III
Metaphysics, Desire, and the Challenges of Embodied Apocalyptic

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I want to say thank you to Kyle and Travis for two absolutely fascinating texts, exceptionally ambitious and vulnerable texts that seek to illuminate that concern for peace is not a unique Anabaptist digression but is at the core of all theopolitical visions.[17] I also want to offer an apology. For several years now (not nearly as many as would have been fitting) I have tried to avoid appropriating or advocating on behalf of the theology bequeathed to us by John Howard Yoder because of the tremendous abuse and trauma perpetrated by this person. That said, both these texts reveal that any post-late-20th-century theopolitical vision that entails peace—especially an apocalyptic one—simply cannot sidestep the fundamental, ground-forming role that Yoder has played in the discourse. Therefore, he will also play a significant role in my response, though an ambiguous one.

So, to the difficult task at hand: providing an insightful, critical, yet constructive series of comments that treat these books individually yet synthetically in a context that will inevitably not do justice to their richness.

Shared Visions

Let me dive directly to what I take to be the shared task of both texts: to provide a theopolitical account of embodied apocalyptic, of what participation in the "cosmic drama" of God's creative Spirit[18] looks like when ends and means are unified. Kyle gives us a daring and somewhat devious genealogy that redefines apocalyptic vision, while Travis gives us a text that at first glance looks a bit like a collage, but, if given a second look, inevitably draws the reader to the heart of the matter with incredible centripetal force.

Kyle's primary concern, in my phrasing of it, is to develop a metaphysics

[17] I take both to be building idiosyncratically on the notion of God's peace as the ontological truth of creation, which has been articulated powerfully by John Milbank and Oliver O'Donovan. For a succinct account of how ontological peace founds a theopolitical vision that is not pacifist, see Oliver O'Donovan, *The Just War Revisited* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2003), 1-3.

[18] Kroeker, *Messianic Political Theology and Diaspora Ethics*, 96.

of peace that displays an aesthetic of peace, "a poetic art" in which doxology, nonviolence, and patience are inextricably bound together and anchored in the apocalyptic politics of Jesus.[19]Just as roughly summarized, Travis's primary concern is to attend to the constitutive nature of desire, of rightly ordered and dependent love in diaspora ethics properly practiced. To the extent that they are successful, both threaten the perceived confines of what have become familiar and somewhat canonical formulations of Anabaptist theology. In doing so, both draw freely from a broad range of resources—Plato, Paul, Augustine, Luther, Hegel, Metz, and Milbank, to name just a few—while also paying the almost necessary toll at the narrow gate that is the theological legacy of John Howard Yoder.

There is much more to say about the interplay between the two texts, but at this point I will turn to them separately in turn to press further into their internal logics.

The Architectonics of Hope

Kyle's title is fantastic and rightly allusive. However, what I take to be the heart of his argument is displayed clearly in the middle of the text with reference to Yoder's "To Serve Our God": "Hope is not a reflex rebounding from defeat but a reflection of theophany"(128). It seems to me that this quotation rightly captures your concern that hope—a reflection of the patient nonviolence of Christ's cross and resurrection—and its underlying metaphysic cannot be framed as a reaction, as an agonistic dialectic, or in terms of a friend/enemy dualism that must be managed. Rather, this must be the foundational reality in which form and content are united. I take this to name the precise structural flaw you want to point to in the entire genealogy you sketch from Schmitt through Milbank and Hart—even if agonism is self-consciously denied in metaphysical terms, it is implicit in aesthetic performance. To my mind, you capture this best when you offer the following assessment of Milbank:

> However, in the end, the aesthetic potentials that Milbank attempts to harness here are finally parasitic on his attempt to unthink the necessity of violence because it remains—

[19] Gingerich Hiebert, *Architectonics of Hope*, 128.

