God’s demands are not overwhelming because whatever comes from God overcomes the world. And this is what overcomes the world: our faith.

1 John 5:3–4

Climate change represents the challenge that anthropocene powers pose to Christian ethics. Unprecedented social and ecological relations threaten to overwhelm capacities of theological response, rendering practices of faith incompetent to their world. If loving neighbors, for example, becomes uncertain within emerging planetary relations, then Christian communities begin to lose a central practice through which they interpret themselves and their world in relation to God. In order to sustain their faith, Christian communities must create ways for love to overcome the storms that would defeat it. Like other moral traditions, Christianity must generate ways to sustain the meaning of its way of life in changing conditions—or face collapse. It must invent ways for love to overcome the world of climate change or concede to atmospheric powers the defeat of a moral life shaped around love. So how do theological communities adapt the practice of faith?

A popular view of Christian social ethics supposes that its task is to apply theological ideals to social problems. Christian engagement with society, in this view, starts from fundamental moral values and then works deductively toward concrete situations. When Paul Ramsey introduced his Basic Christian Ethics he opened with that common sense: “before there can be a Christian social ethic, understanding of the fundamental moral perspective of the Christian must be deepened and clarified.” The ethicist, on his account, should first establish a fundamental Christian worldview and then work toward applying it to particular problems. This book opened in a different way, starting from the particular problem of climate change and appealing
to creative reform projects. My approach shares some of the sensibilities of Traci West’s *Disruptive Christian Ethics*: skeptical that communities need professional ethicists to clarify their worldview before they can begin acting on their problems, committed to working with the moral knowledges that reform projects are already producing, and focused on empowering moral agency to meet problems through conversation across disciplines and confrontation across boundaries.2

Between “basic” and “disruptive” ways of doing Christian ethics there exists an important choice in practical strategy. What role should social problems and grassroots projects play in shaping the tasks of a religious ethic? By emphasizing “inventive” and “tactical” dimensions of religious ethics, I have signaled an approach that grants high significance to problems and projects. Those emphases align with liberationist claims that moral theory should arise from the margins of power, within communities working to overcome oppression and poverty. With regard to a problem like climate change, however, doing ethics from grassroots struggles may not always be possible. In the last chapter I explained how the “unprecedented” scope and “wicked” features of climate change frustrate meaningful action. When responses are either missing or tactically inadequate to the scale and complexity of the problem, then it might seem better for ethicists to approach climate change by reconstructing a tradition’s “fundamental moral perspective,” in order to offer communities new interpretations of their basic worldview.

Confronting climate change thus presses a methodological question about how to do religious ethics in conditions of moral incompetence. This chapter defends a pragmatic strategy by offering reasons from theology and social theory to suppose that traditions of faith are sustained through practical responses to social problems. Differentiating this approach from what I call a “cosmological strategy,” I argue that Christian ethics tends to drift away from concrete problems and communities when it assumes that social change begins by changing worldviews, and when it considers the church as a kind of culture with its own worldview. My theocentric pragmatism explains how new problems drive theological production, and why Christian ethics can begin from what is already going on in communities, even when their projects and concepts remain incompetent to the problems they want to face.

Religious ethicists tend to be suspicious of pragmatism for (at least) three reasons. First, problem-based moral reasoning can be crudely instrumentalist toward religious traditions. If an ethicist deploys whatever “moral resource” appears convenient toward the sort of solution that (she already knows) the situation requires, then the moral meaning of a tradition reduces to its use in some extrinsic project. Second, cultural emergencies
Christian social ethics emerged as a distinct field in the late nineteenth century in response to “the social problem” created by emerging industrial
powers. Economic dislocation, class conflict, and urban poverty drew attention to new structures of human relation being made by industrial capitalism. Attending to the political production of human misery, Christian social ethics made structures of relation susceptible to theological criticism. One important line of criticism refuted the social Darwinisms that counseled economic indifference to human suffering. Another criticism interpreted conflicts between labor and capital within an account of the Kingdom of God. By making the social problem a theological problem, Christian ethics made society a subject of God’s concern for justice. So Christian ethics helped invent “social justice”—an adaptation that extended the competency of justice to industrial forms of relation.  

Ernst Troeltsch’s *Social Teaching of the Christian Churches* (1911) was hugely influential in shaping the task of Christian social ethics. By showing how different historical traditions had generated contextual expressions of Christian sociality, Troeltsch demonstrated that the ethos of Christianity could develop in new ways to address modern problems. The ongoing task of Christian communities, Troeltsch thought, is to bring their faith into social existence in new and unexpected contexts. Industrial society made major traditions of Christian life seem incompetent, but creative responses like the social gospel movement bear promise of revitalized expression. The future of civilization, Troeltsch worried, depends on the success of reform communities achieving a social expression that extends a Christian ethos to industrial powers.

At the beginning of the twenty-first century, Christian ethics seems to find itself in a similar situation. The planetary economy of human power is transforming structures of human relation, making new problems of dislocation, conflict, and impoverishment. Once again reductive ideologies try to suppress cultural impulses to civilize those relations, and once again the ethical task includes rejecting fatalist indifference to human suffering and (this time) ecological loss. At stake, it seems, is the future of human civilization. “Sustainability” is now a summary keyword for its complex of problems—for “the social problem” expanded to planetary scale and ecological depth.

The task facing Christian social ethics is therefore analogous to the one Troeltsch saw, only now more complex. For, as we saw in the last chapter with climate change, ethics must address the enduring conflicts of social injustice within humanity’s growing conflict with ecological systems. Those tensions cannot be resolved by conjunctions like “eco-justice;” they must be reconstructed by inventing practices that bring the Christian ethos to expression within all the relations within which agents now live. As Troeltsch put it, new moral teachings must be developed “out of the inner impulse
of Christian thought, and out of its vital expression at the present time. A century later, the task of Christian social ethics remains constant: to discover vital expressions of Christian life that meet the needs of societies imperiled by their own powers.

Unless the whole idea of a Christian social ethic is a mistake. Stanley Hauerwas and John Milbank, in their distinct styles, condemn the notion that Christianity should worry over the problems caused by a corrupt civilization’s fragmentation. Why should Christians care about sustaining modern cultures of power? To the contrary, argue Hauerwas and Milbank, theology must refuse to serve a civilization that views religion as a moral instrument useful for safeguarding its power. Faith is not a “resource” for sustaining industrial power. Christianity does not have a social ethic, says Hauerwas, it is a social ethic. Theology does not relate to social theory, writes Milbank, it is its own social theory. Both attack the very idea of “Christian ethics and social problems” by deconstructing the notion that Christianity is a religious aspect of culture and arguing that it is better understood as a unique culture of its own. Christianity need not accept the problems of modern power as its own; it should rather interpret them as symptoms of another culture’s alienation from God and creation. If Christian social ethics has a task, it is to help the church to continue being the church by sustaining its own unique sociality.

In their view, Troeltsch formalized a standing temptation for the church to accept responsibility for social problems and thereby surrender its own social existence. Christian social ethics has largely been the literature of yield to that temptation. Especially in the responsibility ethics of H. Richard Niebuhr, Milbank and Hauerwas see plans for the church to cease being Christian. The mistake lies in assuming that social problems pose real theological challenges. This book’s opening chapter exemplifies their fear: beginning a Christian ethic by acknowledging theological incompetence before a problem of industrial powers seems to allow those powers to interpret what Christian practices must mean, and implies that the church should be measured by its effectiveness in the world.

Their critique of the very idea of a Christian social ethic must be taken seriously. Milbank and Hauerwas force any ethic, and especially a project constructed like this book, to defend its account of “problems.” Why is climate change a real problem for Christian ethics, rather than just another symptom of the world’s violence? Why is practical response to it a theological responsibility, rather than a capitulation to power?

Social problems become theological problems when Christian communities receive them as challenges to their practice of faith. When problems seem to mediate transformative demands from God they become the scene
of a theological exercise to open new ways of living the faith. In the late
nineteenth century, Christian reform projects made structural poverty a
theological problem that challenged proclamation of good news to the poor.
Christian socialism and the social gospel opened new ways of proclaiming
good news amidst economic powers threatening to overwhelm that practice
of faith. The problems of atmospheric powers await analogous adaptations
of Christian moral agency.

My argument depends on a different relation of Christianity and cul-
ture than the one Milbank and Hauerwas seem to have in mind. Instead
of narrating a separate Christian culture with its own worldview and lan-
guage, in which the world’s problems seem distracting and compromising,
I argue that Christian social ethics arises from missional projects that bear
and respond to the world’s problems as their own. Doing so, Christian eth-
ics does not sanction industrial powers or submit to market relations; it
rather opens those powers and relations to different uses by inventing ways
to live faithfully within them. By bearing responsibility for emerging prob-
lems of human power, the church learns to sustain the practices that carry
its faith—loving enemies and neighbors, asking and granting forgiveness,
witnessing to justice, and proclaiming good news for the poor. In other
words, the church sustains its unique sociality precisely by taking seriously
the world’s problems.

I therefore take a less dim view of Christian social ethics over the past
century and in fact develop my argument in conversation with H. Richard
Niebuhr’s responsibility ethics. The Christian social reform projects that
emerged over the twentieth century were hardly aporetic losses of church;
on the contrary, missional reform movements kept opening possibilities of
Christian practice by theologically confronting social problems. The Catho-
lic Worker Movement, for example, demonstrates that ways of love and
justice have been opened amidst political and economic powers that would
make those concepts almost unintelligible. Catholic Worker hospitality has
been an important guarantor of the meaningfulness of neighbor-love within
industrial economies. Critical theological interpretations of social struc-
tures rely on communities that sustain the credibility of Christian moral
thought, by making practices of faith possible within structures of relation
that would seem to defeat possibilities of acting in the way of Jesus.

Christian social ethics developed alongside a practical response to social
problems. The Protestant social gospel developed alongside labor struggles
and in settlement houses. Catholic social thought developed in response
to class conflict and in Catholic Worker houses. A half century of libera-
tionist initiatives have expanded and intensified those legacies. Liberation
projects have exhibited a particular genius for making social problems into
theological problems by locating interpretation of God’s action within struggles to overcome exploitation and poverty. Jon Sobrino completes the logic of that genius in his revision of Cyprian’s dictum (“outside the church there is no salvation”) to proclaim “outside the poor there is no salvation.” That is to say, outside confrontation with poverty, there is no church, no practice of faith, no meaningful talk of salvation.10 My argument shares the liberationist commitment to locate theological meaning within practices of response to the world’s wounds.

