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THE
POLITICS
OF THE
CROSS

The Theology and Social Ethics
of John Howard Yoder

Craig A. Carter

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Introduction

Why a Book on Yoder?

The social-ethical thought of John Howard Yoder represents a major contribution to Christian theological ethics in the second half of the twentieth century, but it has not yet been taken with the seriousness it deserves at the level of disciplined scholarship. Yoder's impact can be seen in the influence that his thought has had on the increasingly vocal left wing of North American evangelicalism¹ and on mainline Protestants who have grown weary of liberalism and are developing various nonfundamentalist ways of being postliberal.² Ten years after the publication of Yoder's most important book, *The Politics of Jesus*,³ Edward Leroy Long Jr. stated that it "has become as frequently cited in discussions of social ethics as Paul Ramsey's *Deeds and Rules* in the discussion of norm and context."⁴ An indication of the interest in Yoder's thought in American gradu-

1. Yoder has contributed to *Sojourners* magazine and has influenced groups like Sojourners, Church of the Saviour, and the group that publishes *The Other Side*. Yoder gave a keynote address at the founding meeting of Evangelicals for Social Action in Chicago in 1973. See a revised version of this address, "The Biblical Mandate for Evangelical Social Action," in *For the Nations: Essays Public and Evangelical* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 180–98. Philip Thorne describes Yoder as a "New Evangelical" who, as one of the few Anabaptist evangelicals to have interacted seriously with Karl Barth, has exerted an important influence on the North American evangelical tradition. See Thorne's *Evangelicalism and Karl Barth: His Reception and Influence in North American Evangelical Theology* (Allison Park, Pa.: Pickwick Publications, 1995), 171. See also Dale Brown, "Communal Ecclesiology: The Power of the Anabaptist Vision," *Theology Today* 36 (April 1979): 22–29.

2. Stanley Hauerwas writes of the influence Yoder has had on him in *The Peaceable Kingdom: A Primer in Christian Ethics* (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1983), xxiv.

3. *The Politics of Jesus: Vicit Agnus Noster*, 2d ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994). All future references to this work will be to the second edition except where specified. The first edition, published in 1972, sold over 75,000 copies and was translated into at least nine other languages. The second edition sold over 11,000 copies between 1994 and April 1998. See Mark Thiessen Nation, "John Howard Yoder: Ecumenical Anabaptist: A Biographical Sketch" in *The Wisdom of the Cross: Essays in Honor of John Howard Yoder*, ed. S. Hauerwas et. al. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans 1999), 21.

4. Edward Leroy Long Jr., *A Survey of Recent Christian Ethics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982), 90, as cited by Mark Thiessen Nation, "A Comprehensive Bibliography of the Writings of John Howard Yoder," *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 71 (January 1997): 93.

ate schools can be seen in the fact that, in North America between 1984 and 1997, twelve doctoral dissertations were completed that deal, at least in part, with Yoder's thought in a substantial way.⁵ Marlin VanElderen, in the World Council of Churches' magazine *One World*, said that *The Politics of Jesus* was one of the most influential North American theological works of the 1970s and spoke of how it had provided the theological underpinnings for renewed social engagement among a large number of evangelicals. He also credited the book with opening up dialogue between Anabaptists and representatives of the mainline Protestant groups.⁶ Paul Ramsey stated that Yoder is "widely recognized as the leading contemporary American exponent of Christian pacifism."⁷ The late James McClendon has noted that Yoder's lifework remains a serious but unanswered challenge to Christian thinkers and has called Yoder a "largely unsung American theologian."⁸

Stanley Hauerwas states, in a comment on the back cover of the second edition of *The Politics of Jesus*, that he is convinced that, when the history of theology in the twentieth century is written, Yoder's work will be seen as marking a new beginning. I agree with this comment, but many readers may find themselves puzzled as to what it is about Yoder's work that might cause Hauerwas or me to say this. Speaking for myself, I think that the most significant and original aspect of Yoder's thought is that he models a way of doing theology that is appropriate for the twenty-first century. He shows us how to remain faithful in a post-Constantinian and post-Enlightenment cultural situation in which Christians are no longer in control of most cultural institutions.⁹ Yoder does theology from a minority position, but he does it with a concern for dialogue with those from other positions.

5. These dissertations are all available from University Microfilms International, Ann Arbor, Michigan, and will be referred to at appropriate points in this book. They were completed at Boston University (2), Duke University (2), Southern Baptist Theological Seminary (2), Baylor University, Catholic University of America, University of Chicago, Claremont Graduate School, Northwestern University, and the University of Virginia.

6. "On Studying War . . .," *One World* (October 1985): 18, quoted by Beulah Stauffer Hostetler, "Nonresistance and Social Responsibility: Mennonites and Mainline Peace Emphasis, ca. 1950 to 1985," *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 64 (January 1990): 70.

