Is Warsaw Close Enough?
Reading Yoder's *Nonviolence – A Brief History* in Kenya

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The publication in 2010 of John Howard Yoder's eleven 1983 Warsaw Lectures[1] brings them into my life early in my second year as head of Friends Theological College (FTC), a Quaker theological seminary in Western Kenya. As I consider using this brief history of nonviolence in one of the courses in ethics I teach, I sit about 25 miles from Kisumu, one of the areas hardest hit by the Kenyan post-election violence of early 2008. Those among our students who had been most directly traumatized by the post-election events have recently graduated, taking with them deep psychic and spiritual wounds that were, sadly, only partially healed by on-campus interventions. I have recently received a dignified elderly visitor who offered me a financial bribe if I would arrange a process he described as "reconciliation" between his younger relative, who is a former member of the college staff, and the college's board of governors.

Do these pieces fit together? Do the *Warsaw Lectures* speak to this time and place and the relationship between corruption and violence in a way that could assist in preparing our FTC students to respond to such situations in their own ministries? Or is this volume too theoretical, too outdated, or too Northern and Western to provide guidance here in the two-thirds world as the second decade of the third millennium begins? Is Warsaw close enough?

Corruption and Violence

Logically speaking, corruption is a kind of violence. When officials in a public or private institution are diverted from carrying out the responsibilities to the common good by which it is defined, trust of and within the institution is violated. The fabric of specific interpersonal relationships is distorted. The context of the web of life actions the institution was designed to support or carry out is damaged. Gaps in the provision of goods or services emerge. The society or sub-society the institution serves is weakened. In ways large or small the well-being of the entire human community and, in some cases, the wider web of life and the cosmos is lessened.

In two recent books about Kenya, the historical connection between public corruption and physical violence has been documented and painstakingly analyzed. In one of these volumes, *Imperial Reckoning: The Untold Story of Britain's Gulag in Kenya,* Caroline Elkins demonstrates the way corruption in the colonial administration laid the ground for the savagery of the Mau Mau and the British colonial responses to it.[2]

The British system of empire included using local collaborators in positions of authority over the wider population. In areas of East Africa where Kikuyu[3] people lived, such African imperial officials were viewed as exercising illegitimate authority. From a certain perspective one could say that everything done by these officials, called chiefs, was corrupt and not a carrying-out of legitimate social authority. More particularly, as long as the chiefs fulfilled the responsibilities assigned to their role by the higher colonial administration, primarily for collecting taxes and procuring labor for colonial projects and the farms of white settlers, they were not held accountable for financial or other corruption.[4] In return for loyalty, the chiefs, the Home Guard, and others connected with the colonialists were given special material privileges, another form of corruption.[5]

Those corruptions were among the factors leading to the rise of the Mau Mau, a secret Kikuyu society that emerged into public notice in the early 1950s. Mau Mau adherents pledged in highly ritualized ceremonies – what in other contexts might be called liturgies – to defend the unity and needs of the Kikuyu community and to resist and expel the intruding colonials. Mau Mau goals of land and freedom were served at varying levels of involvement and committed to with a series of oaths. The seventh and highest oath was *batuni,* the killing oath. In rapid escalation of atrocities and retaliatory atrocities, the Mau Mau and the British and Africans connected with them became locked in an embrace of violence. For some, land and freedom meant specifically a rejection of the imposed chiefs and their corruption.[6]

In another volume, *It's Our Turn to Eat: The Story of a Kenyan Whistle-Blower,* Michela Wrong recounts a more recent narrative of corruption and violence.[7] In the decades after independence, corruption became tied in a special way to ethnicity, to tribe. Processes of giving favors to those of one's own tribe continued and deepened. Everyday services became something to be paid for. A study undertaken in 2001 by Transparency International found that the average urban-dwelling Kenyan paid 16 bribes a month, accounting for 31.4 percent of the average household's income.[8] Although many live in rural areas, where life situations are generally harsher, a 1998 study found that Kalenjin children were 50 percent less likely to die before the age of five than children from other tribes. Former president Daniel arap Moi, a Kalenjin himself, had made sure that Kalenjin areas had ample resources for medical care and high quality roads leading to them.[9] In this context, "eating" refers to the opportunity to turn the corruption tables to the advantage of one's own group.

