

1

Judaism as a Free Church: Footnotes to John Howard Yoder's *The Jewish-Christian Schism Revisited*

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At the very beginning of his posthumously published volume, *The Jewish-Christian Schism Revisited*, John Howard Yoder wrote:

A wide stream of literature, some erudite and original, some creatively popular, has opened up the inadequacies of the traditions through which both Jews and Christians have interpreted our differences for centuries. Yet most of the redefinition going on in the vast scholarly literature still is engaged in making adjustments *within* the framework of the received schema. The corrections being made weaken that schema yet without replacing it. What this present study contributes is not another volume of details within those debates, but an alternative perspective on what the problem was and still is.¹

Innocent (although I shouldn't have been) of Yoder's work until very recently, I have been carrying on a scholarly-ethical project for a decade and more that dogs his steps in many ways and carrying it on, as it were, from a "Jewish" perspective, that is, as one self-defined and communally located within historical Judaism and historical Jewry. Yoder's work, almost by definition, invites dialogical response.²

1. *The Jewish-Christian Schism Revisited*, ed. Michael G. Cartwright and Peter Ochs (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003) 31.

2. The very volume to which I am largely responding in this essay is a product of one such dialogue with the deceased. I shall engage in dialogue, then, with the dialogue.

Perhaps one could say that I have been (and am) inadvertently writing footnotes to Yoder. Let me begin to lay out for you my starting place in this conversation that I am about to begin. At about the time that Yoder's book was being published, I was struggling to complete a book of my own on the Jewish/Christian schism and not managing to do so. As I indicated finally in a pathos-filled preface, something seemed lifeless in the work, flaccid; I wasn't confronting the political core of the book and consequently couldn't find the desire and energy to write it (although it was 90 percent complete at the time). I realized that a piece of work that I had insisted was not political must discover and uncover its political and ethical power in order for me to find the passion that alone would let it be done. I had to discover where my passion lay, or I could not finish the book. Convinced that the passion could not be for what seemed like it might be the obvious consequence of the book, calling the Jewish/Christian difference into question, I searched elsewhere.

Although the book is called *Border Lines: The Partition of Judaeo-Christianity*, a revisionist reading of the Jewish/Christian schism, I still insisted in its preface—the preface that made it possible for me to finish the book—that the historical work was just that, history (at least of a certain sort), and that the politics of the work lay elsewhere entirely, allegorically, in my deep and ongoing concern for justice for the Palestinians.

Indeed I asserted rather loudly that:

Why does my book want me to “come out?” Why need I tell about the love that (almost) would not dare to say its name, the love of this Orthodox Jew for Christianity? Even more grandiosely, I could pose the question (but very hesitantly, almost taking it back as I ask it), what purpose might this strange attraction play? Perhaps it has led me to uncover something: Implicitly through this scholarship and explicitly right here, I suggest that the affiliation between what we call Judaism and what we call Christianity is a much more complex one than most scholars, let alone most layfolk, imagine and that that complexity has work to do in the world, that we can learn something from it about identities and affiliations. The world that I have found in this research is one in which identities were much less sure than they have appeared to us until now, in which the very terms of identity were being worked on and worked out. Not only had there

not been the vaunted “parting of the ways,” but Christianity was deeply engaged in finding its identity, its boundaries and even busily and noisily sorting out what kind of an entity it would be, what kind of an identity would it form. There was no telling yet (or even now) what the telos of the story would be. Non-Christian Jews, and especially an important group of Jewish religious elites, were busy, as well, working hard to discover how to define their own borders in a discursive world being dramatically changed by the noise that Christians were making, soundings of “New Israels,” “true Jews,” and “heretics.” “Judaism”—an anachronism—was up for grabs as well, as it were, by which I don’t mean only the by now well-accepted notion that there was no normative Judaism, only Judaisms, but something more. Even rabbinic Judaism was struggling to figure out for itself what a “Judaism” is and who, then, could be defined as in and out of it. My book is a narrative of that period of struggle, of false starts and ruptures and abandoned paths during the initial phases of this site under construction. . . .

