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Chapter Four

THE LIBERAL READING OF YODER

The Problem of Yoder Reception and the Need for a Comprehensive Christian Witness

CRAIG A. CARTER

The influence of John Howard Yoder now extends far beyond his own Mennonite tradition. There is no need for this chapter to document the steadily increasing number of publications that indicate the significant influence his thought is now exerting on both Roman Catholics and Protestants and, within Protestantism, on both Evangelicals and Liberals. But as Yoder's influence grows the problem of how to receive his work becomes more complex and more contested. This paper is too brief to reflect this complexity; there may be as many as five or six different interpretations of Yoder on offer at the moment. Due to limitations of space, I do not deal here with the best known approach to Yoder interpretation, the postliberal interpretation of Stanley Hauerwas, nor with the new book by Nathan Kerr, which seeks to "rescue" Yoder from Hauerwas and presents a radically Barthian, apocalyptic Yoder.¹ My concern here is the growing number of scholars and activists who have pressed Yoder into the service of their liberal theological agendas. It is a concern because it makes use of Yoder's thought in such a way as to imply that his theology has nothing to offer beyond the realm of the immanent and the human. Such theology is not properly theology at all, but merely a dressed-up form of humanistic social science or secular politics. Ironically, some Mennonite scholars have been at the forefront of this trend, cheering on the liberal use of Yoder, having consciously or unconsciously made their own personal decision to interpret the Mennonite tradition as a subset of liberal Protestantism, rather than as having more in common with either Evangelical Protestantism or the Roman Catholic tradition.

This approach, which I have called in my title, "The Liberal Reading of Yoder," is of concern on two levels. On the one hand, it is a concern strictly on the level of historical theology. The liberal reading of Yoder is debatable and needs to be challenged on the basis of the evidence so that scholarly opinion can come to a reasoned judgment in the matter. On the other hand, it is a concern on the level of how we ought to go about doing theology and ethics in our contemporary situation and what kind of resources Yoder offers to this on-going work of the church. Let me be more specific about these concerns.

There are two main pillars of Yoder interpretation for which I have argued in the past and which are, I think, central to this debate. First, there is a high degree of continuity in his thought over the course of his career, which implies that his later work on the importance of the Jeremianic turn and the exile for the shape of Christian ecclesiology and mission can and should be interpreted in the light of his earlier thought and not as a radical departure from it.² Second, his thought is rooted in the theology of Karl Barth, especially in Barth's confession of deeply traditional versions of the doctrines of Revelation, Trinity, and Incarnation. Sometimes the roots are explicit, while other times they are implicit; but Yoder can be interpreted as presupposing and extending the Christocentric theology of Barth in the realm of ethics and ecclesiology.³ Despite the fact that these two lines of interpretation are ones I have advanced and continue to defend, I must acknowledge that they are not being accepted by a good number of Yoder's interpreters today, as we shall see below.

Many who are inclined to be sympathetic to classical orthodoxy tend not to be sympathetic to Yoder, and

this may well be due to the way in which those who advocate an immanent, ethical-political reading of the Christian gospel often attempt to assimilate Yoder to their essentially modern project. Those of us who continue to insist on interpreting Yoder in a way that is not hostile to the “Great Tradition” of historic Christianity are fighting an uphill battle and, in the end, it may even prove to be a lost cause. Yet, it seems to me that those who stand within the “Great Tradition” of catholic and evangelical orthodoxy stand to experience a considerable loss if Yoder’s ecumenical reception results in the assimilation of the politics of Jesus to the modern, liberal tradition in which we find such movements as the social gospel and liberation theology.

My purpose in this chapter is to examine and critique the liberal reading of Yoder and to offer some thoughts on how Yoder can be received by the ecumenical church. I argue that the liberal reading fails as a contribution to ecumenical theology and that my interpretation, while not without problems of its own, at least renders it possible to read Yoder as a theologian of the Christian church, rather than as a sectarian despiser of the majority tradition of Christian orthodoxy down through the centuries. For those for whom sectarianism is no vice, my interpretation undoubtedly will seem like a perverse attempt to “tame” Yoder. But, for those who cherish the church catholic throughout the centuries, I hope that my reading will enable Yoder’s work to enrich Christian reflection on ethical and political issues across the ecumenical spectrum. Before turning to the liberal reading of Yoder, I summarize briefly my own reading.

My Reading of Yoder’s Pacifism

Yoder did not view his “pacifism of the messianic community” as interchangeable with liberal pacifism. In the third edition of his *Nevertheless: Varieties of Christian Pacifism*, Yoder lays out sixteen major and twelve minor types of pacifism before coming to his own preferred view in chapter nineteen. Here he writes, “To say that this is the pacifism of the *messianic* community is to affirm its dependence upon the confession that Jesus is Christ and that Jesus Christ is Lord. To say that Jesus is the Messiah is to say that in him are fulfilled the expectations of God’s people regarding the coming one in whom God’s will would perfectly be done. Therefore, in the person and work of Jesus, in his teachings and his passion, this kind of pacifism finds its rootage, and in his resurrection it finds its enablement.” Yoder goes on to write, “It follows that the character of such a messianic community position can be known only in relation to Jesus Christ.”⁴

