

Preface

WHAT FOLLOWS IS A light revision of my Edinburgh University doctoral thesis as submitted in August 2011 and examined by Graham Ward and Fergus Kerr in October of that year. My examiners had many helpful suggestions as to how the manuscript could be improved and I am grateful for their sympathetic and sharp readings. Since the examination I have had fruitful discussions about all or part of the thesis with Tim Jenkins, Derek Robbins, and John Rempel. I have followed my readers' suggestions when possible while revising this book, though impending academic employment narrowed the scope of what I was able to accomplish. Moreover, many of my readers' comments are worthy of more extended treatment than is appropriate here given the limited aims of the project as a revision of Yoder. Two of these suggestions are worth discussing briefly, as they point to significant gaps in the present work.

The first concerns the status of my proposed "sociological theology" as a viable theological method. As outlined in chapter 4 below, sociological theology is a non-reductive contextual methodology directed toward the church's mission. But this description only hints at how my proposal may or may not overlap with other contextual methodologies and forms of "engaged theology" (such as liberation and public theologies). As important as the proposal is to the present book, I did not feel that I would be able to develop a full-blown methodology here without detracting significantly from the focus on Yoder and his legacy. Much more work on this methodology is necessary, and for that reason I hope to treat it in detail in a subsequent volume.

The second suggestion was that I be more explicit about problems with Bourdieu's "secularism." Sociological models are not theologically neutral, and their adaptation for theological purposes should be mindful of how they are shaped by assumptions about creation and divinity. In contemporary theology, Milbank's *Theology and Social Theory* is the landmark effort in theological vigilance toward secular sociology, but from a historical perspective the book belongs to a line of theological thought about as old as

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sociology itself. In earlier drafts of this manuscript I did include Milbank-style criticisms of Bourdieu, though I was never fully convinced they hit their target. However, some account of the “Christian difference” from secular sociology is necessary. Bourdieu, after all, writes as if God were dead and endorses the classical (French) sociological vision of society as God; his post-liberal anarcho-socialism—in which the defense of the welfare state is a first step toward the redistribution of political and economic power throughout the entire body politic (i.e., “God”)—is not precisely the politics of the church; and his Stoical and Spinozistic meditations on the necessity of contingency cannot be separated from his core sociological concepts, which are meant to show how contingency becomes embodied in (and denied by) our bodies and institutions. As I indicate in the introduction, the “revisions” to Yoder—which were written originally as mutual criticisms of Bourdieu and Yoder—hopefully already show clearly how I depart from Bourdieu in articulating a Christian sociological theology. But more work is needed, namely, a detailed and comprehensive theological critique of Bourdieu that also deserves its own volume.

The need to complete the project leaves another set of more recent interlocutors unanswered, and here I have in mind the several books by or about Yoder that have been published since August 2011. While writing my thesis I did not have access to three of the essays contained in *The End of Sacrifice*, a collection of Yoder’s writings on capital punishment edited by John Nugent.¹ It will be important for scholars to account for changes over time in Yoder’s approach to the topic in light of broader developments in his *oeuvre*, and *The End of Sacrifice* will be indispensable for such efforts. For the purpose of the present book, however, I do not judge that the newly available material would substantially alter my argument. The publication of Yoder’s 1966 South American lectures as *Revolutionary Christianity* poses a more difficult problem, as it contains a previously unavailable chapter on the principalities and powers.² Since this material mostly made it into *The Politics of Jesus*, I did not feel obliged to include it in the part of each chapter where I review Yoder’s other writings on the powers. *Revolutionary Christianity* provides fascinating insight into how Yoder was working toward the arguments of *The Politics of Jesus* and how those arguments hang together with arguments he makes

1. Yoder, “Capital Punishment and the Bible,” “Capital Punishment and Our Witness to Government,” and “Against the Death Penalty,” in *End of Sacrifice*, 29–36, 63–75, 77–152. The other two chapters are “The Christian and Capital Punishment” (37–62) and “You Have It Coming: Good Punishment” (153–238). I had access to earlier publications of these documents and they are referenced below in their original formats. See especially chapter 3 below, on violence.

2. Yoder, “Christ and the Powers,” in *Revolutionary Christianity*, 120–34.

elsewhere about ecclesiology and history. But, again, I did not feel like the material was so revolutionary for my own understanding of Yoder that it warranted major revision to the manuscript as it was.