I am not, after all, a heretic from either the orthodox Christian or orthodox Jewish point of view, neither a Judaizing Christian nor a Christian Jew [a *min*], for all my attraction to Christianity and Christians. I do not choose, in any way, to be a Messianic Jew, a Jew for Jesus, or anything of that sort, but actually, to be just a Jew, according to the flesh and according to the spirit. Let me state here the obvious, the simple, the straightforward, and definitive: I do not believe that Jesus the son of Joseph of Nazareth was (or is) the Messiah, let alone do I subscribe to even higher christological glories ascribed to him as “Son of God.” I am not, I think, a Jew *against* Jesus but there is no credible sense in which I could be construed as a Jew *for* Jesus either. I do not seek, of course, covertly (as sometimes Jews for Jesus do) nor overtly, to convert myself or any other Jew to Christianity, nor claim that Christianity is the true Judaism, nor preach that somehow Jews must accept John as Gospel truth.

In the wake of all that insistent denial, all that allegation of who I am not, there really was nowhere for me to go but to assume that my book was (for me) about something else. I agree with nearly every aspect of Yoder’s account of the historiographical revision itself. As Yoder remarks, in the standard account, “the historical development of the first three centuries of our era ended with the presence, in many of the same places, of two separate, mutually exclusive systems (intellectual,

cultural, social) called ‘Jews’ and ‘Christians.’ Therefore the standard account claims that this mutual exclusiveness must be assumed to have been inevitable, i.e., logically imperative, even when and where the actors in the story which led to that outcome did not know that yet.” But, as Yoder has also written, “The new angles on the story in which recent scholarship has been so prolific modify this account in one detail or another. They leave standing the overall outline,” that overall outline in which “we know perfectly well what ‘Christianity’ and ‘Judaism’ are.”³ In my own work, I retold the whole story and strikingly along the lines of Yoder’s own retelling, but I still (through my baroque denial and in defiance of all logic) managed to leave standing the overall outline, of knowing perfectly well what Christianity and Judaism are, or at least that they are not each other. When my own spirit wouldn’t let me call it just scholarship, I found some other explanation for it. Now, in the trail of Yoder I seek to undo the denial and ask more fully two questions that I could not confront even two years ago: What *are* the implications of such a radical revision of the history of the Jewish/Christian schism for the diaspora lives of Jews and Christians now? And, How do those implications impact on our response to the tragedy of Zionism? Do we (I) need to rethink indeed what Christianity and Judaism are? And, (II) is the refusal to do such rethinking an implacable obstacle on the way to justice and peace (for Palestine!) and does the radical reformation in any way provide for a possible way towards such a rethinking in the wake of the historical work I have done, in *some* ways more radical even than Yoder’s, on the origins of the divide between something we call Christianity and something we call Judaism?

The Jewish/Christian Schism Revised

Yoder was clearly ahead of his time in his historical conception vis-à-vis the so-called separation between Judaism and Christianity. Before most of the more properly historical work had been done, he had already adopted a highly revisionist understanding of the matter; he had understood that there was no definitive form of Judaism that could claim either temporally or phenomenologically to be the one true Judaism before the rabbinical period beginning in the early third century with

3. *Jewish-Christian Schism*, 31.

the publication of the Mishna and also that Paul did not understand himself as breaking away from Judaism to found a new religion but as constituting a strand, the “true” one, as everyone else was doing, within Judaism.⁴ I would go further than Yoder in fact. From my scholarly point of view, rabbinic Judaism cannot claim (historically speaking) to be the one true Judaism even long after the Mishna was promulgated. I have argued that the Mishna was part of a project to establish a Judaic orthodoxy but one that ultimately failed, such that throughout late antiquity there were various kinds of Jews, rabbinic and para-rabbinic who had as much “right” to the name “Jew” as anyone else did. Some of those Jews held religious convictions strikingly like ones that are otherwise understood as definitive of Christianity; indeed, I would assert that there is no particular theological claim or expectation that marks Christianity as “other” to the Judaism of its time, excepting, of course, the claim that Jesus of Nazareth is the one. This is not to say that I consider all Christians always as Jews. Many Christians resist and reject that name from quite early on and with rejection of the name come shifts in practice and belief that might be said, phenomenologically speaking, to define themselves out. This is analogous to the situation with the Karaites later, some of whom remain Jews till this day and others that have clearly left Jewishness entirely.

