

JOHN HOWARD YODER AS HISTORIAN

**On Flushing the Confessional Rabbit  
Out of the Socio-Ecclesial Brushpile**

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**Transitions**

After teaching and being a pastor in a North American Mennonite context for fifteen years, I am now teaching in a very different setting. I am going through the kind of transitional crisis that teachers experience when they find the questions they have a ready-made stock of answers for are not being asked; and I am also encountering questions for which I don't have answers somewhere on my hard drive. I say that because this paper deals primarily with the impact John Howard Yoder's heritage has had on the Mennonite Church and in particular on its theology of peacemaking. So, if I'm answering questions that no one is asking in this context, I ask your understanding and patience. I should also add a word to those for whom English is not their native language: to "flush" an animal is to drive it out of hiding, usually so it can be killed! But my goal in flushing the confessional rabbit out of the socio-ecclesial brushpile is simply to see it, not to harm it.

Yoder is the pivotal figure in a major transition that has taken place in Mennonite theologies of peacemaking. In the first half of the twentieth century, Mennonite social thinking was dominated by a strictly defined "two kingdoms" theology that can be traced back to the origins of the Swiss Anabaptists. The Schleithem Confession of 1527 polarized the world into the "regenerate" and the "unregenerate," the "children of light" and "the children of darkness." The practice of Christian non-resistance was seen as something possible only within the community of faith. The unregenerate world, however, needed the strong arm of "the sword" to preserve law and order, and God had ordained the State to carry out this role. Mennonite theology interpreted church and world as two different mutually exclusive orders, each with a fixed nature and function. The boundary between them was clearly defined and largely impermeable. This two-kingdom dualism, while it

did not bless state violence, nevertheless accepted that in a fallen world this is the way things were and had to be. It was our business to be faithful disciples of Jesus, not somehow to affect the way the world did its business.

From the beginning of his work and continuing with increasing subtlety and sophistication throughout it, Yoder developed a critique of this reading of the two kingdoms and helped open the way for a more active engagement with the world.<sup>1</sup> Some of the key steps he developed in building a bridge to social engagement with the world are these:

(1) Yoder demonstrated that Jesus taught and called his disciples to practice a new kind of “politics,” a new way of ordering human relationships (as opposed to just inaugurating a purely ‘spiritual’ kingdom). This new politics dealt with the standard issues that all politics must address, such as the nature and use of power, patterns of economic distribution and consumption, self-defense, and how to handle social offenders. That this politics is in a sense like all politics, yet of another order altogether, meant that Jesus’ kingdom is a direct threat and challenge to the kingdoms of Caesar. This is the thrust of Yoder’s *The Politics of Jesus*.

(2) The church that is faithful to Jesus and takes him as its ethical norm, rather than accepting compromises with “realism” or seeking positions of power from which to shape the social order, is a creative force in the world that can bring about real social change. The church functions as “salt” and “leaven.” Its influence is not just on the people it converts and brings into the Jesus way of life; it also ministers by generating creative new models of community life, ways of dealing with conflict, humanizing enemies, and ministering to the needy. The larger social order, even if it does not recognize the lordship of Jesus, can learn new creative social attitudes, practices, and patterns from the church. But Yoder remained adamant that the church can be a source of social creativity only if it remains faithful to Jesus and remains radically non-conformed to worldly standards of right and justice. Its social and spiritual distinctiveness is the precondition to its “relevance,” not the obstacle to it.