I do not mean to romanticize. Christian social projects sometimes mobilize “Christian values” to govern cultures as if that were the special prerogative of the Christian religion. Troeltsch looked for a new Christian social philosophy because he thought that the ethos of the Christian religion must play a central role in sustaining western civilization.11 Troeltsch thought Christianity could perform that role because he followed Max Weber’s view of the relation of ethos and society. With a different view of how religious ethics matters for moral culture and how culture matters in confronting social problems, ethicists would take a different view of the task of Christian social ethics. Later in the chapter I offer a view of religion and culture that situates Christian projects in a more pluralist and fluid setting.

Nor do I mean to diminish the role of theology. Christian social projects sometimes substitute moral earnestness for critical interpretation. Starting from problems and practices does not mean that theology mutely serves “action.” The social gospel movement is often remembered as an example of the risk that theological communities might let some notion of social needs determine the meaning of God and salvation. Social gospel advocates could all too easily talk of correlating Christian teachings with economic principles and of realizing Christian ideals through political institutions. By overdetermining theology with its earnestness on the issues of the day, the social gospel movement could baptize nationalist and ethnocentric impulses as divine movements.12 Most worrisome, its initially strong account of social transformation was prone to dilution into an empty liberalism of social progress, which was the target of H. Richard Niebuhr’s famous epigraph: “A God without wrath brought men without sin into a kingdom without judgment through the ministrations of a Christ without a cross.”13

Yet those cautions do not vitiate the idea of Christian ethics as a social project. Niebuhr does not dispute the idea of social salvation but rather laments its desuetude. Christianity’s social expression loses its ability to make a cultural difference when it collapses faith in a transformative God into the romance of a movement. When the needs of a social moment overdetermine the church’s task, Christianity’s dynamism for cultural reform calcifies into an inert institution of cultural sanction. Niebuhr was not shy about
naming where in church history were pillars of salt. If the kingdom of God is really salvation and is really social, thought Niebuhr, then its faith should produce a dynamic, tactical engagement with its world. Church forms as a "grand strategy of life under the kingdom of God."14

Later in the chapter I question the ideas of “Christ and culture” that shaped Niebuhr’s strategy for theologically framing social problems. I contest his idea of culture, however, in order to intensify the generative tension of church and social problems that he made conditional to Christian ethics. The “church’s social teaching,” according to Niebuhr, is shaped by how an inventive community constructs faithful responses to its context. Describing the church as “the organic movement of those who have been ‘called out’ and ‘sent,’” Niebuhr looks for it as “the social expression of the movement of life toward its true goal” in the God who creates and redeems.15 Niebuhr thus sought to preserve the central tension of Christian social ethics with a pragmatic sensibility to test Christianity by its social expression and a theological insistence that meaningful expression happens through faith in a transformative God.

I think Niebuhr was right about the “strategic” character of Christian sociality, and in this chapter describe two basic strategies of Christian social ethics. The difference between them turns on key assumptions about how religion functions in cultural change and how social problems matter for theological communities. A cosmological strategy uses theological discourse to critically interpret cultural worldviews, on the notion that such interpretations can illuminate the significance of social problems in an agent’s moral imagination. A pragmatic strategy attends to how Christian reform projects already use theological discourse to interpret practical problems, on the notion that such interpretations form part of how social problems drive moral change. The former focuses on worldviews as the patterns of meaning behind action. The latter focuses on practices as the patterns of action that carry and change meaning.

Both strategies appear in the legacy of H. Richard Niebuhr, which I show in order to avoid drawing the distinction between them too sharply by illustrating how the two strategies differently treat central tensions in a common body of work. My point in this exercise is not to defend Niebuhr’s own version of responsibility ethics, nor do I mean to impose a Protestant style for Christian ethics in general. Using Niebuhr allows a common angle of approach for sketching two complementary methods for addressing social problems. Ethicists working in Catholic social thought or Eastern Orthodox theology would sketch them differently, but I think they would recognize this outline of methodologies. While departing from Niebuhr’s account of responsibility at many points, this exercise nonetheless follows
his sensibility that ethics should begin in interpretation of how moral agents are situated within social relations and structures of power. His orienting question, “what is going on?” makes contextual interpretation central to Christian ethics. Indeed Niebuhr’s most important legacy for Christian social ethics may lie in the field’s subsequent focus on interpreting relations and powers, and its enduring interest in how those religious interpretations figure in cultural dynamics.

These two strategies represent two general ways of thinking about the relation of Christian ethics and social problems. They do not correspond to normative frameworks, confessional settings, or theological traditions; they offer no taxonomy of the field. They differentiate two broad ways of thinking about how problems shape the task of Christian ethics. Because they also correspond to analogous debates within global ethics and sustainability science (the subjects of the next two chapters), the play of this argument within Christian ethics matters for how one interprets other fields and the role of religious ethics within them.

THE STRATEGY OF MORAL COSMOLOGY

A cosmological strategy creates an imaginative field for moral agency by using theological beliefs and symbols to interpret social reality and its problems from a Christian point of view. Niebuhr called his approach “Christian moral philosophy,” and seemed to understand it as countercultural religious interpretation of social problems. “The great religions in general, and Christianity in particular . . . make their impact on us by calling into question our whole conception of what is fitting.” Religions do that “by questioning our picture of the context into which we now fit our actions.” Reinterpreting pictures of reality with Christian beliefs and symbols allows the ethicist to redescribe the field of moral action. The ethicist thus confronts social problems by investigating the cultural imaginary in which they appear and by uncovering the reality-shaping goals and values that have led to a crisis. She can then propose alternative moral symbols by which to reshape the worldview through which agents determine fitting action.

William Schweiker demonstrates rigorous pursuit of a cosmological strategy as he develops his own ethic of responsibility for planetary problems. He presents his two books on the subject as “Christian moral philosophy” in Niebuhr’s sense. “What is at issue most basically is how we ‘picture’ or imagine the moral space of life.” Schweiker introduces Responsibility and Christian Ethics by describing the ethical task as interpretation of a technological extension of human power that threatens to “overwhelm moral reason.” His Theological Ethics and Global Dynamics intensifies the situation:
“Nothing so much characterizes the age of globality as the fantastic, even terrifying, expansion of the human capacity to respond to, shape, and even create reality, that is, the explosive growth of human power . . . a power that increasingly is beyond our capacities or desire to control and orient.” Writing with David Klemm on *Religion and the Human Future*, Schweiker characterizes this as the age of “overhumanization.” The task for religious ethics is then to construct value symbols that can guide hyperbolic powers while abstaining from a “hypertheism” that would govern powers by absolutizing a particular view of the divine. Ethics must picture the moral space of globalizing power while recognizing that its problems bring many moral worlds into conflict.

To meet those tasks Schweiker works in two steps. He first shows how to use Christian symbols to rescue moral reason from titanic powers. The symbols of God, creation, and Christ’s love call into question a cultural obsession with power while still valuing the significance of power within finite lives. Agents living in an era of overhumanization need the capacity to imagine “endangerment to the entire life system.” Explicating reality with Christian interpretive symbols invites moral agents to revise the interpretation of power and peril within their worldview, for the sake of better orienting their action. Then secondly, because not all find Christian symbols acceptable, Schweiker offers metatraditional reflection on what his reinterpretation of those symbols accomplishes. He proposes “integrity of life before God” as an ideal norm that gathers and regulates the illuminative claims of particular cultural symbols. It names the summary claim on the humanist imagination and grounds an imperative of responsibility.

Other religious ethicists working on the problems of anthropocene power may work with different interpretive symbols and propose different summary claims, but they share a sense of their strategic task: ethics criticizes visions of reality. For several ethicists, that shared task is made possible by the cultural theory of Clifford Geertz. What makes an ethic “religious,” affirms John Reeder, is its critical engagement with pictures of fundamental reality. What makes an ethic “Christian,” as Douglas Ottati puts it, is “the reflective attempt to articulate a Christian worldview in the service of the life of faith.” Proposals for practical action lie implicit in the content of its worldview. “We need a picture of things in relation to God if we are to know how to interact with them.”

Focused on the symbolic imagination of moral consciousness, Gibson Winter affirms that “ideology furnishes the subject matter of religious social ethics.” So we have visual metaphors for a foundational relation between religious ethics and social problems: some picture, worldview, vision, or image creates the symbolic background that grounds and orients practical action.
Those metaphors indicate the practical trade-off in this strategy of religious ethics: beginning from a worldview and working toward application abstracts ethics from concrete problems. Schweiker’s compelling description of titanic powers seems likely to include climate change and his references to disempowerment seem likely to include human rights violations, but he hardly mentions those problems, except as symptoms of a deficient moral consciousness. While he clearly intends to help public discussion of social problems, his interpretive work requires only a very general notion of global threats. More particular engagement with a problem like climate change is not required by his approach because the bedrock of response lies in the metaethical sediments of myth and metaphor. That assumption limits the relevant range of interdisciplinary exchange because all the important ethical work happens at the level of moral ontology. Schweiker thus stays close to moral philosophy while remaining aloof from the environmental and social sciences, and distant from the organic creativity of reform projects.

Two important examples from within this strategy complicate that description. Sallie McFague’s book on climate change shows how acutely a cosmological approach can apply itself to a specific problem, and is not aloof from the relevant sciences. Interrogating the metaphors that mediate cultural behavior, she approaches climate change by critiquing the deficient cosmological ideas that she thinks permit and produce its emergence. In order to reform the dysfunctional vision of the human place in earth that she thinks underwrites anthropogenic climate change, McFague develops alternative metaphors of God and nature.31

Still, the particular problem seems overdetermined by the task of cosmological interpretation, as if climate change were a direct manifestation of mental metaphors and religious symbols. Because all the important moral work happens within worldviews, the particular practices of responsive projects can seem derivative and secondary, while concrete features of the problem have little bearing on what those projects should do. Generating practices of responsibility for climate change awaits the new landscape of agency made possible by a better moral imagination.