Yoder himself understood that the very project of a Jewish orthodoxy is, in large part, a response to the Christian formation of proto-orthodoxy: “We do not know *for sure* of *any* rabbi trying to drive a wedge between himself and the *nozzrim* before Justin began driving his wedge between himself and the Jewish church. If Justin’s need for Gentile respectability⁵ had not lead [sic] him to be ready to split the church, we cannot be sure the rabbis would have reciprocated in kind.”⁶ Like Yoder, I too think that there were Christians who were Jews late, very late, into late antiquity, Jews who continued to hold to Logos theology, expectation of the Son of Man, and some who even believed that Jesus of Nazareth was that Son of Man. I have argued that it takes an army

4. *Ibid.*, 32–33.

5. On which, see J. Rebecca Lyman, “The Politics of Passing: Justin Martyr’s Conversion as a Problem of ‘Hellenization,’” in *Conversion in Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages: Seeing and Believing*, ed. Anthony Grafton and Kenneth Mills (Rochester: University of Rochester Press, 2003) 36–60.

6. *Jewish-Christian Schism*, 61.

(Theodosius II's army) to pry Judaism and Christianity apart, and that is a major aspect of the Nicene project. Adam Becker adds that outside of the Roman *limes*, the separation may have been even messier and longer than inside the Empire.⁷ Thus where Yoder considers the Jewish-Christian schism as a product of the second and third centuries,⁸ I am more inclined to see it as a product of the fifth⁹ and even then never quite a done deal. Yoder draws radical theological conclusions from his revision of the history; what theological conclusions shall I draw, in dialogue with him, from my own somewhat more radical historical revisionism?¹⁰

7. Adam H. Becker, "Beyond the Spatial and Temporal *Limes*: Questioning the 'Parting of the Ways' Outside the Roman Empire," in *The Ways That Never Parted Jews and Christians in Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages*, ed. Adam H. Becker and Annette Yoshiko Reed (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2003) 373–92.

8. *Jewish-Christian Schism*, 43.

9. See, however, *ibid.*, 66 n. 26, gesturing towards the fifth century as well.

10. Yoder is not always as good a reader of the historiography as he could be. Thus, he imagines that in the Temple period there were already "rabbis," some of whom, "the most respected of whom," were "Pharisaical" (*ibid.*, 48). One would have thought that his reading of Neusner would have disabused him of that anachronism. Interestingly, sharper historiography would only have strengthened his case. Another instance: Yoder allows that there is Jewish manuscript evidence from the "third century [!] that in the usage of *some* synagogues the term for 'Christians' (*nozrim*) had by that later date been added in the third line [of the curse of the heretics] to that for 'heretics' (52). Talmud scholars would be only too delighted to have any manuscript evidence from the third century indeed. The earliest we do have is from the ninth century in fact. The writings of Jerome provide, however, a *terminus ad quem* in the early fifth century for this formulation. Again this only strengthens Yoder's point, not weakening it at all but a surprising inaccuracy. Well aware that the terms "Jew" and "Christian" are anachronistic, Yoder seems hardly to notice that his preferred "rabbinic" and "messianic" are at least as anachronistic in turn (54). These are not nits but neither, of course, do they invalidate the work, not by any means. Most of Yoder's historical instincts seem to me to be spot on. He anticipates (54, for one) nearly precisely the same definition of the role of Justin Martyr in making a difference between Judaism and Christianity as I have done in *Border Lines: The Partition of Judaeo-Christianity*, *Divinations: Rereading Late Ancient Religions* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004) 37–73, only having left for me, as it were, the task of actually working it out in the texts. His book was published when mine was well underway at the press, and I do need to admit that had I read his work earlier mine would have seemed somewhat less innovative to me. It is a shame that his work has been so badly served by its recent editors who could easily have fixed quite a number of minor errors with respect to Judaism: e.g., confusing Yehuda Ha-Nassi (redactor of the Mishna) with Yehuda Ha-Levi (a medieval poet-theologian), an error on the order of confusing Augustine of Hippo with Augustine of