(3) The state and the social order should not be seen as an ontologically fixed, God-ordained institutions but as a form of “ordering” that can evolve and develop patterns for governance, ways of settling conflicts, and ways of dealing with offenders that are less violent and destructive. Yoder is not a

social gospel idealist who thought the world could evolve into the kingdom. But he believed that if Jesus is Lord, if the Redeemer is also the Creator, then there can be times and places in which the way of Jesus contextually modeled by the community of faith could “work” among people who do not necessarily confess Jesus’ name.<sup>2</sup>

Progressive, socially aware Mennonites eagerly traveled across the bridge that Yoder built and took up the call to apply the way of Jesus to society’s problems. Yoder’s *Politics of Jesus* became the bible of a new activism that took the concrete economic patterns of Jubilee and Jesus’ commitment to absolute nonviolence and made them a kind of canon within the canon for Anabaptist social activism. But having traveled across the bridge and moved from sectarian separatism to world engaging activism, it also became possible to burn the bridge. A strange reality of the current generation of Mennonite social thinkers and peace activists is that while Yoder’s significance is recognized and usually praised, his work, or at least his work beyond *The Politics of Jesus*, is not widely read and discussed. Current social thinking in Mennonite colleges and social service programs is focused primarily on social analysis, a commitment to working at social justice, and highly developed, pioneering programs for teaching and practicing “conflict transformation.” These all make a positive contribution.

What I lament is that these programs are often carried out with little attention to sustained theological reflection. After all, didn’t Yoder teach us that the gospel is a social ethic? And as Anabaptists aren’t we more committed to following Jesus than to metaphysical reflection on theological doctrine? Nonviolent action directed to increasing peace and justice has become a kind of self-authenticating program that hardly needs theological rationales beyond “that’s what Jesus called us to do.”

While Yoder can hardly be blamed for being misread, the very subtlety of his thought lends itself to misunderstanding. In his own masterful way he always correlated confessional language with the concreteness of embodied discipleship. He was suspicious of theologies and theologians who treat theological issues as things-in-themselves that could be abstracted from, and treated prior to, questions of discipleship and ecclesiology. Yoder’s insistence that the gospel is a social ethic, and that Jesus incarnated and calls his followers to incarnate a new politics in the world, is a central theme

throughout his work. The confession that Jesus is Lord lacks integrity and meaning if not made by a community of disciples who in a visible, costly way serve as a sign of the coming kingdom before “a watching world.”<sup>3</sup>

Yoder had great respect for the work of Robert Friedmann, a late-in-life convert to Anabaptism who, in his major interpretation of the movement, referred to Anabaptists as having “an implicit theology” existentially expressed as discipleship.<sup>4</sup> Granted that for Yoder the Christian’s confession of faith in Jesus has its habitat in a socially specific peoplehood, what I would like to do in this paper is “flush the confessional rabbit out of the socio-ecclesial brushpile.” I intend to show that the Christian confession of faith in Jesus logically and ontologically precedes social ethics, and is the animating power that gives it coherence and meaning. I am not doing this in order to capture the rabbit and put it in a cage called “systematic theology” or because the rabbit is the “kernel” and Yoder’s socio-ecclesiology is the “husk.” Rather, I am doing this for two reasons. The first is to show that it is a significant misreading to believe Yoder is not serious about the form and content of the Christian confession of faith. To take his social ethic and run with it, without constantly showing how it is grounded in and is only possible and intelligible in the context of confession, seriously distorts his theology *and* his ethic. The second reason is to recall that Yoder is not, and did not claim or intend to be, addressing all aspects of the Christian faith and life in his work. It was motivated by and focused on a particular interest in doing “apologetics” for a certain kind of reading of Jesus and ecclesiology within the context of ecumenical conversation. Yoder’s interests and agenda left gaps and underdeveloped aspects of the faith, and these need to be augmented, balanced, or corrected if his theology is going to adequately serve the community of faith.

### **Witness, Eschatology, and Doxology**

I want to do more than find places where Yoder makes his confession of faith explicit. What is needed is to show that confession is structurally critical to how he thinks about ethics, and that his account of ethics becomes unintelligible if the behaviors he commends are transferred into another frame of reference. Thus I will look briefly at his account of witness, eschatology, and doxology.

