Walking With Yoder Toward a Theological Approach to the Automobile from a Mennonite Perspective

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For many, the word "Mennonite" is synonymous with "Old Order Mennonite" or "Amish." It connotes a group of people who maintain a unique religiosity and lifestyle, most notable for their plain dress and rejection of modern conveniences; at the very least, it might bring to mind a postcard image of a horse and buggy. In light of this popular perception, it is ironic that most members of Mennonite churches in North America are not distinguishable from mainstream society merely on the basis of the technologies they utilize. Despite having their own counter-cultural legacy, perhaps best exemplified in their pacifist witness, so-called "modern" Mennonite theological and ethical reflections have not directly addressed the topic of technology. In my view, it would be a mistake to conclude that this lack of reflection means that technology is *not* of significance for the religious values of these same Mennonites.

There are a few obvious places to look in order to begin to address this gap in Mennonite theological discourse. For example, the word "technology" is sprinkled throughout a number of essays by A. James Reimer as a result of his interaction with philosophers such as Hans Jonas and (especially) George Grant.[1] Like Grant, however, for Reimer the topic of technology is only raised as a symptom of an underlying intellectual problem; furthermore, he is convinced that the theological resources necessary to address it are found outside the Mennonite tradition. Gordon D. Kaufman's approach to theology is clearly motivated by his concern over our capacity to destroy life on earth, a capacity made possible by recent weapons technology and widespread industrialization.[2] For Kaufman, the solution to this problem is not found in either the Mennonite tradition or the return to a classical worldview, but in the radical reconstruction of our understanding of God in light of our contemporary situation.

A final example of a possible starting place to address this gap for Mennonites is found in the recently published proceedings of a conference on the pressing topic of biotechnology. Held at Eastern Mennonite University in the fall of 2003, this event included contributions from theologians such as Stanley Hauerwas, Joseph J. Kotva, and James C. Peterson in addition to contributions from scientists, nurses, doctors, and philosophers.[3] While all the participants attempted to relate their reflections to the Anabaptist-Mennonite tradition, the diversity of their perspectives confirms that much more work must be done to understand the implications of this tradition for the topic of technology. Nonetheless, it is a promising sign that these participants recognized their religious values had something to say about biotechnology.[4]

This essay seeks to demonstrate that the work of one of the most significant twentieth-century Mennonite theologians, John Howard Yoder (1927-1997), is suggestive of a distinctive theological approach to technology. I am not arguing that Yoder's theology is the only way forward; rather, I intend to show that resources available in the Mennonite tradition can be used to practice thinking theologically about technology.

Relating Yoder's Theological Stance to Technology in General
Many have pointed out the fundamental coherence of the wide-ranging work of John Howard Yoder.[5] One would suspect that someone whose thinking was so rigorous and consistent would have attempted a more systematic project, but Yoder repeatedly disavowed "starting from scratch." He concluded his only book dedicated to formal theology with an explanation of why he avoided the issues normally dealt with in the prolegomena of systematic theologies: "we do not begin with the fiction of starting from scratch with a blank mind that needs to be convinced. There are no blank minds."[6] And he introduced his last collection of essays with a similar comment: "One reason I do not start from scratch to do a book on just one subject is that there is no scratch from which to start. Every theme is already awash in debate."[7] Yoder rejected the foundationalist assumption so common in modern scholarship—that all knowledge should be built upon universally accepted categories of reason and experience; he argued that there was no neutral or non-particular place from which to begin.

Yet to call Yoder "anti-foundationalist" would be misleading. Indeed, he was skeptical not just of foundationalist methodology but of what he called "methodologism"—all attempts to uncover the "first principles" that supposedly lie "before" or "beneath" a discussion.[8] What then was his alternative? The conclusion to *Preface to Theology* is instructive: "We have not found that we needed for our purposes to set up any particular rules about logic. We just went ahead with the discussion in the community in which we found ourselves."[9] For Yoder this community was the church. His approach to theology wasn't bound together by a philosophy or methodology but by his commitment to the church—to persons of every tribe and tongue, people and nation, who confess that Jesus is Lord.

Yoder's writing was clearly consistent with his attitude toward methodology. Rather than constructing a timeless systematic theology, Yoder assembled (or allowed others to assemble) anthologies, collections of essays organized around particular themes.[10] For him, like his sixteenth-century Anabaptist forebears, system building was "a rare privilege." He argued that a theologian is "always 'on the way' because his or her first duty is always to a present crisis of disobedience or opportunity."[11] He was certain that whatever overall coherence could be found in his work had less to do with his own intellectual might than to the working of God's spirit through the various communities that had commissioned it.

Yoder's corpus provides numerous examples of how his theological "stance"[12] could be applied by churches in specific cases. Indeed, he proposed that Christians accept a plurality of approaches, a general grammar of faith, rather than restricting themselves to one approach or another: "there is no obligation to reason in the same way on all subjects.… Instead of making the case for the priority of one style, what I have argued is thus that all of them are needed, precisely because none of them may be dominant."[13] This stance has much in common with the biblical narrative and its "multiplicity of styles," a "mixing and matching" of praise, prophecy, and blame rather than concern for one proper mode of discourse.[14] However, while Yoder may have resisted the search for absolutes and the urge to systematize, he was not resigned to relativism. Instead, his theology was characterized by patience; he continued to advocate radical discipleship while recognizing that *he* could never offer a final reading: "The key to the obedience of God's people" as

one of his best known quotations puts it, "is not their effectiveness but their patience."[15] One indication of his appreciation of this value was found in his commitment to ecumenical conversation, a conversation that not only showed respect for those who disagreed but remained vulnerable to their insights.

