

## JOHN HOWARD YODER AS HISTORIAN

### **Doing History with Theological Ethics in Mind: John Howard Yoder as Historian of Anabaptism<sup>1</sup>**

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It is common to connect the name of John Howard Yoder with “Anabaptism” and to describe his work as “neo-Anabaptist.” This connection is not accidental. Yoder’s ground-breaking theological and ethical contributions were given significant shape by the historical studies in sixteenth-century Anabaptist beginnings he carried out from 1950 to 1957 at the University of Basel.<sup>2</sup> In 1957 Yoder completed a two-part study of the dialogues between the early Swiss Anabaptists and the Reformed under Professor Ernst Staehelin, the first part of which was accepted as his doctoral dissertation in theology at the University of Basel.<sup>3</sup> The second part was a theological analysis of the dialogues, published separately in 1968 in Zürich, Switzerland.<sup>4</sup> In the foreword to this later work, Yoder notes that this study originated “at the beginning of 1957 as the second, more systematic part of a work on ‘Anabaptism and Reformation in Switzerland.’”<sup>5</sup>

These early publications – now translated into English in a single volume<sup>6</sup> – document Yoder’s initial historical research in sixteenth-century Swiss sources and his analysis of biblical, theological, and ethical themes derived from it. Yoder’s doctoral work is a careful study of Reformation events in and around Zürich in the 1520s. It is a piece of historical research and was treated as such by contemporary scholars. As the basis for his later work, Yoder’s historical studies shed unique light on the origin and development of his thought. However, this present article will not attempt to trace that development; it will instead provide an overview of Yoder’s activity as an historian of Anabaptism and will review his historical work in the context of the Anabaptist scholarship that developed in the second half of the twentieth century.

**The Historiographical Setting for Yoder's Initial Study (to 1968)**

The historical study Yoder carried out for his doctoral dissertation reflects many of the historiographical outlines of Anabaptist scholarship from the late 1950s and early 1960s. More particularly, there are strong echoes of the North American Mennonite renaissance in Anabaptist studies associated with the names John Horsch, Harold S. Bender, and Robert Friedmann. Though Yoder is at pains to correct points of historical interpretation taken by Bender and other Mennonite scholars, nevertheless his approach to the Anabaptist story and his work as a whole fit comfortably within the mid-century North American Mennonite historical project: rehabilitating the Anabaptists in the face of centuries of hostile Reformed, Lutheran, and Roman Catholic historiography. Among European Mennonite scholars, Yoder made common cause with Heinold Fast, whose work on Heinrich Bullinger and intimate knowledge of archival sources for eastern Switzerland become visible from time to time in Yoder's own work.<sup>7</sup>

By the third quarter of the twentieth century, thanks in no small part to the efforts of committed Mennonite scholars, a secure place had been made for Anabaptism within the landscape of Reformation history and, more narrowly, within the scope of the Radical Reformation, which was in itself a new rubric in Reformation studies. By the late 1960s, however, the tone of historical writing in Anabaptist studies began to change from earlier denominational attempts to be taken seriously to more technical historical research on empirical details of the story, undertaken particularly by social and intellectual historians (as opposed to theologians doing historical theology). The shape of Anabaptist historical scholarship had changed dramatically by century's end. Accordingly, one question to be explored in the present article is this: How did Yoder's historical depiction of Anabaptism change in response to the changing and evolving historical paradigms?

At the mid-point of the century, when Yoder was doing his original historical work, the most contentious issue in Anabaptist studies was the question of the origin and essential nature of the baptizing movement. Theories abounded, related to the various denominational and intellectual commitments of the authors, but invariably the "origins" of Anabaptism were said to color its essential character. A particularly contentious "origin" was the traditional assignment of a leading role to the insurrectionist theologian Thomas Müntzer, called the "father" of Anabaptism by some scholars in the

Lutheran and Reformed mainstream. This point of origin, so the reasoning went, gave an essentially “revolutionary” shape to Anabaptism that bore its logical fruit with the events at Münster. Origins in late medieval mysticism appealed to less dogmatically motivated scholars, who pointed to the influence of spiritualist Anabaptists such as Hans Denck. And so it went.

A point of concentration for North American Mennonite historical scholarship in the century’s first half was thus the question of Anabaptist origin (emphatically singular) and the “essential” Anabaptist character reflected by that origin and birth. Bender’s doctoral study confirmed that the first baptizers in sixteenth-century Europe emerged as erstwhile followers of Ulrich Zwingli: Zürich was the true “birthplace” of the “genuine” Anabaptist movement and Conrad Grebel was its father.<sup>8</sup> As Bender later articulated in his famous “Anabaptist Vision” statement, the fundamental teachings of genuine Anabaptism were “a new conception of the essence of Christianity as discipleship; second, a new conception of the church as a brotherhood; and third, a new ethic of love and nonresistance.”<sup>9</sup> Discredited were theories about Anabaptists springing up as continuations of Erasmian humanism, fanatical heresy, “pious heretical groups,” apocalyptic visionaries, or late medieval movements. Pushed to the margins of the movement were adult baptizers who had deviated from the “genuine Anabaptism” of the Swiss origins. In 1944 Bender could state with assurance that “Anabaptism is the culmination of the Reformation, the fulfilment of the original vision of Luther and Zwingli, and thus . . . a consistent evangelical Protestantism seeking to recreate without compromise the original New Testament church, the vision of Christ and the Apostles.”<sup>10</sup>

Yoder’s historical project in no way replicated Bender’s but rather took those essential outlines for granted as needing no further essential proof – although his own work did provide independent arguments for Bender’s basic view.<sup>11</sup> Yoder’s historical project was characteristically his own, in that he set out to clarify the Reformation roots of Anabaptism through a detailed study of the process of separation between Zwingli and the early Swiss Anabaptists. It was a question that certainly had not been asked in this way before, but it did grow directly out of the historical depiction of Anabaptist origins in Zürich summarized for English readers by Bender’s work. That is, Yoder’s research questions assumed the central importance of Zürich and Zwingli to the story as a whole, and they assumed that the true nature of

Anabaptism would be revealed by a thorough and profound examination of the rupture between the first baptizers in Zürich and Zwingli.<sup>12</sup> He explains in the “Introduction” to his historical study:

An alignment of the Anabaptists with the whole course of the Reformation demands above all that they be seen in their positive and negative relationships to the other streams of the Reformation, and above all that means in relation to the Zwinglian Reformation, which can be considered the only possible birthplace of Anabaptism.”<sup>13</sup>

When Yoder speaks of the origin and the nature of “Anabaptism” in this earliest historical work, he intends the term to be as far-ranging as it sounds: he is speaking of the baptizing movement as a whole. Empirically speaking, however (as he recognized), his research focused only on the early Swiss Anabaptists and, even more narrowly, on the crucial interactions of certain of them with Zwingli and his reform.<sup>14</sup> But since the nature of “true Anabaptism” was born and took shape in Zürich and at Schleithem, a focus on the Zürich events provided the “Anabaptist” template by which all other baptizing movements could comfortably be described and measured.

In order to investigate the Reformation origins of Anabaptism in Zürich, Yoder focused his historical analysis on the conversations, dialogues, and disputations (*Gespräche*) between the Swiss Anabaptists and the Zwinglian reformers. This choice of source material provided a fertile field, comprised as it was of historical documents in which the protagonists debated biblical truth, faithful action, and the shape of a biblical church. These were documents to which biblical, theological, and ethical questions could later be addressed. In the first part of his study, however, Yoder carefully lays the historical groundwork for the systematic theological questions he already anticipated engaging: the thoroughly “Zwinglian” nature of the early Anabaptists,<sup>15</sup> Zwingli’s “turn” from his earlier views,<sup>16</sup> the Anabaptist will to dialogue,<sup>17</sup> and the emergence of an ordered community (Schleithem) capable of sustained existence even in the face of determined political opposition.<sup>18</sup>

Based on his study of the dialogues, Yoder concluded that the original Anabaptists stood in no significant causal relationship to peasant unrest or to the social and economic issues of interest and tithes, but were motivated by

scriptural, theological, and ecclesiological questions.<sup>19</sup> Nonresistance was fundamental to Anabaptism from the start because the original Anabaptists refused state resources.<sup>20</sup> In the case of Swiss Anabaptists who did not fit the mold being described, who either strongly opposed paying interest and tithes (Pfistermeyer), were not non-resistant (Hubmaier), or demonstrated signs of spiritualistic “enthusiasm” (as in St. Gallen), Yoder says these individual instances are exceptions to the significant and surviving ecclesial unity created at Schleithem.<sup>21</sup>

The Afterword to the historical study fittingly returns to a central theme of mid-century Mennonite historiography – “true Anabaptism” – but now with a different answer than the one provided by Bender’s “Anabaptist Vision.”

