He Came Preaching Peace:  
The Ecumenical Peace Witness of John H. Yoder

Mark Thiessen Nation

More than any other person, Yoder has labored to bring the Peace Church witness against violence into the mainstream of theological discussion. – Walter Wink

John Yoder inspired a whole generation of Christians to follow the way of Jesus into social action and peacemaking. – Jim Wallis

[Yoder’s] influence on my generation of Catholic moral theologians has been profound. His witness as a theologian in the peace-church tradition is highly esteemed, and the seriousness with which he has carried out his role as a friendly critic of just-war thinking has without doubt contributed to sharpening its formulation and application in the American Catholic setting. – Drew Christiansen, S.J.

At the major ecumenical gatherings, Yoder taught us to be open to brothers and sisters and opened our eyes to the unbelievably diverse forms of peace church existence. – Wilfried Warneck, Church and Peace

Introduction

Sometimes I am startled by statements that suggest that John Howard Yoder was sectarian. Most of my theological reading and contact over the years has been from non-Mennonite sources. So, I long ago grew accustomed to hearing and reading characterizations of Yoder which labeled him as sectarian, meaning both that he did not adequately engage the larger social world or the larger ecumenical church. If I had grown accustomed to such accusations, why have I been startled? Because, over the last several years, I

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have increasingly heard or read such accusations from Mennonites. I get the sense from some Mennonite academics that they believe we have outgrown Yoder. I will not name names, partly because I am not at this point interested in debating the details of the positions of others. I also want to avoid a posture of defensiveness. However, I am interested in making it difficult for others—Mennonite or otherwise—to caricature Yoder.

For years Yoder spoke of his peace witness work as a hobby, a sideline. His real work, he claimed, was as a teacher of historical theology and other theological courses as assigned. However, I believe that by the end of his life he realized that too much of it had been given to speaking about peace for such articulation to be perceived by him or anyone else as a hobby. Throughout Yoder’s life, articulation of a peace witness consumed far more of his time than any other single activity.

However, it is surely true that Yoder was from beginning to end a theologian. He tirelessly spoke on behalf of peace in a multitude of contexts. And just as faithfully he sought to work out the theology that undergirded a Christian commitment to peacemaking. Of course, anyone who knows Yoder’s writings knows that he wrote on many topics. But since peace preoccupied him more than any single topic and was integrated into his theological approach, and since this essay is to be brief, I will focus on Yoder’s witness to peace. I will not attempt to set forth his theology of peace. Rather, by focusing on his witness for peace, I want to argue that Yoder was broadly ecumenical, engaged the larger culture, and was committed to a broadly-defined orthodox theology that could hardly be defined as narrow.

Ecumenical engagement

Yoder’s ecumenical engagement began when he was young and continued until the day he died. As a child he went to Fellowship of Reconciliation meetings with his parents in Wooster, Ohio. When he was in high school in Wooster he was conscious that he was the only Mennonite in his class, and that his principal was a Presbyterian (ex-Mennonite) pacifist. He debated the issue of pacifism on the high school debating team. In the summer of 1948 Yoder traveled from eastern Iowa to western Pennsylvania on a “peace team,” speaking about peacemaking in Mennonite churches and camps. This
gave him experience in speaking about peace and exposure to a broader range of Mennonites.

On 1 April 1949 Yoder arrived in France to begin a Mennonite Central Committee assignment, initially overseeing a network of children’s homes. By 1952 he was involved in conferences about pacifism in Europe. Albert J. Meyer highlights the significance of these encounters: “the Puidoux theological conferences of the fifties and sixties were the first extended theological conversations in over four hundred years between the Historic Peace Churches . . . and the official churches of Central Europe.” Yoder played a central role in these events, delivering significant lectures at most of them. During his last three years in Europe he was a member of the ecumenical committee of the Deutscher Evangelischer Kirchentag and the Europe Council of the International Fellowship of Reconciliation. He also wrote his first of many essays on ecumenism while in Europe.