Late in 2007 Kenyans went to the polls for a presidential election, after which violence erupted in diverse areas. In Kisumu, disappointed Luo who had hoped it was their turn to "eat" looted and burned.[10] In the Rift Valley, 95 percent of violent clashes occurred in areas where notoriously corrupt land redistribution had been carried out decades before.[11]

Wrong contends that donor organizations from the World Bank to World Vision assisted in creating the culture of pervasive public corruption. By failing to insist that the money they donate be handled and spent according to the same standards applying anywhere else in the world, they are complicit in the violence that has followed the long decades of corruption. She writes:

> Kenyan journalist Kwamchetsi Makokha is not alone in detecting an incipient racism, rather than altruism, in our lack of discrimination. 'Fundamentally the West doesn't care enough about Africa to pay too much attention to how its money is spent.' By subjecting donor budgets to unprecedented scrutiny, the global recession may, ironically, succeed where any number of skeptical reports on aid have failed, making it impossible for Africa's foreign backers to maintain their Pollyanna perspectives.[12]

Further, Wrong quotes Hussein Were, a Kenyan engineer whose painful life experience of workplace and professional ethnic discrimination and corruption she documents, in asserting that no new mechanisms are needed for donors to be able to effectively impact corruption: “You don’t need any more bodies, you don’t need any more laws, you just need good people and the will.”[13]

In the shadow of such public corruption, a pervasive culture of corruption in private institutions, including Christian churches and their related service institutions such as hospitals and colleges, has also grown up. Recently the church-related hospital a few doors down from our college abruptly dismissed its administrator. He had been minimally competent at some key tasks and was helping himself to the institution’s scarce funds. Here in Kenya even social protest is often corrupt. A protest that was recently planned against another nearby institution, but failed to materialize, was expected to feature modest compensation for the “protesters,” a common practice.

Corruption is an instance of what Dom Hélder Câmara called “first violence.”[14] Câmara (1909-1999) was Catholic Archbishop of Olinda and Recife in northeast Brazil. In his deep analysis of the situation of the less and least developed countries, and the less and least developed communities within the world’s more developed areas, the violence that can erupt in response to their situation and the violence by which it may be repressed delineate what he calls “a spiral of violence.” In his book of that title he writes:

> Look closely at the injustices in the underdeveloped countries, in the relations between the developed world and the underdeveloped world. You will find that everywhere the injustices are a form of violence. One can and must say that they are everywhere the basic violence, violence No. 1. . . . No-one is born to be a slave. No-one seeks to suffer injustices, humiliations and restrictions. A human being condemned to a sub-human situation is like an animal – an ox or a donkey – wallowing in the mud.

Now the egoism of some privileged groups drives countless human beings into this sub-human condition, where they suffer restrictions, humiliations, injustices; without prospects, without hope, their condition is that of slaves.

This established violence, this violence No. 1, attracts violence No.

2, revolt.[15]

My recent encounter with corruption, then, was an encounter with violence. John Howard Yoder ends his Warsaw lectures by quoting Câmara and his collaborator in promoting nonviolence in Latin America, the poet and sculptor Adolfo Pérez Esquivel: "'It is love, not violence or hatred, that will have the last word in history.' If that is the last word, say Câmara and Pérez Esquivel, it must be our word now" (*Nonviolence – A Brief History*, 145). Yoder, along with Câmara and Pérez Esquivel, propose that I should respond to this sinful proposal of corruption with love – indeed, with suffering love. But which is the path of suffering love? And does Yoder's newly-published work assist someone who wants to learn that path?

Multiple Voices of Temptation

My visitor that day was an elderly Friend, a *mzee* in Kiswahili, whom I had not previously met. He had many years before been a leader within the Board of Governors of Friends Theological College. He was someone who as an individual and institutionally could claim informal authority. He had come to ask me to engage in what he presented as a deeply Christian task: he wanted me to arrange an occasion for reconciliation between the FTC board and a cousin of his, who some months before had left employment at the college, and to reinstate her here. Previous to her leaving FTC, in discussions with board members others in our community had accused her of very poor judgment in carrying out her responsibilities (engaging in intimate personal relationships with students and staff of lower authority than herself). In the wake of these claims, she had never taken an opportunity to respond formally to the complaints. She had been denied personal justice. She was, her cousin reported, preparing to sue the college.