Yoder presents a remarkable and important set of reflections on the historiography of the partition of Judaeo-Christianity (my term) under the rubric of “It did not have to be.”¹¹ His primary *ethical* (although he does not designate it such) claim is that it is a wrong to the people of the past to assume in any way that what came to be had to be that way and no way else, that a given moment of decision before a Rubicon was crossed could only have gone the way it did.¹² Historiography for Yoder means being alive intellectually (and affectively) to the indecision, the openness, to the ways in which it could have been otherwise, “in order to discern options which might have been really available if someone had had the information, or the courage, or the organization to reach them, distinguishing these from other kinds of wishful thinking and from wasteful or resentful utopias.” The real point of the exercise, of course, is to find a way to change history, as it were, to go back to a moment of real decision, of real openness, when it did not have to be that way and make it otherwise, now and for our future. It is this moment to which Yoder refers as a “repentant” mode of historiography and one with which I am in deep sympathy, one that although I have always used a different sort of language for it, has been the motivating force for all my own historiographical work until now, with respect to gender, sexuality, race, Zionism. Clearly, however, I have balked at letting that be the force of the newest work, the work that—like Yoder’s history-writing—undoes the naturalness, the inevitability of the production of two “religions” out of Judaeo-Christianity. Although it would seem that the whole point of writing a book subtitled, *The Partition of Judaeo-Christianity*, recalling such events as the partition of India and

Canterbury or Gregory of Nyssa with Gregory the Great. The editing of this volume is shockingly bad to the point of distorting the communication drastically. Thus, for one example, on 62, “*could* have happened” (emphasis original) has to be “*couldn’t* have happened” for the sentence to make any sense whatever. The grossest error, perhaps, among many results in a sentence reading: “Non-cooperation, when empowered by a level of conviction that is willing to suffer, is a more powerful way to move a society than is the ballot box; it can be used defectively [sic] by minorities.” This poor editing is especially unfortunate in the light of the editors’ statement that they have intervened in the text to make it more readable (63, editor’s note.)

11. *Ibid.*, 43–63.

12. It will be important, I think, to read this aspect of Yoder’s work in the light of Michael André Bernstein, *Foregone Conclusions: Against Apocalyptic History*, Contraversions (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994).

of Palestine, political, even colonialist, schisms imposed from above, would appear to call the partition into Christianity and Judaism the same kind of thing and thus into question, I kept forgetting/denying that very point as I wrote the book. I need to own that consequence, difficult for me as it is.

Thus, at the same time that I acknowledge now that my own research brings me to a deconstruction of the Jewish/Christian opposition, I don't want to too easily tread there. Yoder writes that "doubting that things had to go as they did *way back when* correlates logically with doubting the rightness of how they continued to go later."¹³ This strikes me as a non-sequitur. Perhaps better to say that it *permits* such doubt. Is doubting the rightness of the Jewish/Christian difference where I want to go, or is there, perhaps, some alternate way of learning from Yoder and from my own historiography, some way that moves at least some humans forward towards justice and peace without necessitating the loss of that which I take (still) to be most valuable about human cultural (including religious) diversity per se? Is there a possibility of an ethics of the preservation of that which is in some genealogical sense, mine, just simply because it is the unique cultural product of the people with whom I choose/have been chosen to be historically connected (a project with which I am not sure that Yoder is in sympathy)? To be sure, there are causes other than the defense of one's own separate identity that would render morally imperative a counter-cultural commitment, and, too, there are causes that might make the renunciation of such identity morally imperative. Is the defense of one's own separate identity ever a moral imperative of its own? For Yoder the "division" is tragic; I am sure that the division has led to tragedy and that as surely I would want to change, but I still ask whether it is necessary to undo the division to end the tragedy, or possible, perhaps, to comprehend and live it differently.

These are real, not rhetorical, questions for me, by which I mean only that I don't know the answers.

