When Anabaptists Get Angry: The Wrath of God in a Process-Anabaptist Perspective[1]

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I

As peace churches with a strong commitment to scripture, Anabaptists are in a particularly difficult position with regard to divine wrath. On the one hand, the biblical stories of divine wrath, sometimes culminating in divinely mandated acts of violence, are not only embarrassing to us but also dangerous to others in a world where religious rhetoric is so often used to justify violence. Too often, even within the church, we use the concept of divine wrath in a violent manner to threaten those with whom we disagree.[2] In common parlance, which greatly simplifies the traditional notion of wrath, the term means "taking revenge," "losing your temper," or "holding a grudge." These behaviors are hardly fitting for a church that seeks to follow a path of nonviolence. There is a reason, after all, that wrath has its place as one of the seven deadly sins.

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[1] The original title of this paper as presented at the American Academy of Religion in 2012 was "When Mennonites Get Angry: The Wrath of God in a Process-Anabaptist Perspective." The use of the term "Mennonite" was not meant to be exclusive of other Anabaptist groups, but mostly for rhetorical effect. The term has been changed here to be more precise.

[2] See, for example, Paul Gotwals Landis, "God's Wrath, Love," *Mennonite World Review*, March 12, 2012, www.mennoworld.org/2012/3/12, or Lowell Delp's sermon at "Affirming the Faith," a 2010 gathering in Lansdale, Pennsylvania of Eastern District Conference and Franconia Mennonite Conference members, reported by Heidi Martin, "Conference Affirms Teachings on Sexuality," *The Mennonite*, February 1, 2010, www.themennonite.org/issues/13-2.

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Yet the disappearance of wrath from the Anabaptist theological toolbox would leave us significantly impoverished. After all, wrath does seem to be a key component of the biblical tradition, not as a petty display of anger but as a passionate judgment against unrighteousness or idolatry. Much of the prophetic literature, for instance, speaks in the name of divine wrath against greed, militarism, and apathy. To the extent that Jesus sees himself in the line of the prophets, one might even say that wrath (i.e., passionate judgment) is a foundational element of the nonviolent ethics that can be derived from the New Testament. Certainly Jesus seemed to have moments of wrath; the picture of the gentle Jesus beckoning the children to him should be balanced by that of the Jesus who calls people "a brood of vipers" (Matt. 23:3) or names a person "a child of hell" (Matt. 23:15).[3] Biblical nonviolence seems to grow out of wrath; it does not stand in contradiction to it. As Walter Wink says, "We need to be able to bring anger, power, passion, and an iron intransigence to our nonviolence."[4] Nonviolence without wrath is at best bland and at worst acquiescent or voyeuristic towards violence and injustice.

The conundrum, as I see it, is how do we think about the concept of wrath through the lens of the nonviolent God revealed in Jesus? How do we maintain the authority of the church as a nonviolent witness without falling into authoritarianism, in which we use the idea of divine wrath (a false idea, in this case) to foster exclusion, polarization, and narrow-mindedness?

I will argue that a creative dialogue between process and Anabaptist theologies, especially their respective Whiteheadian and Yoderian versions, offers fertile new ground for just such a paradigm. In this paradigm, divine wrath is the aspect of the creative transformation of the world in God that challenges the violence and intractability of conflict. Insofar as the church

[3] It is sometimes argued that the Bible attributes wrath to God alone, that it is a divine prerogative rather than a human one. See, for example, Willard M. Swartley, *Covenant of Peace: The Missing Peace in New Testament Theology and Ethics* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006), 395. While it is true that in scripture the destruction of the unrighteous or of enemies is solely God's function, many individuals in the Bible feel no qualms about giving voice to God's judgment, or perhaps, to take a more critical view, attributing their own judgment to God. Either way, humans in the Bible certainly participate in the activity of judgment and condemnation, which seems to me to be the core of the concept of wrath.

[4] Walter Wink, *Engaging the Powers: Discernment and Resistance in a World of Domination* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992), 289.

engages in nonviolent hermeneutics, it is the manifestation of divine wrath. But the community is not automatically an agent of God's wrath; the violent or exclusive actions of a community are by definition counter to the insistence of God and are therefore the objects of God's wrath rather than its representatives. This means that God's wrath is inherent in the church's process of discernment and interpretation but also comes from outside the church through the provocation, spoken or unspoken, of those currently excluded by any given consensus of the community.

