

Introduction

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John Howard Yoder has exerted a powerful influence over contemporary theology and ethics ever since the publication of *The Politics of Jesus* in 1972. At that time, Yoder emerged as the most articulate defender of Christian pacifism against a theological ethics guild still dominated by the Troeltschian assumptions reflected in the work of Walter Rauschenbusch and Reinhold and H. Richard Niebuhr. For most of the last thirty-five years Yoder has continued to be read in conversation with Rauschenbusch, the Niebuhrs, and other mid-century orthodoxies. But in the last decade there has been a clearly identifiable shift in the scope and focus of Yoder scholarship. A new generation of scholars has begun reading Yoder alongside figures most often associated with post-structuralism, neo-Nietzscheanism, and post-colonialism, resulting in original and productive new readings of his work. At the same time, scholars from outside theology and ethics departments and from outside of Christianity, like Romand Coles and Daniel Boyarin, have discovered in Yoder a significant conversation partner for their own work. The essays collected in this volume are some of the best examples of this shift.

The Old Yoder

We shall refer to this situation as marking the emergence of a “new Yoder” that differs in some significant ways from the “old Yoder” that captivated the work of an earlier generation. This is not to identify a shift in Yoder himself. His work was remarkably consistent over the course of a long career. Nor do we mean to suggest that this shift is

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absolute, that new readings of Yoder have altogether supplanted the old ones. It is not, in other words, a purely temporal shift. Old Yoder discussions can still be found. We also do not wish to suggest that it is always easy to tell which is which (still less that newer is better). And yet we think that the categories of old and new are helpful, but only if understood as broad, occasionally clumsy, generalizations. The new Yoder represents an important development in the way Yoder has come to be read in recent years. In particular, it reflects an approach to Yoder that finds it helpful to bring him into conversation with a range of dialogue partners with whom he was not himself explicitly engaged. In doing so, attention is drawn to a series of important moments in his work that tended to be obscured, or at least underappreciated, by an earlier generation's encounters with his writings. In particular, we understand the transition from the old Yoder to the new Yoder to involve three interrelated shifts.

First, essays before the 1990s tended to work within the parameters of the Christian ethics guild as set by Troeltsch, Rauschenbusch, and the Niebuhr brothers. These parameters are determined by the Troeltschian typology of church and sect. They are defined against the background of Troeltsch's claim that "the preaching of Jesus and the creation of the Christian Church were not due in any sense to the impulse of a social movement."¹ Debates in Christian ethics thus came to be divided between those who set out to translate theological convictions so that the church could make meaningful contributions to political matters and those who denied that theology could be so translated and thus set the church outside the realm of the political. Within those parameters, the Christian pacifist was presumed to be epistemologically and politically handcuffed. Faithfulness and effectiveness were assumed to name alternatives in a zero-sum game. The more faithful, and therefore sectarian, a community was said to be, the less relevant, responsible, and comprehensible to the world.² It is this set of assumptions that Yoder set out to

1. Ernst Troeltsch, *The Social Teachings of the Christian Churches*, 2 vols., trans. Olive Wyon (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1992) 1:39.

2. See, for example, Duane Friesen, *Christian Peacemaking and International Conflict* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald, 1986). While not strictly an interpretation of Yoder, it is not unfair to describe Friesen's work as an attempt to demonstrate that Yoder's "politics of Jesus" can be interpreted in such a way that it makes a realistic contribution to contemporary global politics.

challenge in his most well-known book, *The Politics of Jesus*. Old Yoder essays tend to focus on his defense of pacifism against those who dismiss peace as an irresponsible sectarian ideal. These discussions often set out to evaluate the cogency of his critique of mainstream Christian ethics. They ask whether or not Yoder's theological articulation of peace is finally sectarian. In other words, they are concerned to determine whether his pacifism had political teeth, whether it is sufficiently realistic to have anything to say to the increasingly "complex" world of contemporary politics.³