Emilie Townes shows how closely a cosmological strategy can cleave to concrete embodiments of reality and how interdisciplinary its work can be. Writing self-consciously in H. R. Niebuhr’s mode of cultural interpretation, her Womanist Ethics and the Cultural Production of Evil develops an account of the “fantastic hegemonic imagination” that weaves racism, sexism, militarism, and classism into the fabric of everyday life. She reads history, literature, and cultural theory as avenues of “getting into the interior worlds of structural evil itself,” seeking to show how social evil is maintained not
only by ideologies, but “by more heuristic forces that emerge from the imagination as emotion, intuition, and yearning.” Townes brings readers into that interior imaginative world by tracing the cultural production of figural stereotypes that come to function as fantastic, deadly images. For example, she traces the role of the Mammy figure—the devoted, asexual, rotund Negro matriarch of plantation myth—from antebellum narratives to blackface minstrel shows to early baking-product advertising campaigns to Aunt Jemima syrup. Uncovering the charged, “fantastic” connections of an everyday grocery item, Townes begins to make visible a cultural imaginary embodied and implicit in everyday interactions. Historicist and pluralist in method, Townes shows a nonfoundationalist variety of the cosmological strategy that avoids abstract deductivism by describing the moral visions carried and reproduced through material culture.

Townes exhibits both the power and the risk of a cosmological strategy. On the one hand, deep cultural transformation seems to require this investigation into the interior worlds of evil in order to open critical space between everyday life and the ghostly haunts that shape our inhabitation of it. On the other hand, her account of the cultural production of evil seems so fantastic and hegemonic—plantation ideologies reproduced by a maple syrup container—that it almost overwhelms everyday practices of resistance. Apart from the intellectual work of criticizing the social production of evil, how can agents open spaces for freedom? There seems little opportunity for practical moral agency to appropriate, redirect, and reinvent the world that they inhabit.

Townes’s work cautions would-be reformers not to move too quickly to adaptive solutions. She wants moral agents to pay close interpretive attention to the cultural landscape that produces the problems on which ethicists work—including the imaginaries that shape how we identify and frame “problems.” The work of Schweiker, McFague, and Townes addresses what James Gustafson approvingly calls “global questions”—investigations into how views of human nature, social structures, and moral values cohere into a prevailing ethos. Such investigations maintain the spirit of Christian social reform, says Gustafson, but with a more sophisticated account of the meta-ethical work required to generate meaningful change. The drawback to this strategy, Gustafson admits, is the difficulty of identifying points for practical action: “given the socialization processes of culture and society, it is difficult to apprehend what the points of explicit activity would be to which one could turn one’s reforming zeal.” A cosmological reception of social problems cannot easily solve that difficulty, and Gustafson must leave the point with a discomfiting exhortation for ethicists to maintain an agnostic interest in cultural reform along with their focus on the big questions.
Gustafson’s caution likely stems from continued embarrassment with aggressive reform optimism, which reappears with each new movement in the zeal of social activists who have a plan to change the world in this generation. Gustafson is therefore suspicious of strategies of practical reason that make too much of problems and projects. However, the civilization-threatening problems of planetary human power that interest Schweiker and McFague seem to beg for a clearer account of how the work of religious ethics participates in adaptive social change. Precisely because climate change threatens to overwhelm the moral imagination, organizing the task of religious ethics around the interpretation of worldviews can underscore the impossibility of any cooperative action until agents adopt a more satisfactory worldview. That seems to involve an unlikely three-step process of social change: first, religious ethicists or other cultural producers articulate a revised moral worldview and, second, they successfully persuade many individuals to adopt it. Only then does ethics come to the task of negotiating concrete applications. In relation to climate change, the chronic deferral of practical action in that approach feeds the accumulating wickedness of the problem—inequality to act becomes part of what paralyzes productive ethical deliberations.

A cosmological strategy risks that long interval of ideological debate in order to achieve the deep cultural transformation that it holds necessary to address problems whose roots lie in moral consciousness. If architectonic ideas drive the emergence of climate change, if dominant worldviews corrupt interpretation of reality, then religious ethics cannot turn to addressing climate change until it critically revises the foundations of moral imagination. No adequate response to discrete “social problems,” Townes shows, can avoid confronting the cultural production of evil.

Criticism of Christianity’s role in the cultural production of anthropocentrism is especially influential for how Christian ethics approaches sustainability problems. Lynn White’s argument that “The Historical Roots of our Ecologic Crisis” lie in religious cosmology—specifically in the dualist worldview of western Christianity—provoked a debate that has shaped work in several fields. Even when disputed in fact, White’s claim that Christian belief generated the modern ecological crisis has been methodologically influential for how theorists think ethics matters for environmental problems. “What people do about their ecology depends on what they think about themselves in relation to things around them,” writes White. Problems like climate change, in this view, are symptoms of a crisis in worldview, and must be addressed at that metaethical level. The fields of religion and ecology, Christian ecotheology, and environmental ethics have often followed that assumption: adequately addressing environmental problems
requires constructing a new value theory, reclaiming a doctrine of creation, or telling a different narrative. My own *Ecologies of Grace* follows that assumption by treating visions of salvation as the background of environmental behavior. The method: first establish a basic moral vision, then see about applying it to particular problems. (Of course I never got around to any problems in that book—so secondary and derivative seemed the task of application.)

Christian ethics participates in cultural reform, in this strategy, in much the way that Gustafson describes: through interpretive criticism that can alter dominant pictures of reality. Gustafson’s own critique of anthropocentrism questions religious tendencies to suppose that God and nature stand in service of human benefit, and so casts doubt on a corresponding modern assumption that nature must serve human interests. What happens to ethics, Gustafson asks, if humanity “is rightly related not only to other persons, not only to social institutions and their relations to each other, but to the elements of nitrogen, oxygen, and carbon . . . to the world of plants and animals, and even to the inanimate features of our planet?” Recognizing our limits and vulnerability, thinks Gustafson, would shift the moral perspective in a way that would allow better interpretation of planetary ecological relations, and, finally, more fitting responses to the problems arising within those relations.

An ethicist might, of course, pursue a cosmological strategy without subscribing to a view that global problems represent cultural catastrophe. Max Stackhouse follows the Weberian view “that in the dominant structures of social, political, and economic life, religious themes that were worked out over centuries have been plowed into the very fabric of the common life.” Ethicists “cannot understand the globalizing forces if we do not grasp the ways in which these ideas are derived directly from biblical and Christian religious resources.” Stackhouse, however, evaluates global social conditions more approvingly than most Christian ethicists, so he thinks that the religious roots of those conditions do not need revision as much as reinforcement. Globalizing social forces bear promise for humanity, thinks Stackhouse, and will continue to do so as long as they are guided by the religious worldview which first generated them. “If the Christian traditions that have shaped so much of the spiritual and social life of our contemporary world are not to fade into oblivion, bringing an utter collapse of civil society, a renewal of Christian ethics as it bears on economic life is necessary.” In a view similar to that of Troeltsch in his era, Stackhouse thinks that global sustainability needs renewal of Christian social thought. Stackhouse has a much sunnier interpretation of both inherited Christian cosmology and global society than the other ethicists in this section, but he
follows a similar strategic aim: to supply a theological picture of reality that helps agents rightly interpret new social relations.

My point in this section has been to identify one distinctive approach to concrete problems in religious ethics. A cosmological strategy approaches social problems through interpretation of cultural worldviews. It addresses problems indirectly by confronting the metaphors, symbols, and stories that shape an agent’s perception of her world. Through this strategy, Christian ethics sustains possibilities of moral agency in the face of unprecedented problems, by using imaginative resources to reinterpret worldviews and thus alter the pictures of reality by which persons orient their action.

THE STRATEGY OF THEOCENTRIC PRAGMATISM

A pragmatic strategy works in the other direction, from confronting problems toward rethinking reality. Practical action, in this strategy, does not await the outcome of interpretation; it is itself a site of interpretive production. Rather than supposing that the most important moral resources of a religious tradition are the symbols and metaphors that an ethicist might use to illuminate general conditions of human life, or to criticize the roots of a cultural ethos, a pragmatic strategy supposes that its most important resources are the tactics generated by communities using their traditions to confront new problems. Those tactics cultivate opportunities for moral agency to bear responsibility for unprecedented problems, and thereby permit moral agents to sustain the meaning of life carried by their tradition of faith.

I introduce this strategy also within the legacy of H. R. Niebuhr in order to avoid overdrawing the divergence between the two methods, each of which an ethicist might deploy in different contexts. I also want to illustrate how much of the difference between strategies depends on how one conceives of the relation between Christian ethicist and Christian community, and of the relation between Christian community and wider society. In an essay on the “responsibility of the church for society,” Niebuhr appeals to the church as “the sensitive and responsive part in every society and mankind as a whole . . . the pioneer part of society that responds to God on behalf of the whole society.” Analogous to the way natural science specializes in responding to the rationality of the world and artists in responding to its beauty, says Niebuhr, the church is a community of prophetic specialists, taking the lead in responding to injustice and idolatry. The church “pioneers” in developing and enacting practical forms of responsibility for the relations and powers of a society. “It is the first to repent for the sins of a society and it repents on behalf of all,” beginning with concrete efforts to realize justice in its own
communities, thus creating new practices of being church before God. By invoking a responsive, missional sense of church, Niebuhr points Christian ethics toward the practices of faith communities struggling for faithfulness in an overwhelming world.

That sense of a constant struggle for faithfulness makes the actual practices of Christian communities come nearer the center of Christian ethics. Ethics in a cosmological strategy often overlooks the organic creativity of faith-based movements for social change. When religious ethics organizes around transforming worldviews, its task belongs primarily to professional interpreters who work with symbols and texts. Even when church is celebrated as the source of Christian sociality, attention to what specific churches or faith-based projects do is muted because their actions remain derivative of the first task (the cosmological task). I opened this chapter with Traci West contesting the notion that Christian communities await the specialized knowledge of great moral thinkers. Interpretation of social problems is more accountable to how agents are already responding to their world, she argues, when done in collaboration with what she calls “community sources.” West takes the example of racial justice initiatives in relation to the legacies of Reinhold Niebuhr and Martin Luther King. According to some commentators, the elder Niebuhr’s realist theory of justice was the decisive influence on Martin Luther King, who in turn guided the movement with successful ideas of power, pride, and political prospect.

If we think of ethics this way, with Reinhold Niebuhr as the genius behind King’s thought, and King as the genius of a movement, says West, “it conceals the multiple actors and innovators in the moral dramas of history, and reinforces the supremacy of whites in our understanding of how moral knowledge is generated.” West points to a Harlem network of projects bubbling with social creativity and strategic innovation—just blocks away from where Niebuhr wrote. The Harlem Housewives League analyzed the economic flows of Harlem and devised some of the first targeted boycotts in the country, while the Harlem YWCA cultivated a social space free from white hegemony in order to develop black culture and black pride. Interpretive actions like those, says West, show areas where Reinhold Niebuhr’s theories of power and pride would have been improved by attending to how the communities around him used those moral resources. West is pressing a methodological claim: “this Christian social ethics work of critical reflection and social confrontation can never be adequately carried out as a solitary journey but must be waged within and through some form of Christian faith community.”