Given John Howard Yoder's articulation of ecclesiology, wrath should have an important function in the hermeneutics of Anabaptist faith communities. According to Yoder, the church is supposed to be a hermeneutic community, having the authority to interpret and to make judgments. This is the "binding and loosing" of Matthew 18. But if the church is to be a hermeneutic community, it must be able to identify the things in this world that run counter to the spirit of God. This seems to entail getting "angry" (maybe even wrathful) about certain realities, and speaking out against them. Some Anabaptists have realized that nonviolence should not mean keeping quiet in the face of injustice, and our language has been changing over the last century from Guy Hershberger's "nonresistance" to the more active "nonviolent resistance."[5]

The importance of Alfred North Whitehead (1861-1947), the founder of process thought, to this discussion is the way that his theology mirrors Yoderian ecclesiology and ethics. In process theology, God receives all that occurs in the world and harmonizes the conflicting elements into a coherent whole. Whitehead calls this the "consequent nature" of God.[6] In simpler terms, God is the ultimate example of nonviolent consensus. God's judgment on the world is not enacted by simply excluding those people or points of view that do not match a pre-established divine vision, just as Yoder suggests with Gandhi that the church should include the enemy in its pursuit of

[5] Leo Driedger and Donald B. Kraybill, *Mennonite Peacemaking: From Quietism to Activism* (Scottdale, PA: Herald Press, 1994).

[6] "The consequent nature of God is [God's] judgment on the world. [God] saves the world as it passes into the immediacy of [God's] own life. It is the judgment of a tenderness which loses nothing that can be saved. It is also the judgment of a wisdom which uses what in the temporal world is mere wreckage." Alfred North Whitehead, *Process and Reality* (New York: Free Press, 1978 [1930]), 346.

truth.[7] Instead, God's vision is constituted by the transformation of conflict into a creative, novel solution.[8] It is a vision that adapts to the changing circumstances, the concrete suffering and successes, of creation.

One of the early process theologians, Bernard Loomer, noted that Whitehead's theology advocates an alternative conception of power. The common view is what Loomer calls "linear power," defined by its ability to actualize its own interests against the competing interests of others. In this paradigm, one's "size" or stature is measured by the amount of unilateral influence one has over others, or how much one can limit the other's power. By contrast, process theology assumes that power is relational. Relational power is the ability to be influenced without losing one's own freedom or identity.[9] In a relational paradigm, one's stature depends on the ability to incorporate seemingly contradictory elements into a cohesive whole.

Another important aspect of process theology is that God's vision is a mere abstraction without the world. The world gives concreteness to what Whitehead calls "the kingdom of heaven."[10] God's role is to organize and harmonize this content into an aesthetic whole. God's vision then flows back into the world as a persuasive force towards creative advance to which the world must then respond. This is what Whitehead means by his noted antitheses: "It is as true to say that the World is immanent in God, as that God is immanent in the World. It is as true to say that God transcends the

[7] "The reason one renounces violence in social conflict, said Gandhi, is not (not only, not merely) that bloodshed is morally forbidden; it is that the adversary is part of my truth-finding process. I need to act nonviolently in order to get the adversary to hear me, but I need as well to hear the adversary." John Howard Yoder, *Body Politics: Five Practices of the Christian Community Before the Watching World* (Nashville: Discipleship Resources, 1992), 69.

[8] For Whitehead, creativity and novelty do not connote newness for its own sake but the achievement of an aesthetic intensity or widening of perspective, which includes but goes beyond more traditional concepts like justice, righteousness, and, I would argue, peace. See Whitehead, *Process and Reality*, 105.

[9] "The world of the individual who can be influenced by another without losing his or her identity or freedom is larger than the world of the individual who fears being influenced. The former can include ranges and depths of complexity and contrast to a degree that is not possible for the latter. The stature of the individual who can let another exist in his or her own creative freedom is larger than the size of the individual who insists that others must conform to his own purposes and understandings." Bernard Loomer, "Two Conceptions of Power," *Process Studies* 6, no. 1 (Spring 1976): 5-32.