Yoder spent a lifetime dealing with the question of the efficacy of nonviolence. Early in his work he tended to accept the formula that “we are called to be faithful, not effective.” Later he regarded this distinction as simplistic and limiting. In a number of essays and culminating in his *Body Politics*, he argues that the faithful Christian community should develop and practice a number of social practices, rooted in the gospel, that can be shared with the social order. Instead of beginning by assuming that “we are called to be faithful, not effective,” we should share these practices with “a watching world” in the hope that it may find something useful and helpful in them.<sup>5</sup> This is not an attempt to build a Christian social order or the kingdom of God, but simply a gift of grace that the community wants to share. Yoder developed increasing confidence that kingdom patterns of living made sense and were actually the way we were created to be. So we should not *a priori* limit the possibilities for social change and adaptation in the world. Human history has shown many instances in which the efficacy of nonviolence has been demonstrated.

But even though this is a kind of developmental shift in his thought, Yoder never abandoned the ideas that the reason for obedience to Jesus is not its social efficacy or that to be a Christian is to accept the vocation of bearing witness to the coming kingdom of God. In his early work, *The Original Revolution*, he developed the idea of an ethic of “testimony.” Simply put, his rule for action is, how would this act bear witness to God’s redemptive love? This theme of the Christian life as a form of witness to God’s love is the key to Yoder’s reading of Christian ethics and, indeed, to his theological method. Yoder is a post-Kantian theologian who takes up the great questions Kant bequeathed us in epistemology and axiology. Yoder answers both questions with the concept of “witness.” The posture of a witness, one who demonstrates the in-breaking rule of God and invites others to share in it, is the only one he sees as consistent with the servant stance of Jesus. From this position he rejects foundationalist strategies for proving the truth of the faith or for deriving moral rules from universally known absolutes.

While developing an account of how Christian practices are contextually shaped by the hermeneutical community and humbly shared with whomever may benefit from them because they “work,” Yoder makes it clear that within the community of faith deeds are made meaningful because

they “witness.” Perhaps the high point of this understanding of deeds and how they work is expressed in the essay “Discerning the Kingdom of God in the Struggles of the World.” Yoder writes:

‘Sign,’ rather than ‘instrument,’ describes more properly how our words and deeds ‘work.’ We proclaim; our humanizing deeds signify. Others, or rather, Another will determine whether success or sacrifice better represents the Lamb’s lordship. (*For the Nations*, 240)

This emphasis, that deeds are signs rather than instruments, shows they gain their meaning from a reality that is, rather from the results they might achieve. In “Christ, the Hope of the World,” Yoder explains that for us to be in the world as a sign is significant “*Because that is the shape of the work of Christ*”:

When Christians devote themselves to the care of the seriously ill, of the mentally retarded, of the unproductive aged, the fruitfulness of this service cannot be measured by any statistical index of economic efficacy. Whether evaluated from the perspective of the individual or the society, the meaning of this deed is what it signifies, the reality for which it is *the sign*, namely that this person is here to be a servant to his neighbor. His presence and posture, *not* his productivity, are the referent of the sign. (*Royal Priesthood*, 204)

Yoder, while free to consider the utility of deeds, does not believe Christian practices gain their meaning and truthfulness from their consequences. He consistently resists “a kind of creeping utilitarianism” (*Royal Priesthood*, 124). His ethic resists being assimilated and validated within a consequentialist framework for important theological reasons.

First and foremost, Yoder insists that the most fundamental temptation for Christians is not violence but the desire to move history in the way we think it should go. To witness to the Lamb’s victory is to give up this need and desire to engineer the future, and instead to live by faith and hope. This means Yoder cannot be simply classed among that noble group of philosophers, which includes Gandhi, who believe our means should always be consistent with our desired ends. That is, if peace is the goal,

then that end is inconsistent with the use of violent means. Within Yoder's *theological* frame of reference the concept of means and ends does not apply. His comment that "Others, or rather, Another will determine whether success or sacrifice better represents the Lamb's lordship" shows he operates with a strong sense of divine Providence. The way to show that we are indeed creatures and that God is indeed God is to leave the question of results in the hands of God. Even to use nonviolent means to achieve desirable ends is an instance of "a polite form of demagoguery" (*Royal Priesthood*, 158).