The ongoing challenge for those interpreting and evaluating Yoder's work is to find ways to apply his thought to new contexts. What does his stance suggest for the particular concerns of the church that he did not address? In my view, given that we live in an age increasingly defined by the opportunities and challenges of technology, those working in the tradition of Yoder need to practice thinking theologically about technology.[16] I am not under the illusion that a full-blown theology of technology can be mined from Yoder's work or that he would have, or could have, provided answers before he was asked a question about technology. Nonetheless, by looking to Jacques Ellul, the well-known French sociologist and lay theologian, I think we find one suggestion for how we might proceed to develop a theological approach to technology in general that is faithful to Yoder's thought.

Known principally for his critique of technological systems and ways of thinking,[17] Ellul shares Yoder's rejection of traditional disciplinary boundaries and efforts to construct comprehensive systems of thought. The most important connection, however, is their appropriation of the biblical concept of the "principalities and powers," a connection pointed to by Yoder himself[18] and later highlighted by Marva Dawn.[19] Both Ellul and Yoder reject modern attempts to demythologize the biblical worldview, choosing instead to try to demythologize the contemporary world in order to expose the fallacy of modern myths that have too often gone unquestioned. It is thus not surprising that both would choose to embrace the principalities and powers language from the Pauline literature,[20] language often explained away as part of an antiquated worldview. The reality of the powers and Christ's lordship over them is "the true situation of the world," to use Ellul's words,[21] or a "declaration of the nature of the cosmos," to use Yoder's.[22]

Yoder's fullest discussion of the powers is found in chapter eight ("Christ and Power") of *The Politics of Jesus*. There he reviews the various ways "structure" is used in contemporary discourse, suggesting that this provides an analogy to the biblical concept of the powers. "Structure" can

refer to a physical artifact such as, for example, a bridge, but it also points to "the patterns or regularities that transcend or precede or condition the individual phenomena we can immediately perceive."[23] "Structure" reminds us that a bridge is more than the sum of the cables and girders used to build it. In the same way the biblical concept of the powers enables us to perceive this "more than the sum of" factor that, despite its profound significance, has often remained nameless.

Yoder contends that these powers were created by God and remain under God's sovereignty even though they have fallen. Indeed, society would not be possible without order and structure, and so we "*cannot live without them*."[24] Thus Yoder stresses the positive role of the powers in human existence, valuing the order and regularity that they enable as part of God's good creation. Even in their fallen state they perform necessary functions; Yoder goes so far as to say that "tyranny is still better than chaos."[25] However, he also stresses that instead of enabling freedom and love, these powers have demanded our loyalty and enslaved us, so that we "*cannot live with them*."[26] Bridges make travel easier, but they also favor particular modes of transportation and particular destinations over others. Yoder does not go any further in discussing the manifestations of these powers; instead he points to the social analysis of Jacques Ellul as an example of someone who "thinks the most consistently within the framework of this approach."[27] This endorsement suggests that Yoder's discussion of how the powers are overcome will offer a suggestion for how the church should approach particular manifestations of the powers that Ellul grapples with, particularly technological systems and ways of thinking.

Like Ellul, Yoder doesn't believe that humans (or God) can simply get rid of the powers; after all, our subordination to them is what makes us human:

> If then God is going to save his creatures in their humanity, the Powers cannot simply be destroyed or set aside or ignored. Their sovereignty must be broken. This is what Jesus did, concretely and historically, by living a genuinely free and human existence.[28]

Jesus, like all people, was subject to the powers, but he refused "to support them in their self-glorification" and thus refused the temptation of idolatry.

His willingness to give up his life to the powers manifest in the Roman government and Jewish religious elite is a sign of this refusal: "Not even to save his own life [would] he let himself be made a slave of these Powers."[29] Jesus' death was a victory over the powers, disarming and making a public example of them by revealing their true nature. It is this victory that the church proclaims by confessing that Jesus Christ is Lord. In Ellul's words, this victory "reveals another direction for life, another choice, namely, of non-power."[30]

Yoder stresses that the church itself does not break the sovereignty of the powers but "concentrates on not being seduced by them"; it is not a matter of fighting the battle that Christ has already won.[31] Thus Yoder's primary concern with the power of technology would be that the church avoid being seduced by it. The seductiveness of technological systems and ways of thinking lies in their ability to blind us to their real power, to make us think we are doing the "responsible" thing or solving worthy problems when we are actually placing our faith in something other than the power of God. The "real power" or the "greater than the sum of" factor of our pursuit of technology is not readily apparent to us.

How can the church avoid this seduction? In Ellul's writing one is left wondering if it can. While technological systems and ways of thinking ultimately remain subordinate to Christ, Ellul regards them as autonomous and thus any efforts to redirect or transform them will ultimately be futile. As a power, technology is fallen and can only be overcome or transcended, not redirected or transformed.[32] Here Yoder would likely part ways with Ellul, and argue that instead of focusing on the possibility that individuals might avoid the seduction of technology through spiritual heroics, we should focus on the possibility that a community might avoid that seduction through concrete practices. Yoder more closely links the powers with human and social realities:

> The Powers have been defeated not by some cosmic hocus-pocus but by the concreteness of the cross; the impact of the cross upon them is not the working of magical words nor the fulfillment of a legal contract calling for the shedding of innocent blood, but the sovereign presence, within the structures of creaturely

orderliness, of Jesus the kingly claimant and of the church who
herself is a structure and a power in society.[33]

Not only does Yoder emphasize the positive role of the powers in human
existence, he stresses that Jesus' overcoming of their sovereignty was a
human and social act, not just a spiritual one.

