

JOHN HOWARD YODER AS HISTORIAN

John Howard Yoder's Contribution to Research on Anabaptist History

Hanspeter Jecker

A Brief Overview of Yoder's Publications on Anabaptist History¹

For this presentation I have compiled close to eighty titles of works by John Howard Yoder, either dealing primarily with Anabaptist and Mennonite history and theology or directly related to this topic.² My compilation is based primarily on Mark Thiessen Nation's *Comprehensive Bibliography of the Writings of John Howard Yoder*, 1997, as well as some later additions and my own amendments. Below I list approximately sixty titles that I consider the most important of these works. These titles vary in length from several pages to entire books—the latter appear in bold italics. Works not listed here are, as a rule, short book reviews.

- 1947 "The Swiss Mennonite Churches of Southern Wayne County,"
essay for Harold Bender's "Mennonite History" course, Goshen
College
- 1949 A series "What Would You Do If...?" published in *The Youth's
Christian Companion* under the pseudonym "An Anabaptist"
- 1950 Translation and publication of Harold Bender's "Anabaptist
Vision" in French (with Marthe Ropp)
- 1955 Several historical articles in *Mennonite Encyclopedia*, I: Baccarat,
Bénaville, Bitscherland, Blanc-Rupt, Courgenay (5) [Hereafter
ME]
- 1955 Publication of "Principes et Doctrines Mennonites," with Pierre
Widmer
- 1956 Other articles in *ME* II: Diesen, France (2)
- 1957 "The Prophetic Dissent of the Anabaptists," in Hershberger, *The
Recovery of the Anabaptist Vision*
- 1957 First specific book review in the field of Anabaptist History; Roger
Ley, *Kirchenzucht bei Zwingli*

- 1958 "The Turning Point in the Zwinglian Reformation," in *MQR* 32 (April 1958)
- 1959 "Balthasar Hubmaier and the Beginnings of Swiss Anabaptism," in *MQR* (Jan 1959)
- 1959 "How to Deal with Anabaptists: An Unpublished Letter of Heinrich Bullinger," in *MQR* 33 (April 1959), with Heinold Fast
- 1959 Articles in *ME* IV on Zofingen and Zwingli (2)
- 1960 Review of Fritz Heyer, *Kirchenbegriff der Schwärmer*
- 1961 ***Translation of Verheyden, Anabaptism in Flanders, 1530-1650 – A Century of Struggle***
- 1961 Reviews of Siegfried Rother's *Die religiösen und geistlichen Grundlagen der Politik Huldreich Zwinglis and Heinrich Schmid's Zwinglis Lehre von der göttlichen und menschlichen Gerechtigkeit* (2)
- 1962 ***Täuferum und Reformation im Gespräch (I)*** [Now translated: Part I of *Anabaptism and Reformation in Switzerland* (Kitchener, ON: Pandora Press, 2004)]
- 1962 "Von Göttlicher und Menschlicher Gerechtigkeit" in *Zeitschrift für Evangelische Ethik* (Reply to W. Schweizer)
- 1967 "The Hermeneutics of the Anabaptists," *MQR* 41 (Oct 1967)
- 1967 Introduction to the chapters "Anabaptist Origins in Switzerland," "Persecution and Consolidation," and "A Summary of the Anabaptist Vision" in C.J. Dyck, *An Introduction to Mennonite History* (also in later editions) (3)
- 1968 ***Täuferum und Reformation im Gespräch (II)*** [Now translated: Part II of *Anabaptism and Reformation in Switzerland* (Kitchener, ON: Pandora Press, 2004)]
- 1968 Review of Fritz Schäufole, *Das missionarische Bewusstsein und Wirken der Täufer*, *MQR* 42 (Jan 1968)
- 1969 "The Evolution of the Zwinglian Reformation," *MQR* 43 (Jan 1969)
- 1969 "Conflict from the Perspective of Anabaptist History and Theology" (unpublished paper presented at Mennonite Graduate Fellowship, Ithaca, NY)
- 1970 "Anabaptist Vision and Mennonite Reality," in Klassen, *Consultation on Anabaptist Mennonite Theology* (Aspen)