In preference to legal action she was now asking for an opportunity for personal reconciliation between herself and the board, a reconciliation that would make it possible for me to rehire her. My visitor clearly thought the occasion might well include his younger relative admitting to some disregard of the college's expectations regarding her personal life. He pointed out that it would be embarrassing for the college to be taken to court. (He did not quote Matthew 18:15 to me, but that text was certainly in the background of our conversation.[16]) He continued by recounting that he knew there was a Friend who had failed to pay back a loan due to the college years ago. He knew this person and believed he could see to it that the money was finally paid. He was certain others had written off the loan as a bad debt.

As the situation was presented to me by my visitor, the temptations offered were numerous, contradictory, and in no way unique. Any of our students might be faced with a similar set of temptations in their future ministries:

- agree to the reconciliation process and take the money for my own use.

- agree to the reconciliation process and recover the money for the college, accepting the extra funds for current pressing needs and, perhaps, allowing Friends to see me as having achieved something others had thought impossible.

- scrupulously reject the funds but agree to the reconciliation process, following the clear instruction of Jesus' words as recounted in Matthew 18:15-16.

- be a peacemaker, someone who could be called a child of God (Matthew 5:9).

- protect the college from a lawsuit that not only might be costly and/or embarrassing but would certainly be contrary to the classic Quaker rejection of settling disputes in court.

- defer to the respected *mzee*, because in Kenyan culture I would be expected to do so, and as a North American it would be colonial of me not to defer to the culture.

- agree to the proposal, with the idea that in the future the former employee's conflict with the college would be focused on the board of governors rather than on myself, the chief executive who had dismissed her.

A list of reasons to agree to the proposal(s) offered, some with more moral cogency than others, might continue further.

I rejected the proposal. To agree would have been corruption, a form of first violence. In response to all these diverging temptations, it was appropriate for me to say, as in the Warsaw lectures Yoder describes Jesus as saying "Your definition of the *polis*, of the social, of the wholeness of man in his socialness, is perverted" (*Nonviolence – A Brief History*, 95). Corruption is action guided by a perverted sense of the social. That perversion may appear even within the very way events, possibilities, and potential responses to them are characterized or delineated.

It seemed – and it still seems – very unlikely to me that this former staff member had actually failed in her responsibilities in the ways portrayed. Yet, from my own observation of her professional performance it seemed to me that the misguided accusations did give voice to an actual damaging of community life and of teaching-learning relationships. She had been dismissed in part because, despite her long years of experience, she had not been a highly effective teacher. But more emphatically she had failed to engage in community-nurturing interactions with colleagues and students. The accusations of specific failures, though almost certainly unjust, were symptoms of this larger, more broadly social, picture.

It was the former staff member and her familial advocate who had redefined the situation into a matter of radically personal concerns and refocused it on personal reconciliation, ongoing hostility, and peacemaking. To accept that framing, rather than keeping the focus on questions of the institution's faithfulness to its broader social purposes and its community responsibilities to all, would have been a corruption, a perversion "of the *polis*, of the social."

The institutional leader or the pastor who seeks to be faithful to the call to suffering love in this particular context has the responsibility to keep the right questions in view, accepting any discomforts or lawsuits that might come in response. To my reading, Yoder's Warsaw lectures do indeed give important tools and resources for meeting these demands within the current African context.

Yoder's Warsaw Response

By way of conclusion, let us briefly note four points at which Yoder's Warsaw lectures are especially helpful in addressing the questions raised by this characteristically African test case.

First, in lecture seven, "Jesus and Nonviolent Liberation," Yoder discusses five traditions of 20th-century theological discourse that he finds to be falsely conceived dichotomies. "*The tradition tells us we must choose between the individual and the social*," he writes (*Nonviolence – A Brief History*, 96; italics in original). "*The tradition tells us we must choose between the political and the sectarian*" (Ibid., 94; italics in original). In the view of this dubious tradition "the 'ethics of the Sermon on the Mount' is for face-to-face personal encounters; an ethic of the 'secular vocation' is needed for social structures" (ibid., 96).

As we have seen, in their accounts of the rise and carrying out of corruption and responding violence in Kenya over the course of a century, Elkins and Wrong trace how distortion of the personal dimensions of social action has supported and fueled now deeply entrenched spirals of public violence. If contemporary church and para-church donors will not care enough to actively and publicly resist a blasé acceptance of graft in the programs they fund, and to insist on the integrity of recording and management in the use of their gifts, who will?