West develops a self-consciously liberationist approach with the characteristic epistemological claims: that theological, ethical, and social analyses
follow the practices of those suffering the world’s evil and struggling for liberation from it. A pragmatic strategy aligns with claims that privilege the contextual practices of communities attempting to overcome some problem.45 It differs from some liberation theologies in its openness to how communities may understand what it means to overcome. “Liberation” does not always function here as a final claim about God’s action or the meaning of Christian life. A pragmatic strategy begins interpretation of God’s action more sparely: by supposing that Christian ethics should interpret social problems in relation to communities already creating live strategies of response. Recall H. R. Niebuhr’s description of the church as an organic movement, continually seeking strategies by which to give social expression to the mission of God. Over the past half century some of the most dynamic movements to confront social powers have been liberationist, but in the next half century they might understand themselves and God’s action differently. Where reform projects meet new problems in ways that sustain or open possibilities of faithful response to God, they present the object of a Christian social ethic: a venture of response that interprets the events of the world in terms of how God is acting through them.

Creative theological thinking, observes Mary McClintock Fulkerson, arises from the scene of a wound; it is “generated by a sometimes inchoate sense that something must be addressed.”46 A pragmatic strategy considers problems as goads to creative responses in Christian communities. Fulkerson writes in ethnographic description of a particular church, but her metaphor of wound holds, I think, for a general role that social problems can play in eliciting moral production across theological communities. It may not be clear how exactly to respond to a refugee crisis, or to global hunger, or to climate change; but each problem carries a demand. Each wounds Christian life, the credibility of which would diminish if no response were forthcoming. A pragmatic strategy supposes that the most interesting theological production is driven by confrontation with the most overwhelming problems.

The role for the professional ethicist, according to this strategy, is to critically participate in some project of response, interpreting and evaluating how it functions in meeting some problem’s demand. Academically trained ethicists can cultivate and critique these initial responses by seeking to make them more competent to the problems they face and more adept with the traditions they deploy. Ethicists need not remain loyal to a project if they find it hopelessly incompetent. They may try to convince a community that its current tactic misuses its tradition or misunderstands its context and persuade them to adopt alternative tactics, perhaps by claiming their tradition differently or by borrowing from other communities and
traditions. “Competence” here means a capability to address wounds that demand response from a community of faith in a way that sustains or improves the community’s understanding of itself before God. That is no simple task of matching a tradition’s resources to contextual need because how a community responds is likely to reframe the problem and its ostensible demands, as well as to renegotiate the meaning of its tradition. A pragmatic strategy expects those interpretive shifts and makes it one task of religious ethics to describe and evaluate them.

“The church” in this strategy appears not as the community of a certain worldview, story, or identity. It is rather more like a social movement or a mission project, constantly seeking to open possibilities of response to God amidst difficult and changing conditions. In this strategy the metaphors for the relation between theological traditions and social problems are more dialogical than visual: confronting, answering, responding. Christian symbol and narrative remain important interpretive resources, but this strategy emphasizes their tactical function. They are not available as a stock of symbols and values, from which a master technician might construct a new worldview. They appear within the patterns of action by which a community interprets and addresses its world. Christian ethics should therefore work from those practices, relentlessly criticizing them in order to make them more productive, more capable of facing the problems they seek to address. A pragmatic strategy supposes that the most interesting ethical production happens within the tactics of live moral communities because those tactics enable a community to keep cultivating the sort of moral agents who can understand themselves and so give answer to God amid and for emergent powers and unprecedented problems.

But how then to account for the inert dullness of most self-advertised churches? The North American churches of the twentieth century have not always been so “pioneer” in addressing social problems. More often they have been laggard and dim, using religious thought as a refuge from thinking about social problems. What passes for “prophetic” in North American churches often means showing up in vestments at rallies organized by others. H. Richard Niebuhr helps here because his image of an innovative moral community, responsive to social evils through practices of inward critique and outward witness, need not describe the empirical reality of ecclesial institutions in order to depict an ethical function that characterizes the notion of “church” at the center of this strategy. This church exists by the act of taking responsibility for an overwhelming world, by which it participates in God’s responsibility for the world. The fundamental moral community for Christian ethics, this suggests, may not be a group explicitly shaped for the maintenance of a Christian identity or worldview, but might rather be an
association of shared practice formed by attempts to respond to the world’s wounds, as before God.

My point here is that with a pragmatic strategy, Christian social ethics can start from adaptive projects because theological production and social interpretation happen within them. Martin Luther King’s interpretation of the civil rights movement offers an important example of how formal theological reflection can arise from tactical actions, and can then contribute to those practices to make them more productive, more competent, and more faithful. King saw in the actions of those willing to risk their bodies for the sake of political solidarity a glimpse of what Christian love might mean. As he preached that practice as Christ’s love in action, he cultivated a resource implicit in the movement: the Christian symbol of agape as a tactic for overcoming racism. Now, maybe appealing to agape was politically imprudent in the face of white violence, or maybe it was too strained an extension of the tradition’s thought on love. Critics have made both claims. The inquiry of Christian ethics can begin from how the movement community used love as a tactic for responding to a social wound and then test and perhaps improve that tactic through critical engagement.

Does that imply that agape might come to mean anything that a community’s problems need it to mean? Which is to ask: what makes a pragmatic strategy meaningfully theological? According to one view of pragmatism, social needs should determine the task of religious ethics, which should try to supply reform projects with cultural tools that help a broad political community meet its challenges. “Our task,” writes Jeffrey Stout, “like Thomas Aquinas’s, Thomas Jefferson’s, and Martin Luther King’s, is to take the many parts of a complicated social and conceptual inheritance and stitch them together into a pattern that meets the needs of the moment.” Stout depicts that taking and stitching with the metaphor of “bricolage,” and his description fits King’s genius for borrowing from multiple moral traditions in order to organize a broad coalition of democratic reform. In Stout’s pragmatism, King was a skilled moral entrepreneur, fitting religious resources to the needs of social reform.

However, Gustafson and others worry that this sort of pragmatism represents the worst legacy of the American social gospel: a crude instrumentalism that puts God and religion in the service of moral ventures already determined by whatever society thinks it needs. In this view, there is eventually nothing interestingly Christian about a pragmatic ethic. Christian ethicists from a variety of perspectives have similar worries. John Yoder objects to Stout that “there is nothing in bricolage worth dying for.” Hauerwas complains that “something has gone terribly wrong in the linking of charity with effectiveness. For while it is certainly true that the Gospel is
a social gospel . . . by the world’s standard Christ was ineffective.” If the content of Christian love reduces to its use-value for some situation, then the apparent demands of a political moment determine the meaning of life in Jesus. Perhaps a pragmatic Christian ethic becomes merely a sensitive reading of social science with theological glosses.

Those objections worry that a pragmatic strategy compromises the basis for a distinctively Christian ethic. But tactical uses of religious traditions do not necessarily reduce religious meaning to social efficacy—and they would not work if they did. H. R. Niebuhr observes that religion only works instrumentally if its members do not in fact view their faith in instrumental terms, but take it as the proper object of their ultimate loyalty. For bricolage to be effective, then, it must be understood as a theological practice, such that taking and knitting cultural resources to meet the needs of a moment is an important way of living and keeping the faith. For King, tactical confrontations with white violence were practices through which a community could learn what Christ’s love means precisely because he had faith that God was (effectively) loving the world through the tactics of the civil rights movement. If by the world’s standard Christ was ineffective that does not make it a theological principle that love should not seek success by its own standard. Jesus did not lay down his life for the method of bricolage, true; but he did creatively adapt a religious lexicon in combination with other political and cultural inheritances in order to open new possibilities of love.

Creative responses to social problems can become occasions in which a community decides what is going on in its world by deciding how to answer for it to God. This problem-driven process of development in Christian ethics accommodates Alasdair MacIntyre’s account of how traditions work. MacIntyre describes traditions developing through internal arguments about their orienting sense of good. The pragmatic strategy I am describing here differs in supposing that “external” problems—including shared social problems recognized across traditions and cultures—can drive internal arguments. MacIntyre agrees that the conceptual resources of a tradition take their meaning from the contingent social practices of moral communities, but he thinks that traditions differ so much that their conceptual resources must be understood exclusively within the terms of the internal argument of a tradition. Pragmatic borrowing and planetary problems pose threats to this view of tradition. But if the internal arguments of moral traditions develop at least in part from ongoing attempts to make traditions capable of meeting shared political challenges (as Stout protests to MacIntyre), then pluralist borrowing for wider social reform purposes does not necessarily fragment a tradition. On the contrary, bricolage may create repertoires of action that allow a community to assimilate responses to social problems.
within their ongoing argument over the good. Because Christian civil rights projects drew on multiple moral inheritances they were able to use responses to white racism to sustain the possibility of loving enemies and keeping faith with God’s justice. The tactics of overcoming racism were, for them, the tactics of faith.

A strategy of Christian ethics that expects responses to social problems to renegotiate the meaning of traditions accrues the sort of participatory and activist dimensions described in Cornel West’s “prophetic pragmatism.” West wants skilled cultural actors to help communities cultivate an “emancipatory social experimentalism” that functions as a “quest for wisdom that puts forth new interpretations of the world based on past traditions.” For West, “organic intellectuals” help communities find new capacities in their moral inheritances, inventing possibilities for cultural reforms that in turn enable communities to take responsibility for society’s deepest and most difficult problems. King is exemplar for West as well; he is “the most significant and successful organic intellectual in American history.”

In a theological version of a pragmatic strategy, King was successful not merely because he borrowed resources from cultural inheritances in a politically useful way, but because he preached that Christian communities needed the tactics supported by that borrowing in order to remain faithful to the way of Jesus. Indeed, King’s struggle for faith drove the tactical engagement needed to borrow well in the first place. King’s pragmatism is theocentric in a way that West’s pragmatism does not seem to fully appreciate. “What sets him apart from exemplary organic intellectuals of the past such as W. E. B. DuBois or Frederick Douglas,” writes Luther Ivory, is his “God-centeredness.” The problem of American racism compelled the movement’s moral work, which King sought to understand as always also a response to God. King’s style of taking and stitching multiple inheritances presented tactical responses to the problem at hand as concrete ways to participate in God’s redemptive responses to evil. His interpretation of God’s purposes could shift through tactical experience. For example, King’s early views on love and power were shifted by the student sit-in movement. Persons putting their bodies on the line in a drama of confrontation with social evil was compelling to King because it seemed to have the shape of Christ’s way of acting. In the unexpected use of that drama, King learned from movement actors new tactical approaches for opening possibilities of love in the midst of overwhelming power. By adapting love to meet the shifting powers of racism, they sustained love’s possibility for moral agents. Learning what love could do, they learned more deeply what it means.