There have been two books published about Yoder that do warrant serious consideration as to how they might change the arguments presented below.³ In *The Politics of Yahweh: John Howard Yoder, The Old Testament, and the People of God*, John Nugent provides the invaluable service of making sense of Yoder's vast body of writings on the Old Testament. Nugent argues persuasively that, although Yoder's approach to scripture is beset by methodological difficulties, many of his suggestions have been upheld and nuanced by scholarship and others point in fruitful directions even if they do not stand on their own merit. In his own defensive revision of Yoder's "trajectory" approach to the Old Testament—by which Yoder reads the Old Testament critically as pointing forward to the New Testament—Nugent makes an important contribution to discussions about Yoder's treatment of Israelite holy war (or "Yahweh war").⁴ Writing in *The Politics of Jesus* and elsewhere, Yoder contends that the holy wars were occasions when Israel learned to trust in God alone, and not military preparedness, for victory. Although God does use these wars to secure Israel's place in the Promised Land, the wars are ultimately a propaedeutic toward the pacifism, i.e., total trust in God, envisioned by Jeremiah and realized by Jesus. This is the basic outline or trajectory that Nugent defends as biblically and theologically adequate.

The reason Nugent must defend Yoder's work is because many of Yoder's readers find an inconsistency between this interpretation of Israelite holy war and the claim that Jesus reveals the character of God and the grain of the universe. If Jesus refuses even the most chastened forms of violence, then why was God directing battles in ancient Palestine? This question is especially troubling from an orthodox Trinitarian perspective, in which the Father and the Son (and the Holy Spirit) share attributes perfectly. If we affirm the trinitarian being of God, then we cannot affirm the violence of the Father and the nonviolence of the Son. The question has ethical implications as well, for if Jesus' nonviolence only reveals God's character partially or provisionally, then perhaps Christians are called to be nonviolent in some

3. Mention should also be made of Daniel Colucciello Barber's *On Diaspora*, which discusses Yoder in the context of a larger, Spinozistic project. Given my own debts to Yoder and, via Bourdieu, Spinoza, I find much of Barber's argument congenial to my own, even though I remain committed to the theological idiom and the faith that produces it. Barber's case for diaspora, instead of theology and philosophy, is powerful and complex, and I am still uncertain how to respond to it. I do wonder if pursuing the theological vision of Nicholas Lash's *Holiness, Speech and Silence* might constitute a beginning.

4. Nugent, *Politics of Yahweh*, 101–2, 110–18, 126–28.

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instances and violent in others. H. Richard Niebuhr's trinitarian ethic suggests a possible resolution on these terms, in which each triune person calls for a distinct ecclesial response.⁵ A "theocentric" ethic might respect pacifism as a faithful response to the Son and war as a faithful response to the Father; if carried out with integrity, perhaps in the latter case as just war, then both responses can point to the transcendent goodness of God.

Nugent, however, takes a different angle on the issue, depicting the holy wars as a provisional tactic necessary for establishing Israel in the Promised Land. "God must creatively solve the problem of forging a people of peace in a world of war," he argues, and the holy wars are the solution.⁶ Holy war serves God well, then, for two reasons: first, because it accomplishes God's purposes in history and, second, because it teaches the Israelites that God is the only security in battle. By forming Israel in such a way, God prepares it for Jesus' later witness of peace. Jesus' witness and God's former use of holy war are in no conflict. Both point to peace as the center and goal of God's purposes. Jesus may reveal the heart of God, but "his actions and teachings were [not] meant to constitute an exhaustive representation of God's responses to evil" (112). Nor is there an ethical dilemma, as Christians are called to be like Jesus and become a people of peace who trust God for their safety. Christians can be nonviolent without having to worship a nonviolent God.

Nugent does not shy away from the difficult implications of his argument, going so far as to explain the total destruction of people and property at Jericho and Ai as ritual sacrifices commanded by God to punish idolatry (116–70). Far from acts of genocide or imperialism, these were purely religious acts whose non-pragmatic nature is evident in the strange military tactics God has the Israelites undertake: marching around a city seven times and blowing a horn is not a blueprint for martial glory. The Israelite holy wars must, therefore, be understood only as a means by which God formed a people whose story culminates in the everlasting peace of Christ. They may not be used to justify genocide or any other act of violence.