-
- 1971 "The Recovery of the Anabaptist Vision," in *Concern* 18/1971
- 1972 "Der Kristallisationspunkt des Täuferturns," in *Mennonitische Geschichtsblätter* 24/1972 [Hereafter *MGBI*]
- 1973 ***The Legacy of Michael Sattler***
- 1973 "Briefwechsel über die Bedeutung des Schleitheimer Bekenntnisses," in *MGBI* 30/1973
- 1974 Review of James Stayer, *Anabaptists and the Sword*, in *Church History* 43 (June 1974)
- 1974 "Anabaptists and the Sword Revisited: Systematic Historiography and Undogmatic Nonresistants," in *Zeitschrift für Kirchengeschichte* 85.2/1974
- 1975 "Foreword" to the new edition of Blanke, *Brüder in Christo* (zum 450-Jahr-Jubiläum, hg. durch den Schweizerischen Verein für Täufergeschichte, [Zürich 1975])
- 1975 "Anabaptism and History – Restitution and the Possibility of Renewal," in Goertz, *Umstrittenes Täuferturn*
- 1976 ***Textos Escogidos de la Reforma Radical*** (Ed.)
- 1976 "A la recherche du Bucur de l'histoire," in *Bulletin de la Société de l'Histoire de Protestantisme*
- 1977 "The Anabaptists," in Dowley (Ed.), *Eerdmans' Handbook to the History of Christianity*
- 1977 *The Schleithem Confession* (Ed./Translator) Pamphlet
- 1977 "Introduction," in Lienhard (Ed.), *The Origins and Characteristics of Anabaptism*
- 1977 "Les Frères Suisses," in Liver (Ed.), *Strasbourg au Coeur Religieux du XVIe siècle*
- 1977 "Martin Luther's Forgotten Vision," in *The Other Side* (April 1977)
- 1978 "Quelques Anabaptistes Notoires," in Rapp (Ed.), *Grandes Figures de l'Humanisme Alsacien*
- 1978 "Radical Reformation Ethics in Ecumenical Perspective," in *Journal of Ecumenical Studies*
- 1978 "'Spirit' and the Varieties of Reformation Radicalism," in Horst (Ed.), *De Geest in het geding*

-
- 1979 "The Enthusiasts and the Reformation," in Moltmann/Küng (Ed.), *Conflicts About the Holy Spirit* (in French: "Les illuminés et la Réforme," in *Concilium* 143/1979, 67-74).
- 1980 "Introduction: Les origins de l'anabaptisme au sein de la réforme du XVIe siècle," in Michiels, *Les Anabaptistes des Vosges*
- 1983 "Anabaptists in the Continental Reformation," in Yoder, *Christian Attitudes to War, Peace and Revolution*
- 1984 **God's Revolution: The Witness of Eberhard Arnold** (Ed./Translator, with Hutterian Society of Brothers)
- 1984 "The Hermeneutics of the Anabaptists," in Swartley (Ed.), *Essays on Biblical Interpretation: Anabaptist-Mennonite Perspectives*
- 1986 "Les troubles aux Pays-Bas dans le miroir strasbourgeois," in Horst (Ed.), *The Dutch Dissenters*
- 1987 Review of McMaster, *Land, Piety, Peoplehood: The Establishment of Mennonite Communities in America, 1683-1790*, in *Journal of Church and State* 29 (Winter 1987)
- 1988 "The Anabaptist Shape of Liberation," in Loewen (Ed.), *Why I am a Mennonite: Essays on Mennonite Identity*
- 1989 **Balthasar Hubmaier—Theologian of Anabaptism** (Ed./Translator, with Wayne Pipkin)
- 1989 "The Historic Peace Churches: Heirs to the Radical Reformation," in Parker/Fraser (Ed.), *Peace, War and God's Justice*
- 1991 Review of Lavater (Ed.), *Lebenn nach der Ler Jhesu*, in *MQR* 65 (July 1991)
- 1992 "Christologie et dissidence au sein de la réforme zwinglienne," in Doré (Ed.), *Jésus-Christ aux marges de la réforme*
- 1993 "Swiss Anabaptism," in Dyck, *An Introduction to Mennonite History* (3rd Edition)
- 1995 "Primitivism in the Radical Reformation: Strengths and Weaknesses," in: Hughes (Ed.), *The Primitive Church in the Modern World*
- 1995 Review of Liechty, *Early Anabaptist Spirituality*, in *Church History* 64 (March 1995)

Observations and Conclusions

This list suggests that Yoder's contributions to Anabaptist and Mennonite history are concentrated in the late 1950s and around 1975. Both high points of publication coincide with Yoder's longer stays in Europe. This chronological concentration of publications would be even more visible if we were to consider not just the dates of publication but the time of writing. During his first stay in Europe Yoder was quite preoccupied with his Basel dissertation on the dialogues between Anabaptists and Reformers. This period of his life is usually referred to as the "hidden years," during which many of his convictions apparently took form.³

Yoder's second extended trip to Europe took place in the mid-1970s in the context of, among other things, events celebrating the 450th anniversary of Anabaptism (1525-1975). These circumstances gave Yoder multiple opportunities to speak out on Anabaptist and Mennonite matters. In relation to his well-known essay "Anabaptist Vision and Mennonite Reality,"⁴ one could say that when in Europe Yoder mainly did historical work to lay the foundation for his own interpretation of an "Anabaptist Vision,"⁵ while in North America he was concerned mostly with the conflict between Mennonite reality and the overarching religious and social realities of his time.