The Jewish Radical: Diaspora Ethics

I want to begin anew now by clearly articulating what it is that makes Yoder's work so different from most Jewish/Christian "dialogue." The

13. *Jewish-Christian Schism*, 45.

answer is a simple one. Yoder is listening as well as talking. Most inter-religious dialogue strikes one as folks simply trying to articulate their unchallengeable positions to each other politely, or as Yoder has put it: “The alternative to each of us having his/her own picture of the other would be to ignore each other and to limit each of us to describing only himself/herself.”¹⁴ Yoder is not interested in just describing himself; he wants genuine dialogue in which he (and the other) can be changed in the encounter; he wishes to fairly (as fairly as possible) appropriate Judaism: “So the right way forward must rather be a constructive appropriation of the other’s identity.”¹⁵ He is making his own ecclesiology by learning something from Judaism and the Jews. He refuses explicitly the option (taken by many Christians, including some pacifist and some feminist Christians) of participating in “the way in which, once western Christians have had it decided for them that ‘the Jews’ are to serve as a foil, to be accused of whatever counter-view will serve to make the Christians look better, then ‘the Jews’ can be described in ways quite unjustified by the record. In the Gospel accounts Jesus is rejected by many individuals and sometimes by the leaders of groups of people, for various reasons, but his nonviolence is not given as a reason. Neither is his calling for the law to be ‘fulfilled.’”¹⁶ Yoder, I think, truly and successfully supersedes supersessionism.

This clear critical perspective leads Yoder to an entirely different account of the relationship of Judaism to Christianity than I have seen anywhere else. Rather than seeking that which differentiates Judaism from Christianity, Yoder assumes, as I do, that Jesus’s Torah—as given variously in the Gospels—*was* Judaism, that is, a recognizable Judaism. (In forthcoming work, I shall be suggesting that in some respects the Gospels provide the best example we have of first-century Judaism.) Thus the politics of Jesus are seen by him as part and parcel of demonstrable historical developments within Israelite religion over the centuries between the earlier parts of the Tanakh and the first century. Israelite religion is, for him, not frozen in some ahistorical primitive state of tribal ethos in order to make Jesus new, but Jesus is read rather as “prolong[ing] the critical stance which previous centuries of Jewish

14. Ibid., 115.

15. Ibid.

16. Ibid., 70.

experience had already rehearsed.”¹⁷ Yoder insists that in some sense the most authentic Judaism, or at any rate the Judaism that he frankly and openly prefers, is what he calls the “peace tradition” within Judaism (there is no pacifist tradition in early Judaism, but I think he is right in insisting that there is a pietist “peace” tradition as early as Jeremiah and continuing throughout). Where I part company with Yoder is in his insistence, paradoxical indeed from my point of view, that the peace tradition, the free church, must be a missionary church. He supports this historically with a further claim, namely that prior to the promulgation of the Mishna, “Judaism” was indeed a missionary religion and that only owing to fear of Christianity [!] was it that rabbinic Judaism, which after all begins with the Mishna, was to forego missionary ideals and thus, already?, to set itself on the path of Christianizing and ultimately Zionist Constantinianism. There are several real problems with this formulation. The first is historical: There seems to this scholar little data to support a notion of a Jewish mission prior to the Rabbis that was abrogated by them. To be sure, there were many Gentiles who attended Synagogues as Godfearers before the Rabbis, but that does not constitute evidence of a mission. Moreover, there were many Gentiles (Christians!) attending Synagogues long after the Mishna was promulgated, including at Origen’s Caesarea, near the very epicenter of rabbinic power itself. Secondly, missionizing precisely does not distinguish peace churches from other Christian, including the most Constantinian, of churches. To be sure, mission does not necessarily mean precisely the same thing in the “Constantinian” church that it means in the free churches. Nevertheless, to the extent that rabbinic Judaism constitutes a critique of missionary work, I think that that critique ought to be attended to by radical Christians as well. This Jew finds it much easier to accept those messianic Jews who renounce any claim, desire, or effort to convert other Jewish to their way, and while we Jews ought to accept converts, we have wisely learned, I think, both sociologically and theologically not to seek them. Where for Yoder it seems that the notion of universal salvation via the seven laws given to all people in the Noahide covenant is a defect in rabbinic Judaism, I would see it as a theological step forward, one that was indeed encouraged by the challenge of missionary Christianity. Thus Yoder seamlessly

17. *Ibid.*, 71.

moves from the notion that pre-mishnaic pharisaism, as represented by Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakkai, was “non-violent” in substance to an assumption that this means that it manifested a “continuing missionary openness.”¹⁸

There are several difficulties here. First of all (and very tellingly, I think), the narrative about Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakkai to which Yoder refers is entirely a product of the Babylonian Talmud and thus entirely a part of that to which Yoder refers as “Constantinian Judaism” itself. We have no access to any information about the “real” Pharisees, other than Josephus, Philo (and Paul), and nothing that we know about them suggests that they were a peace, or, on Yoder’s terms, a missionary party. In other words, I suggest, Yoder’s binary oppositions break down in several ways here. Constantinianism is not the opposite of mission and being resolutely out of power is not the necessary opposite of caring for the world. Rabbinic Judaism is not the opposite to Pharisaism, but actually in many ways, the inventor after the fact of the Pharisees.