Indeed, far from advocating the sectarian withdrawal from culture or
the spiritual transcendence of it, Yoder argues that the church, by focusing
first on being the church, is capable of affecting the authentic transformation
of its surrounding culture – and, I would add, its surrounding technology.
The key is that this transformation is not about re-building the world as
much as it is about building the church; not about the witness of the church
leading to social transformation in the world at large but about transforming
the world *into* the church.[34] Yoder would agree with Ellul that efforts to
take responsibility for the direction of technology in general are futile,
but he would also argue that this does not preclude the possibility that a
community might transform technology in the particular by following the
way of Jesus. For it is only the presence of an alternative power that makes
resisting the seduction of the fallen powers possible. Thus for Yoder the
authentic transformation of technology *is* possible when it is subordinated
to the power of Christ and embodied in the church.

Yoder's perspective on the autonomy of the powers is shaped by his
Anabaptist anthropology and its affirmation of the freedom of the will, but
it is also consistent with his overall theological stance. Yoder approached
the powers of the world the same way he approached theological reflection:
he started with the church, and was willing to be patient.[35] Yet he would not
be content with a general strategy for resisting the seduction of the power
of technology and technological ways of thinking. Particular, concrete
manifestations of the transformed power of technology are what would
really matter for him.

The Automobile as a Test Case
Over the past century the automobile has become a significant force in the
economy, environment, and culture of industrialized nations. Because the
development and use of this particular manifestation of technology is now
pervasive and routine, it may not seem to be the most enthralling entry point

into a discussion of the *theological* significance of technology. Indeed, historian Wesley Swanson has suggested that the study of "common cultural artifacts" such as the automobile is "often clouded by over-familiarity and a lack of perspective."[36] Yet this is precisely why the automobile makes such a good case study. It is *because* the automobile is now mundane, because the arguments extolling both its virtues and pitfalls are now mature, that an examination of the issues involved can benefit greatly from the perspective offered by theological discourse. In addition, our intimate knowledge of a familiar or mature technology has the potential to enrich further reflection on unfamiliar or new technologies.[37]

  Of course, the basic problem with any mature argument is that positions become polarized and entrenched. Thus, not surprisingly, clarity is *not* what one finds when searching for an overarching assessment of the automobile in contemporary culture. On one side, authors in environmental science and political philosophy such as Julie Meaton and David Morrice provide helpful summaries of the litany of familiar social and technical problems, ranging from unsightly urban sprawl and the pain caused by accidents, to the unpleasant delays of traffic congestion and the unbelievable scale at which nonrenewable resources are being converted into dangerous pollutants.[38] While many of us are sympathetic toward those arguing that the use of the automobile should be restricted or at least reduced, we continue to drive more and more.[39] We are, according to critics of the automobile, not being rational.

  On the other side, those defending the automobile agree that its status has declined and that drivers are often seen to be a public nuisance. As columnist John Tierney recently wrote, "Americans still love to own their cars, but they're sick of everyone else's."[40] However, in contrast to the suggestion of critics that a conspiracy of corporate interests is responsible for foisting the car on us, commentators such as Tierney suggest that liberal intellectual elites are responsible for turning people against the car.[41] To be sure, no advocates of driving more will deny the reality of the environmental problems caused by driving. However, they are convinced that these costs will continue decreasing with the development of new technology, and that the benefits of the automobile have been under-valued. Critics of the automobile, they say, are not being rational.

The result of all this irrationality is that car enthusiasts and car critics end up shouting at a crowd who cannot hear them, a crowd that, to use Howard P. Segal's apt term, has found a way to *accommodate* the automobile.[42] For the most part, our culture has accepted this particular type of technology, whether it does so happily or grudgingly. In a word, we have been *seduced* by it. Whether we know it and resent being manipulated, or whether we don't know it and feel nothing but love, the automobile has seductively found its way into our lives.

The key for moving beyond this impasse toward a more helpful overarching assessment of the automobile is to recognize that it is more than a scientific, economic, or political debate. In Swanson's words, "To understand the appeal and vital symbolic power of the automobile it is essential *not* to view it as a transportation device."[43] Drivers will not necessarily give up their wheels on the basis of a more compelling cost-benefit analysis, or even when encouraged to do so by political policy. Nor will car critics endorse new highway construction even if everyone drove hybrid vehicles. At its core this impasse relates to differences over fundamental human values.

One study of the automobile that moves beyond the realm of science, economics, and politics is *For the Love of the Automobile* by Wolfgang Sachs.[44] Sachs, who studied both sociology and theology, is a German professor currently working on globalization and sustainable development. He begins his book with the same question that other critics of the automobile find so vexing:

> The problem with the automobile today consists precisely in the fact that the automobile is *not* a problem. Why, I asked myself, does the loyalty to automobiles remain so unassailable, even though everyone knows that cars already have their future behind them?[45]

Sachs's reading of the development of the automobile in Germany is an attempt to show that it is a "morality play."[46] He demonstrates this alternative view by discussing the motivation of the first drivers, all of whom were elites and enthusiasts more concerned with social status and mastery of their environment than with mobility. Thus the "automobile sank its roots into society from the top down."[47] The rest of the book shows just how deep these roots go, how the automobile itself became dependent on complex

technological systems and, more important, came to embody specific values. Citing the often quoted phrase from Roland Barthes that the automobile is "the Gothic cathedral of modern times," Sachs argues that just as "the cathedral is not merely a shelter, so the automobile is more than a means of transport; automobiles are, indeed, the material representations of a culture."[48] I will discuss two of the values of this culture below.