This defense is a creative attempt at faithfully extending Yoder's argument while staying true to the apparent shape of the biblical text. Nevertheless, the defense looks a lot like all those expressions of false consciousness by which a people justify their founding acts of violence in order to justify their present political constitution. In this case, the more religiously, spiritually, or morally motivated the violence the better. Although the objective outcome of the Israelite holy wars is the same as any other war—territorial

5. Niebuhr, "Doctrine of the Trinity" and *Christ and Culture*. See chapter 1 below for further discussion.

6. Nugent, *Politics of Yahweh*, 102. Unless otherwise noted, references to *Politics of Yahweh* are hereafter contained in the text.

domination—they belong to a separate class of activities by virtue of God’s involvement and purpose. The appeal to Yahweh as the ultimate warrior serves as an ultimate, indisputable form of legitimation: “God gave us this land and disposed of its inhabitants, we only helped out and obeyed God. The integrity of our past and the present it authorizes is beyond dispute.”

Of course, God may have given the ancient Israelites Palestine and may have done so by using holy war. Speculative ideological critique cannot tell us what actually happened, it can only warn when our accounts of what happened resemble other accounts used to perpetuate domination. Once the resemblance is acknowledged, moral, historical, and hermeneutical judgments still have to take place. Nugent does his best to separate Israelite holy war from the specter of domination. He downplays questions about their historicity and argues that what matters is how the narratives constituted a people then and can continue to do so today (126–28). The primary arena of judgment, then, is moral, and he regards these texts as righteous because they point to peace and so are consistent with God’s overall purpose in redeeming creation. Further, since he insists that Christians, as (spiritual) beneficiaries of Israelite holy war, are called to nonviolence, he denies that Israelite holy war can be used to sanction further violence. The founding act of violence does not, in this case, legitimate a present polity’s domination.

Nugent’s solution has much to recommend it, insofar as it maintains Jesus’ nonviolence as normative for Christians without distorting the holy war passages and their depiction of God as a warrior. I remain troubled, however, by the systematic implication that God’s Word and Wisdom, the second person of the Trinity, was apparently uninvolved in the constitution of Israel, surely one of the foundational moments of salvation history. It is one thing to claim that the human Jesus was not leading the Israelites in battle, another thing altogether to say that the divine Christ through whom all things were made and all things hold together was absent from the scene. From a trinitarian perspective, the peace of Christ is not a mere dispensation but definitive of God’s being and action in the world from creation to eschaton.⁷ If the burden of exegetical proof rests on those of us who seek alternative interpretations of Israelite holy war, then there is an equally

7. See *ibid.*, 188, where Nugent defines his approach as “dispensationalist in its attention to various developments in the gradual unfolding of God’s plan.” As an Anabaptist theologian, I am especially wary of dispensationalist interpretations of scripture given their legacy at Münster, where Bernhard Rothmann told followers the age of Christ’s nonresistance had passed and the eschatological age of vengeance had begun. Anabaptist missionary Hans Hut embraced a similar hermeneutic, but, at least after the failure of the Peasants’ Revolt, maintained that the end had not yet come and so pacifism was normative for the time being. Nugent would reject such distortions, but dispensational pacifism is always vulnerable to the proclamation of a new, violent era.

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weighty theological burden to be borne by Nugent and those who agree with him.⁸

The second book that merits consideration is Paul Martens's *Heterodox Yoder*. Martens, whose earlier essays are discussed throughout the present book, here recapitulates and refines his case that Yoder progressively reduces theology to ethics, politics, and sociology. After dispatching with the shibboleths of the Yoder guild that deny the possibility of a developmental reading of Yoder's *oeuvre*,⁹ Martens sets out his argument in four stages: (1) Yoder's core theological commitments, from the very beginning, were oriented to ethics and church practices (19–53); (2) by *The Politics of Jesus*, the ethical and political focus has overtaken Yoder's ecclesiology to the point where he almost exclusively uses governmental language to describe the church (54–86); (3) throughout the 1970s and 80s, he articulates his understanding of the fundamental unity of Judaism and Christianity in ethical terms, such that his primary Jewish interlocutor, Steven Schwarzschild, is unsure why he remains a Christian (87–115); and (4) Yoder's late sociological interpretation of the sacraments makes social practice the only possible point of distinction between church and world (116–40). Yoder, Martens concludes, is “heterodox” in the sense that his sociological theology ignores the substance of historic orthodoxy and presents Jesus as merely an ethical model (143–44). In resisting the forces of theological speculation and idealism, Yoder gives in to “the powerful temptation to turn faith into just another form of ethics or series of practices” (147).