Second, Yoder returns in many different settings to discuss what Reinhold Niebuhr called "the irony of history" (human control and predictability are very limited, and campaigns or actions intended to produce certain desirable consequences often achieve something very different from what was intended). An inherent limit in any consequentialist ethic is that "it posits a degree of both actual analysis and ability to predict, to say nothing of ability to control, which are not, in fact, present in any important social conflict. This is not simply a matter of ignorance due to the bluntness of our present tools of observation, analysis, and prediction. . . . Rather it is an intrinsic limitation of the very nature of our self-understanding as social animals. . . ." (*Royal Priesthood*, 124). This case is not just a cause for modesty about how effective we can be but a way of confessing we are witnesses to, not actual agents of, redemption. Yoder really cannot be read as an advocate for developing nonviolent techniques that move history somehow closer to God's reign of justice and peace – though he is often used to justify this approach. Our actions are signs, not instruments.

It might be argued – and is argued by some pacifists – that nonviolent techniques are available or can be found soon that would be successful in defending anything worth defending in any society. Then the feasibility of these techniques and the promise of efficacy is presented as an argument within the prudential frame of reference.... Such an argument, actually basing the rejection of violence on the promise of a better way or proving the relevance of pacifism on the grounds of the lessons of history, would place in the prudential type of reasoning and the historical type of analysis much greater faith than I can do. (*Royal Priesthood*, 216)

Yoder's discussion of witness focuses primarily on deeds pointing toward the coming reign of God. But this is not opposed to verbal proclamation of the gospel. While one would not expect from Yoder a handbook on personal soul winning, he clearly acknowledges the role of the evangelist in a couple of rather remarkable statements. One comes from his early essay, "Peace Without Eschatology?":

Second, there is the call to the individual, including the statesman, to be reconciled with God. This is evangelism in the strict contemporary sense and is a part of the peace witness. Any social-minded concern that does not have this appeal to personal commitment at its heart is either utopian or a polite form of demagoguery. (*Royal Priesthood*, 158)

Another telling comment comes from a much later work, "The Spirit of God and the Politics of Men":

We should give thanks for every believer whose personal calling is not to be an agent of direct social change, if that person's genuine calling is to be a face-to-face evangelist, or to discharge any other distinct gift. (*For the Nations*, 235)

To make things more complicated, this emphasis on deeds as witness and signs does not mean it is never legitimate or important to think about results and what works in a given social system and context. Yoder respects the social framework and frame of reference of those who do not confess Jesus. If a given society has been brutalizing and humiliating its social offenders for generations, and the church models a new way of dealing with offenders that honors their humanity and seeks to restore them to human responsibility and dignity, members of that society might at some point say, That seems to work better than the way we've been doing it, let's give it a try. They would adopt these new attitudes and practices because they seem to work better. They produce demonstrably good results that the society can recognize within its own frame of reference and values.

But that utilitarian rationale for adopting more redemptive ways of dealing with offenders is not why the Christian community practices them. That they work better is a secondary property. The Christian practices them because that's how God has dealt with us in Jesus Christ. We share them

with “a watching world” as an act of witness to the gospel of Christ. The society embraces these ways not because it believes Jesus is Lord but because they work better. This sensitivity to multiple and very different systems of validation is a part of Yoder’s subtle analytic genius that is sometimes lost by those whom Peter Dula has called “peace monists.”<sup>6</sup>

Moral validation is derived from the imminent kingdom which Jesus announces, not from the righteous state of affairs our actions promise to bring about. Moral being and behaving are primordially proclamation or celebration. Only derivatively are they debatable positions in value theory or efficacy. (*Royal Priesthood*, 136)

Obviously, this discussion of witness has already anticipated the central role of eschatology in Yoder’s social thought. His gospel is focused on the Lamb’s victory, the triumph over the principalities and powers that Jesus won on the cross. It is this joyous confidence that, despite all appearances to the contrary, the triumph of the kingdom of God is a certainty which defines and energizes Christian discipleship. It is the church’s transcendent hope that ultimately creates and sustains its social creativity. It is hope that enables it to give up control, which Yoder sees as the precondition to real social creativity; that enables it to take risks, empowers it to swim against the stream and maintain its distinctive prophetic voice in the world; and enables it even to accept martyrdom, the ultimate form of inefficacy that in the final analysis is powerful only because it participates in the victory of the Lamb. Yoder’s reading of Christian ethics is false if it is not true that Jesus was raised from the dead and is coming again.