. . . the course of our research has established that it is possible to recognize a “true Anabaptism,” with its own pre-history and its own organic development. . . . The Anabaptists who first introduced believers’ baptism, who established ordered church communities, who held out despite persecution; the Anabaptists who repeatedly engaged the reformers in dialogue, show themselves to be a unified group with definite boundaries. . . . those Anabaptists who stood on the foundations of Zürich and Schleithem – although they were almost leaderless and continually exposed to the violent measures of the authorities – survived through the decades. In our opinion, they deserve to be considered the “true Anabaptists. . . .”<sup>22</sup>

“True Anabaptism,” then, was the sixteenth-century movement composed of baptizers who developed Reformation insights organically through open dialogue with others, and who established ordered church communities with visible boundaries capable of surviving even in the face of state persecution. This description of “true Anabaptism” provided key ecclesiological norms for Yoder in subsequent historical writing as well as a heuristic tool for sorting through varieties of radical dissent in the sixteenth century in his writings of the 1960s and 1970s. By the early 1980s he disavowed the historical search for a “normative” Anabaptism, as will be noted later, although in his theological and ethical work he does disavow the ecclesial and ethical categories that he had originally derived from normative Anabaptism.

**Reactions and Counter-reactions (1958 - 1975)**

In the years immediately following his dissertation work, Yoder remained active in the field of Anabaptist history, publishing a series of writings drawing from and building on his earlier research.<sup>23</sup> Two of these writings elicited responses from scholars; in a third, Yoder engaged the work of others. In the midst of this activity he also edited and translated source documents for the first volume of the *Classics of the Radical Reformation* series, *The Legacy of Michael Sattler*,<sup>24</sup> and wrote voluminously in other disciplines as well. The scholarly apparatus in the Sattler translation volume reflects themes and insights first encountered in Yoder's dissertation; the Schleithem Articles feature prominently in the dissertation and the source collection, and occupy a central place in his empirical description of Anabaptism.

*The Turning Point of the Zwinglian Reformation*

Yoder's dissertation developed the thesis that Zwingli had "turned" from an initial commitment to form an independent (believers') church and accepted instead an alliance with the civil authorities to form a state church. Four years before publishing his dissertation but shortly after completing it, Yoder published "The Turning Point in the Zwinglian Reformation" in the *Mennonite Quarterly Review* (April 1958), which sharply summarized the thesis of Zwingli's "turn" without providing the nuance or detailed documentation of his dissertation.<sup>25</sup>

It took most of a decade but Yoder's "turning point" thesis generated a full-scale response by the Reformation historian Robert Walton, first in a monograph and then in a concentrated article also published in the *Mennonite Quarterly Review*.<sup>26</sup> Walton's central argument was that Zwingli had always thought "theocratically," in terms of a state unified under one church.<sup>27</sup> In particular Walton challenged the contention that Zwingli had ever intended a "clean break" from the state for his reformation; rather Zwingli expressed himself in terms of a "gradual transformation within the existing institution."<sup>28</sup>

Yoder replied the following year in the same journal, with an article that was actually an English translation and adaptation of one chapter in the second *Gespräch* volume that had just been published in German the year before. Along with some adaptations in translating the original wording,

Yoder also inserted several pages of commentary directed to Walton's challenge.<sup>29</sup> There it was clarified that the radical "turn" by Zwingli was a mistaken reading of Yoder's original intent. What he had meant was contained in the original German text, namely "how an inner contradiction between two strands of Zwingli's theological personality gradually comes to the surface. One strand is the theocratic, which was always present. . . . The second strand . . . speaks of sharing the sufferings of Christ. . . ."<sup>30</sup>

With this clarification the sharp edges of the disagreement were blunted, though significant differences remained in the interpretation of certain crucial, ambiguous documents (especially a key letter from Zwingli to Myconius, written in 1520): Zwingli's "turn" was more of a "drift" or a "slide" than a "sudden veering" from a free church to a theocratic position – an "evolution," in short. The basic thesis, Yoder maintained, still remained valid, once appropriate qualifiers were entered.

#### *The Crystallization Point of the Anabaptist Movement*

The Schleithem Articles played a central role in Yoder's 1957 historical work on Anabaptist beginnings: at Schleithem the Anabaptist movement received an "order" or "constitution" that allowed it to survive and flourish, with no dependence on civil power. In 1972 Yoder published an article in the *Mennonitische Geschichtsblätter* that extended the significance of Schleithem by proposing that the Articles represented the "crystallization point" of the movement.<sup>31</sup> What was new in this thesis was the suggestion that when Michael Sattler had been present in Strasbourg in 1526, in dialogue with Bucer and Capito (documented in an extant letter from Sattler to them), Sattler was harboring the hope that Anabaptism could be implemented in Strasbourg itself, somewhat along the lines of the earlier Waldshut attempt. Only when Bucer and Capito refused to continue the dialogue were Sattler and the Zürich Anabaptists forced to separate from the mainstream reform and create a binding "constitution" for themselves (the Schleithem Articles). They had nowhere else to turn, having now been rejected by all the reformers.

The Schleithem Articles, composed a few months after the Strasbourg episode, thus mark the true beginning of the Anabaptist movement, its "crystallization point," because an "ecumenical point of no return" had been

reached. The final rejection of dialogue by the reformers led to unwilling separation for the Anabaptists. Furthermore, the “false brethren” rejected in the Articles were Bucer, Capito, and other mainline reformers – not the baptizing libertines or spiritualists in St. Gallen or other places.<sup>32</sup> At issue here, then, was the question of how early Swiss Anabaptism had become separatist and how Schleithem’s separatism was to be interpreted.

The Reformation historian Klaus Deppermann of Freiburg replied in an article the next year in the same journal.<sup>33</sup> Deppermann could find no evidence that Bucer and Capito had ever thought of Strasbourg in any other terms than a small “corpus Christianum” in which citizens were at the same time church members (i.e., Bucer and Capito never would have seriously entertained the notion of a believers’ church); he saw Sattler’s separatism as fundamental to Sattler’s thought (and not a regrettable result of ecumenical rejection); and finally he suggested that the “false brothers” mentioned at Schleithem were Anabaptist spiritualists, not Bucer and Capito.

This response elicited an exchange of letters between Yoder and Deppermann, published in the same issue of the journal.<sup>34</sup> There is no evidence that either Yoder or Deppermann changed their minds as a result of this exchange; Yoder’s basic “crystallization” interpretation of the Strasbourg episode and the nature of the Schleithem Articles can still be read in the critical apparatus of the translation volume *The Legacy of Michael Sattler*, also published in 1973 and still in print.<sup>35</sup>

#### *Reply to ‘Anabaptists and the Sword’*

A central conclusion to Yoder’s work on Anabaptist beginnings in Zürich was that the principled nonresistance of the earliest Anabaptists was integrally related to their “free church” ecclesiology, just as Zwingli’s acceptance of state violence in service of the church also irrevocably determined his state-church ecclesiology. Schleithem’s Article VI was the ultimate statement of the Anabaptist position on the sword.<sup>36</sup> By 1974 three works had appeared that posed questions about the relationship of nonviolence to the social order.<sup>37</sup> In “‘Anabaptists and the Sword’ Revisited: Systematic Historiography and Undogmatic Nonresistants,”<sup>38</sup> Yoder set out to address all three, concentrating most of his attention on James Stayer’s recently-published *Anabaptists and the Sword*. Stayer’s description and analysis was

a significant new addition to Anabaptist scholarship, all the more so for its careful reading and categorizing of Anabaptist sources from all regions of Europe and all manner of baptizers.