Readers of Martens's earlier essays on Yoder will find much of *The Heterodox Yoder* familiar, although he has considerably restructured the arguments and introduced significant material from Yoder's correspondence and obscure early writings. These changes render Martens's challenge to many of the prevailing interpretations of Yoder more lucid and compelling, supporting the need for the kind of revision I undertake here. That said, my response to Martens remains essentially the same as it was before the publication of *The Heterodox Yoder*. Martens work is valuable insofar as it forces close inspection of Yoder's developing theological practice and of the theological assumptions behind that practice. We are in Martens's debt for his rigorous scholarship and refusal to accept standard presentations of Yoder's

8. The contrast between biblical and theological work should not be overplayed, even when discussing the Trinity. The “systematic” problem arises precisely because of scripture passages like John 1 and Colossians 1 that relate Christ and God in the most intimate of terms. See Hurtado, *God in New Testament Theology*, for a sustained argument that the New Testament authors had a triune understanding of God.

9. Martens, *Heterodox Yoder*, 7–16. Unless otherwise noted, references to *Heterodox Yoder* are hereafter contained in the text.

work. I doubt, however, that the search for a definitive “historical Yoder” will result in a new consensus, as indicated by the lengthy online exchange between Martens and Branson Parler.¹⁰ The unlikelihood of forthcoming consensus does not, of course, render debate irrelevant. But it does suggest that the search for what Yoder “really said” might, if it is to avoid insularity and irrelevance, be subordinated to bold new attempts to move with and beyond Yoder to face the challenges of Christian living in the twenty-first century.

Nevertheless, there is one “historical Yoder” issue that scholars must face squarely, and that concerns the relationship between his sexual misconduct and his writings.¹¹ This preface is not the place to carry out a comprehensive review of Yoder’s theology based on knowledge of his sexual activity, but a few comments must be made. Yoder was a theologian for whom, in theory at least, the consistency between “walk and word” was paramount. Yet his sexual activities clearly contravened his ecclesiology and ethics. By persistently violating physical and emotional boundaries with a large number of women, he failed to exhibit patience as method in moral reasoning and he failed to participate in the dialogue that constitutes the church. Moreover, Yoder used aspects of his theology to justify his actions, as he apparently told several women that he was conducting an avant-garde ecclesial experiment. Anyone familiar with Yoder’s ecclesiology will recognize these terms as central to his understanding of the church’s role in the world: the church as firstfruits, pioneer, pilot project, and creative transformer of culture. Although Yoder’s point about the avant-garde church—it breaks with the world and demonstrates God’s coming reign—is theologically sound, perhaps his ability to twist that logic to deviant ends will caution his inheritors from claiming too much for the church and, especially, for themselves as church members. Perhaps we need to say more clearly that the church *might become* avant-garde insofar as it exhibits the integrity-in-discernment that is its calling.

In addition to a more humble ecclesiology, consideration of Yoder’s personal failings might lead us to emphasize more strongly than he did that personal spiritual integrity is vital for theological and ecclesial practice. I

10. Parler wrote a thirty-eight page review of *The Heterodox Yoder* that can be downloaded from *The Englewood Review* website (<http://erb.kingdomnow.org/the-heterodox-yoder-paul-martens-feature-review/>). That page also contains links to a response by Martens and concluding remarks by Parler.

11. For a description of Yoder’s sexual misconduct, see Hauerwas, *Hannah’s Child*, 242–47, and the articles by Tom Price in *The Elkhart Truth* published in June and July of 1992. Ted Grimsrud has posted these articles on his website, *Peace Theology* (<http://peacetheology.net/john-h-yoder/john-howard-yoder%E2%80%99s-sexual-misconduct%E2%80%94part-five-2/>).