Second, it is fair to say that this sort of engagement with Yoder was done primarily by Mennonites. While Yoder was read widely as a representative of Christian pacifism, with the exception of Stanley Hauerwas and Jim McClendon, few non-Mennonites did significant work on him. But Yoder was and continues to be an ambiguous figure for Mennonites. On one hand, he gave Mennonites a voice in the wider academy and church. But his "politics of Jesus" still seemed too "sectarian" for some Mennonites who had lived through the Civil Rights and anti-Vietnam War movements and who were eager to flex their new-found political muscles. Interpretations of Yoder often became a battlefield upon which Mennonites worked out their anxieties about what Troeltsch and others called sectarianism. In that respect, it might be suggested that old Yoder discussions often tell us as much about the extent to which Mennonite conversations were determined by the Troeltschian categories whose grip Yoder sought to loosen as they do about Yoder himself.⁴

3. The debate around the work of J. Lawrence Burkholder is representative here. See the essays collected in Rodney Sawatsky and Scott Holland, eds., *The Limits of Perfection: A Conversation with J. Lawrence Burkholder* (Waterloo, ON: Institute for Anabaptist-Mennonite Studies, 1993). The exchange between A. James Reimer and J. Denny Weaver is also of note in this regard. Put briefly, Reimer worries that Yoder's pacifism is too idealistic. He seeks to correct for this perceived weakness by turning to the categories of law and justice, on the one hand, and classic creedal statements, on the other. Weaver, by contrast, seeks to defend Yoder against Reimer's critique. In doing so, he maintains that the peace of Christ entails a rejection of creedal Christianity, which he reads as a product of constantinian accommodation. What is significant for our purposes is how both Reimer and Weaver engage Yoder against the background of a set of assumptions that fairly straightforwardly reflect the Troeltschian alternatives of church and sect. See J. Denny Weaver, *The Nonviolent Atonement* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001); and A. James Reimer, *Mennonites and Classical Theology: Dogmatic Foundations for Christian Ethics* (Kitchener, ON: Pandora, 2001).

4. In this regard, it is perhaps not merely a coincidence that two significant figures

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Third, old Yoder essays tend to be preoccupied in a rather direct and narrow way with questions of peace and violence. Indeed, they might be described as war-centered insofar as they take war and physical confrontation as the paradigmatic instances of violence. Of course, Yoder's work was heavily oriented towards issues of war and peace. But it was also an ongoing attempt to interpret and theorize what it is that the categories of peace and violence name. By contrast, old Yoder discussions often proceed as if peace and violence name fairly straightforward realities. In this regard, peace tends to function as the tail that wags the theological dog.⁵ Whether intentionally or not, such an approach had the effect of leaving us with a Yoder whose discussions of war and peace lacked background and context and was therefore sometimes difficult to distinguish from what he called "liberal pacifism." This reification of peace is also reflected in the way the discussion quickly turns to the task of exploring how we can go about making the world less violent and more peaceable. In this regard, old Yoder scholarship bears a significant kinship to the fields of conflict resolution and restorative justice, not to mention the work of NGOs such as the Mennonite Central Committee.⁶

The New Yoder

Richard Rorty once wrote that it is characteristic of great thinkers that their "purpose is to dissolve the problems considered by [their] prede-

in the previous generation of Mennonite scholarship in theology and ethics wrote dissertations on Troeltsch. See Duane Friesen, "The Relationship Between Ernst Troeltsch's Theory of Religion and His Typology of Religious Association," PhD diss., Harvard University, 1972; and Harry J. Huebner, "The Continuity of Axiology and Epistemology: An Examination of the Presupposition of Ernst Troeltsch's Historicism," PhD diss., University of Toronto, 1981.

5. The work of J. Denny Weaver most straightforwardly exemplifies such an approach. But it is also reflected in the way Yoder has influenced a generation of Mennonite biblical scholarship, where finding a "peace theme" in some text has become a familiar move. See, for example, Willard M. Swartley, *Covenant of Peace: The Missing Peace in New Testament Theology and Ethics* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006).

6. By way of example, see the essays collected in Duane Friesen and Gerald Schlabach, *At Peace and Unafraid: Public Order, Security, and the Wisdom of the Cross* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald, 2005).

cessors, rather than to propose new solutions to them.”⁷ Interestingly, Rorty’s description echoes one of Yoder’s early attempts to describe his own approach. Toward the end of *The Christian Witness to the State*, Yoder made the following claim: “It is normal for the newcomer to a debate which is already in process to accept the prevailing definition of terms and choose one of the existing sides, whereas the wiser approach is to question the definitions.”⁸ One important trait of the new Yoder is the recognition of the way this particular form of greatness animates his work. Whereas old Yoder essays often worried that his illiberalism was too conservative, new Yoder essays tend to see him as a radical. That is, they read him as challenging the categories themselves instead of just taking up a position within the given categories.⁹