Now this is an epistemological point: we cannot know this kind of pacifism from any other source, such as experience, nature, or world religions because it is bound up with the historical particularity of God’s self-revelation in Jesus Christ. But it is also a Christological point. Yoder goes on to say, “Note well that although all the positions reviewed above are held by Christians, this is the only position for which the person of Jesus is indispensable. It is the only one of these positions which would lose its substance if Jesus were not Christ and would lose its foundation if Jesus were not Lord.”⁵ Note that he says that the *substance* of the pacifism of the messianic community is known only through Jesus Christ. Jesus is not merely an inspiration to take up a pacifist position that was previously known but perhaps not embraced out of lethargy or fear. It is not that we all know what pacifism is already and Jesus merely provides compelling leadership to get us moving in the right direction; what Yoder is saying here is that we would not even know what pacifism is without the Incarnation, including the sinless life, radical teachings, miracles, saving death, bodily resurrection, ascension, present session, and future return of Jesus Christ. It is Jesus Christ who gives content and meaning to Christian pacifism with the result that our pacifist action is taken up by the Spirit of God and made into a true witness to the gospel.

I interpret this passage as being in harmony with his statement in *The Politics of Jesus* to the effect that, from the perspective of dogmatic theology, his view of Jesus is “more radically Nicene and Chalcedonian than other views.”⁶ He explains that demonstrating this point is not his task in this book because his focus is exegetical, rather than dogmatic. But he gives a strong hint that a dogmatic defense of the politics of Jesus is possible, which is to say that one does not need to reject the tradition of classical trinitarian and Christological orthodoxy in order to embrace the politics of Jesus.

In *The Politics of Jesus*, Yoder is at pains to distance himself from what he calls “the mainstream ethical consensus” and “the theology of the natural” by which we develop an ethic of “vocation” or “station” or “the situation” or “natural law.” Yoder says that the problem in all of these cases is that it is “by studying the

realities around us, not by hearing a proclamation from God, that we discern the right.”⁷ When Yoder speaks of “a proclamation from God” here, we should not imagine some sort of private inspiration received by an individual, or a consensus developed through congregational discussion, or a discovery made by employing the tools of social scientific analysis, but rather what Paul in 1 Corinthians calls “the gospel,” that is, the proclamation of the saving events centering on the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. The gospel is the central proclamation of the church and the inalterable source, foundation, and warrant for the kind of pacifism Yoder is advocating.

The Liberal Reading of Yoder

In what I am calling the liberal reading of Yoder, however, these emphases are largely reversed or ignored. Instead of pacifism being known only through the gospel, pacifism is known in advance of hearing the gospel. Pacifism is understood as a message of nonviolence found in many religions, such as in Hinduism and Buddhism for example, and in many cultures and periods of human history. Nonviolence becomes a principle which is known rationally and functions as a tool for the ideological critique of the entire Christian tradition, including the Scriptures and the Creeds. The kind of natural theology that Yoder rejected seeks to root itself in black, womanist, and feminist experience with the result that Jesus becomes a symbol of our commitment to inclusion, tolerance, and peace. This reduction of the gospel to natural theology results in catastrophic damage to important doctrines, including the nature of God, the atonement, and the authority of Scripture. In each case, nonviolence functions as an ideological critique of traditional Christian orthodoxy and a premise for theological revisionism. A good example of a theologian who risks turning nonviolence into natural theology is J. Denny Weaver.

J. Denny Weaver

Weaver, in his book *The Nonviolent Atonement*, develops a new atonement theory called “narrative *Christus Victor*” in an attempt to avoid problems inherent in existing atonement theories, especially in the satisfaction and penal substitutionary theories. He writes, “This book presents the results of the efforts to develop an understanding of atonement that made sense in its own right as a statement about the universal significance of Jesus Christ but also answered questions raised by the contextual theologies. The working assumption in development of this model is that the rejection of violence, whether the direct violence of the sword or the systemic violence of racism or sexism, should be visible in expressions of Christology and atonement.”⁸

Here we see a correlationist approach in which what makes sense as an expression of the universal significance of Jesus Christ is correlated with questions raised by contextual theologies. The social analysis that produces constructions such as “racism” and “sexism” is taken as a given and the job of the theologian is assumed to be bringing systematic theology into line with these social scientific constructions. Weaver goes on to define violence very broadly as “harm or damage.” He says that this broad definition includes killing, of course, but it also includes physical harm, injury to bodily integrity, and “a range of acts and conditions that include damage to a person’s dignity or self-esteem.” Slavery, contemporary racism, and “social practices that proscribe set roles for women and limit their opportunities” are all considered by Weaver to be violence. Even the criminal justice system, insofar as it inflicts punishment and is not purely restorative, is violent. Interestingly however, and not entirely consistently, when it comes to defining nonviolence, Weaver allows that nonviolent resistance is not violence.⁹

Weaver argues that nonviolence is intrinsic to “the story of Jesus” and therefore “should be a constitutive, shaping element of Christian theology, rather than emerging as an issue to deal with after one has established the theological foundation or the framework on some other basis.” Perhaps sensing the implications of his view of the centrality of nonviolence as a principle, he states that “this does not reduce Jesus or the gospel to nonviolence.”¹⁰ While I agree that recognizing the teaching of Jesus on nonviolence in the Scriptures *need not* necessarily reduce Jesus or the gospel to nonviolence, I am not so sure that this outcome is avoided in Weaver’s own theology. Weaver is clear that the question of nonviolence is a matter that goes beyond Christology to the issue of God’s nature.¹¹