While in Europe Yoder also pursued graduate studies, receiving a Dr. Theol. from the University of Basel. He studied with a number of the luminaries there, including Walter Eichrodt and Walter Baumgartner in Old Testament, Oscar Cullman in New Testament, Karl Jaspers in philosophy, and Karl Barth in dogmatics. Under the supervision of Ernst Staehein he wrote his doctoral thesis (and a subsequent volume) on the disputations between the magisterial Reformers and the Anabaptists in early sixteenth-century Switzerland. He finished those studies in 1957 and returned to the United States, where from 1959 to 1965 he worked full-time as an administrative assistant at the Mennonite Board of Missions. From the beginning of his tenure there he initiated contacts with Evangelical leaders, the National Association of Evangelicals, and the National Council of Churches. For nine years, beginning in 1960, he had several official roles with the NCC and for more than twenty years, beginning in 1963, he worked in various capacities with the World Council of Churches. Not all these responsibilities had to do with peace, but we can be relatively certain that when Yoder was speaking of evangelism or missions within these contexts, matters related to peace arose and were often central. Recall that this was a time when he would have been hard pressed to get much Mennonite support for what he was doing ecumenically.

Yoder was a part-time instructor for Mennonite Biblical Seminary from 1960 to 1965. Beginning in 1965 he became an associate consultant with the
Mission Board (1965-1970) and a full-time professor with Goshen Biblical Seminary (1965-1977). Beginning with the autumn of 1977 he became a full-time professor at the University of Notre Dame, with Goshen Biblical Seminary buying a quarter of his time from Notre Dame until the spring of 1984. In 1973 Yoder was already chair of the program in nonviolence at Notre Dame as well as (starting in 1986) a Fellow of the Joan Kroc Institute for International Peace Studies. As a Fellow of the Peace Institute he gave lectures and wrote occasional papers. While at Notre Dame he regularly taught two undergraduate courses on issues related to war and peace. He also regularly taught two graduate-level courses related to peacemaking. Eleven times he was the team coordinator for an interdisciplinary course on “The Legality and Morality of War.” In addition, he coordinated a multi-departmental course that was offered twice on the Catholic Bishops’ Pastoral letter, The Challenge of Peace.

Over the years Yoder conducted lecture tours in some twenty countries in Latin America, Asia, and Western Europe, as well as in South Africa, Poland, and Australia. Of course, this is to say nothing of the many speaking engagements he gladly accepted in the U.S.—from conservative Evangelical audiences to liberal Protestant, from mainstream Catholic to fringe, radical Catholic, from religious and non-religious, and from pacifist and non-pacifist. It appears that Yoder’s only criteria for accepting invitations were his availability and whether he believed he might have something to contribute to a conversation.

Cultural engagement

What would it mean to say that Yoder was sectarian or against engaging the larger culture? In 1943, when he was a high school sophomore, he already knew he did not want to go to Goshen College, his parents’ college. After the relative diversity of Wooster High School he thought that the ethnic Mennonite world at Goshen would be too confining. He had secured acceptance and scholarships in special programs at the University of Chicago and St. John’s College in Annapolis, Maryland—programs that would allow him to begin study after only two years of high school. However, he respected his parents and submitted to their strong desires, determining to stay at Goshen
only two years. Because of his great intellectual abilities and through creative means he managed to graduate in two years, in 1947.

If you were a Mennonite in 1947 and wanted to engage the culture and gain cross-cultural experience, one of the more obvious ways to do that was to work overseas. That was exactly what Yoder did. First he helped escort a shipload of horses to Poland that summer. Then in April of 1949 he arrived in France to work for the Mennonite Central Committee. For the next five years he oversaw the transformation of the relief program there from being one of primarily feeding people to having a network of children’s homes, based “on the notion that stranded children are the people most in need of being fed and the best way to feed them is also to house them.”