Later in his work Yoder also introduced a theme that both encompasses and surpasses his emphasis on witness: the idea of deeds as “doxology.” One discussion of the role of doxology occurs in the essay “Are You the One Who is to Come?” under the stark sub-heading of “Not Engineering, but Doxology.”<sup>7</sup> The standard account of moral reasoning in Western thought, Yoder suggests, has been how to get “from here to there.” What is the ideal society we want? What methods can bring it closer? Jesus’ novelty was not that he had a new vision of social goodness or new methods for getting us there, but that he lifted up and celebrated the reign of YHWH over the whole creation. His life and ministry was a celebration and proclamation of what *is*, not a method for getting where we want to be.

It is thus a profound misapprehension of the messianic moral choice to think that in his rejection of violence, Jesus was led by methodological purism in moral choice, choosing to be an absolutist about the sacredness of life. It would be an equally profound misapprehension to think that he was the world's first Gandhian, calculating the prospects for a social victory as being in his particular circumstances greater for nonviolent than for violent tactics. Both of these interpretations of what Jesus was doing as a social strategist follow the "standard account of social ethical discernment" that it is precisely the purpose of all the prophets to free us from. Jesus' acceptance of the cross . . . was not, in the final analysis, a moral decision, but an eschatological one. It was dictated by a different vision of where God is taking the world. Or, we may say it was an ontological decision, dictated by a truer picture of what the world *really is*. (*For the Nations*, 210)

It is this doxological memory of the cross and resurrection of Jesus, and the anticipation of his coming reign, that creates the space in which the church can find an alternate consciousness and spirituality that gives rise to an alternate way of living in the world. Yoder is not a theologian who says first, "Get your doctrines intellectually correct," and then, secondarily, "Apply them to living." But he does clearly affirm the ontological priority of doxology (singing the praises of God) to ethics (singing those praises in a contextually relevant political form). When Yoder writes pieces with titles like "Gospel as Social Ethics," one could expect to find a social gospel or liberation theologian who gives ontological priority to action. But in Yoder's reading of the title, the emphasis *and* the content of the ethic is in the word *gospel*.

### **Yoder's "Skewed" Agenda**

I mentioned that Yoder does not seek to address all aspects of the Christian faith and life. His particular mission was to give an account of a distinctive kind of free church ecclesiology often dismissed by establishment churches as sectarian or politically irrelevant. He does this with unmatched subtlety and brilliance. But this focus on the church as an ethic, or as a politic, opens

him to a kind of reductionist reading that simply takes the behaviors of the Christian community and makes them a kind of self-authenticating social program. Yoder himself acknowledges that his interests “skew” his discussions of the faith, as in this statement at the end of his “The Kingdom as Social Ethic” under the sub-heading “Back to True North”:

The imperatives of dialogue with majority mentalities have skewed this description toward the problematics of weakness and effectiveness. An authentic portrayal of “the peace church vision” from the inside would have spoken more of worship and servanthood, reconciliation and creativity, *Gelassenheit* and the Power of the Light, “heartfelt religion” and transforming hope, and the person of Jesus Christ. But if this paper had been thus affirmative then the reader would have wondered why any of that should be “sectarian.” (*Priestly Kingdom*, 101)

This comment is downright revelatory – as though we have emerged from the forest into a sun-drenched clearing. It’s as if the confessional rabbit just came out of the socio-ecclesial brushpile and did a little dance! It could apply to most of Yoder’s published works. An emphasis on apologetics, especially apologetics for a distinctive kind of ecclesiology and ethics, leads Yoder to develop explanatory categories for critical outsiders. The key term in the quotation is in “an authentic portrayal of ‘the peace church vision’ *from the inside*.” Here the stress is not on ethics and how we can best develop strategies for influencing the outside world but on worship, praise, and the person of Jesus.