Let us note the logical steps in Weaver’s argument. First, he has taken the words of Jesus in the Sermon on

the Mount about enemy love and used them to justify a broad definition of nonviolence, the content of which is filled out by modern ideologies and social scientific tools of cultural analysis. Second, this theory of nonviolence is used as a criterion to reject certain atonement theories, specifically satisfaction and penal substitutionary theories that work by means of violence. Third, in the process of this revision of atonement theories, the issue of God's character arises. Is God a God of wrath? Does God judge sin and sinners? Must not God be nonviolent if Jesus reveals God and Jesus is nonviolent? All violence is assumed to be immoral, and punishment is considered to be violence. Fourth, in response to these questions, the depiction of God as wrathful and determined to punish sin is based on a false view of God as immoral and violent. God therefore must be reconceived altogether and much of the traditional doctrine of God must be revised. Fifth, this also has implications for the doctrine of the authority of Scripture, since God in the Old Testament (and in the New Testament!) is depicted as a God of wrath and judgment. Specifically, the wars of the extermination of the Canaanites by Israel under Joshua must be judged to be immoral and so the God of the Old Testament narrative cannot be the God of Jesus. This argument results in a thorough-going revision of biblical authority, God, sin, atonement, and the Christian life.

In some ways, however, Weaver's revisionist proposals are rather conservative and tame compared to some of the other theological trajectories that have started from his premise, such as the "death of God" theologies. At least Weaver in this book does not give up the Christian teaching on the divinity of Christ or reject the Christian God altogether. Weaver is conservative in that he attempts to develop an atonement theory in which the resurrection still has a normative and central place. This is crucial to his contention that his theology does not make Jesus dispensable. Gandhi cannot stand in for Jesus because Jesus was raised from the dead and Gandhi was not. The person of Jesus remains as necessary for Weaver as for Yoder, at least so far as Weaver is concerned.

Unfortunately, there is a serious internal inconsistency in Weaver's theory that practically guarantees that those who find his views persuasive will not be able to resist going further in the process of abstraction thereby losing the particularity of Jesus Christ as a unique revelation of God. Weaver criticizes other atonement theories for their employment of divine violence. He writes, "Unavoidably, therefore, the satisfaction theory implicates God in the sanction of violence." He expands on this statement: "Stated crassly, in satisfaction atonement God orchestrates the scenario in which Jesus is sent to earth for the purpose of dying to satisfy the offended honor of God. . . . When analyzed from a nonviolent perspective, it is apparent that satisfaction atonement depends on violent imagery—death is needed to satisfy God—with the attendant implication that the sanction on this violence is intrinsic to the character of God. God is the one who arranges for that death to satisfy God. This is intrinsically an image of a violent God or a God who sanctions violence."¹²

Leaving aside the question of whether or not this is a fair depiction of the actual satisfaction theory as it has been held in the Christian tradition, I want to focus on Weaver's point that God is violent because God sanctions violence insofar as God "arranges for" Jesus' death. The obvious implication here is that if God were nonviolent, God would find a different way than allowing Jesus to be killed. But a problem immediately arises: in Weaver's narrative *Christus Victor* theory, God accomplishes the atonement through Jesus' death on the cross by which he defeats the powers and then raises Jesus from the dead to demonstrate Jesus' Lordship. Obviously, there can be no resurrection without a death. So if the resurrection is the key to Weaver's atonement theory, how convincing is it to say that Weaver's theory, unlike all the others, does not "need" the death of Christ?

Weaver recognizes that he has a problem here and he admits that narrative *Christus Victor* contains violence, but he argues that "it is not God's violence, nor violence sanctioned or needed or used by God. The violence in narrative *Christus Victor* comes from the side of the forces of evil that killed Jesus."¹³ But what can Weaver possibly mean by saying that God does not "need" Jesus' death in order to accomplish the atonement? Suppose Jesus had lived to a ripe old age and died of natural causes. Would the atonement still have taken place? If we say yes, the death and resurrection of Christ was optional in God's plan—a contingency rooted in the free will of human beings. If we say no, we are back to God somehow "needing" Christ's death. So it appears, on Weaver's premises, that the answer must be yes, the "atonement" is thinkable apart from the death and resurrection of Christ.

Yet if it is meaningful to state that God could have saved us without the death of Christ, then how important can the atonement really be? Why not dispense with the whole concept of atonement altogether? Those in the Socinian and Unitarian-Universalist traditions are happy to do just that. Weaver does not want us to go this far. So he must somehow convince us that his theory really *does* require the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. But he has backed himself into a corner and cannot do it, lest his critique of other theories rebound on his own.

Weaver contrasts his view with other atonement views, saying, “*Christus Victor* does contain violence, but it is not God’s violence The violence in narrative *Christus Victor* comes from the side of the forces of evil that killed Jesus.¹⁴ The problem here is that *any* theory of atonement could say as much. Anselm and Calvin portray the death of Christ as being caused by the human and demonic forces of evil, as does the New Testament itself.¹⁵ But Anselm, Calvin, and the New Testament (Acts 2:23) all agree that this horrendous evil was foreseen by God and yet God sent Jesus anyway—knowing in advance that Jesus would die—because this was the only way for God to redeem his good creation. It seems to me that Weaver must either deny that God had foreknowledge or say something very similar to what Anselm, Calvin, and the New Testament say. How it is not “divinely sanctioned violence” for the Father to send the Son knowing in advance that the Son would die in narrative *Christus Victor*? Will those who follow Weaver and build on his thought see this as a meaningful distinction? There is already evidence that the answer is no.