Sachs's discussion of the values embodied by the automobile comes in a section of chapters called "Desires." The first of these he titles "Independent as a Lord," what I will call "the value of autonomy." In contrast to the railroad, which condemns us to passivity, the automobile requires our active involvement. It requires that *we* choose when to depart and which route to take. American philosopher Loren Lomasky has expanded this point in his essay "Autonomy and Automobility,"[49] arguing that self-directedness or autonomy is a distinctively human trait and thus any technology that enhances it is inherently good. In short, "automobile transport is good for people in virtue of its intrinsic features."[50] He is convinced that the ability of the automobile to enhance autonomy is rivaled only by the printing press and possibly the computer.

Lomasky's essay helps explain the irrational behavior of drivers. People prefer driving to the bus, streetcar or train; they "vote with their tires"[51] because the costs of driving do not outweigh the inherent value of autonomy, a value that the automobile's critics have not fully considered. The importance of this value is seen in the fact that drivers are willing to put up with such high economic and social costs. For example, if cars are valued strictly for their mobility, why do so many people endure spending so much time sitting in traffic jams during their daily commute? Autonomy is more about individual control than mobility, and driving allows people to regain control over their immediate environment.

Yet Lomasky's essay is problematic. Although autonomy was valued long before the car came along, Sachs wonders to what extent this technology allowed this particular value to increase in importance:

> Technology does not simply fall from the sky; rather, the aspirations of a society (or a class) combine with technical possibility to inject a bit of culture into the design like a genetic code. Yet neither do lifestyle and desires emerge from the thin

air of culture; instead they coalesce around a given technology. A technological invention is often accompanied by cultural creativity.[52]

Thus the value of autonomy has "coalesced" around the automobile, and the automobile has allowed it to appear as if "natural."[53] To what extent, then, has the premium Lomasky places on autonomy been influenced by the very technology he endorses because it complements this value? How far has the automobile contributed to a wave of "cultural creativity" characterized by the valuing of autonomy and the flourishing of individualism? Sachs suggests that independence or autonomy is a value embodied not only in automobiles but in all modern technology: "Technology fulfills the desire to leave behind burdensome social, spatial, or temporal ties and become one's own master."[54]

For Sachs, the irony of this emphasis is that the more prevalent automobiles became, the less autonomous the drivers became. Autonomy is not lost because of traffic jams but because of dependence on the vast technological systems that make driving possible: "Ultimately all these 'independence machines' depend on streets and power lines, pipelines and radio waves, which in turn bind the individual with multiple ties to industries, power plants, drilling rigs, and broadcast stations." Every "increment of freedom in our private lives" comes at the cost of greater dependence on others. Thus "we have metamorphosed once again from drivers into passengers, even if self-propelled."[55] Put another way: "The desires of yesterday rain down on us as the compulsions of today."[56]

The second value embodied by the automobile that Sachs discusses is "victorious speed." Again, this is a value absorbed in the automobile's early days when the new invention was promoted through competitive races. Sachs suggests that the spectacle of car racing and the corresponding thrill of high-speed driving resulted in "nothing less than a new perception of reality":

> . . . drawing on pleasure and superiority in the role of driver, by teasing the limits of both the automobile and one's own fate, so that the world, the tired, old world, flew by and an admiring gaze looked after.[57]

Czech novelist Milan Kundera describes this reality in terms the enthusiast understands best: "Speed is the form of ecstasy the technical revolution has bestowed on [humanity]."[58]

It is not difficult to see how, as with autonomy, the value of speed is embodied in numerous other examples of modern technology. Technology is better when it is faster, whether it is the computer used to design the car, the assembly line used to build it, the car itself when it accelerates to pass a truck on a country road, or the pay-at-the-pump service station used to replenish the car with fuel. Speed, it turns out, is not only pleasurable because it is risky, it is pleasurable because it is efficient. In the words of esteemed historian of technology Lewis Mumford, "There is only one efficient speed: *faster*."[59]

Just as the value of autonomy was both embodied and encouraged by the automobile, so too was the value of speed. The transformation of the tired, old world into the blur of a new world that makes our eyes water as it goes rushing by contributes to our assumption that history too is rushing forward, progressing in a straight line toward ever greater accomplishments. Once again we find a certain irony here. As Kundera suggests, often speed is more about what we are rushing away from than what we are rushing to: "the degree of slowness is directly proportional to the intensity of memory; the degree of speed is directly proportional to the intensity of forgetting."[60] Furthermore, the seduction of the value of speed is evident in how more time is lost than gained as the speed of travel increases. As Sachs points out, instead of saving time, the automobile encourages us to travel farther: "its powers of speed are cashed in not for less time on the road, but for longer routes."[61] Or, put even more strongly, "The masters of space and time awaken to find themselves slaves of distance and haste."[62]

Applying Yoder's Stance to the Automobile
The above discussion of the automobile was intended to demonstrate that the polarized and entrenched perspectives of enthusiasts and critics can be traced to a conflict over the values embodied and encouraged by this particular technology. If this assessment is correct, then the starting place for addressing this conflict needs to be on the level of values rather than science, economics, or politics. Our scientific research, economic policies,

and political action must be informed by an ethic, an ethic that for Christians must itself be informed by a theological vision.