So, for example, Daniel Boyarin begins his chapter with a quote from Yoder: “Yet most of the redefinition going on in the vast scholarly literature [on the Jewish/Christian schism] 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.” A similar claim is at the heart of Peter Blum’s essay on Foucault where he writes, “Yoder’s strategy is interestingly similar to that of Foucault, in that he responds to questions not by answering them in their own terms, but by inquiring into where the questions come from, by showing that the frame of reference within which they are raised is not as monolithically self-evident as we might have assumed.” Or Daniel Colucciello Barber: “Already it is possible to see Yoder resisting, when faced with the task of explaining the distinctive

7. Richard Rorty, *Consequences of Pragmatism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1982) 40.

8. John Howard Yoder, *The Christian Witness to the State* (Newton, KS: Faith and Life, 1964) 90.

9. While Yoder articulately undermined the categories of the mid-century debates, he often did so after long essays (like *The Christian Witness to the State*) working within the terms of the old frameworks. One way to describe the shift from old Yoder to new Yoder would be as a difference in emphasis on these two aspects of his work. But once again, the division is not hard and fast. See for example, Theodore J. Koontz, “Christian Nonviolence: An Interpretation,” in Terry Nardin, ed., *The Ethics of War and Peace* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998), which nicely straddles this divide.

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lifestyle of the community of disciples, the easily-at-hand opposition between the domain of the church and the domain of the secular.”

For decades, Yoder’s insistence on speaking from a particular place, his denial of the possibility of starting from scratch, left him vulnerable to the charge that his fidelity to first-century texts left him unable to communicate to a wider public.¹⁰ The Yoderian thus bore the burden of proof in arguing that one did not have to jettison particularity in order to communicate with the wider world. This charge could take the shape of an accusation of political irrelevance or irresponsibility.

What makes the essays in this volume “new” is not so much that they agree with Yoder on this score but that they don’t think the argument is a very interesting one. They simply start with the assumption that Yoder is right and build from there, asking a different set of questions and pursuing different lines of inquiry. Old Yoder essays argue about whether or not his claim that “there is no public that is not just another particular province” is somehow “sectarian.” New Yoder essays take that claim for granted, and it rarely occurs to them to think of it as “sectarian” when it is already common knowledge to those reading Foucault or Deleuze.

Moreover, they find Yoder useful in exposing the kinds of violence implicit in many of the old liberal orthodoxies. Peter Blum captures this nicely when he calls the following Yoder lines, “a Nietzschean question”: “We want what we say not only to be understandable, credible, meaningful. . . . We hanker for patterns of argument which will not be subject to reasonable doubt. . . . To say it another way, *the hunger for validation is a hunger for power*. We want people to *have* to believe what we say.” Blum, like the other contributors to this volume, realizes that it is not just that the “public” world of universal truth was intellectually misguided, but that it was politically repressive. This intertwining of political and epistemological matters is also evident in Romand Coles’s essay, “The Wild Patience of John Howard Yoder.” Coles wrote, “few today offer as compelling a vision for pursuing justice and political

10. See James Gustafson, *Ethics from a Theocentric Perspective*, 2 vols. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981) 1:74. In old Yoder conversations, this issue was often framed as a debate between Yoder and Gordon Kaufman. See James Reimer, *Mennonites and Classical Theology*, Duane Friesen, *Artists, Citizens and Philosophers* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald, 2000) and numerous essays of Scott Holland. In contrast, new Yoder writers do not seem to have read Kaufman.

engagements in heterogeneous societies.” Against the background of Troeltsch and the Niebuhrs, such a claim was much harder to make and defend, simply because of the way the notion of “the political” was defined as an autonomous realm from which questions of knowledge were excluded. In contrast to the war-centeredness of the old Yoder, where violence was interpreted primarily in physical and narrowly political terms, new Yoder essays find in Yoder an appreciation that questions of violence and peace are as much a matter of epistemology, aesthetics, the formation of identities, etc.