7. Paul Ramsey, *Speak Up for Just War or Pacifism: A Critique of the United Methodist Bishops' Pastoral Letter "In Defense of Creation"* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1988), 96.

8. James Wm. McClendon Jr., "Commentary: John Howard Yoder, 1927–1997," *Books and Culture* 4 (May–June 1998): 7.

9. By *post-Constantinian*, I refer to the current period of Western culture in which the alliance of church and state, which has made Christianity the official or unofficial religion of the West, has ended. By *post-Enlightenment*, I refer to the period of Western culture in which the dominance of eighteenth-century rationalistic philosophy and the emphases on science, democracy, and objective truth have passed. For more on these two terms, see chapter 6.

He also does theology in a rational, but not rationalistic, manner, rejecting the foundationalist epistemology of the Enlightenment without compromising the truth claims of the gospel. Yoder makes historic Christian orthodoxy powerfully relevant for our day by his imaginative rereading of the Bible and classical orthodoxy from a nonestablishment, minority perspective.

In order to appreciate Yoder's true significance, we need to understand that he is a serious Christian theologian, not simply a member of a somewhat eccentric religious group that espouses an unrealistic, though in many ways admirable, pacifism. I want to show that, for Yoder, pacifism is not the point; Jesus is the point. Not only is Jesus the point, but protecting, declaring, and unpacking the claims of classical Christology is what Yoder is about. The persecution and killing of the Anabaptists in the sixteenth century prevented Anabaptist theologians from doing the kind of long-term, patient, nuanced scholarship that we find in Calvin's *Institutes*. When one reads Calvin, there is no question that his thought is deeply rooted in the Christian tradition as well as in the Scriptures. He is no iconoclast recklessly tossing over the side centuries of faith, reflection, and wisdom. The Anabaptists and their descendants, however, are often portrayed as doing precisely that. After Yoder, this can never be done legitimately again. Here is a thinker who is steeped in the writings of the church fathers and the Reformers, who has a firm grasp of the history of Christianity, and who has a deep respect for the creeds and historic Christian orthodoxy. The subversive and disconcerting thing about Yoder's challenge to the church is the way in which he argues from the Bible and classical trinitarian and christological creedal orthodoxy for his radical position. His is not a Mennonite theology, but a Christian theology, and his social ethics is deeply rooted in his theology. We may not agree with Yoder, and that is our right, but we must deal with the fact that he is basing his challenging arguments on beliefs that he and those of us who confess Jesus to be the Christ all hold in common.

The Purpose of This Book

The scholarly neglect of Yoder, bemoaned by James McClendon above, has occurred for several reasons. First, Yoder's recent death has only now made it possible to survey the impact of his lifework as a whole and to assess it objectively. We are still in the early stages of assessing the overall and permanent contribution of this highly original thinker. Much research into his thought needs to be done, and a great deal of debate needs to go on concerning the importance of his ideas. In this book, I attempt to make a contribution to both of these tasks.

Second, Yoder wrote no major systematic treatise in which the comprehensiveness, logical rigor, and originality of his theology could be readily ascertained.¹⁰ One must read a large number of his essays, which are scattered in various journals and books and which are uneven in terms of style and vocabulary, before one begins to grasp just how powerful his analysis is and how coherent his overall system is. Yoder himself had substantive reasons for using the essay format as his primary vehicle for communication, reasons that will become clear in the course of this book as integral to his epistemology, his concept of his role as a writer, and his style of ecumenical dialogue.¹¹ Although Yoder considered the possibility of writing a basic introduction to ethics or to his thought as a whole, he rejected the idea as being inconsistent with his firm rejection of foundationalism or methodologism.¹² Yoder could acknowledge the educational value of an introduction to a subject, but he points out that one must have a clear picture of the student in mind; in other words, one must begin where the potential reader is and work from there.¹³ This type of conversational and occasional writing is what Yoder did throughout his career.

Even though Yoder himself rejected the shaping of his thought into a system, he was nevertheless a very logical and systematic thinker. The coherence of his essays written over a period of a lifetime is extremely impressive.¹⁴ It is, therefore, necessary that scholars carefully reflect on his work as a whole in order to make a complete, accurate, and fair as-

10. Yoder's most famous work, *The Politics of Jesus*, is not really an exception, although it comes closest to being a systematic presentation of his position.

11. Yoder, *For the Nations*, 9.

12. See Yoder's "Walk and Word: The Alternatives to Methodologism," in *Theology without Foundations: Religious Practice and the Future of Theological Truth*, ed. S. Hauerwas, N. Murphy, and M. Thiessen Nation (Nashville: Abingdon, 1994), 77–90. Yoder says that he cannot write a book from "scratch" because, in his opinion, there is no "scratch" from which to begin (*For the Nations*, 10). The terms *foundationalism* and *methodologism* will be defined and discussed in more detail in chapter 6, in the context of the discussion of the charge of sectarianism, which is often made against Yoder. For now, let it simply be noted that Yoder is quite suspicious of modernity's exaltation of method and sees it as being rooted in discredited rationalist epistemologies and linked to Western imperialist pretensions.

