Recollections

John Howard Yoder was not the easiest man in the world to relate to casually and informally. I would run into him regularly at the American Academy of Religion meetings, an annual gathering of academics teaching at universities and colleges, but our greetings to each other until recently were no more than perfunctory. I was always surprised at how well he was known outside Mennonite circles, even though he was always an enigmatic and silent presence at such international academic conferences. He would virtually never say anything but would take notes prolifically. What did he do with all those ideas? Write books, I guess! I do remember him once accusing me in front of others of trying to Catholicize the Mennonites at Conrad Grebel College. I punched him good-humoredly. He seemed to be taken aback.

In the past few years, we managed to establish what I would consider to be a kind of relationship. In the Fall of 1994, I had breakfast with him in Chicago, at a conference for which I had flown in from Amsterdam, where I was spending my sabbatical. He was sitting alone and I joined him. We talked about Dutch Mennonites and how they differed from North American Mennonites. I told him about my wife’s (Margaret Loewen Reimer) article on Mennonite hymnody. He was particularly interested in the high regard Harold S. Bender had had for the Russian Mennonite choral tradition. An issue that was of special interest to me, but one that Yoder never fully answered, was the role that dogmatics (as in Karl Barth’s *Church Dogmatics*) played in his ethics.

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In October 1996, I drove Yoder back and forth to the Believers Church conference sessions which we were both attending at McMaster Divinity College. We rode the hour distance between Waterloo and Hamilton a number of times. The discomfort of my 1982 AMC Concord, an awkwardness compounded by trying to find a place for his ever-present crutches, did not hinder us from engaging in lengthy conversations on a range of topics, including his reflections on Karl Barth, with whom he had studied in Basel. The influence of Barth on Yoder’s thought always fascinated me, but my probings into the matter never received satisfactory answers. Then in March 1997, I helped to arrange a series of lectures by Yoder at Conrad Grebel College and at the Toronto Mennonite Theological Centre. Again we spent a lot of time in conversation at lectures, in my car, and at my house. I was struck by the “patriarchal” style of his presentations and interaction with audiences. Discussions were question-and-answer periods more than conversations. He lectured on Tolstoi, The Politics of Jesus Revisited, Judaism as a Non-non Christian Religion, and The Jewishness of the Free Church Tradition. These lectures confirmed what had been my impression over the years: here was a man who seemed never to have changed his mind. His *The Politics of Jesus* (1972) was simply a working out of his Concern Group theology of the 1950s and 1960s. And in his last book, *For the Nations*, he sets the record straight about what he has always thought, said, and meant, for those who misunderstand him. In this final book he is especially concerned to defend himself against the charge of a sectarianism that is apolitical and withdraws from engagement with contemporary culture. My last memory of Yoder is a vigorous handshake at the American Academy of Religion meetings in San Francisco in November 1997.

Yoder’s influence on the Mennonite church in the twentieth century is irrefutable. Through his writings, his lectures at Associated Mennonite Biblical Seminaries, his administrative responsibilities for a variety of Mennonite Institutions, and his ecumenical presence, he has profoundly shaped the Mennonite self-understanding of a whole generation of pastors, lay persons, and academics. While his importance should not be underestimated, his passing does free the next generation of Mennonite theologians and ethicists to reconfigure the question that preoccupied him above all others: What does it mean to be “in the world but not of it?” What
does it mean to follow Christ in contemporary society and culture? The impact of Yoder’s reading of the sources and the logic of his argument does not preclude the possibilities of other interpretations of what it means to be faithful in the world at the turn of the millennium.

Yoder’s claims reconsidered

Yoder’s intellectual pursuits were eclectic: Biblical studies (The Politics of Jesus, The Fullness of Christ, Body Politics), historical and systematic theology (Preface to Theology: Christology and Theological Method), Reformation studies (his German doctoral dissertation on the Swiss Anabaptist disputations, The Legacy of Michael Sattler, Balthasar Hubmaier (ed.), ecclesiology (The Royal Priesthood), ecumenicity (The Ecumenical Movement and the Faithful Church), and innumerable other articles and pamphlets on topics from capital punishment to sexuality. Underlying all of these impressive contributions, however, is one over-riding concern: the nonviolent peace witness that all who confess Jesus as Lord are called upon to give without compromise. It was the topic that compelled Yoder and is the explicit focus of many of his books (The Christian Witness to the State; He Came Preaching Peace; The Original Revolution; Christian Attitudes to War, Peace, and Revolution; Nevertheless; The Priestly Kingdom; For the Nations; Karl Barth and Pacifism; Reinhold Niebuhr and Christian Pacifism; What Would You Do If ?; When War is Unjust). Yoder’s views on this subject, part of the much larger issue of the relation of church to world, of Christ to culture, might be summarized with the following six propositions.