In the days and weeks since I have presented this as a lecture, several kind Mennonite scholars have written to me that I mistake the Mennonite notion of mission, Yoder’s even more so. I don’t think so, for he explicitly divides it from the project of rabbinic Judaism, which is, as articulated over and over again in the early rabbinic writings, in the Talmudic story of Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakkai even more, a quietist witness to G-d’s presence in the world and his goodness by enacting good. The term for this practice is *kiddush Hashem*, sanctifying the name of G-d through exemplary behavior in the world, including the willingness to die for G-d, to be martyred, for which this phrase is also the name. Rather than identifying particular religious forms, then, as peace churches or Constantinian churches (Jewish or Christian), I suggest rather that we attend to Constantinianism as the temptation that lies within each of us as individuals and each of us (always) as religious organizations. Jews are enjoined by the Rabbis to avoid power but seek the peace of the city. (Of course, we fail most often on both accounts, but then who doesn’t?)

From my perspective, mission is not a sign of non-violence and refraining from missionizing hardly a regression. As I wrote fifteen years ago, “The genius of Christianity is its concern for all of the Peoples of

18. Ibid., 153.

the world; the genius of rabbinic Judaism is its ability to leave other people alone. This is grounded theologically in rabbinic Judaism in the notion that in order to achieve salvation, Jews are required to perform (or better, to attempt to perform) the entire 613 commandments while non-Jews are required only to perform seven commandments given to Noah that form a sort of natural, moral Law. Jewish theology understands the Jewish people to be priests performing a set of ritual acts on behalf of the entire world. Clearly the temptation to arrogance is built into such a system, but precisely the temptation to ‘Sacred Violence’ that leads to forced conversion, whether by the sword, ridicule or the Pound, or de-culturation in the name of the new human community, is not.”¹⁹

I believe that radical reformed churches and (some versions of) radical rabbinic Judaism may have much, much more in common (even in communion) with each other than I would have imagined revisiting the Judaeo-Christian schism (historically and through Yoder), but I think we also still have something to teach each other. Radical rabbinic Judaism may be able to temper the dangers of missionizing while radical reformed Christianity may provide an attractive dialogue partner for a reformed ethnocentrism that does not produce contempt for the other peoples of the world. What I had imagined as possible for the dominant versions of Judaism and Christianity may only be possible, and may indeed be possible for those who are out of control within their own traditions as well as within the world.

This brings me to explore a crucial question with respect to my own understanding and taking on of Yoder’s theological project. While his work is obviously deeply, deeply congenial to me, there is an aspect that is troubling as well, one that makes it difficult for me to simply be that which Yoder would have me be as a Jew. Now it is not that I, myself, am not in sympathy, in the deepest sympathy with his political vision for Judaism, for a Judaism that is forever the repository and manifestation of a diasporic politics, the politics of a religion that is “not in charge,” and thus too an anti-Zionist. My difficulty, then, is not in being the kind of Jew that Yoder would want Jews to be; my difficulty is in the assumption that this is simply what Jews ought to be if they

19. [See Daniel Boyarin, “The Subversion of the Jews: Moses’s Veil and the Hermeneutics of Supersessionism,” *Diacritics* 23:2 (1993) 16–35.—Ed.]