13. Yoder, *For the Nations*, 10.

14. See, for example, *The Royal Priesthood: Essays Ecclesiological and Ecumenical*, ed. Michael Cartwright (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), which includes essays written between 1954 and 1990. The excellent introductory essay, "Radical Reform, Radical Catholicity: John Howard Yoder's Vision of the Faithful Church," by Michael Cartwright, cites no major examples of inconsistency of thought or self-contradiction. In fact, Cartwright affirms that one of the purposes of this collection of essays is to show the "substantial unity of Yoder's work over the past four decades" (3). This does not mean that Yoder's thought never evolved, but the differences in emphasis are mostly explicable by the situations of the various essays, and they do not entail a fundamental reversal of a prior position.

assessment of it. The danger inherent in attempting to facilitate this task is that I will turn Yoder's thought into a "system" that can easily be refuted by attacking its "axioms." I do not intend to do that; rather, I intend to help the reader of this book to become a skillful reader of Yoder's work by giving something more like a guided tour than an abstract analysis.¹⁵

Third, Yoder has often been pigeonholed as a representative of one (extreme) type of Christianity that needs to have a place at the ecumenical discussion table (to show how open we are) but that is known in advance to have the specific function of representing the extreme end of the spectrum and therefore not a viable option for mainstream Christianity. In other words, the value of the Mennonite/Anabaptist (or radical-reformation or believers' church) perspective that Yoder is taken to represent is not that it can be taken seriously as a debating partner but that it defines a sectarian extreme that rounds out the spectrum of positions under consideration.¹⁶

This attitude is alluded to by James Gustafson in his *Ethics in Theocentric Perspective*, where he says of Yoder's social ethics:

It is patronizing to say that it is useful, in the mix of Christian communities and views of morality, to have this stringent tradition alive, just as it might be seen to be useful to have Marxists around to remind the exponents of the free market that there are some matters that seem lost in the outlook of the capitalist. Such a view assumes that that value of a position is its contribution to discourse on a moral plane, that the reason for interest in the position is that it represents a moral ideal which wiser persons know is "unrealistic" but nonetheless need to be reminded of from time to time. The issue that has to be joined is theological, not simply ethical. *Theological integrity more than moral distinctiveness is the challenge of the traditional radical Protestant view. . . . My conviction is that all constructive theology in the*

15. It could be argued that to turn Yoder's thought into an ahistorical system of ethics is to distort it seriously; as an interpreter first and critic second, one must be very sensitive to this concern. For this reason, my exposition is preceded by introductory chapters that seek to situate Yoder historically, that is, within his denominational and intellectual context. It is not possible to understand the thought of such a conversational theologian without keeping in mind who he was conversing with, reacting to, debating, and learning from while writing his essays.

16. Yoder expressed his frustration at being misinterpreted as a "pure type" by others who could then use that as their foil. See *The Priestly Kingdom: Social Ethics As Gospel* (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984), 1. Criticisms of Yoder's position range from reasonable concerns expressed in moderate tones about issues such as reductionism, sectarianism, responsibility, and balance to rather extreme accusations often tossed out without attempts at documentation and supported by *ad hominem* arguments. For example, Yoder has been accused of legalism, perfectionism, Marcionism, secularism, unitarianism, and politicizing a spiritual gospel. For the sake of ecumenical dialogue, these accusations need to be examined calmly and in light of Yoder's entire corpus of writings.

*Christian tradition needs to be defined to some extent in relation to this radical option.*¹⁷

My intention in this book is to take up the challenge laid out here by Gustafson: to expound, analyze, and critique Yoder's theology as a serious option for constructive Christian ethics today. It is interesting to note that, even though Gustafson admits that Yoder's theological ethics constitutes one of the most cogent challenges to his own approach, he himself does not engage Yoder's thought extensively in his book. This seems inconsistent of Gustafson, but it is typical of the way that the position represented by Yoder has been treated over the centuries. Some grudging respect is expressed and a bit of verbal praise is given; nevertheless, it remained possible to write one's *magnum opus* on Christian theological ethics in the 1980s without refuting Yoder's position in detail.

