Introduction

Paul H. Martens

To paraphrase an occasional observation whispered – usually inflected with a hint of disdain – in Mennonite circles over the past few years, "John Howard Yoder has published more since he passed away than he did when he was alive!" It is doubtful whether this statement is true, but the sentiment expressed does not depend on its truth. In a subtle way, it suggests that perhaps we already have enough Yoder. As one complicit in the production of Yoder's posthumous publications, I simply offer that as long as Yoder continues to fascinate, intrigue, trouble, and encourage us as we pursue faithful living today, so be it! This was my hope as one of the editors of *Nonviolence – A Brief History: The Warsaw Lectures,* and it is my hope as one of the editors of this special issue of *The Conrad Grebel Review*.

The lectures gathered under the title of *Nonviolence – A Brief History* were presented in May 1983 in Warsaw, Poland at the invitation of Witold Benedyktowicz, president of the Polish Ecumenical Council. To understate the case, it was a tense time as the Solidarity (*Solidarność*) Movement was threatening the hold of the Polish Communist Party through mass strikes held just a couple of years before. And, to add to the mix, the relationship between the dominant Roman Catholic Church and the rest of the churches in Poland was less than cordial.

Yoder sensitively stepped into this virtual minefield and, without explicitly mentioning the specifics of the Polish context, offered eleven lectures that, among other claims, address how Christians should embody nonviolence, how the church's nonviolent witness relates to other religious and secular social thought and movements of the twentieth century, and how Poland's minority churches should understand the most fruitful trajectories within the Roman Catholic Church.

Although several of the essays in this issue provide partial summaries of Yoder's *Nonviolence – A Brief History*, it may be helpful to outline the basic structure of that text up front. The eleven lectures making up the text trace a single trajectory, namely the increasing relevance of nonviolent thought and

action. The trajectory takes four steps. First, Yoder outlines the promise of nonviolent action based on the lessons learned from Tolstoy, Gandhi, Martin Luther King, Jr, and others in the twentieth century (chapters 1-3). Second, he addresses two common objections to nonviolence – (a) just war logic and (b) biological and sociological theories – in order to demonstrate that these objections, in reality, support nonviolence in significant ways (chapters 4-5). Third, Yoder returns to more familiar territory by contextualizing the twentieth-century movement within a rich Jewish-Christian framework (chapters 6-8). To conclude, he outlines the hope for the future by illuminating how the nonviolent movement is blooming and bearing fruit within the contemporary Roman Catholic Church (chapters 9-11).[1]

* * * * *

This issue of *The Conrad Grebel Review* is evidence that lectures given in Warsaw twenty-eight years ago still speak today. I am humbled by, and most grateful for, the six thoughtful and provocative engagements with those lectures that are gathered here. Working on these pieces was a luxury that I do not deserve! Here I will offer a few introductory comments about each contribution and point towards a couple of debates that transcend the individual papers.

In the first essay – "Is Warsaw Close Enough?" – Ann Riggs queries and extends Yoder's text from a Kenyan perspective, one that is daily challenged by the temptation of corruption and its intimate relationship with violence. Drawing on Dom Hélder Câmara's description of corruption as "first violence," Riggs utilizes Yoder's definition of the polis, "of the wholeness of man in his socialness" (*Nonviolence – A Brief History*, 95), to articulate a rejection of corruption because it is an action guided by a perverted sense of the social. Against this background, the lessons of Tolstoy, King, and Gandhi distilled by Yoder can address from different perspectives how hate is overcome by love. Facing a society built largely upon corruption and violence, Riggs concludes with confident hope by returning to Yoder's claim that "The means is the end in process of becoming" (ibid., 46) in order to embrace the task of transforming Kenyan society as well as the task of becoming a new people of peace in the Friends Theological College a little

more every day.

Transporting us from contemporary Kenya to the civil rights movement in America, Romand Coles offers both a strong affirmation and a critique of nonviolence in the second essay. In the first part, he integrates a reading of Yoder's *The War of the Lamb* into the concerns of *Nonviolence – A Brief History* for the purpose of developing Yoder's suggestive explorations of how the resonant energies of love and vengeance are intertwined in human interaction. Against the real temptation to violence, Coles highlights the intensity and quality of spiritual resonance that releases one to "do the right thing." This is the necessary insight that allows one to see "how nonviolent interaction might become a powerful world-transformative *movement* articulating the 'grain of the universe'" (Coles, 23). Yet, despite his creative illumination of resonant causality in Yoder's "wild peace," he refuses to follow Yoder's unconditional nonviolence. He further problematizes Yoder's reading of the history of the Civil Rights Movement, arguing that a fuller reading reveals that self-defense (or the threat of it) was often required to make space for nonviolence to be publicly proclaimed. And in his conclusion he, like Riggs, brings the conversation into the present by suggesting – unlike Riggs – that unconditional nonviolence risks being implicated in sustaining situations of extreme terror.

In the third essay, Matthew Porter and Myles Werntz (co-editors of *Nonviolence – A Brief History*) attend directly to Yoder's display of the relationship between nonviolence and the church by contrasting it with that of Stanley Hauerwas's *The Peaceable Kingdom*, published the same year Yoder presented his Warsaw lectures. Despite Hauerwas's proclaimed indebtedness to Yoder's nonviolence and ecclesiology in *The Peaceable Kingdom*, Porter and Werntz argue that the church plays a fundamentally different role in the practice of nonviolence for both thinkers. To put it bluntly, the church forms one virtuously in the practices of nonviolence according to Hauerwas, while a conversion to nonviolence leads one into the church according to Yoder. This difference, say these commentators, allows Yoder to begin to account for nonviolence outside the church, and therefore reflects a significant set of disagreements between him and Hauerwas on the church's role in relation to nonviolence, a set of disagreements that discomfits Hauerwas's strong claim of indebtedness.