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make this argument throughout the present book in response to critics who think Yoder favors social ethics so much that he occludes the personal and spiritual. Although we should avoid conjecturing personal reasons as to why he did not write much about the spiritual life, it is apparent that his life in this instance stands as a warning not to decouple the personal and the social, the spiritual and the ethical. Heeding that warning will likely involve moving to consider theological labor itself as a spiritual practice.

It goes without saying that no theologian will perfectly embody their stated beliefs, but attempts to grapple with Yoder's legacy that do not reflect on the relationship between his theology and personal life do not take seriously his rejection of idealism. In other words, they assume that his life and words exist on different planes, an assumption he steadfastly resisted when it came to the church's common life. Although the present book is aimed at overcoming idealism without falling into reductive materialism, I acknowledge that I was unsuccessful to the extent that I did not examine Yoder's work in light of his sexual misconduct. Further revision to my revised Yoderian sociological theology is necessary.

As with the other areas of revision, though perhaps somewhat more surprisingly in this case, Pierre Bourdieu's reflexive sociology is a helpful conversation partner. In 1975 Bourdieu published an extended essay on Martin Heidegger, a philosopher whose work was highly influential on his own.¹² Heidegger had been a member of the Nazi party and much ink had been spilled either to expose his Nazi activities and so denounce him personally, or to demonstrate how his Nazism was irrelevant to the interpretation of his "pure philosophy."¹³ Bourdieu viewed these opposite biographical and philosophical approaches as unwitting collaborators in protecting Heidegger's writings from criticism: both treated his life and work as separable. By contrast, Bourdieu's essay shows how it is the very ideology and language of "pure philosophy," of ontological inquiry completely removed from politics, that is the philosophical correlate of the Nazi obsession with racial purity. Although this move to link Heidegger's writings and politics would seem to be the strongest form of repudiation, Bourdieu insisted that his essay was "conceived above all as a methodological exercise" and therefore not an effort in "denunciation."¹⁴ "Methodological exercise" perhaps sounds

12. The essay was first published in *Actes de la recherches en science sociales* and then put out in lightly revised form as the book *L'ontologie politique de Martin Heidegger* in 1988, with an English translation appearing in 1991. References to *L'ontologie politique* here are to the 1988 edition.

13. This, anyway, is Bourdieu's understanding of the literature. See *L'ontologie politique*, 9–14.

14. *Ibid.*, 7: "Conçu avant tout comme un exercice de method, il se situe dans une

a bit clinical when dealing with such a sensitive topic, but his point is that the science of understanding how politics and intellectual work intersect is more important than the legacy of this one man. That is because such a science, for Bourdieu, gives its adherents the possibility of understanding, and so of changing, life, work and their often hidden relationship. And so it is for Yoder. Far from denouncing him, we should be concerned to understand him lest we fall into the same trap. There is much to give thanks for in Yoder's legacy, but our thankfulness should not preclude our recognition of the need for repentance.

Yoder eventually did submit to a disciplinary process initiated by the Indiana-Michigan Mennonite Conference, the regional body responsible for his ministerial credentials. Those involved in the process, which lasted over three years, were satisfied to the extent that they publicly "encourage[d] Yoder and the church to use his gifts of writing and teaching."¹⁵ A cautionary reading might suggest that Yoder went through the motions and fooled those tasked with overseeing the process. We now have no way of knowing for sure. What is evident, however, is that his readiness to undergo discipline and offer assurances of repentance were, finally, consistent with his ecclesiology. Sin permeates our world. There is no way of ensuring in advance that Christian leaders will avoid egregious error and live exemplary lives. When error occurs forgiveness and restoration is called for, and Jesus provided an invitation and opportunity for those to be realized. Without downplaying the seriousness of Yoder's failings, we can be grateful that he persistently called Christians to follow Jesus and so to discern and forgive sin. We can best honor Yoder's legacy, in all its complexity, by imitating the politics of Jesus and becoming ministers of reconciliation in church and world.

perspective qui n'est pas celle de la dénonciation."

15. This quote is from the Conference's news release "Disciplinary Process with John Howard Yoder Draws to a Close." I am grateful to Sara Wenger Shenk for making available to me this release and other relevant documents about the conclusion of the process.