Yoder's Calvinist dialogue partner Richard Mouw makes an interesting observation in his foreword to Yoder's collection of essays on ecclesiology, *The Royal Priesthood*. After renouncing, like Gustafson, the attitude that treats the Anabaptist perspective as "a series of compensatory emphases whose ecumenical usefulness lies in their ability to modify other theological schemes," he then points out that the Anabaptists "have often left themselves open to this kind of treatment" because they have neglected systematic theology in favor of biblical and historical studies.¹⁸ This neglect has meant that others do not have to deal with the Anabaptist perspective as a systematic challenge to their own dogmatics. Mouw praises Yoder for having led the way in setting forth the systematic challenge. But, as we have seen above, the type of writings Yoder has produced does not focus this challenge as sharply as they could have if his position were expressed more systematically. As an aid to informed ecumenical debate, therefore, my goal in this book is to expound the logic and depth of Yoder's theological social ethics in such a way that, in the future, refuting Yoder's position will be seen as a task to be undertaken by those who disagree with him and ignoring his position will not be seen as a viable option for those who wish to engage in serious Christian social-ethical debate.

In evaluating Yoder's thought it is necessary to distinguish between two perspectives from which an evaluation could be carried out: the external and the internal. The external critique is often carried out by those mentioned above who use Yoder as a foil or as a representative of a type.

17. James Gustafson, *Theology and Ethics*, vol. 1 of *Ethics in Theocentric Perspective* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981), 75 (emphasis added). This type of attitude to pacifism was advocated by Reinhold Niebuhr. Yoder discussed Niebuhr's views in his article "Reinhold Niebuhr and Christian Pacifism," *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 29 (April, 1955): 101ff. See chapter 1 of this book for further discussion of Yoder and Reinhold Niebuhr.

18. Richard Mouw, foreword to *The Royal Priesthood*, viii.

They employ axioms derived from elsewhere than Yoder or the radical-reformation (or believers' church or Anabaptist) tradition to use in testing the adequacy of his formulations. They cannot be blamed for using whatever axioms they believe to be correct to evaluate the thought of other ethicists, but neither can they claim thereby to have demonstrated the logical inconsistency or incoherence of Yoder's thought. In order to do that, they would have to employ an internal critique, which is what I attempt to do in this book. By situating Yoder in his denominational and intellectual context and then examining the logic of his response to that context as expressed in the total corpus of his writings, I hope to develop a balanced and nuanced evaluation of his importance as a twentieth-century Christian ethicist.¹⁹

A Brief Overview of Yoder's Life and Writings

Yoder was a significant figure in Mennonite studies, in ecumenical discussions, and in Christian ethics in Europe and North America for over forty years. He entered into significant dialogue with evangelicals, Catholics, the World Council of Churches, Latin American liberationists, Christian Realists, conservative Calvinists and Jewish theologians, including such figures as Karl Barth, Reinhold and H. Richard Niebuhr, Paul Ramsey, Albert Outler, Jose Miguez Bonino, Richard Mouw, James Turner Johnson, Michael Walzer, and Rabbi Steven S. Schwarzschild.²⁰ He lived for a number of years each in France and Switzerland, as well as spending a year each in Argentina and Israel. Yoder was a polyglot, being fluent in several languages besides English, reading yet others, and delivering lectures in languages other than English on many occasions.²¹

19. This book should be regarded as a preliminary step in the evaluation of Yoder's thought, since understanding a thinker as fully as possible must precede evaluation. It may be that Yoder's thought turns out, on the basis of an internal critique, to be strongly argued (in the sense of logical consistency), very coherent (in the sense of systematic consistency), and highly comprehensive (in the sense of taking into account all the relevant data), and yet one would still not be justified in declaring Yoder's position to be true. Two different systems of thought may both exhibit all of these internal characteristics and yet arise from vastly different foundational assumptions or worldviews. In order to choose between such alternatives, a person must make a decision about the worldviews or the foundational assumptions at the root of the two systems. The best way to facilitate such a choice, however, is to display the system as fully as possible, exploring its own inner logic.

20. For discussion of this aspect of Yoder's work, see Michael Cartwright, "Radical Reform, Radical Catholicity," 15–23, and Mark Thiessen Nation's "He Came Preaching Peace: The Ecumenical Peace Witness of John Howard Yoder," *Conrad Grebel Review* 16 (Spring 1998): 65–76.

21. John Howard Yoder, "How to Be Read by the Bible" (A Shalom Desktop Publication, 1996), 7.

His *Politics of Jesus* was the work that first brought his thought to the attention of most ethicists and theologians generally. Although his doctoral work was in historical theology,²² he demonstrated enough competence in biblical studies and ethics to engage scholars in those fields in serious debate. The breadth of his scholarly endeavors is quite impressive. Although he was involved in the editing and translation of historical texts, the teaching of historical and systematic theology, ethics, and missiology, as well as mission-board and seminary administration, Yoder's primary contribution to scholarship probably was in the area of ethical methodology.