The problem is that a sub-community within the Mennonite Church has found its identity and reason for being in the socio-ethical apologetics that Yoder developed but has lost its connection to the language of faith. How many social activists talk about “heartfelt religion and transforming hope, and the person of Jesus Christ”? Instead, the canonical language has become Jubilee economics and a commitment to nonviolent means of achieving peace and justice in the world. Divorced from worship and the celebration of salvation, the language of justice and peace takes on a different grammar and meaning. Yoder’s apologetics program assumes there are communities in which the term “the person of Jesus” names an identifiable and active reality, and people who are doing the hard inner work of learning

*Gelassenheit*. In short, it assumes too much. It is still a Christendom social ecclesiology (defined vis-à-vis Christendom) that assumes that the language and experience of faith is a given, and needs to receive a prophetic ecclesial focus.

Let me illustrate, in perhaps a slightly exaggerated way, how this focusing on apologetics can lead to alienation from the subject matter of faith. In *Body Politics* (pages 14-27), Yoder creatively develops the idea that the Christian sharing of bread at the Lord's table suggests and implies the idea of sharing bread. So, one Christian practice that can be shared with the world is the idea of economic sharing. Good enough. But I can imagine that somewhere down the road we might start hearing sermons suggesting that the reason Jesus broke and shared bread with his disciples was to teach them socialism. At this point the mysterious, distinctively Christian meaning of the event would be lost behind the social practice derived from it.

Yoder clarifies his priorities in a concluding comment at the end of the above quoted section on doxology:

Our angle of entry into the issue would seem to indicate that the latter (knowing *what* God is doing) is prior because it was our question. But certainly the former (*that* God is doing it) is prior. The fact that God is already doing in the world what God plans ultimately to do is certainly prior both in sequential logic and importance to the use we might make of that fact as a source of information and language to provide self-conscious guidance to our sharing in the outgoing process. (*Royal Priesthood*, 126)

That is, it could *appear* that Yoder starts with ethics and what *we* should be doing; but in fact he is beginning with the reality that it is *God* who is doing it. Yoder is thoroughly schooled in the theology of Karl Barth and is certainly aware of the danger of doing apologetics. The danger is that the apologetic reasoning, intended as a secondary kind of explanatory reasoning for those who do not share the language of faith, can instead become the primary form of reasoning that the community of faith uses to explain itself not just to the world but to itself.

**Additions, Amendments, and Corrections**

Acknowledging that Yoder's agenda and interests "skew" his interpretation of the gospel, it is legitimate and helpful to ask how this imbalance could be supplemented, augmented, and corrected. What themes does Yoder leave underdeveloped?

*The Role of Theology*

Yoder is primarily a hermeneutical theologian. For him, the community is formed by a constant re-appropriation of the biblical story. He does some very creative work on how the varied gifts of the Spirit function within the community of faith, empowering it to be a contextually sensitive hermeneutical organism.<sup>8</sup> But he also takes the church's doctrinal traditions with utmost seriousness; never committing himself dogmatically to accept them yet always patiently working to learn from them.<sup>9</sup> There have been many questions about what kind of theological reflection, or even *if* systematic theological reflection, is compatible with Yoderianism. I suggest that, though for Yoder the primary task of theology is hermeneutics, our discussion above could imply it might also have the task of investigating and clarifying the ontological grounds of the practice of doxology. If the recently emergent model of theological reflection developed by people like James McClendon and Stanley Hauerwas is adopted, and theology is seen as reflection on distinctive Christian practices, then perhaps doxology should be seen as a kind of master or defining Christian practice that calls forth theological thought. Making doxology a kind of master defining practice would free theology from an overriding focus on ethics, an emphasis that I believe lends itself to "creeping utilitarianism." It would be fun to begin theology with a question like Why are these people so happy? instead of always starting with Why are these people so good?