1. To say that Jesus is the messiah is to say that the “way of the cross” is the way to particular and universal reconciliation (at-one-ment). The “suffering servant” vision of the messiah, already present in the messianic passages of the Hebrew Scriptures (e.g., Isaiah 53), is the one appropriated by Jesus from a number of options, a fateful choice forged through struggle with intense temptation in the desert in preparation for his mission. Retrospectively, it is most profoundly expressed in the Pauline kenosis (Jesus emptying himself of his divinity) passage of Philippians 2, one of the oldest hymns of the early church. This “way of the cross” (the resurrection somehow does not get equal treatment), the way of self-sacrificial love, is not a means to salvation but is
itself the gospel, the good news, the kerygma. It is not primarily an existential, inner reality but a social-political alternative for how people ought relate to each other in community.

The existential dimension (one’s individual stance before God) is subordinated to the “political” message—“political” interpreted not in any narrow sense but as a whole new way of living with others in the world. To confess Jesus as Lord is to commit oneself to the way of the cross in human relations. This is the gist of Yoder’s best known work, *The Politics of Jesus*. The question is whether this is an adequate Christology. In his effective corrective to the evangelical tendency to interiorize the gospel and that of the mainline churches to sacramentalize it, Yoder offers a powerful political reading of the New Testament which unfortunately devalues the existential-sacramental power of Jesus’ message—that part having to do with divine grace, the personal forgiveness of sin, the inner renewal of the spirit, and the individual’s stance before God.

2. The earliest Christian community consisted of messianic Jews who accepted Jesus’ messianic vision. The Jesus movement in its earliest phase was quite compatible with the range of Jewish possibilities at the time. It was in the synagogue tradition of exilic Judaism. Only gradually, with Christianity’s transformation into a Gentile religion, did Christianity and Judaism separate into two discreet, even hostile, religious entities. Until the end of the third century, there were still Christians who went to the synagogue on Saturday and heard Origen preach on Sunday. The tragic split emerged gradually with the Hellenization of the Christian movement. The apologists of the second century (like Justin Martyr) are at least partly to blame for it. They use non-Hebraic philosophical categories to make universal, rational claims for Christianity (what in modern academic jargon might be referred to as “foundationalism”). The struggle against so-called “heresies” (Jewish on the one side and Hellenistic on the other), together with the conversion of the Emperor Constantine, signals the completion of the rift. In the process Christianity isolates Judaism into a defensive, non-missionary religious culture quite different from its earlier Babylonian version.

In Yoder’s reading of the Hebrew Scriptures, the dispersion of the peoples in the Babel story (Genesis 11) was not a punishment but a blessing.
It represented God’s “nonfoundationalist” intention in creation–diversity (plenitude) rather than conformity. Again and again God’s people were tempted by a “foundationalist” tendency to conform and unify. Centralized military and religious bureaucracies were the result of falling away from God’s intent. Through the Babylonian captivity and the consequent scattering of the Jews from their homeland, God (as God had done in the “Tower of Babel” event) once again was trying to teach his people the missionary task of contributing to the welfare of alien cultures in foreign cities. The formation of the Hebrew canon was not orchestrated by a central hierarchy in Jerusalem but emerged in the diasporic community as a way of achieving Jewish identity–an identity based not on central authority but on text(s). This is the line of argument in Yoder’s last book, *For the Nations*.

Yoder’s compelling interpretation of the exilic Jewish and early Christian story fails to do justice to the importance of organized, institutional religious and political life both in Judaism and in historic Christianity. Jerusalem and Constantinople/Rome, symbolically speaking, played a more important role (both historically and theologically) in the development of Judaism and Christianity, respectively, than Yoder allows for. His selective reading of the history of each appears to be driven by his Free Church agenda. Furthermore, there is diversity in the prelapsarian biblical vision of creation, to be sure. But underlying this plenitude is a foundational unity and divine harmony that Yoder underestimates. It is the Fall that brings disunity, fragmentation, and estrangement.

3. The great Christian reversal took place with the so-called “Constantinian shift.” The conversion of Constantine in the fourth century is for Yoder the dominant symbol for the reversal of the messianic vision of early Jewish-Christianity. Whereas the early Christian community was a suffering and persecuted minority within a larger, hostile culture, Christianity gradually becomes first the privileged minority and eventually, in the medieval period, virtually coincident with society. It now supported the state in persecuting non-Christian minority groups like the Jews. Constantinianism becomes a shibboleth in Yoder’s theology for all that is wrong, especially centralized and military top-down authority which presumes to be in charge of running the world. It is a code word for everything that faithful Christianity should
not be, and characterizes the basic stance of all mainline denominations in Eastern and Western Christianity up to present.