After World War II, Yoder was one of a group of young Mennonites who went to Europe to work in refugee relief ministry with the Mennonite Central Committee. While in Europe, he participated in various ecumenical discussions as a representative of the Mennonite tradition and studied at the University of Basel. He eventually obtained his Doctor of Theology degree in historical theology, specializing in sixteenth-century Reformation

22. His doctoral dissertation at Basel was published as *Täuferium und Reformation in der Schweiz: 1. De Gespräche zwischen Täufern und Reformatoren 1523–1538* (Karlsruhe: H. Schneider, 1962). See also *Täuferium und Reformation im Gespräch: Dogmengeschichtliche Untersuchung der frühen Gespräche zwischen Schweizerischen Täufern und Reformatoren* (Zurich: EVZ-Verlag, 1968). Yoder also translated and edited *The Legacy of Michael Statler, Classics of the Radical Reformation 1* (Scottsdale, Pa.: Herald, 1973) and, with H. Wayne Pipkin, *Balthasar Hubmaier: Theologian of Anabaptism, Classics of the Radical Reformation 5* (Scottsdale, Pa.: Herald, 1989). He also translated and edited *The Schleithelm Confession* (Scottsdale, Pa.: Herald, 1977) and translated other monographs and wrote many essays on the radical reformation and historiography. Furthermore, he also produced two large collections of class lectures on Christology and on war, peace, and revolution, consisting of over nine hundred pages of historical theology (*Preface to Theology: Christology and Theological Method* and *Christian Attitudes to War, Peace and Revolution: A Companion to Bainton*). Unfortunately, these two works have only been informally published at this point in time, although *Preface to Theology* is scheduled for publication in 2002 (Brazos Press). Another important work in historical theology, *Nevertheless: The Varieties and Shortcomings of Religious Pacifism*, revised and expanded edition (Scottsdale, Pa.: Herald, 1992) is much more readily available. Readers of Yoder who only consult *The Politics of Jesus* and the three main books of essays, *The Priestly Kingdom*, *The Royal Priesthood*, and *For the Nations*, can certainly ascertain the main points of Yoder's thought. However, much of the background, rationale, and working out of the implications of his thought are found only in the one thousand plus pages of historical theology in the works mentioned above, especially in the unpublished class notes. Any serious interpreter or critic of Yoder must come to grips with this material and let it temper rash conclusions about Yoder's theology being not well thought out, heretical, one-sided, unrealistic, and the like. For example, the critic tempted to jump to the conclusion that Yoder is Manichean and totally negative toward the state would be well-advised to discipline his or her criticism by showing how it does justice to Yoder's discussion of William Penn and the Quaker experiment in colonial Pennsylvania. Or again, the critic tempted to conclude that Yoder is preaching an unrealistic form of perfectionist legalism would be well-advised to try and reconcile that view with Yoder's balanced, sober, and nuanced account of the rise of various forms of sectarian dissent in sixteenth-century Europe. The point is not that Yoder is beyond criticism or right on every point but that he has developed a case for pacifism that has unprecedented and unparalleled historical and theological depth and that, therefore, cannot be dismissed lightly.

studies. He also studied with Karl Barth and was drawn to Barth's ecclesiology and to his theological ethics in general.²³

Yoder returned to North America in 1957 and spent a number of years working for the Mennonite Board of Missions. After taking up a full-time teaching post at Goshen Biblical Seminary in 1965, Yoder completed a book on Barth's view of war, which contains one of the best early expositions of Barth's ethics available in English.²⁴ Yoder's classic, *The Politics of Jesus*, was published in 1972. During the next quarter century Yoder emerged as the leading spokesperson in North America for the Anabaptist (or believers' church) vision of Christianity and for Christian pacifism in particular. From 1967 (part-time; full-time beginning in 1984) until his death in late 1997, Yoder taught at the University of Notre Dame. In 1988 he served as the president of the Society of Christian Ethics.

The Central Thesis of This Book

At the heart of this book lies the conviction that Yoder's work shows us how the trinitarian and christological orthodoxy of the fourth and fifth centuries contains the key to the survival and flourishing of the church's witness to Jesus Christ in the post-Christendom era that is now dawning. The central thesis I wish to defend is that Yoder creatively unites aspects of his Anabaptist theological heritage with the theological method and major themes of Karl Barth's thought to create a distinctive postliberal²⁵ alternative to Christian Realism, liberation theology, and privatized evangelical religion. Yoder's pacifism of the messianic community is not only a development of Barth's theology but also the most adequate account of social ethics to emerge thus far in the brief history of postliberalism. Furthermore, as Gustafson was noted as saying above, it is also the most important alternative to the revisionist theology that currently dominates many parts of the modern Western academy.

The theology of Karl Barth, once "widely dismissed by American theologians in the 1960s as a remnant of a discredited neo-orthodoxy,"²⁶ has

23. See John Howard Yoder, "Karl Barth: How His Mind Kept Changing," in *How Karl Barth Changed My Mind*, ed. D. McKim (Grand Rapids, Eerdmans: 1976), 166–71, and idem, "Karl Barth, Post-Christendom Theologian" (unpublished paper presented to the Karl Barth Society, Elmhurst, Ill., June 8, 1995). Many other references to Barth, scattered throughout Yoder's writings, will be noted at many points in this book.