Painfully, the opposite has sometimes been true. In 1956 the Christian Council of Kenya had extensive documentation of the savagery of the British repressive response to the Mau Mau. Pastoral representatives who had access to the numerous detainment camps were the best informed outsiders. They even had the support of the Church of England in Britain and other figures for public disclosure of Kenyan atrocities.[17] Instead, they sought to bring "the Kingdom of God and its standards of righteousness" to the attention of the government "in the spirit of our Master who directed as a first step 'if thy brother shall trespass against thee go and tell him his faults between thee and him alone'" – without furthering more public steps.[18]

Yoder proposes, supports, and encourages a reordering of the "perversion" of one's sense of sociality and human wholeness that lies in these false dichotomies. It is, he proposes, a matter of conversion, a transformation of worldview and perception that is simultaneously practical, intellectual, and spiritual (*Nonviolence – A Brief History*, e.g., 119): "Tradition tells us to choose between respect for persons and participation in the movement of history; Jesus refuses, because the movement of history is personal. There is no choosing between spirit and flesh, between theory and praxis, between belief and behavior, between the ideal and the possible" (ibid., 96).

A community is not simply an aggregation of numerous private individuals, but a fabric in which the dignity, value, and contributions of all support the well-being of all and each. African traditional culture is radically social.[19] Christianity brought a new focus on the individual into this culture, in the concept of the salvation of a believing individual through reconciliation of that individual and God by faith in Jesus Christ. Too easily this shift can become a doorway to a perversion of both the society and the individual rather than a pathway to the healing and transformation of both.

Second, Yoder's account of nonviolence in the Warsaw lectures is not tied to free church self-understandings as these have developed and been elaborated in the global North and West.[20] In his final three lectures, Yoder presents heroes of nonviolence within the Catholic Church: among them are scholars, theoreticians, and practitioners of the most hands-on of ministries – laypeople, Jesuits, and archbishops. He does not exclude from his understanding of "peace church" communities and persons in highly differentiated relationships of authority and power. This offers an intriguing and challenging contrast to the linking of "violence and dominative power"[21] prominent in some current North Atlantic analyses within my own Quaker community and within such collaborative groups as Christian Peacemaker Teams.

In a review of *Seeking Peace in Africa: Stories of African Peacemakers*,[22] John C. Yoder notes among a list of uniquely African characteristics, approaches, and perspectives on peacemaking the role of authority figures. In his assessment Westerners and Northerners favor democratic approaches through which conflicting groups "confront each other, listen to stories of pain and grief, express forgiveness and develop egalitarian plans for reconciliation and justice." On the basis of essays in the book under review, he claims that "Africans often are more comfortable relying on the authoritative intervention of respected and powerful leaders, who investigate a situation, determine a strategy for action and impose a solution on the community."[23]

Based on my lived African experience, I would not say there is no place in Africa for the more egalitarian approach preferred by members of the free church peace churches of the global North and West. Yet African

Friends do ascribe a higher responsibility for the making and maintaining of peace to elders and leaders than they do to others in the community. That is why the elderly cousin of that former staff member was in my office to talk about processes of reconciliation. Thus the Warsaw lectures, with their openness to diverse social patterns, are more accessible for African use than some other materials from the global North and West might be.

Third, in the Warsaw lectures John Howard Yoder employs multiple references, terms, and names. In speaking of Leo Tolstoy's approach he claims nonviolence is "the 'key' to the Scripture message: the cure for evil is suffering" (*Nonviolence – A Brief History*, here 21; the following quotations are from the pages indicated). He quotes Martin Luther King, Jr., who is himself drawing upon Gandhi: "We must meet the forces of hate with the power of love; we must meet physical force with soul force" (37). "There is no clash between psychic wholeness and love of the enemy" (72). "The shedding of the blood of a fellow human being is the fundamental denial of human dignity (Genesis 4) from which all other sins against society are derived," Yoder quotes from a Jewish perspective (82). The meaning of history is carried "by the creation of a new human fellowship through the cross, defined precisely by transcending enmity between classes of people" (104). "To be the kind of person who loves one's enemies, to be a servant, and to be meek are themselves more adequate definitions of doing the will of God than are tactical projections about how to maximize the likelihood of bringing about certain desirable states of the total social system " (113). The cross, says Yoder, "is not a tactic of resistance; it is first of all, God's means of reconciliation" (118). Each way of speaking of his topic opens insights into it from different perspectives and in response to different concerns and approaches. This diversity is itself a useful resource in bridging theological perspectives from diverse social and ecclesial contexts.