How then could John Howard Yoder's stance inform a theological approach to the automobile from a Mennonite perspective? There are several obvious points of connection with Sachs's portrayal of the history of the automobile. First, the automobile can be thought of as a manifestation of the biblical concept of the principalities and powers as understood by Yoder. The automobile is itself composed of numerous particular technologies and depends on numerous others that form a complex technological system. This system, or structure, to use Yoder's word, is more than the sum of its particular technologies, for it embodies the values of the technological way of thinking that created it. Moreover, the automobile itself encourages and extends this way of thinking, and thus we find ourselves being seduced by its power. Like all the powers, the automobile is both evil and fallen – we (and the rest of creation) cannot live with it, and good and necessary – we cannot live without it. So, in Sachs's words, "Even when we find ourselves up to our necks in harmful consequences, a kind of structural irresponsibility blocks the necessary change of course."[63]

For Yoder, the way past this blockage is to recognize that the powers have already been defeated and put in their place by the death of Jesus Christ. As we have seen, for Yoder the authentic transformation of the powers, in this case the power of the automobile, *is* possible when it is subordinated to the power of Christ and embodied in the church. Of course, this transformation involves much more than the physical artifact of the automobile itself, as if the church could provide after-market kits capable of redeeming the vehicles in its parking lots. This transformation must touch the vast technological system that automobiles are a part of, and, most important for this essay, it must touch the values embodied and encouraged by the automobile. Indeed, the clash between Yoder's theology and the technological way of thinking embodied and encouraged by the automobile could not be starker.

This leads to a second obvious point of connection between Sachs and Yoder, their assessment of the value of autonomy. Yoder's starting place for theological reflection as well as his ethical response to the powers, his commitment to the church, would lead him to question the importance that thinkers like Lomasky place on the value of individual autonomy. In my

view, Yoder would concur with Sachs that individual autonomy as manifest in the automobile is ultimately illusionary. We are inevitably dependent upon a community, and technology both amplifies and obscures that dependence; as Sachs puts it, more than ever we are passengers, even if "self-propelled" ones. The critical point for Yoder is the nature or character of the community that we depend on. Is it based upon impersonal, distant relationships mediated by technology and motivated by necessity and economic self-interest, or is it based upon personal, face-to-face relationships motivated by love and the interests of others? Yoder's theology clearly values the latter. Going beyond Sachs, his theology could be used to argue that, just as the church by focusing on being the church can avoid the seduction of the powers in general, it can also avoid the seduction of the value of autonomy embodied and encouraged by the automobile in particular. Voluntary allegiance to the church does not mean the end of our individuality; rather, it is a sign of our recognition that individualism is both illusionary and destructive.

A third obvious point of connection between Sachs and Yoder is their assessment of the value of speed. Yoder would likely concur with Sachs and Kundera that speed is risky not only because of the possibility of accidents but because of how it makes us forget. By extending the potential range of travel, the increased speed of the automobile makes us forget what ties us to a particular place. Further, going beyond Sachs now, speed makes us forget that ultimately God is in control of history. Yoder's theology reminds us that, despite the impressive scale and scope of technology, both it and we have limits. His theological stance, and his suggestion for how we can resist the seduction of the powers in general, is characterized by patience. The value of patience is obviously relevant for avoiding seduction by the value of speed embodied and encouraged by the automobile. This alternative value encourages us be mindful of the working of God's spirit in the world instead of rushing in to make the world come out right. While cars encourage us to accelerate our efforts, Yoder encourages us to slow down. While they urge us to throw caution to the wind, he urges us to be careful. And while they encourage us to stick our noses where they don't belong, at times he encourages us to sit still and wait. Yoder's values are not simply theological principles; they are also practices.

Like his Anabaptist forebears, Yoder refuses to separate theology from ethics, belief from practice, or thought from action. Thus he would

disagree with many in the Christian tradition who assume that theology is related to ethics in a hierarchical fashion. Following Yoder, I agree that ideally our beliefs should shape our practices, but the reality is that often they do not. Why do we ignore or forget what we believe, or allow our beliefs to be twisted? As our study of one particular example of technology indicates, I think it is because our practices end up shaping our beliefs. Thus I would argue that there are times when, in order to get our thinking right, we have to start acting in the right way. To put it another way, participating in Christian practices shapes us into the kind of people who truly believe. Yet my discussion of the practices of commitment to the church and patience has thus far been limited to generalities; thus I must now suggest a few particular forms these practices might take when applied to the automobile in a congregational setting. This is by no means an exhaustive or exclusive list.[64]

To start with, I suggest that the value of commitment has implications for the ownership of automobiles. One reason the value of autonomy is magnified by automobiles is that they are most often at the disposal of a single individual, a reality demonstrated by our language. If someone asked me how I traveled to school today, they might expect me to say either that I caught *the* bus or I drove *my* car. Recognizing that automobiles will often be necessary for the foreseeable future, the value of autonomy could be diminished if the church was a place that made it possible for its members to get by with less than one car per adult in every household. People within households could be encouraged to find ways of sharing a car, but this could also extend beyond households to include other church members, or participation in local car sharing co-operatives. There are certainly good economic and environmental reasons for pursing this path, but there is also the recognition that diminishing the importance of autonomy in deciding how we travel from place to place will increase commitment to a particular community.[65]

Furthermore, the value of commitment also has implications for how we value particular geographic places. One way a church could build commitment to a local community is if its members shared that community. Churches should encourage members to make living in close proximity to each other a priority, and should strive to build relationships with non-

members living in the neighborhood of the church. The idea that our church would dictate where we buy a house seems even more counter-cultural than the idea that it would encourage us to make do with fewer cars, but again we should see that our decisions on these matters are never about either asserting or giving up our individuality. We are simply choosing to commit ourselves to different types of community.