24. John Howard Yoder, *Karl Barth and the Problem of War* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1970).

25. I am using the term *postliberal* here in a somewhat broader sense than simply as a reference to the so-called Yale School. I could easily have said "postmodern" or "post-Enlightenment" here instead of "postliberal." I clarify the relationship of Yoder to the Yale School below.

26. Mary Kathleen Cunningham, *What Is Theological Exegesis? Interpretation and Use of Scripture in Barth's Doctrine of Election* (Valley Forge, Pa.: Trinity Press International, 1995), 9.

recently come to light as the inspiration for a whole new generation of “postliberal” scholars who have in common an opposition to what they term “revisionism.”²⁷ Centered in the work of a number of scholars associated with Yale University over the past thirty years, postliberalism has become a significant force on the current theological scene. Yale professors George Lindbeck and Hans Frei²⁸ and many of their former students, including William Placher, George Hunsinger, Ronald Thiemann, and Stanley Hauerwas, have been identified with this approach to theology. Influences on the genesis and development of this approach make for an eclectic list, including such diverse figures as Gilbert Ryle, Ludwig Wittgenstein, Thomas Kuhn, Clifford Geertz, Peter Berger, and Erich Auerbach, as well as a number of other figures at Yale, such as Brevard Childs, Wayne Meeks, Paul Holmer, William Christian, and David Kelsey. It would be misleading to overstate the degree of unity among this group of theologians. What is clear, however, is that the work of Karl Barth stands in the background and has been a major factor in making this new mood in theology possible.²⁹

This book will interpret the thought of Yoder as “postliberal” in the sense of constituting a rejection of theological liberalism³⁰ and in the sense of having been influenced greatly by the theology of Karl Barth, but

27. See William Placher, “Postliberal Theology,” in *The Modern Theologians*, vol. 2, ed. D. F. Ford (Oxford: Blackwell, 1989), 115–28; and idem, “Revisionist and Postliberal Theologies and the Public Character of Theology,” *The Thomist* 49 (1985): 392–416.

28. George Lindbeck made the term *postliberalism* central in contemporary theological discussion in his book, *The Nature of Doctrine: Religion and Theology in a Postliberal Age* (Philadelphia: Westminster/John Knox, 1984). His colleague, the late Hans Frei, was also central in the development of this approach to doing Christian theology. Especially important are his books: *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1974); *The Identity of Jesus Christ: The Hermeneutical Bases of Dogmatic Theology* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1975); and *Types of Christian Theology*, ed. G. Hunsinger and W. C. Placher (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992).

29. William Placher, “Postliberal Theology,” 115–17.

30. “Liberalism,” as used in this sentence, means both classical and contemporary liberal theology. Nineteenth-century “culture Protestantism,” as expressed in the thought of Troeltsch, Ritschl, Harnack, and, in North America, the social gospel movement, was highly optimistic about human potential and used idealistic philosophy as a way to express the progress that it saw in history as Western culture moved toward the kingdom of God. It saw a correlation between Christian teachings, on the one hand, and secular science and the best insights of culture in general, on the other. Twentieth-century liberalism has been greatly chastened by the horrific events of this century (world wars, genocide, nuclear weapons, ecological threats) and has abandoned the assumption of progress and renounced undue optimism concerning all forms of utopia. Revisionism is chastened liberalism, still concerned to correlate Christian belief with the highest wisdom of secular culture, but largely purged of shallow optimism and inclined to take the reality of sin far more seriously. Twentieth-century liberalism is more inclined to look to existential, rather than idealistic, philosophy and views liberation as a more realistic metaphor for the goal of Christian social ethics than Christianizing the social order or bringing in the kingdom of God.

not in the sense of having been influenced by the “Yale theology.” One of the differences between Yoder’s thought and that of Frei and Lindbeck is that Yoder has engaged biblical texts more extensively than they have, even though postliberals tend to criticize revisionists for becoming preoccupied with prolegomena and strongly advocate the constructive engagement of Scripture.³¹ Another key difference is the prominence given to pacifism in Yoder’s thought.³² A third key difference between Yoder, on the one hand, and the Yale theologians, on the other, is that Yoder’s theological realism is much more clear cut.³³ Yoder’s nonfoundationalist approach to epistemology does not lead him to a relativist position when it comes to affirming the ontological reality of God; this book attempts to show why and how this is so. Yoder studied with Barth in the 1950s and published a book on Barth’s ethics in the early 1970s, which makes him a rough contemporary of Lindbeck and Frei. However, there appears to be little, if any, evidence of influence either way in the early development of their respective positions.³⁴