are to be Jewish. My own dilemma is between adopting a position in which I want to call for something that I perceive to be a better and *an* authentic Judaism, while not denying the right of others, even those whose position I find repugnant—and where human lives are at stake—the right to that name. This is a tricky moment, because, after all, it is precisely anti-Zionist, out-of-chargedness, diasporism to which I have been in my work and political life calling Jews, Jewry, and Judaism as well. However, I have been trying to be careful—I hope—in not defining an *essence* to Judaism, while Yoder is, I think, not careful enough. The reason for such care is, on the one hand, an ethical respect, one that I know Yoder would share, for those with whom one disagrees, even most sharply, and an unwillingness to engage in a politics of virtual excommunication; on the other hand, the reason is to avoid even the appearance of apology and triumphalism. Reading the past in an idealized way in which one assumes a pristine moment for one's own (or another) tradition is a very different, move, I think, from seeking the best in one's tradition and asserting its value even when most of one's fellows reject it. Thus, Judaism is not, in the end a free church, any more than Christianity is, and to read it as such will produce the response that I have often heard that Yoder is a romantic idealizer, but a Jew (this Jew) can hope to learn from the free church tradition in constituting a radical dissenting position as anti-Zionist, calling it the best that Jewish history and tradition have to offer us, not mistaking that with the dominant or historically essential truth. I read Yoder as not able to decide between, on the one hand, seeing in historical Jewry/Judaism an exemplum for the free church of how a dissenting community might maintain its identity and moral, critical force when it is out of political power, and, on the other, calling (tacitly, as he must) for the strengthening of a critical tradition within Judaism/Jewry. While embracing such a position with all the consequences, I am at the same time uncomfortable to be the “good Jew” for what, I hope, are obvious reasons. Is it “Judaism” and “Christianity” that will turn out to have been the schism that need not have been with all that that implies for the future, or only minority dissenters, then and now? Can there be for Yoder a messianic Judaism that does not accept Jesus? In what way, then, would it be different from rabbinic Judaism *tout court*, always messianic?

Yoder, for his part, frankly chooses the so-called “peace tradition” as the Judaism that interests him but immediately shows his awareness as well of the ethical pitfall in doing so:

Why not let the Jews be themselves? Is it not bias for us even to have an opinion as to who ‘the Jews’ ‘ought’ to be? Or who they are? Is it not both bad historical method and bad inter-community dialogue to choose one’s own picture of who the Jews must properly be, what image of Judaism one considers representative? Of course it is; but to take note of that fact is the beginning, not the end of our needing to work at the problem.²⁰

I want to take the rest of my time working at this problem along with Yoder. Yoder writes obviously and frankly from one subject position, the position of a theologian of a free church, of a radical reformation church, going back to the first two centuries for a model of a time when Judaism and Christianity were not two separate entities, two religions, seeking a new kind of communion with Jews through appropriating that time, and arguing that contemporary Jews are heirs to that time as well and if they are not, then they too need a radical reformation. He argues that historically the Jewish People have through most of their history lived out (perforce or no) the vocation of a free church of a minority religion out of power with all of the critical force that such a position can be invested with. As Yoder puts it, countering a certain charge, “What goes on here is *not* that I am ‘co-opting’ Jews to enlist them in my cause. It is that I am finding a story, which is really there, coming all the way down from Abraham, that has the grace to adopt me.”²¹

Among the singular importances and powerful originalities of Yoder’s work is the argument that the dissenting radical free church is not withdrawing from the world but participating in it via non-cooperation with that which it abhors. He provides a blueprint of a principled non-being-in-charge that is nevertheless not quietist but active in its resistance to that which it finds evil in the world. Using the Jeremic injunction to “seek the peace of that city to which God has sent you,” and a somewhat idealized reading of this as the principle of the Jewish diaspora, Yoder argues that “Not being in charge of the civil order is

20. *Jewish-Christian Schism*, 113.

21. *Ibid.*, 115.

sometimes a more strategic way to be important for its survival or its flourishing than to fight over or for the throne.”²² This is indeed very close to the political ethic of anti-Zionism, or positively put, Diasporism, that I have articulated and defended as a vision for Jewry throughout my work, sometimes in almost explicitly pacifist terms, although I think that I am not truly a pacifist.²³ He identifies as well, very vividly, “social effectiveness from below” in the ways that the Jehovah’s Witnesses enlarged our notions of religious liberty, the “Old Order Amish break the stranglehold of homogeneous state education,” and “Christian scientists and charismatics who believe that God heals challenge the American Medical Association medical-care cartel.”²⁴ Indeed, “our refusal to play the game by the agreed rules may be morally more basic than our courageous wrestling with things as they are.”²⁵ But at the same time, Yoder’s missionary impetus leads him to the position (further developed by his disciple Stanley Hauerwas) that the believers should continue to be involved in public life and discourse without in any way “compromising” (Yoder’s scare-quotes) “the particular identifying value commitments of a faith community, in favor of common-denominator moral language. Yet if in order to ‘be involved’ you commit yourself to values less clear or less imperative than your own, which are more acceptable because the ‘public’ out there already holds them, then your involvement adds nothing to the mix but numbers.”²⁶ How then shall the Christian be involved in public life if she holds as a matter of faith moral positions that are particular to a particular reading of Scripture? How shall such positions be maintained in a public space of those who read Scripture quite differently and those who don’t read Scripture at all?