Yoder's works on Anabaptist history are almost exclusively based on already published printed sources, with relatively few works dealing with and elaborating on new historical material. However, bear in mind that some of the printed material Yoder used was very old, hardly accessible, and therefore rarely used. Nevertheless, even in his dissertation, probably his most important work on Anabaptism, the bibliography contains no section entitled "Unpublished works."

It is striking that Yoder, aside from his dissertation, published so few extensive, specifically Anabaptist works. Even such rare instances often deal with ideas he had already touched upon in the dissertation (which was actually published relatively late). In this regard can be mentioned "The Turning Point in the Zwinglian Reformation" (1958), "Balthasar Hubmaier and the Beginnings of Swiss Anabaptism" (1959), "The Hermeneutics of the Anabaptists" (1967/1984), "The Evolution of the Zwinglian Reformation" (1969), "Der Kristallisationspunkt des Täuferturns" (1972) with the

subsequent correspondence with Klaus Deppermann (1973), and debates about James Stayer's *Anabaptists and the Sword* (1974f).

It is also interesting how relatively early this category of works comes to an end. Yoder's subsequent publications dealing with Anabaptist issues bear a much stronger theological emphasis (insofar as such a distinction should or can be made at all). Or perhaps one should address this from another angle: 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, not in the history or theology of Anabaptism.

In light of the content of Yoder's late-published dissertation, it is astonishing that contemporary response to it in professional circles remained relatively modest. In my opinion, Yoder's work deserves much more attention, even today. There were in fact debates with Robert Walton about Zwingli and with Klaus Deppermann about the importance of events at Schleithem and Strasbourg in the early years of Anabaptism; and with James Stayer (and Hans-Jürgen Goertz and others) about violence in early Anabaptism, "true Anabaptism," and "confessional historiography." However, as far as Yoder's involvement is concerned, all of these discussions were soon ended.

With the development of "revisionist" studies of Anabaptism, the general interest shifted to other topics and authors. The "Bender school," represented primarily by such publications as the *Mennonite Quarterly Review* and the *Mennonite Encyclopedia*, was heavily criticized by revisionist historians.⁶ It was accused of idealizing the Zürich Anabaptism of Grebel and Mantz, which was viewed as the norm and original form of "true Anabaptism." According to this understanding (of "true Anabaptism"), whatever from the outset did not fit a free church movement—peaceful, non-violent, separated from the world, ready to suffer, and strongly committed to the Bible—was excluded as non-Anabaptist.

Yoder, in spite of his occasional in-house, exceptionally sharp criticism of Bender—his long-time teacher and mentor—saw his own work identified with the "Bender school" and carried away with it by the flow of debate.⁷ In part this was not fair, but it was also not entirely unjustified. In my view, Yoder too generally and uncritically considered things to be

implemented in early Swiss Anabaptism that corresponded with his own convictions about the core of the Gospel and his contemporary analysis of the demands of the hour. I have my doubts, and observe in the Anabaptism of the time many more shadows (weaknesses, limitations, open questions, etc.) next to the striking light (strengths, virtues, definitive answers, etc.). Yoder depicted this light impressively, and thus shaped and provided vision to whole generations. However, just like today, the shadows were already there in the sixteenth century. It would help us deal with our own shadows if we could see that shadows existed and persisted in the past, and how they were, or were not, dealt with.

Yoder focused almost all his Anabaptist historical work on the beginning years of Anabaptism, predominantly on the Swiss Brethren. With the start of Anabaptism comes the important main objective, for Yoder, of universal spiritual renewal through rediscovery of a messianic community, radical following of Jesus, devotion to nonviolence, and willingness to suffer. What comes afterwards is for him a fall from the high ideal of this “Anabaptist Vision” into the narrow-mindedness of a denominational “Mennonite Reality.”⁸

It is a pity, from the viewpoint of Anabaptist history, that Yoder did very minimal historical research on later developments, such as on the later Swiss Brethren. First, I think the decline wasn’t so extensive. Some of the early Anabaptist concerns that were so important for Yoder continued, although often in a slightly modified form. Secondly, in the following years the Anabaptists dealt with how a second and third generation could live with the need for a complete spiritual renewal. Now, new questions had to be answered: how faithfulness could be distinguished from stubbornness and assimilation, or when compromise deserved to be called laziness. The challenge here was whether and to what extent, from the Anabaptist standpoint, a life of “second best solutions” could be lived faithfully. Another issue was how a life with repeated individual and community failures could be lived in a hopeful, satisfying way. How, then, can and should we live “between the times”? How can we live in the tension between “Anabaptist Vision” and “Mennonite Reality” (or more generally “human reality”)? All these questions are still pressing for us today, and I would like to have seen more extensive fundamental historical research by Yoder on them.⁹