Philip E. Stoltzfus

In an essay presented at a Yoder conference held in Toronto in 2007,¹⁶ Philip E. Stoltzfus argues that Yoder should have been bolder in following Gordon Kaufman in his program of imaginative theological construction. The reason he thinks so is that he sees Yoder as locked into the dilemma of believing in a nonviolent Jesus and a violent God. Stoltzfus refers to an article by Ray Gingerich in which Gingerich accuses Yoder of inconsistency in continuing to hold to an explanation for holy war in the Old Testament that presupposes that God can justly punish sinners without thereby becoming violent and immoral.¹⁷ Yoder’s explanation of how the Father of Jesus Christ could be one and the same as the Old Testament God who ordered the extermination of the Canaanites is a failure, according to Gingerich and Stoltzfus. Yoder understands the institution of holy war in pre-monarchial Israel as one in which Israel is meant to be pacifist because God fights for Israel and defeats the enemy in a way epitomized by the Red Sea event and the battle of Jericho. Yoder argues that later in Israel’s history, as a result of disobedience, Israel institutionalized warfare under the kings and in so doing was disobedient. God’s plan, from which the monarchy was merely a distraction, was actually to preserve Israel miraculously as God’s witness among the nations. Hence Yoder saw the exile as God’s will for his people.

The problem with this line of thought for Gingerich is that it supposes that divine judgment is moral, a belief which Gingerich, like Stoltzfus and Weaver, rejects. Stoltzfus agrees with Gingerich that Yoder never came to grips with the violent God of the Old Testament, but unlike Gingerich, Stoltzfus has a solution. Stoltzfus proposes that if Yoder had taken more seriously the idea that God is a “concept” or “model” invented by human beings and that the task of theology, as theologians such as Gordon Kaufman and Sally McFague have contended, is to create models of God by an act of creative imagination that can speak to our contemporary situation, then Yoder could have overcome this contradiction. In other words, if Yoder had allowed nonviolence to become his “principle of principles” in constructing a new model of God for the twenty-first century, he could have had a nonviolent Jesus *and* a nonviolent God.

Now, faced with the apparent contradiction in Yoder’s thought identified by Gingerich and the residual “violence” involved in narrative *Christus Victor*, what will a younger generation of theologians influenced by Weaver do? It seems to me that Stoltzfus has already identified the wave of the future. Stoltzfus notes three reasons Gingerich gives as to why he thinks Yoder never addressed the contradiction between a violent God and a nonviolent Jesus and he sees in them an agenda for where Mennonite theology needs to go next. First, Yoder was a product of the Mennonite community and, perhaps more important, he had immense loyalty to it. He creatively expanded the theological paradigm of his mentors but never broke out of it. Yoder could not break free of the conservatism of Mennonite church life and embrace the theological revisionism dominant in

the secular academy. Though Yoder laid the foundation for the next step, he was unable to take it for personal, familial, and cultural reasons. Second, Yoder was, to the end of his life, a tempered Barthian and a “biblical realist.” This framework did not allow sufficient freedom to view Scripture more dialogically as the product of a fallible and faltering people of God, that is, as a collection of writings produced and preserved by communities in which power politics was at times more determinative than faithful prophecy and servanthood. In other words, Yoder was trapped by a high view of biblical authority. Third, Yoder seems to have had an innate urge to sacralize the Hebrew worldview or, more specifically, to view certain events in ancient Israel’s history as *Urgeschichte*, beyond the pale of historical analysis.¹⁸

Where Gingerich and Weaver stop in their analysis, Stoltzfus begins. For Stoltzfus, it is out with Barth, in with Kaufman; out with biblical realism, in with philosophical naturalism; out with the traditional doctrine of God, in with late modern experiential models of God. After Weaver’s narrative *Christus Victor* theory, which rejects other atonement theories because in them God needs the death of Jesus but still wishes to retain the death and resurrection of Jesus as necessary and central to its doctrine of the atonement, where can we expect theology to go next? The next natural step is to do away with the concept of atonement altogether and to construct a model of God out of modern identity politics—a model that allows us to view Jesus as one of many symbols of nonviolence and one of many ways to a nonviolent God, a model that has been purged of Christian particularity, the centrality of the Incarnation, and the idea that the salvation of the world came exclusively through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

An Ecumenical Reading of Yoder

In *The Politics of the Cross*,¹⁹ I interpret Yoder as a Barthian, biblical realist who stands in the Great Tradition of classical Christian orthodoxy and whose defense of the politics of Jesus presupposes both a high Christology and a high view of biblical authority. The most important implication of this interpretation is that Yoder is an ecumenical theologian who must be taken seriously by the whole Christian church.