[10] Whitehead, *Process and Reality*, 350-51.

World, as that the World transcends God. It is as true to say that God creates the World, as that the World creates God."[11]

While some process theologians have described God's vision as providing a specific, concrete plan, I believe Catherine Keller's interpretation is closer to the spirit of Whitehead. She says, "Rather, I am trying to think a complex goodness . . . which is not in fact offering a positive lure for every occasion. . . . The specific lure, as the initial aim of every occasion, need not be understood as encoded with a particular, father-knows-best . . . sort of content."[12] Instead, Keller proposes an aim that is better characterized as the ground of an entity's well-being. God does not privilege a particular outcome as God's unambiguous "will," but rather demands that each entity embark on a creative venture to transform their context into something greater. In a sense Whitehead's system prefigures John Paul Lederach's theory of conflict as a cyclical process of change between concrete episodes of conflict, and a transformative platform that provides a foundation for processes of constructive response.[13]

These characteristics of process theology make Whitehead's theology very conducive to a nonviolent ethics, even though Whitehead was not writing as a pacifist. In fact, just as 16th-century Anabaptists saw their ecclesiology as a return to the origins of Christian life, he considered his theology a reclamation of the "Galilean origin of Christianity":

> When the Western world accepted Christianity, Caesar conquered; and the received text of Western theology was edited by his lawyers. . . . The brief Galilean vision of humility flickered throughout the ages, uncertainly.... But the deeper idolatry, of the fashioning of God in the image of the Egyptian, Persian, and Roman imperial rulers, was retained. The Church gave unto God the attributes which belonged exclusively to Caesar.
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> [The Galilean vision] does not emphasize the ruling Caesar, or

[11] Ibid., 345.

[12] Catherine Keller, "The Mystery of the Insoluble Evil: Violence and Evil in Marjorie Suchocki," in *World Without End: Christian Eschatology from a Process Perspective*, ed. Joseph A. Bracken (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), 63.

[13] John Paul Lederach, *The Little Book of Conflict Transformation* (Intercourse, PA: Good Books, 2003), 40-47.

> the ruthless moralist, or the unmoved mover. It dwells upon the tender elements in the world, which slowly and in quietness operate by love….[14]

This should start sounding familiar—one should recognize in this passage a cousin to John Howard Yoder's critique of Constantinianism or to J. Denny Weaver's suspicion of creeds. They share a commitment to reclaiming theology from its co-option by the state and Christianity's subsequent justification of violence.

Even more important to this discussion is how process thought develops certain ecclesiological themes that are core to Yoder's theology, specifically Yoder's definition of the church as an interpreting community aiming to resolve conflicts restoratively rather than punitively. One of Yoder's key points is that the authority of the church to engage in this kind of work is actually a divine authority. God empowers the church to interpret and judge in God's name:[15] "To be human in the light of the gospel is to face conflict in redemptive dialogue. When we do that, it is God who does it."[16] If we accept Yoder's argument, there is a correspondence between the church's activity and God's activity, or between the church's judgment and God's judgment. But the authority of the judgment depends on several factors: it aims at restoration rather than punishment, it assumes that both parties can "win,"[17] and it requires a voluntary community.[18]

Notice that Yoder's claim that "when we do that, it is God who does it" has not only ecclesiological but theological consequences. Read one way, it says something about the church (it is invested with moral authority); read another way, it says something about God (the church's process of judgment is a window into God's own process of judgment). Anabaptist ecclesiology therefore has theological implications, namely that God's judgment is based on a non-competitive, restorative, communal dialogue.[19] But we have already

[14] Whitehead, *Process and Reality*, 342-43.
[15] Yoder, *Body Politics*, 6.
[16] Ibid., 13.
[17] Ibid., 12.
[18] Ibid., 5.
[19] This may seem counterintuitive, since we usually think of ecclesiology as derivative from theology, or even more so from scripture, in the case of Anabaptists. In my opinion, the fact

seen this worked out in Whitehead's thought, though his starting point was philosophical rather than ecclesiological. It may come as a surprise to see such a heterodox (some might say heretical) theology converging with Anabaptism; but remember that the Anabaptists were once heretics themselves. The similarity of motivation and content suggests that these different systems might work together to solve the problem of envisioning a nonviolent divine wrath.