Moving on to the value of patience, I suggest that here we find implications for the practice of driving. Since failing to wear seatbelts and speeding are, aside from alcohol impairment, the leading causes of traffic fatalities, perhaps these implications are obvious.[66] But patience implies much more than taking the time to buckle up, follow speed limits, and contain our road rage. In what is quite possibly the only article focused on the automobile that has been published in a theological journal, John Waterson notes that "to suggest that anyone was a *sinful* driver would in general merely provoke amusement. Yet that is precisely what we all are from time to time."[67] Indeed, we are all guilty, at the very least, of a host of minor sins while behind the wheel, ranging from allowing ourselves to be distracted by children bickering in the backseat to driving on too little sleep. We are all guilty of failing to take full responsibility for the "lethal weapon"[68] at our disposal, and only thanks to luck, or perhaps the grace of God, have we avoided facing frightening consequences for these minor sins. The church should be a place where bad habits are recognized and confessed, and good habits are developed and nurtured, and this should certainly apply to driving. Indeed, a key characteristic of good drivers, as Waterson points out, is humility: "first-class drivers [are] given to continual searching examination of their own performance, with devoted striving to do better."[69] Humility or self-critique is closely related to the value of patience; it is hard to get one without the other.

Finally, the value of patience also has implications for how we relate to the automobiles we drive. Most of us have been taught to use or consume technology with a "black box" mentality. We turn on our computer and expect to begin typing an essay, or, for in the case at hand, we turn the ignition key in our car and expect it to go. Everything that occurs in between the initial input and the desired result remains a mystery. Philosopher Albert Borgmann has suggested that this mentality is why technology leads to the

separation of means and ends (or practices and beliefs) so characteristic of modern life.[70] His analysis of technology as a "device paradigm" is incisive, and his urging a return to a more traditional life of engagement through "focal things and practices" is made even more compelling when applied to Yoder's preferred starting point of the church.[71] In my view, the value of patience makes the possibility of turning means into ends, for example, of transforming an automobile from a device into a thing, much more likely. One final suggestion, then, is that churches encourage their members to take the time to learn the basics of automobile technology – for example, how engine performance impacts fuel consumption – in order to become more aware of how their inputs while driving are translated into desired (as well as undesired) ends. Again, there are good economic and environmental reasons for pursuing this path, but the larger aim is to nurture the re-connection of practice and belief that the automobile's seductive power has divided.

Conclusion

This essay has offered brief overviews of one contemporary Mennonite theologian, one particular technology, and the ethical implications of the intersection of these two realms. The thesis I set out to demonstrate is that Yoder's work not only is relevant for reflecting theologically on technology in general but, more important, has significant ethical implications for how we approach particular technologies. The values of Yoder's theology *can* be translated into particular, concrete practices that will enable the church to resist the seduction of the power of the values embodied and encouraged by the automobile. I have suggested four practices, but there are many more. In leaving the impression that I have only scratched the surface of the ways Yoder's thought can be applied to the realm of technology, I hope to encourage further Mennonite reflection in this area.

Notes

[1] Cf. A. James Reimer, chapter one, "Theological Method, Modernity, and the Role of Tradition," and chapter four, "Transcendence, Social Justice, and Pluralism: Three Competing Agendas in Contemporary Theology," in *Mennonites and Classical Theology: Dogmatic Foundations for Christian Ethics* (Kitchener, ON: Pandora Press, co-published with Herald Press, 2001).

2 Cf. Gordon D. Kaufman, *Theology for a Nuclear Age* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1985), and *In Face of Mystery: A Constructive Theology* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993).

3 Roman J. Miller, Beryl H. Brubaker, and James C. Peterson, eds., *Viewing New Creations with Anabaptist Eyes: Ethics of Biotechnology* (Telford, PA: Cascadia Publishing House, co-published with Herald Press, 2005).

4 This diversity was highlighted by Conrad G. Brunk in his review of the conference – see "Biotechnology and the Future," in *Viewing New Creations with Anabaptist Eyes*, 257-60. In his own work, Brunk has helpfully focused attention on how technology poses *moral* risks in addition to the readily apparent environmental, economic, and social risks, a concern that this essay is intended to underline. See "The Biotechnology Vision: Insights from Anabaptist Values," in *Viewing New Creations with Anabaptist Eyes*, 106-21, as well as "Religion, Risk, and the Technological Society," in *The Twenty-First Century Confronts Its Gods: Globalization, Technology, and War*, ed. David J. Hawkin (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2004): 45-58.

5 Cf. A. James Reimer, "Mennonites, Christ, and Culture: The Yoder Legacy," *The Conrad Grebel Review* 16.2 (Spring 1998): 5-14. My summary of Yoder in this section resonates with Harry Huebner's extended treatment in "The Christian Life as Gift and Patience: Why Yoder Has Trouble with Method," in *A Mind Patient and Untamed: Assessing John Howard Yoder's Contributions to Theology, Ethics, and Peacemaking*, ed. Ben C. Ollenburger and Gayle Gerber Koontz (Telford, PA and Scottdale, PA: Cascadia Publishing House and Herald Press, 2004): 23-38.

6 John Howard Yoder, *Preface to Theology: Christology and Theological Method* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2002), 401.