King’s theological commitments took shape through social confrontations. He “combined revolutionary consciousness with a radical pragmatism,”
writes Ivory. His was not the sort of instrumentalist realism that constrains ethical possibility to the perceived limitations of power structures. King’s theocentric pragmatism sought concrete opportunities for transforming racist and impoverishing social relations, in the faith that their attempts answered a God whose action always exceeds and transforms the situation. Christian love is not “applied” to social wounds; it arises from wounds as participation in God’s way of incorporating the wounds into God’s body. Participating in movements that meet the needs of the moment can be, in faith, participation in God’s action for the world.

Understanding King’s social ethics in that way still requires an account of how Christian action is a cultural practice and of how Christian belief matters for changing cultural practices. My point in this section was to outline a basic strategy of Christian social ethics that begins from problems and attends to how reform projects use their traditions to create faithful responses. In order to claim that this strategy is better for addressing unprecedented problems like climate change, I need to defend the view of culture it assumes and explain the role of theological invention within it. So the next section revisits “Christ and culture” with a view to the difference it makes for the basic strategies of Christian ethics.

**CHRIST AND CULTURE**

The shorthand of “Christ and culture” to identify cultural strategies of Christianity comes from H. Richard Niebuhr. Even while readers questioned the accuracy of Niebuhr’s five types, the book influenced generations of Christian ethics by making models of cultural engagement central to interpreting Christian social practice. The debates over those models of engagement, however, sometimes fail to consider what is a culture. The most important assumption in Niebuhr’s book is not his preference for one type (Christ transforming culture), but the idea of culture underlying all five types. In this section I pay heed to a series of theologians who are concerned that (North American) Christian social practices have been tactically misoriented, because they chronically misconceive how cultures work. They point to social theorists who displace thinking of culture as a coherent worldview in favor of thinking of culture in terms of strategies of action. Those views of culture offer additional reasons to choose a pragmatic strategy of Christian ethics, especially when facing unprecedented problems.

Different theories of culture, Kathryn Tanner argues, make for different styles of theological practice. Tanner observes that as Niebuhr extended Troeltsch’s ideal religious types, he assimilated the Weberian understanding of culture that Troeltsch assumed. So for Niebuhr “culture in all its forms
and varieties is concerned with the temporal and material realization of values.” Superimposed on nature, “the world of culture is a world of values,” measured by their benefit to humanity and conserved through social organization. Culture is about realizing ethical values, and the task of Christian ethics lies in measuring prevailing cultural values against Christian ones. With a better view of culture, argues Tanner, the role of theological interpretation shifts—and with it the task of Christian ethics.61

Some post-liberal theologies turn to ideas of culture that allow them to interpret Christian practices as linguistic performances, the meaning of which lie in the particular interpretive world (or “language”) that they make. This view helpfully reconceptualizes the “Christ and culture” thematic by beginning to render those two terms more fluid to what participants are doing. The linguistic pragmatism of George Lindbeck and Stanley Hauerwas refers the meaning of theological ideas to their “grammatical” function within the language (Lindbeck) or narrative (Hauerwas) of Christian churches.62 So the meaning of Christ lies in the contingent discursive practices of ecclesial communities attempting to “speak Christian” or to tell the Christian story. That view of culture seems idealized, however; it seems insulated from the flux and border-crossing of its participants. Both views borrow from the anthropologist Clifford Geertz, who argues for seeing religions as cultures, and who thinks of culture as a coherent worldview which makes intelligible the social practices within its boundary.63 With a view of culture as a comprehensive scheme of interpretation that lends intelligibility to Christian practice, theology inevitably orients itself toward identifying and strengthening the boundaries. If the boundary of a cultural system defines the interpretive scheme that lends certain practices of life their distinctiveness and intelligibility, the theologians must protect that boundary from outside incursions. That helps explain why Milbank and Hauerwas want to defeat the question of “Christian ethics and social problems”: responding to the problems of an alien culture would introduce exotic solvents into the linguistic system that maintains Christian identity. Understanding culture as a worldview and Christianity as a culture orients theological ethics toward defending a Christian worldview.64

Tanner argues that theologians have reasons not to accept that view of culture, and here she is joined by sociologists and philosophers. The sociologist James Hunter criticizes prevalent models of culture in Christian thought. “The dominant ways of thinking about culture and cultural change,” he writes, “are based on both specious social science and problematic theology.” Across the ideological spectrum, Christian social thinkers imagine culture as a worldview and so conceptualize the task of social reform in terms of transforming moral consciousness. Focusing on ideal worldviews,
Hunter, “ignores the way culture is generated,” which happens within the institutions, community structures, and networks of power that use culture as a resource to organize the daily lives of moral agents.  

James K. A. Smith calls for a moratorium on worldviews. Smith wants Christian cultural engagement to stop overestimating the influence of cognitive moral perspectives and instead pay closer attention to how social practices form persons into habits of desire. Theologians should think of social practices (from shopping to warfare) as cultural liturgies, says Smith; they function as a “pedagogy of desire,” shaping agents into dispositions to a practical inhabitation of the world. Because agents do not necessarily recognize and intend the interpretive frameworks that are reproduced by the social practices in which they participate, focusing reform on those ideas misses how moral formation happens and how cultures work. It misses the embodied practices that generate worldviews and that carry the culture that shapes us.

The dissenting ideas of culture at work here come more clearly into view with Pierre Bourdieu’s sociology (to whom Tanner, Hunter, and Smith each refer). For Bourdieu, the organizing center of culture is a *habitus*, a set of practical, interpretive relations to the world: “durable, transposable dispositions, structured structures predisposed to function as structuring structures . . . which generate and organize practices . . . without presupposing a conscious aiming at ends.” In other words, agents interpret their world through practical actions, which in turn produce the interpretive structures that make the practices possible. A *habitus* shapes an embodied, practical sense of a world. Like the sense of a game, it enables agents to function, anticipate, and innovate in ways that sustain the meaning of the game. Agents therefore participate in social practices that are already structured toward the end of reproducing the world in which those practices have their sense.

Except in the odd cultural field of academics, agents do not usually interpret their world by theorizing with ideas and values, but by participating in the practices through which a culture reproduces an interpretive scheme. The worldviews that seem to explain the purposes of action, maintains Bourdieu, come after the fact, as the product of intellectual inquiry. Moral agency happens at a different moment, within the creativity that sustains a pattern of acting. The *habitus* is an “art of inventing,” which makes agents capable of producing responses to situations—an “infinite number,” says Bourdieu, whose diversity is limited only by the extent to which structures can make them intelligible as recognizable responses to a real situation. The “unpredictable confrontation between the habitus and an event . . . can exercise
a pertinent incitement on the *habitus* only if the latter snatches it from the contingency of the accidental and constitutes it as a problem by applying to it the very principles of a solution.”69 A functioning culture makes problems for its participants.

Bourdieu’s view of culture presents a difficulty for any sustainability ethic because action seems limited by what a culture can recognize as a problem, which is only those situations for which the *habitus* already has the principles of a solution.70 A functional culture makes only problems that its participants can solve. What about unprecedented problems that threaten the continuation of a cultural pattern of life? As we saw in the case of climate denialism in chapter 1, the *habitus* produces “avoidance strategies” in order to suppress recognition of threats that its range of creativity cannot meet.71 In order to think that it can face unprecedented problems, Christian ethics needs an understanding of culture more open to change.

Charles Taylor helps open the possibility of change. When Smith calls for a moratorium on worldviews he proposes in its place the “social imaginary” of Taylor. An imaginary refers beyond intellectual schemes to the implicit meanings in lived experience that carry a common understanding, making possible shared practices. Similar to Bourdieu, Taylor thinks of a social imaginary as embedded within the social practices which it makes possible.72 However, Taylor thinks that the various arts by which people use their “cultural repertory” can lead to epochal shifts in the social imaginary and even the emergence of a new understanding of self. Taylor’s *A Secular Age* narrates a historical transition in European civilization from a permeable, social self to a “buffered self” with a disciplined interiority. Although driven by Christianity’s reform spirit, the immanent humanism it makes possible eventually becomes the new common sense imaginary. Taylor thus provides a view of culture in which the normative creativity of reform efforts can create new cultural options, but does so within a sobering historical account of ironic (and maybe tragic) outcomes. Theological inventions of new cultural capacities led to ideas and practices that shifted the background imaginary of European societies toward a buffered, anthropocentric culture that eventually made faith in a world-transforming God less intelligible. Attempting to restore that faith through a clash of ideas will not work because a culture’s common sense is (as Smith sees) carried and reproduced in everyday trips to the mall.

Taylor’s theory of culture keeps attention on the everyday practices that shape agents into a sense of the world, while his history of modern European culture forces Christian ethics to reckon with a more intense challenge than mere pluralism. For after the epochal shift to an immanent frame, Christian
social ethics must decide how its reform practices matter within cultures whose social imaginaries may not recognize those practices as intelligible options. Christian responses to social problems may not even count as one cultural option among others if their distinguishing characteristics (e.g., supposing a transcendent God confronts humanity in climate change) cannot appear as an option at all. If that is the case, why should Christian ethics respond to social problems at all?

To suppose that the sustainability problems of a secular age matter for Christian ethics, we need (1) an account of culture in which theological creativity can make a difference for social reform even when Christian practices no longer determine the social imaginary of a culture. In order to make that a respectable project for Christian ethics, we also need (2) a theology in which inventing responses to sustainability problems counts as a central practice of faith.