I still hold to this interpretation of Yoder, but reading the literature on Yoder over the past eight years has prompted me to wonder what it is about Yoder’s thought that makes it at once so attractive, yet also in need of serious revision, to those who are attracted by the modern project of revising Christian faith to make it compatible with a modern, secular, scientific, liberal, individualist worldview. The typical modern revisionist views all of Christian thought from the Apostles to the Enlightenment as so much “fundamentalism” and laments the persistence of such thinking into the post-modern era. The main task of many university departments of religion and liberal seminaries today is to search through the rubble of this “fundamentalist, pre-modern theology” in search of fragments that can be rescued and somehow fit into the modern worldview as “proof” that the project is not the rejection of Christianity outright. The attempt to claim the mantle of Yoder for an essentially modern project strikes me as slightly absurd, but no more so than the attempt to co-opt other well-known Christian figures, whose prominence as spokesmen for their traditions makes them important symbols of continuity for a project that is essentially discontinuous with the tradition of the church.

In the last section, I want to examine six strategies that can be pursued and to evaluate each one as to its effectiveness in promoting an interpretation of Yoder that does not make him say the opposite of what he actually said in the service of modern revisionism.

Strategy #1

Emphasize Yoder’s high view of Scripture and rule out any interpretation of his thought that requires a low view of biblical authority

This strategy emphasizes Yoder’s biblical realism and the high view of biblical authority that the biblical realist movement shares with the church throughout history. While Catholics and Protestants may differ over the role of tradition in the interpretation of Scripture and the formulation of dogma, they agree that the Bible is the inspired Word of God and must be interpreted, rather than denied, replaced, or ignored. The strength of this approach is that it strikes at the heart of the modern project of locating truth in the self-positing, thinking subject, rather than in God and in divine revelation. The weakness is that modern revisionists have two centuries of experience stretching the biblical text into strange shapes in order to evade the charge of denying it outright, and so the debate over whether, for example, the wars of Israel were actually commanded by

Yahweh is likely to be interminable. Revisionists are adept at obtaining by obfuscation what they are unable to win by clear argument. Will this strategy suffice alone? I strongly doubt it will prevent the use of Yoder for revisionist purposes in isolation from other strategies. This weakness is shared by much conservative Evangelical theology.

Strategy #2

Insist on Yoder's distinction between divine judgment and human violence and reject the reduction of the former to the latter on theological grounds

This second strategy develops the fundamental insight that God is God and not human. The infinite gulf between God and humanity means that it is dangerous simply to apply human concepts to God. All theological language is analogical, and every comparison between God and humanity involves more dissimilarity than similarity. This strategy involves making fine distinctions between divine judgment, human force, and violence.

Judgment is properly and primarily applied to God alone, although there is a pale imitation of it among humans. The paleness of such imitation is the result of original sin. We may try to judge righteously, but we often fail completely and never get it perfectly right. God, on the other hand, is presented in Scripture as “the righteous Judge,” (e.g., Ps 96), who judges in a perfectly equitable, just, and fair manner at all times. God is holy, so he hates sin, and righteous, so he must punish sin. Therefore, “the wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of men who suppress the truth by their wickedness” (Rom 1:18 NIV). Nothing in the teaching of Jesus or the New Testament as a whole contradicts this essentially Jewish, Old Testament teaching about the nature of God. The whole concept of human government in the Judeo-Christian tradition is built, as Oliver O’Donovan points out, on the function of right judgment.²⁰

Force is the use of disciplinary, police, or military means to make laws effective and stop evil. It can also be used to shape character. Force is different from violence in that it is constrained by law, limited in scope, and rationally deployed. Force consists of various grades up to and including lethal force. But force always operates within rationally determined limits. If it exceeds those limits it turns into violence, which is a constant threat in a fallen world. The difference between God’s wrath and human force is that God’s wrath is always an exact reflection of his righteous judgment, whereas human force is, at best, an approximation and, at worst, a demonic mockery of God’s righteous judgment. An example of disciplinary force would be parental punishment of children. An example of police force would be policemen arresting murderers or thieves. An example of military force would be just war, but not total war, crusades, or nuclear holocaust.

Violence can be defined as the human use of force when it is unconstrained by law, unlimited in scope, and irrational. Force may turn into violence at any moment; it lives on the boundary between law and lawlessness. Parental discipline can become violent if parents are not selfcontrolled. In certain situations, large scale use of force almost inevitably morphs into violence as, for example, in a large scale war in which irrational powers such as nationalism or racism come into play and commandeer the whole enterprise. This is one of the most troubling problems with the deployment of just war theory in the real world.

Since God is the author of judgment, not violence, the apparent discrepancy between a nonviolent Jesus and a “violent” God disappears as a misunderstanding of what divine judgment is. Liberals collapse all three categories into one and reject them all. Yoder would reject all violence and most force, but not judgment. There is no need to reject divine judgment in order to reject violence. This approach is crucial, in my view, for guarding Yoder and the wider Christian tradition from misinterpretation.

Strategy #3

Distinguish between Yoder's Christologically-based view of discipleship and a natural theology of nonviolence of which Christ becomes a mere symbol

This third strategy distinguishes between the basis of Christian pacifism and the basis of liberal pacifism and argues that they are different in substance and not merely in how they are known. This approach builds on Yoder’s own thinking in *Nevertheless* and involves the differentiating of the motives, goals, priorities, and shape of the Christian life from those of the “noble pagan,” “secular humanist,” or “liberal individualist.” For

one thing, Christian patience with error is not the same as liberal tolerance, which tends to view all human ethical choices as equally valid simply because they are free. This is to replace morality with values and to eviscerate the Christian understanding of creation and God's law as the basis of true morality.