In the context of the corruption that is an element of the "first violence" of so many local settings, one of Yoder's compact and apt observations seems particularly useful in my own Kenyan setting. "The means is the end in the process of becoming," Yoder observes. "Only fidelity to love as means can be an instrument for love as end" (*Nonviolence – A Brief History*, 46). Because corruption and violence – first and second and third violence – were means for building the Kenyan society of today, corruption and violence have come to characterize the current end of that building.

Lastly, Yoder's word on the centrality of transformation to nonviolence is particularly welcome. Each morning students pray in the Friends Theological College chapel. They almost always include a thanksgiving to God for how far he has brought each one of us. They believe that God will have a new chance today to bring us farther and transform us into his people of peace. Maybe they will go farther than Warsaw.

Notes

[1] John Howard Yoder, *Nonviolence – A Brief History; The Warsaw Lectures*, ed. Paul Martens, Matthew Porter, and Myles Werntz (Waco, TX: Baylor Univ. Press, 2010).

[2] Caroline Elkins, *Imperial Reckoning; The Untold Story of Britain's Gulag in Kenya* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 2005).

[3] Kenya is made up of 40 to 70 different tribal peoples, depending on how the groups and subgroups are designated. In a 2009 census: Kikuyu 17.1%, Luhya 13.8%, Kalenjin 12.8%, Luo 10.5%; the many dozens of smaller African tribes and resident Arabs, South Asians, Europeans making up the remaining 47%, www.mwakilishi.com/content/articles/2010/08/31/census-2009-kenyas-population-reaches-386m.html, accessed 10 February 2011.

The struggle for independence from Britain was focused particularly in conflict between the colonial authorities and the Kikuyus. Much of the land assigned to European settlers had been Kikuyu land. Since independence, the most powerful groups within Kenyan politics have been and continue to be the Kikuyu and Kalenjin. In the late 2007 election after which so much violence erupted, there was a prominent and appealing Luo candidate who many thought would win. In a country riddled with corruption, questions inevitably arose about the integrity of the election process. A Luo did win an important election in the subsequent year, 2008: US President Barack Obama is ethnically Luo.

Due to mission patterns in former days, the overwhelming majority of Kenyan Quakers are Luhya. Despite their large numbers, the Luhya community is proportionally less well represented in national politics than other groups.

[4] Elkins, *Imperial Reckoning*,18-19.

[5] Ibid., e.g., 28-9, 71, 275.

[6] Ibid., 25-28.

[7] Michela Wrong, *It's Our Turn to Eat: The Story of a Kenyan Whistle-Blower* (New York: HarperCollins, 2009).

[8] Ibid., 55.

[9] Ibid., 56.

[10] Ibid., 295-316.

[11] Ibid., 308.

[12] Ibid., 326f.

[13] Ibid., 327.

[14] Hélder Câmara, *Spiral of Violence* (London: Sheed and Ward Stagbooks, 1971).
[15] Ibid., 29f.
[16] *If another member of the church sins against you, go and point out the fault when the two of you are alone. If the member listens to you, you have regained that one.* (NRSV)
[17] Elkins, *Imperial Reckoning*, 298-303.
[18] Christian Council of Kenya, "Press Release—Statement by Church Leaders of Kenya," 8 July 1956, quoted by Elkins, 303.
[19] John S. Mbiti offers an excellent introduction to African traditional philosophy, religion, and culture inhis *Introduction to African Religion,* 2nd ed. (Nairobi: East African Educational Publishers, 2003) and *African Religions and Philosophy,* 2nd ed. (Oxford: Heinemann, 1990).
[20] Ibid., 120.
[21] Christian Peacemaker Teams, "Statement of Identity," www.cpt.org/about/identity_statement, accessed 31 August 2011.
[22] John C. Yoder, Review of Donald E. Miller, Scott Holland, Lon Fendall, and Dean Johnson, eds., *Seeking Peace in Africa: Stories of African Peacemakers* (Telford, PA: Cascadia Publishing, 2007), in *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 82.4 (Oct. 2008): 620-23.
[23] Ibid., 622.

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