First, the account of culture. Sociologist Ann Swidler agrees with accounts like those of Bourdieu and Taylor which displace the explanatory role of values, worldviews, and other ideal symbols. “The significance of specific cultural symbols,” writes Swidler, “can be understood only in relation to the strategies of action they sustain.” In the United States, she observes, ideas of culture and ethics have been shaped by two main views: the view of Geertz that a unified worldview shapes action, and a view derived from Weber that cultural values set the goals for action. Neither view stands up to empirical sociological research, claims Swidler. “Culture in fact drives contemporary social change,” she says, agreeing with Geertz and Weber, “but not in the way conventional sociological models suggest.” Culture shapes social action “by furnishing a repertoire of capacities for action that can be mobilized to achieve new objectives.” Swidler’s research into how Americans talk about love and relationships shows that “cultural meanings operate less as logical structures that integrate ends and means, and more as tools and resources that cultivate skills and capacities that people integrate into larger, more stable ‘strategies of action.”

By supposing that new ways of organizing action are developed as agents redeploy the resources of their “cultural toolkits” to meet new challenges, Swidler puts social practices at the center of cultural interpretation in a way that allows a greater range of social change than Bourdieu anticipates. Through “the reappropriation of larger, culturally organized capacities for action,” agents received patterns of acting in different ways to invent new capacities for action. Those new patterns of action in turn allow agents to develop conceptual capacities for recognizing new problems which they could address by reappropriating their cultural inheritances anew, thus anticipating further possibilities for cultural change.
Worldviews and the task of changing values still have their place in this account. A culture’s repertoire of action always admits a diversity of strategies, practices of cosmological criticism among them. In “unsettled” times especially, says Swidler, agents may try ideological constructions that explicitly propose new ideas, worldviews, and values as ways of arguing for new strategies of action that seem to better meet contextual problems. A pragmatic view of culture therefore retains a role for rethinking basic metaphors and narratives, especially in the face of unsettling social challenges. (Chapters 4 and 5 show how appeals to ecological cosmologies play exactly that kind of role.) Such ideological reconstruction is an important tool for solving problems. For Swidler, culture is a “tool kit’ of symbols, stories, rituals, and world-views which people may use in varying configurations to solve different kinds of problems.” The meaning of culture is made in the ways that agents use its components to solve problems.

Here we have an account of culture that explains how agents might create new capacities of moral agency as they face new problems. In this account of culture, Christian ethics (or any reform-oriented moral project) does not need to first establish its worldview in the hearts and minds of those whose world it would change. If cultures change in something like the way Swidler suggests, then theological communities should instead focus on using cultural resources in odd and innovative ways. They do not have to approve or reconstruct the cultural symbols in order to use them to open new possibilities for faithful action. (A group does not have to approve of mall shopping in order to use the practice in unexpected, ironic ways.) We could think of Christianity, then, not as its own kind of culture, but as a characteristic style of using culture in order to open unexpected patterns of action.

Second, the theology of cultural invention. Tanner supplies theological reasons to think of Christian action as a style of cultural use. “Christian practices are always the practices of others made odd.” The Christian difference from culture is not a boundary that falls along internal narratives or language games, but a boundary made by participating in culture in odd ways. All the interesting theological production happens not safely inside some boundary, as if Christianity were a territory, but in an ironic reproduction of culture that happens at the boundary it makes. Its style is characterized not by a shared ultimate symbol, but by a shared ultimate strategy: to refer all things to God, and thereby constantly reopen a space for responsiveness to God. In this view, Christian community forms by tactical uses of culture rather than as an alternative culture altogether. “Because God is the God of the whole world, and not just of our religious lives,” Christian faith attempts to bring a double-voicedness to all the relations in which its members live.
Christian social existence is not “alien” inasmuch as it is ironic. “Prophetic objections to the wider society are maintained, not by isolation, but by the indefinitely extended effort to alter . . . whatever one comes across through sustained engagement with it.”

Christian efforts to open spaces for discipleship within a modernist social imaginary should therefore style themselves not so much as countercultural but as ironic: deftly combining use of theological traditions with uses of a humanist culture in order to open possibilities for responsiveness to the God who always exceeds any such effort. Theologians need “artisan-like inventiveness” and “tactical cleverness” in order to keep solving an inexhaustible problem: how to reflect in word and deed human responsibility before God. Tanner’s argument suggests that Christian styles of cultural action have a special impetus for constant creativity, for their fundamental problem—how to respond to a God beyond all creaturely goods—can neither be solved nor avoided. Christian cultural production happens in the gap between a saving, transcendent God and the finite possibilities for creaturely action. That gap makes Christian practice constantly self-critical, recognizing the inexhaustibility of its project, and therefore critically open to the possibilities it might learn and make from the surrounding culture.

Theological strategies of culture may then allow for more inventiveness than either Bourdieu or Swidler anticipate. Tanner’s sense of bricolage here differs from Stout’s, in that Tanner sees the creativity of a figure like King sourced from a gap between a transcendent God and finite creatures. Whereas Stout imagines the bricoleur stitching together cultural resources to meet “the needs of the moment,” the verticality in Tanner’s version of bricolage implies the capacity to reinterpret social needs, reconstructing social problems in order to confront a theological problem: how to faithfully answer God. On the other hand, however, Stout highlights the role of contextual needs in driving moral creativity in a way that Tanner’s metaphor of style can suppress. Theological inventiveness may sometimes simply effervesce, as Tanner’s account implies, bubbling up toward God from various cultural scenes. But the moral inventiveness at the center of Christian social ethics has definite occasions: it arises from the scene of a wound. In King we see moral creativity supporting tactical responses to definite problems (Stout’s sense of bricolage), undertaken as ways to keep responding to God (Tanner’s sense). For King, the theological gap that elicits the creativity of faith opens in the moral gap between a particular problem and possibilities for addressing it. Concrete problems mediate the problem of faith when their demand is received as a demand from God. Responding to “unprecedented” and “wicked” problems thus becomes part of responding to the unavoidable and overwhelming problem of faith: answering God.
With the account of culture from Swidler and of theological creativity from Tanner, a pragmatic strategy of Christian ethics can expect practical innovation in the gap between social problems and competencies of action. Moral incompetence before climate change does not then defeat the possibility of Christian ethics but should rather incite the initial responses that begin its inquiry. It is not the task of Christian ethics, in this strategy, to close the distance between the apparent demands of climate change and current moral competencies by proposing ideal values which could serve as the basis for better practices. The task of Christian ethics is rather to help the tension of that moral gap drive reform projects that are culturally and theologically productive. The social ethicist’s task, in the account I am developing here, is shaped by strategic participation in the reform efforts of communities using their traditions to respond to demands.\textsuperscript{81} King exemplifies pursuit of that task, showing the theological ethicist as a uniquely trained participant in movements that draw on cultural repertories as they attempt to invent responses to problems that seem to demand faithful answer.

I have now offered reasons from social theory and from theology for Christian ethics to adopt a pragmatic strategy, at least for confronting problems like climate change that need moral innovation. Christian ethics should work from problems rather than worldviews because problems mediate theologically charged demands, thus driving the inventiveness of communities seeking to open practices of faith through their responses. Christian ethics should work with the movements using religious traditions and other cultural inheritances to generate possibilities of practical faith because the creativity of these movements fits with compelling accounts of how cultural change happens.

One final point remains in this section. Sometimes debates of “Christ and culture” make it seem that “Christ” is the possession of the church and “culture” the province of corrupting temptations. A pragmatic strategy of Christian ethics changes those debates by implying that the relevant moral community here is characterized not by its proprietary Christian language but by its capacity to invent concrete possibilities of faithful practice. Luke Bretherton’s description of Christian political practice helps illustrate the point. Bretherton wants Christian ethics to orient itself toward developing responses to God from existing relationships and practices. He takes Christian inhabitation in structures of culture—including market and state—not as an obstacle to overcome but as the condition for responding to God. The “missiological orientation of the church” means that it cannot be content to merely resist the world or to await the world’s conversion to the beliefs by which the world could become church. Rather, it “entails combining active investment in Babylon’s wellbeing with faithful particularity,” such that the
church “acts in expectation of [Babylon’s] transfiguration.” The way Christian communities learn how grace overcomes the world is by constructive investment in its well-being.

Constructive investment in the well-being of the world sounds to some theologians like compromise and complicity. However, it orients Christian ethics to the embodied practices in which morality is lived and renegotiated, and thereby performs a language of witness intelligible to other moral worlds. Christian hopes for moral transformation and social salvation dwell in the concrete. If ethics hopes to reeducate desire and stimulate social change, argues Anna Peterson, it must work with everyday practices, cultivating and opening them as “moments of grace” in which transformation happens. Moreover, Christian responses to social problems, produced in self-conscious relation to other cultural productions, become an important missiological activity in pluralist cultures. Graham Ward explains how projects for social faithfulness form a key part of Christian witness. “What characterizes Christian social practices in the world, Christian poiesis, is a governing soteriology that pursues social transformation by means of opening up new utopian possibilities in the prevailing cultural Zeitgeist.” By inventing responses to climate change that make faithful response possible, Christian projects may open cultural space for other kinds of response. The ironic, double-voiced uses of culture become cultural production that other groups may use, for their own purposes and with their own ironies, but hopefully in ways that make them more competent to a problem all cultures face.

Christianity offers itself to the wider culture, then, through its unique way of trying to give answer to God for shared problems. In pluralist societies, Christian communities perform the claims of their own (particular and marginal) standpoint through projects which enact cultural opportunities made by Christian faith. Ward calls this view an “operative pragmatism” since the content of Christian claims hangs on these provisional, contextual practices. Christian performance can bring about social change insofar as other standpoint communities find the performances compelling; “cultural transformation takes place on the basis of these operational pragmatics that are brought into play with any intentional project.” In Ward’s view, Christian ethics can understand the inventions of Christian social projects as marginal cultural products that might, insofar as they are compelling responses to shared demands, interact with the wider social imaginary in which they participate. That marginal role may be especially important in an era anxious for sustainability, in societies looking for possible futures. As Christian social practices attempt to enact the body of Christ, says Ward, they “practice the future like practicing a foreign tongue.”
In this section I have argued for an account of culture and of the role of theological production within it that allows Christian ethics to interpret social problems as occasions for theological and moral invention. Christian ethics should work with creative projects as sites of that invention, on the view that they can keep generating more adequate and more faithful possibilities, and based on the assumption that, insofar as they demonstrate novel capacities of responses, they may become compelling to other moral communities. In order to explain where to find such projects, I now need to clarify the role of Christian communities in this strategy.