Christians have as their highest priority the evangelization of the world during this time between the times, the era between Jesus' first and second comings. As part of their witness to the reality of God, the sinfulness of the human race, the need for forgiveness of sin, and the provision of reconciliation through the cross of Jesus Christ, Christians are bound to bear witness to the fact that for one human being to take the life of another simply for the convenience of the stronger person is intrinsically evil. It is an example of what Christ came to save us from. We cannot preach the gospel if we turn sin into choice and remove guilt from choices that violate God's law. My point here is that Christians have theological and evangelical reasons why they cannot interpret nonviolence in such a way that it becomes a cover for the will to power of the strong. It is not only a matter of justice; it is a matter of faithfulness to our Lord in the life of discipleship.

Strategy #4

Stress the differing God-ordained roles of the church and the state in the current time between the first and second comings of Jesus and the necessity of the church to be nonviolent because of its commission to preach the gospel of salvation and the necessity of the state to use force to restrain evil even though the risk of falling into violence is always a danger

This strategy involves stressing something about which Yoder was ambiguous. Yoder argued that God, in some way, "orders" the state and makes use of its employment of the sword so as to preserve at least a rough kind of order in fallen human society. Yet he rejected the idea that we need a "theory" of the state and avoided any talk of the state being used by God to establish or enforce Christianity. Yoder argued stringently against the over-interpretation of Romans 13 in *The Politics of Jesus*, which holds that, because the state has a divinely sanctioned or permitted role in preserving public order for the common good, Christians should play a part in the state. For Yoder, the state is a pagan institution that will always be there in one form or another and which Christians must not trust too much.

This careful, nuanced approach to the state is a long way from modern messianic concepts of the state as provider of the necessities of life and bringer of justice as equality that characterize much of modern thought. However, Yoder's view of the modest role of the state stands in some tension with his tendency to push the boundaries of what can be accomplished in the political realm in the name of justice and peace. Since he sought to avoid the isolationism of his conservative Mennonite forebears and wished to engage the world, he was drawn toward a stance of calling the state to nonviolence.

This could be seen as opening the door to pressing Yoder into the service of liberal pacifism and its lamentable naivety about the effects of sin and its sunny utopianism. It must be admitted that this tendency builds on a regrettable ambiguity in Yoder's thought and is not a misuse of it in the way that certain other uses of his theology are. Here we must be clear that if we wish to maintain a pacifist stance, we must accept that sometimes (often?) the world will pronounce us "irrelevant" and rule us out of a place at the table. This is the price that must be paid for a consistent pacifist ethic and it should not be assumed that it can be finessed in every case by convincing non-Christians to join us in our pacifist stance.

Strategy #5

Accept Karl Barth's "practical pacifism" in place of "absolute pacifism" so as to leave the door open a crack for the possibility of God commanding Christians to exercise lethal force in extreme situations (that is, the Grenzfall or borderline situation)

This fifth strategy involves accepting something that Yoder did not accept. In his book on Barth's ethics of war, Yoder discussed the notion of the *Grenzfall* in chapter nine.²¹ Barth utilized this notion in order to preserve God's freedom to command exceptions to general rules in exceptional circumstances. However, as Yoder points out, the definition of an exception is actually left to human reasoning processes rather than being a literal command from God.²² Yoder agrees that the *Grenzfall* helpfully reminds us of our limitations as finite human beings to know in advance what God's command must be in any new situation. But he adds that it is equally impossible to know in advance that God might actually command someone to kill. In other

words, the theological value of the *Grenzfall* in protecting the freedom of God and reminding us of our own finitude in no way translates into our certitude that war will turn out to be morally right in some cases. Yoder concludes that “the analysis of the concept of the *Grenzfall* itself has given us no new information on the war question.”²³ Insofar as it functions to inform us that sometimes war is justifiable, Yoder argues, it has become a form of natural theology and therefore inconsistent with Barth’s overall theology.²⁴

It seems clear to me that Yoder is correct in his analysis of Barth’s use of the *Grenzfall*. The only way to approve of what Barth is doing is to approve of natural theology and to hold that it is possible to know from an analysis of the situation that war is sometimes just. Yoder is therefore right to think that Barth would be more consistent simply to eliminate the *Grenzfall* from his ethics altogether and simply say no to war altogether.

Strategy #6

Accept Yoder’s case for pacifism as a convincing case for the proper place of pacifist groups within the Christian church as a witness to the future, eschatological kingdom of peace, while also accepting that the involvement of other Christians in just war constitutes a necessary witness to the current fallen world in which an imperfect peace is kept by the sword imperfectly as a witness to the doctrine of the fall and the need for redemption

This strategy involves making a major modification of Yoder’s thought, one which he certainly would not have approved. It involves saying that Yoder was wrong to insist that pacifism is required of all disciples, which implies that those who try, in good conscience, to follow the just war theory necessarily are wrong and disobedient. If we make this modification to Yoder’s thought, we can incorporate a vocational pacifism into a church that also allows for participation in just war for those not called to vocational pacifism. To make such a modification is basically to save Yoder from liberal Protestantism by making him a Catholic. However, this is tantamount to denying that Anabaptism is a viable third way.