It is also worth noting that new Yoder discussions tend to be conversational or dialogical in their very form. More often than not, they proceed by reading Yoder alongside some other figure, such as Foucault, Derrida, Certeau, Said, Stout, and Rowan Williams, to name just a few of the other voices to appear in this volume. Again, we turn to Romand Coles in order to illustrate the significance of this point. “What most interests me about Yoder,” Coles writes, is “the way he combines bearing evangelical witness to his confessedly provincial tradition with vulnerable and receptive dialogical practices with others.” Not only does Coles capture better than many what Yoder says about theology as a dialogical pursuit, he also appreciates the sense in which Yoder’s own work was a series of dialogical performances. Accordingly, Coles’s essay is itself an attempt to perform the kind of vulnerable and receptive dialogical engagement that he finds so powerfully exemplified by Yoder, in his case by bringing Yoder into conversation with radical democratic theory. Although the conversation partners may be different, many of the other essays included in this volume similarly approach Yoder in such a dialogical fashion.

It should be added that these essays are not first of all intended as interpretive efforts designed to make sense of Yoder’s work. They do contribute to and enrich our understanding of what Yoder said. But to assume that their primary focus is with Yoder’s work itself is to miss their full significance. They typically engage him in conversation as part of a larger constructive enterprise of some sort. They turn to Yoder because they have found him helpful in an attempt to explore a range of contemporary questions and concerns, many of which are not given explicit or extensive treatment by Yoder himself. For example, Coles engages Yoder because he finds in him a helpful resource for the task of

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articulating the sorts of insurgencies, mobilizations, and experimental practices that enable one “to envision what a more radically democratic flourishing might look like in a heterogenous world.”¹¹ Boyarin turns to Yoder as part of his ongoing efforts to interrogate the invention of the difference between Judaism and Christianity. Barber finds in Yoder an instructive alternative to the options commonly presented in the much-debated question of “the secular.” Alain Epp Weaver uses Yoder to address the Palestinian discussion of exile and return. And Cynthia Hess draws upon Yoder in order to respond to the kind of psychic violence taken up by the field of trauma theory. Moreover, some, like Gerald Schlabach, do so in ways that lead to a re-examination of some of Yoder’s favorite foils, most notably Augustine and constantinianism.¹² Accordingly, we think that the significance of these essays might be described as two-fold. Not only do they make Yoder’s work come alive in a variety of refreshing new ways. They also serve to introduce a new range of academic voices and concerns, both theological and otherwise.

How We Got Here

One feature that might go some way toward explaining the developments associated with the new Yoder is the way in which some formative moments in his life overlapped with those associated with post-structuralism and post-colonialism. The post-colonial theorist Robert Young begins his book *White Mythologies* by saying, “If the so-called ‘post-structuralism’ is the product of a single historical moment, then that moment is probably not May 1968 but rather the Algerian War of Independence. . . . In this respect it is significant that Sartre, Althusser, Derrida and Lyotard, among others, were all either born

11. Romand Coles, *Beyond Gated Politics: Reflections for the Possibility of Democracy* (Minneapolis: University of Minneapolis Press, 2005) x.

12. See also J. Alexander Sider, “Constantinianism Before and After Nicea,” in Ben Ollenburger and Gayle Gerber Koontz, eds., *A Mind Patient and Untamed: Assessing John Howard Yoder’s Contributions to Theology, Ethics, and Peacemaking* (Telford, PA: Cascadia, 2004) and Charles Mayo Collier, “A Nonviolent Augustinianism?: History and Politics in the Theologies of St. Augustine and John Howard Yoder,” PhD diss., Duke University, 2008.

in Algeria or personally involved with the events of the war.”¹³ Helene Cixous wrote, describing her childhood in Algeria,

I learned everything from this first spectacle: I saw how the white (French), superior, plutocratic, civilized world founded its power on the repression of populations who had suddenly become invisible. . . . I saw that the great, noble, “advanced” countries established themselves by expelling what was “strange.”¹⁴

There is no biographical evidence that Yoder was as affected by Algeria as Cixous. But from the perspective of the new Yoder, it seems more than coincidence that Yoder was working in Algeria in the late 50s. Those post-colonialists and post-structuralists taught us that the formation of Western politics and identity came at the expense of its colonial others. Yoder taught us to include the Anabaptists as one of the original colonial others. So Yoder’s anti-foundationalism comes not from a close reading of Quine or Wittgenstein, but rather, as with the postcolonialists, from a marginalized, persecuted minority’s recognition that the establishment’s categories themselves worked to defend against any possible destabilization from its others.