31. William Placher urges contemporary theologians to abandon their preoccupation with methodology and to get on with constructive theology—in the preface to a book on method! (*Unapologetic Theology: A Christian Voice in a Pluralistic Conversation* [Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1989], 7). It is interesting to note that the Yale theology has developed as discussion of method first and is only beginning to be applied in the construction of theology. This focus on method may well be due to the influence of Karl Barth’s theological corpus, which fits in the background of postliberal theology. Since the 1960s, postliberal theologians have only gradually come to terms with the massive challenge to modernity presented by Barth as they have reflected on methodological moves which are more implicit than explicit in the *Church Dogmatics*. It is significant to remember that Frei’s doctoral dissertation was written on Barth. What Frei wrote about Schleiermacher and Barth remains true: “A great man condemns the rest of us to the task of understanding his thought” (“Eberhard Busch’s Biography of Karl Barth,” in *Types of Christian Theology*, 147).

32. Of course, the major exception here is Stanley Hauerwas, who has embraced pacifism and made it central to his work. George Hunsinger has also written in support of pacifism but has not thus far produced major writings in which pacifism plays a central role. See Douglas Gwyn, George Hunsinger, Eugene Roop, and John H. Yoder, *A Declaration of Peace: In God’s People the Renewal of the World Has Begun* (Scottsdale, Pa.: Herald, 1991). Pacifism does not appear to play a role in the thought of Lindbeck or Frei.

33. This is not to say that the Yale theologians are not theological realists. This is a point on which it is hard to generalize. Hunsinger’s commitment to realism seems to be clear, while that of Lindbeck and Frei is less so. That of Hauerwas is still more ambiguous. All that is being claimed here is that Yoder’s commitment to theological realism is more straightforward than that of most of the theologians associated with postliberalism from Yale.

34. In the few references to Lindbeck I have noted in Yoder’s work, Yoder refers positively to him: “The reason it is so hard for critics from within these foundationalist games to be fair to ‘realism’ is that they assume, as it does not, the need to justify one’s recourse to Scripture by appeal to some other criterion outside it. For my ‘straightforward’ posture (and intrinsically for the account given by George Lindbeck, and the similar one presupposed without much analytical argument by Brevard Childs, or the one given with enormous analytical argument but less content by Alasdair MacIntyre) the presence of the

Stanley Hauerwas is the only other major ethicist thus far to have written extensively from a postliberal perspective, and he claims to have been greatly influenced by Yoder's thought.³⁵ Thus, it is natural that many commentators tend to assume that both Hauerwas and Yoder can be interpreted together as "narrative ethicists."³⁶ Of course, there are many significant points of similarity. However, there are some important differences between Hauerwas and Yoder as well that need to be taken into account in any discussion of the relationship of their respective positions. For now, some of these differences will be listed without comment. They will be documented in the course of this book. First, Yoder engages the text of Scripture to a much greater degree than Hauerwas. Second, Yoder takes history much more seriously than Hauerwas does in his theology. Third, Yoder does not share Hauerwas's interest in character; his doctrine of the imitation of Jesus is sharply focused on the cross. Fourth, it is questionable as to whether or not Hauerwas shares Yoder's Biblical Realism.³⁷ There are other differences in areas such as ecclesiology, but this list surely can serve to make the point that the two thinkers simply cannot be lumped together. Nor can Yoder be interpreted through the grid of Hauerwas.

Yoder makes what many of us today think of as "stuffy old orthodoxy" as fresh and relevant as the latest, trendy theological fad. It is fascinating to observe that, unlike many who derive a conservative social ethic from a conservative theology and many others who derive a radical ethic from an unorthodox theology, Yoder derives a very radical social ethic, centered on pacifism, from a classically orthodox Christology. In this book, I will present an interpretation of Yoder's thought as containing a highly coherent theological social ethic that has a contribution to make to Christian faith and practice in the coming century. Yoder's "disavowal of Constantine" allows him to develop a christocentric eschatology that views the church as an eschatological community that participates both in the old age of the fallen creation and in the new, messianic age inaugurated by Jesus. The Christian community is distinguished from the world

text within the community is an inseparable part of the community's being itself. It would be a denial of the community's being itself if it were to grant a need for appeal beyond itself to some archimedean point to justify it" (see Yoder's "How to Be Read by the Bible," 65, cf. 28). In a 1992 article ("On Not Being Ashamed of the Gospel: Particularity, Pluralism, and Validation," *Faith and Philosophy* 9 [1992]: 285–300), Yoder defends Lindbeck's position against Gustafson's charges of sectarianism. I am not aware of any references to Yoder in the work of Frei or Lindbeck.

35. See Hauerwas's comments on Yoder's influence in *The Peaceable Kingdom*, xxiv–xxvi. Hauerwas credits Yoder with having converted him to pacifism.