While a full-time student at the University of Basel (1954-1957), Yoder oversaw the Mennonite Board of Missions relief program that had begun in Algeria in response to the earthquake there in 1954. He wrote a series of five articles about his experiences in Algeria, reflecting on Islam, the war, and the relief efforts. Additionally, during this same period, he was engaged in ecumenical dialogues about peace.

Much has been written about the “Concern” group that grew out of the gathering of some Mennonites who were doing graduate studies in Europe. This group began a pamphlet series in 1954, produced, as its editorial note stated, “for a strengthening of prophetic Christian faith and conduct.” Yoder contributed significantly more to the journal than any other single person. The pamphlet series may appear rather insular now; 1998 is not 1954. Anyone reading through Yoder’s many contributions to Concern between 1954 and 1971 would see that he was attempting to call Mennonites to take their own Anabaptist heritage seriously in order to better engage the larger religious and secular worlds.

Additionally, it was during his time in Europe that he was, as an academic, articulating what it meant to engage the larger world in relation to peace. He wrote essays about Karl Barth and Reinhold Niebuhr, two of the major theological voices of the day who had addressed the question of violence. He also made his first efforts at formulating a theological rationale for why Christians should be actively involved in the world, something he would continue to write about for the rest of his life.

After he returned to the U. S. in the late 1950s, Yoder first worked as administrative assistant for Mennonite Board of Missions. However, for most
of the rest of his life he was an academic. He had early in his career taught a variety of courses, including New Testament Greek, Systematic Theology, and Modern Theology. However, partly because he was so good at articulating the grounds and implications of pacifism and partly because of the wide influence of *The Politics of Jesus*, first published in 1972, he became the chief spokesman for Christian pacifism in the world. Henceforward, more of his time was given to this issue than anything else.

“John Yoder inspired a whole generation”

What would it mean to accuse Yoder of not being ecumenical enough? Most would grant, surely, that in the Mennonite world of the 1950s and 1960s Yoder’s pro-active engagement with virtually any Christians willing to dialogue was progressive. And I think many would also grant that his continuous, extensive ecumenical dialogue until he died is, on some levels, admirable. So, why would some accuse him of not being ecumenical enough? Three things are often meant by this accusation: (1) that he didn’t engage in enough inter-faith dialogue; (2) that his style of ecumenical engagement was wrong; (3) that his theology was inadequately ecumenical.

(1) On inter-faith dialogue: In the 1990s, for some, it is not enough to cast as wide a net as possible within the Christian world; one is only truly broad enough if one is engaged in inter-faith or faith-nonfaith dialogue. I offer three points in response. First, what Mennonite has influenced or engaged a broader range of Christians than John Yoder? Second, Yoder, on a theoretical level, was open to inter-faith dialogue. In fact, he was engaged in a serious dialogue with Judaism over a significant period of time. That he did not engage more fully with other faiths was, I imagine, more because of a lack of invitations rather than unwillingness. Third, to deal adequately with this issue, consider his writings on the subject he gave the most attention to, namely violence. Here he quite deliberately framed arguments that would appeal to generally religious people as well as Christians, and non-religious people as well as religious. How is this a refusal to engage in inter-faith dialogue? Yoder was not a systematician. So, he did not write about doctrine. His inter-faith dialogue focused on the topic about which he wrote most often in general, the ethics of using violence.
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(2) On his style of ecumenical engagement: Yoder could be quite generous, ecumenically. However, because of his deep convictions (combined with his peculiar personality), he could sometimes be overbearing. But, aside from his own personal style, his theory about ecumenical relations, developed very early, had great wisdom. First, he believed that it was the responsibility of Christians to call other Christians to faithfulness. Second, he believed that all Christians need to realize that “we,” whoever that we is, have “something to learn [from others] just as surely as we have something to teach.” And, third, he believed that Christians should not break off fellowship. “If there is to be a breach in fellowship between us, that breach in fellowship cannot be at our initiative. If the fellow Christian with whom we discuss is willing to ‘return the compliment,’ and to lay upon us, according to his convictions, the claims which Christ lays upon His disciples, we must converse with him.” Yoder demonstrated, through his often thankless ecumenical engagement that he did, for more than forty years, exercise considerable “ecumenical patience.”