At the outset of his review article Yoder stated he had no wish to examine the empirical data that he said, rather surprisingly, “have not been very debatable for a century already.” Rather than debate the data, he would take up the methodological question of “the way in which a prior theological and world view commitment enters into the capacity of the historian to make a meaningful unity out of the data he reads.”<sup>39</sup> The classifications of nonresistance utilized by historians, he argued, pre-judge the possibilities of Christian engagement with the state by imposing either a yes or a no answer to the question. He included Stayer’s panoramic study (with its categories such as separatist; apolitical; moderate apolitical; undogmatic nonresistant, etc.) as an example of such a pre-judged methodology. The “definitional dualism” of the historians Yoder reviews skews the data they examine by predetermining the answer – although, according to him, Stayer’s “empirical approach” contains the most fruitful possibilities for “conversation.”<sup>40</sup>

Yoder’s answer to definitional dualism is subtitled “Reading through a less dualist grid.” Yoder lists eight “logically possible positions which can be taken on the question of the sword in the context of reformation debates.” It is the third of these positions that he favors, the one he identifies with Schleithem’s Article VI.

It is possible to hold that two orders of preservation and redemption exist together under the same God. In one of them the sword has no place, due to the normativeness of the work of Jesus Christ, whereas in the other the sword has a limited legitimacy, which is tested precisely at the point of its ability to keep itself within limits. The classic early Anabaptist statement of this position is that of Schleithem VI: “The Sword is an ordering of God outside of the perfection of Christ.”<sup>41</sup>

Those who hold this position will be able “to condemn a given action in principle, and yet . . . continue to consider those who persist in that action as Christians, albeit misguided ones, and thereby to continue conversing with them.”<sup>42</sup> This position is “something new in the history of ideas,” namely

a position that insists that “it should not be” yet “refuses to destroy the adversary or to withdraw from the struggle.”<sup>43</sup>

The implicit conclusion to be drawn is that Schleithem’s Article VI held the key all along to a new, politically engaged (within the limits of the possible), dialogical, nonviolent manner of structuring Christian relationships that enables fraternal admonition within a believer’s church, ecumenical conversation with other communions, and even “viable democracy.”

Stayer did not publish a reply to Yoder’s review, although in the summer of 1977 he did read a paper in response at a colloquium at which Yoder was present and to which he responded informally.<sup>44</sup> In that paper Stayer moved the discussion away from “logically possible” positions, and asked whether the historical evidence concerning Sattler and Schleithem actually fit the description assigned to Schleithem by Yoder. He marshaled textual evidence that Sattler repeatedly drove a wedge between the kingdom of Christ and that of Satan (and Sattler clearly placed worldly power in the realm of Satan). Stayer also affirmed the interpretation of Schleithem as a dualist, separatist statement that cemented separation from worldly power by condemning the world’s satanic origin and nature. Schleithem did not leave the door open to constructive engagement with government as a “Christian” entity but rather firmly closed it.<sup>45</sup> Stayer granted there were Anabaptists who held views close to the one described by Yoder, but suggested that in fact the more flexible, less dogmatic and less separatist position Yoder wished to ascribe to Article VI actually came closest to the views of Hans Denck, the mystical Anabaptist.<sup>46</sup>

In his early dissertation work Yoder had noted that “The questions of whether and how a civil authority should be considered Christian, and whether and how the Christian should participate in state life, belong to theological ethics and not to dogmatic history.”<sup>47</sup> In replying to Stayer’s empirical study on the sword in Anabaptism in 1974, when he wished to address nonviolent Christian engagement with the state, Yoder constructed a methodological grid that revealed its natural home in theological ethics rather than in empirical historical study. (In fact, Yoder’s scholarship had been developing away from historical studies towards Christian ethics even in 1957.) His engagement with Stayer failed to engage the vast array of sources and the new historical narrative Stayer had marshaled. His encounter with

Stayer's early work on the sword would mark Yoder's last direct published engagement with Reformation scholars working in Anabaptist history.

The methodological divide now visible grew wider almost immediately. Not only was Yoder strongly drawn in other directions – *The Politics of Jesus* had been published in 1972 and had been preceded by *The Christian Witness to the State* (1964), *Nevertheless* (1971), and *The Original Revolution: Essays on Christian Pacifism* (1971) – but the field of Anabaptist history was undergoing a major methodological shift that brought to the forefront wide empirical research on the social, economic, and political contexts in which Anabaptism found expression. The historiographical details will not concern us here, but two publications indicate the depth and significance of the methodological change now underway.

In 1975 James Stayer, Werner O. Packull, and Klaus Deppermann published “From Monogenesis to Polygenesis.” This ground-breaking article announced a new approach to Anabaptist history based on detailed empirical studies of particular regions and persons, and drew new conclusions as a result.<sup>48</sup> The historical question no longer was “What was the *place* of origin of Anabaptism?” but rather “What were the *places* where Anabaptism originated”; no longer was it “Who was the intellectual *father* of Anabaptism who determined its essential character as a movement?” but “Who were the intellectual *fathers* of Anabaptism who determined the varieties of Anabaptism?” One was to think no longer of a “normative Anabaptism” but of “Anabaptisms,” all with unique origins and characteristics, and none of them normative.

Needless to say, Yoder's early concentration on Zürich and Zwingli and the assumption that from this study the essential marks of “true Anabaptism” could be identified ran counter to the method and results of the polygenesis historians and, increasingly, those of other historians working in the field, most of whom had no denominational connections with the believers church tradition.<sup>49</sup> One need only reference Yoder's conclusions in 1957 to see that the historiographical gulf was widening quickly.<sup>50</sup>

The methodological exclamation point of this development was contained in the papers of a symposium of scholars discussing “Problems of Anabaptist History,” published in 1979 in the *Mennonite Quarterly Review*. The keynote essay by Hans-Jürgen Goertz, titled “History and Theology: A Major Problem of Anabaptist Research Today,” celebrated what he saw as the

demise of confessional history at the hands of the Marxist historian Gerhard Zschäbitz, the social historian Claus-Peter Clasen, and the intellectual historian James Stayer.

It would appear at first glance that the work of Zschäbitz, Clasen and Stayer has negated the cherished conclusions of the free-church historiography on virtually all points: the nonrevolutionary character of Anabaptism, its clearly voluntaristic ecclesiology, its essential unity, and its significance for the emergence of the modern world.<sup>51</sup>

There is a place for theology in the study of church history, Goertz conceded eventually, but it must be subservient to history, methodologically speaking, and good history is independent of theological commitments.

The theologian can perhaps draw attention from his distinctive perspective to problems which no one else would have noticed, but he must do this in such a manner that his results can be examined by everyone on the basis of historical material. That very fact bars the way to a hermeneutical primacy of theology in the study of church history.<sup>52</sup>

Thus the “cooperative participation” of theologians and historians in the investigation of Anabaptism can and should happen, Goertz concluded — but with appropriate methodological limitations on the side of the theologians.

Other participants in the symposium did not entirely echo Goertz’s views. Stayer, for example, said that Goertz seemed to be calling for the “abject surrender” of church historians who had “distinctive religious viewpoints.” He concluded, “I doubt if such a surrender will take place and, in fact, I hope it does not.”<sup>53</sup> Nevertheless, work in Anabaptist history in the last quarter of the century was strongly colored by the approach not only recommended by Goertz but already well underway as the dominant methodology.

The methodological sea change did not create the kind of environment hospitable to the approach Yoder had taken and continued to develop, and his stronger interests lay in other fields in any case. Although the pioneering “Polygenesis” article appeared in 1975, only seven years after the publication of Yoder’s second volume of the Anabaptist-Reformed dialogues, Yoder did not engage polygenesis historical scholarship even once in print — although

he did modify his own teaching narratives in light of the new scholarship, as will be noted below. However, this lack of direct engagement with the subsequent scholarship—coming from a renowned debater, prolific writer, and brilliant scholar who did his doctoral work in Anabaptist history—speaks volumes.

Yoder's answer to polygenesis historiography was perhaps written before there even was such a historiography. In 1962 in the penultimate footnote to his first published volume on the Anabaptists and Reformers in Switzerland, Yoder wrote: "By pointing to the deep unity of all surviving Anabaptist groups, we are not claiming that they were all under one organizational roof."

There were also visible differences, for example, in their teachings on the incarnation, in the sharpness of their practice of the ban, and regarding community of goods. . . . *But this was not our topic.* These other streams may have helped to form the ethics and the anthropology of Anabaptism, but they do not explain baptism and the community-building power of the Anabaptist message. They influenced the outer form of Anabaptism, but we have Zürich to thank for an Anabaptism that endured.<sup>54</sup>

"The Anabaptism that endured" became a polestar for all of Yoder's historical work. From the start, the questions he was asking led him to seek the essential theological unity of the Anabaptist movement (which he sought and found in Zürich); that the "essential Anabaptism" had been appropriately identified was "proven" historically by the survival of communities that embraced the principles he had identified in the first Swiss Anabaptists. When Yoder extrapolated and "logically" extended the theological, ecclesiological, and ethical significance of the Anabaptist responses beyond what the Swiss Anabaptists actually said (as he explicitly does in the more systematic part of his doctoral work – part II of *Anabaptism and Reformation in Switzerland*), this is not a betrayal of his methodology but a faithful carrying out of it and his privileged questions. This was a fact perhaps understood but not appreciated by his historian critics.