7 John Howard Yoder, *For the Nations: Essays Public and Evangelical* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 10.

8 John Howard Yoder, "Walk and Word: The Alternatives to Methodologism," in *Theology without Foundations: Religious Practice and the Future of Theological Truth*, ed. Stanley Hauerwas, Nancey Murphy, and Mark Nation (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1994), 77.

9 Yoder, *Preface to Theology*, 401.

10 Gerald Schlabach has highlighted this point in "Anthology in Lieu of System: John H. Yoder's Ecumenical Conversations as Systematic Theology," *The Mennonite Quarterly Review* 71.2 (April 1997): 305-09.

11 John Howard Yoder, "Why Ecclesiology is Social Ethics," in *The Royal Priesthood: Essays Ecclesiological and Ecumenical*, ed. Michael G. Cartwright (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), 121.

12 Yoder recommended the use of the word "stance" rather than "system" to describe the coherence of his writing. See *For the Nations*, 10.

13 Yoder, "Walk and Word," 84-86.

14 Ibid., 88.

15 John Howard Yoder, *The Politics of Jesus: Vicit Agnus Noster,* 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), 232. See also Yoder, "'Patience' as Method in Moral Reasoning: Is an Ethic of Discipleship 'Absolute'?" in *The Wisdom of the Cross: Essays in Honor of John*

Howard Yoder, ed. Stanley Hauerwas, Chris K. Huebner, Harry J. Huebner, and Mark Thiessen Nation (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999): 24-42.

[16] Following the suggestion of a leading contemporary philosopher of technology, Carl Mitcham, I define technology rather simply and inclusively as "the making and using of artifacts." See *Thinking Through Technology: The Path Between Engineering and Philosophy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 1. However, it is also important to draw attention to the ways of thinking that gave rise to modern technology and to the complex interactions between particular technologies. Thus in the paragraphs that follow I discuss not only the material manifestations of technology but the significance of technological ways of thinking and technological systems.

[17] The word "technology" in most English translations of Ellul's work refers to *la technique*, defined as the "*totality of methods rationally arrived at and having absolute efficiency* (for a given stage of development) in *every* field of human activity." See the "Note to the Reader" in the American edition of Ellul's *The Technological Society*, trans. John Wilkenson (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1964), xxv. In this essay my use of "technological ways of thinking" is shorthand for Ellul's definition of *la technique*. In his later work Ellul became increasingly concerned with the impact of technological *systems* – the complex interactions and dependencies necessitated by modern technology – and thus his critique does have implications both for the material manifestations of technology and for the way of thinking that led to them in the first place. Cf. Jacques Ellul, *The Technological System*, trans. Joachim Neugroschel (New York: Continuum, 1980).

[18] Yoder, *The Politics of Jesus*, 157, and *For the Nations*, 35.

[19] Marva J. Dawn, "The Biblical Concept of 'the Principalities and Powers': John Yoder Points to Jacques Ellul," in *The Wisdom of the Cross*, 168-86. While I share Dawn's interest in relating Yoder and Ellul, in this essay I approach this connection from the opposite direction: Ellul points Mennonites in search of a theology of technology to Yoder.

[20] Cf. Romans 8: 38-39, Ephesians 6:10-17, and Colossians 1: 15-17.

[21] Jacques Ellul, *The Presence of the Kingdom*, trans. Olive Wyon (New York: The Seabury Press, 1967), 25.

[22] Yoder, *The Politics of Jesus*, 157.

[23] Ibid., 138.

[24] Ibid., 143.

[25] Ibid., 151.

[26] Ibid., 143.

[27] Ibid., 157.

[28] Ibid., 147.

[29] Ibid., 148.

[30] Jacques Ellul, "Technology and the Gospel," *International Review of Mission* 66.262 (April 1977): 114.

[31] Yoder, *The Politics of Jesus*, 150.

[32] Ellul, *The Technological Society*, xxxiii. This emphasis on the autonomy of technological systems and ways of thinking is undoubtedly the most controversial aspect of Ellul's sociological analysis.

[33] Yoder, *The Politics of Jesus*, 158.

[34] This reading of Yoder is shared by Chris K. Huebner in "Patience, Witness, and the Scattered Body of Christ: Yoder and Virilio on Knowledge, Politics, and Speed" in Ollenburger and Koontz, eds., *A Mind Patient and Untamed*, 56-74.

[35] Yoder's approach contrasts with, at one extreme, that of modern theologians preoccupied with the search for the "right 'handle' by which one can 'get a hold on' the course of history and move it in the right direction" (*The Politics of Jesus*, 228). These theologians often end up at least appearing rather instrumental or, better yet, technological. They know their theology is right when history is moving in the right direction. Yoder's emphasis on patience reflects his conviction that human agency is limited. At the other extreme his approach contrasts with that of Christian millennialists or spiritualists (and to a lesser extent Ellul) who are preoccupied with getting out of the way as God steers the course of history to completion. By confining faith to other-worldly concerns, spiritualists often end up baptizing as God-ordained whatever the status quo happens to be. Yoder's emphasis on the church reflects his conviction that God's spirit is at work in the world through the agency of transformed individuals and institutions.

[36] Wesley Swanson, "The Cult of the Automobile," *Epoche* 18 (1983), 98.

[37] Carl D. Bowman makes a similar point in "Emerging Biotechnologies: A Historical Perspective," in *Viewing New Creations with Anabaptist Eyes*.

[38] Julia Meaton and David Morrice, "The Ethics and Politics of Private Automobile Use," *Environmental Ethics* 18.1 (Spring 1996): 39-54.

