s explorations of Christian “peaceableness” chart territory beyond the violence of the state, including reflection on topics as wide-ranging as abortion and mental disabilities. But despite his constant claim that the “first social ethical task of the church is to be the church,”¹¹ he does not identify the subsequent tasks¹² that prove integral to Christian ethics for realists. As such, he continues to neglect not only important questions raised by realists about Christians’ moral responsibilities beyond the church but also constitutive components of the church’s witness of peace: resistance to the violence of sexism and racism.

For his part, Lovin develops a Christian realism focused not, as Niebuhr’s was, on the nation, but on the “new realities.” Despite his affirmation of “unapologetic politics,” however, his realism continues to under-analyze how the church sustains its politics—a topic of concern for witness theologians. Thus, despite his advance beyond Niebuhr’s focus on the nation to articulate a Christian realism for

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the new realities of globalization and the power of new religious movements, his proposal continues to leave largely unanswered witness questions about how the church and other contexts cultivate the necessary moral resources to meet current challenges. What is perhaps most curious about both of these oversights is that, despite certain nonnegotiable differences between their accounts, providing more adequate answers to each other’s questions is entirely possible without sacrificing integrity. In fact, far from compromising their accounts, responding more readily to the other’s criticism would actually strengthen them.

**Christian Witness**

Witness theologians have devoted a great deal of attention to the church and how its narrative and practices form Christian communities in moral virtue, preparing them for a distinctive witness. If Barth’s own hesitancy to associate Christian ethics with the questions of politics was motivated by the aim to resist the accommodation of Christianity to National Socialism, Hauerwas identifies political liberalism as the Constantinian temptation for American Christians. It is impossible to do justice to Hauerwas’s contributions to the field of Christian ethics. His prolific writings make it difficult to even cover the body of his work in any detail. But among his significant contributions are a renewed focus on the church and its practices as constituting its own politics, the importance of virtue and character for Christian ethics, and attention to the ways Christians must resist cultural accommodation. In addition to addressing war-related issues, Hauerwas develops his understanding of Christian “peaceableness” in relation to important moral questions such as abortion and issues related to the family and mental disability.
Hauerwas is perhaps most famous for his insistence that the church is its own political and social reality. He is frequently quoted as saying that “the church does not have a social ethic; the church is a social ethic.”¹³ Highly critical of the social gospel ideal of Christianizing the social order—with which he identifies Reinhold Niebuhr as complicit, despite Niebuhr’s disavowal of the social gospel—Hauerwas argues that it is not the primary responsibility of Christians to attempt to improve the social situation in which they live. “The first task of Christian social ethics . . . is not to make the ‘world’ better or more just, but to help Christian people form their community consistent with their conviction that the story of Christ is a truthful account of our existence.”¹⁴ One of the strengths of Hauerwas’s approach is its focus on the church as a site of moral formation with its emphasis on the church’s distinctive moral resources and the role of Christian Scripture and practices in shaping Christians in virtue. Also significant is Hauerwas’s emphasis on the inherently political nature of the church’s internal activity, especially in his insistence that church communities should provide alternative solutions to moral problems. Hauerwas finds himself in good company here with feminists, who also emphasize the inherently political nature of the church’s institutional life and the task of theology itself. Feminists also understand the church’s role as a countercultural witness against dominant (sexist, in the feminist case) cultural trends.

This emphasis on the church as its own polis enables witness theologians to distinguish Christian truth from American political liberalism. Because the “social ethical task of the church. . . is to be the kind of community that tells and tells rightly the story of

¹³. Hauerwas, Peaceable Kingdom, 99.
Jesus,” the church will often find itself at odds with the values and priorities of the larger culture. Upholding Barth’s thesis that the church often runs against the stream, Hauerwas criticizes Christians who equate being a good Christian with being a good American. His proposal highlights the distinctiveness of the Christian community over against the values of the nation. Despite frequent critical claims to the contrary, this antagonism does not constitute a sectarian withdrawal from society. In Hauerwas’s words, “This does not involve a rejection of the world, or a withdrawal from the world; rather it is a reminder that the church must serve the world on her own terms.” In this sense, emphasizing the church’s particular moral identity and resources is less a withdrawal from worldly affairs and more a statement about the priority of Christian truth claims over those of other communities to which Christians may belong. Given the complexity of our identities and social roles—or as Hauerwas puts it, the fact that “we inherit too many histories and participate in too many communities”—Hauerwas’s insistence on the priority of the church serves as a reminder that despite their other communal identities, Christians’ ecclesial identity is primary.