Yoder's earliest studies reveal history being done with theological ethics in mind, as the choice of source material reveals. The dialogues, after

all, were historical debates about biblical truth. Debate over such questions, Yoder believed, should continue to be the focus for committed church historians and for the ecumenical discussions emerging in earnest at the time of his research and writing. He felt the ecumenical task was primary. For a Christian scholar to fail to direct questions of biblical truth to historical sources that documented the “breaking points” leading to Christian division would be irresponsible; it would be treating history as an “idle academic recreation.”<sup>55</sup> Such idle recreation could not have been farther from Yoder’s approach to the historical material.

Nevertheless, Yoder would still work in the historical idiom from time to time, as we will note below. But in what would be an amazingly prolific publishing career, his historical work would occupy less and less space. He never again published the results of concentrated sixteenth-century archival and primary source work, although in 1957 he had projected an extension of his Zürich research into Strasbourg.<sup>56</sup> Such a study was never published; perhaps the “crystallization point” article was part of such a study, begun but not completed.

### **Radical Reformation Typology and Anabaptism (1974 and beyond)**

Although Yoder withdrew after 1974 from direct published engagement with academic historians doing research in Anabaptism, he did not abandon historical writing altogether.<sup>57</sup> The audiences for which he composed overviews of sixteenth-century dissent were primarily students and scholars involved in church settings;<sup>58</sup> his post-1974 historical writing was for interaction primarily with those working in a Christian context and with theological interests and commitments.

As early as 1957 Yoder was well aware of the great variety of sixteenth-century Anabaptist views. The crucial questions in terms of historical narrative were not the bare fact of diversity but how that diversity would be described and how differing views and actions would be explained. When he dealt with the wider panorama of Reformation dissent (both Anabaptist and non-Anabaptist), he mirrored the typological “Radical Reformation” rubric of George H. Williams<sup>59</sup> and the similar “Left Wing of the Reformation” framework of Heinold Fast.<sup>60</sup> Already in 1957 Williams’ typology of radical reforming positions had made a comfortable place for “evangelical

Anabaptists” within a wider, very diverse radical stream that included Karlstadt, Müntzer, Hut, Mathijs, and radical dissidents of all sorts.

In a 1964 lecture (published in 1971), Yoder presented an abbreviated but revealing historiographical survey to assess the significance of the “recovery of the Anabaptist Vision”<sup>61</sup> for a lecture audience comprising participants in a Students Services Summer Seminar at Elkhart, Indiana (not Reformation scholars). Making the point that the earlier hostile collective label of “fanatics” or “enthusiasts” (*Schwärmer*) had been superseded by European and North American scholarship, and that a wide diversity of Reformation dissent was now recognized, he listed twelve divisions among Reformation dissidents, which were then grouped according to four major types: Non-Anabaptist dissenters (e.g., Karlstadt, Müntzer), Fanatics (properly speaking), Anabaptists (“mainstream” Anabaptists), and Antitrinitarians. The general approach in this early lecture mirrors that of Williams, even if the categories do not correspond exactly.

Among the “mainstream Anabaptists,” the group with which Yoder was primarily concerned, were included the Swiss Brethren, Menno Simons, the “strong individual Anabaptists” (Denck, Hubmaier, Hut), the Hutterian Brethren, and Pilgram Marpeck. Yoder found an “enormous breadth of agreement between them,” and further subdivided the mainstream into the surviving groups of Mennonites, Swiss Brethren, and Hutterian Brethren.<sup>62</sup> The identifying marks of this mainstream Anabaptism were noted (with nuanced comment) as being the four primary marks of mainstream Anabaptist ecclesiology: a church that is visible, missionary, a brotherhood, and led by the Word and the Spirit.<sup>63</sup> Yoder concluded with an analysis of the “contemporary significance” of the Anabaptist Vision for the renewal of the Mennonite church.

A more thorough and nuanced description of the broader sixteenth-century “radical” scene was published in 1976 with a collection of Radical Reformation source documents, edited and introduced by Yoder, and published in Spanish in Argentina in a politically charged atmosphere.<sup>64</sup> *Textos Escogidos de la Reforma Radical* was a reader based on the English collection of George H. Williams and Angel Mergal, *Spiritual and Anabaptist Writers*, and the parallel collection of Heinold Fast, *Der Linke Flügel der Reformation*. In the general introduction Yoder explains that he favors the

term “Radical Reformation” as a descriptive label for sixteenth-century dissent because of the applicability of the double sense of the term “radical.” The dissenters were not only intent on “returning to the roots,” they also meant to renew the church in keeping with its apostolic roots.<sup>65</sup>

In spite of the acceptance of William’s basic typology and Radical Reformation rubric, the historical narrative introducing this volume is an unusual combination of the panoramic, inclusive description of all manner of radical reform, as pioneered by Williams, and interpolations that recall the descriptions of “true Anabaptism” sounded by Yoder in 1957. The Latin American context for which the introduction was written may have led Yoder to shape the text in unusual ways.

After a brief outline of four stages of early Reformation chronology that identifies the emergence of radical reform in the period 1520-21, the first of two historiographical outlines follows. The historiographical survey, however, concerns only the origin and nature of Anabaptism rather than that of the wider “radical reform” and concludes with a narrative firmly rooted in Yoder’s 1957 conclusions.

Today there is no longer any doubt that, in the strict sense, Anabaptism began in Zürich in 1525, in the very heart of the Zwinglian reform. It was led by disciples and collaborators of Zwingli who were disappointed by the slow pace of his official reform. . . . these “radical Zwinglians” respected Thomas Müntzer because of his honest forthrightness [*franqueza*] but they were not in agreement with him on essential liturgical and political points.

If Anabaptism was defined by such a Zwinglian stamp, how is the wide variety of baptizing dissent to be explained?

. . . in spite of being purely Zwinglian in its origins, Anabaptism could very easily and quickly integrate people from very diverse origins, thanks to its non-official nature, its lack of juridical bases and its clandestine situation. These diverse people included little remnant groups of third-order Franciscans, Waldensians and Moravian Brethren; mystical thinkers and ‘enthusiasts’ ready to give themselves to any ecstatic current. Many of these people formally joined the baptizing movement for a time.<sup>66</sup>

The Radical Reformation/Anabaptist narrative begins with dissent from Luther but quickly passes through Zürich to emerge as Anabaptism, which subsequently gathers up “non-Anabaptist” elements for a time. These elements do not last and are not significant to the story, as is shown by the application of the heuristic principle of “true Anabaptism” (not named as such here) that includes only those baptizers who founded visible, permanent groups capable of surviving in the absence of political support.

However, the introduction turns from a description of Anabaptism back to a description of five common characteristics of “Radical Reform” in all of its inclusiveness:

1. A rejection of alliances with civil power (Thomas Müntzer is noted as an exception).
2. Acceptance of suffering at the hands of those with power (Anabaptists like the Münsterites, who inflicted suffering, are not mentioned).
3. Authenticity of personal faith, personal experience, and personal commitment.
4. A visible community, distinct from society in general (the Spiritualists are not noted as exceptions here).
5. A universal vision for mission (separatist groups are not mentioned).<sup>67</sup>

Yoder suggests this radical Christian expression is particularly relevant for an Iberian culture “whose medieval Catholic era lasted until yesterday.” Within the limits of historical models, a Christocentric Protestantism that was free, voluntary, missionary, communitarian, and capable of surviving and changing the world might well have something to say to the contemporary Latin American situation.<sup>68</sup>

Throughout this introduction, Yoder moves effortlessly between panoramic descriptions including all varieties of Reformation radicals to descriptions purporting to describe all radicals but bringing to mind the “true Anabaptists” of Zürich as in the description of Christocentric Protestantism above. But not all the radicals included under Williams’ rubric can be matched with the listed “common characteristics” of radical reform. A profile of Thomas Müntzer, so beloved by the Marxist historiography of that era and a figure of considerable interest to liberation theologians of that time in Latin