Whereas George Lindbeck and Stanley Hauerwas had to learn how to occupy the space of minority and unlearn the habits of establishment, as a Mennonite Yoder was already there and so betrayed none of post-liberalism’s anxiety about the need to secure the church’s ongoing survival in an increasingly secular world. In a similar way, it might be suggested that for Yoder, “exile” was not a regrettable fait accompli of late modernity. It was a fact of Anabaptist history. This history allowed Yoder to be way ahead of others who have blended theology with cultural studies. Twenty years before Kathryn Tanner,¹⁵ Yoder’s critique of *Christ and Culture*¹⁶ dovetailed uncannily with the work of cultural

13. Robert Young, *White Mythologies: Writing History and the West* (London: Routledge, 1990) 1.

14. Ibid.

15. See her *Theories of Culture* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1997), and “Social Theory Concerning the ‘New Social Movements’ and the Practice of Feminist Theology,” in Rebecca Chopp and Sheila Greeve Devaney, eds., *Horizons in Feminist Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1997) 179–97.

16. See “How R. Richard Niebuhr Reasoned: A Critique of *Christ and Culture*,” in Glen H Stassen, D. M. Yeager and John Howard Yoder, *Authentic Transformation: A New Vision of Christ and Culture* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1996) 31–89.

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studies theorists such as Raymond Williams, Stuart Hall, and Dick Hebdige.

More generally, it might be suggested that, largely because of the accidents of time and place, Yoder found himself ahead of an intellectual world that has only more recently come to cultivate spaces that allow a voice such as his to be heard. The emergence of the new Yoder surely has something to do with the way the North American academy has changed in the past twenty years. Whereas twenty years ago, religion was generally on the defensive throughout the academy, now intellectual luminaries such as Derrida and Certeau, Agamben, and Žižek, Chakrabarty and Asad, Stout and Coles, all find in religion a helpful antidote to some outworn modernist orthodoxies. In such a climate, the theologians who hoped to save Christianity by rendering it intelligible to its cultured despisers (Gordon Kaufman and James Gustafson, for example) can be of little help, while Yoder and Barth become important resources.

Finally, the role of Stanley Hauerwas needs to be mentioned in this regard. Hauerwas is responsible for introducing Yoder to a wider audience, so much so that, for better or worse, the names of Hauerwas and Yoder are often assumed to be synonymous. As Hauerwas came increasingly to be engaged alongside the kinds of figures and conversations mentioned above, partly on his own and partly by means of his kinship with the movement known as Radical Orthodoxy, many began to approach Yoder with those same dialogue partners in mind. And yet this has had the ironic effect of leading some to distance Yoder from Hauerwas. For example, in *Christ, History and Apocalyptic*, Nathan Kerr reads Yoder's radically apocalyptic conception of history against the tendencies toward historical closure he sees exemplified in Hauerwas's church. In his contribution to this volume, Kerr expands this reading of Yoder by placing him in conversation with Certeau. We do not mean to overemphasize the role of Hauerwas here, as if to suggest that his distinctive voice is always lurking in the background. Sometimes it is, and sometimes it isn't. Nor do we mean to suggest that the new Yoder is somehow an essentially anti-Hauerwasian Yoder. The authors represented in this volume would no doubt reflect a range of positions on that score. But we nevertheless do suspect that the relationship between

Hauerwas and Yoder has played a significant role in the emergence of the new Yoder.

Conclusion

To refer to all of this as the “new Yoder” is not an attempt to introduce a better or new-and-improved Yoder. It is worth noting, for example, that most of the essays collected here do not engage with the sources most foundational for Yoder himself—scripture and sixteenth-century Anabaptism. Not only is the new Yoder much more philosophical than Yoder himself was, it is more philosophical than he ever would have wanted to be. And he would no doubt have expressed hesitation with some of the projects he is associated with here. Similarly, in contrasting all of this with the “old Yoder,” we do not mean to imply a negative judgment on this sort of work. After all, the old Yoder—Mennonites focused on war and spending a great deal of energy sorting through the legacy of Troeltsch and the Niebuhrs—is Yoder himself. That work carried on Yoder’s work, continued fighting his battles and pursuing his agenda. It is just that his work also involved more than this. It is this “more” that *The New Yoder* points to. In so doing, we hope that these essays might serve to enrich and round out the kinds of questions taken up by an earlier generation’s interest in the work of John Howard Yoder.