

Scott Thomas Prather. *Christ, Power and Mammon: Karl Barth and John Howard Yoder in Dialogue*. New York: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2013.

Jamie Pitts. *Principalities and Powers: Revising John Howard Yoder's Sociological Theology*. Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2013.

In his introduction to *Christ, Power and Mammon*, Scott Prather notes the “near absence of any sustained treatment of our theme [of the powers] in Barth and Yoder studies” (3). Jamie Pitts, in his introduction to *Principalities and Powers*, concurs that this theme in Yoder’s corpus “has not been reviewed systematically in its own terms” (xxxvi). If their assessments are right, then their books have more than begun to fill this lacuna. Both works are revised UK doctoral theses, each putting Yoder’s theology in dialogue with another figure—Karl Barth for Prather, French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu for Pitts. Read together they offer an interesting argument: Barth’s *exousiology* (theology of the powers) needs Yoder’s “clear historical-structural emphasis” in order to resist readings of Barth as “non-ideological and thus socially conservative” (Prather, 7), while Yoder’s “sociological theology” needs Bourdieu’s reflexive sociology in order to offer “an improved, non-reductive social theory” (Pitts, xxxv).

Prather begins his volume with describing Barth’s *exousiology*, drawing on three post-World War I texts: “Justification and Justice,” an excursus from *Church Dogmatics* III/3, and a section from *The Christian Life* on “the Lordless Powers.” Barth’s conception of the powers is “as the sheer antithesis . . . or total corruption . . . of creaturely being and activity” (51). In chapter 2, Prather describes Yoder’s *exousiology* as “spurred on by a negative assessment of Niebuhr’s political heritage” (53) while drawing positively from Reformed theologian Hendrik Berkhof. Given recent arguments for development in Yoder’s thought, this chapter would benefit from attention to chronology; still, it provides a nice overview of Yoder’s *exousiology*.

Prather then turns to how eschatology functions in Barth and Yoder’s *exousiologies*, drawing out both continuities between them and ways that “Yoder’s voice is finally shown to be crucial,” given his “more sociopolitically conscious account” (107). In his penultimate chapter, the author applies this account to political and economic power, “the demonization of which Barth names Leviathan and Mammon” (163). Notably, this chapter includes an

illuminating survey of Yoder's sympathetic critiques of liberation theology. Finally, Prather incorporates insights from William Stringfellow and Jacques Ellul—as well as the early “socialist” Barth—to offer a contemporary critique of capitalism, concluding with Hurricane Katrina as an illustration of how “self-serving economic power (Mammon) reaches its highest inhumanities through the manipulation of the world-ordering powers of law and might (Leviathan)” (234).

Pitts's book is composed of six chapters, each addressing a theme in Yoder's work: creation, theological anthropology, violence, theological method, ecclesial politics, and Christian particularity. Each chapter follows a three-fold pattern. First, Pitts offers a chronological overview of Yoder's writings on the powers with respect to the chapter's theme and discusses criticisms of Yoder's work relevant to it. Next, the author explicates concepts from Bourdieu's work pertinent to the theme. Finally, applying Bourdieu's concepts and “creedal affirmations of the Trinity and the divinity of Christ” (xlii), Pitts attempts to “revise” Yoder's theology in broadly “Yoderian” ways that are more capable of withstanding criticisms.

For example, in chapter 3, “Revising Yoder's Theology of Violence,” he describes Yoder's theology of violence in terms of the powers before discussing four criticisms of it: “Yoder insufficiently recognizes that violence requires discernment; Yoder's focus on violence misses out on the broader meaning of the fall; Yoder fails to relate his critique of violence to the judgment of God; and Yoder is ambiguous as to the legitimacy of state violence in the order of providence” (72). After interacting with the sources of these criticisms, Pitts turns to Bourdieu's writing on violence and domination, particularly his distinction between “physical and symbolic violences” (83). Pitts describes how “Bourdieu's theory of violence and domination . . . facilitates a revision of Yoder's theology of violence and the fall that responds to critics” (91). This pattern allows each chapter to stand on its own, though it does lead to some redundancy when the book is read straight through.

Both these books take exousiology as their starting point, but each employs this theme for different purposes. Although Prather discusses Barth and Yoder at length, ultimately his aim is to use their work for his own constructive account. In doing so, he offers a view of the powers that addresses global capitalism more directly than previous accounts. In contrast, Pitts uses

Yoder's exousiology as a foray into Yoder's broader theology. As such, his work will be of more direct interest to Yoder scholars, although his proposed "sociological theology" also has promise for further development.

While these volumes have distinct aims, they share a few limitations. First, both appear to be only lightly revised theses, evident in Prather's book by numerous self-referential markers. Repeatedly the reader is reminded of arguments made in previous chapters or coming in later chapters. Their preponderance seems unnecessary in a text with otherwise clear, cogent arguments and structure. In a preface Pitts notes several of his book's shortcomings, which stemmed from needing to complete his project prior to academic employment. One hopes that a subsequent volume will build on suggestions made by his examiners and outside readers, as at least two are essential to evaluating the success of his project, namely whether his "proposed 'sociological theology' is a viable theological method" and whether a secular sociologist such as Bourdieu can be appropriated for a theological project (ix).

Both works also raise the question of what it means to put two thinkers "in dialogue," or to use one to "revise" the work of another. Prather argues in early chapters that Yoder is a "crucial" addition to Barth's account, but in his conclusion Yoder drops out and is replaced by the early "socialist" Barth. Pitts suggests that his revisions are "improvements to Yoder's writings" that are nonetheless "Yoderian" (xxxix). Yet it is unclear whether these revisions are drawing out what is implicit in Yoder's work or correcting Yoder's errors. Pitts doubts that "the search for a definitive 'historical Yoder' will result in a new consensus" (xv), but it is uncertain why such doubt precludes him from committing to his own reading of Yoder.

Finally, for works addressing Yoder's writing on power and the powers, it is regrettable that neither text engages substantively with Yoder's own misuses of power that have been public for years though only recently receiving sustained attention. Pitts discusses this omission in his preface, while Prather fails to mention it. But as Pitts notes, this issue is one "that scholars must face squarely" (xv). As they do so, I believe they will find *Christ, Power and Mammon* and *Principalities and Powers* to be valuable resources.

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