America, would have elicited very different “radical” characteristics. Indeed, given the charged political and religious context for which this material was written, it surely was not accidental that in the “analytical essay” that follows careful attention is given both to the sixteenth-century “revolutionary” option (attractive to liberation theologians) and the spiritualist option (attractive to the growing Protestant Pentecostal movements). A third option was what Yoder now called “ecclesial Anabaptism” (rather than the earlier “mainstream Anabaptism” or “true Anabaptism”) that grew out of radical Zwinglianism.<sup>69</sup>

The general introduction then moved to a relatively thorough description of the broader panorama of reformation dissent, at times echoing Williams’ categories,<sup>70</sup> with occasional narrative hints to contemporary Latin Americans as to how best to make value choices among the options. Stronger conclusions came in an appendix<sup>71</sup> that begins with a second, more detailed survey of “sixteenth-century radical reform,” listing five historiographical stages:

1. Official Protestant historiography.
2. In-group historiography (Mennonite: *Martyrs Mirror*).
3. Scientific revision (U. Heberle and C. A. Cornelius, whose work led to “a corrected understanding of the basic facts that has not changed.”).
4. Mennonite and Believers’ Church historians (Horsch, Bender, who change little regarding the basic facts).
5. Ernst Bloch and neo-Marxist historiography, who favor Müntzer but ignore religious elements and groups like the Anabaptists.<sup>72</sup>

Under the third period, which Yoder considered the most important for establishing the “basic facts,” there is a further summary of thirteen different strands of radicalism that closely parallels but does not exactly match the list provided in the 1964 lecture noted above. After Müntzer, the Peasants’ War, and Karlstadt comes “Anabaptism proper” [*el Anabaptismo propiamente dicho*] described according to the pattern seen elsewhere for “mainline Anabaptism.” Not included in Anabaptism proper are Hubmaier, Denck, Hut, the Stäbler, Hoffman, Mathijs, or the Antitrinitarians. After Münster, the Melchiorite inheritance in the Netherlands was rejected and the northern

baptizing movement regrouped under Menno Simons. Yoder concludes,

In this way we may sum up the results of a century of research in the manner of Heberle and Cornelius, which culminated with the publication of the *Täuferakten* document series and with the work of other scholars like Fritz Blanke, Franklin H. Littell and George H. Williams.<sup>73</sup>

Having presented again a wide panorama of radical persons and movements, refracted this time through a more explicitly “ecclesial Anabaptist” lens, the historiographical appendix concludes with a key section subtitled “the Theological Contribution.”

Anyone attempting to interpret the broad range of the radical reform has to begin by noting its extreme diversity, Yoder notes. Nevertheless, “insofar as we are dealing with a movement, we must distinguish between organized communities capable of surviving, and radical individuals who are alone and without followers.” According to this criterion, the unsavory Radical Reformation brew is distilled down to three movements of the same type: the Mennonites, the Swiss Brethren, and the Hutterian Brethren. These groups have a distinctive theological contribution to make, in contrast to the mainline reform.

1. They form particular and visible communities which are voluntary, in which economic goods are shared. It is a missionary community that is organized locally according to the “Rule of Christ” (Matthew 18:15ff.).
2. These groups have a distinctive biblical hermeneutic, marked by a Christocentric Reformation biblicism, an historical view of the Bible, a congregational and critical hermeneutic, open to new insights.
3. These groups renounce political power in support of the church, and maintain the freedom of the church in the face of the state. Conversely, they maintain the freedom of the state in face of the church, and call for liberation from violence.

Yoder concludes by noting that although only some of these Anabaptist marks have been universally accepted in the modern world, “at least we cannot doubt the relevance of their history, their critique and their testimony of word and blood.”<sup>74</sup> In the end, when theological meaning and significance

needed to be extracted from the diverse history of Radical Reform, the only groups who provided a “distinctive theological contribution” were groups who fit the mold of the “true Anabaptists.”

The two writings surveyed above were drafted before the appearance of the influential revisionist (“polygenesis”) article by Stayer, Packull, and Deppermann in 1975 discussed earlier. Consequently, they continue to reflect the historiographical approach that appealed to “normative Anabaptism.” Although no evidence exists of a direct response published by Yoder to the polygenesis thesis, a collection of lectures delivered at the Mennonite Seminary in Elkhart, Indiana (last edited and published in 1983) indicates that he was abreast of the emerging historiography and significantly modified his narrative of Anabaptist beginnings and diversity in his teaching of seminary students, in response to the new findings.<sup>75</sup>

The seminary course “Christian Attitudes to War, Peace, and Revolution” dealt with the Anabaptists in one chapter, and although that chapter’s focus was nonviolence in Anabaptism, a narrative of Anabaptist beginnings and development was included of necessity.<sup>76</sup> Notice that Yoder was working with a modified narrative model comes early in the material: “The Anabaptist movement of the 1520s was not a unity. The historian can’t talk about a unified Anabaptist position until after 1540, and then only on certain questions, and only because people representing the other options were persecuted out of existence.”<sup>77</sup>

Far from speaking of “true Anabaptism,” Yoder now accepts a broader historical definition as urged by the revisionist historians.

An Anabaptist is someone who doesn’t baptize babies and does baptize adults. . . . So there were nonpacifist Anabaptists who were genuine Anabaptists, in the sense that they were baptized. . . . If water baptism received by an adult is the mark then there were obviously violent Anabaptists.<sup>78</sup>

The far-reaching implications of this broad definition are also accepted, including a questioning of the earlier heuristic measure of the “survival” of a given group as a measure of true Anabaptism.

There is no point in saying that one of these groups was legitimately Anabaptist and another wasn’t, since there is no

other criterion [other than adult baptism] for the legitimacy of an Anabaptist. It is possible to say that the Swiss Brethren movement had one kind of coherence. The Hutterite movement had another kind of coherence. The Frisian Mennonite movement had another kind of coherence. Those three movements went on in time long enough that we can make of their coherence a standard, a 'type,' and say (after the fact) that other groups didn't fit that type. We can also record the fact that no other groups survived beyond roughly 1540. Those who survived had come to relatively similar positions on the sword. Yet that measure of survival is of course a different criterion from whether they were Anabaptists in the first place, or from whatever standards we might use to decide whether we would like these Anabaptists better than those.<sup>79</sup>

In light of Yoder's earlier historical writings these were significant concessions and modifications, demonstrating a real evolution in his conception of sixteenth-century Anabaptism.<sup>80</sup> Of course, very many of Yoder's earlier distinctive emphases remain in this lecture on nonviolence and the Anabaptist tradition, as one would expect, but the historical narrative has shifted in substantial ways.<sup>81</sup>

### **Conclusion**

By what measures can we assess John Howard Yoder's work as an historian of Anabaptism? First, the quality and thoroughness of Yoder's investigation into his chosen array of sources (the dialogues) cannot be disputed. Those who have wished to disagree with Yoder on the basis of alternative readings of these particular sources have faced the daunting task of replicating his original, painstakingly careful study in order to find fault with it. Nevertheless, significant challenges to Yoder's historical work did appear, especially those arising in the last quarter of the twentieth century, as outlined above.

Even a superficial intellectual biography of Yoder cannot help but note his uncanny ability to analyze data of all kinds and to find logical patterns of meaning where others could not. When he looked at any field of data, including empirical historical records, it seemed inevitable that the search for larger patterns of meaning was set in motion. The results

usually were breathtakingly insightful, cutting across academic disciplines with brilliant abandon. Nevertheless, in the case of the discipline of history, for those academics whose task it remained to sift through original records and construct historical narratives, Yoder's interpretive grids often were not convincing. In spite of his careful work with the sources of Anabaptist beginnings in Switzerland, his methodology of choice for describing Anabaptism was historical theology in search of the "essence" of the movement; his manner of locating Anabaptism's place in the wider field of Reformation history tended to the typological (also, essentialist) rather than to a descriptive historical narration that was highly empirical. This is not to say that either historical theology or typology are divorced from empirical evidence, but to say that these approaches rather quickly smooth over the rough edges and exceptions that closer adherence to empirical evidence invariably highlights.

It is strange but true that critiques of specific parts of Yoder's early historical investigations leave his work as a whole unchallenged. This is because as a church historian committed to church renewal and ecumenical dialogue, he was pressing the historical sources with theological, biblical, and ethical questions in mind: What does the Bible demand of us as Christians? How should the faithful church be ordered and constituted? How should the faithful church relate to the state? Questions such as these not only were not asked but increasingly were ruled out of order by academic Reformation historians. All the same, as his seminary lectures reveal, Yoder continued to learn from the revisionist historians and made some important modifications to his own historical narratives as a result.