**CHURCH PRACTICE**

Appeals to the practices of Christian communities occupy the center of some important accounts of Christian ethics—most visibly in the work of Stanley Hauerwas. We have seen that Hauerwas organizes ethics around the performance of church, and that he rejects methods that would seem to deprioritize formation of Christian character for the sake of social responsibility. Critics like Jeffrey Stout have objected that such appeals to church suppress attention to social problems and conceal the participation of Christians in shared civic arrangements. By arguing for Christian ethics to work on social problems through engaging the practices of Christian reform efforts, I have been developing a position that borrows from pragmatist ideas of both. My appeal to Christian reform projects follows a post-liberal sense that the meaning of moral concepts lies implicit in the practices which use them, and I have argued that competent uses are characterized by efforts to respond to the world’s wounds. I let the demands of social problems test the fittingness of Christian practice, yet I also insist that those practices reinterpret the problems they address and reframe the demands they pose. I will now explain that position further by engaging the debate between Hauerwas and Stout, and illustrate it by arguing that it makes the best sense of Martin Luther King and of Dietrich Bonhoeffer.

A pragmatic strategy of Christian social ethics must answer the worry of Hauerwas that it identifies the church with some need for a social reform project. Since the social gospel movement, theologians have been rightly wary of enthusiastic reform programs that would identify the mission of Christ with social meliorism. H. R. Niebuhr worried about those sorts of pragmatisms, calling them “banal, Pelagian theurgisms in which men were concerned with the symptoms of sin, not its roots.” He could be searing with regard to projects “which expected to change prodigal mankind by improving the quality of the husks served in the pigsty.” A practical sensibility should not lead churches to identify their gospel of transformation with
some project of modest improvement—or worse, with a mere principle of continuation in “sustainability.”

Hauerwas and Yoder think that Niebuhr nonetheless remains too pragmatic himself, and they blame the loss of church in Christian ethics on a concern for responsibility. Insofar as it organizes around responsibility for social problems, claims Yoder, the field of Christian ethics starts by assuming the irrelevance of Jesus. Yoder opens his *Politics of Jesus* in sarcastic protest of the notion that social ethics should “measure what is ‘fitting’ and what is ‘adequate;’ what is ‘relevant’ and ‘effective;’ . . . ‘realistic’ and ‘responsible.’” Those slogans (which come from the two Niebuhr brothers) amount to a situational ethic, he thinks, guided only by the day’s “common sense” and secular sciences of reality.87 Hauerwas and Yoder force a pragmatic strategy of Christian ethics to prove how bearing responsibility for the world’s problems is a way of participating in the reality of Christ experienced in the church. In the last section I explained how responses to social problems could be understood as participations in Christ, but where are the communities in which that actually happens?

Church happens in two ways in my account. Let me begin to explain by answering another sort of worry about pragmatism in Christian ethics. In a powerful ecumenical essay interpreting the past century of social ethics “under the sign of the cross,” David Hollenbach worries that the ironic pluralism of pragmatist thought can suppress responses to human suffering. With Richard Rorty in mind, Hollenbach laments that, in responses to social wounds, pragmatists teach that “simply coping’ is the best we can aspire to,” such that “what we may hope for becomes ‘survival—for the time being.’” Christian ethics refuses mere survival (and mere sustainability) by seeking a “reality behind the conflicts and brokenness of the world that may be a source of reconciliation.”88 How can Christian ethics name that source, that reality beyond realities, in a pluralist world? Hollenbach argues that the cross reveals God’s participation in all human suffering and God’s solidarity in all struggles against dehumanizing violence. The particularist Christian symbol of the cross thus supports all social practices that develop solidarity with human suffering. Wherever a moral community develops its ethos by bearing suffering as part of a strategy of confronting social brokenness, Hollenbach’s view implies, Christian ethics should interpret it as practically participating in the reconciling reality of Jesus Christ.89

Hollenbach’s response to Rorty’s school of pragmatism supplies what a theological pragmatism needs: the suggestion that the reality of church may be experienced in responses to social wounds. Responsibility may—sometimes, under cruciform conditions—be a form of participating in Christ. Hollenbach does not venture the further implication: that “church”
can take place beyond the bounds of normal ecclesial structures and Christian identities. But with the view of moral culture I describe in this chapter, Christian ethics should anticipate unauthorized cultural productions that “do the cross” better than the outreaches of official churches or self-identifying Christians. That is precisely how King interpreted the cruciform love of movement protestors: often ventured without sanction of the official churches and sometimes by non-Christians, they did Christ better than the institutions and people claiming his name. If that holds, then the politics of Jesus are not the sole possession of communities devoted to confessing Jesus. Others may better see what the Christian repertory can do in some context, and may improvise on its pattern of acting in a way that is so compelling that it becomes an icon of faithfulness. Christian action, that is to say, may show up beyond Christian churches and within projects that do not identify themselves as Christian. That should not surprise: it does not seem uncharacteristic of the mission of God to move beyond its institutional sponsors.

The moral community of Christian social ethics may appear, then, wherever communities of shared practice (even if not shared identity) create ways of bearing responsibility for the world that—eventually and upon theological reflection—Christian churches adopt into their repertory of faith. That view keeps Christian ethics accountable to concrete ecclesial practices while accounting for the boring, pitiable character of most churches. Christian social ethics remains an activity of and for the contingent practices of the church (as Hauerwas wants), but those practices might appear outside the institutions that go by the name. An important task of Christian ethics, therefore, involves interpreting where church happens, in order to find the sites where communities of shared practice are inventing ways to respond to the wounds of the world. Creative problem-focused communities of responsibility often develop beyond the boundaries of visible churches, which they regularly criticize and cajole. Reform projects may reject conventional churches in frustration at their inert complacency, may confess on behalf of them, or may form in indifference to religion in general. The confessional identity of their members, I contend, is not the most interesting or important thing about them.

Christian ethics therefore faces some ecclesiological dissonance: the contingent social practices that make the meaning of the church can (and often do) occur outside churches. How to make sense of that paradox? Hauerwas and Stout agree that the meaning of ethical ideas depends on contingent social practices. They disagree on where those practices happen, on what sort of community can function as “church.” Stout and Hauerwas can both follow a linguistically pragmatist claim that in Selma in 1965, “agape”
meant what the political tactics of a civil rights movement made it mean. The question is whether Christian ethics should recognize that meaning as an authoritative instance of Christian love. Stout would want the field to do so and thus show how Christian traditions can make useful contributions to democratic liberalism by deploying their inheritances to meet shared social needs. For Hauerwas it depends on whether the Selma movement community counts as a church, and it is not clear from his descriptions of church how a Christian story-telling community in Selma in 1965 could have made civic desegregation part of its mission, or recognized the civil action of other groups as participation in the mission of Jesus. It is not clear, that is, how segregation outside the church could appear as a problem nor how tactics to confront it could be undertaken as proper theological exercises.

When Hauerwas insists that “the first social ethical task of the church is to be the church,” he means more than that Christian social ethics depends on the contingent discursive practices of communities using the repertory of faith. He also has a substantive account of the practices that make a church. “Being the church,” for Hauerwas, primarily means narrating its own existence. Protecting the conditions of telling and understanding its own story, he thinks, requires refusing responsibility for the world’s problems. Christian ethics should respond to political debates over war or health care allocation by turning them into occasions for the church to retell its story, and so establish anew the discursive boundary of church from world.

Stout impugns Hauerwas not for his Christian particularism, but for the way he lets Christians think that they inhabit a different cultural world with different problems. Stout worries that Hauerwas combines MacIntyre’s internalist sense of tradition with an Anabaptist critique of “the world” adapted from Yoder. In combination, those two elements alienate Christian storytelling from social responsibility. It is not his sources that Stout dislikes, but what the bricoleur has made from them. Church appears as the performance of anti-civic apathy for the sake of maintaining Christian identity. When Hauerwas’s concern for the distinctiveness of the Christian lexicon leads him to warn against “alien” discourses of justice and rights, Stout thinks that the anti-civic performance begins to deprive Christians of concepts the church once thought important for enacting the faith (as recently as Selma 1965). The consequence is not rigorous performance, but complacent irresponsibility: “Many of Hauerwas’s readers probably liked being told that they should care more about being the church than about doing justice to the underclass. At some level, they knew perfectly well how much it would cost them to do justice. So they hardly minded hearing . . . that following Jesus involves little more than hating the liberal secularists..."
who supposedly run the country, pitying poor people from a distance, and
donating a portion of one’s income to the church.”91 Stout is saying that
Hauerwas’s rendition of ecclesial performance appears neither civic nor
Christian.

Now Hauerwas would object that he dislikes appeals to “social justice”
because he thinks that slogan has required too little of privileged Christians.
“Church” for Hauerwas names an arduous school in the virtues of love and
justice.92 Yet he opens the door to criticism of his church as cheap grace by
refusing to let it be shaped by the problems of the social systems in which
it participates. Because response to social wounds is not an important ex-
ercise in that school, Hauerwas’s church begins to appear comfortably ab-
stract. Because concrete responsiveness to social context does not matter
for the church’s performance of itself, Hauerwas’s church seems not just
alien but disembodied. It is difficult to say where one could join one of
these churches. While regularly critical of most of the visible options he
sees, Hauerwas seems uninterested in offering directions to any particular
body. The idea of church seems important to him primarily for its service in
identifying the boundary of Christianity and thus for organizing the work of
Christian ethics. The actual existence of any particular church goes without
observation.

The absence of concrete instances of church becomes especially evident
where appeals to it are strongest. In Milbank the church is “the difference
from all other cultural systems,” a strangely wonderful culture that over-
turns the world’s corrupt loves by true charity and counters its distorted
economies with true gift.93 Where might one join? No empirical, joinable
communities, it turns out, actually embody that life. Once upon a time
such communities may have existed as a real society, but the church has
since been dissolved by modernist (nominalist! Scotist!) nihilism. So in the
same moment that the world is reinterpreted by the light of the church, it is
also told that, sadly, membership is not quite a possibility. With the church
in eclipse, “the theologian feels almost that the entire ecclesial task falls on
his own head.”94 How good for academic theology: one cannot really join
church, but theologians can keep using it to fund their social criticism. Thus
the late-modern solution to Christian social ethics: theologians interpret
society by the practices of churches which exist only in their own rhetoric.
Christians can go to church virtually, by reading the theologians who invoke
the virtues of a lost colony.