> perhaps tragically but nevertheless positively—committed to its educative function. Violence is thereby authorized to operate as more than merely a king of "malign transcendental," and Milbank's aesthetic reconfiguration of political theology secretly participates in a manipulable economy in which peace, while certainly capable of being obscurely anticipated in time, is ultimately deferred and merely names the eschaton. (96)

Of course, my initial comments may seem rather pedantic until one pauses to reflect on what it means that Kyle's corrective articulation of hope and its architectonic is attributed, at least in large part, to Yoder. He is certainly circumspect and refuses a whole-hearted embrace of Yoder. But it seems that Yoder is "indispensable" (118) for his genealogy for several reasons: (i) Yoder provides the methodological style—that of vision that is open-ended and enables a constructive looping-back (120), a constant potential for reformation (134); (ii) He offers the underlying meaning of history—"the cross and not the sword" determines the meaning of history (125); (iii) Yoder gives the framework for human action—the relationship between "the obedience of God's people" and the victory of the Lamb is "not a relationship between cause and effect but one of cross and resurrection" (126). Therefore, on the shoulders of Yoder, he arrives at the declaration that, if hope is to be Christian, it must be conformed to what it proclaims (127).

I am with Kyle in all of this, and I am willing to go along even further when he suggests that all of this actually betrays that Yoder, contrary to his own declamations, is a metaphysician of sorts. Yoder is, after all, interested in claiming that his apocalyptic style entails a commitment to working "with the grain of the cosmos" (141), the closest he gets to claiming an explicit theological metaphysic. As Kyle rightly notes, this claim is justified by Yoder's recognition that the kinds of practices Christians practice give a clue to the grain of the cosmos "because Jesus is both Word (the inner logic of things) and the Lord" (143).

However, it is also precisely at this point that I want to press further on two issues that are related to Yoder and also relevant to the broader delineations of Christian apocalyptic theology: (i) Is it really possible for Yoder's—or any apocalyptic theopolitical vision—to escape a fundamentally agonistic aesthetic? (ii) to what extent does refusing an agonistic metaphysic

also weaken the disjunctive force of any apocalyptic claims?

Let me take these questions in order. First, in his theology, Yoder eventually comes around to articulating a little more directly what he takes to be "the grain of the cosmos." He eventually distills a basic logic that captures the grain of the universe: borrowing from Tolstoy—"the cure for evil is suffering"[20]—or later, echoing some liberation themes—"the oppressed are the bearers of the meaning of history."[21] These reflect the logic of "a universe—that is, a single system—in which God acts and we act, with our respective actions relating to each other."[22] Yet, in all of these descriptions, including the notion of diaspora that Travis takes up more fully, Yoder's apocalyptic peaceableness, too, suffers from a necessary and seemingly permanent aesthetic dualism that is always and definitively predicated on the pre-existence of evil, death, and oppression.

If you think there may be occasions where Yoder slips into a violent aesthetics (and by that I gesture to the manner in which he codes suffering and oppression into peaceableness), it may be that he just goes wrong here. Or, might the confines of the category of apocalyptic betray at least an aesthetic need for some form of antagonism, in order to elicit the sort of possibilities that it celebrates?

Of course, one could appropriate Yoder's polyphonic corpus (polyphonic, as I read it) in the opposite direction. Yoder seems to be a little anxious about the radical disjunction between Jesus' cross and resurrection and all that came before, because of his commitment to a single cosmos with a consistent logic. I'm thinking particularly about his hesitation to separate the logic of Judaism and the logic of Christianity. Or, to rephrase, his increasing wariness of qualitatively separating Jeremianic Judaism from first-century Christianity. He even goes so far as claiming that the peaceful apocalyptic ethos that Jesus displayed was "already well established" in Judaism prior to Jesus' arrival in the first century.[23]

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[20] John Howard Yoder, *Nonviolence—A Brief History: The Warsaw Lectures* (Waco, TX: Baylor Univ. Press, 2010), 21.

[21] John Howard Yoder, *For the Nations: Essays Evangelical and Public* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1997), 35.

[22] John Howard Yoder, *Politics of Jesus: Vicit Agnus Noster*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1994), 242.

[23] Yoder, *For the Nations*, 69.