(3) On his theology as inadequately ecumenical: Of course, some critics simply don’t like Yoder’s theology. That is their prerogative. However, we must be clear about several things. Yoder attempted quite carefully to craft *The Politics of Jesus* so that it would reach a large audience. The book’s wide influence would suggest both that his goal was achieved and that the book was fairly broadly ecumenical. Yoder could write such a volume partly because his own thought was, in the main, orthodox. I would argue that such orthodoxy is more broadly ecumenical (and catholic and evangelical) than many alternatives some find more attractive. But Yoder did not dismiss out of hand alternative ways of construing theology. However much he might have disagreed about this or that position, he was often quite generous in his assessments of the positions of others.

Why would some accuse Yoder of being sectarian? Again, three issues: (1) his refusal to justify the use of violence; (2) his theology, especially in relation to church and world distinctions, is construed by many to be inherently sectarian; (3) he did not wrestle enough with the ambiguities of situations. Agonizing was not a significant part of his approach to dealing with complicated situations of violence and injustice. In response, I suggest the following points:
(1) I hope Yoder’s refusal to justify the use of violence is not a reason why Mennonites sometimes think he is sectarian. However, note that Yoder, through a large volume of writings, made it very clear that he could distinguish between varying degrees of violence and injustice. In his own way of contributing to the conversation, he wanted to witness that there would be less violence rather than more and less injustice rather than more.

(2) I cannot deal adequately here with the critique of Yoder’s views on church and world. The proof, as they say, is in the pudding. Yoder’s writings do not lend themselves to the caricaturing of his position that is frequent in this regard. Yes, he believed that it was biblical and had theological integrity to posit the church as central in what God is about in the world. But that did not, for him, preclude a variety of responsible actions in the world on the part of Christians.

(3) At least as revealed to others, Yoder certainly did not agonize much over issues. That is who he was. We each have different gifts. One of Yoder’s gifts to the church was, without question, an incredible ability to bring intellectual concentration and analytical power to issues. However, he did, in his own intellectual way, wrestle with the ambiguities of situations. Perhaps some would only be assured of the genuineness of his agonizing if he abandoned his theology or his commitment to nonviolence. But that is hardly fair. His lack of intellectual agonizing does not mean that he never felt the agony of others.

Though many may be unaware of it, Yoder did sometimes feel the pain suffered by others. In early May of this year I received a copy of an e-mail containing his daughter Becky’s reflections on the brutal murder of Monsignor Juan Gerardi, who headed the Guatemalan Catholic Human Rights project. Becky was in Guatemala at the time of the murder. She wrote: “When I first heard of this death I felt a real twinge of missing Daddy. I knew that if he had been there I could have e-mailed him and he would have known of Gerardi, understood the situation, and felt pain–I have never seen him as moved as when he has talked about the witness and deaths of persons in situations like these. When I ran out the door to the procession I grabbed the only candle we have. But when I got there I realized that it was wonderful to have that candle, because it was the candle from Daddy’s funeral. So he walked with us too.” Strange reflections, these, from the daughter of a sectarian. But then I cannot imagine that Becky Yoder Neufeld would think
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of her father as a sectarian, nor that she would think that her desire to be in
Guatemala or care about the murder of human rights activists is unrelated to
who her father was, what he wrote, or what he cared about.

I imagine Yoder would not have allowed himself to speak with pride
of his daughter Becky. At the same time, I can well imagine that if Becky had
e-mailed him he would have been moved and would have shared her
description of the witness of Juan Gerardi with his many friends around the
world. Because he cared and because “he came preaching peace.”