If we recognize doxology as a defining practice of the community of faith, then the set of practices we can "offer to a watching world" can be expanded. The practices Yoder develops are political practices which, though grounded in Christian community and its faith, can be shared in the wider world. In addition to these we can also offer joy, hope, healing, and deliverance, and a conviction that life has meaning. Yoder's reading is skewed toward structural aspects of the ordering of human life and

inattentive to the spiritual aspects of human bondage and destructiveness.

Witness is grounded in ontological difference, and it would be a service to the world and to the church for theology to *name* that difference. For the practices of the faith to endure and have meaning they need intellectual self-consciousness—i.e., they need theology. To trust that this ontological difference can be taught and maintained only by participating in a distinctive set of social practices is a fallacy.

### *The Creative Power of Speech*

Yoder is fully aware of the importance and power of language. Speaking of the Holy Spirit's work in building up the church, he writes that "The life blood of that body is language" (*Royal Priesthood*, 139). However, he goes on to say that theologians are like antibodies in the bloodstream! When the body is functioning well they have nothing to do, but when it is threatened by something alien and destructive they go to work. The theologian's task is to guard against the misuse of words. Yoder has a keen sense that new language should be tested: not rejected because it is new or valued because it is old, but tested to see whether it squares with scripture and expresses the faith well in the contemporary context. In "The Hermeneutics of Peoplehood," he describes theologians as "agents of linguistic self-consciousness" (*Priestly Kingdom*, 32).

Interestingly, in his discussions of the gifts of Spirit and the very radical Pauline charismatic order he sees as the ideal for the church, Yoder stresses that the role of *didaskalos* (teacher) is one with which very few people should be entrusted. But this emphasis on the guardian role of the theologian—the person who watches over the flow of language—assumes there is new language being generated all the time. It assumes there are poets, preachers, evangelists, and catechists who are imaginatively naming the in-breaking reality of the kingdom in ways that convert people and energize the community of faith. Yoder's kind of moral and theological discernment in and of itself cannot create and sustain faith. His focus on deeds as signs of the kingdom should not be stressed at the expense of an equally necessary focus on the power of words to evoke new ways of seeing and being. Deeds (or at least my own) are not so transparent that the world can just look at me and see Jesus. We also need words that name, invite, challenge, and renew faith. Yoder does not help us much with the challenge of developing words

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that make faith a possibility. Along with his kind of discernment we need to name the faith explicitly in evangelism, catechism, and worship.

*A Place for the Heart*

I have suggested that Yoder's use of the term "doxology" includes and surpasses his use of the term "witness." Doxology surpasses witness partly because it clarifies that the deeds and words by which we confess our faith must come from the heart, from the depths of the human spirit as it experiences the Spirit of God. I believe Yoder does not adequately address what we might call human subjectivity. He is an ecclesial thinker, and that is good and needed in our individualistic age. But we are also *persons* in community, and for the person to be fully present in the community's praise of God we need a gospel that addresses us in the depths of our being. Yoder does not adequately consider how the person hears, experiences, and appropriates the community's language of faith. Granted, our witness is social and ecclesial, but for believers to be fully present and engaged in that witness they must be converted from the heart. We need what Yoder himself called "heartfelt religion"!

When we listen to the doxologies of believers, particularly new ones, we do indeed hear them singing "Worthy is the lamb that was slain." But we don't hear them continue only with "and has created a new peoplehood that bears witness to Christ's victory over the politics of the principalities and powers." We also hear them sing to the victory of Christ over bondage to evil spirits, over addiction to drugs and alcohol, over guilt and shame, and over a deep sense of meaninglessness. These songs too are signs of the coming kingdom. Yoder, like so many other insightful theologians, is aware of the danger of reducing the gospel to its subjective meaning. He rejects the widespread notion that religion deals with personal, not public, issues. He is critical of those he calls "the Bultmanns and Grahams" and "the Peales and Robertses" who focus primarily or only on what the gospel means for the believing individual. But in doing so he marginalizes the subjective, experiential dimensions of the gospel in a way that is unnecessary and unhelpful.<sup>10</sup> He seems to say that the meaning of the gospel is structural and political, and that any personal meaning it has is accidental and secondary. This division is not true to a close reading of the gospels. Jesus announced

the kingdom not only as a new way of dealing with power and structural relationships but as a power that healed and delivered people in bondage to deeply personal destructive powers.<sup>11</sup>