II

In light of these common notions from process and Anabaptist theologians, how should we define wrath? If God's judgment is based on a creative harmonization of conflicting elements, God's wrath, or negative judgment, will be directed at practices or systems that tend to block such transformation. Of course, many concrete practices tend to foster exclusion instead of creativity—such evils as racism, greed, and violence. Insofar as they do prevent transformation of conflict, we must imagine them to be an object of God's wrath. Wrath is not vengeance, not even the justice of "an eye for an eye." Wrath is the courageous stance against those things that stifle us or others.

However, God's vision for the world should not be thought of as a pre-existing list of good and bad actions; ultimately it is the world itself that provides the content of God's judgment. For example, God is angered by racism because it denies an entire group of people the right to contribute to the resolution of a conflict, not because it offends an abstract notion of justice or deviates from a plan that God has scripted out into eternity.

The church, then, is simply the deliberate effort of a community to bring about the "kingdom of heaven," the transformation of the world that occurs within God. Insofar as the church achieves a true consensus (i.e., not coercive or exclusive), it represents or even helps to construct this divine vision. Of course, the church is always a limited, local transformation in comparison to the infinite receptiveness of God. A church will have a finite size or stature, as Loomer would say, compared with the infinite stature of God. A finite community can incorporate only so many disparate elements

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that ecclesiology has theological content is an overlooked implication of Yoder's claim.

while maintaining a unified identity. There is always some "outside" to a community of which it has not yet taken account. Or, as Yoder says more elegantly, "all communities of moral insight are provincial. . . ."[20] This has both positive and negative implications for the church's ability to represent God's wrath.

On the one hand, the church is empowered to be a prophetic witness against practices preventing the restorative, creative movement that transcends the barriers created by conflict. Where the church protests against the diminishment of creative transformation, God's wrath is made manifest. This wrath operates with the constant hope that the situation can be transformed into a win-win solution where all parties can be respected and restored to a healthy relationship.[21] The church's wrath, which correlates to God's wrath, is a nonviolent anger because it does not seek to exclude the other but to call the other, and perhaps itself as well, out of the narrowness of their initial perspectives.

This assumes that the oppressor comes from outside the community of faith, which itself is composed of or allied with voices that have been ignored or excluded. That is, in order to represent the wrath of God, the church must identify itself with the poor, the outcast, the sick, et al. One of the biblical narratives usually interpreted as a story about God's violent anger is Matthew 25, about the sheep and the goats. Although the story ends with the goats being led away to eternal punishment, the point is really how these two groups were aligned with the voiceless in their society. Verses 44 and 45 read: "Then they also will answer, 'Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not take care of you?' Then he will answer them, 'Truly I tell you, just as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me.'" In the process-Anabaptist view, this story is not merely hyperbole: God is really made present when a community reconciles to itself those thought to be irredeemable outsiders. Conversely, whenever a community excludes the outsiders, it becomes an

[20] John Howard Yoder, *The Priestly Kingdom: Social Ethics as Gospel* (Notre Dame: Univ. of Notre Dame Press, 1984), 41.

[21] This idea probably has more resonance with Anabaptist contributions to the fields of conflict studies than to theology, but one can see in Yoder too the claim that the enemy should be approached under the assumption that a wider truth embraces both of us. See n. 6.

object of God's wrath, not a representation of it.

In fact, because the church is a community that is conscious of its role as God's representative, it is particularly susceptible to the divine wrath that constantly demands a broader consensus. Because the church makes the radical claim to be a community invested with hermeneutic authority, it must also take account of the limitations of its own consensus.

To the extent that the church is a finite community with a limited moral perspective, it can represent God's wrath only within a limited sphere. One community may have done more work on integrating a particular issue or voice and therefore has the responsibility to exhibit a divine wrath in this respect. But the same community may, in regard to some other issue, actually be engaged in excluding voices that need to be heard. Often this is either unconscious or the result of an uncritical acceptance of cultural norms. Here, it would be necessary to listen to the wrath of God that may reveal itself through another community, whether sacred or secular.