Roman Catholics and Protestants, because of their different histories, inevitably hear Yoder’s call to radical discipleship and pacifism differently. For Catholics, it is possible to respond to Yoder’s call to pacifism without leaving their tradition, since the Catholic tradition has always included both pacifist and non-pacifist Christians in the same church. The monastic orders, the secular clergy, and the hierarchy have always been pacifist, even though the vast majority of the faithful have been permitted to use limited force in police and just war actions. It has been thought that a complete Christian witness requires both a pacifist and a just war component. On the one hand, the faithful were allowed to engage in limited just war as a testimony to the tragic reality of original sin and that, in this time between the first and second comings of Jesus Christ, the kingdom of God has not yet come in its fullness. On the other hand, the witness of the religious orders and clergy was necessary to point toward the Christian hope for the eschatological kingdom and to emphasize that the kingdom has already begun in the person of the King—the Lord Jesus Christ. When the pacifist part of the witness is missing, the truth of the first coming is compromised and the reality of the Spirit’s work in the church today is denied; when the just war part of the witness is missing, the truth of the second coming is compromised and the door is left open to utopian disasters rooted in the denial of original sin and the pretentiousness of thinking we can establish the eschatological kingdom here and now. So for a Catholic to read Yoder and become a convinced pacifist does not entail changing the Catholic tradition; it merely means adopting a pacifist vocation.

For Protestants it is considerably different. At the time of the sixteenth-century Reformation, the magisterial reformers sought protection against their papist enemies from the princes of northern Europe. At this time, the nation states of modern Europe were beginning to form and so church and state became deeply intertwined in Germany, England, and elsewhere, as Protestant state churches came into being. The new state churches had no counter-balancing international identity as Catholics had in the institution of the Papacy, which led to a situation in which Protestants, eager to please their protectors, became zealous in their rejection of anyone who would not fight in defense of the new Protestant governments. This meant that the Anabaptists were in trouble. In the Thirty-Nine Articles of the Church of England, for example, Anabaptists were singled out for condemnation for refusing to bear the sword under the authority of the magistrate.²⁵ In addition, Protestantism rejected and destroyed monasticism as monkish works righteousness. So, instead of

the Anabaptists becoming a pacifist wing of Protestantism and fulfilling a similar role as monasticism in the pre-Reformation church, they were mercilessly persecuted by Catholics and Protestants alike.

Against this historical backdrop, when a Protestant encounters Yoder's politics of Jesus, the reaction is quite different from the Catholic's reaction. There are two choices for the Protestant. One may convert to a Mennonite church and regard Protestantism as sub-Christian, or one may embrace pacifism in a Protestant way by concluding that all true Christians must be pacifists and preaching pacifism for everyone. The magisterial Protestant logic is one state, one church, and one theology. Even in a context of the formal separation of church and state, Protestants are so used to being in charge that they assume their theology should be the theology of the state. But this "pacifism for everyone" stance leads directly to liberal pacifism and engenders the revision of the whole of Christian theology according to the principle of nonviolence. So the project of theological revisionism in which Weaver and company are engaged seems to be a straight-forwardly Protestant endeavor.

Although conservative Protestants continue to reject pacifism as heretical and the historic peace churches as sectarian, liberal Protestants are open to the idea of pacifism or nonviolence because they have already come to reject original sin and a literal second coming. Since liberal Protestants are open to modern ideas of progress, pacifism seems to them appropriate for anyone wishing to work for peace and justice in the world. Liberal Protestantism is inherently Constantinian, it seems to me, and this explains why Protestants find it difficult to receive Yoder without becoming liberal pacifists. This constitutes the single most important problem in Yoder reception today. It seems to me that, in order to receive Yoder without becoming liberals, Protestants must, in important ways, become catholic.

Conclusion

How are interpreters of Yoder likely to respond to these six possible strategies for ensuring that the liberal reading of Yoder does not prevail? It seems to me that the first three are unlikely to arouse much opposition from serious readers of Yoder. Each one has a textual basis in the Yoder corpus and does not contradict anything he wrote. Scholars are free to disagree with Yoder on these points if they think he is wrong, but they are obligated not to misrepresent him by suggesting that Yoder would have agreed with their revisionist views.

We could almost say the same about the fourth strategy in that Yoder definitely allowed that the state bears the sword legitimately in a way the church cannot. The question is whether Yoder can be interpreted as arguing for minimizing state violence by advocating nonviolent conflict resolution methods and nonviolent resistance tactics wherever possible, or whether he advocated calling the state to unilateral disarmament and total pacifism. The former seems more likely to me. But complicating the picture is the ambiguous position of those who press Yoder into the service of their agenda. Liberal social activists can sound very pacifist most of the time and yet swerve into militarism at the last moment, as many in the American progressive tradition did with regard to World War I. So one is never quite sure whether "total exceptionless pacifism" or "near pacifism" or "pragmatic (as long as it works) pacifism" is being advocated. I think it highly doubtful that Yoder envisioned a totally pacifist state in our fallen world, but those who press Yoder into advocating "near pacifism" or "pragmatic pacifism" have some Yoder texts on their side. This, however, opens Yoder to charges of encouraging forms of violence and disaster that a more "realistic" geopolitical strategy could have avoided. It would be better, I think, if the church was less dogmatic about what the state should do in specific situations, especially when the expected outcome of certain recommended actions might well be martyrdom.