Mark Thiessen Nation, in the fourth essay, challenges what he takes to be problematic attributions – the terms "ecumenical" and "cosmopolitan" – assigned to Yoder in the Introduction to *Nonviolence – A Brief History* by the editors, especially and additionally singling out the critical interpretation of Yoder's development I offered a few years ago in "Universal History and a Not-Particularly Christian Particularity." (There I suggested a gradual evolution occurred in Yoder's thought, namely toward positioning his ethical view as a sociological posture that is no longer particularly Christian.)[2] Reading the Introduction (authored by all three editors) through the critical conclusions of my article, Nation seeks to defend Yoder's Christian particularity, both in its theological and ethical expression. Appealing to *The Priestly Kingdom*, *The Royal Priesthood*, and several other texts, he argues that although Yoder may not have been as careful as he could have been, he never really abandoned "his own particularistic, radically reformed, Christologically and ecclesiologically centered ethics" (Nation, 84).[3]

If Nation defends the Christian particularity of Yoder's ethic, David Cortright pushes the conversation in the opposite direction. In the fifth essay – "Toward a Realistic Pacifism" – Cortright embraces Yoder's appropriation of Jesus, Tolstoy, Gandhi, King, and Catholic peacemaking in order to call readers to work for justice in challenging the structures of power that reinforce oppression and exploitation, to return good for evil, and to continue to progress toward social and economic tolerability. Cortright also applauds Yoder's insistence that Just War logic increasingly leads its practitioners to pragmatic pacifism. Yet Cortright moves further than Yoder by arguing that nonviolent discipline is possible without a religious foundation. Moving in the optimistic direction already suggested in the chapter of *Nonviolence – A Brief History* entitled "The Science of Conflict," Cortright asserts that nonviolence is being effectively understood and applied in a thoroughly secular, pragmatic context more often than not.

Peter Ochs brings things to a close with comments on the "wonders" and "burdens" of Yoder's approach to Judaism and, by extension, Yoder's approach to the relationship between divine speech and human speech. While praising much of Yoder's own practice, Ochs worries about Yoder's occasional decidedly modern confidence that natural or human language can be trusted as equal to the task of disclosing the things of God, "the

good news." He worries that Yoder overstates the cure for the Christian heritage of spiritualism by too precisely articulating nonviolence as "a piece of Christian religious law" (Ochs, 96) without appropriate provision for the inductive reasoning and debate common to the tradition of rabbinic case law. And, despite Yoder's attempts to the contrary, Ochs argues that Yoder's description of "Christianity," with its confident overcoming of *mysterium*, becomes a form of conceptual totalization in the fashion of modern reason. Unfortunately, this totalization (even if nonviolent) is not banal, because modernity's well-intentioned pursuit of universal truth and human welfare has tended to generate as much evil as good (Ochs, 92). Precisely to avoid this problem, Ochs concludes by outlining a hopeful, expansive notion of *Shabbat* – "the day of the completion of creation" (Ochs, 99) – in place of Yoder's normative account of nonviolence.

* * * * *

Not all of the contributors consider themselves adherents to nonviolence alone, nor do they all consider themselves Christians. As even the cursory summary sketched above suggests, their essays illuminate aspects of Yoder's thought that help us ask further and perhaps sharper questions, both of ourselves and of Yoder. Yoder was a Christian who claimed nonviolence as normative. Yet because he explicitly describes nonviolence as a way of existence around which Protestants, Catholics, Jews, Hindus, and secular social theorists, political scientists, economists, and biologists should converge on their own terms (given time, he would no doubt address others too), he opened doors to conversation and debate well beyond his own experience and expertise. Yoder leaves us with a choice: either further these conversations or foreclose them (foreclosing is, of course, one way of furthering as well).

Therefore, there are several ways to invigorate conversations among and beyond these essays. With respect to a most basic form of the conversation on nonviolence as an ethical norm, we find that Riggs, Nation, and Cortright generally affirm Yoder's position, while Coles and Ochs remain skeptical that nonviolence as a norm – at least an absolute norm – can be justified either theologically (Ochs) or historically (Coles). Further,

with respect to the relationship between a religious vision and nonviolence, we find that (1) Riggs affirms and extends Yoder's position with prayer and thanksgiving, while Nation sharply defends the Christian particularity of Yoder's nonviolence; (2) Cortright applauds Yoder while suggesting that social science may be self-sufficient in maintaining nonviolence; (3) Porter and Werntz are positioned somewhere between Nation and Cortright; and (4) Ochs argues that a humble understanding of God calls nonviolence into question. Clearly, discussion on this issue has a most vibrant future.

These are only the most obvious debates in these essays, and there are many more. It is my wish that readers will engage with the essays in the same hope with which Riggs concludes her contribution (if she will permit a slight paraphrase): Maybe we will go farther than Warsaw.

Notes

[1] This summary is drawn from *Nonviolence – A Brief History*, 3. For a fuller summary, see pages 3 to 8 of that volume.

[2] See Paul Martens, "Universal History and a Not-Particularly Christian Particularity: Jeremiah and John Howard Yoder's Social Gospel," in *Power and Practices: Engaging the Work of John Howard Yoder*, ed. Jeremy M. Bergen and Anthony G. Siegrist (Scottdale, PA: Herald Press, 2009), 131-46.

[3] This is not the place to respond fully to Nation's critique. In this context, I will make two brief comments: (1) equating my position with that of the other co-editors of *Nonviolence – A Brief History* assumes too much; and (2) a fuller articulation of my interpretation of Yoder's thought (and my understanding of the disagreement with Nation) is found in Paul Martens, *The Heterodox Yoder* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2011).

Paul H. Martens is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Religion at Baylor University in Waco, Texas.