Within this Constantinian worldview, Christian ethics is always premised on what is universalizable and pragmatic. Only if it is possible to think that something works for everybody can it be considered realistic. In this way of thinking, Jesus’ “way of the cross,” and nonviolent love (agape) no longer is the one criterion— you obviously can’t run a society that way. Other criteria, taken from the larger culture (norms based on what is considered rational or common sense) are now more important than the Christological one. The theory of the Just War, originating with St. Jerome and St. Augustine, replaces the official pacifism of the early Church during the time of Constantine. The medieval church (in exempting the clerical estate from bloodshed) still bore witness to the higher nonviolent ideal— war was an evil only to be tolerated (“justified”) in extreme circumstances and required penitence. But with the Reformation the duty to defend one’s country militarily becomes imbedded in the very articles of faith (in effect it is dogmatically justified). The Crusade (or “holy war”), in contrast to the “just war” which plays by certain restraining rules, is divinely ordained violence, a position adopted by the Church during part of the Middle Ages, and by certain groups in the modern period (some Puritans and Liberation movements). Only the Jews of the Middle Ages, some medieval Christian sectaries, the Anabaptists, parts of the modern Believers Church (Mennonites, Quakers, Church of the Brethren et al.), and some humanists and Christian dissenters in mainline traditions have kept the pacifist vision alive. The Constantinian reversal is to blame for this loss of Jesus-based pacifism. Christians began thinking that they were responsible for running the world, that Jesus’ love ethic was irrelevant, unrealistic, and irresponsible. This is the basic argument of Yoder’s twenty years of lectures on the subject published as Christian Attitudes toward War and Peace: Companion to Roland Bainton, and When War is Unjust: Honesty in Just War Thinking.

There is no denying the power of Yoder’s critique of Constantinianism and the “fall of the church.” It is a message that is not original with Yoder, and one that the church caught in civil religion needs to hear over and over again. But there is an injustice to history, including the Constantinian era, that is committed by Yoder and others for whom “Constantinianism” is a shibboleth.
for all that is bad. The third and fourth centuries were a time of great upheaval and diversity. There were many serious Christians, including theologians, clerics, and statesmen, who were attempting to address the profound issues raised by their cultures in the light of the gospel. One cannot dismiss the working of the divine in the movements of history, even in its most unlikely places and persons (like Constantine). What Yoder, in my view, does not adequately account for are the tragic ambiguities of human existence and the ethical dilemmas of concrete social-political (including ecclesiastical) life in the fallen world in which all of us still find ourselves. Theologians like J. Lawrence Burkholder have seen these matters more clearly.

4. The history of Christian theology and ethics from the second century to the present is predominantly the story of Constantinian apostasy. Although the theologians of the second to fifth centuries asked some significant questions, and the ecumenical councils and creeds (Nicaea, Constantinople, Chalcedon) dealt with important issues, they transposed the narrative approach of the apostolic message into a Greek metaphysical and ontological way of thinking. In the process, obedience to the moral-ethical challenge of Jesus’ life, teaching, and ministry was no longer central. This Platonizing of Christian theology suited imperial politics. Constantine called the council of Nicaea in order to unite the Empire. He chaired the Council and played a key role in its theological formulation using Greek philosophical terminology. Dissenting voices were pronounced anathema (heretical) for the sake of unity. This becomes the story of institutional Christianity from then on. It is not altogether clear whether Yoder believes that the Trinitarian and Christological developments of the classical period were necessarily linked to the Constantinianization of the church. He equivocates on this issue. It is also not entirely evident whether or not he thinks the truth lies with those minority views (the heretics) that were excluded. What Yoder certainly objects to is the exclusion of the dissenters for the sake of unity.

Yoder’s over-riding concern in his historical-theological approach to the treatment of Christian thought through the millennia is with the unfaithfulness of the church to the original messianic vision of Jesus. Yoder does not claim that we can in any simplistic sense turn the clock back and return to the origin, but again and again the Christian community needs to
loop back (as a vine) to the initial Christ-event for renewal and reform in the present. This is the substance of Yoder’s *Preface to Theology: Christology and Theological Method*.

Yoder’s encyclopedic grasp of the variety of theological controversies and systems throughout the ages never ceases to amaze. Yet the sharply-focused ethical glasses through which he views every event, text, and theory filter out too cleanly the rich plenitude of historical possibilities and contingencies. The theological seriousness of historical moments and individual Christians caught in the messiness of life never quite get their due. The development of a Christian doctrine of God in the first few centuries, with its distinctive metaphysical and ontological character, is not sufficiently appreciated as the grounding for the ethic that Yoder proclaims. Both theology and pneumatology are eclipsed by a low christology interpreted primarily in ethical-political terms. In the process the mystical, spiritual, and sacramental get lost.