When we read Yoder's original historical work, it is as if the Swiss Anabaptist-Reformed dialogues provided the door through which he could pass, allowing him to explore the larger questions that gripped him and stimulated his creative mind. The door as such—the historical work in its own right—certainly mattered to him, but finally it mattered far less than the wide panorama revealed after he had passed through that door and looked beyond. Professional historians may have wished (and may still wish) to argue about the size, shape, or location of this or that Anabaptist door—and even about the size and shape of the Anabaptist edifice itself—but all this ultimately had minimal impact on the systematic questions Yoder intended to ask. To borrow a phrase he used frequently in debate, he was "asking a

different question” than were academic historians in the last quarter of the twentieth century.

The foundational questions driving Yoder’s historical study become the consistent focus of his later systematic work, as Neal Blough has noted: How can the church be church if there is no possibility of true dialogue? Who held the *more adequate position* in the debates between Swiss Anabaptists and Reformed, in light of the Bible? How did each side understand what it meant to be a Christian community? What model of church was *more faithful* to Scripture? Historically considered, did the Zwinglian or the Anabaptist attempts to be church in the world achieve the *more faithful result* after four hundred years?<sup>82</sup> These questions were matters of engaged faith commitment, as Yoder’s subsequent career clearly demonstrated.

The methodological debate continues over how the history of Christian movements should best be approached and written, in light of the various ideological and religious commitments of the historians doing the work. As for the study of sixteenth-century reforming movements, the pendulum seems to be swinging away from concentration on social, economic, and political causation, to taking more seriously again the religious commitments of the actors as providing valid “historical” reasons for their actions.<sup>83</sup> The academic environment has become friendlier now (perhaps temporarily) to the kinds of historical questions Yoder posed almost fifty years ago and to his way of approaching them.

Nevertheless, “using” history to speak to contemporary situations – which all historians do to varying degrees when they construct narratives – continues to pose the same difficult questions it always has. Yoder’s evolving relationship with the changing discipline of radical Reformation history is partly a story of changing disciplinary canons to which Yoder refused to be bound. But more significantly in the light of the broader sweep of his intellectual biography, the story of his relationship to sixteenth-century historical study demonstrates the power of the historical past to stimulate and inform ground-breaking contemporary analysis and debate—in the hands of someone with unique intellectual gifts. Although Yoder withdrew from the field of Anabaptist history as such, it is manifestly true that his historical work “helped twentieth-century theologians to take seriously the theology of Anabaptism.”<sup>84</sup>

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> This article is an edited version of the previously-published “Editor’s Preface” to John Howard Yoder, *Anabaptism and Reformation in Switzerland: An Historical and Theological Analysis of the Dialogues Between Anabaptists and Reformers* (Kitchener, ON: Pandora Press, 2004).

<sup>2</sup> “One could argue that John Howard Yoder’s entire academic career was committed to communicating in broadly Christian terms what he learned through his studies of sixteenth-century Anabaptism in the 1950s in Europe. It was through those studies that he came to the central convictions that he would subsequently spend a lifetime articulating.” Mark Thiessen Nation, *John Howard Yoder: Mennonite Patience, Evangelical Witness, Catholic Convictions* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006), 31. For an overview of Yoder’s Basel studies, see *ibid.*, 18, nn. 69, 70. Also Neal Blough, “The Historical Roots of John Howard Yoder’s Theology,” in Yoder, *Anabaptism and Reformation*, xli-lx.

<sup>3</sup> It was due to be published in 1959 but was delayed until 1962. John H. Yoder, *Täuferertum und Reformation in der Schweiz, I. Die Gespräche zwischen Täufern und Reformatoren 1523-1538* (Karlsruhe: Mennonitischen Geschichtsverein, 1962). The delay is said to have been the result of “difficulties in printing and technical redaction,” 7.

<sup>4</sup> John H. Yoder, *Täuferertum und Reformation im Gespräch* (Zürich: EVZ-Verlag, 1968).

<sup>5</sup> The tight links between the two publications are further revealed in the copious cross-referencing between the two works: anticipations of later, more systematic treatment are noted in the first volume, and in the second, there are numerous pointers back to the historical work already done in the first.

<sup>6</sup> John Howard Yoder, *Anabaptism and Reformation in Switzerland*.

<sup>7</sup> See Mark Thiessen Nation, *A Comprehensive Bibliography of the Writings of John Howard Yoder* (Goshen, IN: Mennonite Historical Society, 1997), where the subject matter of published and unpublished writings provides a barometer of Yoder’s shifting scholarly interests. For a review in English of Yoder’s historical work see Mark Thiessen Nation, “The Ecumenical Patience and Vocation of John Howard Yoder: A Study in Theological Ethics,” PhD dissertation, Fuller Theological Seminary, June 2000, chapter 2 and *idem*, *John Howard Yoder: Mennonite Patience, Evangelical Witness, Catholic Convictions*. For a brief but incisive review of Yoder’s historical work (in German), see Hanspeter Jecker, “Annex: John H. Yoders Beitrag zur Erforschung der Täufergeschichte,” in Hanspeter Jecker, ed. *Jesus folgen in einer pluralistischen Welt: Impulse aus der Arbeit John Howard Yoders* (Weisenheim am Berg: Agape Verlag, 2001), 157-66.

<sup>8</sup> The original doctoral dissertation, completed and submitted in 1935 to the University of Heidelberg, was published later as Harold S. Bender, *Conrad Grebel, c. 1498-1526, the Founder of the Swiss Brethren sometimes called Anabaptists* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1950).

<sup>9</sup> Harold Bender, “The Anabaptist Vision,” in Guy F. Hershberger, ed., *The Recovery of the Anabaptist Vision* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1957), 42.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 37.

<sup>11</sup> Harold Bender was Yoder’s teacher and inspired him to pursue Anabaptist studies. Nation,

John Howard Yoder, 32.

<sup>12</sup> Yoder relied on the European studies by Heberle and Cornelius to confirm the Swiss origins of Anabaptism. Urban Heberle, “Die Anfänge des Anabaptismus in der Schweiz,” *Jahrbuch für deutsche Theologie*, III (1858), volume 2, 225-80; C. A. Cornelius, *Geschichte des Münsterischen Aufbruchs in 3 Büchern* (not completed), 2 volumes (Leipzig, 1855-60).

<sup>13</sup> Yoder, *Anabaptism and Reformation*, 1-2.

<sup>14</sup> He argues, for example, that since Balthasar Hubmaier did not participate in the initial debates with Zwingli, he was not part of key dialogical developments experienced by the inner Anabaptist circle. Hubmaier is thus a more marginal figure.

<sup>15</sup> See Yoder, *Anabaptism and Reformation*, Part I, sections 1- 4; the point will be revisited throughout. “Even when [the Anabaptists] separated themselves from [Zwingli] and had to go another way, they could only go in the directions that he had already shown them: discipleship as the formal principle of ethics, the local congregation where valid church action is located, the questioning of infant baptism; all of this they had from Zwingli.” *Ibid.*, 121.

<sup>16</sup> This is posed as a “formal question” in *ibid.*, 122ff. “In 1520, Zwingli had visualized the church community as a persecuted minority, as sheep among wolves, and had described following after Christ as the way of the cross for the few. At the end of 1523, the church community is no longer a minority, but is so fully identified with the people of Zürich that it cannot occur to Zwingli that the authorities, who indeed do represent the people, are not responsible for church questions. The original concept of the church community must have changed. The Anabaptists had carried it further, made it more precise....” *Ibid.*, 125.

<sup>17</sup> Dialogue emerged as a key ecclesiological concept for Yoder. This central theme is summarized in *ibid.*, 118-21. The sixteenth-century roots of that emphasis on dialogue can be illustrated by two examples from this early historical work: “Only the Anabaptists, with their rejection of the government’s authority over the church, continued to be present in the Reformed areas as a continuing provocation to bring questions into dialogue.” *Ibid.*, 115. “But even if the continued survival of the Anabaptist communities to the present earns them a claim to be heard ... their right to be heard really stems from their inexhaustible will to dialogue.” *Ibid.*, 136.

<sup>18</sup> See *ibid.*, section 14. Speaking of the “inner growth” of the Anabaptist movement, Yoder writes, “The final level was achieved at Schleithem in 1527, at which these different questions united in a new understanding of the church community.” *Ibid.*, 132.