Running like a thread through Yoder's works is a concern to encourage and motivate people, both inside and outside their congregations and linguistic areas, to become engaged with Anabaptist history and theology. Examples include Yoder's translation and publication of Bender's "Anabaptist Vision" in French (1950), and his francophone summary of Anabaptist-Mennonite doctrine (1955). Equally important are his years-long work with different editions of C.J. Dyck's *Introduction to Mennonite History* (1967f) and his numerous editions and translations of various sources of Anabaptist history into English, French, and Spanish. Extremely important and impossible to overestimate is the influence of Yoder's decades of teaching at different theological schools, the significant number of lectures he gave, including many multiple-day Bible courses in local congregations, and numerous articles in church publications. Anabaptist historical aspects were always either the central theme or incorporated into these presentations. It is noteworthy that Yoder often gave significant stimulus and encouragement to establishing Anabaptist historical societies, such as the Swiss Society for Anabaptist History in 1973.

With the last title on my personal list of Yoder's works (the review of *Early Anabaptist Spirituality* by Liechty), Yoder brought up a topic that was then on everyone's mind, spirituality. It would be very interesting to know more about the subject from him—if possible with reference to early Anabaptist history. All the more so, since he has been accused of creating the conditions for the loss of spirituality and personal faith within Mennonite communities because of the direction of his research.¹⁰

Yoder's own historical and theological work was always closely related to the places where he resided and the people with whom he felt connected. This is illustrated even in the first title in my list, a church history paper on "The Swiss Mennonite Churches of Southern Wayne County." Long after Yoder left Europe, he could often be found in different churches and conferences, teaching very specific topics. There we came to see some of his "love of Jesus and his congregation" that every now and then came through in a stiff, emotionless way, but nevertheless was genuine and had a longlasting impact. Many experienced their first formative encounters with him in such contexts. For them it meant the beginning of a path on which Yoder for decades played the inspiring, motivating role of teaching companion.

Notes

¹ This article was published in Hanspeter Jecker, ed., *Jesus folgen in einer pluralistischen Welt. Impulse aus der Arbeit John Howard Yoder* (Weisenheim, 2001), 157-66. It was presented first at a symposium held at the Bienenberg Theological Seminary, Liestal, Switzerland on September 10, 2000, as a short informal report, an addendum to Mark Thiessen Nation's bibliographical abstract. It has been slightly revised. On Yoder's engagement with Anabaptist history, refer to the second chapter in Thiessen Nation's dissertation, "The Ecumenical Patience and Vocation of John Howard Yoder: A Study in Theological Ethics," Fuller Theological Seminary, Pasadena, CA, 2000.

² Mark Thiessen Nation, *A Comprehensive Bibliography of the Writings of John Howard Yoder* (Goshen, IN: Mennonite Historical Society, 1997). Cf. the more detailed data on the separate works, which I mention here only if the work does not appear in Thiessen Nation.

³ See also Stanley Hauerwas in *The Wisdom of the Cross: Essays in Honor of John Howard Yoder* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1999), 397f. James Reimer also reports the formation of important steadfast convictions with longlasting impact in this busy time of Yoder's life. However, he expresses himself much more critically: "Here was a man who seemed never to have changed his mind." *CGR* 16.2 (1998): 6.

⁴ John Howard Yoder, "Anabaptist Vision and Mennonite Reality," in J.J. Klassen (Ed.), *Consultation on Anabaptist-Mennonite Theology: Papers Read at the 1969 Aspen Conference* (Fresno, CA: Council of Mennonite Seminaries, 1970), 1-46.

⁵ This does not contradict the fact that from the 1950s Yoder had actively worked at ecumenical dialogue, including his time in Europe.

⁶ See a short historiographical survey in Hanspeter Jecker, *Ketzer-Rebellen-Heilige. Das Basler Täuferturn von 1580-1700* (Basel, 1998), 20ff.

⁷ Compare the comprehensive bibliography by Albert N. Keim, *Harold S. Bender 1897-1962* (Scottsdale, PA; Waterloo, ON: Herald Press, 1998).

⁸ Compare to *Concern* 18/1971, 22ff.

⁹ Compare with John D. Roth, "Living Between the Times: 'The Anabaptist Vision and Mennonite Reality' Revisited," in *MQR* 69 (July 1995): 323-35.

¹⁰ E.g., Stephen Dintaman, "The Spiritual Poverty of the Anabaptist Vision" in *CGR* 10 (Spring 1992): 205-08, or "The Pastoral Significance of the Anabaptist Vision" in *MQR* 69 (July 1995): 307-22.

Hanspeter Jecker is professor of Church History at the Bienenberg Theological Seminary, Liestal, Switzerland. This article was translated by Nikolai Penner.