Wherever the church itself uses power to silence particular voices, it has lost its role as representative of the wrath or the vision of God, and stands in need of reformation. This is not an occasional need but a constant one. A finite community can nevertheless grow in size or stature (see Loomer's remarks cited earlier) and challenge itself to reflect more of God's infinite vision. If the church does not continue to expand its moral vision, it will stagnate. Here we could apply Whitehead's statement about civilization in general to the church (changing a few words to suit the context): "A [church] preserves its vigour so long as it harbours a real contrast between what has been and what may be; and so long as it is nerved by the vigour to adventure beyond the safeties of the past. Without adventure [the church] is in full decay."[22] The adventure in this case is to be constructively responsive to the ways God's wrath is directed against us.

The church is therefore always simultaneously the agent and the object of God's wrath, and it often takes significant discernment to decide how these two roles play out in a particular context. In fact, there will never be a way to define God's wrath universally and objectively, not only because this requires a community capable of an infinite receptivity but because the context of our judgment is always in flux. Even within the divine vision, any harmonization

[22] Alfred North Whitehead, *Adventures of Ideas* (New York: Free Press, 1967), 279.

of conflicting elements is relevant only to the current context; it waits for the world to make the next step into the future so that it can continue to adapt. This keeps us from claiming a perfect correlation with God's will, as many evangelical preachers have been tempted to do. It does not condemn us to a complete relativism, but it does mean that our representation of God's wrath is always partial and context-bound.[23] God's wrath will spring up in new and unexpected places, and the church, if it seeks to embody the reign of God more fully, must be constantly on the alert. Again, as a nonviolent wrath, we should also expect this anger will be transformative rather than punitive, no matter in which position we find ourselves relative to it.

Under this view, it becomes impossible to define God's wrath universally and concretely at the same time. To define it universally would be to describe an abstraction devoid of content, merely as the prevention of creative transformation in whatever form that may take. And when God's wrath is made concrete by a community, it is always a local rather than a universal manifestation. This becomes a sort of "uncertainty principle" for the church—but not a debilitating one. Every instantiation of divine wrath, so long as it arises through a process of nonviolent discourse,[24] is valid up to the boundaries of that discourse. To use a political analogy, that one state's laws do not apply to the neighboring state doesn't mean they are relative; they are binding within a jurisdiction because the process of instituting them was confined to that jurisdiction. At the same time, these laws may affect the way people in other states and countries view their own legislation. As Yoder says, "The community pulls back from any claim to catholic generalizability and infallibility, yet it is believingly, modestly ready to say of consensus reached today, 'it seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us,' and to commend

[23] "To say…that there exists no nonprovincial general community with clear language, and that therefore we must converse at every border, is in actuality a more optimistic and more fruitful affirmation of the marketplace of ideas than to project a hypothetically general insight which we feel reassured to resort to, when our own particularity embarrasses us, but which is not substantial after all when we seek to define it." Yoder, *The Priestly Kingdom*, 41.

[24] As opposed to violent discourse, which could occur in several ways. For one, contradictory voices could be suppressed or dismissed rather than incorporated into a creative solution. Or, the terms of a discourse could be such that they preclude some perspective from being voiced in the first place.

this insight . . . to other churches."[25]

This theological vocabulary allows us to talk about God's wrath in a way that preserves the integrity of both God's stance against injustice and the revelation of the nonviolent God through Jesus. Given Yoder's articulation of the authority of the hermeneutic community, together with the theological framework of process thought, there is a correspondence, though never a perfect one, between the activity of God and the activity of the church. If the church is the manifestation of God's reign on earth, then God's wrath must be made manifest in the faith community. If the church's wrath must be a nonviolent, restorative wrath, then this must also be the character of God's wrath. The wrath of God cannot be utilized to self-righteously define one's own group against others thought to be hopelessly outside God's grace. The wrath of God is precisely the movement of a community to identify exclusion and to work uncompromisingly towards a creative transcendence of conflict. This puts the church constantly at odds with those who benefit from the status quo, but it leads to embrace rather than abandonment even of those who stand in the way of creativity. To paraphrase Teresa of Avila, "God has no wrath on earth but yours." This should be both an empowering and humbling realization.

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[25] Yoder, *The Priestly Kingdom*, 35. The quotation that Yoder uses here is from Acts 15:28.