<sup>19</sup> See *ibid.*, 130-32.

<sup>20</sup> “The nonresistance that remained typical for Anabaptists and Mennonites in the later decades and centuries was not the fruit of some development. It arose neither from exhaustion or embarrassment. From the moment of its birth on, the essence and reason for the existence of Swiss Anabaptism was its rejection of state resources.” *Ibid.*, 132.

<sup>21</sup> Hubmaier and Pfistermeyer are called “in-between figures” [*Zwischengestalten*] who didn’t fully agree with the Anabaptist view as expressed at Schleithem. As for the St. Gallen enthusiasts, Yoder notes that Schleithem provided the means to reject libertinism. *Ibid.*, 133.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 135-36.

<sup>23</sup> Some of the most important of these writings are: “The Turning Point in the Zwinglian

Reformation,” *MQR* 32 (April 1958): 128-40; “Balthasar Hubmaier and the Beginnings of Swiss Anabaptism,” *MQR* 33 (Jan. 1959): 5-17; “The Hermeneutics of the Anabaptists,” *MQR* 41 (Oct. 1967): 291-308; “The Evolution of the Zwinglian Reformation,” *MQR* 43 (Jan. 1969): 95-122; “Der Kristallisationspunkt des Täuferturns,” *Mennonitische Geschichtsblätter* 24 (1972): 35-47; “‘Anabaptists and Sword’ Revisited: Systematic Historiography and Undogmatic Nonresistants,” *Zeitschrift für Kirchengeschichte* 85.2 (1974): 126-39. See Nation, *Comprehensive Bibliography*, for an exhaustive list. Jecker, “Annex” (in this issue of *CGR*) lists 56 of Yoder’s most important historical writings, ranging from book reviews to books.

<sup>24</sup> (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1973).

<sup>25</sup> In this article Yoder argues that Zwingli and Grebel were still in accord in October 1523 (a date at which other scholars had noted a rift between them), and that Zwingli’s “turn” came in December 1523, necessitating Grebel’s opposition. “By thus seeing the basic nature of Zwingli’s shift in position we have at the same time found the crux of Grebel’s clash with him.” Yoder, “The Turning Point,” 140.

<sup>26</sup> Robert Walton, “Was There a Turning Point of the Zwinglian Reformation?,” *MQR* 42 (Jan. 1968): 45-56, based on Walton’s monograph *Zwingli’s Theocracy* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1967). An abridged version of this printed debate is found in James M. Stayer and Werner O. Packull, trans. and eds., *The Anabaptists and Thomas Müntzer*, (Dubuque, IA; Toronto: Kendall/Hunt, 1980) 61-71. Hans Hillerbrand also published a brief critique: “The ‘Turning Point’ of the Zwinglian Reformation: Review and Discussion,” *MQR* 39 (Oct. 1965): 310-11.

<sup>27</sup> “There is ample evidence from Zwingli’s later career that he thought of Zürich as a unified Christian community.” Walton, “Was There a Turning Point?,” 50.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 51. Walton concludes: “Yoder does Zwingli less than justice when he claims that Zwingli abandoned the church to assure unity in society. As Zwingli understood the problem church and society were one; to maintain the unity of the commonwealth was to defend the church.” *Ibid.*, 56.

<sup>29</sup> John H. Yoder, “The Evolution of the Zwinglian Reformation,” *MQR* 43 (Jan. 1969): 95-122. The material added to the dissertation original text is found from the first full paragraph of the *MQR* article, page 108 to the second full paragraph on page 113.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 109-10. “If one looks back over the development that took place from October 1522 to the Summer of 1525, one does not get the impression of a ‘turning’ but more of an almost unconscious slide.” *Ibid.*, 113.

<sup>31</sup> “Der Kristallisationspunkt des Täuferturns,” *Mennonitische Geschichtsblätter* 24 (1972): 35-47.

<sup>32</sup> In his dissertation, Yoder suggests that the Schleithem criticism of the “false brothers” could have been a reference to the Appenzell “libertine” disturbances, as well as the kind of “carnal freedom” implied by not breaking with Constantinian Christendom. See Yoder, *Anabaptism and Reformation*, 70. In 1971 in a general overview of reformation dissenters, Yoder appears to attribute the Schleithem meeting to “radicals of Eastern Switzerland”: “It was probably the liberty taken by some representatives of this trend which led to the Schleithem meeting with its concentration on responsible church order.” J. H. Yoder, “The Recovery of the Anabaptist Vision,” *Concern* 18 (July 1971), 10. The *Concern* article was

based on a lecture given in 1964; the “crystallization” thesis thus emerged in the eight-year interval between that time and 1972.

<sup>33</sup> Klaus Deppermann, “Die Strassburger Reformatoren und die Krise des oberdeutschen Täuferturns im Jahre 1527,” *Mennonitische Geschichtsblätter* 25 (1973): 24-41.

<sup>34</sup> “Ein Briefwechsel über die Bedeutung des Schleitheimer Bekenntnisses,” *Mennonitische Geschichtsblätter* 30 (1973): 42-52. As a young graduate student working on Michael Sattler’s biography, it seemed to me that Deppermann had the stronger empirical arguments. C. Arnold Snyder, *The Life and Thought of Michael Sattler* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1984), 89-95.

<sup>35</sup> See Yoder, *Legacy*, 26, note 48, and 27-29 for a restatement of the “crystallization” view. Yoder revisited the matter briefly in “The Burden and the Discipline of Evangelical Revisionism,” in *Nonviolent America: History Through the Eyes of Peace*, ed. Louise Hawkley and James C. Juhnke (North Newton, KS: Bethel College, 1993; second printing, Kitchener, ON: Pandora Press, 2004), 23-25.

<sup>36</sup> “The final level was achieved at Schleitheim in 1527, at which these different questions united in a new understanding of the church community.... The rejection of violence by the sword and the rejection of the oath were not only taken from various New Testament proof texts, but were also theologically supported.... From this base, Anabaptism could defy the state church and finally do away with the fanatics.” Yoder, *Anabaptism and Reformation*, 130.

<sup>37</sup> The three works were Hans Hillerbrand, *Die politische Ethik des Oberdeutschen Täuferturns* (Leiden/Köln, 1962), summarized as “The Anabaptist View of the State,” *MQR* 32 (April 1958): 83ff; Clarence Bauman, *Gewaltlosigkeit im Täuferturn* (Leiden, 1968); James M. Stayer, *Anabaptists and the Sword* (Lawrence, KS: Coronado, 1972).

<sup>38</sup> “‘Anabaptists and Sword’ Revisited: Systematic Historiography and Undogmatic Nonresistants,” *Zeitschrift für Kirchengeschichte* 85.2 (1974): 126-39.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 126-27. Taking this tack is to assume a position on the slippery slope of historical debate, of course, because those criticizing the methodological pre-dispositions of others open their own methodological pre-dispositions to the same criticism.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 130; 132.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 135.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 137.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 138.

<sup>44</sup> James Stayer, “Anabaptist Nonresistance and the Rewriting of History: On the Changing Historical Reputation of the Schleitheim Articles and the Four Hundred Fiftieth Anniversary of Hans Denck’s ‘Concerning Genuine Love,’” unpublished paper, June 1977. If Yoder composed a written response, it appears not to be extant.

<sup>45</sup> “Systematic dualism and the conception of Satan as lord of the world are not inventions of Robert Friedmann, they were Sattler’s own ideas.” *Ibid.*, 13. “Although Yoder may have been closer to the meaning of the New Testament in his discussion of the ‘powers,’ Friedmann’s conception of two worlds, one of them ruled (with God’s permission) by Satan, ‘the prince of this world,’ is closer to the meaning of Michael Sattler.” *Ibid.*, 14. My later work on Sattler supported Stayer’s conclusion against Yoder’s: “With the Schleitheim Articles the Anabaptist church becomes the faithful, pure, and separated body of Christ outside which there is no

salvation.” Snyder, *Life and Thought*, 200.

<sup>46</sup> Stayer, “Anabaptist Nonresistance,” 14.

<sup>47</sup> Yoder, *Anabaptism and Reformation*, 265-66.

<sup>48</sup> James Stayer, Werner Packull, and Klaus Deppermann, “From Monogenesis to Polygenesis: The Historical Discussion of Anabaptist Origins,” *MQR* 49 (April 1975): 83-122.