Therefore, perhaps Yoder, against himself, can also be instructive in our reflection here. Might it be the case that to avoid slipping into a violent aesthetic, one may inevitably give up the force of the disjunctive claims that are part and parcel of the concept of apocalyptic?

Stepping back for a moment, a third issue or question that I am raising in the above concerns the precise relationship between a violent metaphysic and a violent aesthetic. Before pressing that question further, allow me to take up Travis's text and then loop back.

Messianic Political Theology and Diaspora Ethics

If Milbank is the cipher that animates or at least occasions Kyle's argument, it might be fair to say that Oliver O'Donovan plays something like the same role for Travis. Of course, O'Donovan is not really a villain and in fact is rather generously engaged in the middle of the volume. Yet his characterization of the relationship between the church and state—different yet balanced[24]—haunts the overall shape of the text. Contra O'Donovan, Travis audaciously recruits Augustine among others to cast a theopolitical vision in which "citizenship is not to be identified with any earthly republic but rather with the messianic body on pilgrimage in this age,"[25] While they are working in slightly different genres, there are many instances when the consonance between Travis and Kyle is closer than the 38 miles that separate Toronto and Hamilton. That said, Travis attends more directly to the everydayness of apocalyptic embodiment:

> Messianic ethics will focus less upon the legitimating claims of defining institutions (law courts, parliaments, churches, etc) than upon the embodied practices of the communities that shape the public polis in the saeculum, the everyday of the present age—but always with witness-bearing reference to the parabolic passage of the divine through it. (79)

In doing so, he recognizes what has so often been the orienting and/or motivating element missing in appeals to Yoder's theopolitical vision: affection. I take this to be one of the most important aspects of Travis's text

[24] Gingerich Hiebert, *Architectonics of Hope*, 2.
[25] Ibid.

and offer the following comments as an attempt to illuminate its significance more fully.

First, as an Anabaptist of a certain generation with historical roots to "the land" and apparently genetic yearnings for farmer sausage and *rollkuchen*, I find the juxtaposition between our Mennonite articulations of asceticism and our worldly enjoyments paradoxical, or at least unconvincingly thematized by our tradition. I fully support what Travis is driving at in an attempt to gesture toward Anabaptist existential theology. However, I wonder whether his choice of short reflections on disparate texts serially presented unconsciously exhibits something like an inchoate guilt or critical posture towards the world, one that haunts even our constructive apocalyptic visions because of our deep skepticism about the temptations of the world. I mean there is wine and Tweeback, but the good life seems to be defined by being pulverized in a mill and baked in the heat of fire (96). A sense of humor in the Mennonite tradition, even if dark, is important here, because that's how many of us paper over incongruities that we do not otherwise know how to address synthetically.

Perhaps the issue is whether Augustine or Yoder are sufficient guides for sustaining apocalyptic affections in the everydayness of our lives. Do either have a sufficiently strong account of the goodness of creation that affirms our bodies, families, friends, and non-human creation as other than temptation? Second, this question is intended to set the table for an engagement with your concerns about technology and its dehumanizing, disembodying, and "death-dealing" nature (244). You argue:

> What we need in the first place, rather, is an account of spiritual causality, if I may put it this way, in the language of poetic, dramatic experience, a return to our personhood—which is particular, limited, embodied, passing away, and yet inhabited, indeed inspired, by divine mystery. (244)

I couldn't agree more! But I also worry that this logic of the sufferings and passing away of the body can all too easily be accepted for the bodies of others and of creation, full stop. Again, and perhaps echoing some of what I indicated in relation to Kyle, I wonder whether the apocalyptic vision is still too negatively defined. Certainly, our hope is not "an otherworldly hope but the enactment of a hope that takes place in quiet, embodied service of

others in everyday life" (245), but to what end? To put it most crassly, I'm not sure ending the book with Dostoevsky's monastic way adequately captures the end to which we ought to be oriented: a flourishing human community. Without that end, is it possible to properly embrace the affections necessary for existential Anabaptism? I ask this question not with a preconceived notion of what the right answer is, because it is also, as you well know, a question that is ripped open anew after Yoder.

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