[39] The total number of vehicle miles traveled annually in the United States increased steadily from 2,296 billion in 1993 to 2,880 billion in 2003 (which translates into a total increase of approximately 2,000 additional miles per year for every person in the U.S.). See the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration's "Traffic Safety Facts 2003 – Overview," 3, available online at: <http://www-nrd.nhtsa.dot.gov/pdf/nrd-30/NCSA/TSF2003/809767.pdf> Accessed on 10 February 2006. The same data is not available on a national basis for Canada, but it is safe to assume a similar trend. In Ontario, for example, the total number of vehicle kilometers traveled annually increased steadily from 76 billion in 1993 to 117 billion in 2003 (which translates into a total increase of approximately 2,500 km or 1,560 miles per year for every person in the province). See Section 3 of the "Ontario Road Safety Annual Report, 2003," available online at: <http://www.mto.gov.on.ca/english/safety/orsar/orsar03/chp3_03.htm#data_chp_3> Accessed on 10 February 2006.

[40] John Tierney, "The Way We Drive Now: The Autonomist Manifesto (Or, How I Learned to Stop Worrying and love the Road): A Social, Moral and Environmental Case for Driving More," *New York Times Magazine* (26 September 2004), 60. Tierney continues to publish a steady stream of opinion pieces in a similar vein; cf. "Burn, Baby, Burn," *The New York Times* (7 February 2006), A21.

[41] Ibid., 65.

[42] Howard P. Segal, "The Automobile and the Prospect of an American Technological Plateau," *Soundings* 65.1 (Spring 1982): 83. Italics added.

[43] Swanson, "The Cult of the Automobile," 99.

[44] Subtitled *Looking Back into the History of Our Desires*, trans. Don Reneau (Berkeley:

University of California Press, 1992).

[45] Ibid., vii.

[46] Ibid., viii.

[47] Ibid., 36.

[48] Ibid., 91.

[49] *Independent Review* 2.1 (Summer 1997): 5-29.

[50] Ibid., 6.

[51] Ibid.

[52] Sachs, *For the Love of the Automobile*, 92.

[53] Ibid., 98.

[54] Ibid., 100.

[55] Ibid., 101.

[56] Ibid., 208.

[57] Ibid., 111.

[58] Milan Kundera, *Slowness*, trans. Linda Asher (New York: HarperCollins, 1996), 2.

[59] Quoted in Sachs, *For the Love of the Automobile*, 120.

[60] Kundera, *Slowness*, 39.

[61] Sachs, *For the Love of the Automobile*, 185.

[62] Ibid., 187.

[63] Ibid., 207.

[64] I began this essay decrying the lack of Mennonite reflection on technology in general, and historian Marlene Epp has made a similar point regarding the automobile in particular. See "Mennonites were silent about the automobile," *The Mennonite Reporter* 20.8 (April 16, 1990): 7. However, Donald B. Kraybill's bibliography for the entry under "Automobile" in the *Mennonite Encyclopedia* vol. 5 (Scottdale, PA: Herald Press, 1989) notes several articles from church publications in the 1920s and 1930s that indicate some level of self-conscious discernment regarding the acceptance of this form of technology.

[65] Amish and Old Order Mennonite communities ban the *ownership*, not the *use*, of cars. Cf. Donald B. Kraybill, *The Riddle of Amish Culture*, revised ed. (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001), 219.

[66] While in the United States seatbelt use has increased and alcohol-related fatalities have decreased since 1993, the percentage of fatal accidents in which excessive speed was a factor has actually increased over the same period. See the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration's "Traffic Safety Facts 2003 – Overview," 3-7. Comparable national data is not available for Canada.

[67] John H.L. Waterson, "Religion and Road Safety," *Theology* 64 (1961): 228.

[68] Barbara Halton Stoops, "Driving as Christians," *Engage/Social Action* 15 (1987), 20.

[69] Waterson, "Religion and Road Safety," 229.

[70] Cf. "The Invisibility of Contemporary Culture" in Albert Borgmann, *Power Failure: Christianity in the Culture of Technology* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2003).

[71] Borgmann's primary concern in his recent work is with the transformation of society. Cf. his discussion of "public celebrations" in *Power Failure,* 117-28. Marva J. Dawn helpfully applies his concept of focal practices to the church in "How Can We Learn to Live the

Language of Focal Concerns," of *Unfettered Hope: A Call to Faithful Living in an Affluent Society* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2003). While for Yoder the authentic transformation of technology would start with the church, he would never suggest it must be confined to the church. Since the boundary between the church and the world is blurred in all sorts of ways, not the least of which is in the realm of technology, I think Yoder would support translating the practices of the church into, for example, subsequent political advocacy for greater access to public transportation, zoning changes, and more extensive driver training requirements. For an illustration of this type of sequence, note how the "What Should the Governor Drive?" campaign initiated by the Interfaith Climate and Energy Campaign followed the "What Would Jesus Drive?" campaign initiated by Evangelicals for Social Action and the Evangelical Environmental Network, with its focus on educating congregations to see that their transportation choices are moral choices. See the Michigan Interfaith Climate and Energy Campaign, "What Should the Governor Drive? Recommendations for Improving the Fuel Economy of the State of Michigan's Auto Fleet" (unpublished report, September 2003); and Ron Sider and Jim Ball, "What Would Jesus Drive? A Campaign Discussion Paper," available at: <http://www.whatwouldjesusdrive.org/resources/paper/> Accessed on 10 February 2006.

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