This leaves the fifth and sixth strategies. If we choose to employ such strategies, we had better be forthright in admitting that we are going beyond interpreting Yoder to correcting his position. Barth's position could be described as "practical pacifism" but, alternatively, it could be described as strict just war theory. Yoder's critique of Barth makes that plain. To embrace Barth over Yoder at this point may not entail immediate practical differences, but it does entail major ethical and theological differences. As for the sixth strategy, this is even more the case, although it is only the logical extension of the fifth strategy. To admit that Reinhold Niebuhr was basically right in affirming vocational but not absolute pacifism would be a bitter pill for Yoder to swallow and no one should delude himself into thinking that Yoder would approve. But the question that remains is whether or not the first four strategies are sufficient to guard against a liberal interpretation of Yoder.

I want to raise one final question in conclusion and that is to wonder out loud what it means if the middle does not hold. What if Yoder scholarship splits into two streams, one that declares his orthodoxy inconsistent with his pacifism and therefore seeks to revise his theology in a liberal direction, and another that comes to believe that his high view of Scripture, his acceptance of the legitimacy of divine judgment, and his high Christology simply do not justify an absolute pacifism? In that case, we would have some scholars rejecting Yoder's pacifism and others rejecting his orthodoxy. I am convinced that Yoder himself held the two together. But will his legacy be a school of theology that continues to hold to an orthodox pacifism, or will it degenerate into two schools of interpretation that ultimately have little in common with each other and become subsets of liberal and Evangelical theologies, instead of challenging both liberal and Evangelical Protestantism to follow Jesus in the way of peace while believing in Jesus as the divine Saviour of the world?

Endnotes

- 1 Nathan R. Kerr, *Christ, History and Apocalyptic: The Politics of Christian Mission* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2009).
- 2 The continuity of Yoder's thought is contested by Paul Martens who argues that there is a loss of Christian particularity and focus on Christology and Ecclesiology in the later Yoder in "Universal History and a Not-Particularly-Christian Particularity: Jeremiah and John Howard Yoder's Social Gospel," in *Power and Practices: Engaging the Work of John Howard Yoder*, 131-146, ed. Jeremy M. Bergen and Anthony G. Siegrist (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 2009).
- 3 This is contested by some who deny that Barth's influence was as pervasive as I imply. For example, see Philip Stoltzfus, "Nonviolent Jesus, Violent God? A Critique of John Howard Yoder's Approach to Theological Construction," in *Power and Practices*, 29-46.
- 4 Yoder, *Nevertheless: Varieties of Christian Pacifism*, 3rd ed. (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1994), 133-34, original emphasis.
- 5 Yoder, *Nevertheless*, 134.
- 6 Yoder, *The Politics of Jesus: Vicit Agnus Noster*, 2d ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), 102.
- 7 *Ibid.*, 9.
- 8 J. Denny Weaver, *The Nonviolent Atonement* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001), 7.
- 9 *Ibid.*, 8, 9.
- 10 Weaver, "The Nonviolent Atonement: Human Violence, Discipleship and God," in *Stricken by God? Nonviolent Identification and the Victory of Christ*, ed. Brad Jersak and Michael Hardin (Abbotsford, BC: Fresh Wind Press, 2007), 316.
- 11 *Ibid.*, 317.
- 12 *Ibid.*, 338.
- 13 *Ibid.*, 337.
- 14 *Ibid.*
- 15 See Calvin's comments on Acts 3:13-14 in John Calvin, "Commentary on the Gospel According to Acts

of the Epistles,” trans. Christopher Fetherstone, ed. Henry Beveridge (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 2005), 1:146. Calvin emphasizes the guilt of those who killed Christ. St. Anselm is adamant that “God did not compel Christ to die . . . but Christ himself freely underwent death, not by yielding up his life as an act of obedience, but on account of his obedience in maintaining justice, because he so steadfastly persevered in it that he brought death on himself.” St. Anselm, “Why God Became Man,” in *A Scholastic Miscellany: Anselm to Ockham, Library of Christian Classics*, Volume X, ed. and trans. Eugene Fairweather (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1956), 113. In the New Testament, there are a number of passages to which one could point. See especially Acts 2:23 and 3:13-14.

16 Stoltzfus, “Nonviolent Jesus, Violent God?” in *Power and Practices*.

17 Ray C. Gingerich, “Theological Foundations for an Ethics of Nonviolence: Was Yoder’s God a Warrior?” *Menmonite Quarterly Review* 77, no. 3 (July 2003).

18 Ibid., 426.

19 Craig A. Carter, *The Politics of the Cross: The Theology and Social Ethics of John Howard Yoder* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2001).

20 Oliver O’Donovan, *The Ways of Judgment* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), esp. ch. 1.

21 Yoder, *Karl Barth and the Problem of War and Other Essays on Barth*, ed. Mark Thiessen Nation (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2003).

22 Ibid., 51.

23 Ibid., 53.

24 Ibid., 62.

25 “The Thirty-Nine Articles of the Church of England,” in *Confessions and Catechisms of the Reformation*, ed. Mark A. Noll (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1991), 211-27. Numbers 37-39 were directed against the Anabaptists and 37 says, “It is lawful for Christian men, at the commandment of the magistrate, to wear weapons and serve in the wars” (226).