Despite the strengths of his proposal (and his prolific body of work), Hauerwas’s proposals tend to leave important questions—especially those of concern to realists—under-addressed. Hauerwas continues to evade questions about how the church’s witness of peace relates to extra-ecclesial politics. As Robert Jenson notes in his analysis of “the Hauerwas project,” no matter how compelling his account, Hauerwas will never escape claims that he is sectarian if he does not more effectively address the question of how the church should navigate its relationship to the world. Hauerwas’s

15. Ibid., 52.
16. Ibid., 85.
17. Ibid., 126.
account rightly challenges Christians when they might be tempted to conflate American ideals and the truths of their faith. But his account is less effective at acknowledging what his own witness colleague, John Howard Yoder, once referred to as the “confluence of optimisms” that sometimes obtains between American liberalism and Christianity. Nor does it fully address how the church might participate in larger political structures without compromising its particular identity and mission. Nor has it adequately acknowledged the ways liberalism itself operates as a moral tradition. Hauerwas’s interest in emphasizing the distinctiveness of the Christian tradition has meant that he has been too hesitant to identify the formative influence of the Christian tradition in political liberalism, the intricate relationship between church and world, and the variety of ways they already, and might yet, engage each other in mutually beneficial ways.

But perhaps even more importantly, it is not just that Hauerwas avoids consideration of how the primary task of Christian ethics relates to its secondary tasks; he also stops short of adequately developing his account of the first task. There is, of course, more to being a peaceable community than rejecting the military violence of the state. But despite his important reflection on topics such as abortion, disability, and medical ethics, his elaboration of “peaceableness” has not done enough to engage questions raised by

21. For a powerful critique of Hauerwas’s project, see Nathan R. Kerr, Christ, History and Apocalyptic: The Politics of Christian Mission (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2009). Kerr argues that Hauerwas’s doctrinal focus on ecclesiology is both overdetermined by his antiliberalism and “reductive of Jesus’ historicity,” preventing Hauerwas from conceiving of the church’s identity as constituted by its missionary encounter with the world (20, 93). Kerr’s account of Christian politics, which calls for a shift from “church-as-polis” to “mission makes the church” (169), resonates at points with the account of “feminism as Christian politics” that I develop in chapter 3.
feminists and other liberation theologians about sexism and racism.\textsuperscript{22} Hauerwas’s account gives little indication of how the church should respond to either the internal violence of trauma or the pervasive forms of systemic violence within the church and in society at large. In this sense, it is not simply the case that Hauerwas ignores the “second” and “third” task of the church in favor of elaborating the first; his account also requires a fuller development of the first.

Hauerwas’s neglect of racism and sexism are especially odd given that the theologian whom he credits for his conversion to pacifism, John Howard Yoder, saw both the rejection of ethnic provincialism and commitment to feminism as inherent to—indeed, constitutive of—the church’s identity and mission. I am far from the first to raise this issue, and Hauerwas has responded to some of these criticisms. But while acknowledging the importance of these issues, Hauerwas generally defends his decision not to engage racism and sexism. For example, although Hauerwas identifies the black church as the best example of what his theology promotes, he also says that he has not written about Martin Luther King Jr. because King’s story “is not my story.”\textsuperscript{23} But given Hauerwas’s emphasis on the church as Christians’ primary identity, it is hard to understand how King’s story is not Hauerwas’s story. Honestly acknowledging the difficulty of addressing racism as a white person has its own integrity and should be respected as such. But in another sense, it remains complicit in the white privilege that allows white persons to imagine that the issue of racism is not about them. It too easily excuses oneself from dealing with issues of critical importance.\textsuperscript{24} Certainly, one cannot expect one scholar to write everything there is to write about the church’s first

\textsuperscript{22}Hauerwas himself acknowledges that he can be “rightly criticized for not writing about the challenges raised by feminism.” See Stanley Hauerwas, “Remembering How and What I Think: A Response to the JRE Articles on Hauerwas,” \textit{Journal of Religious Ethics} 40, no. 2 (2012): 302.

task, but these issues represent missed opportunities for Hauerwas to develop his account in directions realists and feminists might appreciate while simultaneously strengthening his own agenda.

Despite substantial feminist response to his project, Hauerwas has also tended to avoid feminist concerns. This is not, he notes, because he has a problem with feminism, but because most feminist theologies are often versions of the theological liberalism he rejects. While it is true that many feminist theologies—especially the earliest ones—reveal the influence of theological liberalism, the proliferation and significance of diverse feminist theological perspectives challenges Hauerwas’s reasons for not engaging feminist theologies. I argue in chapter 3 that Hauerwas would do well to take a page out of Yoder’s playbook on this count because Yoder identifies feminism as intrinsic to Christian identity and ecclesial politics. Doing so would enable a promising trajectory for work on which witness and feminist theologians might collaborate. What does a Christian witness of peace that takes sexism seriously as a form of systemic violence look like? The account of feminism as Christian politics that I develop in chapter 3 both enhances the relevance of Yoder’s legacy and makes needed contributions to witness accounts like Hauerwas’s by better addressing questions raised by realists about extra-ecclesial politics and by feminists about the church’s response to racism and sexism.

**Christian Realism**

Robin W. Lovin is arguably the most important realist in contemporary Christian ethics. His work has been instrumental in

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