5. The Believers Church tradition, prototypically present in the Anabaptists of the sixteenth century, is a reform movement in which the concerns of the early, pre-Constantinian Jewish-Christian community are recovered. Anabaptism, and the Free Church tradition it exemplifies, represents the retrieval of the Jewishness of Christianity. Although Yoder had been interested in the early Jewish period of Christianity for a long while, the similarity of the Free Church tradition to exilic Judaism seemed to engage him more intentionally toward the end of his life. He saw not only sociological parallels between Mennonites and Jews, but also sociological-theological ones between the synagogue culture of Babylonian Judaism and the ecclesiology of the Believers Church more generally. Both were suspicious of centralized authority structures, particularly those enforced by the state. Both were small messianic-type communities intent on living faithfully in alien cultures, their identities similarly shaped by the reading and discussion of texts and the pre-eminence of ethical obedience. Both espoused nonviolence. These insights are spelled out in Yoder’s essay “The Jewishness of the Free Church Tradition” (a lecture he gave at the Toronto Mennonite Theological Centre in March 1997). In drawing out the historical and ethical similarity between the synagogue culture of diaspora Judaism and Free Church Christianity—a valuable analogy which is illuminating and helps to mitigate anti-semitic
elements present in the Christian tradition–Yoder does not do justice to the genuine theological differences that developed early on between the two religions (seen from both perspectives). He also, thereby, distances Mennonites and the Believers Church movement even further from the historic development of catholic Christianity, particularly from its ecumenical, “dogmatic” foundations.

6. The task of the Christian in contemporary culture is not to run the world, not to make history turn out right, but to live faithfully within a believing community as a witness in and to the world of the coming of the Kingdom of God. Christians have only one norm–Jesus Christ, who incarnates the way of self-sacrificial, nonviolent love in the world. They cannot expect the world (dominant culture and society in general) to live by this standard. This norm can be presumed only for those who have voluntarily joined the believing community, for whom faith is a presupposition, and who have committed themselves to a life of Christ-like love. Yoder identifies many different forms of pacifism, but the one he espouses is “the pacifism of the messianic community.” It is a pacifism that does not depend on effectiveness in any usual pragmatic sense, but on the corporate confession of Jesus as Lord. Such a community is not sectarian, it is not quietistic, it does not withdraw from the world but seeks to live out the way of Jesus in human relations. It does not take direct responsibility for the political life of the state but does so indirectly by “witnessing” to the state. It does so with the use of “middle axioms,” by which Yoder means norms that society in general can understand (justice, freedom, equality, etc.). For Christians these norms receive their content from the one christological norm of redemptive love; but in communicating with society this ultimate criterion remains indirect. At no point in its engagement with society is the church justified in compromising this Christological basis for ethical thinking or behavior. The “church” is to be distinguished from the “world,” not sociologically and institutionally but in terms of response. It is a community of faith response to the way of Jesus Christ. This is the heart of Yoder’s theological ethics, and it is found throughout his work but concentrated in books like The Christian Witness to the State, Nevertheless, and The Priestly Kingdom.
The logical tightness of Yoder’s system makes it difficult to refute. But its inner consistency fails to square with the inconsistencies, ambiguities, fallenness, and messiness of real life either in the church or in the world. There is little room for personal or group failure within the messianic community. Nevertheless, his is a powerful critique of much mainstream ethics which is theologically too prone to justify failure, sin, and violence.

After Yoder, what?

Yoder was known in recent years to say with just a little too much modesty that others had passed him by. It is tempting to think that after a great era that produced thinkers like Bender and Yoder, we the epigones enter a period of mediocrity. It is certain that Yoder himself would rightly refute any such conclusion. He would encourage those who come after him to find new ways of being more faithful to Christ within contemporary culture. Yoder’s death will without a doubt usher in a time of intense scrutiny and reappraisal of his way of reading the Gospel. In his lifetime there were contemporaries of his, like Gordon Kaufman and J. Lawrence Burkholder, who saw things quite differently. Even fellow members of the original European-based Concern Group, like John Miller, have come to interpret the Bible and the responsibility of the Christian within society differently than Yoder.

I myself believe that the Trinitarian foundations for Christian ethics are not sufficiently worked out in Yoder’s thought. The Christian doctrine of God that emerged in the Biblical and post-Biblical period is the foundation for all Christian ethics, and is not exhausted by an ethic of agape. God cannot be said to be a pacifist in any strict sense (he gives and takes life; “‘Vengeance is mine,’ says the Lord”)—this, of course, does not justify our human use of violence. But there is a sense in which a theology that begins and ends with a Jesus-ethic of nonviolent love cannot fully account for the irrational depths of evil and suffering in the world which also are mysteriously in the hands of God and can be used for divine purposes. God is an unfathomable and inexhaustible abyss, and the disclosure in Christ does not fully (without residue) annul the hiddenness. Wasn’t it William Blake who asked, “Did he who made the Lamb make thee [the Tiger]?” Where is the Tiger in Yoder’s God? In Yoder’s Christ?