It is not only outsiders like Stout who find such views the nadir of in-
sulated irresponsibility. So does any Christian community that interprets
the church as a concrete, a response to the world’s suffering as embodied
as is the cross. A responsibility ethic may be more ecclesial, I am arguing,
than some confessionalist accounts that take themselves to be zealous for
the priority of church. If church takes form by taking responsibility for
the world’s problems, as a way of answering God, then confronting social
problems functions as a site of revelation. In *The Responsible Self*, Niebuhr allows
that suggestion with the formula: “God is acting in all actions upon you.
So respond to all actions upon you as to respond to his action.”95 That view
of responsibility implies that the contextual experience of social problems
mediates the demanding action of God, and so become sites of response to
God. Of course reckless human powers have made these problems; just so,
God summons a response within the context and relations driving the crisis.
That is how the church “overcomes the world”: by learning to bear responsi-
ability for problems whose demand comes from the God who, in body, bears
responsibility for what is going on in the world.

When Niebuhr seeks vocabulary for what fitting responses mean for the
church, his language becomes, in spite of himself, theurgical and christo-
centric—and strikingly less Protestant in image. Summoned into existence
by its responsibility before God, the church is “that part of human society,
and that element in each particular society, which moves toward God.” That
association becomes a church by moving toward God in a corporate act of
bearing responsibility, “as the priest acting for all.” Social responsibility is
not an expression or outreach of the church, then; it is its participation in
Christ. In responsibility it offers “a demonstration of love of God and neigh-
bor” in which “the deed of Christ is reduplicated.”96 As Niebuhr’s language
bends toward theurgy, it recalls patristic images of the church as a microcos-
ic liturgical laboratory, where is made the reality of Christ for the world.
Liturgy, the central Sunday act of churches, includes inventing ways to bear
the world’s wounds before God.

A view like that seems to explain the notion of church in King’s work.
One could actually join what King did not hesitate to call a “colony of
heaven,” for it appeared in the streets of Birmingham, bearing wounds and
so proving the possibility of agape.97 For King, the reality of Christ was no
rhetorical invocation of lost society’s difference from a racist world; it was
instead a summons to concrete practices of self-sacrificial love for enemy
and neighbor. If Christian social ethics depends on the church, the church
could be found, militantly responsible, marching in the streets, bearing
blows, suffering imprisonment, enacting justice, offering redemption. Not
all participants in this church were Christian, noted King, who thus faced
the paradox that the reality of church may be practiced by those who are
not members of churches. The reality of Christ was made by the suffering
of many who were not Christian, were not even religious, in communities
that did not always understand themselves as church but were willing to
undergo the discipline of nonviolent love. As King pastored this “church,” he found himself wondering over the many institutions that called themselves church but would not join the embodied reality of Christ. It tempts one toward locating the real church in some theological imagination, he reported; “maybe I must turn my faith to the inner spiritual church, the church within the church, as the true ecclesia and the hope of the world.” He was saved from that temptation, he writes, by Christians who recognized the reality of the gospel in the movement, who saw the movement as the living reality of the church in that moment, and gave themselves to it.98

Dietrich Bonhoeffer faced that paradox even more intensely. The theologian who began his career celebrating the church as the concrete social existence of God’s reality for the world came to the end of it witnessing the collapse of even the “confessing” churches and working instead for a political resistance group. Like King, Bonhoeffer came to understand his political participation as still a way of participating in God’s reality. Late in life he wrote: “In Christ we are invited to participate in the reality of God and the reality of the world at the same time, the one not without the other.” The invitation comes to us, Bonhoeffer sees, without offering moral rules of participation, but only a call to interpretive discernment: “The Christian ethic asks, then, how this reality of God and of the world that is given in Christ becomes real in our world.”99 Like King, Bonhoeffer discovered that the reality of Christ may become real within the actions of those not belonging to churches. At the same time, like Niebuhr, his ecclesial ethic takes on theurgic tropes as he searches for language of Christ’s body becoming concretely real within a wounded world: “the reality of God demonstrates itself only as it places me completely in the reality of the world.” In times when the official churches betray the reality of Christ, “the gospel will instead demonstrate itself in the few remaining figures who are just, truthful, and humane."100 Bonhoeffer knows the church not as an ontic foundation but as a social operation: the reality of Christ makes itself known through the actions of those risking themselves in order to bear responsibility for the wounds of their world.

So does his “religionless Christianity” reduce the church into noncreedal humanitarian programs? Bonhoeffer explicitly excludes any “myopic pragmatism” that would reduce responsibility to social utility; what matters is whether a particular project shapes action in accordance with the reality of creation.101 The final meaning of created reality must be interpreted theologically, but Bonhoeffer rules out deciding which actions are in accordance with reality on the basis of who performs them (whether they are Christian or not). Responsibility for the world as it actually exists in Christ may be conducted by those with no belief or interest in Christ.
King and Bonhoeffer, I would argue, leave us with two senses of “church” for Christian ethics: those communities that gather in word and sacrament to tell the story of Jesus, and those communities that make the reality of Jesus by bearing responsibility for the world’s suffering. The former maintain the interpretive lexicon for recognizing the latter. Confessing churches cultivate the narrative which tells the shape of Christ’s becoming evident in the world, which may happen elsewhere. Charles Marsh calls that persistent “elsewhere” the “beloved community,” which King sought wherever it might appear. “The church establishes the hidden meaning of beloved community,” writes Marsh, “even as beloved community makes visible that meaning in ways the church often may not.” When churches fail to hear the summons of God in the world around them, they can be grateful that the Spirit brings forth responses from elsewhere. If this elsewhere is alienated from the church, that is no reason to despise it. “The church should not be envious of her children,” says Marsh, writing with Bonhoeffer’s meditation on good people, “but should listen to them and should learn lessons as they catch a glimpse of a better future under a different banner than Christ . . . Christians should receive with gratitude the opportunity to participate in a common human struggle for a just world.” For that opportunity, that struggle, is the gift of Christ’s body, and thus the real life of the church.

The confessionalist theologians have something right when they insist that the language of Christianity depends on the practices of the church. They are wrong only in supposing that church happens only among those who tell the story. The reality of the church may appear wherever the reality of Christ demonstrates itself among those responding to the world’s realities. Social problems may legitimately determine the tasks of Christian social ethics, without reducing the field to religious support for social programs or conflating the church with a social justice movement. Because the reality of Christ always exceeds any practice, it exceeds the performance of any project. One important task of Christian ethics is to continually insist on that excess. For that, Christian ethics needs the narratives of confessing church communities. Often those “story-formed” communities tell the story insipidly and poorly, especially when they become obsessed with the preciousness of their own identities. But their story anticipates embodied performances which enfold the narrative, cultural improvisations which bring the reconciling reality of God to life. A second task of Christian ethics is to interpret where that community is happening. In a pragmatic strategy, ethicists cannot know in advance by devising tests of belief, worldview, or narration; the way of Christ opens itself by participating in the reality of the world.
CONCLUSION

This chapter has described two basic strategies of Christian social ethics formed by different methods of confronting social problems. It has developed a pragmatic strategy by presenting reasons from theology and social theory to prefer its view of culture and its account of the relation between Christian practice and cultural change. Most importantly for a book on sustainability problems, a pragmatic strategy explains how unprecedented problems can drive moral adaptation. To allay common suspicions of pragmatism, I have argued that moral adaptation functions theologically as a practice for sustaining faith. Christian ethics can then work with incompetent responses to sustainability problems on the supposition that they offer both a site of moral production and an important way that Christian communities sustain their faith.

By focusing on the tensions between theological production and the demands of a problem, Christian ethics need not arrive on the scene of social problems with an already complete theory. Ethics might rather begin in recognition of incompleteness—of something that compels a response not yet fully given. That production may not necessarily happen through self-critical reconsideration of a community’s worldview or its beliefs about reality. In fact, the least interesting part of a community’s response is often what its authorized spokespersons say their beliefs mean for a problem. A pragmatic strategy supposes instead that Christian ethics should interpret difficult social problems in relation to communities already creating live strategies of response. Rather than proposing an arrangement of symbols, metaphors, and beliefs that could lead to new kinds of action, a pragmatic strategy supposes that the most important interpretive resources lie in the tactics communities use to make their traditions confront new problems. Ethicists can help realize the potential of those tactics by cultivating and criticizing a community’s initial responses, working to make their trajectory more competent to the problems they face and more faithful to the traditions they use.

In the next two chapters I consider the role for particularist religious projects in global ethics and in the sciences of sustainability. Chapter 3 explains how a particularist and pragmatic ethic can contribute to the pluralist arena of global ethics. Chapter 4 explains how religious creativity makes a difference for science-based sustainability decisions. In both chapters cosmology makes a return, as I show how a pragmatic strategy sometimes needs the scope of reimagination that working with worldviews affords. Then chapter 5 returns to a concrete problem by tracing how responses to
toxins have begun to adapt ideas of justice. Appeal to worldviews, I show there, plays an important role in expanding the competency of justice. The point of this chapter, then, has not been to condemn all talk of worldviews and attempt to install in its place the lexicon of problems and practices. Its point has been that Christian ethics should interpret efforts to create practical responses to overwhelming sustainability problems as struggles to keep faith with God’s way of keeping faith with creation.

NOTES

3. Another reason for suspicion is the hostility of some pragmatic theorists toward religious belief, and especially toward theological modes of moral reasoning. Attempting to interpret those debates would distract the focus of this chapter, so I address this suspicion implicitly: by showing how processes of moral invention, which both pragmatists and theologians have distinct reasons to value, are sometimes driven by beliefs beyond those permitted by strictly materialist epistemologies.


18. “Strategy” is a different category from those in methodological debates over universalism versus particularism and principlism versus casuistry. It aims to bring into view distinct styles of theological creativity and consider how they each make practical cultural proposals. The terms “strategy” and “tactics” appear in this chapter without intending the precise uses to which they are put in Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, Steven Rendall, trans. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984).


20. This is how James Gustafson takes the legacy of Niebuhr; see his introduction to Niebuhr, *The Responsible Self*, 13–18.


44. West, *Disruptive Christian Ethics*, 9, 41.


57. Luther Ivory, *Toward a Theology of Radical Involvement: The Theological Legacy of Martin Luther King, Jr.* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1997), 111.


64. See Tanner, *Theories of Culture*, 97–106.


78. Tanner, *Theories of Culture*, 113, 103, 152.

79. Tanner, *Theories of Culture*, 166, 80–87.


81. There are similarities in my account with what Michael Walzer describes as the “path of interpretation” for social critics; Michael Walzer, *Interpretation and Social Criticism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1987).

100. Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, 55, 347. I translate “erweisen sich” in the first quotation with “demonstrate itself” (the translators use “is disclosed”) to highlight the same verb appearing in the second quotation (where the translators do use “demonstrate itself” for “erweisen sich”).