36. See, for example, J. Philip Wogaman, *Christian Ethics: A Historical Introduction* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1983), 234; and James Wm. McClendon Jr., *Ethics*, vol. 1 of *Systematic Theology* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1986), 328.

37. See chapter 2, note 10 of this book for Yoder's understanding of the term *Biblical Realism*.

by its confession of Jesus Christ and thereby is a foretaste of the coming age. The pacifism of the messianic community allows it to bear witness to the Lamb who was slain but who, nevertheless, reigns in heaven.

An Overview of the Argument of This Book

This book is divided into four parts, each consisting of two chapters, plus an introduction and a conclusion. In part I, I sketch the background necessary for understanding Yoder's theological method. In the first chapter, I focus on the Mennonite struggle for self-definition, which has been intricately connected to the scholarly reexamination of the historical roots of Anabaptism during this century. Yoder has also been influenced in significant ways by the theology of Karl Barth, so the second chapter seeks to summarize the important areas of similarity and agreement between their respective positions. In particular, I explore the way in which Yoder creatively appropriated much of Barth's thought and combined it with his own Anabaptist heritage.

In parts II, III, and IV, I expound the source, context, and shape of Yoder's social ethics. A major criticism of Yoder's thought is considered in detail in each part. In part II, I describe Yoder's Christology as the *source* of his social ethics. This is done first by examining, in chapter 3, his reading of New Testament Christology and the New Testament teaching on discipleship as the ethical meaning of Christology. Then, in chapter 4, I focus on Yoder's reading of the historical development of classical Christology and contrast his understanding of the doctrine of the Trinity with that of H. R. Niebuhr. I show that Yoder's Barthian interpretation of the doctrine of the Trinity contrasts sharply with H. R. Niebuhr's liberal approach and then build on this reading of Yoder to refute the charge that Yoder's theology is reductionistic. I argue not only that Yoder affirms classical, orthodox Christology, rather than reducing Christology to ethics and spirituality to politics, but also that such a catholic affirmation is absolutely essential to the logic of his overall position.

In part III, I describe Yoder's eschatology as the *context* for his social ethics. In chapter 5, I show how Yoder attempts to derive his eschatology from the New Testament as interpreted in the light of the canonical thrust of Old Testament Scripture. Yoder deals creatively with the "problem of the eschatological Jesus" in a way that is different from both Albert Schweitzer and Reinhold Niebuhr. He describes biblical eschatology as being both partially realized and future oriented. This chapter sets the stage for the discussion of Constantinianism as an eschatological heresy in chapter 6. Yoder argues that Constantinianism is a reversal of New Testament eschatology, a reversal that is rooted in a significant misreading of the Old Testament. I show in this chapter how Yoder turns the charge of sectarianism back upon his critics by portraying Constantinianism as an abandonment

of true Christian universality for a sectarian captivity to the Roman Empire (and Western Christendom). I defend a reading of Yoder as a radically catholic, ecumenical theologian and examine the political and epistemological implications of the charge of sectarianism. This reading of Yoder makes it clear that his theology is not denominational apologetics but a radical critique of the praxis (and the theory) of all denominations (including his own) that is based on, and rooted in, the historical mission of the church as Yoder understands it. That mission is incomprehensible apart from the understanding of history that governs Yoder's eschatology and the christological foundation of Yoder's eschatology.

In part IV, I describe Yoder's ecclesiology as the *shape* of his social ethics. I do so, in chapter 7, by expounding Yoder's view of the believers' church as the most faithful form of the New Testament view of the church and by contrasting it to the theocratic and spiritualist types of ecclesiology. The ecumenical potential of Yoder's believers' church ecclesiology is also explored, and the practices of the Christian community that enable it to build up and maintain unity are described. The believers' church vision involves viewing the church as the new humanity, a foretaste of the kingdom of God. In chapter 8, I consider the charge that Yoder's social ethics promotes the withdrawal of the Christian from society and makes the church irrelevant and ineffective in terms of social change. In response to this charge, I sketch a reading of Yoder as unfolding a coherent, though deliberately *ad hoc*, vision of social witness. Yoder's critique of, and alternative to, H. R. Niebuhr's model for "Christ transforming culture" is reviewed, and Yoder's believers' church vision is described as an alternative to strategies that compromise a faithful witness to Jesus Christ in the hopes of short-term effectiveness in terms of social change.

In the conclusion, I assess the coherence of the theological basis for Yoder's social ethics and suggest how the interpretation of Yoder's thought presented in this book is relevant for the contemporary Christian church. The overall interpretation of Yoder's thought is summarized, and a new profile of this much misunderstood thinker is sketched. The conclusion also assesses the validity of various criticisms of Yoder's social ethics and makes a few suggestions regarding how his thought could be developed further to address these criticisms.