The title of this essay was inspired by the title of one of Yoder’s books,
which in turn was inspired by a verse from Ephesians.34 The verse reads: “So
he came and proclaimed peace to you who were far off and peace to those
who were near” (Eph. 2.17, NRSV). It is important to remember that Yoder
was not only concerned about proclaiming peace “to you who were far off,”
he was also proclaiming peace “to those who were near,” to other Mennonites.
For fifty years he labored among us. As Jim Wallis has said, “John Yoder
inspired a whole generation of Christians to follow the way of Jesus into
social action and peacemaking.”35 That “generation” includes Mennonites,
some of us converts to the Mennonite tradition largely because of him. Thank
God for this inspiration. We still need to heed Stanley Hauerwas’s words,
uttered twenty-five years ago:

An attempt to treat pacifism in a serious and disciplined way
is particularly important today when many people are
emotionally predisposed to make vague commitments to the
cause of peace. If emotional decisions are not refined by
intellectual expression, they can be too easily transferred to
the next good cause, which may entail violence for its
success. Further, if this kind of pacifism is to be saved from
the perversities of innocence that too often invite aggression
or acquiescence to evil, it will need to be based on a more
substantive ground than it now possesses. There is no better
school to go to for such training than the pacifism of John
Yoder.36
I believe the above statement is at least as true today as when first written. It would be both a tragedy—and a profound mistake—to ignore the ongoing powerful witness of John Howard Yoder to what it means to be Christian, to what it means to be Mennonite. And it would be a tragedy to ignore his voluminous attempts to make Christian pacifism as intelligible to as many different groups of people (especially, though not exclusively, to Christian groups) as possible. Yoder calls us to be followers of Jesus, to engage in “the politics of Jesus,” so that, as “the priestly kingdom” we may witness to the Gospel and work for justice and for the lessening of violence wherever and whenever it may appear.

Notes

7For the biographical information that follows I am chiefly indebted to two CVs for John Yoder (one compiled by me, with Yoder’s assistance; the other by Yoder); an untitled transcript of a 1980 autobiographical tape made by Yoder for James Wm. McClendon, Jr. and Karen Lebacqz; a June 12, 1991 interview with Yoder by the author; and a July 14, 1991,
supplement to that interview, given to the author by Yoder.

8The Fellowship of Reconciliation is an international, broad-based, religious pacifist organization with local chapters.


10See the appropriate sections of Durnbaugh, On Earth Peace.

11This became the booklet The Ecumenical Movement and the Faithful Church (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1958).

12See Yoder Bibliography, 20, 24.

13He had taught an occasional course at Notre Dame since the fall of 1967.

14See Yoder Bibliography, especially unpublished listings 1990-1996.


17See Bibliography.


19See Concern 1 (June 1954), inside front cover.


24I think many have not fully appreciated the ecumenical and, even, inter-faith dimensions of

25Again one could point to *Nevertheless*.

26Of course this begs the question of what faithfulness is. But each dialogue partner has some notion of what it is, and it is to that faithfulness that they call others.


28Ibid., 36.


31Some of Yoder’s friends who basically embrace his theology do agonize. The best known is Stanley Hauerwas. Many who think Yoder may be sectarian are sure Hauerwas is. The best demonstration that Hauerwas is not sectarian is Arne Rasmusson’s *The Church as Polis* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1994). Some of Hauerwas’s (apparent) inconsistencies and overblown rhetoric are precisely because of his active engagement with the culture and his great agonizing over what it means to be faithful Christians in a quite complicated world. What is not fair is to criticize Yoder for not agonizing (and being ruthlessly, passionlessly logical) and simultaneously to criticize Hauerwas for, more or less, the opposite. They have jointly demonstrated that it is quite possible to hold their theology while having either style of engagement, either type of personality and intellectual mode.


33E-mail to me from Glen H. Stassen, May 6, 1998, containing an English translation of a speech by Monsignor Juan Gerardi and Becky Yoder Neufeld’s reflections on the murder of Gerardi, 2-3.