<sup>49</sup> Besides Stayer, Packull, and Deppermann, one must mention Martin Haas, who worked on social unrest in the Zürich area; Hans-Jürgen Goertz, who worked on Thomas Müntzer and increasingly focused on anticlericalism; Gottfried Seebass, who connected Hans Hut’s South German Anabaptism with Müntzer’s apocalyptic radicalism; Claus-Peter Clasen, who applied a social-historical approach to a huge range of Anabaptist sources; and Calvin Pater, who identified Andreas Karlstadt as the “father” of the Swiss Anabaptists. Since the collapse of the Berlin wall, it is easy to forget that serious and influential work was being done at this time by the Marxist scholars of East Germany, such as Gerhard Zschäbitz.

<sup>50</sup> See Yoder, *Anabaptism and Reformation*, Part I, §30, “The Zwinglian Origins of Anabaptism.” “Our presentation leaves hardly any room for doubt that the Anabaptists came from Zwingli and can only be understood in Zwinglian terms.... It is no less obvious that the Anabaptists cannot be understood as originating with Luther, either through Karlstadt or through Müntzer.” *Ibid.*, 121-22.

<sup>51</sup> Hans-Jürgen Goertz, “History and Theology: A Major Problem of Anabaptist Research Today,” *MQR* 53 (July 1979): 184.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, 186.

<sup>53</sup> James Stayer, “Let a Hundred Flowers Bloom and let a Hundred Schools of Thought Contend,” *MQR* 53 (July 1979): 212.

<sup>54</sup> Yoder, *Anabaptism and Reformation*, Part I, “Afterword,” note 5; italics mine.

<sup>55</sup> In an article published in English summarizing his doctoral research findings, Yoder wrote, “If the study of church history is to have a real significance for the Christian church in our day, it must attach especial importance to the analysis of those ‘breaking points’ which have left Christians with a heritage of dividedness in faith and life. It is therefore no idle academic recreation when we seek to ascertain as exactly as possible just how and why this most significant of all ‘breaking points’ within Protestantism [i.e. between Zwingli and the Swiss Anabaptists] came to be reached.” John Howard Yoder, “The Turning Point in the Zwinglian Reformation,” *MQR* (April 1958): 128-40; citation from 129.

<sup>56</sup> See Yoder, *Anabaptism and Reformation*, 162.

<sup>57</sup> Two publications dealing with Anabaptist history do not form a part of our survey below and should be noted: Yoder contributed the original drafts to chapters 2, 3 and 8 in *An Introduction to Mennonite History*, chapters subsequently edited and revised by Cornelius J. Dyck (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1967). He also collaborated with Wayne Pipkin in the translation volume *Balthasar Hubmaier: Theologian of Anabaptism* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1989). The latter volume’s publication date is misleading. Work on the translation had been underway, intermittently, for “a good number of years,” as editor C. J. Dyck noted (page 12).

<sup>58</sup> For example, “The Believers’ Church Conferences in Historical Perspective,” *MQR* 65 (January 1991): 5-19. That Yoder changed “dialogue partners” is also noted by Jecker: “the audiences and dialogue partners of Yoder’s later work, increasingly and explicitly, are people

both inside and outside a specific Anabaptist-Mennonite tradition who are struggling to be faithful Christians and a faithful church in the modern world. They were interested primarily in *these* issues [of faithfulness], not in the history or theology of Anabaptism.” Jecker, “Annex” in this issue of *CGR*.

<sup>59</sup> George H. Williams, *The Radical Reformation* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1962); typological classifications also in George H. Williams and Angel Mergal, eds., *Spiritual and Anabaptist Writers* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1957).

<sup>60</sup> Heinold Fast, ed., *Der Linke Flügel der Reformation* (Bremen: Schünemann, 1962).

<sup>61</sup> John H. Yoder, “The Recovery of the Anabaptist Vision,” *Concern* 18 (July 1971), 5-23. A brief survey that follows the same basic narrative pattern, with the specific addition of some individuals from Strasbourg, is “Les Origines de l’Anabaptisme au sein de la Réforme du XVIe siècle,” in Alfred Michiels, *Les Anabaptistes des Vosges* (Molsheim: Editions Jean-Pierre Gyss, 1980), 15-23.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, 14.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, 14-20.

<sup>64</sup> *Textos Escogidos de la Reforma Radical*, John H. Yoder, ed. (Buenos Aires: La Aurora, 1976).

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, 11.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, 10-12; translated portions from page 12 (translation mine).

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, 12-14.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, 15.

<sup>69</sup> The “Analytical Essay” works through six categories: 1. From Luther to the Peasants’ War (including the non-baptizing radicals Strauss, Karlstadt and Müntzer); 2. Radical Zwinglianism (recounting the details of Yoder’s doctoral work, concluding with Schleithem); 3. the Spiritualists (including a very perceptive analysis of the work of the Spirit in radical reform); 4. the “enthusiasts” or fanatics (included here are Hut, Bader, Hoffman, Joris); 5. Ecclesial Anabaptism; 6. Evangelical Humanism.

<sup>70</sup> For example, the spiritualists are further subdivided into “evangelical,” “rationalist,” and “speculative” types. The “enthusiasts” are further subdivided into “patient” or “suffering” enthusiasts, and “violent” or “revolutionary” enthusiasts. Yoder, unlike Williams, does not utilize the categories of “contemplative Anabaptists” or “revolutionary Anabaptists.” The only Anabaptists listed as such are the “ecclesial Anabaptists.”

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*, 39-47.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*, 39-44.

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*, 43 (translation mine).

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*, 46 (translation mine).

<sup>75</sup> *Christian Attitudes to War, Peace, and Revolution: A Companion to Bainton* (Goshen: Goshen Biblical Seminary, 1983), especially chapter 10, “Anabaptists in the Continental Reformation,” 163-200. My thanks to Mark Thiessen Nation for directing me to this specific source.

<sup>76</sup> “Our interest will then be in the logic of that way in which, as there is concern for greater faithfulness [to Scripture], the problem of the sword arises and moves to the center. We are more interested in the logic of how that happens than in the details of the story. Yet we have to tell some of the story in order to see the logic working.” *Ibid.*, 168.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid., 178-79, *passim*.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid., 191.

<sup>80</sup> In this lecture Yoder also accepts the existence of “nonseparating congregationalist” Anabaptist villages in the Zürich area, who opposed the payment of tithes and tended toward acceptance of defensive violence. Ibid., 191-92. Hans Hut is not depicted as having “converted” to a full-fledged pacifist position, but rather as holding the sword in abeyance, until the second coming. Ibid., 193. James Stayer is said to be correct in wanting to increase the “variegation with which we read the story. He is also right in working against what he takes to be a kind of apologetic self-protection on the part of Mennonite historians, who affirm the centrality of the Schleithem position without recognizing that it wasn’t typical at the time.” Ibid., 199.

<sup>81</sup> There remains an undeniable emphasis on the Protestant nature of the strand of Anabaptism Yoder privileges in this lecture, with non-Protestant streams entering in from “outside,” particularly those carried by Denck, Hubmaier, and the visionaries. Ibid., 190. After stating appreciation for Stayer’s work on Anabaptists and the Sword, Yoder revisits his earlier critique, arguing that Stayer’s category of “Realpolitik” is anachronistic; he does not speak to Stayer’s critique of his classification of Schleithem as dialogically open rather than separatist in principle. Ibid., 199. In this lecture Schleithem continues to be described as dualistic in a closely nuanced way: “It is the tense missionary dualism representing in the midst of the world a position which the world cannot tolerate.... So this is a pragmatic, biblical, occasionalistic separation.” Ibid., 193.

<sup>82</sup> See Blough, “The Historical Roots,” in Yoder, *Anabaptism and Reformation*, xli-lx.

<sup>83</sup> Three recent works that privilege religious factors in sixteenth-century historical narratives are C. Arnold Snyder, *Anabaptist History and Theology: An Introduction* (Kitchener, ON: Pandora Press, 1995); Brad Gregory, *Salvation at Stake* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999); and most recently Andrea Strübind, *Eifriger als Zwingli: Die frühe Täuferbewegung in der Schweiz* (Berlin: Dinkler & Humblot, 2003). For a recent and perceptive historiographical review, see John D. Roth, “Recent Currents in the Historiography of the Radical Reformation,” *Church History* 71.3 (September 2002): 523-35.

<sup>84</sup> Blough, “The Historical Roots,” in Yoder, *Anabaptism and Reformation*, lviii.

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