We need language and theological reflection that names the way people actually experience the in-breaking reign of God and come to appropriate and inhabit the biblical narrative of redemption through Jesus. If a Yoderian language monitor is watching the discussion, we will not address this apart from how we learn faith by participating in a community defined by distinctive Christian practices. But the community of faith gains meaning and authority in people's lives at least partly because it provides meaningful maps for personal discovery and truthful self-awareness.

### **Conclusion**

It is a misreading of Yoder to reduce his work to a program of social ethics. But the cure to peace and justice reductionism is to read more, not less, Yoder. The structure and meaning of his social ethic is that ethics is an expression of the victory of God in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. Having flushed the confessional rabbit out of its socio-ecclesial habitat, we may now notice that by their very nature rabbits, especially Anabaptist-Mennonite ones, are rather shy, nervous creatures when thus exposed. Decency requires that we let the rabbit return to where it feels at home – in the set of practices and behaviors we call church.

### **Notes**

<sup>1</sup> Yoder's work is best read as having a dual argumentative focus. On the one hand, he is arguing against Niebuhrian social realism and Troeltsch's description of the "sect" type of church which establishment Protestants use to argue that a separatist community seeking to consistently live out a Jesus ethic is socially irrelevant. On the other, he is arguing against Mennonites who accept this description of their social role.

<sup>2</sup> Yoder did not, however, abandon all forms of two-kingdom thinking. Following Karl Barth he made a critical distinction between those who confess faith or recognize the lordship of Christ and those who do not. He consistently argued that the difference between confession and non-confession should be a constitutive element of a Christian social ethic.

<sup>3</sup> The phrase "a watching world" is from the subtitle of Yoder's *Body Politics: Five Practices of the Christian Community before the Watching World* (Scottsdale, PA; Waterloo, ON: Herald Press, 2001).

<sup>4</sup> *The Theology of Anabaptism* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 2002 [1973]).

<sup>5</sup> *Body Politics* passim. Other Yoder references in this section are to his *The Royal Priesthood: Essays Ecclesiological and Ecumenical* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994) and to *For the Nations: Essays Evangelical and Public* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997).

<sup>6</sup> “Pacifism After Babel: Does It Stretch or Will It Break?” Peter Dula, MA Thesis. Associated Mennonite Biblical Seminaries, January 1995. See especially 41-59.

<sup>7</sup> *For the Nations*, 199-220. The specific section on “Not Engineering, but Doxology” is found on 209-15.

<sup>8</sup> Yoder’s discussion of the church as a hermeneutical community in the context of a Pauline charismatic church order is developed in “The Hermeneutics of Peoplehood” in *The Priestly Kingdom: Social Ethics as Gospel* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984). See especially 26-34.

<sup>9</sup> Fortunately, an important set of lectures from one of Yoder’s seminary classes has recently been published. *Preface to Theology: Christology and Theological Method* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2002) is a sustained patient reading of the church’s theological heritage. It clearly shows Yoder is a confessional, theological thinker, not a neo-Kantian or utilitarian interested only in the ethical meaning of faith language.

<sup>10</sup> *The Original Revolution: Essays on Christian Pacifism* (Scottsdale, PA; Kitchener, ON: Herald Press, 1977), 31-32.

<sup>11</sup> I have dealt with this issue at length in “The Pastoral Significance of the Anabaptist Vision” in *Refocusing a Vision*, (Goshen, IN: Mennonite Historical Society, 1995), 35-50. [www.goshen.edu/mhl/Refocusing/DINTAMAN.htm](http://www.goshen.edu/mhl/Refocusing/DINTAMAN.htm).

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