I think that when Yoder wrote he could not have predicted that there would be a president and a political party in the United States that would be heirs to one version of the radical reformation tradition, as Yoder himself has defined it, including within its purview both Methodism and such American religious traditions as the Rapture

22. Ibid., 172.

23. Jonathan Boyarin and Daniel Boyarin, *Powers of Diaspora: Two Essays on the Relevance of Jewish Culture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002).

24. *Jewish-Christian Schism*, 174.

25. Ibid., 175.

26. Ibid., 169.

and the Bible Churches. Yoder already wrote in the 1970s that the Bible Churches were the representative form of radical reform in the United States, and now these churches are fair becoming the dominant form of Christianity in the United States as well as developing enormous political power. Could he have imagined a world in which not mainline Protestantism and Catholicism but radical dissenters from those churches were becoming the most powerful religious figures in the United States and ones with great political power as well? How can one distinguish, then, between Yoder's insistence on a mission, including his insistence that Christian involvement in public life must not compromise its particular moral values, those that are different from the majority or at least an enormous minority, from the current situation in which we see abhorrent values increasingly being imposed in the name of the Bible on those who would have none of them—such as, for instance, opposition to contraception or the dignity of same-sex love? Of course, such coercion is the very opposite of the Anabaptist tradition, but it is not logically incompatible I think with the positions that Yoder takes on scriptural truth and Christian moral witness. I am not, in any way, identifying the moral positions of the Anabaptists with those of American radical Christianity, but I am wondering about some similarities of ecclesiology and missiology that seem to an outsider to give us pause. Were the Christian Science position to become somehow dominant, not only the AMA medical cartel would be destroyed but at least arguably, medicine itself. Were the position of those who oppose homogenizing public education to become dominant (and this is less unrealistic), then one of the glories of American democracy would be demolished, one which has been the primary vehicle for social leveling such as there has been in the United States until now.

A theology and an ethic of being-not-in-charge has to confront questions of this sort as well. Yoder's work is not finished; he, alas, did not live long enough. He has given us, however, a wonderful legacy, a space I think where a Jew can really engage with Christians beyond the dialogues of the deaf called inter-faith dialogue. He profoundly has understood that "Many other Christians, embarrassed first of all about any kind of particular faith commitment in the face of the pluralistic and relativizing impact of the Enlightenment, and reinforced in their embarrassment by a sentiment of guilt for their indirect participation

in 'the Holocaust', want to see Jews otherwise than as people who reject the fulfillment of God's purpose for them. They do not take this 'accepting' stance on the grounds of the fundamental kind of rethinking proposed in the present study. On the contrary, they thereby prolong and harden the tendency to see western Jewry as just one more equally valid denomination of western Protestantism."²⁷ Yoder's way beyond supersession is for us to begin to imagine ourselves as one thing, as one community, to disinvest ourselves in difference. And I begin to think he may be right. While I still see value in difference per se, in the maintenance of communal and cultural religious tradition, perhaps more than Yoder does, when such maintenance begins to produce so much harm in the world, then perhaps we need to let go, however painfully, of it. Perhaps, perhaps, perhaps not. I am certain that Jews cannot demand of Christians support for Israel as a condition of respect, but I am troubled, anti-Zionist that I myself am, with a gesture of "appropriation" that reads so many Jews somehow right out of Judaism. Yoder has done a more radical rethinking of a possible, once and future, relationship between Judaism and Christianity than anyone else. The questions his work raises are the questions we need to confront as we seek to reform American religion itself.

27. Ibid., 111.